

# Seven Explanatory Approaches about the Increasing of Violence in Mexico

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**Abstract:** There is an increasing amount of research about the causes behind the extraordinary increase of violence in Mexico since 2007. In the current literature about this topic, various interpretations have emerged about why did homicides increased so quickly, which kind of events could unleash major violence and which structural conditions were necessary so that could happen. In this essay, I review this literature and I classify it in seven types of interpretations according to the kind of events that the authors emphasize as a main factor that explains the increasing of violence. The seven types are 1) governmental prosecution, 2) turf war, 3) state-federal lack of coordination, 4) state-weakness, 5) external influence, 6) economic dynamics and 7) State-Criminal war. Finally, I make a methodological suggestion to study the violence related to drug crime accordingly to the civil wars literature.

*Keywords:* armed conflicts, violence, war on drugs, militarization, organized crime.

## *Siete tesis explicativas sobre el aumento de la violencia en México*

**Resumen:** En los últimos años han surgido numerosas interpretaciones sobre el aumento drástico de homicidios cometidos en México a partir del año 2007. En las interpretaciones, diversos autores difieren sobre el factor detonante del aumento de la violencia, los diferentes eventos que pudieron haber sido causa de los aumentos más agudos y las condiciones

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estructurales que permitieron tales fenómenos. En este ensayo hago una revisión de estas interpretaciones, expuestas en la literatura especializada, y las clasifico —según el factor, evento o condición— en siete tesis explicativas: 1) acción gubernamental, 2) conflicto criminal, 3) descoordinación intergubernamental, 4) debilidad estatal, 5) influencia externa, 6) trasfondo socioeconómico y 7) guerra criminal contra el Estado. Finalmente, hago una propuesta de carácter metodológico desde la literatura de guerras civiles para comprender la violencia asociada a la guerra contra las drogas.

*Palabras clave:* conflictos armados, violencia, guerra contra las drogas, militarización, crimen organizado.

**B**ecause of the increasing of the homicide rate in Mexico since 2007, numerous interpretations have been presented about the causes of this phenomena. Statistics about the crisis of crime and violence in Mexico during the administration of president Calderón are astonishing. About 121 600 persons have died of homicide since 2007 (Guerrero, 2015); 12 990 persons have disappeared (Merino, 2015), and approximately more than 160 000 have been forcedly displaced (IDMC, 2012; Atuesta, 2014). This reversed the declining tendency of homicide rate in Mexico since the decade of 1990 (Hernández Bringas and Narro, 2010; Aburto, 2016). This increasing of violence was registered immediately after the Calderón administration deployed several military-police operations in different Mexican states. These events raised the question whether the government triggered the dramatic increase of violence in Mexico.

Even so, the public and academic debate about the increase of the homicide rate in Mexico did not settled in the casual relationship between the police-military operations and the increase of violence in numerous Mexican states. The academic debate has expanded to other topics such as the key factor behind violence, the various events of the Mexican war on drugs that could aggravate the crisis and the structural conditions that made this state of affairs possible. The literature about the Mexican war on drugs has reached to some consensus but also to important divergences that must be studied to understand this complex problem.

Because of the previously explained, in this essay I discuss the principal explanatory approaches about the origin and aggravation of violence in Mexico during the government of Felipe Calderón and the first years of the Enrique Peña Nieto's administration. With this propose I formulated analytic criteria in the literature of this topic accordingly to which variable, event or condition is considered the most relevant to the consulted authors.

With this analytic criterion, I classified the literature of violence of the Mexican war on drugs in seven explanatory approaches: 1) governmental prosecution, 2) turf war, 3) state-federal lack of coordination, 4) state-weakness, 5) external influence, 6) economic dynamics and 7) State-criminal war. Like any other interpretation, the analytic criterion used here it is a simplification and could be objected because of the discrepancies the authors I cite, or even so, if those scholars did not want to be inscribed in some kind of classification. Nevertheless, the studies about the recent spike of violence in Mexico tend to consider some factor, agency or circumstance as the main driver of this phenomena. Also, this classification helps to ordain the academic discussion with the objective to have a coherent review of literature for further investigations.

This essay is divided in seven sections accordingly to each explanatory approach and I make some methodological suggestions for the study of criminal violence in Mexico with the inspiration of the literature of civil wars in political science.

## **The increasing of the homicide rate in Mexico: seven explanatory approaches**

### **Governmental prosecution**

The scholars that have proposed the approach around governmental prosecution defend the thesis that the enforcement policies of Mexican federal government from 2006 caused the increasing of the homicide rate in Mexico. Based on this scholar's studies, the kingpin strategies and the military-police operations were the main strategies that caused this spike of violence.

Right from the beginning of the Mexican war on drugs, media commentators said that the Mexican government caused the increasing of homicides. Fernando Escalante (2009) answered to these opinions and initially affirmed that Mexico was not having a violence crisis using the data of the National Statistics Office in Mexico (INEGI). Nevertheless, Escalante noted that the homicide rate increased in 2006 but not in 2007. For Escalante, the public opinion was exaggerating but he also recognized that better data would change this assessment.

In the field of demography and public health surged the first academic investigation questioning the Mexican government on organized crime. Héctor Hernández Bringas and José Narro (2010) used data of homicides

from 2000 to 2008 and affirmed that, from a demographic perspective, was impossible to explain the increasing of the homicide rates if not considering the government policy. This authors sustained that the military-police operations were the main driver of the increasing of violence.

Later, Escalante (2009a) revised again the homicide data from INEGI in a *Nexos* magazine article and recognized that homicide rates were raising in certain regions of the country that he named as *violent territories*. After that article, Escalante (2011) claimed that the military-police operations were the cause of the increasing of violence in Mexico. Initially José Merino (2011a) refuted this conception, but later he agreed with Escalante (2011). This controversy was in part because of the usage of a government data of the Public Security National System (SNSP) office called “deceased persons in combats with organized crime”. This data base was severely questioned because it had several discrepancies with the INEGI data and the public health data of the Ministry of Health about homicides. Also, it was argued that this data base criminalized victims of violence as members of organized crime with any further investigation (Hope, 2012).

Four studies confirmed the hypothesis about the causality between military-police operations and the increasing of homicide rates. Morales (2012) reached to similar conclusion as Merino using propensity score matching with new control variables and data of homicides with firearms. Osorio (2015) found the same correlation using spatial regressions. Espinal and Larralde (2015) used complexity networks models and discovered that the epicenter of the increasing of violence took place in Uruapan, a town in Michoacán, a southern state. However, Espinosa and Rubin (2015) added an important fact: military-police operations did cause increasing of violence but in some cities happened the opposite.

These scholars propose two casual mechanism in which this operations cause violence. Firstly, drug related organizations react violently to an increase of military and police presence in the territory in which they operate. On the other hand, these operations increase of chances of detention of members of criminal organizations, therefore government affect equilibriums and trust inside and between criminal organizations, causing violent disputes of illegal markets and routes. In some cases, these operations obligate criminal organizations to displace themselves to other places where they find and dispute with the organizations already established there.

In the case of the kingpin strategy (developed by the DEA according with Kenney, 2005), many scholars affirmed that detention of leaders of

drug related criminal organizations caused acute spikes of the homicide rates (Hope, 2013). Guerrero (2012) claimed that this happened before the killing of Arturo Beltrán Leyva, leader of the Beltrán Leyva Organization, by the Mexican marines on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Phillips (2015) proved that homicides increase even more if the leader of the criminal organization is killed rather than detained. Also, Dickerson (2014) confirmed that homicides raise in the states where the criminal organization leader had his operations and in the municipality where the detention or killing happened. Calderón and others (2015) asserted that the spike of homicides after a killing or a detention usually had a duration of six months. Another case of this strategy was the detention of the leaders of the Arellano Félix organization (Jones, 2013). Notably, the Calderón administration detained or killed in combat more leaders of criminal organizations than any other administration before.

These scholars propose two casual mechanism in which the kingpin strategy causes violence. On one hand, criminal organizations react violently against police and military officers. On the other hand, the beheading of a criminal organizations creates a succession crisis for the leadership within the organization and makes that different factions of it fight for predominance. But this depends on the type of criminal organization. If the criminal organization is led by a family junta, it has less problems solving succession crisis because other family member takes the leadership. This happened with the Sinaloa organization. If the criminal organization is federation of mafias, two scenarios are possible: a new leader takes control through violence or the organization fragments itself in many other organizations in conflict. This happened with the Beltrán Leyva organization.

## Turf war

The authors of the second explanatory approach claimed that one of the main drivers of the increasing of homicide rates in Mexico was a turf war that was developing long before the first military-police operation deployed by the Calderón administration. Some of this authors were Calderón government officials and some others were scholars that challenged the hypothesis of governmental prosecution.

Alejandro Poiré (2011), then spokesman of the Mexican National Security Council, claimed that the military-police operations were not to blame of the increasing of violence in Mexico because the homicide rate was rais-

ing since the previous administration. Poiré argued that the Mexican drug related criminal organizations became greedier and therefore more inclined to use violence against other criminal organizations in order to capture new markets and routes of distribution of drugs. After that, Alejandra Sota, spokeswoman of the Calderón administration, and Miguel Messmacher (2012), undersecretary of finance of the Mexican government, used the controversial data base of the SNSP to prove Poiré's argument. Also, Poiré and María Teresa Martínez (2011) objected that the kingpin strategy caused the increasing of the homicide rates. To make this argument, Poiré and María Teresa Martínez used the SNSP data based with the case of the killing by the army of Ignacio Coronel, one of the leaders of the Sinaloa organization. Nevertheless, scholars criticized this studies for using the SNSP data base, and Franco (2011) checked the Poiré and Martínez study and found mistakes like lack of statistical significance of the models they used and problems of autocorrelation.

Joaquín Villalobos (2010), former guerrilla leader of the Nicaraguan guerrilla and adviser of president Calderón, published an essay in *Nexos* magazine arguing that military-police operations did not cause the increasing of the homicide rates because the Vicente Fox administration also deployed similar operations with no effects. Even so, Villalobos (2012) claimed that the fragmentation of criminal organizations in Mexico caused by the beheading strategy was in fact a turf war phenomena that happened before the Calderón administration. Alejandro Hope (2012a) replied Villalobos with the same argument that other scholars used on the studies of Poiré, the Villalobos arguments relied on the SNSP data base.

By contrast with this debate, other scholars used the INEGI data base and argued that homicide rate was raising before Calderón administration in some states (like Escalante found previously) and that there was indeed a turf war that had no direct involvement of the federal government. However, these scholars said that this turf war was accelerated by the intervention of the Calderón administration operations. Guerrero (2012a) and Ríos (2013) said that changes of the international drug markets caused a greedy turf war in Mexico. Vilalta (2014) used INEGI data and proved that homicide rates were increasing in some regions of Mexico before the beginning of the Calderón administration. Azaola (2012) also argued this with qualitative and historical information. Finally, Espinal and Larralde (2015) used networks analysis to establish the date of the beginning of the turf war in 2006, at the final months of Vicente Fox administration.

Turf war scholars have argued that criminal organizations do not change behavior only because of governmental action, these organizations have a conflict-cooperation dynamic between them depending on the circumstances. Also, they claimed that the Calderón government reacted to the increasing of violence in some regions of Mexico. However, these arguments have not disclaimed the studies that linked government operations and the kingpin strategy to the raising of homicide rates.

### State-federal lack of coordination

The researchers of the third explanatory approach attributed the rising of homicide rates to the lack of state-federal coordination of police agencies. Ríos (2012; 2013a) indicated that the lack of coordination between municipal, state and federal polices agencies created a scenario of a violent equilibrium between criminal organizations and the Mexican police agencies. Even so, Ríos argued that federal intervention was necessary. Urrusti (2012), Velázquez (2011), Durante and Gutiérrez (2013) also studied how lack of coordination in some municipalities created conditions in which violence roused. On the other hand, Durán Martínez (2015) proved that lack of intergovernmental coordination had more effect in the increasing of violence in Mexico because of the collapse of the security institutions in Mexico.

On the contrary to the scholars that argued that the lack of intergovernmental coordination was due to the vertical divided government because of Mexico's transition to democracy, Trejo and Ley (2015; 2016) claimed that the lack of coordination had to do more with selectivity of the federal government on which municipality protect rather than no cooperation of local governments. Trejo and Ley, with a new data base of assassination attempts against Mexican mayors and interviews with mayors and governors, proved that several local officials asked for federal assistance in security and it was denied, majorly because those were majors of opposition parties to Mexican president party, Nacional Action Party. Trejo and Ley also evidenced how local governments were threat by criminal organizations and how this governments had to pay from their budgets for protection to them.

From the perspective of Trejo and Ley, violence happened not because of lack of political will, it was a result of a political dispute between Calderón's administration and the left-wing opposition, contrary to the position of Ríos and Urrusti.

## State weakness

From the fourth explanatory approach, scholars rather than argue that violence increased because of some reason, they sustained that this spike in homicide rates needed structural conditions to happen. Grayson (2011) and Friedman (2008) claimed that Mexico was near to transform itself in a failed state controlled by criminal organizations. For both, the Mexican State was incapable to contain the violence of the Mexican turf war. Nevertheless, Friedman (2010) later recognized that the Mexican government had shown results on how it could manage the problem.

Several critics of the failed state literature disputed the Grayson and Friedman assertions. Morton (2012) criticized the usage of the failed state term because of this concept has generalizing and non-operative misconceptions coined from intelligence agencies of the United States about the supposed link between terrorism and failed states. Also, Rexton Kan (2011) considered that attributing to the weakness of Mexican State the main guilt over the rising of homicide rates was an exaggeration.

In agreement with this criticisms, Kenny and Serrano (2012) made an analytical assertion of the usage of the term failed state as a cause of Mexican violence and proposed instead the concept of collapse of the Mexican security system. In another sense, Serrano (2012) sustained that the Mexican State had a complex dynamic of contention with drug related criminal organizations. In this line of research, Pansters (2012) and Knight (2012) affirmed that the dynamic of the Mexican war against criminal organizations was part of a historical pattern of federal interventions on local settings where the local authorities had no capacities to contain violence problems, and that also reproduces violence in those regions. This concurs with the thesis of Tilly (1985) about how the State surged from the violent conflict between criminal organizations.

In this same line of research, Benítez (2015), Garay and Salcedo-Albarán (2012) argued that the weakness of the Mexican State created a vacuum which criminal organizations use to capture or corrupt public officials with their financial resources. This concurs with the Trejo and Ley argument. This reflects the classic argument of Skocpol (1979) about how State weakness creates conditions for revolutions.

Nevertheless, to date there are not empirical studies that use the concept of State weakness and its link with homicide rates. This task requires a new kind of panel data set which could show the effect of State weakness as a variable and not a constant.



## External influence

Some scholars found external influences to the Mexican rising of homicide rates. A part of them attributed to international policies of drug control had an enduring effect on the Mexican drug war, and others found the effects of changes in other markets such as maize or guns.

Some scholars have studied the effect of changes of prices of cocaine and methamphetamines on criminal organizations (Bagley, 2012; Palacio and Serrano, 2010; Astorga and Shirk, 2012). The pressure of the decrease of the prices of these drugs forced criminal organizations to seek violently new markets and routes to compensate financial losses. In agreement with this argument, Kenny and Serrano (2012b) affirm that military-police operations and leadership beheading are part of the Mexican and United States government strategy to reduce the offer of illegal drugs in the international market. Particularly, Castillo, Mejía and Restrepo (2014) proved that the Plan Colombia implemented since 1999 by the U.S. government affected the process of drugs and inflicted behavioral changes in the Mexican drug organizations, leading to the increasing of homicide rates in some regions of Mexico. Garzón and Bailey (2016) offer four some casual mechanism about how the changes in the international market of drugs create violence: 1) the “balloon effect”, that refers to spatial displacement of criminal organizations to new territories, 2) the “diaspora effect” that refers to displacement of criminal organizations to safe-heavens from government prosecution, 3) the “butterfly effect” that refers to displacements or criminal organizations connected but distant regions and 4) the “perforation effects” that refers to the budget allocation from crime prevention programs to prosecutorial policies.

Also, Dube, Dube and García Ponce (2013) found that the expiration of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban of 1994 in the United States in 2004 caused a spike of homicides at the northern municipalities of Mexico. The authors sustain that the end of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban opened a new market of weapons for criminal organizations in Mexico. Also, Dube, García Ponce and Thom (2014) documented how the decreasing of maize prices pushed Mexican farmers to produce marihuana crops.

Theses scholars do not discard the effects of president Calderón’s policies on violence in Mexico, but they offer a complex scenario in which many factors influenced the turf war in Mexico. These studies emphasize the role of the international prohibition regime of drugs in homicide rates

in Mexico and how it has regional effects in rural areas like Michoacán and Guerrero, or at the northern states.

### Economic dynamics

The economic explanatory approach authors sustain that is necessary to study the effects of economic and inequality variables and its effects on homicide rates. These researches, without discarding the other explanatory approaches, affirm that certain economic conditions were necessary for the violence crisis to happen.

Ramírez de Garay (2014) used different models to prove the relation between economic cycles and the homicide rate. Enamorado and colleagues (2014) found that homicide rates increased in municipalities where the Gini index was high. Merino (2013) and Gómez (2012) also documented that most homicide victims were young males with low literacy and frequently in underemployment conditions. Reguillo (2008; 2012) emphasized the Latin-American tendency of criminalization of youth. Also, Figueroa (2015) found a relationship between illegal markets and low development in Guerrero.

The homicide rates caused the decline of life expectancy of males in Mexico by two years (Aburto, 2016). Some researchers have insisted that this data could indicate that young males were recruited by criminal organizations (de Hoyos, 2016; Vilalta and Martínez, 2012; Corona, 2013; Murayama, 2012).

These results concur with the extensive literature about sociology of crime, inequality, unemployment, literacy rates as factors that cause social disorganization and violence in industrialized societies (Sampson and Goves, 1989; Fajnzylber, 2002; Krahn, 1986; Bourguignon, 2001). This research agenda should expand and deepen.

### State-Criminal War

A new branch of scholars has made comparisons between Mexico and countries in civil wars because of Mexico's increasing violence. These scholars have used analytic concepts of the civil wars literature to understand the criminal situation in Mexico. For example, Romero (2014) have used elements from the theory of civil wars to confirm that the Mexican government used media to project a war narrative against organized crime.

But mainly, these studies have created a debate about if Mexico's situation can be classified as a civil war. Aguilar Camín (2015) and Schedler

(2013) have claimed that Mexico is in a civil war. Schedler corrected his first claim and affirmed that Mexico is in a civil war but based on economic motivations, based on the work of Kaldor (2012). She used the case of Bosnia Herzegovina to prove her argument. In this line of argumentation, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) affirm that economic greed can be a sufficient motive to initiate a violent conflict. Also, Gutiérrez (2008) has confirmed this hypothesis for the Colombian case. Therefore, Schedler affirms that Mexico is in an economic civil war because there is a dispute between the Mexican government and criminal organizations for the control of illegal drug markets and extortion of legal economy.

Beyond of motivations, many authors have pointed that some economic and political conditions enable opportunities for criminal violence. Serrano (2012) affirmed that prohibition policy creates opportunities for violence in drug markets. Boix (2008) also claims that collapsed justice and police institutions create opportunities for violence.

Nevertheless, it is not facile to classify Mexico as a civil war. On one side, more than 121 thousand of murders (Guerrero, 2015) put Mexico as a country with an internal armed conflict accordingly with the University of Uppsala standards. The International Red Cross Committee classified Mexico as a country with an armed conflict. However, Kalyvas (2008), Sambanis (2004), Fearon and Laitin (2001) affirm that civil wars are inherently a political conflict because armed forces look for taking the control of government. Kalyvas (2001) criticized Kaldor approach, affirming that guerrillas could have economic interests but their main motivations are political.

Even so, scholars like Farer (2000) and Tokatlian (2010) affirm that several Latin American governments have adopted counter guerrilla strategies against drug criminal organizations, known as military warfare tactics (Kalyvas, 2005). Recently, Kalyvas (2015) affirmed that the Mexican case is not a civil war but rather a criminal war. The main actor it is not a guerilla, it is a criminal organization dedicated to the illegal economy, not dedicated to confronting the national government only if necessary for its economic priorities.

Another scholars have adopted the criminal war assertion of Kalyvas and applied it to the Mexican case. Lessing (2015) studied the violent criminal dynamics of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico and concluded that each conflict could be classified by the participants of the conflict and how violence is used. If the conflict is only between the criminal organizations and the government participates intermittently, therefore is a turf war. That is

the Brazil case. If the case involves actively criminal organizations and the government, therefore the conflict is a cartel state war. That is the case of Mexico and Colombia.

Two recent studies have used the concept of criminal war for regional cases of violence in Mexico. Zepeda (2016) exposed the motivations and opportunities used in civil wars literature (Boix, 2008) for the case of Tierra Caliente in Mexico. In that document, Zepeda argues that state weakness, inequality and external shocks functioned as opportunities for criminal organizations to initiate a criminal war. Specially, state weakness in Tierra Caliente is related to violence as the literature of state capacities has confirmed (Mann, 2008; Lange and Bailan, 2008). Pantoja (2016) studied how the use of war tactics against criminal organizations provoked violence in Guerrero. Several studies have pointed out the relation between violence and fragmentation tactics used by governments in civil wars (Pearlman and Gallagher, 2012; Woldermariam, 2011; Tamm, 2014). These studies searched more for casual mechanisms rather than causal relations between violence and warfare.

## Conclusions


Several debates surged in the literature of the increasing of violence in Mexico beyond the main driver of this phenomenon. Divergences are few and authors have recognized the simultaneously validity of this explanatory approaches. Nevertheless, there are too many theoretical and methodological perspectives and few explanations about why all these explanatory approaches are functional to explain the homicide rates.

Many methodological approaches were used to explain certain phenomena and situations like criminal leadership beheading or military police operations. These studies required certain specialized technics, but further studies require studying how this variable affect homicides in correlation with other control variables. This would require robust replication studies and delimitation of the complexity of the Mexican scenario.

Usually, these studies were mainly non-theoretical and applied. So, it would be necessary to study homicide rates in Mexico from sociology of crime and civil wars literature perspectives. These theories could help to ordain and make coherent the different studies made until now. Specially could be launched a line of research about criminal wars.

Part of the main controversies referred to the measurement of homicides in Mexico. There have been discussions about this in civil wars litera-

ture. Krause (2013) suggests that counting victims in armed conflicts it is more difficult because criminal actors tend to hide bodies of victims. This clearly can be noted in Mexico because of the increasing disappeared people rates and clandestine graves. It is possible that the studies that were mentioned here have a measurement bias because official statistics have not captured this information. Krause suggested that scholars must take this into account to study violence in armed conflicts. Also, it is necessary that researchers demand better data to authorities, even if there are some notable cases of researchers that created alternative data sets.

What do we need to know? It is necessary to have regional studies of violence in Mexico. Scholars have focused at northern states of Mexico and southern state beside the pacific but not all regions and their differences. Some of the variables here discussed could be effective to explain some regions but no others. I hope this essay could help to give some answers and perspectives to confront the public challenge of reduction of homicide rates and their painful consequences on Mexican society. 

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