

1-19-2011

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## Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Mexico's Drug Violence Reveals Worrisome Trends." (2011). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5462>

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## Mexico's Drug Violence Reveals Worrisome Trends

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Drug Trafficking and

Published: Wednesday, January 19, 2011

Beyond the staggering number of deaths caused by drug-related violence in Mexico, other demographics and statistics are emerging that add perspective to the explosion of organized crime in the country during the past four years. Many critics, including a large portion of Mexican citizens, blame the spike in violence on the campaign that President Felipe Calderón launched at the start of his administration in 2006 ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](#)). Administration statistics indicate that almost 35,000 people have lost their lives to drug-related violence in the past four years. Perhaps Calderón's campaign was the match that caused the powder keg to explode, but there were signs that a power struggle was developing among the various cartels, and the potential for an escalation in violence was already there. The emergence of the ruthless Zetas organization, comprising elite military deserters, increased the violence exponentially.

Still, the Calderón government cannot hide from the reality that drug-related violence has taken a tremendous toll in the last four years, particularly in 2010. So the administration has resorted to spin and attempts at transparency. In what the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB) described as an "an exercise in transparency without precedent in Mexico, and with few precedents in the world," the administration candidly acknowledged that more than 15,000 murders last year could be linked directly to organized crime.

"These numbers do not replace the statistics of total homicides compiled by the government's statistics agency [Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI]," SEGOB's security spokesperson Alejandro Poiré Romero told reporters in mid-January. "These are only the deaths thought to be associated with organized-crime activities."

The government's 2010 numbers are even higher than those compiled by other reputable sources such as the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*, which reported 11,500 drug-related deaths.

Poiré Romero tried to put a positive spin on his report, pointing out that the growth in violence in 2010 had "leveled off" by the end of the year. "By the end of the year, there was a drop in murders, although we wouldn't call it a trend," said the SEGOB spokesperson.

The reality is that the SEGOB data shows a surge in deaths in 2010 relative to previous years, rising from more than 9,600 in 2009 and 5,400 in 2008. The total for 2007-2010 approached 35,000 deaths, including 30,913 execution-style killings, 3,153 deaths in gang shoot-outs, and 546 deaths involving attacks on authorities. The statistics do not separate attacks on journalists. Nearly two dozen writers and reporters were killed in the past two years because of their coverage of organized crime ([SourceMex, July 14, 2010](#)).

### *Overcrowding in jails, penitentiaries*

The Calderón government's intense campaign against drug traffickers has had other negative ramifications, such as a surge in the number of arrests on federal drug-trafficking charges. In an effort to keep federal penitentiaries from surpassing their capacity, authorities have resorted to paying state and municipal governments to house inmates facing federal drug charges. As a result,

429 city and state corrections facilities around the country can now be considered dangerously overcrowded.

"In their patios and corridors, these jails are holding at least 50,000 federal inmates, creating overcrowded conditions," said the Mexico City daily newspaper *l*. "In the best-case scenario, these facilities are at their capacity."

The federal government pays states a special bond for each inmate. Some states participate reluctantly, suggesting that the money they get is not worth the increased headaches. "Others gladly accept the program, and even defend it, because they know they will have increased funds in their state coffers," said.

There has been enough grumbling among states that the federal government has taken back some inmates and placed them in federal facilities. In addition, construction is underway on a new "extreme-maximum-security" penitentiary near Papantla in Veracruz state. This facility, which would have 3,000 escape-proof cells, would be ready sometime in 2012.

But the plan to construct the Papantla facility has some high-profile detractors. "They think that spending more money on jails is going to solve the problem," said Alejandro Gertz Manero, who served as director of public safety during the administrations of former Mexico City mayors Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano and Rosario Robles. "The budget for prisons went from 5 billion pesos (US\$413 million) annually to 32 billion (US\$2.65 billion) per year, and things have been worse."

Gertz acknowledged that the problem of overcrowding is alarming, especially in prisons in central and northern Mexico, where violence is common inside the prisons. "There has been no willingness to conduct a true diagnosis of the problem of safety and justice in our country because this would bring as a consequence real changes, which no one is willing to make," he said.

### *Youth deaths fairly high*

Federal and state authorities are reporting a disturbing pattern that has emerged from the drug-related deaths: a large number of the victims and the perpetrators are children and youths.

A recent report from the Chamber of Deputies indicates that close to 1,600 young people died between December 2006 and October 2010 as a direct result of drug-related violence. Deputy Yolanda del Carmen Montalvo López, chair of the committee in the lower house that advocates for vulnerable groups (Comisión de Atención a Grupos Vulnerables), said the violence also orphaned 40,000 children during the past four years.

There is growing evidence that young people are increasingly the perpetrators. The congressional report said that the number of youth detained on weapons, drug-trafficking, and organized-crime charges increased by 34% during 2010. What is even more disturbing is that youth are being recruited at a younger age.

"According to reports from a number of civil and social organizations, the recruiting age a decade ago was somewhere between 20 and 35 years old," said the daily newspaper, based in Ciudad Juárez. "At present, there are young people between the ages of 12 and 15 who are joining crime groups."

State authorities offer similar statistics. For example, 85% of the victims of drug-related violence in Michoacán are between the ages of 18 and 32, and many of those who commit the crimes are aged 30 or younger. "We have discovered that execution victims, as well as those committing the murders, are young people associated with organized crime," said state attorney general Jesús Montejano Ramírez.

In Ciudad Juárez, for example, municipal authorities report that 158 young people were killed in 2010 as a result of drug-related violence. In many cases, the victims were innocent bystanders during a shoot-out, as was the case with several newborn babies. "Even though the majority of the cases are presumed to involve circumstantial deaths, there are clear indications that some attacks were directed at youth," said.

In some cases, the young people who are targeted are attending parties or involved in drug-rehabilitation programs ([SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010](#)) and ([Nov. 10, 2010](#)).

Authorities in Juárez have indications that many victims were working with the drug cartels and involved in such activities as homicide, kidnapping, and drug trafficking. "A number of them were also killed because they were in the presence of someone else who was targeted," said.

Officials say many young people are joining drug-trafficking organizations because of a lack of activities and opportunities and the lure of a steady and fairly decent income. "There is a general disinterest, not only by the government but also by families, to create a positive environment for young people," said Vianey Mendoza, who heads the youth-affairs department in Michoacán.

Many recruited young people come from poor families or group foster homes, with their first activity usually involving (street sales). "The criminal organizations are recruiting heavily among the most vulnerable sectors of society," said the daily newspaper, based in Saltillo, Coahuila state.

The recruits at times do not join voluntarily but are kidnapped from the street.

Montalvo said her congressional committee is urging the Calderón government to develop a program to support the children and youth who are vulnerable to recruitment from the drug cartels. "This program could be created using the resources of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), the Secretaría de Salud, and the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF), which would offer support and follow-up to children and youth who are victims or potential victims of drug trafficking," said Montalvo.

### *The increasingly violent south*

Drug-related violence has been prevalent throughout Mexico during the past few years, but the perception is that the most brutal incidents during 2010 occurred in northern and northcentral states like Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, and Coahuila.

Until recently, many citizens who died because of drug violence were simply caught in the crossfire, although the cartels have long targeted law-enforcement officials and journalists. In the past several years, the Zetas and other trafficking organizations like the Sinaloa and La Familia cartels have resorted to attacking civilians and public officials who have refused to become corrupted. In 2010, drug-related violence claimed the lives of several mayors ([SourceMex, Sept. 29, 2010](#)), a mayoral candidate ([SourceMex, May 26, 2010](#)), and a gubernatorial candidate ([SourceMex, June 30, 2010](#)).

Most of those murders occurred in northern areas under dispute by the Zetas and other trafficking organizations like the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels.

Some observers say there is evidence that the struggle for territorial control has intensified in southern states, with the most brutal battles occurring recently in states like Guerrero and Michoacán. More than 30 deaths related to drug violence occurred in the resort city of Acapulco in Guerrero state during a single weekend in January. Police said 15 of the victims were decapitated, and some of the bodies had messages suggesting that the murders were ordered by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel. Experts say Acapulco—an ideal entry point for imports of cocaine from Colombia and Peru—remains the site of an intense territorial struggle among at least three cartels, La Familia, the Zetas, and the Sinaloa cartel.

The Zetas, which came on the scene as an independent cartel just two years ago, are said to be on a quest to increase control of a larger portion of Mexico, beyond their traditional territory in the northeast. While the cartel continues to meet resistance from rivals in Guerrero, Tabasco, and Michoacán, observers say the group has expanded operations without much challenge in other states like Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Because of this, say SEGOB officials like Poiré Romero, the level of confrontation in these areas is not as strong as it is in the northern states, where the Zetas are in a brutal fight with their former associate, the Gulf cartel.

The control of the southern states has allowed the cartel to expand beyond traditional drug-trafficking operations and into other illicit activities, such as smuggling goods via Guatemala and kidnapping and extortion of Central American immigrants ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)) and ([Jan. 5, 2011](#)).

Grupo Savant, a US-based think tank that analyzes drug-cartel operations in Mexico, said the Zetas' structure is different from that of other cartels. The organization, which has a direct presence in at least 28 Mexican cities, uses the franchising model, by which a member or group of members are sent to a geographic location to recruit local criminals to assist in the operations.

The Mexican government believes it might have dealt the Zetas a blow with the capture of Flavio Méndez Santiago, considered one of the founders of the organization.

As is the case with the capture of cartel leaders, someone else usually emerges to take the leadership role. This was the case with the Tijuana cartel. After leader Benjamín Arellano Félix was arrested, his brothers stepped up to lead the organization ([SourceMex, May 16, 2007](#)). And when a cartel is weakened, other drug-trafficking organizations move in to fill the void. Several cartels continue to fight for territorial control in Ciudad Juárez, which became open territory with the weakening of the Juárez cartel after the murder of its leader Amado Carrillo in 1997 ([SourceMex, July 16, 1997](#)).

Méndez, commonly known as El Amarillo, was detained in Oaxaca state in mid-January. With Méndez's capture, the PGR has now detained 20 of the 37 drug traffickers on the government's most wanted list. The Zeta leader ranked number 29.

Despite the government's success in capturing cartel leaders, one important trafficker has eluded it for a decade: El Chapo Guzmán Loera. The Sinaloa cartel boss escaped from the Puente Grande penitentiary in Jalisco state in 1991 inside a laundry truck with the help of workers at the prison ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 1991](#)). Since that time, Guzmán Loera has become one of the world's most

powerful traffickers, amassing a huge fortune from his drug operations. In 2009, Forbes magazine listed him among the 38 people considered the "new billionaires" ([SourceMex, March 18, 2009](#)).

Guzmán Loera has eluded law-enforcement authorities despite a US\$7 million reward for his capture and strong support from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). "We have personnel dedicated strictly to Chapo Guzmán. That's the importance we have placed on getting him," a top DEA official in Mexico said on the 10th anniversary of his escape.

Mexican officials suspect that the Sinaloa cartel leader might be hiding in the mountains that straddle Sinaloa and Durango states but are unable to get much information on his exact whereabouts. One report suggests that Guzmán moves among 10 to 15 locations and has a security detail of more than 300 people to protect him.

Additionally, the leader has gained the support of the local population with large donations for social projects and jobs for area residents. "With Chapo, he's got the whole Robin Hood thing going," the DEA official told The Associated Press. "People in close proximity to him might not be motivated to turn him in." [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 19, 2010, reported at 12.10 pesos per US\$1.00]

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