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Violent Mexico: Participatory and Multipolar Violence Associated with Organised Crime

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From 2007 to 2012 Mexico experienced a wave of violence and an unusual spike in homicides, much of it associated with organised crime and the state's response. While state actions were a significant trigger, violence in Mexico became participatory as many other actors came into play. Likewise, violence became multipolar as groups involved in the conflict became simultaneously victims and perpetrators. This paper examines the participatory and multipolar nature of the violence in Mexico using the "extremely violent societies" approach, considering not only the features and intensity of the conflict, but also changes in the type of violence and the participation of different actors and groups over time. With no single narrative about the violence in Mexico, this paper understands a series of "violences" converging simultaneously, and finds government policies both unsuccessful in tackling the violence and ineffective in addressing its social dimensions.

Mexico suffered a wave of insecurity stemming from the extreme violence in the six-month period from 2007 through 2012, where more than 120,000 deaths occurred,[1] a large number of which were caused by organised crime and the state's efforts to combat it in the so-called "drug war." Violence has targeted not only antagonistic members of criminal groups and state security personnel, but also public servants, journalists, and in many cases bystander citizens. In total, it is estimated that intentional homicides increased over 200 percent from 2007 through 2012, primarily provoked by violence associated with organised crime, which is considered to have caused at least 50 percent of all intentional homicides in the country.

The nature and characteristics of this wave of violence are complex because victims are not formally "combatants" in a large-scale armed conflict, and because there is no clear ideological, religious, or ethnic component as a driving factor, and because the conflict goes beyond political influence. This latter feature is extremely relevant because it marks a shift in the type of violence the country has otherwise experienced in its recent history.[2]

"Extremely violent societies" (EVS) is an approach used when traditional terms are too narrow to describe the causes of violence where various groups, along with the state, participate in and become victims of violence (Gerlach 2010). Under this framework, the objective of this paper is to expose the participatory and multipolar nature of violence largely associated with organised crime in Mexico, as a plurality of actors independently engage in violent actions despite state responses, becoming simultaneously victims and perpetrators.

1. Violent Mexico

The unusual increase in violence after 2007 shifted the characteristics of violence in Mexico's recent history. Certainly, the twentieth century was turbulent and full of

1 This analysis encompasses a six-year period from 2007 to 2012. The timeframe coincides almost entirely with the administration of President Felipe Calderón (December 2006 – November 2012), when violence related to organised crime activites abruptly intensified.

struggles of different kinds. The first half of the century was marked from the very beginning by major armed conflicts,[3] while the second was rather characterized by state repression of social movements, political dissidents, guerrilla groups, and any active opposition to the authoritarian model adopted by the state.[4] In all the latter cases, physical "mass violence" occurred against civilians outside formal armed conflicts,[5] with the state playing a direct role as the main orchestrator of violence.

By the 1980s Mexico was seeking to project an image of stability and development in a consolidating democracy, in a context of a sustained drop in homicide rates and modest economic growth. Nevertheless, by the 1990s the map of violence began to change as criminality and violent crime escalated due to economic instability and crisis (Ríos Cázares and Shirk 2007), and other types of violence emerged amidst the depletion of the authoritarian model adopted by the Mexican state (Márquez and Meyer 2014).

A series of economic crises between the 1980s and the 1990s were accompanied by sharp increases in certain forms of crime such as robbery and theft (Ríos Cázares and Shirk 2007), and by the mid-1990s violent crimes such as rape, other sexual offenses, and assault, started to steadily increase (Echarri Cánovas 2012).[6] The effects of growing crime reached beyond economic, physical, and psychological harms to victims. Since mid-1990s Mexican society has been in the grip of a collective sense of insecurity that led to a decrease in crime reporting, individual and mob vigilantism, mass protests, and the overall erosion of social capital (Parás 2007).[7]

Also in the mid-1990s, amidst one of the largest economic crises Mexico has experienced, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) emerged in the southern state of Chiapas, as an insurgent group demanding freedom, democracy, and autonomy for indigenous peoples (Cuninghame and Ballesteros Corona 1998). The state response was direct confrontation and paramilitary tactics to deter community support and sympathizers (DIA 1997, 1999; CIA 1998).[8]

The 1990s were also a breaking point for organised crime-related activity and violence, after the dismantling of the Guadalajara cartel in the late 1980s and the decline of its hegemonic leadership over drug trafficking in Mexico.[9]

Although drug trafficking groups in Mexico were traditionally rather small in size and influence, by the 1980s such organisations had grown stronger with just a few controlling most of the trafficking business in the country. The Guadalajara cartel, headed by Miguel Ángel Felix Gallardo and Rafael Caro Quintero, was the most powerful organisation at the time; while other smaller groups coexisted relatively peacefully controlling particular routes and territories

2 We should acknowledge arguments from Piccato (2013) and Knight (2013) regarding the political dimensions of homicides – or at least some homicides –. Piccato explores interconnections between crime and society in Mexico, and affirms all "homicide in post-revolutionary Mexico is political homicide" (Piccato 2013). Likewise, Knight explains the relationships between "mercenary violence" and political violence, where organised crime, despite being geared to economic profit, "cannot remain apolitical" (Knight 2013, 44).

3 Such as the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) or the *Cristero* War (1926–1929).

4 Examples of this kind of violence include the reactions of the Mexican government against the railroad strikes (1958–59), with mass arrests of hundreds of workers (Stevens 1974); the student massacre in Tlatelolco (1968) at hands of the military, members of the intelligence police (Dirección Federal de Seguridad, DFS) and an elite paramilitary group formed and trained by the government (*Batallón Olimpia*); or the systematic torture, forcible disappearance and killings of dissidents and political opponents in the 1960s and 1970s, known as the Dirty War (Doyle 2003, 2006).

5 Gerlach (2010, 1) explains mass violence as "widespread physical violence against non-combatants, that is, outside of immediate fighting between military or paramilitary personnel".

6 According to the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), violent crime is defined as those offenses which involve force or threat of force: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (FBI 2010).

7 The substantial social degradation and community harm can be seen in the mass murders by unknown perpetrators against specific types of victims. One example is the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, where more than four hundred young women – the exact number is still unclear – ranging in age from 16 to 24 have been mutilated, tortured, and raped, and their bodies left abandoned in the desert (Monarrez 2008).

8 The paramilitary presence eventually led to other religious, ethnic, social and political conflicts, as seen in the Acteal Massacre on 22 December 1997, when an alleged paramilitary group stormed a church in Acteal, Chiapas, and opened fire on the congregation, killing forty-five people, including fifteen children and four pregnant women, and injuring twenty-five others. The victims were from Las Abejas, a pacifist civil society organisation dedicated to protecting the rights of the indigenous people (Justice in Mexico 2013e).

9 For a more complete overview of this topic see: Grillo (2012); Astorga and Shirk (2010); Corcoran (2013), InSight Crime (2014a), among others.

(Astorga and Shirk 2010). These included the Gulf cartel founded by Juan Nepomuceno Guerra – and inherited by Juan García Abrego – and the Sinaloa cartel headed by Hector Palma "El Güero" (Blondie), who broke away from Guadalajara in the late 1980s (Astorga and Shirk 2010).

After the arrests of Caro Quintero in 1985 and Félix Gallardo in 1989, and the dismantling of the Guadalajara cartel, a new generation of organisations consolidated during the 1990s and early 2000s. The new drug powers were the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquin Guzmán Loera "El Chapo" (Shorty) and Ismael Zambada García "El Mayo" (following the capture of "El Güero" Palma in 1995); the Gulf cartel, led by Osiel Cárdenas Guillén (after García Abrego's arrest in 1995); and two emerging organisations, the Tijuana cartel, led by the Arellano Félix family, and the Juárez cartel, led by Amado Carrillo Fuentes (Astorga and Shirk 2010, 32–39).

Leadership transitions within criminal organisations and the reconfiguration of trafficking networks during the 1990s occurred relatively tranquilly, although peaceful coexistence was not to last, and the newly restructured organisations soon started fighting one another. Meanwhile, Mexican criminal organisations were gaining power as interdiction efforts by the United States to stop cocaine flows from South America through the Caribbean targeted Mexico as a strategic route for cocaine, and Mexican drug trafficking groups as key partners for Colombian cartels (Corcoran 2013).

Government counter-narcotic efforts since the 1980s contributed to the fragmentation of criminal organisations and, consequently, to a scattered distribution and integration of their structures, which eventually led to an intensification of violence. In 2000, Vicente Fox, the first president from an opposition party – the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) – succeeded to the presidency after seventy-five years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), following a series of victories by opposition parties at the local level and in the federal congress. While the equilibrium of political power was shifting, large criminal syndicates also started to break into smaller organisations due to competition and conflicts among rival groups, but also internal disputes intensified by imprisonment and/or killings of drug barons (Astorga and Shirk 2010, 40). At this stage the lines of participation in violence were blurring.

Certain forms of crime had been on the rise since the 1990s, and by the late 2000s the number of intentional homicides reached new and unprecedented levels, and violence invaded the daily life of Mexico, posing a serious internal security crisis.[10] In 2006, Mexico elected a new president, Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) also from the PAN, who had a clear intention – but not always a clear strategy – of dismantling criminal organisations by dismantling their leadership structures in order to fragment them into minor and more manageable groups. This "strategy" intensified pre-existing conflicts and generated others by creating smaller, less predictable, and more violent groups fighting fiercely for smaller turfs.

The upsurge in violence entirely changed the narrative of the country: large criminal organisations openly fighting against each other; a military-based security strategy; the use of heavy weaponry; and high profile victims were among the features of a tumultuous reality for Mexico at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

2. The Problem of Defining the Problem

Violence escalated to an unprecedented level, transforming Mexico from a generally non-violent supplier of drugs into a country where several regions have become war zones in a "very literal" way (Ríos 2013, 153). The situation began to seem less a metaphorical war, and more as a legitimate armed conflict within the meaning of international humanitarian law (Gallahue 2011, 39). The Conflict Barometer for 2012 prepared by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberger Institut für Internationale Konfliktforschung, HIIK), for example, categorised the situation as a "war" (HIIK 2013), while, the

10 Homicide has been used as a typical proxy to measure violence as a readily measurable, clearly defined and comparable indicator (UNODC 2014).

Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) documented at least ten non-state armed conflicts within the Mexican borders, at least four of them among the most intense worldwide (Sundberg, Eck, and Kreutz 2012). In all such conflicts, criminal groups play a fundamental role, in most cases independently of any state action or influence.

However, a rush to categorise the situation may risk turning it into a "rhetoric war" (Gallahue 2011). While public opinion, media, and sometimes the official discourse are increasingly inclined to refer to a "war," other more "traditional" approaches conceive the problem rather as an extreme – yet internal – situation of crime (Gallahue 2011). Given the great relevance of criminal structures, other experts have explored different approaches to categorising the nature of the conflict. Bunker and Sullivan (2010), and Grillo (2011), for example, have made the case for criminal insurgencies, where criminal "insurgent" groups subsist in low intensity conflicts, where appropriate responses by the state include the use of the armed forces and other elements of national security (Bunker 2013).

Certainly, criminal groups play an important role in this type of violence, despite a clear state influence in most cases. Violence in some forms and against some groups is not state-organised, it is rather caused by non-state actors, when even the state is not often a monolithic entity (Gerlach 2010, 280). Thus, a framework of study has to bear in mind that violence in certain regions could occur without or despite the state. In the case of Mexico, despite state action being a significant trigger of violent events, violence cannot be considered exclusively state-generated, as many other actors participated independently. Violence in Mexico became participatory and multipolar.

As well as broad participation and multi-victim groups, the types of violence increasingly used in Mexico, such as beheadings, public exposure of mutilated bodies, the extensive use of torture, and massive executions, and the number of resulting casualties coincide with the features of an EVS. The emerging concept of EVS is used to trace the social roots of mass violence when traditional terms are too narrow to describe causes of violence in its different forms and intensities (Gerlach 2010).

2.1 Mexico as an Extremely Violent Society

Gerlach (2006, 2010) explains EVS as "formations where *various population* groups become victims of massive physical violence, in which, acting together with organs of the state, *diverse social groups participate for a multitude of reasons*" (Gerlach 2010, 1). This approach understands mass violence as depending on broad and diverse support, based on a variety of motives and interests, spreading violence in different directions, forms, and intensities (Gerlach 2010, 1–2). This idea differs from a traditional conception of mass violence as carried out by the state, often called state-generated violence (SGV).

Structural violence and criminality occur often – but not always – in conjunction with EVS. Societies are not extremely violent in principle or by nature, rather they become violent through a temporary process – crisis – during which four characteristics are typically present (Gerlach 2006, 460):

a) Various victim groups,
b) Broad participation,
c) Multi-casualties, and
d) Great amount of physical violence.

Certainly the EVS framework is more descriptive than analytic. However, it is not just a vague definition of high-level or a general culture of violence, nor a description of cultural, systemic, or structural violence, nor a simple classification of ordinary criminal activity *per se* (Gerlach 2006, 460). Instead, it is an approach to think differently about mass violence relying on the analytical gains produced by empirical case studies. The case of Mexico exemplifies Gerlach's description of EVS, taking into account not only the features or intensity of the conflict, but also changes in the type of violence, and the participation of different actors and groups over time.

2.2 Violence and Organised Crime

Societies like Mexico face a kind of violence unrelated to state or religious violence, or racial conflict. Karstedt (2012, 505) explains that violent societies that did not suffer mass atrocities have certain common characteristics, such as high levels of state violence, high levels of organised crime (OC),[11] and/or on-going low-level political and ethnic con-

flicts. While many countries, especially in Latin America, have featured high levels of violence mainly because of armed conflicts, terrorist attacks, or state violence, others maintain high levels of violence largely caused by excessive homicide rates (Karstedt 2012, 507).

As homicide has been used as a reasonable proxy for violent crime as well as an indicator of levels of security within states (UNODC 2014), it has become a central element of the debate on the terminology used in relation to OC. Despite the widespread use of terms such as "drug-related homicide" or "organised crime-style homicide" there is no fundament or formal definition for them under current legislation that helps to differentiate them from common "intentional homicide"[12] As such, experts and authorities have opposed those classifications and have largely contended tallies of victims purportedly linked to organised criminal activities. (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014).[13]

Finckenauer (2005, 68) explains that defining OC is important because how the problem is defined determines how laws are framed, how investigations and prosecutions are conducted, how research is carried out, and how bi-national legal assistance functions. Certainly, the widespread use of terminology associated with OC by the media, government officials, scholars, and the public, brings significant challenges, since labelling violence based on specific characteristics not contemplated in legislation depends on some degree of subjective interpretation, particularly when the base definitions for a given classification are unclear (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014).

Van Dijk (2007, 41–42) suggests that the rate of unsolved homicides is an objective measure of OC activity, since perpetrators of regular homicides are in most cases arrested, but those responsible for "cool-blooded killings executed by organized crime" are not. Thus a good proxy of OC or "mob-related" violence can be calculated by deducting convictions for homicide from police-recorded homicides. While this proxy is certainly helpful for statistically determining the presence of OC in a society, it is still insufficient to determine the actual influence of OC in the death toll.

It is thus relevant to distinguish, at least analytically, certain homicides that bear distinctive features and patterns common amongst OCGs as OC-related. Characteristics include excessive physical violence, use of heavy weaponry, widespread use of torture, decapitation, mutilation of bodies, among others (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014). Indeed, there is a potential margin of error in classifying homicides as OC-related, although the analytical advantages are greater, especially considering that most homicides in the country will not be successfully investigated or prosecuted by authorities.[14]

3. Violence Associated with Organised Crime in Mexico

Official information suggests a decades-long downward trend in homicide rates in Mexico, a steady decline that reached its lowest values by the mid-2000s and until 2007, when there were just above 8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.[15] However, after 2007 killings increased significantly, maintaining a rising trend up until 2011 – the most violent year in Mexico's recent history with over 27,000 people killed and a murder rate close to 25 per 100,000 inhabitants (see Figure 1).[16]

11 Organised crime is referred hereafter as OC, and homicides presumably associated to organised crime as OC-style or OC-related homicides. An organised crime group will henceforth be referred as an OCG.

12 The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2001) has defined an "organized criminal group" as "a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences … in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit". Article 16 of Mexico's constitution also formally defines OC *(delincuencia organizada)* as "a de facto organization of three or more persons, [existing] in permanent or recurring form to commit crimes, according to the terms of the relevant area of the law" (CPEUM 2008). This situation do not, however, ease the problem of other crimes committed in connection with organised crime, especially homicide.

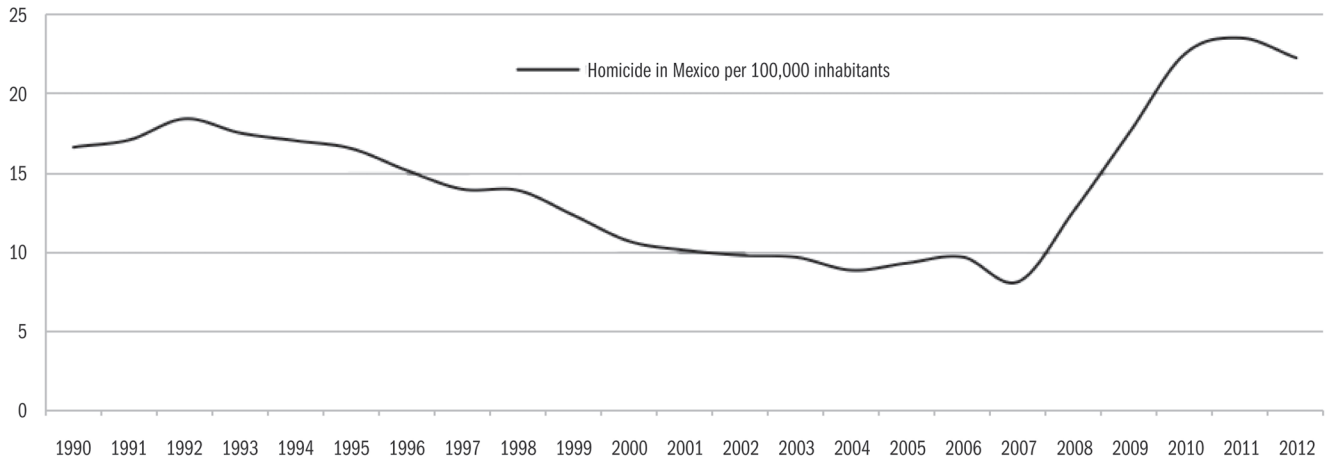
13 For instance, Molloy (2013) argues that tallies of OC-related homicides – mainly those generated by the government – are "politically-influenced and methodologically flawed". She states that the government started using "arbitrary criteria" and terms such as OC-related to legitimize the extremely high rate of homicides in the country. Since homicides occur for many reasons and with many distinctions, she believes that it is necessary to address all types of homicides instead.

14 As Van Dijk (2007, 40) explains, in countries where organised crime is most prevalent, investigations into such crimes will be affected and fewer prosecutions will be initiated or successfully completed. In this case low rates of investigations, prosecutions and convictions for organised crime – or corruption – may point to high prevalence of such crimes.

15 Data presented by the Global Study on Homicide 2013 (UNODC 2014) confirms the steadily declining trend in homicide rates in Mexico from earlier highs in the mid-1950s, and the further sudden increase since 2007.

16 This was a little above the average homicide rate in the region of about 21.4. Nonetheless, levels of violence are relatively lower in Mexico than in other countries in the Americas, and about average for the Western hemisphere. However, no other country in the hemisphere has seen such a large increase in the number or rate of homicides over the last decade (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014).

Figure 1: Homicide Rate in Mexico from 1990 through 2012



Sources: INEGI (2013); CONAPO (2014).

Based on official data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) and population estimates by the National Population Council (Consejo Nacional de Población, CONAPO), Figure 1 illustrates homicide rates in Mexico for a twenty-three-year period (1990–2012), showing a declining trend starting in the early 1990s up until 2007, and then a sudden increase.

Struggles between OCGs and the federal government strategy of direct confrontation appear to be two of the main factors for the dramatic intensification of violence. However, attributing increasing violence to OC can be complicated, because the widespread perception by itself provides no conclusive proof of OC activities, hence the need for proxy indicators (Van Dijk 2007, 41).

3.1 Organised Crime-style Homicides

Using datasets that distinguish regular homicides from those presumably linked to OC based on the abovementioned characteristics, we find that violent activities related to OC were relatively low before 2007. According to data from the National Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) OC-style homicides in 2001 represented only about 10 percent of total intentional homicides. In the six-year period from 2001 to 2006, CNDH reported a total of 8,901 OC-style killings, about 21 percent of all intentional homicides.

The year 2007 marked the beginning of a spike in homicide rates that reached its peak in 2011, when OC-style killings accounted for between 12,000 and 16,000 deaths – depending on the source – and total intentional homicides exceeded 25,000.[17] Overall, OC-style homicides could represent – depending on the source – around 40 percent to 60 percent of the more than 120,000 homicides from 2007 to 2012 (See Figure 2).

17 By 2012, however, homicides declined about 5 percent.

Figure 2: Comparison of OC-style with all intentional homicides.[18]

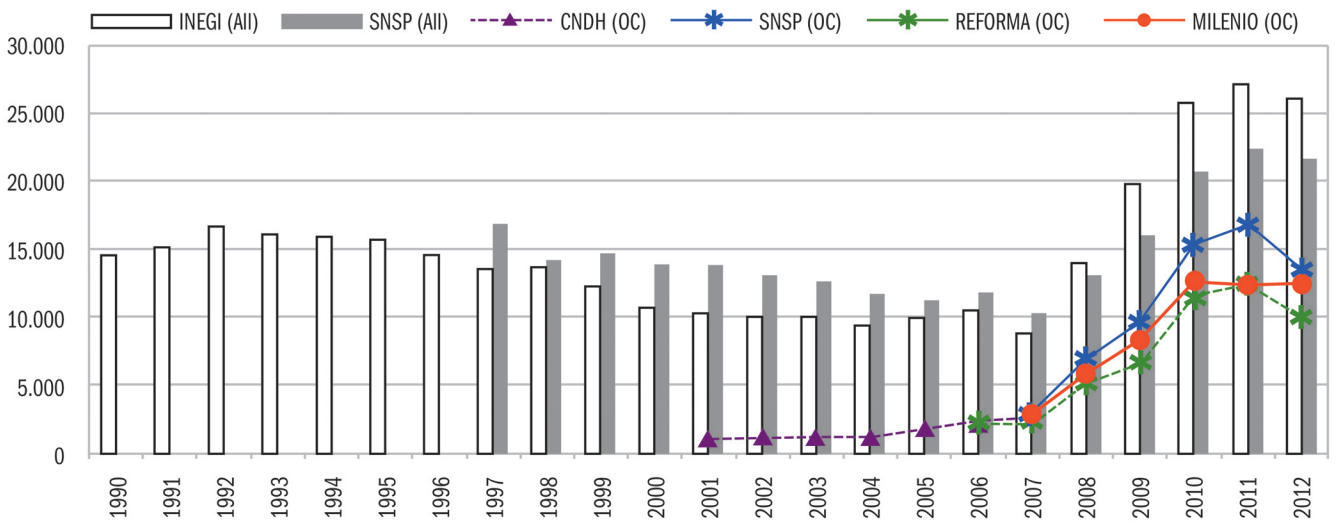


Figure reproduced from Heinle, Rodríguez and Shirk (2014).

Figure 2 illustrates overall numbers of homicides from two sources, the National Statistics Institute (INEGI) and the National System of Public Security (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, SNSP) (both governmental agencies, each represented by bars); and OC-style homicides tallied by different sources, such as the CNDH, national media outlets such as *Milenio* and *Reforma*, and the SNSP (each represented by lines). As the figure shows, the escalation of OC-style violence correlates closely with the increase in overall homicides. The total number of OC-style homicides documented by the Mexican government and other independent sources in the six-year period from 2007 to 2012 could reach between 45,000 and 65,000, representing more than half of all homicides.[19]

3.2 Turf Conflicts and Geographical Dispersion of Violence

Violence associated with OC spreads across times and regions, mainly triggered by the proliferation of internal conflicts and territorial disputes among OCGs. While in the past violence derived from OC and drug trafficking was largely concentrated in the northern region of the country, especially in the border municipalities with the United States, the intensification of conflicts also led to a geographical dispersion of violence to previously largely peaceful regions. Shifts within OCGs' operational structures and expansionist tendencies of criminal groups generated instability and fomented violence (Corcoran 2013).

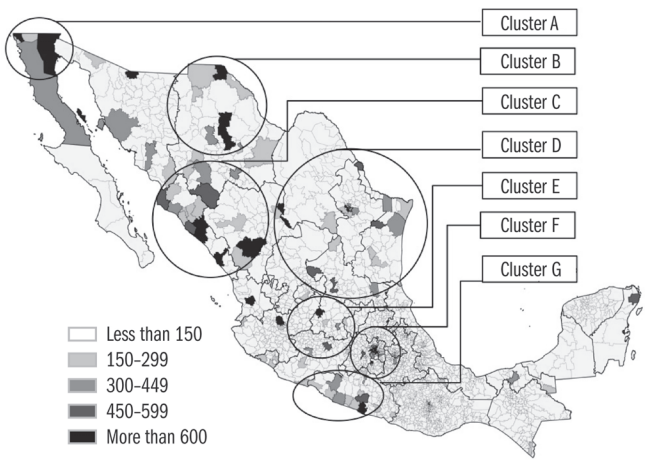
18 Figure 2 presents data from different governmental and independent sources. Data from the National Statistics Institute (INEGI) shows cases of deaths by homicide – either intentional or unintentional – as reported by coroners, and the National System of Public Security (SNSP) shows cases of crime investigations *(averiguaciones previas)* for intentional homicide as reported by State Attorney General's offices. Both sources represent all homicides without distinction based on characteristics or perpetrators, and are labelled in the chart as "all". The SNSP, the National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH) and Mexican national newspapers *Reforma* and *Milenio* also tally homicides presumably related to organised crime. Such sources count homicides with features that suggest their connection with OC, and thus are labelled in the chart as "OC". For more information on how government sources count and classify homicides see Echarri Cánovas (2012).

19 It should be acknowledged that data provided in Figure 2 might also suggest an increase in homicides not related to OC. An explanation for such variance could be hard to determine, as it could be attributable to different methodologies for data collection (Echarri Cánovas 2012), or even a more structured process of crime data reporting. Causes for an increase in homicides with no connection to organised crime could be related to other types of interpersonal violence which raise a completely different set of questions, because it represents a "more detached phenomenon, with its own autonomous dynamic" (Knight 2013, 15), even independent from upsurges in general criminality. For example, Piccato (2013) explains that homicide in Mexico in the twentieth century followed a downward trend, contrasting with the escalation of other crimes closely related to economical instability.

The number of municipalities with high rates of homicide also increased significantly starting in 2007, yet only about 10 percent of the 2,457 Mexican municipalities concentrated most of the country's homicides. The ten most violent municipalities contributed on average 40 percent of all intentional homicides each year (Molzahn, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2013). Municipalities throughout the country started to record unusual numbers of homicides and, in most cases, violence spilled over to neighbouring municipalities forming regional clusters sharing similar patterns..

Figure 3 shows clusters of municipalities that recorded significant levels of homicides in the timeframe between 2007 and 2012, followed by a description of events that might have caused such concentration of violence.[20]

Figure 3: Concentration of homicides by municipality from 2007 through 2012.



Map by author. Source: INEGI (2013).

Cluster A comprises Tijuana and neighbouring municipalities including the state capital Mexicali, in Baja California, on the border with California. For most of the 1990s and 2000s the Tijuana cartel, also known as the Arellano Felix Organization (AFO), was in control of this region.[21]

Major conflicts with the Sinaloa cartel started in the early 1990s, and against a federation of cartels – including Sinaloa – in the 2000s. Amidst the conflict, violence in this region was triggered by arrests and killings of top leaders of the AFO in the 1990s and 2000s (Astorga and Shirk 2010). The federal government responded to increasing violence by launching a major security operation named "*Operativo Conjunto Baja California*" or "*Operativo Tijuana*" in January of 2007, where the military took control of public security in the region (Merlos and González 2007), contributing to a generalized state of violence and insecurity.

In 2008 an important AFO lieutenant, Teodoro García Simental "El Teo", split from the organisation and launched an intense battle against former allies for control of the region (Astorga and Shirk 2010). At that time homicides spiked about 350 percent as compared to 2007, while complaints of violations of human rights by law enforcement and military personnel were also on the rise (Daly, Heinle, and Shirk 2012). The "El Teo" faction was soon dismantled by the capture of its leaders by Mexican authorities in early 2010, and after a brief spike, homicide rates started to decrease (Corcoran 2013).

While it is widely claimed – mainly by the government – that the decrease in violence was a result of a successful strategy by the authorities (Bailey 2010), it is believed that a truce negotiated by the Sinaloa cartel with still active AFO cells (InSight Crime 2014c) could be the real reason for the decrease in violence in the region (Corcoran 2013).[22]

20 Certainly a more in-depth spatial analysis – which is not the purpose of this study – would be needed to generate empirical proof on the causes of such clustering, especially to rule out other socioeconomic and demographic factors that have been shown to correlate with different types of homicide (Kubrin 2003). However, such an unusual concentration of homicides in certain regions suggests some connections to internal conflicts and territorial disputes among OCGs.

21 After the dismantling of the Guadalajara cartel, criminal regions and trafficking routes in Mexico were divided into smaller units by Félix Gallardo, with the idea that each "capo" would pay a quota to operate in another territory. The control of the region was not initially given to the AFO , however, the organisation asserted control over it, establishing its stronghold in Tijuana, the most important border crossing in Mexico (Corcoran 2013).

22 The Sinaloa cartel is considered the most powerful organization yet, and one of its leaders, "El Chapo" Guzmán, was once considered by the Forbes magazine one of the most wealthy and powerful men in the world. Based in the coastal state of Sinaloa in the North-Pacific region it is also one of the oldest organisations in Mexico. It is believed that the Sinaloa cartel controls most of the trafficking routes and criminal territories in Mexico. Its incursions into new markets and regions, and the aggressiveness to assert control over those territories generated some of the most violent conflicts throughout the country. "El Chapo" Guzmán was one of the most wanted criminals in the world until he was arrested in 2014 by the Mexican Navy. A year later, in July 2015, he escaped for the second time from a Mexican "maximum security" prison.

Cluster B includes Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and neighbouring municipalities in the northern state of Chihuahua, sharing a border with the U.S. state of Texas. For most of the 1990s and 2000s, this region was under the control of the Juárez cartel, a group based in Ciudad Juárez and considered in the 1990s – along with its leader Amado Carrillo Fuentes, "The Lord of the Skies" *(El Señor de los Cielos)* – the most powerful in Mexico, famous for their large aircraft fleet (Astorga and Shirk 2010).

The group was believed to be part of a criminal federation promoted by the Sinaloa cartel to set rules for territories and organisations (Astorga and Shirk 2010). However, the 2004 killing of two Sinaloan operatives in Ciudad Juárez by members of the Juárez cartel and further retaliation by Sinaloa broke the pact and started a conflict that escalated dramatically by the late 2000s (InSight Crime 2013a).[23]

It is believed that the Sinaloa cartel formally entered territory of the Juárez cartel in 2008, starting an open conflict for the city that incorporated ruthless operations conducted by small groups and local gangs utilized by cartels (Jones 2014). We find the enforcement arm *La Línea* (The Line) – composed mostly of former police officers – and the U.S. and Mexican street and prison gang *Barrio Azteca* or *Los Aztecas* (The Aztecs) fighting on behalf of the Juárez cartel, against gangs supported by the Sinaloa cartel such as the *Mexicles* and the *Artistas Asesinos* (Assassin Artists) – (El Diario 2014).[24]

In March 2008 the federal government launched another major security operation, "Operación Conjunta Chihuahua" (Joint Operation Chihuahua), followed by "Todos Somos Juárez" (We are all Juárez), where first the military and then the Federal Police took control of public security in the municipality, causing yet more outbreaks of violence (Castillo 2011) and complaints about human rights abuses (Daly, Heinle, and Shirk 2012).

Homicides saw an unprecedented increase, from 136 in 2007 to 2,738 in 2010, the bloodiest year. By 2011 the fight between Juárez and Sinaloa was considered the most intense armed conflict worldwide (UCDP 2012a). Homicides started to decrease suddenly in 2012 – with only about eight hundred that year – when the Sinaloa cartel reportedly managed to assert control over Juárez's territory, causing a general decline in violence (El Diario 2014).

Cluster C includes several municipalities of the states of Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa. This tri-state area is birthplace to the most important Mexican drug traffickers, also comprises the region known as the Golden Triangle, the epicentre of drug cultivation in Mexico, and is also the power base of the Sinaloa cartel (Astorga and Shirk 2010).

While the Mexican government conducted counter-narcotic operations in the region for decades,[25] violence here is not generally associated with state action, despite recent operations contributing to the intensification of conflicts (Corcoran 2013).[26] Struggles between the Sinaloa cartel, its former ally the Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO), and other OCGs trying to gain influence over the region are believed to have been the main reason for the increase in violence (InSight Crime 2013b).

The most violent municipality in the region is Culiacán, in Sinaloa, with an average population of 817,101 and an average homicide rate of over 63 from 2007 through 2012; overall the municipality recorded 2,614 homicides during this period.

Cluster D incorporates the northeast region comprising the border municipalities of the state of Tamaulipas, the metropolitan zone of Monterrey, and other municipalities in the states of Coahuila (principally Torreón) and San Luis Potosí. Violence in this region is largely associated with the

23 Astorga and Shirk (2010, 42) believe that the split between the Beltran Leyva Organisation (BLO) and the Sinaloa cartel also contributed to the conflict between Sinaloa and Juárez, though it is not clear how. They believe that actions by the Sinaloans might have posed a threat to both of their then partners, enabling the BLO to enlist the indirect support of Juárez. They also argue that Sinaloa's need for access to the Juárez-controlled smuggling routes might have simply became more intense, thus intensifying the fight to control them.

24 For a more thorough analysis of this topic see Jones (2014).

25 State actions in this region started back in the 1930s with anti-drug missions launched under President Lázaro Cárdenas, to destroy marijuana and poppy crops (Astorga and Shirk 2010).

26 The Mexican government launched an important operation in January 2007, the Golden Triangle Operation *(Operativo Triángulo Dorado)* to conduct surveillance of mountain roads and regions (El Siglo de Torreón 2007).

conflict that arose after the split between the Gulf cartel and its former allies the *Zetas*.

The Gulf cartel – also known by the acronym "CDG" from its Spanish name *Cartel del Golfo* – was created in the 1970s and is the oldest criminal organisation in Mexico. After the dismantling of the Guadalajara cartel, and the rise of Osiel Cárdenas Guillén as its leader, the CDG grew stronger and came to control drug trafficking routes in the Gulf of Mexico and into Texas. The CDG became more powerful with the incorporation of elite soldiers from the Mexican Army as an enforcement arm, a group known as *Los Zetas*. Nonetheless, the arrest of Cárdenas in 2003 and his subsequent extradition to the United States in 2007 caused a rift between the CDG and the *Zetas*, which eventually started to fight over control of territories in the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and elsewhere (InSight Crime 2014b).

The original *Zetas* were former members of a Mexican Army special operations elite squad, initially recruited by the CDG and its leader Osiel Cárdenas as bodyguards and enforcers. Due to their military training and discipline, they quickly became famous and started to move up the ranks within the organisation. Using a recruitment system borrowed from the special forces, the group also expanded by incorporating former *Kaibiles* – members of the Guatemalan Special Forces trained by the U.S. military to fight guerrillas. Its methods were unusual and unique in Mexico at that time, particularly the use of beheadings and the use of the letter "Z" left on their victim's bodies as a signature for branding and positioning strategy. After splitting from the CDG, the *Zetas* started a turf war for control of the Gulf coast and other regions around 2010 (Astorga and Shirk 2010). As the group grew stronger, it engaged in many regional conflicts in Mexican territory and into Central America, mainly – but not exclusively – with the Sinaloa cartel (InSight Crime 2012). Around 2010 the *Zetas* were considered to be amongst most powerful OCGs in Mexico.

Responses by the federal government as "Operativo Laguna Seguro" (Operation Safe Laguna), "Operativo Tamaulipas" (Operation Tamaulipas), and "Operativo Nuevo León Seguro" (Operation Safe Nuevo Leon) failed to alleviate the situation and actually intensified the conflict between the CDG and the *Zetas* by removing leaders and operators from both groups (Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015a).

The cities of Torreón in Coahuila, Monterrey in Nuevo León, and Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas were the most violent in the region and amongst the most violent nationwide. From 2007 to 2012 the average homicide rate in Torreón was close to 42 per 100,000 inhabitants (with an average population of 612,428); Monterrey had an average homicide rate of 30 (with an average population of 1,136,720); and Nuevo Laredo an average homicide rate of 35 (with an average population of 391,146). Altogether the three cities recorded 4,369 homicides from 2007 to 2012. As mentioned above, the concentration of violence in this region is largely associated with the conflict between the CDG and the *Zetas*, and in 2011 was considered to be among the ten most intense non-state armed conflicts in the world (UCDP 2012a).

Cluster E includes several municipalities in the states of Michoacán and Guanajuato. Violence in this region is associated with conflicts with and within the Michoacán Family (La Familia Michoacana, LFM),[27] and the Knights Templar Organization (KTO).[28] LFM was one of the organisations most affected by the strategy of President Calderón – a native of Michoacán – and was close to being completely dismantled by the government. After a series of operations by the federal government, including the

27 The "Michoacán Family" is an ideology-influenced group based in the central Pacific region of Michoacán, created from lieutenants that deserted from other OCGs. To assert control over the territory, the deserter cell created a "vigilante-style" group with a pseudo-evangelical indoctrination that ultimately gained control of Michoacán and the surrounding region. As the LFM became the reigning OCG in the state and other regions, they also used brutal tactics and abusive behaviour towards local population as other OCGs did, which was one of the main reasons for the creation of the LFM in the first place (InSight Crime 2013c).

28 Known in Spanish as *"La Órden de los Caballeros Templarios"* or simply *"Caballeros Templarios"*, this group formed after a split from the LFM, but retained the same ideological background and the same violent and brutal tactics. The KTO practically crushed their former LFM allies and asserted control over the regions they formerly commanded.

claimed killing of its top leader,[29] a group of former LFM lieutenants split to create the KTO that eventually reduced the LFM to scattered cells around the state of Michoacán and neighbouring states (InSight Crime 2013c). Like the LFM, the KTO engaged in violent practices against rivals and civilians, which led to the creation of small community-based vigilante groups known as *grupos de autodefensa* (self-defence groups), in an effort to expel the KTO and other OCGs from Michoacán (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014).

Cluster F includes Mexico City, municipalities of the State of Mexico and the state of Morelos. The most prominent organisation in this region was the BLO. The Beltrán Leyva brothers – founders of the BLO – were once part of the top leadership of the Sinaloa cartel, but split after the arrest of Alfredo Beltrán Leyva "El Mochomo" – whose capture was believed to have involved a betrayal by "El Chapo" Guzmán, leader of the Sinaloans. In retaliation the Beltran Leyva family ordered the killing of Guzmán's son. Within the Sinaloa cartel the BLO faction was in charge of financial and security operations, mainly coordinating money laundering and fighting with the Gulf cartel and the *Zetas* (InSight Crime 2013b).

A series of splits within the BLO after the 2009 killing of its top leader – Arturo Beltrán Leyva "El Barbas" (The Beard) – by the Mexican Navy in Morelos, created numerous smaller groups engaged in fighting over control of different municipalities (InSight Crime 2013b).

Violence in this particular region is associated with conflicts with and within BLO splinter cells, specially in the state of Morelos (Corcoran 2013) while in the other surrounding municipalities of the State of Mexico and in Mexico City groups including LFM, KTO, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, CJNG), and other groups are believed to have caused – and be causing – violence (Ramírez 2014).[30]

Cluster G is in the coastal region of Guerrero, and includes one of the Mexico's most important ports, Acapulco, and parts of Michoacán on the Pacific coast. Violence in the region has been associated mainly with conflicts with and within BLO splinter organizations (Justice in Mexico Project 2012g), the LFM, and the KTO, especially in Acapulco. The splinter organizations include: *Los Negros* (The Blacks), *Los Rojos* (The Reds), *Los Mazatlecos* (demonym for inhabitants of Maztalán in the state of Sinaloa), *Cartel del Pacífico Sur* or CPS (South-Pacific Cartel), *Cartel Independiente de Acapulco* or CIDA (Independent Cartel of Acapulco), and *La Barredora* (The Sweeper). The conflict between the last two was also considered one of the ten most intense non-state armed conflicts in 2011 (UCDP 2012a). In Acapulco alone, homicides exploded from 65 in 2007 to 1,152 in 2012.

Certain municipalities with similar or higher homicide rates were not clustered, while others were considered violent even though their violence levels were lower. For example, the Metropolitan Zone of Guadalajara had more than 2,200 homicides from 2007 to 2012, and the municipality of Tepic accounted for 850 homicides in the same period, in both cases mainly attributable to the fight between the *Zetas* and the CJNG (a splinter group of the Sinaloa cartel). This conflict was also considered one of the ten most intense non-state armed conflicts in 2011 (UCDP 2012a).

3.3 Fluctuation of Violence across Time and Regions

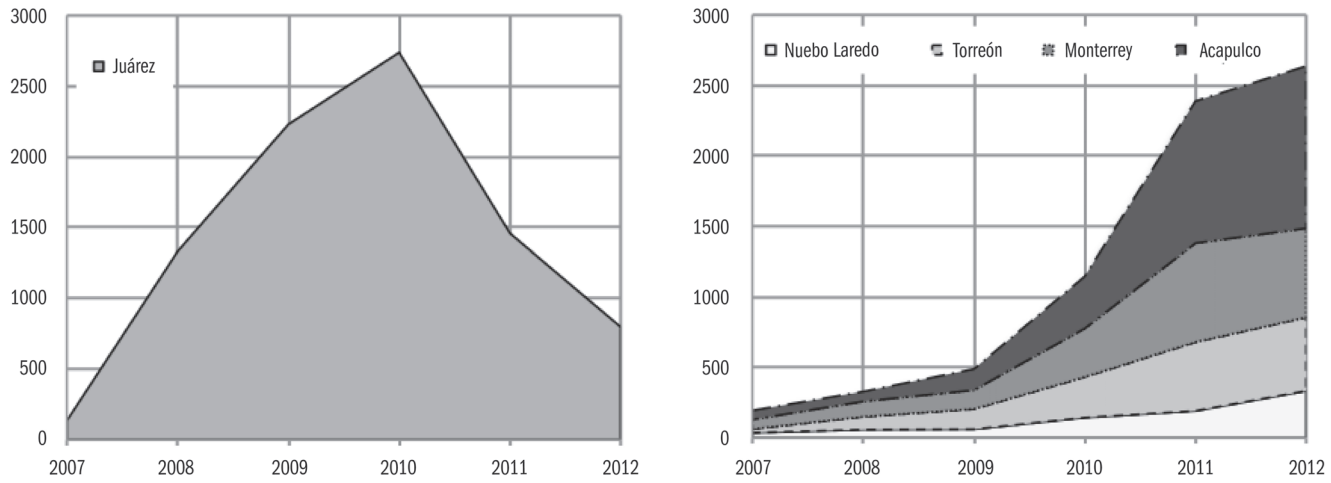
The geographical dispersion of violence into new regions coincided with decreasing levels in others. This illustrates the dynamics of OC-style violence that often concentrates in certain regions during particular periods of time and depending on situations such as arrests or killing of leaders, pacts, or invasion of territories. Moreover, a decrease or increase in violence in particular regions also significantly modifies the map of violence nationwide. In the case of Ciudad Juárez, for example, with only 1 percent of the national population, the number of homicides

29 The Calderón administration officially announced the killing of Nazario Moreno González "El Chayo" in December 2010, although the Mexican Army did not actually finally locate and kill him until 2014.

30 It most be noted that Figure 3 shows total number of homicides rather than rates. Thus high concentrations of violence in certain regions can also be attributed to high population density, especially in Mexico City and neighbouring municipalities of the State of Mexico, which is the most populated region of the country. This also has to be considered in the cases of Guadalajara and Monterrey, as the second- and third-largest cities.

between 2008 and 2010 represented 10 percent of the national total. The conflict that generated the escalation in Juárez thus represented a significant share of the violence nationwide, and its decrease indeed represented an important share of the drop in violence starting in 2012. However escalation in other regions such as Acapulco – the most violent municipality by 2012 – along with Torreón, Monterrey, and Nuevo Laredo (which altogether almost reached the levels of Juárez) overshadowed what could have been a more dramatic change in violence trends (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Municipalities with sudden increase and decrease in homicides from 2007 through 2012



Source: INEGI (2013).

Figure 4 presents a comparison of overall intentional homicides in five municipalities: Ciudad Juárez, Acapulco, Monterrey, Nuevo Laredo, and Torreón. The first chart shows a sharp increase in homicides in Juárez followed by a sudden decrease in 2010, whereas the second shows a dramatic increase in the other four municipalities starting around 2009. Such examples are paradigmatic. While Juárez accounted for more than 10 percent of the national total of homicides in 2010 and only 3 percent in 2012, Nuevo Laredo, Monterrey, Torreón, and Acapulco together represented only 4 percent of the national total in 2010, but 10 percent in 2012. As such, the sudden and dramatic diminution of violence in one place – Juárez for instance – did not represent a dramatic decrease in violence at the national level because of the upsurge of other conflicts apparently unrelated.

Violence associated with organised crime does not necessarily follow a clear pattern. While in some regions violence increases or drops suddenly, in others the tendency is more stable in spite of upward or downward trends. Moreover, drops in violence in one region coincide with increases in other – whether connected or not. Thus, despite being widespread, violence associated with OC is not homogeneous and often independent from region to region. Moreover, while intensified by state actions, conflicts seem to have subsisted independently from the state, as many of the bloodiest feuds have been precipitated not by state actions, but primarily by rivalry between OCGs (Corcoran 2013).

3.4 Transnational Nature

While violence has largely remained within national boundaries, the conflict has certainly been fuelled by illegal activities of a transnational nature. For example, most of the drugs trafficked in and through Mexico are intended for the U.S. market, and a significant portion of the actual drugs or their precursors come from other countries

(UNODC 2010). As a direct consequence, large amounts of cash are believed to cross the border southbound from the United States to finance OCGs' activities in Mexico (Farah 2010).

One of the best indicators of the transnational nature of the Mexican crisis of violence is the increasingly modern and sophisticated weapons, including high-calibre rifles, hand grenades, rocket launchers, and many other types of weapons, that are widely traded within illegal networks despite being forbidden in Mexico. Variants of the AK-47 and AR-15 and other high-calibre weapons are amongst the most widely used by Mexican criminal organisations, and most of them are trafficked from the United States (Goodman 2013).

It is estimated that between 2010 and 2012 around 253,000 firearms were purchased annually in the United States for the sole purpose of smuggling to Mexico. Only 14 percent were seized, almost entirely in Mexican territory by Mexican authorities (McDougal et al. 2013). According to the Mexican Ministry of Defence, between December 2006 and December 2012, a total of 387,007 weapons were seized in Mexico (SEDENA 2012, 38). Likewise, between 2007 and 2011 the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) received nearly one hundred thousand weapons seized in Mexico, of which about 70 percent where bought in the United States (ATF 2012).

The connection between transnational arms trafficking and violence in Mexico is simple; most of the victims of OC-style violence were killed by firearm. Estimations suggest that guns were used in around 95 percent of the OC-style homicides in Mexico (Justice in Mexico Project 2014).

4. Multipolar and Participatory Violence in Mexico

The participatory character of violence is "one of the main characteristics of an extremely violent society" (Gerlach 2010, 88). In some cases violence is not necessarily universal, but participation is widespread and diverse, with different groups having different motivations, often overlapping, as part of a web of interests creating a network of massive violence (Gerlach 2010, 21–87). As Karstedt (2012, 502) explains, the bulk of physical violence in an EVS occurs against several groups rather than one, and in a range of different forms that contribute to and merge into severe incidents of mass violence. Different groups join violent actions with different motives, where the state and its agencies are no longer predominant actors (Karstedt 2012). Likewise, in the context of EVS the traditional concept of victim blurs. "Victims and others are part of one interactive process, in which the former are not just passive or even reactive, but seek support, alliances or counteraction" (Gerlach 2010, 5).

Understanding the multipolar and participatory nature of the different situations of violence in Mexico through the EVS methodology helps to disregard common assumptions of two-sided violence between the state and criminal organisations, bearing in mind the different dynamics of victims and perpetrators. The EVS framework describes situations of violence where traditional terms are inadequate to describe the various causes, forms, and intensities, and covers societies like Mexico in which various groups, along with the state, participate for a multitude of reasons and become simultaneously perpetrators and victims of violence (Gerlach 2010).

4.1 State Responses to OC and Violence in Mexico

The upturn in violence in Mexico coincided with a series of actions carried out by the government. On 1 December 1 2006, Felipe Calderón assumed the presidency, and made clear from the very beginning his intentions to directly confront OCGs by increasing the involvement of the armed forces and federal security agencies. Just a couple of weeks after the new administration took office, forces from different agencies were deployed mainly to the states of Baja California, Guerrero, and Michoacán to restore order and counter rampant corruption among local public security agencies (Justice in Mexico Project 2006). This was the first move toward a large-scale strategy to fight organised crime head on, and the first signal sent by the new administration to OCGs growing in influence and power throughout the country.

Joint operations were conducted by the Mexican Army, the Federal Investigations Agency (Agencia Federal de Investigaciones, AFI), and the Federal Preventive Police (Policía

Federal Preventiva, PFP), entities considered less vulnerable to corruption and better trained and equipped than municipal and state police forces (Justice in Mexico Project 2006).[31]

The public security strategy headed by Calderón focused on strengthening federal security forces, specifically the army and the navy, whose budgets were almost doubled, and the Federal Police whose budget and personnel were tripled (García 2011). By deploying large numbers of forces from different agencies in different regions of the country the government hoped to directly confront OCGs, and to increase and improve – at least in theory – "intelligence work" to trace and crackdown on such organisations.

The government deemed it necessary to conduct special operations in certain regions of the country where the impact of violence and OC was higher. The Calderón administration launched more than ten special operations in specific regions, deploying a still unknown number of federal law enforcement and military operatives, taking over local public security in some cases, establishing social development programs, and assisting local law enforcement and governments. Meanwhile, the federal government kept the armed forces in charge of assisting local law enforcement agencies in other parts of the country.

Actions by the government did lead to relevant achievements in anti-narcotics efforts, such as crop eradications, drug seizures, and busts of tunnels along the U.S. border, and most importantly the capture – as of July 2012 – of 190,543 suspected criminals: 112,889 for drug related crimes, 8,453 for kidnapping, and 69,201 for other related crimes (Presidencia de la República 2012). Most importantly, around twenty-five of the most wanted kingpins were either arrested or killed during the Calderón administration (Gutiérrez 2012).

While war rhetoric became common in public and official discourse, the open use of the military in law enforcement became one of the most heavily criticised aspects of the federal strategy. President Calderón portrayed the actions of the federal government as a "war" against OC immediately after assuming the presidency (Becerril 2011),[32] perhaps as a misuse of the word or perhaps to switch the discourse after a highly contested and criticised election campaign. The tone of the discourse identified the state as the main motor of the so-called "drug war", and thus all achievements and fatalities were consequences of "effective" actions by the authorities. Likewise, on the other side of the spectrum, the state was also to blame for the results of a "failed war" that exacerbated the problem. The discourse was centred on the role of the state, and all the violence was somehow state-driven or state-generated.

Nevertheless, violence cannot be simply and solely explained by looking at the state (Gerlach 2010, 1), and while the Mexican state bears significant responsibility as an important generator of violence, violence did not subside exclusively as a result of state actions. Violence related to OC in Mexico goes far beyond a context of SGV, as other factors have influenced the violence dynamics.

4.2 Groups and Actors of Violence Associated with Organised Crime

In the context of violence associated with OC in Mexico, many groups became intertwined; from the members of OCGs to law enforcement authorities – including those colluding by means of corruption. Even the citizenry and popular culture play a role – albeit indirectly – by condemning or idolizing the actors in the conflict, or by engaging in illicit markets or joining an OCG. Yet the main actors of the conflict are still considered to be the OCGs and their members.[33]

OCGs are highly vulnerable to fragmentation. In the case of Mexico, structures that previously featured a significant

31 The PFP became the Federal Police and was one of the agencies that received more support and attention during the presidency of Calderon, significantly extending its powers (Rodriguez 2012). The AFI was eventually dismantled in 2012 and the Federal Ministerial Police (Policía Federal Ministerial, PFM) created in its place with different and smaller powers (JMP 2012a). Both the AFI and the Federal Police ended the Calderon administration amid scandals and serious allegations of corruption (JMP 2012b, 2013a).

32 President Calderon corrected himself and started to use the more neutral expression "fight" instead.

33 About 468,000 people reportedly work in drug trafficking in a variety of activities. Around twenty major and mid-level OCGs and countless lower level groups operate in Mexico (Garduño 2013).

degree of hierarchy and cohesion switched to a new scheme of fierce competition characterised by extreme violence, leading them to suffer major disruptions (Cockayne 2013, 14). As such, their internal structures and power lines became increasingly blurred, horizontal, and atomized.[34]

This process of disintegration of hegemonic networks diversified criminal organisations into different and varied organisations, such as big transnational groups often labelled cartels, mid-level gangs (often splinter groups from larger organisations), and street gangs, most of which are unknown to the general public (Corcoran 2013). Along with other specialised and hermetic groups, and individuals operating independently, this network of groups and organisations act in a sort of extended "supply chain" (Astorga and Shirk 2010, 40).

A new phenomenon appeared in Mexico after 2012. As a result of a growing crisis in the South Pacific coast – particularly in the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán – armed groups claiming to be grassroots self-defence organisations *(autodefensas)*, primarily from the agriculture and livestock sectors, started to clash with OCGs in response to relentless criminal activities and intimidation of local communities (Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk 2015b).[35]

Hence, due to constant change within OC structures, unceasing fragmentation caused in part by government's efforts to dismantle criminal networks, along with other inner dynamics of criminal rivalries and related factors, the plethora of actors of OC-related violence have collectively grown far more violent.

4.3 Types of Violence Associated with Organised Crime

The escalation of homicides associated with OC in Mexico was associated with unusual features of extreme violence such as torture, decapitations, bodies hanging from bridges, victims burned, human heads and limbs dispersed in public places. Mass burials, arson attacks, mass executions, open street fighting, and other forms of high-intensity violence became regular occurrences during the most intense years of the conflict.

OCGs use extreme violence against their rivals, often as a way to send a message or to cause fear in the society. According to an independent tally by the Mexican newspaper *Reforma*, the number of victims of homicide showing signs of torture and decapitation increased dramatically between 2008 and 2012, with more than 4,000 victims of torture and almost two thousand decapitated (increases of 190 percent and 260 percent respectively). The percentage of bodies left with a "narco-message" directed to government officials or rival cartels also grew by almost 220 percent to a total of 3,117 during the same period. Such brutality has been interpreted as an attempt to intimidate rival cartels and public security forces or as a way to send messages (Molzahn, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2013).

Features of violence amidst the drug war crisis have also included forms of SGV against members of OCGs and the citizenry through the use of torture or forced disappearances. Mexico registered a staggering increase in the number of complaints of human rights abuses after President Calderón took office and stepped up the deployment of troops throughout the country. In 2007 the CNDH registered 367 complaints against the Mexican Army, but in 2008 the number escalated to 1,230, and went on to reach 1,626 in 2011 (Daly, Heinle, and Shirk 2012).

4.4 The Victims of Violence Associated with Organised Crime

In Mexico, the majority of victims are still believed to be persons with ties to OC. However, this assumption is complicated and even dangerous since in most cases a proper investigation has not been initiated or concluded, and most cases are neither reported nor investigated. Inef-

34 Beittel (2013) suggests that such organization adapted and transformed themselves "from hierarchical and vertical organizations to become more multi-nodal and horizontal in their structure … [some adopting] … a more decentralized and networked model with independent cell-like structures that made it harder for law enforcement to dismantle" (33).

35 The Mexican government has since tried to incorporate such groups into local and federal law enforcement agencies, but at the same has systematically arrested some of their leaders for violations of federal laws (such as possessing military-grade weaponry). For more details on the *autodefensas* see: Heinle, Molzahn, and Shirk (2015).

fective actions by the state leave substantial lack of information, and thus a larger number of unknown victims; therefore no classification can be properly assigned to them. Nonetheless, data from government tallies of OC-style killings suggest that at least 90 percent of the victims are presumed to have some level of connection with OC (SEGOB 2013).

However, OC-related violence has also targeted high-profile public officials and other prominent figures, such as forty-five mayors or former mayors from various municipalities and seventy-four journalists and media workers killed between 2006 and 2012 (Justice in Mexico Project 2014).[36] Likewise, from 2008 thorough 2012, at least 2,700 police and members of the armed forces were killed – 2,539 members of various police forces and 204 members of the military (Molzahn, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2013).

Still, there are many gaps in the data on the victims of violence associated with OC. Both government and independent data exclude finer details that would lend a better understanding of violent crime. For example, there is no information about the authorship of killings, making it impossible to determine whether the victims were killed by the military or the police, or in clashes between OCGs.[37] Additionally, there are still many missing persons whose fate remains unknown.[38] Such blanks in information leave officials, experts, and the public with an incomplete picture of the violence, thus impeding a more accurate diagnosis of the problem and its possible solutions.

Therefore, the particular case of Mexico does not have clear victims or perpetrators. On the one hand, OCG members commit violence against rivals, law enforcement agents, and/or citizens; on the other, OCG members and their families are often victims of forced disappearances, torture, and/or extrajudicial executions conducted by law enforcement agencies and the military. In response to the state's inability to tame violence, civil society has taken up arms to form vigilante groups and community police forces to protect communities against OCGs, although they occasionally also target public officials. Meanwhile, OCGs frequently clash with vigilante groups, which in turn may find themselves persecuted by the authorities like any other OCG. Moreover, the number of complaints of violations of human rights by security forces in charge of combating organised crime has increased dramatically, in most cases targeting suspect criminals and innocents indiscriminately. Sadly, in many of these occurrences, citizen bystanders, undocumented migrants, minors, and other populations not related to the conflicts have been injured or killed. It is therefore clear that the case of Mexico blurs the lines of the traditional concept of a victim.

5. Conclusions

There is no single narrative about the violence in Mexico. Rather than defining the situation, it is essential to understand the different "violences" converging simultaneously, some of them connected and some of them not, some solvable and some not. Government actions significantly contributed to the rise in violence and conflicts throughout the country, though other actors played an even stronger role in the development of the series of conflicts. The dramatic increase in the number of intentional homicides in Mexico from 2007 to 2012 occurred in a context of actions carried out by the government to combat OC while OCGs battled to control territories and markets.

Mexico's reality is still plagued by violence. Even though the trajectory of violence appeared to reverse by 2012, OCGs still pose a significant problem; and even if the rate of homicides appears to have decreased, other crimes such as extortion and kidnapping are increasing (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014).

36 The phenomenon of homicides of mayors and former mayors is significant because as Mexico enjoys much greater political pluralism, and significant decentralization, the dynamics among OCGs have changed in ways that contribute to greater competition for influence at both the national and sub-national level (Shirk 2010). Competition for influence leads to corruption, and in many cases to killings of officials who resist the interests of OCGs.

37 As Van Dijk (2008) suggests, the number of homicides not cleared is a particular corollary of organised crime.

38 A widely cited estimate suggests more than twenty thousand persons missing from 2006 through 2012 (Heinle, Rodríguez, and Shirk 2014), yet it is still impossible to calculate the total number.

Furthermore, the situation started to evolve significantly in 2013. Following election of President Enrique Peña Nieto, which marked the return to power of the hegemonic party of the twentieth century, the PRI, geographical dispersion continued to be one of the most predominant features of the violence in Mexico, entering into territories that did not suffer from it in the past, but most strikingly returning to regions that were considered to have been pacified by the government, such as Ciudad Juárez or Tijuana. The network of violence however, reached new dimensions when the citizenry felt the need to take action by creating vigilante and self-defence groups, fighting to reduce the influence of OC in various regions in the states of Michoacán and Guerrero.

Certainly, violence in Mexico is not mainly state-driven. Several groups become victims at different times and under different circumstances. In cases like this, participation does not follow a clear pattern; motives include profit, social status, or a simple *modus vivendi*. There are not defined groups, and the line between victim and perpetrator blurs. Due to its features and intensity, its different types, and the participation of different actors and groups over time, in Mexico, violence associated with OC became participatory and multipolar.

The participatory character means that violence is not necessarily universal, and the participation is extensive and diverse, with different groups, different objectives, creating a network of violence. As we have seen, participation in violence ranges from the state to OCGs and even the civilian population. Causes for this participation are multiple, but some of the main factors are – though maybe not limited to:

a) The inner dynamics of OCGs, characterised by competition for markets, territories or feuds, personal rivalries, and internal fractures (Edmonds-Poli and Shirk 2012, 262);
b) Changes in the equilibrium of political power, mainly due to the reorganisation of public security institutions, and political alternation that generates new regional power realms (Astorga and Shirk 2010, 40);
c) Inner dynamics of domestic illicit markets (Ríos 2013); and
d) The context of shifts in the global geography of drug consumption, and changes in trafficking routes for creating new access to emerging markets (Sánchez 2012).

Furthermore, under certain conditions and environments, violence becomes multipolar insofar as various groups become simultaneous victims and perpetrators of massive physical violence. Often these environments are linked closely to forced disappearances, torture, and weapons and drug trafficking, and involve both military and paramilitary groups (Karstedt 2012). "Mass participation in these events spreads across the boundaries of different groups and blurs the lines between different types of involvement and non-involvement, as well as between the victimized and the persecuting groups" (500). Thus, given the changes in the nature of mass atrocity events, conceptualizations and perspectives have shifted.

Mexico's policies against OC have been unsuccessful, and simultaneously ineffective in addressing the social dimensions of violence and criminality as a whole. Despite the apparent downward trend in homicides, there has not been a reduction in insecurity and violence; moreover the country is experiencing a rise in other types of crimes. Thus it is fundamental to acknowledge that there are no effective general and short-term solutions to the web of violence in Mexico, although some of it could indeed be solvable. Each "violence" in this network follows a different logic, and thus any state and civil society response can only address part of the problem; moreover, any response could even escalate or generate more problems, as has been seen in Mexico. Hence, efforts are needed to lead current and future security policies to address the situation from a different perspective, considering the different actors, the different "violences" and their motifs independently, but comprehensively.

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