Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime

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Principal Findings

What's new? Mexican mayors – who are prime targets of organised crime – have been moved to the rear in the fight to contain it. Local corruption and the sheer magnitude of violence prodded national authorities to strip municipal governments of power and turn to the military to oversee public safety.

Why does it matter? Mexican criminal groups have splintered, with the greatest risks of violence now centred in 80 municipalities where elections can trigger fierce battles for control. Fighting this scourge requires law enforcement attuned to the specific nature of local crime waves. Militarised and centralised policing is not well suited to this task.

What should be done? Town halls should strike a new generation of security cooperation agreements with other rungs of the state, reinforcing local police forces, ensuring a more efficient division of labour and enabling better intelligence sharing. These accords should feature strict anti-corruption controls.

Executive Summary

Mexico's booming criminal groups have turned the lowest rungs of the state into prime targets. Levels of criminal violence vary hugely among the country's 2,500 municipalities: some localities are havens of peace, while others suffer from fighting among illicit outfits, many of which seek to gain a foothold in town hall. As rival rackets splinter, thus multiplying, the intensified struggles are taking many local officials' lives. Yet sympathy for mayors is scant. Once seen as the flag-bearer of the transition from a one-party state to competitive democracy, local government is now among Mexico's most discredited institutions, widely viewed as a cradle of corruption. Federal authorities have increasingly wrested control away from local police and asked the military to lead in protecting the public. But municipal officials and law enforcement personnel often know the particulars of crime in their vicinities the best. Provided that they commit to anti-corruption measures, they should be given a fresh opportunity to join and shape state security initiatives through cooperation agreements with regional and national authorities.

Since former President Felipe Calderón embarked on a frontal offensive against drug cartels almost two decades ago, Mexico has suffered an overall increase in violent crime, notwithstanding tapering in recent years. The cluster of groups that held sway in the Calderón era have broken up, giving way to more than 200 criminal outfits, spread unevenly throughout the country. In states such as Guanajuato, Guerrero, Zacatecas and Michoacán, around 80 municipalities suffer sky-high rates of murder and other serious crimes, which are still rising as groups vie for control of routes for trafficking drugs and migrants, to name just two of the lucrative rackets that plague the country.

Each high-crime zone has its own specificities. But although, in theory, local governments should have the best information about how to approach law enforcement, they are the weakest link in attempts to curb violence. Once among the few parts of the Mexican state not ruled by the formerly hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), local governments have been through an ordeal in the country's transition to democracy from the 1990s onward. Criminal groups had previously complied in large part with informal diktats from the central state. But electoral competition and the emergence of federal, regional and municipal authorities run by rival political forces created incentives for illegal outfits to focus their firepower at the most vulnerable levels of government.

Town halls and municipal police stations often proved helpless to resist. Criminal groups killed hundreds of mayors, councillors and local candidates. Reports of connivance among officials, security forces and criminal groups proliferated. National authorities blamed the notorious disappearance of 43 teaching trainees from the village of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero state, in 2014 on collusion among the local mayor, the police under his command and a criminal band. The president, Enrique Peña Nieto, announced soon thereafter that all municipal police forces would be disbanded.

Congress blocked that move, but the reputation of local police and mayors has not recovered from the battering it has taken over the past two decades. Successive Mexican presidents have experimented with ways to subordinate mayors and municipal

police to central power. A number of local police forces have become adjuncts of state or federal police. Several others have been brought under military command. Budgets for local security forces have been cut to the bone, particularly under the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has ploughed additional funding into the armed forces. Local governments have tended to go along with this trend, sometimes delegating powers to the state or federal government, and other times bringing in military officers to head the local police. Reasons vary. Some need the resources that in certain cases become available or a channel of communication to higher echelons of the state and military; some do it simply because they want to avoid blame if violence mounts in their vicinity.

Amid these changes, the killings of mayors and other local officials have gone on unabated: 65 have been murdered since López Obrador took power in 2018. Local and regional elections in 2021 brought further bloodshed, and 2024, when the country will stage local, regional and presidential elections, could be as bad.

There is an alternative to the pattern whereby local government is denied real authority but held responsible for rising crime – all the while remaining tormented by criminal groups. A number of mayors have signed cooperation agreements with other parts of the state, civil society groups or technical experts, with the aim of strengthening rather than hollowing out local security forces. Data analysis suggests these accords can generate a marked reduction in murder rates, above all when they involve training, intelligence sharing, crime prevention (which includes schemes to make public spaces safer, resolve disputes, raise awareness of illicit activity, and improve employment and leisure opportunities) and a clearer division of labour among security forces. This approach, of course, risks devolving power to local authorities prone to corruption. Still, there are examples of cooperation agreements that balance the need to harness local intelligence, professionalise municipal police and watch for misuse of resources.

President López Obrador will likely be reluctant to let go of security powers or work more closely with political opponents, but he and his successor (to be elected in 2024 when López Obrador, as per the constitution, will have to step down) should acknowledge the likely benefits of such a new generation of agreements. If carefully designed and applied, these accords could be replicated throughout Mexico, enabling authorities to respond in a more coordinated and effective fashion to local outbreaks of violence, instead of relying on the stock response of deploying the military or National Guard.

With lethal violence in Mexico still hovering close to historical highs, public demands for protection from criminal predation will remain a fixture of political life at every level of government. The country's criminal landscape is now made up of a multitude of local territorial battles, waged at a dire human cost. Though their reputations are not unstained, local governments should be given the chance to play a more prominent role in responding, and in so doing to bring greater security to communities much in need.

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I. Introduction

While the disturbing rise in violent crime throughout Mexico that accompanied the "war on drugs" has slowed somewhat in recent years, a number of places have seen no respite. The total number of recorded homicides in Mexico has fallen from 34,563 in 2020 to 30,968 in 2022, and several other types of crime have followed a downward trend since 2017.[1] But murder rates remain high by any standard, with femicides still at all-time highs, while the mainstays of organised crime, such as extortion and drug-related offences, have not ebbed.[2] At the same time, parts of Mexico have enjoyed no decline at all in lethal violence, which has become ever more concentrated in around 30 per cent of the country's municipalities.[3]

Traditionally, organised crime groups clustered in sites of strategic value to the transnational drug trade. Affected municipalities tended to be urban, with populations ranging between 300,000 and 1.5 million. They generally lay along major highways that are either entry points to the U.S. or close to seaports used to ship out drugs.[4] But today, criminal groups have set their sights wider, moving into several smaller municipalities, which, though often poorer, still have financial resources to extract and businesses to shake down, and infiltrating government.

This change in criminal dynamics is integrally related to Mexico's political transformation over the past few decades. In seeking to harness town halls and exploit their powers, criminal outfits have capitalised on the increased political and electoral competition that accompanied Mexico's decades-long democratic transition.[5] Local governments were at the crux of the shift away from one-party rule under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). States and municipalities were the first layers of public authority to host genuinely competitive polls, leading to election of candidates opposing the PRI from the 1980s onward. These local successes at the polls and a series of electoral reforms culminated in the 2000 general elections, in which the PRI lost the presidency after 71 years in office.[6]

[1] Homicide figures from Secretariat of Public Security. "2022 cierra con menos homicidios, pero este gobierno ya es de los más violentos", *Expansión Política*, 17 January 2023.
[2] Clare Ribando Seelke, "Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations", Congressional Research Service, 17 May 2023.
[3] Criminal groups are present in nearly 30 per cent of the country's municipalities. Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs', Explained", 4 May 2022.
[4] Melissa Dell, "Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug War", *The American Economic Review*, vol. 105, no. 6, (2015), p. 1743.
[5] Sandra Ley and Guillermo Trejo, *Votes, Drugs and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge, 2020). Crisis Group Latin America Report N°89, *Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land*, 2 June 2021.
[6] Mexico's democratic transition also featured crucial electoral reforms at the national level. In 1977, responding to complaints that the electoral system was unfair, the PRI government introduced a reform allowing for proportional representation in the Chamber of Deputies. As the opposition con-

Emancipated from the confines of one-party rule, local governments were soon confronted with another threat to their independence: organised crime in the shape of large drug cartels. From their beginnings, illegal outfits had been used to operating under the aegis of an authoritarian state that allowed them to function so long as they conformed to certain conditions and respected their political masters.[7] But as opposition candidates assumed elected posts in various states and municipalities, the system of informal control of crime eroded, giving rise in its stead to violent competition among outfits for influence over state authorities.[8] The turf wars spread to more regions, intensifying during state and municipal elections.

For local governments, the effects of this wave of criminal competition have been ruinous. A number of municipalities have found themselves ill equipped and unprepared to curb the influence of myriad illegal groups battling to control territory, co-opt state officials and exert influence over private firms. A total of 220 mayors and local councillors were murdered in the period from 2006, when former President Felipe Calderón escalated the "war on drugs", to the end of 2022, largely as part of plots to remove local obstacles to criminal control.[9] At the same time, corruption among mayors, town hall officials and councillors has grown so notorious that local government has become one of the least trusted institutions in the country.[10] As discussed below, the corrosion of public trust has contributed to the national government's loss of confidence in local law enforcement and usurpation, in many places, of its authorities.

This report explores the difficulties of numerous Mexican municipalities as they face both the threat of violent crime and the federal drive to strip them of security powers. In particular, it looks at the actual and potential role of security cooperation

tinued to challenge the PRI, another reform in 1986 granted more autonomy to the Federal Electoral Commission. The contentious 1988 presidential poll, marked by fraud allegations and the rise of a robust opposition, led to the establishment in 1990 of the Federal Electoral Institute. Alternation of power at the local level dates back further. The opposition National Action Party (PAN) won its first local poll in 1947, in the municipality of Quiroga, Michoacán, and triumphed in other municipalities in the states of Chihuahua, Nuevo León and Guanajuato during the 1970s and 1980s. See Nora Hamilton and Patrice Olsen, "Mexico: The Evolution of a Multiparty State", in Roderic Camp (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics* (New York, 2021); and Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule", *Comparative Political Studies,* vol. 41, no. 4-5 (2008).

[7] Detailed historical accounts of this system's workings can be found in Luis Astorga, *Drogas sin fronteras* (Mexico City, 2003), and Carlos Flores Pérez, *Historias de polvo y sangre: Génesis y evolución del tráfico de Drogas en el estado de Tamaulipas* (Mexico City, 2013). A crucial moment in the disintegration of the PRI's system of control of organised crime came in 1985, when the state disbanded the Federal Security Directorate.

[8] Luis Astorga, *El Siglo de las Drogas: El Narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al Nuevo Milenio* (Mexico City, 2005); Javier Osorio, "The Contagion of Drug Violence: Spatiotemporal Dynamics of the Mexican War on Drugs", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 59, no. 8 (2015); and Ley and Trejo, *Votes, Drugs and Violence*, op. cit.

[9] "Indicador de violencia política en México, atentados contra ediles (2000-2022)", Etellekt, 30 December 2022.

[10] Mayors are perceived as the second most corrupt government officials (after state governors) in Mexico. Public scepticism of them rose most sharply from 2019 to 2021, when the proportion of Mexican citizens who believe mayors are corrupt increased from 49 per cent to 62 per cent. Traffic police, who are municipal officers, are perceived as more corrupt than any other institution but political parties. "Tercera Encuesta Nacional Sobre Corrupción e Impunidad", Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, 2021.

agreements in strengthening collaboration between local law enforcement and higher levels of government. It is based on 62 remote and in-person interviews between May 2022 and February 2023 with Mexican officials at the federal, state and municipal levels, civil society figures and academic experts, as well as former organised crime members. The report also draws upon prior Crisis Group reporting on criminal violence in Mexico, open-source security data and datasets regarding the presence of criminal organisations as well as security agreements between local governments and their higher-level counterparts.[11]

[11] See Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs', Explained", op. cit.; Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°46, *Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket*, 25 March 2022; Crisis Group Report, *Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°69, *Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, 11 October 2018.

II. Crime and the Local State in Mexico

Crime and policing have undergone huge change over the past two decades in Mexico. The Mexican state's "war on drugs" splintered major cartels into smaller groups, creating a lethal tangle of big and small organisations fighting over old and new turf. Not all towns and cities have been affected in the same way; in recent years, the mayhem has moved to a host of medium-sized cities unaccustomed to such high rates of violence.[12] Political leaders in these battleground municipalities, often ill equipped for the challenges they face, sometimes fall in with the groups that are preying on them. At other times, they are among the victims of the violence that besets their communities. The federal state for its part has generally responded by shifting policing duties and command from local authorities to national forces, above all the military.

A. *The New Map of Crime*

Mexico has 2,469 municipalities, of which 361 suffer middle to high levels of homicide, while 80 endure extremely high annual homicide rates of at least 40 per 100,000 inhabitants (see Figure 1 for the categorisation of municipalities according to levels of violence, and Figure 2 for their distribution throughout Mexico).[13] As noted in Figure 3, in the majority of the most violent municipalities several criminal groups are vying for territorial control.[14]

While law enforcement has tended to focus its efforts on combating large drug trafficking operations, a growing number of criminal outfits have sought to diversify into new rackets, extracting profits from licit commodity production and distribution as well as fuel theft.[15] In the state of Michoacán, for example, criminal outfits have relied

[12] The Citizen Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice reports that in 2022 Mexico was home to nine of the ten most dangerous cities in the world. These cities, with their respective homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants, include: Colima (182), Zamora (178), Ciudad Obregón (138), Zacatecas (135), Tijuana (105), Celaya (100), Uruapan (78), Ciudad Juárez (68) and Acapulco (66). Seven other Mexican cities are found in the top 50, including Irapuato (62), Cuernavaca (60), Cancún (44), Chihuahua (44), Morelia (42), León (38), Ensenada (35) and San Luis Potosí (29). "Ranking 2022 de las 50 ciudades más violentas del mundo", The Citizen Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, 20 February 2023.

[13] For an explanation of the statistical analysis behind Figures 1 and 2, see Appendix A. The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) reports that there are now 2,469 municipalities, but crime data is available only for 2,457, which represents the total number of municipalities used in the data analysis in this report. The disparity comes from the recent demarcation of new municipalities.

[14] At the regional level, as shown in Figure 2, of Mexico's 32 states violence is concentrated in the states of Colima, Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato and Zacatecas, as well as Sonora and Chihuahua. Guanajuato ranks as the country's most deadly state with the highest number of fatalities in 2022. Gender-based violence also tends to reach its highest levels in these places. See Angélica Ospina-Escobar, "'I Don't Want to Disappear': How Mexico's Criminal Violence Reshapes Women's Lives", Crisis Group Commentary, 19 April 2023.

[15] Criminal groups are increasingly reliant on kidnapping, extortion and human trafficking, as well as extracting income from commodity exports and fuel theft. See Falko Ernst, "On the Front Lines of the Hot Land: Mexico's Incessant Conflict", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 April 2022; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket*, op. cit. See also Marco Alcocer, "Drug Wars, Organised Crime Expansion and State Capture: Evidence from Mexico", UCSD Working Paper, 2022.

heavily on rents milked from four cash cows: avocados, lime, iron ore, and control of exports and imports from the port of Lázaro Cárdenas. In Guanajuato, Mexico's most violent state at present, a turf war between the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel, an organisation specialised in oil theft that has broadened its portfolio to include drug trafficking, and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has been the main driver of killings, including the 2022 massacre of twelve people in the city of Irapuato.[16]

Lethal violence is far from the only sort of crime affecting the country. Common crimes are usually perpetrated by gangs (*pandillas* or *clickas*), or smaller criminal groups that commit robbery, theft and assault as well as extortion, kidnapping and street-level drug dealing.[17] Certain municipalities, for instance in the states of Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo, have seen sharp increases in such common crime even though these same areas suffer low levels of lethal violence (see Figure 4).[18] In other cases, these smaller rackets overlap with those of more powerful criminal organisations, with gangs often playing a front-line role in driving spikes of homicidal violence.

Monterrey, in the north of Mexico, offers an example of the new configuration of crime. The wealthiest city in the country in terms of income per capita, it experienced a sharp rise in homicides as a result of inter-gang violence in 2022. A gang member in the city observed that larger criminal groups look to smaller outfits to sell drugs locally. But "only one or two [gang members] are related to cartels and they are the ones responsible for the [drug] sales points in the neighbourhood, and, in some cases, are hired as *sicarios* (hit men)".[19]

Striking local and regional variations in crime underline the challenges faced by local governments in areas of extreme insecurity. Municipalities can be broadly classified into three categories as regards patterns of violence. A number suffer primarily from common criminal offences unrelated to organised crime; others experience high levels of organised and common crime, with connections between the two; while a last set of municipalities primarily contend with organised crime. Senior law enforcement officials have warned that a rising number of municipalities are at a risk of falling into the last category as emboldened criminal groups take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental disasters and rising demand for drugs such as fentanyl and methamphetamine in the U.S. to tighten their grip on additional patches of territory.[20]

[16] "Masacre en Guanajuato: sicarios ejecutaron a 12 personas en bar de Irapuato", Infobae, 16 October 2022.

[17] Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Monterrey, 24 February 2023.

[18] Common crimes are severely underreported; close to 95 per cent are not disclosed to authorities, according to the National Survey of Victimisation and Perception of Public Safety (ENVIPE). Common crime rates were adjusted to account for this issue. For an explanation of the statistical analysis behind Figure 4, see Appendix A.

[19] Crisis Group interview, former gang member, Monterrey, 24 February 2023.

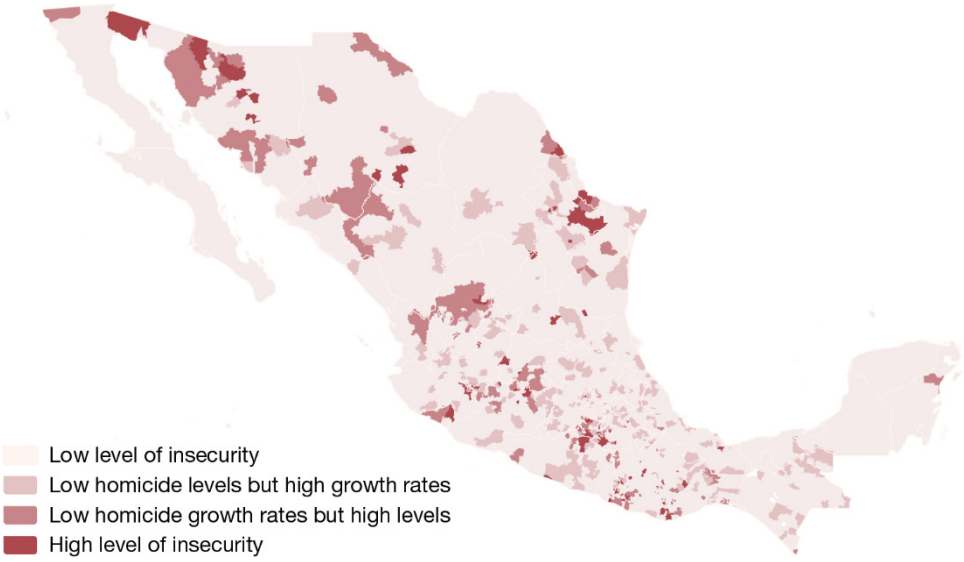
[20] Crisis Group telephone interview, senior National Guard official, 7 September 2022. According to a Mexican army general, "there is a worrisome expectation of an increase in organised crime-related violence in 2023 as signs of inter-criminal group rivalry have been detected in the states of Colima, Jalisco, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Tamaulipas and Sonora". Crisis Group telephone interview, 21 September 2022.

Figure 1: Number of High-, Medium- and Low-Violence Municipalities in Mexico. Categories determined by homicide rates and their growth from 2020-2022.

		Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants	
		Low	High
Homicide growth rate Oct. 2020-Sept. 2021 vs. Oct. 2021-Sept. 2022	High	**240** **Medium level** of insecurity	**80** **High level** of insecurity
	Low	**2,016** **Low level** of insecurity	**121** **Medium level** of insecurity

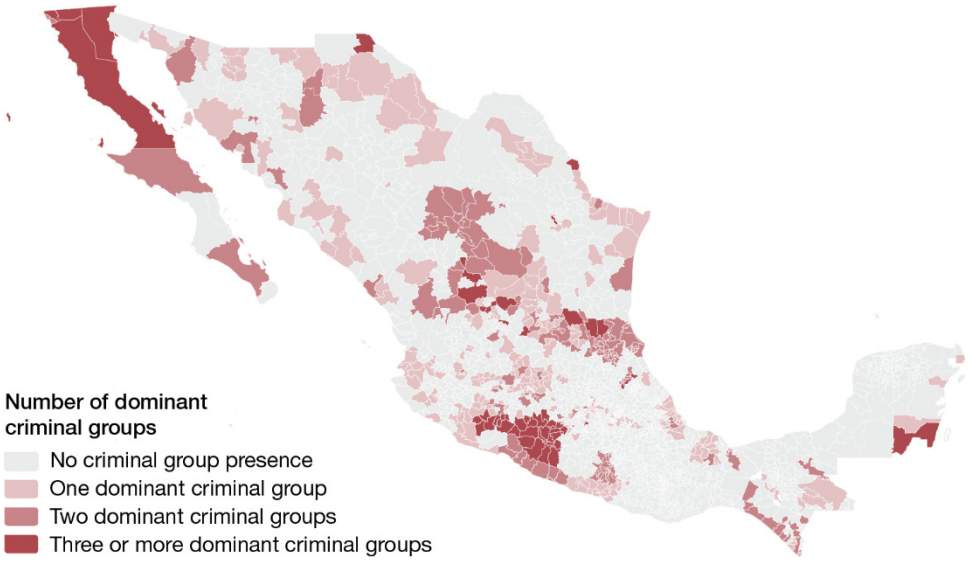
Source: Crisis Group estimates using homicide-related deaths data from INEGI and population estimates from the National Population Council (CONAPO). Classifications based on homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022 and the rate of growth of these rates from October 2020 to September 2021 and October 2021 to September 2022.

Figure 2: Map of Violence in Mexico's Municipalities. Classifications determined by homicide rates and their growth from 2020-2022.



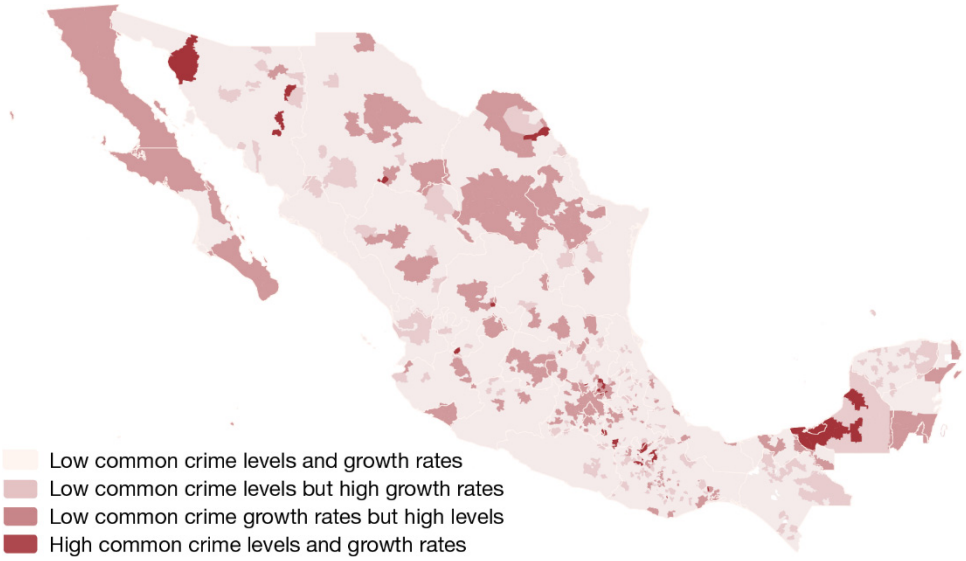
Source: Crisis Group estimates using homicide-related deaths data from INEGI and population estimates from CONAPO. Classifications based on homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022 and the rate of growth of these rates from October 2020 to September 2021 and October 2021 to September 2022. A low level of insecurity corresponds to few homicides and decreasing or stagnant growth rates. Conversely, high insecurity reflects a municipality with high levels of homicides and rapidly increasing growth rates.

Figure 3: Criminal Group Presence in Mexico's Municipalities. Number of dominant criminal groups in 2020.



Source: Crisis Group armed groups database.

Figure 4: Common Crime in Mexico's Municipalities. Categories determined by total common crime rates and their growth from 2020-2022.



Source: Crisis Group estimates using data from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP) and population estimates from CONAPO. Classifications are based on total common crime rates per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022 and the rate of growth of these rates from October 2020 to September 2021 and October 2021 to September 2022. A low level corresponds to few common crimes and decreasing or stagnant growth rates. Conversely, a high level reflects a municipality with high levels of common crimes and rapidly increasing growth rates.

B. *Police and Military*

For almost two decades, Mexico's federal government has taken a heavy-handed approach to fighting crime. Since Calderón's administration (2006-2012), the armed forces have played a leading role in this strategy. In 2017, former President Enrique Peña Nieto – a PRI member who served between 2012 and 2018 – secured congressional

approval for the Law of Interior Security. While the military had previously sometimes acted as a temporary supplement to the police, the new law established it as a permanent public security force. The Supreme Court later declared the law unconstitutional, but it was a clear indication of a trend toward militarisation that continues to this day.[21]

A major factor tempting the federal government to rely more heavily on the armed forces is Mexico's extremely complex, decentralised law enforcement system. (Another, discussed in Section III.A, is rising violence.) Police forces exist at the federal, state and municipal levels. The federal level comprises the recently established National Guard, responsible for public security and combating organised crime, and the Federal Ministerial Police, operating under the Attorney General's Office and focusing on investigating and preventing federal crimes. State and municipal police forces in turn handle traffic and public safety, including conducting surveillance, patrolling neighbourhoods, supporting victims and receiving reports of crimes from the public, as well as securing jails. They also engage in investigative and analytical work, and they form the first line of response to civil disturbances.[22]

State and municipal policing in Mexico is intended to bolster public safety by having officers work closely with communities.[23] Repeated abuses of power and corruption, however, have brought these police into severe disrepute, with 67 per cent of citizens believing they are corrupt and 47 per cent saying they cannot be trusted.[24] Understaffing of police departments is another problem. A large number of local police stations have too few officers or none at all, which makes it all but impossible for the police to fulfil their duties.[25] Corruption and inadequate training further undermine police effectiveness.[26]

[21] Pablo Ferri, "La justicia mexicana tumba a la ley del gobierno saliente que perpetúa el papel policial del Ejército", *El País*, 15 November 2018.

[22] The specific characteristics, responsibilities and organisation of security forces at the state and municipal level vary by jurisdiction, sometimes falling under mayors or governors, and occasionally dividing into specialised sub-units to tackle particular crimes or activities. "Modelo Nacional de Policía y Justicia Cívica", Secretariat of the National Public Security System, 6 July 2020.

[23] Gustavo Fondevila and Rodrigo Meneses Reyes, "El rol del policía municipal en México, Trabajo social y mediación de conflictos", *Gestión y Política Pública,* vol. 26, no. 1 (2017). Based on the 2021 National Census of State Public Security, there were 221,281 state-level police officers, with men making up 83 per cent of the force and women accounting for 17 per cent. A significant portion of these officers, approximately 55 per cent, are stationed in Veracruz, Mexico City and the State of Mexico. Martha Palma Montes, "Gestión y desempeño de policías estatales", *Alcaldes de México*, 3 October 2022. The most recent National Census of Municipal Governments and Territorial Demarcations of Mexico City revealed that in 2020 there were 189,495 police officers at the municipal level, with men representing 79 per cent and women 21 per cent of this force. Isaías Ocampo, "Los 100 municipios con más personal de seguridad pública", *Alcaldes de México*, 3 July 2022.

[24] See the ENVIPE, the national survey conducted in 2022. The survey also ranked municipal police forces as the least effective among the country's judicial and security institutions. For more on the squalid conditions in which many police in Mexico work, the corruption they face inside the force and the difficulties of handling multiple criminal threats, see Camila Osorio, "Alonso Ruizpalacios practica una autopsia a la policía de México (y al amor entre patrulleros)", *El País*, 27 October 2021; and Carmen Morán Breña, "La policía de México: víctimas y culpables de un sistema podrido", *El País*, 13 November 2021.

[25] In 2022, 217 municipalities lacked police forces, according to the Secretary of Interior Adán Augusto López Hernández. Emanuel Rincón, "En México hay 217 municipios sin policías, revela Adán Augusto", *Excelsior*, 21 October 2022. This number does not include the more than 400 municipalities

Since 2006, to supplement (and sometimes to take the place of) a system of civilian policing that is labyrinthine and vulnerable to graft, Mexican governments have progressively handed over more law enforcement duties to the military.[27] U.S. support for Mexico's security forces has also reinforced the military's role, especially since the launch of the Mérida Initiative in 2008, which boosted efforts to prosecute criminal kingpins and seize illicit drugs through financial assistance for military equipment purchases and training programs.

Military-led policing in Mexico has typically consisted of a number of standard procedures: conducting raids, manning checkpoints and carrying out counter-narcotics activities, including patrolling areas known for drug trafficking and other crimes. Troops have sought to disrupt drug production and transport, and they have been involved in the capture of high-profile criminal leaders.[28] Under Calderón, the kingpin strategy, aimed at killing or capturing the leaders of drug trafficking organisations, relied almost exclusively on operations carried out by the armed forces, particularly the army and naval marines.[29]

Despite numerous successes in taking down criminal leaders, as a whole military involvement in law enforcement has not gone well. Military personnel have generally lacked the training they need to work closely with community members or to grasp the nuances of civilian law enforcement. Contrary to successive governments' expectations, widespread troop deployment has not curbed crime but has instead contributed to a marked escalation of violence.[30] The kingpin strategy splintered criminal groups. Subsequent infighting among rival claimants to leadership of these outfits led to greater bloodshed. Successor groups fought over territory and control of illicit businesses, often moving to new areas offering previously untapped opportunities for profiteer-

ruled by "customs and traditions" or Indigenous customary law, which also do not have municipal police. Lidia Arista, "Carecen de policía 650 municipios, otros cuentan con menos de 15 elementos", *Expansión Política*, 21 October 2019.

[26] Alejandro Páez, "Sin política de seguridad ni policías, ciudades en México caen en garras del crimen organizado", *Crónica*, 19 June 2022. Ramón Sevilla, "Municipios, vulnerables ante el crimen: 650 sin policías y 286 sin dinero", *La Silla Rota*, 20 July 2021.

[27] The number of military personnel deployed for law enforcement in Mexico went up significantly from 2000 onward. Between 2000 to 2006, the military presence stood at 32,500. This figure rose to 48,500 during the Calderón administration. Under the Peña Nieto presidency, the number of deployed military personnel rose to 69,700. By 2020, there were more than 85,000 military personnel involved in law enforcement. "Sedena: Más de 148 mil elementos de las fuerzas se han desplegado en México", Infobae, 20 January 2022. See also Tomás Andrés Michael Carvallo, "Infografía: La Militarización de Seguridad Pública en México", Wilson Center, 11 August 2022. As of July 2020, the Mexican army and air force are composed of 165,454 personnel, the navy of 51,946 and the National Guard of 100,324, for a total of 317,724. "Las Fuerzas Armadas y la Guardia Nacional despliegan más de 173,000 elementos en todo el territorio nacional" press release, Secretariat of Defence, 20 July 2020.

[28] In addition to law enforcement duties, the military has also been called upon to provide disaster relief and security during major events, such as elections or political rallies. Iñigo Guevara, "From a Modernizing Fighting Force to National Development Stewards: Mexico's Armed Forces under AMLO", Wilson Center Mexico Institute, April 2022.

[29] George W. Grayson, "The Impact of President Felipe Calderón's War on Drugs on the Armed Forces: The Prospects for Mexico's "Militarization" and Bilateral Relations", U.S. Army War College, 2013.

[30] Falko Ernst, "Time to End the Lethal Limbo of the U.S.-Mexican Drug Wars", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 October 2020.

ing.[31] Criminal outfits also increased their use of firepower and heavy artillery in response to the presence of military forces.[32] Meanwhile, critics argue that the armed forces are ill suited to combating the gangs and smaller bands responsible for much of the violence perpetrated in medium-sized cities because of the risk that military units may target civilians living in the same places.[33]

Cases of military officers abusing their internal security powers have also come to light with appalling frequency. Excessive use of force, unlawful detention and lack of due process have all characterised the Mexican military's law enforcement activities.[34] Recent judicial investigations indicate that alleged complicity with organised crime – not to mention alleged involvement in a number of reported civilian disappearances and other human rights violations – has reached the military's leadership cadres.[35]

President López Obrador promised during his 2018 election campaign to turn away from troop deployments and strengthen regional and municipal police forces. At the time, he argued that public security was a local matter, vowing that he would "not use force to resolve social problems".[36] But, once in office, López Obrador declared that he had changed his mind upon being apprised of the scale of police corruption. He moved instead to deepen military influence over the federal security apparatus.[37] In 2019, he established the National Guard, a hybrid force composed of members from the army, navy and federal police, to address public security, crime and violence throughout the country.[38] On 10 September 2022, he signed an executive decree placing the National Guard under the Secretariat of Defence (SEDENA), which has since

[31] Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, "Security, Drugs, and Violence: A Survey", 7th North American Forum, 2011. Crisis Group Visual Explainer, "Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs', Explained", op. cit. "Mexico Deepens Militarisation. But Facts Show it is a Failed Strategy", Washington Office on Latin America, 2 September 2022.

[32] Gustavo A. Flores Macías and Jessica Zarkin, "The Militarisation of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2019).

[33] Crisis Group interview, civil society leader specialised in solving inter-gang disputes, Monterrey, 24 February 2023.

[34] "IACHR urges Mexico to adopt a citizen security policy in line with the country's international human rights obligations", press release, Organization of American States, 9 September 2022. See also Daniel Wilkinson, "HRW: Lecciones de un sexenio perdido. La militarización de la seguridad pública", *El Universal*, 2 October 2018.

[35] The most prominent case was that of former armed forces chief Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, arrested in the U.S. for drug-related corruption and later returned to Mexico at the Mexican government's request. See Melissa Ford, "Mexican military hack deepens suspicions of cartel collusion in Politics", *Newsweek*, 14 October 2022; "Mexico: Extending Military Policing Threatens Rights", Human Rights Watch, 26 August 2022; Azam Ahmed, "Un exsecretario de Defensa mexicano fue arrestado en Estados Unidos: ¿qué significa para México?", *The New York Times*, 9 June 2021; and Crisis Group Report, *Building Peace in Mexico: Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, op. cit.

[36] Steve Fisher, "Amlo promised to take Mexico's army off the streets – but he made it more powerful", *The Guardian*, 27 September 2022.

[37] "Mexican president says he's changed mind about using army to keep peace", Reuters, 6 September 2022.

[38] The National Guard is responsible for patrolling urban and rural areas, conducting investigations, and collaborating with local police forces in maintaining public order and security. Following its creation, the federal police was in effect dissolved, with many of its members absorbed into the new body. The intention was to create a more efficient, cohesive and disciplined force that could better address the country's security challenges.

been quashed by the Supreme Court, and weeks later backed a bill that extended military presence in the streets until 2028 – outlasting his mandate, which ends in 2024.[39] The latter reform was approved in November 2022.

C. *Mayors on the Front Lines*

Local governments for their part continue to train and equip local police officers despite dwindling federal funding, while many find themselves dangerously exposed to the intimidation and enticements of criminal groups. As noted above, violence against local officials, especially mayors, is a pressing issue throughout Mexico. From 2004 to 2018, 178 mayors, ex-mayors and mayors-elect were murdered, marking a 900 per cent increase over the previous decade, with organised crime held responsible in half of these cases.[40] From 2018 until the start of 2023, 65 more killings of local officials, twenty of them mayors, have taken place.[41]

Violence around elections, particularly local and regional polls, has also shot up, driven in large part by the designs of organised crime over territory and public decision-making powers, as well as by criminal group fragmentation. In Mexico's state and municipal elections from October 2020 to April 2021, 24 candidates, seventeen local officials and three incumbent mayors were killed.[42] Political parties have also struggled to shield themselves from infiltration, leaving openings that criminal groups have fully exploited.[43]

The reasons that specific mayors are targeted are rarely transparent, although it is generally understood that these officials are being punished either for perceived support for rival criminal groups or for refusal to cooperate with a particular outfit. Mayors often face a delicate balancing act in negotiating between the frequently inescapable demands of powerful criminal organisations while handling constituents' expectations and overseeing local police forces starved of resources and beset by low morale. Some mayors are singled out by criminal groups due to their power to either enable or obstruct illicit rackets within their jurisdictions.[44] In a notorious case from 2016, Gisela Mota, the mayor of Temixco who had vowed to combat organised crime

[39] Notwithstanding the Supreme Court decision, López Obrador announced that he would propose a new constitutional reform in 2024 with the aim of enabling the transfer of authority to take place. On the issue of military involvement in law enforcement, see Vanessa Buschschluter, "Mexico Congress votes to keep military on streets", BBC, 13 October 2022. This bill repeated the same arguments used in the March 2019 constitutional reform that extended the military's public security role until 2024. David Marcial Pérez, "México blinda en una ley la entrega de la seguridad pública a los militares", *El País*, 12 May 2020; "Acuerdo por el que se dispone de las Fuerza Armada permanente para llevar a cabo tareas de seguridad pública de manera extraordinaria, regulada, fiscalizada, subordinada y complementaria", Diario Oficial de la Federación, 11 May 2020.

[40] David Pérez Esparza and Helden De Paz Mancera, "Mayoral Homicides in Mexico", Center for the U.S. and Mexico, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, 4 June 2018.

[41] "Indicador de violencia política en México, atentados contra ediles, 2000-2022 (actualización)", Etellekt, 30 December 2022.

[42] Dario Brooks, "The dozens of politicians who have been assassinated in Mexico during the midterm election campaign", BBC, 20 May 2021.

[43] Crisis Group Report, *Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land*, op. cit.

[44] Yuri Nieves, "What's Behind the Killings of Mexico's Mayors?", *Insight Crime,* 28 May 2019; Ioan Grillo, "Why cartels are killing Mexico's mayors", *The New York Times*, 15 January 2016.

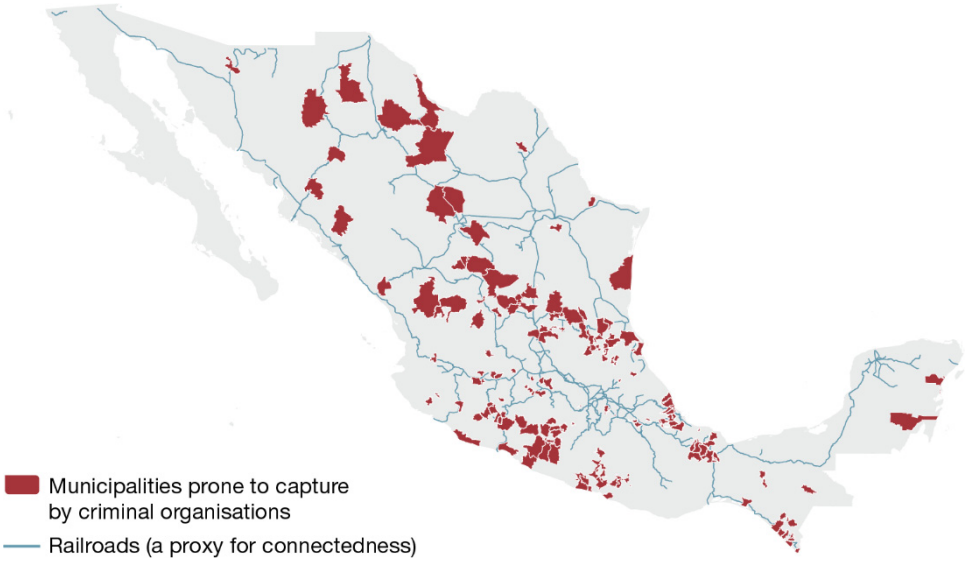
and protect municipal finances from its clutches, was assassinated just a day after taking office.[45] Another harrowing incident occurred in 2022 in San Miguel Totolapan, Guerrero: gunmen massacred twenty, including the mayor, at a town hall, seemingly as part of a plan by criminal groups to influence the municipal budget and policing.[46]

Yet even though they come under regular threat and must contend with the unintended consequences that spring from federal and state governments' security operations, mayors in crime-affected areas tend to receive limited support for their own law enforcement priorities from federal or state security forces. Federal and state operations, moreover, are often undertaken without consulting municipal officials. In one instance in August 2022, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel retaliated against civilians, police, businesses and mayors in various cities in Jalisco and Guanajuato following a joint operation by the army and state police.[47] Mayors in areas controlled by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel in these states found themselves unprepared for the fallout from this operation. Financial allocations from federal and state authorities for local police are also miserly, exacerbating the risk that officers collude with criminal organisations and thereby worsening the already poor reputation of these forces.[48]

Corruption among local officials is especially pronounced in certain kinds of municipalities. A high-ranking defence ministry official observed that corruption among mayors and local police is far higher in areas marked by the presence of criminal groups. These areas are mainly municipalities with populations between 20,000 to 55,000, and which are located near railroads, offering easy access to ports and the U.S., making them good places for trafficking drugs and other illicit activities.[49] In 2020, of the 531 municipalities with criminal group presence, 166 fit these criteria, representing 7 per cent of Mexico's total number of municipalities (see Figure 5).

[45] "Mexican mayor is killed a day after taking office", *The New York Times*, 2 January 2016.
[46] "Mexico mayor among 20 killed in town hall massacre", *The Guardian*, 6 October 2022.
[47] "Bloqueos y quema de comercios: ¿qué desató la violencia en Jalisco y Guanajuato?", *El Sol de México*, 10 August 2022.
[48] Carmen Morán Breña, "La policía de México: víctimas y culpables de un sistema podrido", *El País*, 14 November 2021. The average monthly salary for a municipal police officer in Mexico is 6,950 pesos, equivalent to approximately $386. "¿Cuál es el sueldo mensual de un policía en México? Aquí algunas estadísticas de la profesión", *Milenio*, 2 November 2022.
[49] Crisis Group telephone interview, high-level Secretariat of Defence official, 21 September 2022.

Figure 5: Mexican Hotspots for Organised Crime and Corruption. 166 municipalities prone to capture in 2022.



Source: Crisis Group armed groups database. Population estimates from CONAPO. The 166 municipalities prone to capture have populations between 20,000 and 55,000 inhabitants and provide good connections for drug and other sorts of trafficking.

III. Why Local Law Enforcement Struggles

Mexico's efforts to combat crime have largely sought to bypass municipalities, even though the constitution establishes that local governments are responsible for public security.[50] Instead of playing a central role in addressing insecurity in their territories, mayors are subjected to political and financial influences that condition what they can do. That hamstrings their effectiveness, intensifying public dissatisfaction with them.

A. *Rising Violence*

As noted, the elimination of one-party rule and election of Mexican leaders from a range of political parties from the 1980s onward did not just mark a milestone in Mexico's democratic transition – it also created the conditions for greater criminal violence.[51] Turf wars among crime rings spread to more regions, intensifying during and after state and municipal elections. Major conflicts among criminal groups erupted in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the north-western states of Baja California, Chihuahua and Sinaloa, after these states witnessed the first elections won by opposition governors.[52] By the mid-1990s, violence had spread to other regions where elections were won by non-PRI candidates, including western Pacific states like Jalisco, as well as states where the Sinaloa Cartel was powerful, such as Nuevo León and Tamaulipas.[53]

This alarming rise in violence (coupled with mistrust of local law enforcement and other factors described in Section II.B), led Mexican presidents to take a more prominent role in managing public insecurity, generally to the detriment of local government and police. President Vicente Fox – who in 2000 became the first Mexican leader in 71 years not to be a PRI member – responded by expanding the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) and coordinating security efforts through the federal government. An outbreak of violence in Nuevo Laredo, on the U.S. border, prompted Fox to deploy hundreds of soldiers and federal police to the area in 2005; among their first responsibilities was the arrest of municipal police officers accused of links to organised crime.[54]

[50] According to Article 115, fraction III, item "h" of the Mexican constitution, public security policy falls under the responsibility of municipalities. Matters of national security are the responsibility of the federal government.

[51] For documentation of the association between municipal electoral competition and worsening criminal violence over the last two decades, see Astorga, *El Siglo de las Drogas*, op. cit. See also Osorio, "The Contagion of Drug Violence", op. cit.

[52] After a handover of political power in Baja California, the Tijuana cartel reacted by developing the country's first private militia, under Ramón Arellano Félix, to guard against attack by the government or rival criminal groups. This private army allowed the Tijuana Cartel to hit the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels after the PRI's defeat in Chihuahua and Jalisco a few years later, as these cartels also lost some of their government protection. For a detailed account, see Jesús Blancornelas, *El Cartél: Los Arellano Félix, la mafia más poderosa en la historia de América Latina* (Mexico City, 2022), pp. 207-212. See also Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York, 2011), p. 79.

[53] "Criminal wars" were on average 63 per cent higher in municipalities within states that elected governors from opposition parties when compared to those remaining under PRI rule. See Ley and Trejo, *Votes, Drugs and Violence*, op. cit., p. 96. See also Leonardo Curzio, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Elections", in Kevin Casas-Zamora (ed.), *Dangerous Liaisons: Organized Crime and Political Finance in Latin America and Beyond* (Washington, 2013).

[54] "México: tropas en Nuevo Laredo", BBC Mundo, 14 June 2005; "Despliegue del Ejército de México contra el narcotráfico en ocho ciudades", *El País*, 15 June 2005.

President Calderón deployed the military and increased the size of the federal police (formerly the PFP) to tackle organised crime, as well as seeking to subordinate local police to the command of state-level forces (see more on this topic below).

After the disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teacher training college in Iguala, Guerrero state, in 2014, the shift toward greater federal control over security became even more pronounced. Amid public outrage, former President Peña Nieto endeavoured to dissolve all the country's municipal security forces after evidence emerged of complicity between the mayor of Iguala, local police forces and criminal groups accused of perpetrating the atrocity.[55] "The Iguala tragedy combined unacceptable conditions of institutional weakness", Peña Nieto declared. "A criminal group that controlled the territory; municipal authorities that were part of the very structure of the criminal organisation; municipal police officers who were actually criminals under the orders of delinquents".[56] A senior interior ministry official declared that "75 per cent of municipalities in Mexico are vulnerable to control by organised crime".[57]

B. *Fiscal Weakness*

Because of their limited and at times compromised resources, even mayors who wish to embark on reforms aimed at improving local security provision and transforming their poor reputations lack the means to do so. While the military and federal forces receive more generous funding, local administrations are left with weak judicial, investigative and police bodies, as well as scant money for public security.

Municipalities plagued by high levels of violence not only have meagre public security budgets, but they have also seen sharp falls in financial transfers from the federal government. The federal government stands at the helm of the system for collection and redistribution of money for law enforcement. Only a small fraction of municipalities' revenues – less than 20 per cent – comes from their own tax base. That increases their dependence on federal authorities, and historically officials in Mexico City have used resource transfers to favour allies and punish opponents.[58] Of the entire national

[55] On 28 March 2022, the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts of the Organization of American States presented the third expert report on the Ayotzinapa case, with details on the involvement of state officials in the atrocity. The report revealed that the municipal mayor and local police force of Iguala were intertwined with local criminal groups; that soldiers and marines were also colluding with these same outfits; and that the former attorney general of Mexico and the-then head of the prosecution service's criminal investigation unit fabricated evidence and used torture to construct false accusations. "IACHR presents third report on special follow-up mechanism on the Ayotzinapa case", press release, Organization of American States, 15 November 2022.

[56] Jan Martínez Ahrens, "Peña Nieto elimina la policía municipal para frenar al narco", *El País*, 27 November 2014. Peña Nieto also instructed the army to take control of the thirteen municipalities in Guerrero surrounding Ayotzinapa. "Mexican president Peña Nieto to overhaul police", BBC, 27 November 2014.

[57] Arron Daugherty, "75% de los municipios de México susceptibles al crimen organizado: funcionario", InSight Crime, 23 January 2015.

[58] The federal government decentralised part of public spending in the 1990s but not the collection of taxes. This arrangement allows the federal finance ministry to strike informal agreements with subnational authorities that often entail a form of political compliance. Crisis Group interview, fiscal and security expert, Mexico City, 11 August 2022. See also Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, *Federalism, Fiscal Authority and Centralisation in Latin America* (Cambridge, 2006).

budget, 5.4 per cent is allocated to public security. Of this 5.4 per cent, only 40 per cent is designated for state and municipal governments, even though stopping or solving most crimes lies in their bailiwick.[59]

Most security experts in Mexico believe the funding received by municipal government falls far short of what is needed. "What they get is not enough to raise police salaries, train them, equip them and more importantly evaluate them to prevent the temptations coming from criminal organisations", a security expert observed.[60] With limited resources, mayors are unable to establish specialised units to combat crimes such as kidnapping and extortion. Nor can they coordinate with peer officials fighting these crimes at the state level.[61]

President López Obrador's fiscal austerity program – which he launched in 2019, a year after his election – has further pruned the resources available to state and municipal governments for public security. In particular, it curbed the subsidies that had traditionally been earmarked for municipalities with high levels of violence and intended for use in training police and funding crime prevention. These subsidies have not been included in federal budgets since 2021.[62] Municipal authorities have instead had to rely increasingly on their own tax collection as well as the resource transfers that remain in place.[63] Meanwhile, the defence ministry is managing the

[59] Some crimes fall automatically under federal jurisdiction, including drug trafficking, organised crime, money laundering, crimes against the nation (such as terrorism and treason), and crimes committed against federal institutions or officials. But other crimes are found in both the federal crime code as well as the 32 state codes. In these cases, the difference between federal and state jurisdiction is often determined not by the crime itself, but by the number of people involved, their ties to criminal organisations and other organised criminal activities, the jurisdiction in which the crime occurred (local or federal), and whether the crime violated federal law or posed a national security concern. Depending on the case in question, jurisdiction is then allocated to the national or state prosecutor level, with offences perpetrated by smaller criminal organisations tending to be classified as common rather than federal crimes. The criteria for allocating responsibility for prosecuting crimes based on organised criminal involvement are not always strict and clear, however, which may lead to inconsistencies in classification and jurisdiction. For a general description of the classification of crimes, see "Instrumento para el Registro, Clasificación y Reporte de los Delitos y las Víctimas CNSP/38/15 Manual de llenado", National Secretariat of Public Security, January 2018.

[60] Crisis Group interview, security expert, Mexico City, 10 August 2022.

[61] Mexico's policy to confiscate criminal assets was intended to involve all layers of government. "Extinction of domain" was incorporated into the constitution in 2009, with the Federal Law on Extinction of Domain passed that May. Yet in practice the policy was focused on federal and state governments, with little consideration given to municipalities. The lack of resources for developing specialised staff to handle criminal asset seizures, as well as the absence of trained judges, has complicated the work of prosecutors in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas – two states afflicted by particularly high homicide rates. Pedro Torres Estrada, Juan Montero Bagatella, Carlos Vázquez Ferrel and Sylvia García Mariño, "Public Policies against Criminal Assets in Mexico: Challenges and Opportunities from the North Border States", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 76 (2021).

[62] From 2008 to 2015, federal security transfers to municipalities increased with the Subsidy for Municipalities, which in 2016 became known as FORTASEG, only to be eliminated five years later. Crisis Group interview, expert on security and fiscal transfers, Mexico City, 10 August 2022.

[63] Mayors now have to rely on the Public Security Contribution Fund of the States and the Federal District (FASP) to fund their public security strategies. The FASP saw an increase of 10.1 per cent in the 2022-2023 national budget to offset inflation. Mariana Campos, Lia Álvarez and Jorge Cano, "Seguridad Pública en el PEF 2022: más gasolina para la militarización", México Evalúa, 21 October 2022;

largest budget in Mexico's history, standing at $7.3 billion – 31 per cent more than what it had in 2022.[64]

Still, the president has taken steps to help municipal governments fill the financial gap they are facing. He issued a decree creating a permanent fund to strengthen states' and municipalities' public security institutions.[65] The fund will be allocated based on the number of inhabitants in each state, while up to 25 per cent of it will be assigned to states that show improved performance as regards public security, according to benchmarks to be determined by the National Public Security Council. Each state governor will be allowed to establish an annual security support fund for municipalities with lower populations or higher degrees of poverty and violence. Even though these transfers could eventually give mayors access to additional resources to fund their security apparatuses, the decree makes clear that state governors will have considerable authority to decide where funding is allocated. Discretionary distribution of these resources to municipalities might result in mayors struggling to get funds, which could make them vulnerable to political pressures from governors.[66]

C. *The Partisan Effect*

Mexico has seen robust political competition in recent decades, accompanied by efforts at various levels of government to deploy state funds to reward allies or discipline opponents. Partisan use of public resources has also skewed federal responses to violent crime. In general, when a region is governed by the ruling party – namely the party to which the president belongs – federal authorities offer military support when needed and cooperate in the design and application of security policies. Conversely, in regions held by rival political forces, the federal government often chooses to withhold assistance, even in the face of rising violence.

This discretionary support has left a number of local governments bereft of backing as they seek to deal with a spike in violence. For mayors lacking political or party connections with higher powers in the state, or administrative experience, the challenges of dealing with spikes of violence can be daunting.[67] Many mayors complain that they do not know how to navigate the complex landscape of government relationships in order to convey the needs and problems of their municipality to higher authorities. "Being a mayor was very difficult. I had no political experience. I didn't know people from the federal or state government. I didn't fully know the problems and needs of the municipality", said the former mayor of Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo, where

"Aumenta en 2023 recursos para FASP y FORTAMUN", Government of Mexico, 7 December 2022; "Mexico Inflation Rate", Trading Economics, 8 March 2023.

[64] Alberto López, "México aspira al mayor presupuesto en defensa de su historia para 2023", Info-Defensa, 7 October, 2022. The percentage increase includes spending on the National Guard.

[65] "Decreto por el que se reforma el Artículo Quinto Transitorio del Decreto por el que se reforman, adicionan y derogan diversas disposiciones de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, en materia de Guardia Nacional", Diario Oficial de la Federación, 18 November 2022.

[66] Crisis Group interview, fiscal and security expert, Mexico City, 10 August 2022.

[67] Only 11 per cent of the mayors who held office from 2010 to 2020 had a graduate or undergraduate degree. Crisis Group estimate using the listing of municipal mayors from the National System of Municipal Information.

oil theft produced an explosion that killed more than 137 people and wounded many dozens more. "And being an opposition government makes it much more difficult".[68]

Numerous mayors have voiced complaints about not receiving funds allocated by law, and specified in the national budget, or receiving the money too late in the year.[69] Federal authorities, for their part, may respond to local flare-ups of violence by shifting the blame onto political opponents in charge at the local level.[70]

The selective federal support is a longstanding problem. Under Calderón, the government coordinated closely with other members of the ruling National Action Party at the state and municipal levels, but it had a far less fluid relationship with authorities run by other parties.

Municipal authorities in two of Mexico's most violent cities at the time, Ciudad Juárez, under PRI Mayor Héctor Murguía Lardizábal (2007-2010), and Acapulco, under Félix Salgado Macedonio (2006-2008), from the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), quarrelled with the federal government. In both cases, the contention arose from military and federal police interventions undertaken with little attempt to coordinate with local authorities. Military operations in Ciudad Juárez resulted in increased attacks on municipal police officers, while in Acapulco the security campaign failed to reduce murder rates or to improve coordination between the armed forces and local police.[71] Not surprisingly, during the Calderón presidency (2006-2012) violence increased in municipalities governed by the opposition: the rate of organised crime-related homicide in PRI-ruled municipalities was 36 per cent higher than in those governed by the ruling party PAN, and 134.6 per cent greater in those run by the PRD.[72]

López Obrador and senior figures in his government have also locked horns with opposition officeholders at the state and municipal level over security matters, although the president has not directly accused mayors of fostering the presence of crim-

[68] Crisis Group telephone interview, former municipal mayor, 10 November 2021.

[69] State treasuries in Mexico receive federal funds from the Federal Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit, which they subsequently distribute to municipalities. The grievances raised by municipalities are often aimed at state governments, which they accuse of withholding these funds. Additionally, they criticise the federal government either for overlooking cases of withheld funds or for not disbursing resources to an entire state. In May, opposition mayors and congressional deputies for the PAN and PRI in the state of Nuevo León filed a legal complaint against the State Treasury. They accused it of withholding federal funds, alleging that the governor showed preferential treatment to mayors from his own party. "Congreso NL también busca sancionar a MC por presunta retención de recursos", *La Política Online*, 22 May 2023.

[70] The partisan phenomenon is illustrated by statistical analysis, showing that it affects federal support for military-police collaboration, judicial proceedings involving local authorities, federal government assumption of responsibility for violence and backing for municipalities when addressing escalating violence. Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, "Federalismo, drogas y violencia, Por qué el conflicto partidista intergubernamental estimuló la violencia del narcotráfico en México", *Política y Gobierno*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2016).

[71] Carlos Coria, "Regresa el Ejército a Ciudad Juárez por aumento de violencia", *Excelsior*, 13 December 2012; Sergio Ocampo Arista, "No me toca exonerar o culpar a Félix Salgado, advierte Zeferino Torreblanca", *La Jornada*, 13 February 2007.

[72] Ley and Trejo, *Votes, Drugs and Violence,* op. cit., p. 146.

inal groups.[73] Crime rates in states run by parties opposed to López Obrador remain among the highest in the country.[74]

D. *Electoral Vulnerabilities*

Intense political competition at Mexico's state and municipal levels has contributed to the growth and power of criminal organisations over the past three decades, as mentioned above.

More recently, criminal organisations have capitalised on electoral campaigns, particularly showdowns for municipal office, to strike deals with opportunistic political parties and candidates. The complex relationship between electoral competition and alleged corruption stands out in the Hot Land region of Michoacán state, one of the most conflict-ridden areas in Mexico, where competing criminal groups seek to gain leverage by establishing alliances with aspirants to elected office.[75] Political parties gain resources and protection from these transactions, increasing the chances of electoral success, while criminal groups acquire political influence and a degree of legal immunity, reducing the risks their operations face. Criminal groups' exploitation of local electoral competition has done little for the reputation of municipal government. It also underpins the wave of violence against mayors and candidates for local office.

Extreme criminal violence has, on several occasions, undermined public support for the conventional democratic system itself. Communities dissatisfied with the way authorities have responded to violence have sought to expel criminal groups and state institutions to create systems of autonomous self-rule in their place. The best-known example is that of the town of Cherán in the state of Michoacán, which, under the leadership of local women, managed to expel drug trafficking organisations, the municipal police and politicians accused of corruption in April 2011. Cherán went on to prohibit political parties and cancel elections, creating instead a community council for each of its four districts, as well as a rural town police known as *ronda comunitaria,* which assumed control of public security and placed armed guards at check-

[73] Interior Minister Adán Augusto López has berated opposition governors for not supporting the army in security operations in their states. "[Opposition governors] do nothing to provide an effective public security service. … [Governors and local legislators just] follow the line of the national leaders [of their political parties], instead of supporting [the reforms related to the National Guard]. However, when a violent event occurs, they are the first to demand more of the National Guard, to demand a larger army presence. That's not fair". Víctor Chávez, "No hacen nada por la seguridad de sus estados: Adán Augusto critica a gobernadores de oposición", *El Financiero*, 17 October 2022. See also Rafael Ramírez, "AMLO critica a gobernador de Guanajuato durante presentación de apoyos en Aguascalientes", *El Sol de México*, 25 November 2021; and Carlos Montesinos, "'Les ayuda o no el Ejército': AMLO reta a gobernadores de PAN y MC a posicionarse sobre despliegue militar", *Reporte Índigo*, 9 September 2022.

[74] Crisis Group interview, security expert, Mexico City, 11 August 2022. By 2022, of the five states with the highest crime rates in Mexico, four were governed by the opposition, including the State of Mexico (PRI governor, with 38.3 crimes per 100,000), Aguascalientes (PAN governor; 27.3 crimes), Guanajuato (PAN governor; 25.6 crimes) and Chihuahua (PAN governor; 23.8 crimes). Crisis Group estimates using data from the 2022 ENVIPE and CONAPO.

[75] Crisis Group Report, *Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land*, op. cit.

points.[76] While Cherán adopted a radical community-based approach, elsewhere in Mexico people have been more inclined to embrace authoritarian rule after being subjected to extreme violence.[77]

[76] Linda Pressly "Cherán, el pueblo de México que expulsó a delincuentes, políticos y policías", BBC, 17 October 2016. Statistical analysis shows that communities with a history of rebellion are more likely to resist penetration by organised crime as well as to reject formal democratic institutions. Javier Osorio, Livia Isabella Schubiger and Michael Weintraub, "Legacies of Resistance: Mobilisation Against Organised Crime in Mexico", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 54, no. 9 (2021).

[77] Research examining the links between exposure to extreme violence and backing for authoritarian rule in Mexico indicates that support for non-democratic measures frequently arises from pervasive violence related to organised crime and security forces. Drawing on public opinion data, case studies from Michoacán, Guerrero and Tamaulipas, as well as interviews with citizens, point to dwindling trust in democratic institutions and an increasing preference for strongman leadership to reestablish order. Jonathan Hiskey, Mary Fran T. Malone and Alejandro Díaz-Domínguez, "Authoritarian Recall: Mexico's Drug War and Subnational Patterns of Opposition to Democracy", *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2020).

IV. Options for Mayors

With limited resources to combat crime, mayors who are not linked to criminal groups and are intent on addressing insecurity in their vicinities have tried to find ways to obtain more funding and support. Since the "war on drugs" commenced, two primary options have emerged for mayors to boost resources and bypass political hurdles: first, developing security agreements with federal and other subnational institutions, and secondly, militarising the municipal police force so as to forge a direct relationship with the army.

A. *Security Cooperation Agreements*

1. Overview

Mexico's municipalities have the freedom to negotiate security agreements with public institutions and civil society groups. These accords are typically established for a one-year period, after which they are subject to re-evaluation, adjustment or termination. Mayors can enter agreements with other municipalities, state governors and the federal government, or they can strike deals with autonomous institutions, including NGOs and even foreign governments.[78]

The character of these security agreements varies. Some are no more than temporary arrangements, while others can reach the status of local laws. Most agreements fall within two broad categories: cooperation pacts that enable municipalities to collaborate with other state and non-state bodies; and delegation arrangements that grant temporary authority to a higher level of government to act on the municipality's behalf in managing local police and making use of the force's personnel and equipment. Cooperation agreements emphasise mutual aid involving another part of the state or another body to strengthen law enforcement through sharing of resources, information or expertise. Delegation agreements, on the other hand, establish a clear alternative authority structure. Over the past decade, 79 per cent of Mexican municipalities have signed a security agreement, most of which have been delegation rather than cooperation deals (see Figure 6).[79]

The services provided through these security agreements are wide-ranging. Municipalities can coordinate or delegate crime prevention initiatives, training, use of equipment and technology, analysis and intelligence, as well as issuance of local edicts.[80] In 2019, for example, the Yucatán Safe initiative hatched a series of security cooperation agreements between municipalities and the state governor. These agreements covered various matters, including enhanced police deployment and improved intel-

[78] In 2020, 52 per cent of agreements were with state institutions, 27 per cent with federal ones and the rest with other municipalities, as well as local civil society organisations. Crisis Group dataset on security agreements.

[79] Crisis Group estimate using data from INEGI's Municipal Government Census.

[80] In 2020, the majority of these agreements (39 per cent) involved cooperation in public security issues, 13 per cent regarding matters of transit and 11 per cent crime prevention. All other services including training of police, sharing equipment and technology, research, intelligence and unifying procedures featured in 7 per cent of these agreements. Crisis Group dataset on security agreements.

ligence collection and sharing.[81] The Coahuila Model agreement, signed in 2020 by 38 municipalities, the governor of the state of Coahuila, the National Guard and the military, included the establishment of community networks using WhatsApp groups to share security updates, as well as the development of guidelines to coordinate the various security forces and their response to emergencies.[82] In April 2022, the mayors of 23 state capitals, hailing from a variety of political parties, struck a security cooperation agreement aimed at deepening cooperation among these cities.[83]

2. History

Federal authorities first turned to security agreements as a remedy for what they perceived to be chronic failings by local government and municipal police. Former President Calderón backed the creation of Centralised Police Commands, intended to merge local and regional police forces. This move followed a 2009 law enforcement campaign in Calderón's home state, Michoacán, in which 30 municipal and state officials were arrested and charged with colluding with the criminal group La Familia Michoacana. Designed as a means of dismantling corruption networks among Michoacán's local and state officials, the campaign largely ended in failure.[84] But the effort to curb municipal corruption nationwide went on. The federal government gave its blessing to a series of similar delegation agreements signed by municipal and state authorities that sought to unify local police forces under a single chain of command – in most cases, headed by the state governor.

Agreements to establish Centralised Police Commands faced several hurdles during Calderón's term. A number of municipalities resisted the request that they surrender control of local police. Calderón's preference for working with politically aligned officials, in keeping with the established practice of rewarding loyalists and punishing rivals, did little to win over opposition-held local governments. Some mayors and municipal police chiefs, meanwhile, feared a threat to their lucrative corruption rackets.[85] Civil society experts, for their part, raised concerns that consolidating police command under state governors could actually fuel corruption, as it would enable criminal groups to target a smaller number of more powerful officials.[86] Even so, a

[81] The security agreements under this governor-led initiative were also intended to enhance law enforcement by installing more surveillance cameras, modernising traffic systems, improving maritime surveillance, speeding up emergency response times, and generally strengthening coordination between municipal and state police forces. "Gobierno de Yucatán presenta iniciativa para robustecer la seguridad en cada municipio del estado", Alcaldes de México, 4 July 2019. In 2021, the Yucatán Safe initiative was replaced by Yucatán Safe 2.0, which saw the renewal of the previously signed security cooperation agreements, though with a greater focus on crime prevention and early intervention.

[82] Juan Manuel Contrearas, "Coahuila se coordina para mantener seguridad: Miguel Riquelme", *El Sol de la Laguna*, 27 January 2023.

[83] The security cooperation agreement listed eleven key agreements aimed at combating public insecurity. "Conoce los 11 acuerdos de seguridad intermunicipal promovidos por la ACCM", *Expansión Política*, 26 April 2022.

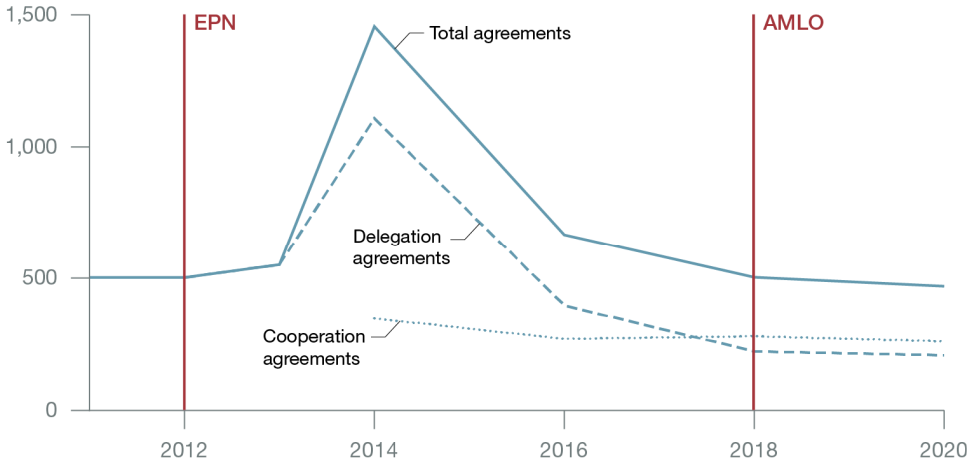
[84] The officials were imprisoned in May 2009. Two years later, however, they were all released due to complaints about lack of due process and lack of evidence proving that they were involved in corruption and complicit with organised crime. Gabriel Ferreyra, "The Michoacanazo: A Case Study of Wrongdoing in the Mexican Federal Judiciary", *Mexican Law Review*, vol. 8 (2015).

[85] Crisis Group interview, security expert, Mexico City, 11 August 2022.

[86] Crisis Group interview, civil society security expert, Mexico City, 9 August 2022.

large number of states and municipalities adopted the delegation model, with a quarter of all municipalities signing up to Centralised Police Commands by the end of Calderón's presidency in 2012 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Municipal Security Agreements with Public Institutions. Number of municipalities that signed an agreement from 2011-2020.



Source: Crisis Group data on security agreements. Total agreements include the sum of cooperation and delegation agreements. Data on cooperation agreements prior to 2014 is unavailable; the total before 2014 only reflects delegation agreements. Before 2018, all delegation agreements entail the creation of Centralised Police Commands.

President Peña Nieto's administration favoured a variation on the Calderón model. Following the mass disappearance of students from the Ayotzinapa teacher training college in 2014, Peña Nieto endeavoured to create what were in effect unified state police forces (officially called the Centralised Police Commands, as under Calderón). This effort would have required dissolving all 1,800 municipal police units into 32 state police forces.[87] But Peña Nieto failed to muster the votes in Congress for a bill that would have established the new forces. Not long afterward, as noted above, the Supreme Court blocked the Law of Interior Security, which would also have curbed municipal and state security powers.[88] But these setbacks did not stop the national government from pursuing its agenda through security agreements. Another 60 per cent (1,456) of the country's municipalities signed a security agreement in 2014, with 76 of these establishing Centralised Police Commands headed by state governors. The remaining agreements were cooperation agreements with other institutions (see Figure 6).

Local governments handed over control of police to state governors under pressure from the Peña Nieto government, but for other reasons as well, including despera-

[87] Jan Martínez Ahrens, "Peña Nieto elimina la policía municipal para frenar al narco", *El País*, 27 November 2014. According to the Secretariat of the National Public Security System, in 2019, over 650 out of the 2,247 municipalities in the country did not have a municipal police force. "Modelo Nacional de Policía y Justicia Cívica", National Public Security System, 6 July 2020.

[88] "El mando único confronta a la política mexicana", *El País*, 28 January 2016; "La Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación Invalidó la Ley de Seguridad Interior en su Totalidad", press release, Supreme Court, 15 November 2018. For a detailed description of the reasoning behind the ruling, see "Crónica de la acción de inconstitucionalidad 6/2018 y sus acumuladas", Supreme Court, 15 November 2018.

tion: it is very difficult to confront endemic violent crime without broader official support. Local governments suffering extreme levels of violence and numerous attacks on mayors were 15 per cent more likely to delegate matters of public security than their peers in municipalities with low levels of violence.[89] In several experts' opinion, the trend to state-level command was not only a response to fear of criminal organisations but also an effort to shift the blame for flare-ups of violence onto the governor, especially during electoral campaigns.[90]

3. Current trends

Many mayors themselves say worries about losing funding or federal protection – not to mention sustaining damage to their political careers – have compelled them to delegate control of the security apparatus.[91] Such concerns are especially salient when their political futures depend on the president's favour. "They [referring to the presidency] use us, control our police, and if we don't play along, they cut our funding or make us beg for it later", said one mayor.[92] While López Obrador appears less inclined to strong-arm local government and is less interested in security agreements in general, state governors continue to exploit their financial powers to keep mayors in line. Mayors who do not sign a security agreement with higher-level authorities have good reason to fear the financial effects: data analysis shows they saw their public security budgets dip by 15 per cent.[93]

Even so, the number of security delegation agreements between municipalities and the state and federal governments has fallen precipitously since 2014. Security experts point to the state and municipal elections between 2015 and 2018 as a reason for this decline: opposition parties gained ground electorally and were under less pressure to align with the federal security strategy. They also point to mayors deciding first to fight common crimes, such as theft, assault and extortion, giving lesser priority to organised crime. In some violent areas, the common crimes are often the most pressing public concerns, but they are not the centre of attention for Centralised Police Commands. Mayors arguably would rather respond to their constituents' complaints, thus improving their prospects for re-election, than let federal and state government tell them what to do.[94]

Furthermore, certain mayors running for re-election may wish to use the police for electoral purposes, which may make them reluctant to sign security agreements, whether delegation or cooperation pacts, requiring them to relinquish control. Police officers can assist in distributing goods, mobilising citizens for rallies and even tam-

[89] These estimates are based on a statistical model focused on the relationship between the change in homicide levels and signing security agreements (confidence interval between 9.5 and 18.3 per centage points in the likelihood of signing). The relationship is described in greater detail in Rafael Ch, "Going Local: How Re-election Breaks the National Pressure of Local Governments to Fight Organised Crime in Mexico", Princeton University Working Paper, 2022.

[90] Crisis Group interview, electoral and violence expert, Mexico City, 11 August 2022.

[91] Crisis Group interviews, mayors, Mexico City, 9, 10 and 11 August 2022.

[92] Crisis Group interviews, municipal mayor, Mexico City, 10 August 2022.

[93] These estimates are based on a statistical model focused on the relationship between the change in federal fiscal security transfers and signing security agreements (confidence interval between 11 and 19 per cent). See Ch, "Going Local", op. cit.

[94] Crisis Group interview, violence and security expert, Mexico City, 11 August 2022.

pering with the vote.[95] Statistical analysis shows that between 2015 and 2022, signing of security agreements decreased by 42 per cent among mayors facing re-election, a higher rate than among those with a one-term limit (though it fell across the board).[96]

Along the same lines, security experts say certain incumbent mayors do not delegate law enforcement to the state governor or federal forces mainly so they can retain the capacity to bargain with criminal groups, especially in municipalities already under the control of organised crime. Evidence suggests that the longer a mayor is in office, particularly in violent regions, the greater the collusion between local officials and criminal groups. Statistical analysis shows there are 8 per cent fewer agreements in municipalities affected by cases of corruption involving mayors, as identified by the Superior Auditor of the Federation, as opposed to municipalities where there are no such accusations. The number of corruption cases is also higher among mayors with longer rather than shorter tenures.[97]

Whereas the number of delegation agreements signed by local governments has declined sharply since 2014 for the reasons described, the tally of security cooperation agreements has fallen less dramatically (see Figure 6). One reason may be that these agreements have worked in helping mitigate lethal violence. As shown in Figure 7, cooperation agreements have led overall to a 5 per cent fall in homicides, with an even greater impact of 8 per cent between 2012 and 2018. In fact, cooperation agreements proved twice as effective in curbing homicide compared to delegation agreements. Data on these agreements show that the most effective sorts of collaboration in reducing local homicide rates are joint crime prevention strategies, police training and intelligence sharing. Agreements also had a beneficial effect when they eliminated the chronic uncertainty as to which security forces should respond to alerts from emergency lines or outbreaks of violence by clearly establishing the responsibilities of each security force.[98]

According to a former undersecretary for crime prevention in Zacatecas, one of Mexico's most violent states at present, "effective policing breaks down without communication. Clear guidelines and communication channels through coordination between the different parts of government help us to address crime".[99]

[95] Crisis Group interviews, mayors, Mexico City, 9, 10 and 11 August 2022. See also "Elecciones 2021, Roban urnas en Guanos, SLP, y disparan contra escuela donde se ubicaba casilla", *Aristegui Noticias*, 6 June 2021; and Víctor Hugo Juárez, "Queman boletas y urnas en recuento en Puebla; IEE atrae conteo de 13 municipios", *El Sol de México*, 10 June 2021.

[96] Reforms introducing re-election for mayors were carried out gradually, with some states allowing mayors to run for re-election in 2018 if they had been elected in 2015, while others had term limits for those same mayors and allowed re-election only for those elected the following term. This staggered approach enables a comparison between the security agreement choices made by mayors who are term-limited with those who are eligible for re-election. See Ch, "Going Local", op. cit.

[97] These estimates are based on a statistical model focused on the relationship between the change in accusations of corruption by the Superior Auditor and signing security agreements (confidence interval between 3 and 12 percentage points in the likelihood of signing). Ibid.

[98] Intelligence sharing reduced homicides by 10 per cent, unified security procedures and joint operations by 10 per cent, joint training by 6 per cent, and public security and crime prevention efforts by 3 per cent. These estimates are based on a statistical model focused on the relationship between changes in homicide rates and coordination between security forces. Ibid.

[99] Crisis Group telephone interview, former undersecretary in charge of crime prevention in the state of Zacatecas, 11 August 2022.

A review of specific cooperation agreements shows how they can bring relief to high-crime zones. The 2010 "We are all Juárez" initiative, in Ciudad Juárez on the U.S. border, was one of the most notable, involving massive federal investment to boost public services and overhaul policing in what had been for three consecutive years the city with the world's highest murder rate.[100] The mayor signed a security cooperation agreement with the military, federal police and state governor to vet and strengthen the local police and prosecution service, among other things, while civil society and the private sector both shaped and oversaw many of the schemes. Separately, the federal government deployed additional troops and police. But while murder rates fell to a fraction of their peak, the plan was not a panacea. Links between criminal forces and local officials allegedly persisted, and the city's dominant crime group may have ordered fewer killings for its own reasons.[101]

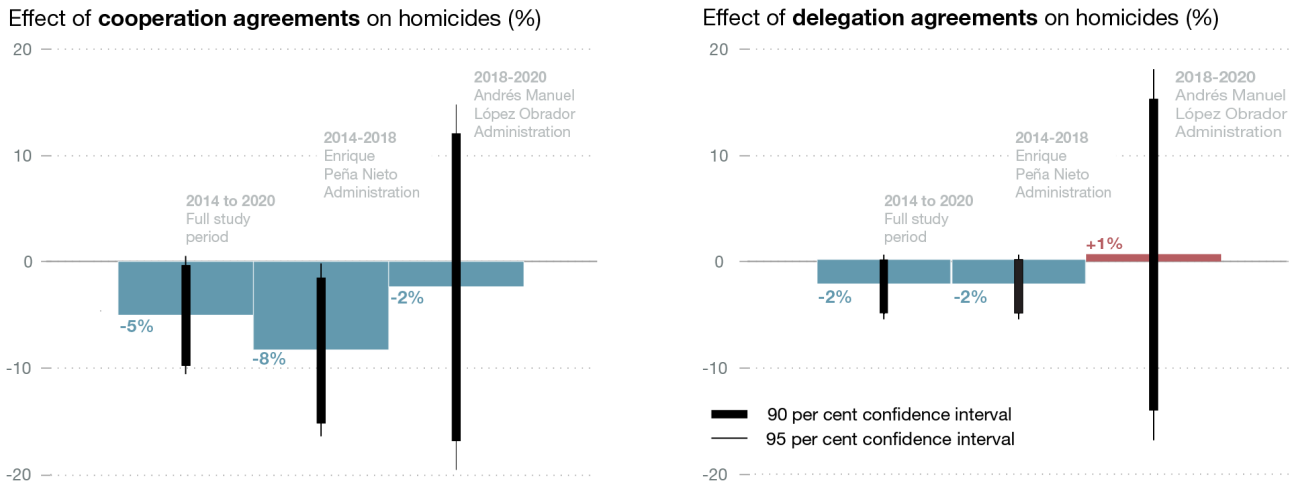
Reliance on security agreements has also tailed off in recent years. Continuing a trend that began after 2014, during President López Obrador's term, both the number of security agreements (including both delegation and cooperation agreements) as well as their beneficial influence have waned. With some exceptions, López Obrador has shown little interest in promoting collaboration between municipalities and other layers of government (see Figure 6). Furthermore, according to the available data, these agreements are no longer making a difference in homicide rates.[102] A decline in the funding available to support these agreements, and for municipalities in general, the withdrawal of the military and National Guard from involvement in these agreements, as well as the appointment of members of the military as heads of state and municipal police forces, have also contributed to the decline in their effectiveness (see more in the next sub-section).[103]

Crime prevention stood out as the sole area where cooperation agreements grew in number in the first two years of López Obrador's administration, with the number of participating municipalities rising from 148 in 2018 to 200 in 2020.[104] At the same time, senior federal officials bemoan what they see as threats to crime prevention campaigns caused by changes at the helm of local governments. "Mayors' terms have a very short lifespan of only three years, making it challenging to develop and implement long-term crime prevention policies", said an interior ministry official. "In Acapulco, we had a high level of coordination with the former mayor, mobilising a significant volume of resources and noticing a significant decrease in crime due to the crime prevention policies in the city. With the arrival of the new mayor and another

[100] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°54, *Back from the Brink: Saving Ciudad Juárez*, 25 February 2015.
[101] Ibid. See also J. Jesús Esquivel, "El narcopacto de Ciudad Juárez", *Proceso*, 23 May 2014.
[102] Statistically, delegation agreements do not have an effect on homicides as confidence intervals touch zero, implying null results. The same is true for cooperation agreements during the first two years of the López Obrador presidency. These estimates are based on a statistical model focused on the relationship between the change in homicides and the signing of security cooperation and delegation agreements the previous year. See Ch, "Going Local", op. cit.
[103] Crisis Group interview, security experts, Mexico City, 9, 10 and 11 August 2022.
[104] Crisis Group data on security agreements based on the National Census of Municipal Governments and Territorial Demarcations of Mexico City, 2015 to 2021.

political party, all the work was discarded. Our most pressing goal today is to build institutions that can withstand political changes".[105]

Figure 7: Security Agreements' Impact on Municipal Homicides. From 2014 to 2020: Comparing Peña Nieto's and López Obrador's Administrations.



Source: Crisis Group data on criminal groups and security cooperation agreements. The bar represents the change in homicide rates in percentage points as a result of signing an agreement the previous year. The line represents the 90 and 95 per cent confidence interval in the change in percentage points as a result of signing an agreement the previous year.

B. *The Temptation to Militarise*

Instead of signing agreements, several mayors have chosen to turn to the military for support. Since the Calderón and Peña Nieto presidencies, mayors and governors have been increasingly likely to appoint soldiers as heads of police forces. This trend has continued under López Obrador. The decision to include military officers in local security forces has not been driven by partisan interests but rather by the wishes of mayors themselves. Having a soldier as the head of the local police brings several benefits, including a direct channel to the Secretariat of Defence that bypasses the party system, as well as sending a clear signal to the mayor's constituency about his or her commitment to security. "Locally elected public officials prefer to hire members of the military because SEDENA answers their phone calls", said a security expert.[106]

For some mayors and governors, there is a financial incentive for resorting to the military. "If you align with the [policy of the] governor or the president, you attract more federal transfers. Alignment brings money!", noted a former mayor.[107] These additional resources, which are often discretionary funds and not earmarked for specific purposes, can be used to strengthen municipal crimefighting bodies. Some mayors, on the other hand, appoint military officers with an eye toward blaming the national government if crime rates worsen. "For a governor or mayor, having a military

[105] Crisis Group telephone interview, high-level interior ministry official, 19 September 2022.
[106] Crisis Group telephone interview, academic specialist in Mexican security forces, 13 July 2022.
[107] Crisis Group telephone interview, former mayor, 10 November 2021.

chief is equivalent to political insurance. It guarantees them impunity for their deficiencies and omissions", noted a former political adviser.[108]

The national government also sees these arrangements as beneficial. Successive administrations have embraced the incorporation of military personnel into civilian police. Top federal officials seeking to control state security policies, and to persuade governors and mayors to toe the line from Mexico City, strongly favour the appointment of military officers to become heads of public security. In 2021, López Obrador encouraged recently elected governors to speak to the defence ministry before naming their public security chiefs: eight of the fourteen governors proceeded to appoint retired and serving military officers as heads of state police forces.[109] At the same time, the appointment of former or seconded soldiers to senior law enforcement positions tends to lead to a more heavy-handed approach to local policing as well as to tensions with civilian officers.[110]

Law enforcement campaigns have repeatedly encouraged mayors to name military personnel as local police chiefs. One agreement between the military and a former state governor – known as the Coahuila Model after the state where it was signed – led to the appointment of military heads of security in five municipalities in 2009, all of them under the supervision of the 11th military zone commander. A similar trend has followed in the wake of the "We are all Juárez" scheme, which entailed the appointment of military officers to positions as police chiefs in the city as well as in the state capital Chihuahua.[111] Likewise, since the joint operation Tamaulipas-Nuevo León in 2008, in which former President Calderón deployed more than 1,100 troops in the two states, the Secretariat of Defence, as well as the commander in charge of these regions, have presided over local police chiefs.[112]

Aside from the perceived public and political benefits of military command, high-ranking officers from the armed forces also use local police offices as placement agencies for retired colleagues or soldiers who can no longer advance in the ranks. Notably, 95 per cent of soldiers who make the transition to civilian police positions are retirees; the remainder are serving officers.[113]

Some police officers see the increasing military influence over local police in a less than positive light. At times, the arrival of a military commander has disrupted the workings of the local force. In the states of Aguascalientes and Hidalgo, as well as the city of Querétaro, local police officers have staged strikes to protest what they saw as the military's failure to address the crimes of greatest concern to the community, in-

[108] Isabel Arvide, "Fracaso absoluto de los militares en funciones de seguridad pública", Estado Mayor (blog), 21 January 2014.
[109] Ezequiel Flores Contreras, "AMLO pide a gobernadores consultar con SEDENA y Marina nombramientos en materia de seguridad", *Proceso*, 19 October 2021; Jorge Monroy, "Ocho Estados con Mando Militar en Seguridad Pública; Expertos lo consideran Riesgoso", *El Economista*, 14 November 2021.
[110] "Nowhere is the military prepared for dealing with civilians, except in humanitarian operations. They aren't trained to prevent crime; they are trained to kill". Crisis Group interview, Adolfo Castro, Chihuahua State Commission for Human Rights, Ciudad Juárez, 13 August 2014. Cited in Crisis Group Report, *Back from the Brink: Saving Ciudad Juárez*, op. cit.
[111] Crisis Group Report, *Back from the Brink: Saving Ciudad Juárez*, op. cit.
[112] Jessica Zarkin, "The Silent Militarization: Explaining the Logic of Military Members' Appointment as Police Chiefs", working paper, 2022.
[113] Crisis Group telephone interview, academic who studies Mexican security forces, 13 July 2022.

cluding property damage, car theft and robbery. "We no longer want a military officer, no matter how many medals he has, or a former federal or ministerial police", said a former mayor of Ahome in the state of Sinaloa. "We want someone who knows the city … someone who works well with the rank and file".[114]

Civilian police have also protested what they perceive as discrimination in favour of the military. They see appointments of retired military officers as cutting short local police officers' opportunities for career development and meting out unfair treatment.[115] Local police sometimes also think military commanders treat them like "second-class citizens", a police officer in the city of Chihuahua observed.[116] In December 2022, the state police in Querétaro threatened to strike in response to the rumour that a member of the military would be named as head of the local police. A state policeman noted: "There are those of us who have experience in coordinating. We have worked for the state police for a long time. We know how it works. When military commanders arrive, they always bring problems of labour abuses. That is why the colleagues are organising and there is talk of striking".[117]

Civilian police express concern about military chiefs assigned to local police forces lacking knowledge of local policing practices and perpetrating human rights violations. "We usually arrest a citizen for a maximum of 24 hours for a common crime", observed one officer. "The military chief keeps them in custody for twenty days, something that we shouldn't legally do".[118]

[114] Ibid.
[115] "Policías al grito de guerra. Ser policía en una corporación militar", Causa en Común, September 2022.
[116] Crisis Group telephone interview, police officer, 12 August 2022.
[117] Anahy Meza, "Policías de Tamaulipas no quieren mandos militares, amagan con irse a paro", *Milenio*, 12 October 2022.
[118] Crisis Group telephone interview, police officer, 12 August 2022.

V. Rethinking the Local Role

Tainted by corruption and ineffectiveness, threatened by criminal organisations, and challenged by the growing military presence in their ranks, Mexico's local governments have seen their law enforcement authority erode, with higher levels of government taking on more responsibility. The result is far from optimal. Closer coordination among the state's three layers – municipalities, regions and the federation – would bolster efforts to fight crime and might also build the strength of (and public faith in) local democratic institutions. Cooperation should enable local officials to participate in the design of security strategies that respond to the specific threats their localities face; draw on the resources, investigative skills and hardware of state and federal forces; and ensure greater mutual accountability.

A. *A Coalition for Cooperation*

Improving cooperation between security forces could lend important momentum to violence reduction efforts in Mexico. Municipal governments are, of course, far more familiar with their localities than their regional and national counterparts: they are closer to their communities and have access to information regarding local organised crime that might not be available to the other authorities. They also see first-hand when law enforcement tactics are not working or backfiring because of the reaction they have provoked from either the criminal groups or residents. But the state and federal authorities also enjoy certain strengths. They can gather and deploy far more resources, draw on more specialised expertise, and adapt to nationwide trends in criminal activity.

Signing well-tailored security cooperation agreements would allow local, state and national authorities to pool resources to the benefit of all – especially the mayors embattled by criminal groups and the locales they govern. Boosting local police preparedness, strengthening connections to other forces and improving intelligence gathering capacities could help authorities protect local officials from attack, while building the public's confidence that these same officials are taking public safety seriously.

Data shows that certain sorts of cooperation – including intelligence sharing, clearer divisions of responsibility among security forces, police training and crime prevention – appear best for reducing criminal violence. Security agreements can help create efficient frameworks for working together on these tasks. But the risks of corruption and abuse of power attached to renewed reliance on local police cannot be brushed aside. Local coordination panels composed of civil society figures as well as representatives of the private sector and public institutions such as universities would need to establish monitoring systems to discourage malfeasance. These should be akin to the working groups established in the run-up to the "We are all Juárez" campaign, which monitored local and federal security forces' behaviour, watching for misuse of power. At the same time, a national effort to control graft in federal security forces through stronger oversight remains essential to achieving more effective law enforcement.[119] Corruption is not the sole preserve of local government and security forces.

[119] Crisis Group Report, *Building Peace in Mexico. Dilemmas Facing the López Obrador Government*, op. cit.

Establishing enduring mutual support among local, state and federal governments will be difficult, particularly when it requires deepening cooperation between political rivals. Explicit backing from political and social leaders from across the political spectrum will be essential. Federal authorities should start by acknowledging the limits of the current security strategy, the importance of local government and its potential role in supporting criminal investigations, particularly given that the constitution does not afford the military a permanent role in handling public security. Backing from the president, whether López Obrador or his successor to be elected in 2024, will be especially important to enlisting various levels of the state in joint security campaigns. Civil society should also support greater coordination, especially in regions that have long suffered political gridlock over security policy.

Mayors, meanwhile, should recognise the value of cooperation agreements that provide them with resources and expertise, but not at the cost of losing authority over local police. The experience of delegation pacts has deterred many mayors from signing any sort of security agreement. Instead, mayors should be encouraged to strike agreements aimed at expanding community-based programs intended to address the drivers of violence and foster local development. They should consider pairing accords with the interior ministry's social reconstruction initiative, which seeks to assist communities in high-violence areas by boosting public services and leisure opportunities, as well as creating jobs.[120]

Finally, as these efforts gain traction, the federal government could aim to create working groups in regions suffering high levels of violence, composed of local mayors, state governors, civil society representatives and businesspeople. These groups could collaborate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of law enforcement and crime prevention programs. Recent initiatives in Yucatán and Coahuila have embraced this collaborative model to an extent, but further steps will need to be taken to ensure a wider public partnership.

B. *Strengthening Municipal Funding Cooperation*

Local governments would benefit greatly from having more resources of their own to spend on law enforcement. Local police units often lack the funding to develop specialised units for high-impact crimes including homicide, extortion and kidnapping.[121]

But in the absence of larger infusions of federal funds, many municipalities will need to find other ways to bring in cash. They may, for example, have to reform tax collection procedures.[122] Helping prevent misuse of municipal funds will also help make more resources available. Potential safeguards include regular independent audits of municipal finances by the Superior Auditor of the Federation to promote

[120] The Social Reconstruction initiative is derived from a Jesuit order program in Mexico called the Social Fabric Reconstruction Program. Following its initial success, the interior ministry incorporated the program and hired members from the Jesuit think-tank, the Centre of Research and Social Action, as public officials. Crisis Group telephone interview, head of the Coordination of Social Prevention of Crime and the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric Unit at the interior ministry, 19 September 2022.
[121] "Las policías en México: radiografía de un retraso crónico", Causa en Común, March 2023.
[122] Vidal Romero, "Los efectos nocivos de la estructura fiscal en la seguridad pública", in Vidal Romero and Jorge E. Tello Peón (eds.), *Seguridad, Inteligencia y Gobernanza en México, Propuestas a Problemas* (Mexico City, 2022), pp. 147-167.

accountability. They might also include strengthening oversight institutions such as local comptrollers' offices and anti-corruption agencies, including the federal and state-level specialised prosecutor's offices and the National Anti-Corruption System.

Local officials may also be able to look to the federal government's new public security fund for states and municipalities for resources to improve public security. Money from this fund, which was established in November 2022, will be disbursed to state governors, with some of it going to those states that achieve the greatest improvements in public security. State governors are also authorised to create an annual security support fund for municipalities facing the highest rates of what the relevant decree describes as social exclusion.[123] But while these transfers could give beleaguered mayors a lift, discretionary financing continues to raise concerns about possible misuse of funds for political ends. Federal authorities should craft clear guidelines for distributing this money. In particular, they should specify how governors are to allocate the funds at the municipal level and stipulate that none are to be used for partisan political gain.

Together with local and international civil society, donors should support the above-described policies, in particular by providing financial assistance for the roll-out of appropriately tailored security cooperation agreements.

[123] The recent presidential decree that created a permanent fund to strengthen states and municipalities' public security institutions stipulates that state governors can give additional support to municipalities with higher levels of poverty and small populations. "Decreto por el que se reforma el Artículo Quinto Transitorio del Decreto por el que se reforman, adicionan y derogan diversas disposiciones de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, en materia de Guardia Nacional", op. cit.

VI. Conclusion

Mexico's crime wave is an ordeal for local governments, which have seen their reputations sullied, their powers trimmed and their capacities overwhelmed. As crime has evolved, so, too, has criminal groups' interest in controlling local authorities and stocking them with loyalists. For the country's mayors, and above all those in the 80 most violence-affected municipalities, the dangers these outfits pose are immense. Local officials are targets for criminal organisations wishing to ensure compliance with their designs. Dozens of mayors have been killed in recent years; many others are suspected of colluding with criminal groups. The approach successive federal governments of various political stripes have taken – namely, reinforcing military-led nationwide policing, depriving municipalities of security powers and limiting their funding – is ill suited to the moment.

As crime rings have fragmented throughout Mexico, the country needs a security strategy that adapts to the specific threats faced by individual states and municipalities. Enhancing the role of local government and police and deepening their collaboration with higher rungs of the state and security forces should be a fundamental part of this shift. Harnessing the knowledge and commitment of many local authorities poses challenges, none greater than the dangers of supporting corrupt actors who are also in the mix. But a new generation of security agreements among the three layers of the Mexican state could help to achieve real coordination and mobilise resources effectively, while managing the risks of collusion. Inability to curb rising insecurity has become the greatest failing of Mexico's democracy. Enlisting all parts of the state and bridging political divides for the sake of people's safety could be part of the formula for turning that record around.

Mexico City/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 23 June 2023

Appendix A: Violence Categorisation of the 2,457 Municipalities of Mexico

Figures 1 and 2 classify the degree of violence in municipalities, as indicated by homicides, which serves as the most reliable measure for fatalities caused by criminal groups, given that approximately two thirds of homicides can be attributed to them. To classify municipalities, both the per capita homicide rate for the most recent year and the rate of change during the same period were assessed. First, both the average per capita homicide rate and the rate of change of homicides from January to September 2022 were calculated. Secondly, these estimates were compared to the same period in 2021. This process allowed for estimating both the level of homicides in the past year and the rate of change.

Municipalities were then sorted into four categories: those with high homicide levels and growth rates, those with high homicide levels only, those with high homicide growth rates, and those with low homicide levels and growth rates during the past year. Municipalities in the top 97.5 percentile for both homicide levels and growth rates were considered "high". Homicide data was sourced from INEGI, while population estimates were derived from CONAPO and national censuses.

The same process was used to estimate common crime levels and growth rates, and the comparison to 2021, in Figure 4. The only two differences are that crime data were drawn from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, alongside a statistical adjustment of crimes at the state level using the 2020 and 2021 ENVIPE surveys. Underreporting of crime is widespread in Mexico, particularly for common crimes, with the ENVIPE indicating that around 95 per cent go unreported. This phenomenon is particularly common in poor, rural or remote areas, where residents may distrust authorities or fear retaliation from criminal groups. Municipalities with limited resources, weak law enforcement or a history of corruption may also experience higher rates of unreported crimes. To adjust for underreporting at the state level, Crisis Group inversely weighted common crimes by the underreporting measured by ENVIPE. Municipal adjustments are not possible as there are no representative victimisation surveys in the country at that level.

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Emergency Trust Fund for Africa), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs), Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and EuropeanAffairs), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Republic of Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office), United States Institute of Peace, and the World Bank.

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June 2023

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America since 2020

Special Reports and Briefings

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups, Latin America Report N°78, 20 February 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish)

Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace, Latin America Report N°80, 4 May 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, Latin America Report N°81, 8 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Bolivia Faces New Polls in Shadow of Fraud Row, Latin America Briefing N°43, 31 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace, Latin America Report N°82, 6 October 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, Latin America Report N°83, 13 November 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°84, 14 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro's Clean Sweep, Latin America Report N°85, 21 December 2020 (also available in Spanish).

The Exile Effect: Venezuela's Overseas Opposition and Social Media, Latin America Report N°86, 24 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia, Latin America Report N°87, 26 February 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Risks of a Rigged Election in Nicaragua, Latin America Report N°88, 20 May 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Electoral Violence and Illicit Influence in Mexico's Hot Land, Latin America Report N°89, 2 June 2021 (also available in Spanish).

The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia's Mass Protests, Latin America Report N°90, 2 July 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti: A Path to Stability for a Nation in Shock, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°44, 30 September 2021 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace", Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

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