The Legacy of Mexico’s Drug War on Youth Political Attitudes

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Abstract

In this study, we investigate how exposure to violence during one’s formative years of life may affect sociopolitical attitudes years later. Focusing on the case of Mexico, where young generations have been exposed to protracted violence during the so-called Drug War (beginning in 2006), we demonstrate that there are long-lasting, negative effects. We do so by fielding an in-person original survey to 2880 young adults in urban Mexico, measuring various sociopolitical attitudes, including community and political trust. We then construct two measures of violence exposure, both exposure to homicidal violence and militarization, by matching respondents with historical trends in homicide rates and data on military confrontations from their childhood municipality. Our analysis demonstrates that exposure to both types of violence during the first ten years of life is associated with up to 20 percent less reported interpersonal and political trust.

Keywords: Violence, militarization, political trust, youth, Mexico

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Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, a generation of Mexicans has been raised amidst the most violent conflict that the country has experienced since the 1910 Revolution. Various regions have been affected by a wave of organized criminal violence, resulting in almost 400,000 homicides and about 90,000 disappearances. This began in 2006, when former Mexican president Felipe Calderón launched a war against organized crime by deploying military forces throughout Northern and Western Mexico. The Mexican army, which had not been trained to fight these groups, became the leading force behind “Drug War” operations. The core of this approach continued under Calderón’s successor, President Enrique Peña Nieto.

During this era, an entire generation of Mexicans was born, raised, and transitioned to adulthood, and now constitute a large portion of the country’s voting-age population. They witnessed not only a sharp increase in the number of military confrontations, but also homicides (Figure 1). Beyond bystanders, they were often victims – between 2007 and 2011, the homicide rate among youths aged 15–24 increased three-fold. As of 2020, 21% of the victims of intentional homicide were 24 years old or younger, and more than half were under 34 years old (INEGI, 2020).

Figure 1: Annual Homicide Rate and Military Confrontations Across Presidential Administrations in Mexico (1990–2020)

Few scholars have investigated the impacts Mexico’s Drug War has had on these exposed youths. But, existing work suggests that impacts could be profound. Scholars have shown that childhood experiences heavily influence the formation of political attitudes, behavior, and preferences. Indeed, the adoption of
political identities during childhood strongly predicts political attitudes and behavior in adult life (Campbell et al., 1980; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2008; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Further, large-scale violence has been shown to have long-term community level effects (Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov, 2017). However, this literature has primarily focused on understanding the development of political identities in the context of the U.S. and Europe. Although some evidence suggests exposure to violence during childhood decreases support in various levels of government later in life (Hong and Kang, 2017), this has not been explored in the region nor in the context of Mexico’s Drug War.

We connect this literature to that regarding political and interpersonal trust, and examine if childhood exposure to this violence negatively affected trust later in life. This builds upon, and extends, several studies which show that exposure to crime and insecurity affects contemporaneous trust in various political institutions and one’s community (Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015; Blanco, 2013; Malone, 2010). This can weaken social and institutional fabrics by increasing fear, suspicion, and distrust. This is important, as trust is tied to various behaviors of interest to politics, such as political participation (Mishler and Rose, 2001), support for populism (Seligson, 2007), and compliance with the law (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). We extend this work by examining if such effects are long lasting, which could help to better understand patterns of political behavior across young generations of Mexicans today.

To investigate how exposure to criminal violence and drug-war related militarization during childhood affects political and interpersonal trust among young individuals, we fielded an original in-person survey (n = 2,880), representative of Mexico’s young adult urban population. The core of our empirical strategy is testing whether respondents exposed to varying levels of Mexico’s Drug War violence during their childhood present different levels of certain attitudes. We compare respondents to those who were born in a different year in the same municipality, and those who were born in a different municipality but belong to the same cohort. This approach resembles the identification strategy used by others to examine the impact of childhood exposure to violence on human capital accumulation (Shemyakina, 2011; Chamarbagwala and Morán, 2011; Leon, 2012). We expect childhood exposure to drug-related violence to negatively affect levels of political and interpersonal trust.
Research Design

We rely on three main data sources: our original survey fielded in Mexico among young adults, official records of municipal homicides, and data regarding municipal military confrontations with criminal organizations (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). To measure the sociopolitical attitudes in question, we fielded an in-person survey of 2880 young adults age 16-29 in June of 2021 across urban Mexico. We asked respondents to rate their trust in the following groups on a 1-7 scale (where 1 represents no trust at all and 7 represents a lot of trust): neighbors and family, the police (municipal, state, federal), the military (army and navy), and the government (federal, state, local).

In addition to representativity across typical sociodemographic characteristics, we employed a complex strategy to ensure our sample was representative of the various levels of municipal violence across the country (Citation to be added after review). We considered three variables which capture variations in violence at this level: homicide rates, reported non-homicidal crime, and perceived levels of violence. Although homicide rates are often used as a benchmark for prevalence of violence, we involve additional measures as homicide does not capture the complete reality of citizen insecurity. However, these measures are not available at the municipal level. We thus rely upon measures available at the national and city level from Mexico’s National Survey of Urban Public Security (ENSU) and use multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) to generate subnational measures (Gelman and Little 1997). Estimates for 157 municipalities are generated for both reported victimization and perceived insecurity. For more information on this process, see the Appendix. We utilize these estimates and the most recently reported homicide rates collected by the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security (SESNSP) to stratify our survey sample. In this way, we generate a sample that is representative of urban Mexico for our age group of interest, and of reported insecurity, reported victimization, and homicide rates at the municipal level.

Within our survey, we also ask respondents where they were born (either the municipality where they currently reside, or elsewhere). This is uncommon in current public opinion surveys in the area, and allows us to measure exposure to violence and militarization during one’s childhood. To capture exposure to homicidal violence, we use municipal homicide rates reported by Mexico’s National Institute for Ge-
We calculated the average homicide rate for each respondent for the first ten years of their lives based on their birth year and where they spent the majority of their childhood. To measure exposure to militarization, we use municipal-level data regarding the military’s confrontations with criminal groups (2007-18) collected by Flores-Macías and Zarkin (2021). The authors use this as a measure of military presence. We extend this assumption and use this as a measure of general militarization, both of the military and police, as during the Drug War presidents often deployed the military along with both federal and state police to confront drug trafficking (Felbab-Brown 2014).

We first examine if survey respondents exposed to higher levels of violence during their first ten years of life express different levels of trust relative to those who were born in a different year in the same municipality and those who were born in a different municipality but belong to the same cohort. Similar empirical strategies have been used in other studies addressing the impact of civil war on human capital accumulation and health-related outcomes (Shemyakina 2011; Chamarbagwala and Morán 2011; Leon 2012). We run different models with each of our 10 dependent variables, one for each government or community actor. We specify our model as a multilevel model with non-nested random intercepts for birth year and municipality.

We adapt this modelling strategy slightly to examine the role of militarization on respondent trust. We examine whether or not a respondent was older or younger than one of three age cutoffs (10, 12, and 15) in 2012 and interact this variable with exposure to militarization. We choose to dichotomize age based on the year 2012 as this year represents the end of the Calderón administration and a turn towards significantly less militarization overall (see Figure 1). Therefore, those who were at the cutoff age or younger by 2012 would have experienced the majority of their formative years during the most repressive period of the Drug War. We explore three cutoff ages to determine if effects persist across different years of adolescence. We interact this dichotomous variable with the mean number of military confrontations during

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1 We rely upon two sources of homicide data due to issues of data availability. INEGI provides the most reliable historical data, while SESNP provides the most reliable for 2020 at the time of our survey.

2 We analyze individuals who live in the municipalities where they spent their childhood (about 84% of our sample).
this initial period of the drug war (2007-2012).

Both analyses include a series of control variables and random intercepts both for municipality and birth-year of the respondents. Random intercepts allow us to account for both municipal-level (e.g., more contemporaneous violence trends that vary at the municipality) and year trends (e.g., any spikes, declines in violence across certain years). See the Appendix for full details of our modeling strategy, in addition to alternate specifications.

**Results: Exposure to Homicides**

We find a consistent negative relationship between exposure to homicidal violence and trust. Visualizations of predicted values from these models can be seen in Figure 2. All coefficients and alternate models are provided in the Appendix.

First, exposure to homicidal violence is negatively associated with trust in all levels of the police. This effect is strongest when examining the federal police. Similar effects exist when examining trust in both state and municipal police, although the magnitude of the decrease in trust is smaller. All effects are significant, at minimum at the p < .01 level.

![Figure 2: Predicted Values of Trust vs. Mean Homicide Exposure](image)

Trust is reported on a 1-7 scale. Figures present predicted values from random-intercept models with 90% semi-parametric bootstrapped confidence intervals.

We find a negative relationship between exposure to violence during childhood and trust in one’s government. However, this relationship is only significant when examining trust in the municipal government (at the p < .05 level). A change in exposure to homicides from 0 to the maximum value is associated with an 18 percent decrease in trust in the municipal government. We find a similar relation-
ship between exposure and trust in the military, however this relationship is only significant in the case of trust in the army ($p < 0.05$).

Finally, exposure to homicide during one’s youth is associated with lower levels of interpersonal trust, both in one’s family and neighbors. The drop in trust in neighbors is large - a 19 per cent drop when exposure increases from 0 to the maximum value. On the other hand, although trust in family does decrease, the magnitude of this change is comparatively lower (about 7 percent).

**Results: Exposure to Militarization**

We generally find a negative relationship between exposure to militarization during respondents’ young years and political and interpersonal trust later in life. For this series of models, we are interested in the interactive effect between military confrontations (our measure of militarization) and the various age cut offs (10, 12, and 15 years) during the year 2012. In this section, we provide visualizations for significant results for the 10 year cutoff (Figure 3); visualizations for 12 and 15 year cutoffs and all model coefficients can be seen in the Appendix.

The interaction between exposure to militarization and trust in the police is significant for both federal and municipal police. As seen in Figure 3, those under the age of 10 in 2012 exhibit decreased trust in federal police as exposure to militarization increases. Those over this age cutoff experience a positive increase in trust. This effect is strongest for those under 10 years old, indicating that exposure to trust during one’s youngest years has the most prominent effect. In particular, a change from no militarization to the maximum value of militarization leads to about a 25 percent decrease in trust in the federal police among those under 10 years old in 2012. We find a statistically significant and negative interaction affect among trust in municipal police, however only among those under 10 years old. This effect dissipates as we increase the age cutoff, suggesting this effect is not as strong among those exposed to militarization during later years of their adolescence.

When examining the government, we find that those under 10, 12, and 15 years old have lower levels of trust in federal government as exposure increases. However, this result is only significant when examining
the 10 year cutoff – a change in exposure from zero to the maximum value results in a 15 percent decrease in trust among those under 10 years old. We find slightly different patterns when examining trust in state and municipal government. In the case of the state government, models examining the cutoffs of 10 and 12 years are significant. These show a trend of decreased trust among those under the age cutoff, and a prominent increase in trust among those above it. In the case of municipal government trust, models examining the 10 and 15 year cutoffs are significant and show that trust among those under the cutoff stays rather consistent, while those above the cutoff increase trust with more militarization.

With regard to trust in the army, an increase in militarization from zero to the maximum value results in a 12 percent drop in trust among those younger than 10 years old. Conversely, the relationship is positive for those above 10 in 2012. We find that the interaction between age and trust in the navy is only significant for the 10 and 15 year cutoff. Among those younger than 10, trust decreases as militarization increases.

We find a relationship between militarization and trust in family among those who were younger than 10 in 2012, although this effect is not dramatic compared to previous results, and trust in family is predicted to be quite high (over 6 on the 1-7 scale). This effect disappears as we explore older cohorts. There is no effect on trust in one’s neighbors.
Discussion

Exposure to violence and militarization during childhood negatively impacts both political and interpersonal trust later in one’s life. We examine this phenomenon in the context of Mexico’s Drug War, when a generation of youth were exposed to massive conflict between the state and organized crime. Our analysis shows strong evidence that an increase in both a child’s local homicide rate and increase in militarization can decrease trust in multiple government agencies, one’s family, and neighbors.

In terms of political trust, this affect varies based on the level of government, but results overall indicate an overall negative trend. In terms of exposure to homicide, trust in all political entities is negatively affected, and five out of eight of these relationships are significant at conventional levels. When examining militarization, similar exposure during younger years is associated with a decrease in trust among all explored entities, and all eight of these relationships are significant at conventional levels. We show interpersonal trust is also negatively affected by exposure to violence, reinforcing previous work such as that of Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori (2007), extending it to demonstrate this effect is long-lasting. Although it is concerning that levels of trust decrease, and reinforces the idea that exposure to militarized conflict can harm the social fabric of communities, we find that trust in one’s family is still relatively resilient.

Our analysis points to important ramifications of exposure to violence during childhood. These effects are crucial to examine in modern-day Mexico, as many young individuals were exposed to the heightened violence of the Drug War during these formative years. Our analysis suggests this has implications for the politics of this country, and could be relevant to other nations where youth are exposed to protracted violence within their communities (e.g., Colombia and the FARC, Peru and the Shining Path).

References


Felbab-Brown, Vanda. 2014. “Changing the Game or Dropping the Ball?”


