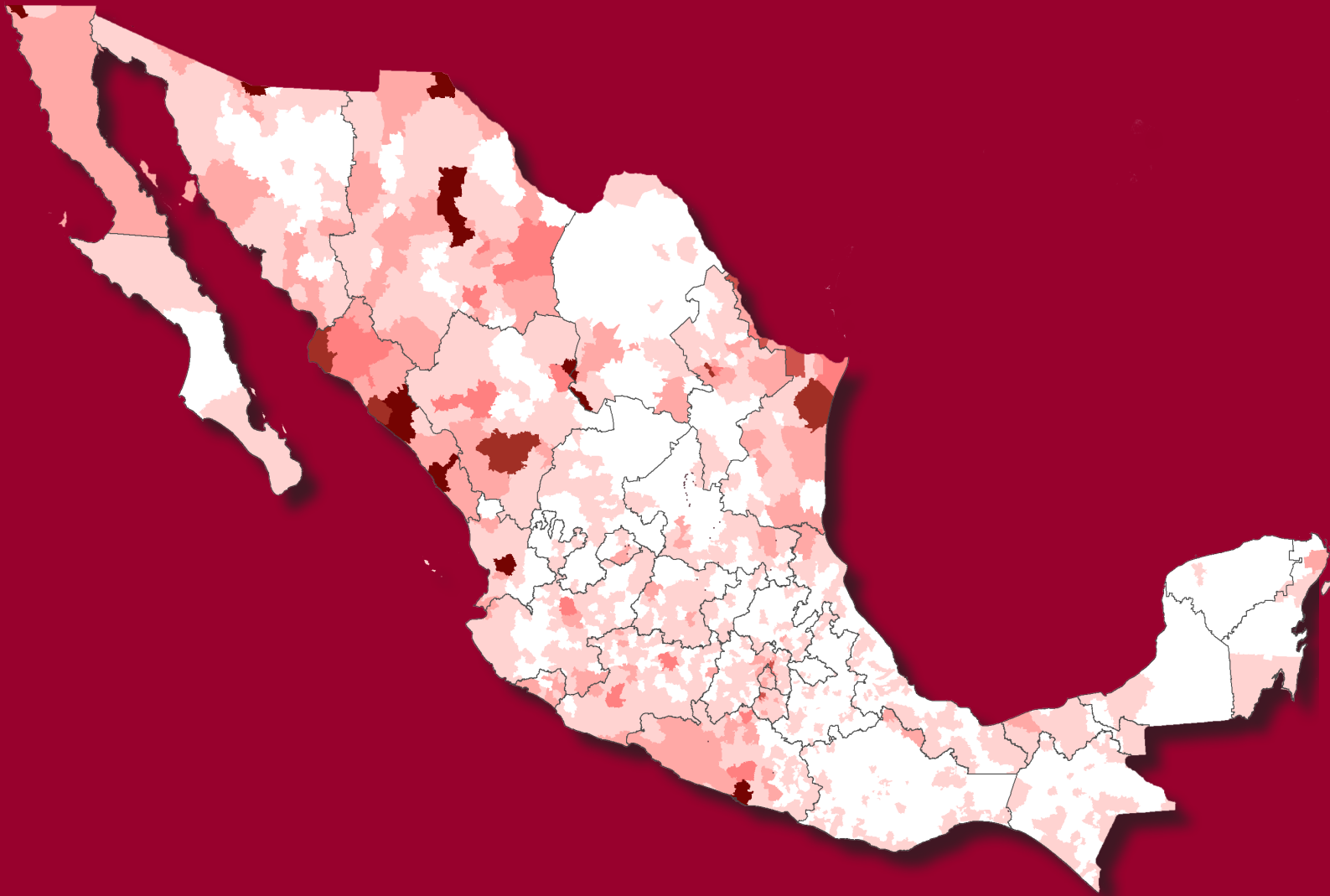


# Drug Violence in Mexico

*Data and Analysis Through 2010*



**Special Report**

**by Viridiana Ríos and David A. Shirk**



**Trans-Border Institute**

*Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies*

University of San Diego

**February 2011**

## About the Trans-Border Institute

The Trans-Border Institute is a program of the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego (USD) that seeks to promote cooperation and understanding between the United States and Mexico, address challenges and opportunities that spring from the bi-national relationship, and advance the two countries' shared interests along the U.S.-Mexico border. The Institute administers broad range of programs, research, events, and other activities involving scholars, practitioners, and students working to inform public debate, promote international cooperation, and surmount obstacles to cross-border collaboration.

## Acknowledgements

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Trans-Border Institute (TBI)  
University of San Diego  
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110  
[www.sandiego.edu/tbi](http://www.sandiego.edu/tbi)

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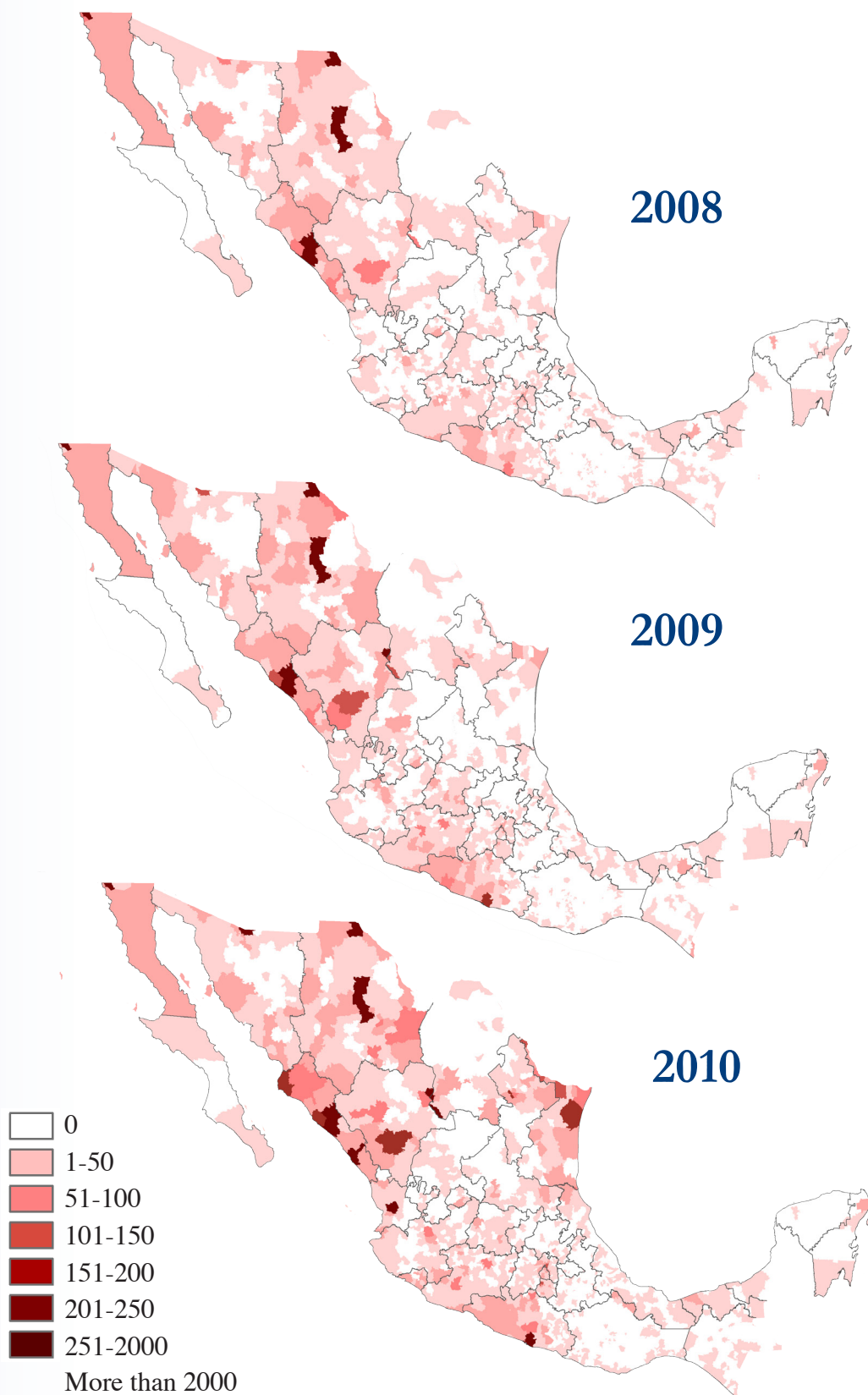
**Trans-Border Institute**

Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies

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## Drug-Related Killings in Mexico, 2006-2010



# Drug Violence in Mexico

## *Data and Analysis Through 2010*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Government data shed new light on the extent of drug violence in Mexico.** Recently released official figures on homicides associated with organized crime report levels of violence that are significantly higher than those tracked by media accounts, which were previously the only source of information publicly available.
- **Violence has increased sharply under Mexican President Felipe Calderón.** Four years into the administration of President Calderón (2006-12), 34,550 killings have been officially linked to organized crime, a dramatic increase from the previous administration of President Vicente Fox (2000-06) when 8,901 cases were identified.
- **2010 greatly surpassed previous levels of violence in Mexico.** Over 15,000 organized crime killings occurred in 2010, comprising 44% of the total number accumulated during the Calderón administration and representing an increase of nearly 60% with respect to the previous year.
- **Violence from organized crime in Mexico is geographically concentrated.** 84% of all homicides from organized crime in 2010 occurred in just four of Mexico's 32 states (Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Guerrero and Baja California). Most others have had much lower levels of violence, and several states have been virtually untouched by violence (Baja California Sur, Campeche, Querétaro, Tlaxcala, and Yucatán)
- **Over 70% of violence in 2010 was concentrated in just 80 municipalities.** The top five most violent municipalities in 2010 were Ciudad Juárez (2,738 cases), Culiacán (587), Tijuana (472), Chihuahua (670), and Acapulco (370), which together accounted for 32% of all the drug-related homicides in 2010.
- **Violence spiked in some areas due to new clashes among Mexican crime groups.** Four states experienced large, sudden spikes in violence during the course of the last year: San Luis Potosí (from 8 homicides per year in 2009 to 135 in 2010), Tamaulipas (90 to 209), Nayarit (37 to 377), and Nuevo León (112 to 604).
- **Mexico's violence had broader political and societal impacts in 2010.** An unprecedented number of elected officials, police, military, and civilians have been caught in the crossfire, including 14 mayors and 11 journalists.
- **Recent government arrests constitute significant successes, but may have unpredictable effects.** During this year, the Mexican government's counter-drug efforts led to the capture of several high-profile traffickers, including Teodoro "El Teo" García Simental, Edgar "La Barbie" Valdez, and Nazario "El Chayo" Moreno, which authorities believe may help bring a reduction, if not an end to the violence.



# Drug Violence in Mexico

## *Data and Analysis Through 2010*

By Viridiana Ríos and David A. Shirk

### **Overview**

Since the 1990s, Mexico has experienced a persistent public security crisis involving high rates of violent crime and—particularly since 2004—increased violence among organized crime syndicates involved in drug trafficking and other illicit activities. In recent years, this violence has become so severe that officials in Mexico and the United States have expressed uncertainty about the Mexican state’s ability to withstand the effects of this violence. Indeed, 2010 was the worst year on record for such violence, and was marked a sharp increase in politically targeted violence that included numerous assassinations and kidnappings of public officials.

Until recently, there has been little detailed data or analysis available to gauge Mexico’s drug related violence. Until January 2011, the Mexican government released only sporadic and unsystematic data on drug violence, and tracking by media sources produced widely varying estimates. In the absence of reliable information, sensationalistic reporting and government statements contributed to considerable confusion and hyperbole about the nature of Mexico’s current security crisis. Fortunately, in recent months, greater public scrutiny and pressure on Mexican authorities has resulted in a wealth of new data on Mexico’s drug violence.

This report builds on previous research by the Trans-Border Institute’s Justice in Mexico Project ([www.justiceinmexico.org](http://www.justiceinmexico.org)), compiling much of this new data and analysis to provide a more complete picture of Mexico’s drug war and the challenge it presents to both Mexico and the United States.

## Approaches to Measuring Drug Violence in Mexico

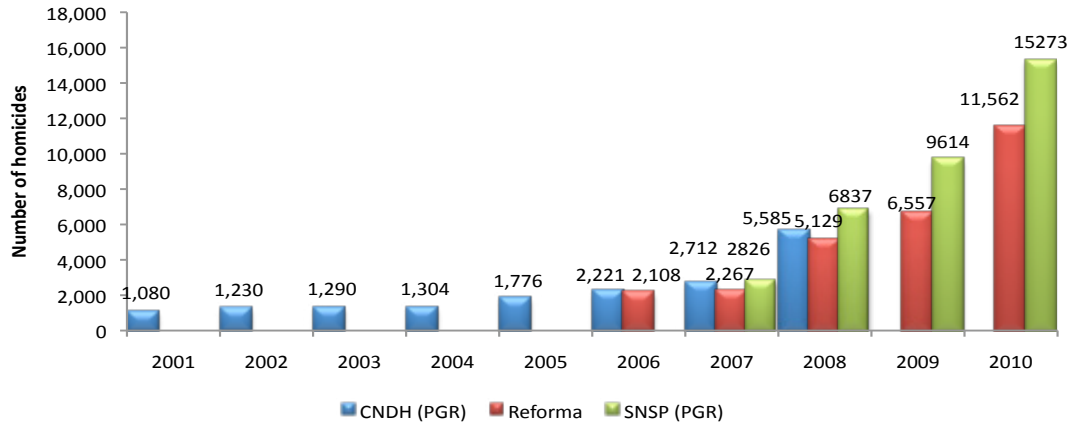
Measuring drug related violence in Mexico is inherently challenging. First and foremost is the problem of definitions. “Drug violence” and “drug related homicide” are not formal categories in Mexican criminal law, and there is some disagreement among scholars and analysts over the appropriate terminology used to describe the phenomenon. That said, like many other ill-defined social phenomena, most people recognize drug related violence when they see it. Mass-casualty shoot-outs in the public square, bodies hanging from bridges, decapitated heads placed in front of public buildings, mass grave sites, and birthday party massacres are among the worst examples of such violence.

Even so, establishing a verifiable connection to drug trafficking activities requires proper police investigation and due process of law, all of which can be very time consuming in the best of circumstances. In Mexico, such investigations are often slowed by the resource limitations of police agencies, particularly at the state and local level. As a result, numerically counting “drug related” murders has thus far been a highly subjective exercise, prone to substantial guesswork even when done by government authorities. In part for this reason, Mexican authorities have been exceedingly cautious in reporting statistics on the number of drug related homicides. Indeed, over the last few years, the Mexican government regularly denied requests by the Trans-Border Institute (TBI) and other organizations for a full accounting of civilian deaths in Mexico’s drug war.

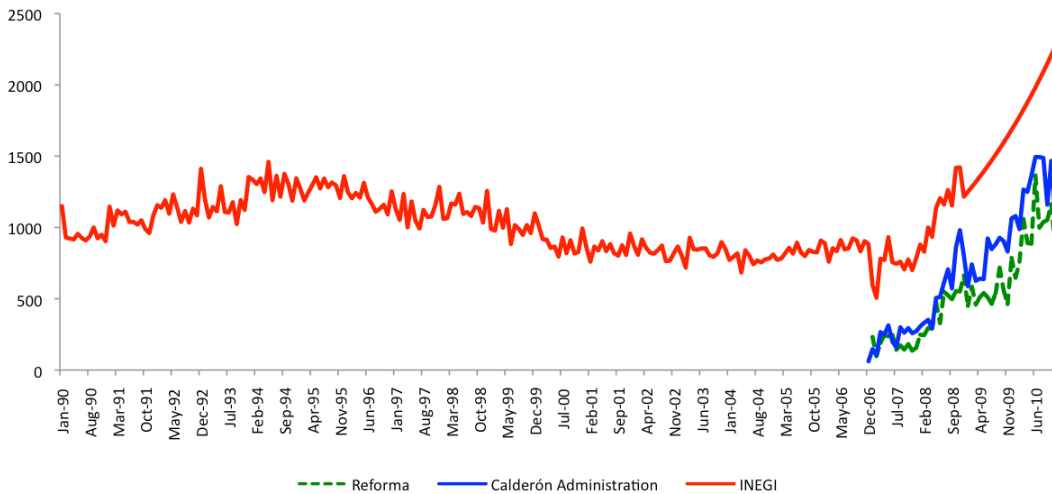
On January 2011, growing public scrutiny and pressure led the Mexican government to release a comprehensive online database with a wealth of new information. A clearer picture of the patterns of Mexican drug violence thus emerges by combining data from several sources: figures on drug-related homicides from 2000-2008 gathered by Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) from the Mexican Attorney General’s Office (PGR); data from 2006 to 2010 gathered by the Trans-Border Institute from estimates compiled by the Mexico City-based *Reforma* newspaper; and recently released official statistics on organized crime-related homicides from December 2006 to 2010 compiled by the PGR for the National Public Security System under (SNSP) Mexican President Felipe Calderón. (See Figure 1).

The authors reference *Reforma*’s tally because it has been the most consistent media source in reporting its data and utilizes a specific methodology for identifying drug related homicides. As noted in TBI’s January 2010 report, *Drug Violence in Mexico*, this methodology uses specific criteria associated with drug trafficking (e.g., “narco” messages, etc.). Until the recent release of SNSP figures, *Reforma* and media sources had the advantage of being more accessible to the public than government data. However, the absolute numbers and distribution of killings reported by *Reforma* and different media sources vary greatly, due to differing methodologies and definitions of “drug related” violence. That said, media sources mostly agree on the general direction of mortality trends, and often provide details that are not reported by the government, such as the number of women, police, and soldiers killed each year.

**Figure 1. Drug-Related Killings in Mexico, 2001-2010**



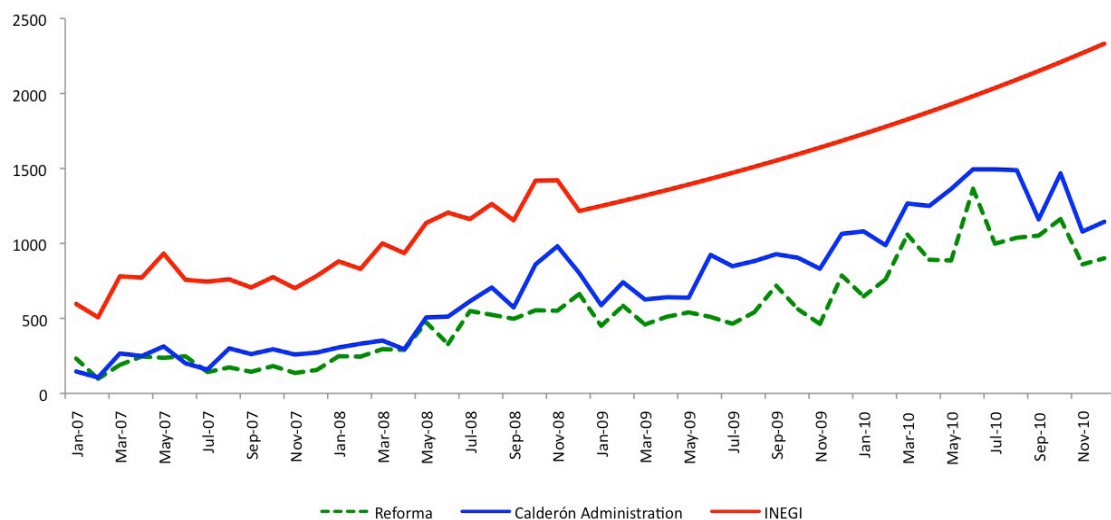
**Figure 2. Tracking Long Term Trends in Homicide, 1990-2010**



To track violence over longer periods of time, data on intentional homicide are available from Mexico’s official statistical agency, INEGI and the World Health Organization (WHO). Unfortunately, these figures require very tedious data collection techniques, and do not discern between “regular” murders and those perpetrated by drug traffickers. Also, the compilation and release of intentional homicides statistics lags well past recent events: at the time of this report, the most recent data available from INEGI’s online database were from 2008. For the purpose of this report, the authors reviewed municipal level homicide data for all years available from INEGI (1990 to 2008), and created a special dataset for the individuals most likely to be involved in drug related violence: young men aged 18-35. The authors also calculated an approximation, projecting from the last three years available, to estimate the possible trend beyond 2008. Figure 2 compares these data against those of Reforma and SNSP, offering a longer term view of Mexico’s violence.

A comparison of the sources described above demonstrates a number of important observations. Notably, INEGI data suggest that homicide had been trending downward during most of the last two decades, as observed in previous research on this topic. Indeed, in a study titled *Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico*, the Justice in Mexico Project found that homicide rates declined rather steadily over the course of the 20th century. As demonstrated in Figure 2, there has been a sharp reversal of this trend in recent years; all of the data illustrate a steep increase in violence, particularly after the start of 2008.

**Figure 3. Comparing Homicide Trends, 2006-2010**



Another observation worth noting about available information on drug related homicide is the consistency of trends across different sources. Focusing on the presidential administration of current President Calderón (2006-2012), Figure 3 provides a comparison of INEGI, *Reforma*, and SNSP data suggests that all three sources have methodologies that provide closely correlated results. Aggregate rates of increase and decrease are closely correlated, which suggests a certain degree of reliability across each of these sources. Again, this subset of INEGI data references only homicides involving young males aged 18-35 and is limited to the period from 1990-2008. Meanwhile, both the government and *Reforma* offer more precise tracking of organized crime and drug-related homicide, respectively. However, the government's figures are significantly higher than those tracked by *Reforma*. This is probably due to the fact that the government has more complete information about criminal investigations involving organized crime and because its tracking of "organized crime killings" is probably more inclusive than *Reforma's* tracking of "drug related violence." In addition, there is some level of interpretation in compiling both SNSP and *Reforma* data, which may also explain part of the variance. Finally, it is worth noting here that SNSP tracks homicides in three categories: drug related executions (*ejecuciones*), violent confrontations (*enfrentamientos*), and aggression targeting authorities by organized crime groups (*agresiones*).

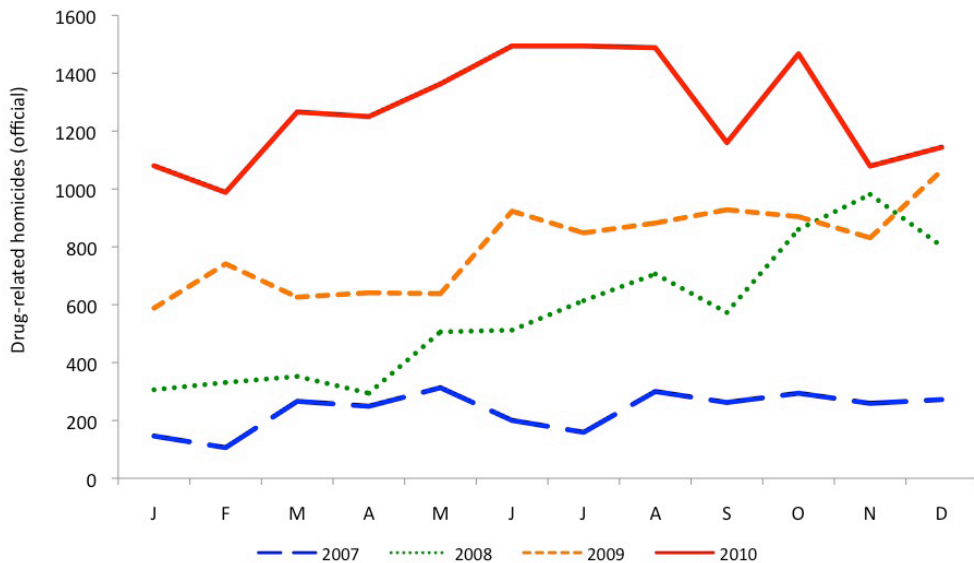
In short, all of the currently available sources of data on Mexican drug violence have different strengths and weaknesses. Some information gaps are insurmountable; many bodies have yet to be discovered and there has been little analysis of missing persons data in relation to recent violence. Other gaps are still the result of a lack of information provided by the government. For example, the SNSP data do not yet include certain potentially relevant information that can be obtained from other sources, such as tallies of decapitations, police and military casualties, time of day, age and gender of victims, and indications of physical distress indicative of torture. This lack of information makes it difficult to properly assess the problem and offer effective recommendations regarding Mexico's recent violence. Still, thanks to the recent release of official data, there are now more informational resources to understand this problem than in the past.

This report sorts through these various sources to provide a comprehensive assessment of drug related violence in Mexico. In general, the authors give preference to the government's official tally of suspected organized crime homicides, recognizing that these figures may include cases not related to drug trafficking. At the same time, in order to demonstrate trends that pre-date the current administration, the authors refer to official statistics obtained from INEGI and the World Health Organization. Also, where necessary to identify weekly trends or specific victimization rates, the reports relies on data from *Reforma*. While the base numbers vary across these different sources, the trends that they reveal are closely correlated.

## Analysis of Recent Trends in Drug Violence

**There has been a dramatic increase in violence in recent years.** Regardless what measure is used, the most immediately observable trend regarding recent violence in Mexico is simply the large and increasing number of intentional homicides associated with organized crime. As noted above, according to PGR figures reported by the CNDH, there were a total of 6,680 drug-related killings from 2001-2005. With 1,776 officially designated organized crime killings in 2005 and 2,221 in 2006, the rate of violence increased by 36% and 25%, respectively, during these years. Hence, some significant increases in violence clearly preceded the current administration of President Calderón, which was inaugurated in December 2010.

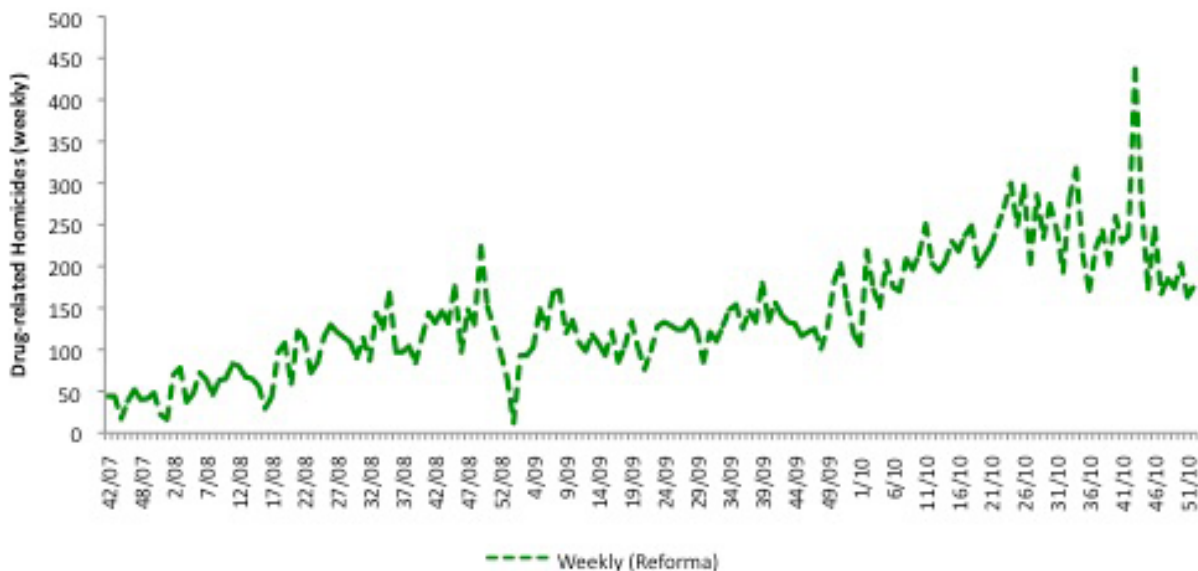
**Figure 4. Government Data on Organized Crime Killings, By Month and By Year, 2006-2010**



During the period from 2007 to 2010, however, the total number of organized crime related homicides identified by the Mexican government reached 34,550. In other words, the number of organized crime homicides reported during the first four years of the Calderón administration was four times greater than the total of 8,901 such killings identified during the entire Fox administration (2001-2006). With an estimated 76,131 intentional homicides in Mexico since 2007, killings related to organized crime accounted for about 45% of all murders in the country. While the upward trend in violence dates back to 2005, the major increase in violence came after a dramatic spike in 2008, as organized crime related homicides jumped to 6,837 killings, a 142% increase from 2007. After another increase of more than 40% to 9,614 killings in 2009, the number of killings linked to organized crime jumped by 59% in 2010, reaching a new record total of 15,273 deaths.

**Violence has tended to increase and decrease in sudden surges.** Aside from generally higher levels, a second trend is the sporadic spiking of violence at different points in time. That is, broken down on a weekly basis, Mexico’s violence exhibits less of a continuous increase than a series of sporadic spikes. Weekly data are not yet available from the Mexican government via SNSP’s database, but *Reforma* has been tracking weekly data since 2007, as illustrated in Figure 5. As these data show, the trend in 2007 and 2009 was generally stable, but in 2008 and 2010 violence was characterized by several dramatic spikes, as well as significant declines at different points during the year. Given the nature of the violence, it is difficult to determine whether the downward trend in late 2010 will be sustainable into the coming year.

**Figure 5. Reforma Weekly Tallies of Organized Crime Killings, Compared by Year, 2006-2010**



**There is also substantial geographic variation and different levels of violence.** The heaviest concentration found in major trafficking and production zones. At the state level, we see three major categories: states with high, moderate, and low rates of organized crime related homicides.

In terms of high levels of violence, since 2007, ten states experienced an average of between 250 and 2,600 organized crime homicides each year and a cumulative total exceeding 1,000 deaths each. Among these, the top four states —Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Guerrero, and Baja California— accounted for 84% of all violence during this same period. Most states in this category are not densely populated and are located in the major drug producing areas on Mexico’s west coast or trafficking corridors located near the U.S.-Mexico border.

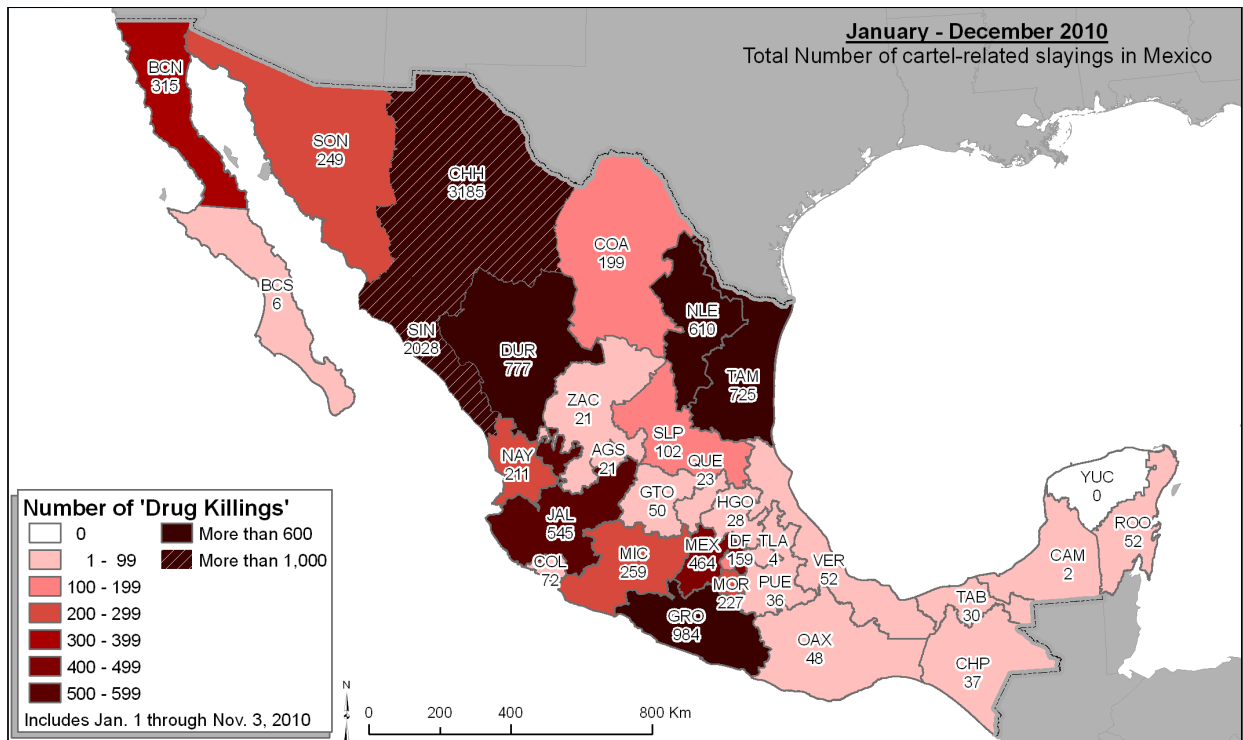
In terms of more moderate levels of violence, 16 states had an average of between 25 and 250 organized crime related homicides each year, and a cumulative total between 100 and 1,000 deaths each. These states tend to be located in areas not associated with major production or trafficking of drugs, though this is not always the case.

As illustrated by Figure 6, with Reforma's closing figures for the whole of 2010, only a handful of states have remained mostly untouched by drug violence in recent years. Specifically, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Querétaro, Tlaxcala, and Yucatán have experienced the lowest rates of violence, each averaging no more than ten drug related homicides per year and not exceeding a cumulative total of more than four times that number since 2007.

**Variation in levels of violence is even more pronounced at the municipal level.**

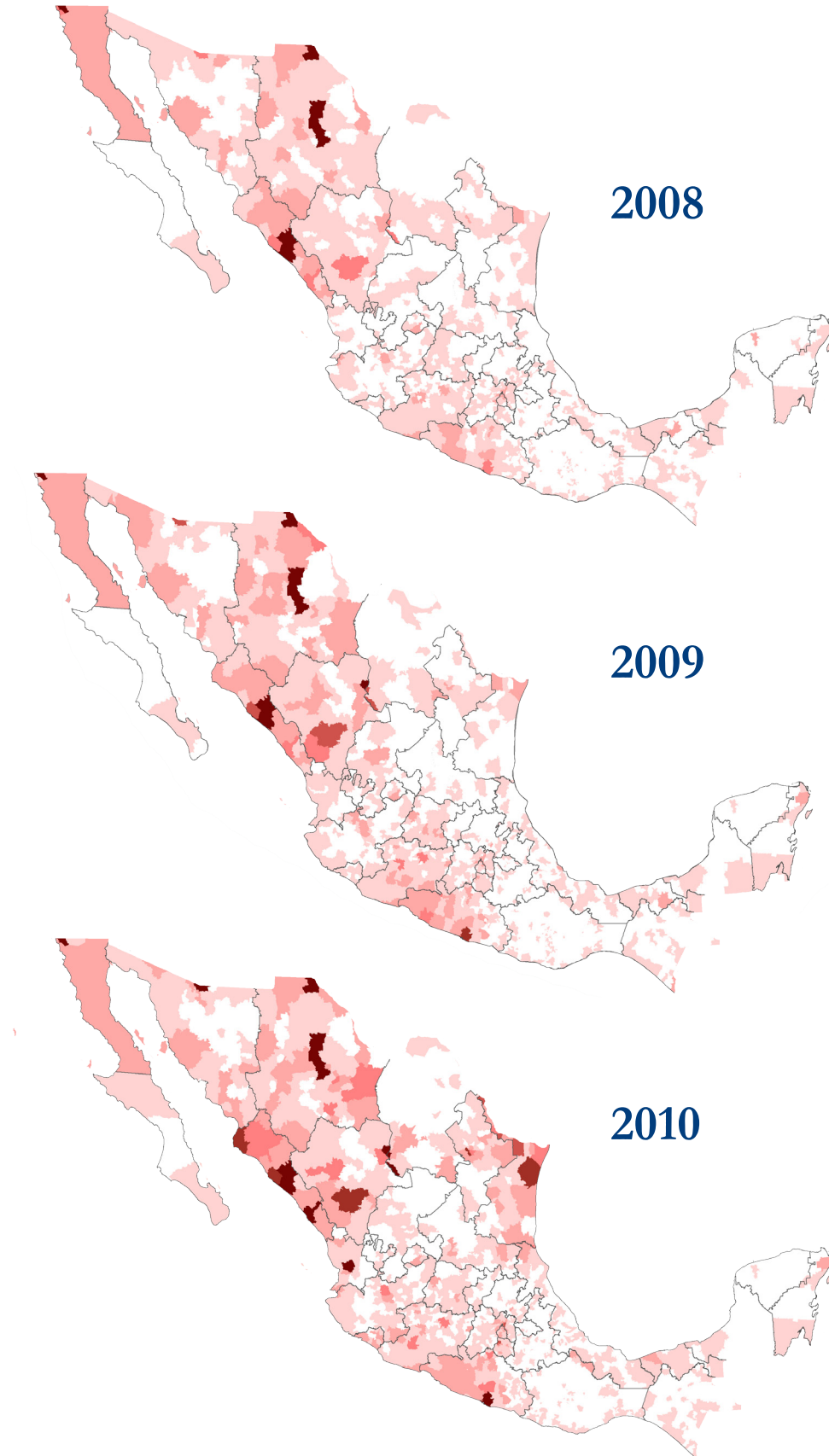
According to the government's recently released statistics, roughly 40% of organized crime killings since December 2006 occurred in just ten of the country's roughly 2,450 municipalities. Combined, the next 90 most violent municipalities accounted for another 32% of the violence, while the rest of the country accounted for only 28%. The top five most violent cities in 2010 —Ciudad Juárez, Culiacán, Tijuana, Chihuahua, and Acapulco— accounted for 31.7% of the violence for the year. The map in Figures 7, 8, and 9 illustrate the number of organized crime homicide identified in 2008, 2009, and 2010, respectively, and the spread of violence to Mexico's northeast over the last year.

**Figure 6. Reforma's 2010 Tallies of Drug Related Killings, by State**



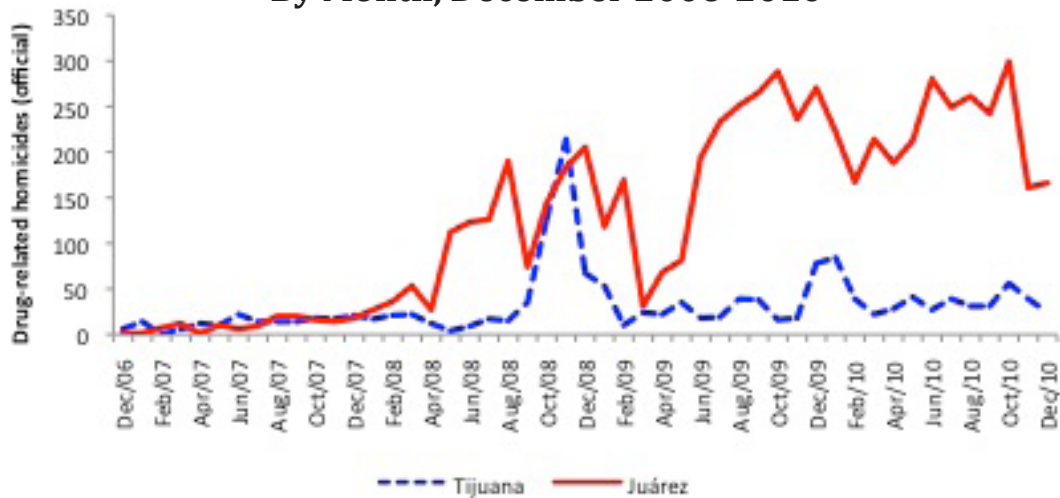
All TBI maps produced by Theresa Firestine.

**Figure 7, 8, & 9. Organized Crime Killings by Municipality**

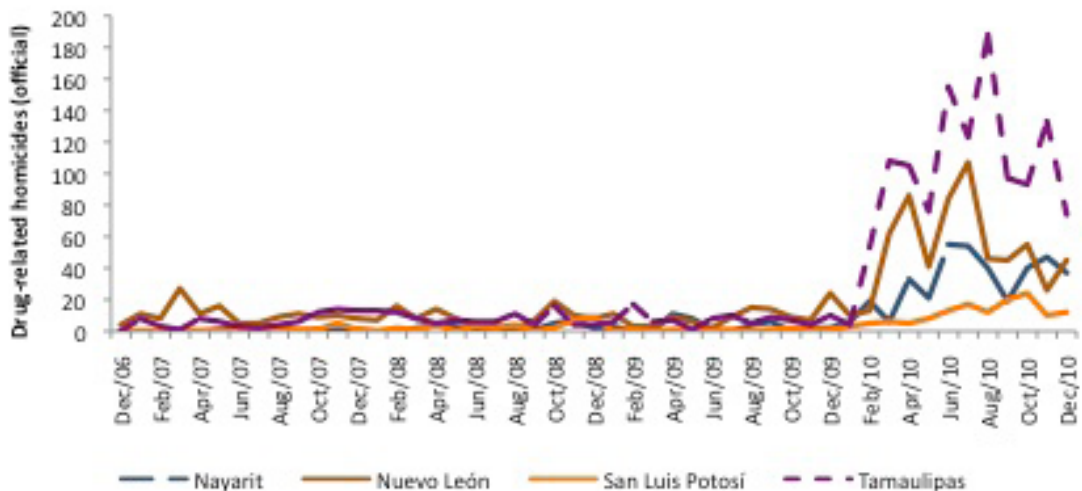


**Increases in violence tend to vary over time in certain states and municipalities.** Tijuana, in the state of Baja California, is the most widely cited example; in 2008, violence from organized crime increased by over 270% before dropping to moderately higher levels than in the past. Ciudad Juárez, in the state of Chihuahua, presents the worst case scenario, since violence increased more than tenfold that same year, and has persisted at ever higher levels since then. In 2010, 14 out of 16 states with mid-level violence experienced increases of at least 10% or more, and seven saw increases of 100% or more: San Luis Potosí jumped from 8 homicides in 2009 to 135 in 2010, Tamaulipas increased from 90 to 1,209, Nayarit from 37 to 377, and Nuevo León increased from 112 to 620. Meanwhile, while some other states saw very dramatic spikes, their overall levels were still fairly low: Baja California Sur went from 1 execution in 2009 to ten in 2010. Only five states nationwide saw a year-to-year decrease in violence: Michoacán, Chiapas, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, and Tlaxcala.

**Figure 10. Organized Crime Killings in Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, By Month, December 2006-2010**



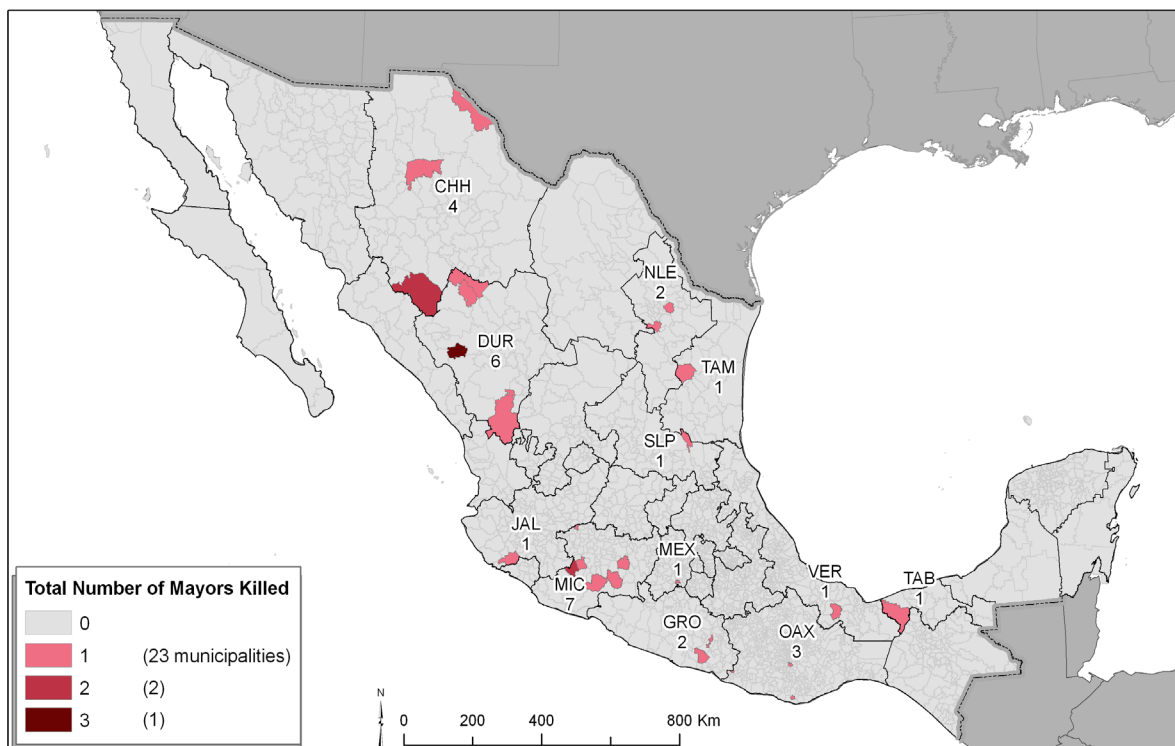
**Figure 11. Organized Crime Killings in Nayarit, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, and Tamaulipas, December 2006-2010**



**Qualitatively, violence has become more extreme and widely targeted over time.**

Indeed, statistics utterly fail to convey the ghastly nature of many killings, many of which are accompanied by beheadings, dismemberment, torture, and other acts of unimaginable cruelty. In addition, organized crime groups have resorted to more aggressive tactics, including the use of explosive devices and traffic blockades, that have wide ranging effects on the civilian population. One multiple occasions in 2010, drug traffickers commandeered buses and dragged citizens from their vehicles to blockade major streets, paralyzing traffic and policing in Mexico's third largest city. Furthermore, to amplify their message of fear and intimidation, ever more brazen organized crime groups often take great pains to advertise their handiwork using handwritten banners, viral internet videos, and even popular ballads, or narcocorridos. In this sense, the tone of violence has become increasingly ominous over recent years.

**Figure 12. Number of Mayors Killed from 2004-2010, By Municipality**



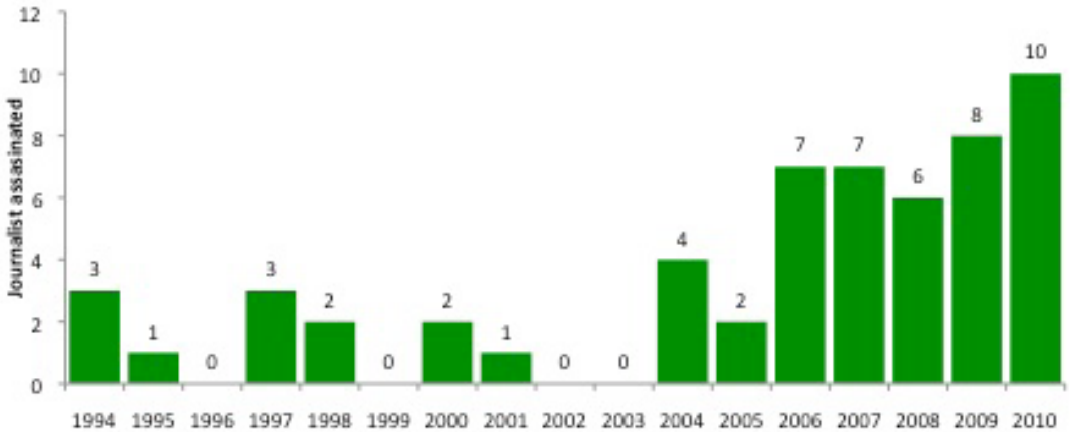
Meanwhile, the number of high-profile victims —such as elected officials, police, soldiers, and journalists— has increased in recent years. For example, in 2010 alone, there 14 of the country's roughly 2,450 mayors were assassinated, an unprecedented number in Mexico's history. From 2004 to 2010, there were 27 mayors killed, largely as a result of aggression by organized crime groups, though in a small number of cases this was not clear from the circumstances. Figure 11 illustrates the location of these assassinations using data compiled by the authors and several volunteers working with the Trans-Border Institute. The killing of mayors has been concentrated in Durango (eight mayors), Mi-

choacán (four), Chihuahua (three), Guerrero (two), and Oaxaca (two). In addition, Silverio Cabazos, former governor of Colima from 2005 to 2009, was also assassinated by gunmen outside his home in November 2010.

There were also signs of violence and intimidation in Mexico's July 4, 2010 elections, which put into play 12 governorships nationwide. DTOs assassinated thirteen candidates, including the PRI-candidate for governor of Tamaulipas, Rodolfo Torre Cantú. His assassination, just a few days before the election in which he was the clear frontrunner, was the highest-profile murder of a political candidate since 1994 when presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated in Tijuana. In Tamaulipas and other states, violence significantly reduced electoral turnout and citizen participation in the organization of elections.

In addition, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an average of seven journalists were killed annually in Mexico since 2006. While not all of these killings involved organized crime, many exhibited clear signs of DTO involvement. The first execution of a journalist in 2010 came in early January when Valentín Valdés Espinosa, a newspaper reporter in Coahuila, was found dead a day after he and a colleague were kidnapped. Subsequently, at least 10 more journalists were assassinated, and many others were threatened, resulting in domestic and international calls for stronger protections for the press in Mexico. Notably, CPJ named Mexico as the fourth most dangerous country for journalists in Latin America (after Honduras, Colombia, and Cuba).

**Figure 11. Organized Crime Killings in Nayarit, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, and Tamaulipas, December 2006-2010**



Politicians and journalists were not the only victims. Indeed, the direct targeting of civilians by organized crime also increased significantly during 2010. Particularly relevant was the case of Villas de Salvárcar, a working class neighborhood in Ciudad Juárez, where in late January, armed gunmen stormed into a birthday celebration and massacred 15 people—mostly college students and one 13 year old girl—evidently mistaken to be traffickers. The action brought enormous civil protests and became a symbol of the failure of the government’s heavy-handed approach to combating organized crime. The event resulted in the launch of a new, federal security strategy named “Todos Somos Juárez” (We are all Juárez), personally endorsed by President Calderon. The new strategy included a broad set of social policies meant to reduce violence in both the short and long term, with a strong emphasis on prevention via education, labor opportunities, and social development.

Another critical moment came in March, when two U.S. consular employees (and one of their spouses) were assassinated by gunmen while returning from a Sunday afternoon birthday party in Ciudad Juárez. In the aftermath, a delegation of high level U.S. authorities led by Hillary Clinton traveled to Mexico to unveil a new framework for the Mérida Initiative, a three year 1.4 billion dollar assistance package to help Mexico fight drug trafficking started under President George Bush. Like “Todos Somos Juárez,” the next phase of this initiative will focus more on social spending with the purpose of improving justice sector performance, reducing criminality, and improving general social conditions in communities affected by violence. In recent years, Mexico has not been a major recipient of U.S. economic assistance, particularly compared to other countries —like Colombia— where the United States has tried to improve security through social development spending.

Finally, following the trend of recent years, 2010 saw a significant increase in kidnappings and extortions, particularly in northern states. Kidnappings for the January - July 2010 period were up 14.7% from the same period last year, and 78.8% up over that period in 2008. The kidnapping of Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, a former Mexican presidential candidate and prominent member of Mexico’s political class, shook the country. Fernández de Cevallos was held by his captors for more than seven months, but was finally liberated in December 2010, after a suspected \$2 million ransom was allegedly paid by his family. Despite the release of Fernández de Cevallos in good health, this very high profile case made it clear that nobody was exempt from being a victim of organized crime.

In short, Mexico’s violence demonstrates substantial increases over time, exhibits a significant degree of geographic concentration in production and trafficking zones, and presents a growing threat to the Mexican state and civil society. Although 2010 was the most violent year on record, the last half of the year demonstrated a significant downward trend. This has raised hope among some authorities and analysts that Mexico has finally turned a corner, and violence will return to more manageable levels in the coming years. Below we discuss the underlying factors and sequence of events that have contributed to Mexico’s violence.

## Contributing factors

Why has there been so much violence in Mexico? One explanation, advanced by Mexican officials, is that drug violence is an unfortunate side effect of government counter-drug efforts. The arrests of top cartel bosses disrupt their operations and contributes to greater infighting between and within competing organized crime groups. This is surely at least part of the explanation. The determination of government officials to aggressively combat drug trafficking during recent presidential administrations represents a sea change in political will in Mexico. Yet this newfound resolve also points to another part of the explanation for the growth in violence: the reformulation of political-bureaucratic corruption that has accompanied Mexico's transformation from a single-party state into a more competitive democratic system.

During the 1980s, many of today's top cartel operatives, virtually all of them with roots in Sinaloa, helped to construct a loosely knit criminal network to smuggle drugs into the United States. Criminals within this network obtained their "commissions" (or "*plazas*") to control specific territories and distribution routes with the support of corrupt officials at very high levels who were paid substantial bribes. Because governmental authority was highly centralized—thanks to single party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—this arrangement provided drug traffickers with a tremendously profitable scope of operations, an enormous degree of impunity, and even certain degree of harmony among competing organizations.

Over the last thirty years, Mexico experienced a dramatic political transformation that significantly altered the domestic regulatory environment affecting drug trafficking organizations. As single party rule gave way to state and local opposition victories during the 1990s, previously established agreements were rejected or renegotiated by new political actors, sometimes to the disadvantage of criminal networks once favored by state protection. Over the long term, in this context of political diversity and uncertainty—among other factors—the state no longer served as an effective broker and criminal organizations began to splinter and battle each other for turf.

That said, corruption remains a pervasive problem, as illustrated by several examples in 2010. In late May, Quintana Roo's gubernatorial candidate and the former mayor of Cancun, Gregorio Sánchez, was detained on drug charges and accused of having ties to the Beltrán Leyva and Zeta DTOs. Sánchez's arrest took place weeks after Mario Villanueva, the former governor of the same state (1993-1999), was extradited to the United States on similar charges. In October, Chihuahua state Attorney General, Patricia González Rodríguez, was accused by her own brother of having ties to the Juárez Cartel. The accusation was made in a video confession—with her brother, Mario González, surrounded by gunmen and showing signs of duress—and widely disseminated on YouTube days before he was found dead. After avoiding authorities for 15 months as a fugitive and infiltrating the offices of the Mexican Congress to take his oath of office, Julio Cesar Godoy was formally impeached and is now under investigation for allegedly accepting \$2 million in

bribes, based on his recorded telephone conversations with drug traffickers. Finally, over 300 inmates escaped from Mexico's troubled federal prisons in 2010, often abetted by officials who allowed prisoners to walk out the front door; for example, in July, prison officials granted inmates an unofficial furlough in order to murder a group of 17 people.

Such examples suggest several new dynamics regarding drug trafficking and corruption in Mexico today. First, corruption is pervasive, affecting both the political system and the judicial sector at all levels. Second, drug corruption is not limited to any particular political party, though it remains most associated with certain geographic and demographic characteristics in states that still tend to favor the PRI. Third, allegations of corruption are often difficult to prove, and can be engineered to target upstanding public officials who present an obstacle to organized crime. Finally, while it may appear that Mexico has more corruption today than in the past, it is likely the case that corruption is simply more clearly visible. Today, there is both greater transparency and —perhaps more importantly— competition has emboldened DTOs to expose the corruption networks of their rivals, either through public accusations or as informants for the government upon their arrest.

Indeed, what stands out about Mexico's current security crisis in recent years is the extent to which recent violence has been driven by competition among Mexican drug trafficking organizations. In addition to the factors mentioned above, some analysts believe that increased competition among traffickers has been fueled by volatility in U.S. drug consumption (shrinking demand), increased border interdiction (greater costs for traffickers), fluctuating drug prices (lower profits), growing domestic demand in Mexico (new markets), and recent efforts to crack down on organized crime (government intervention).

The first major schisms among Mexican DTOs started in the early 1990s, as four main groups emerged as the country's predominant wholesale traffickers of drugs: the Juárez Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, and the Gulf Cartel. In recent years, the Sinaloa cartel's efforts to encroach on the territories of its rivals (and some of its former allies) have contributed to conflicts and schisms that have greatly increased drug violence. Indeed, in August 2010, Mexican authorities reported that the Sinaloa organization's conflict with the Juárez cartel alone accounted for more than a third of Mexico's recent drug-related violence. Meanwhile, accounting for roughly 50% of the violence are the Sinaloa cartel's clashes with their former allies in the Beltrán Leyva Organization (who broke away in 2008) and its battles with the Tijuana and Gulf cartels.

At the same time, the dynamics among Mexico's smaller regional and breakaway organizations —notably, the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), La Familia Michoacana (LFM), and the Zetas— has greatly fueled the violence as they clash with the larger cartels and with each other. Indeed, the Mexican government's killing of Arturo “El Jefe de Jefes” Beltrán Leyva in December 2009 (and the later arrest of his brother Carlos) produced a record level of violence in the holiday season and into January 2010. Likewise, a new split between the Gulf Cartel and their former partners, the Zetas, has contributed to unexpected fronts in the Mexican drug war, including the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila.

**Table 1. Organized Crime Killings Resulting From Specific Conflicts Among Drug Trafficking Organizations, 2006-2010**

<b>Killings by group conflict (Dec. 2006 – Dec. 2010)</b>		
<i>Groups in conflict</i>	<i>Killings</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
Sinaloa vs. Beltran Leyva	5,864	16.9%
Sinaloa vs. Juárez	8,236	23.8%
Sinaloa vs. Golfo-Zetas	3,199	9.2%
Sinaloa vs. Tijuana	1,798	5.2%
La Familia vs. Zetas	1,744	5.0%
Golfo vs Zetas	1,328	3.8%
<i>Subtotal</i>	<b>22,169</b>	<b>64.1%</b>
<b>Total Organized Crime Killings</b>	<b>34611</b>	<b>100%</b>

The balance of power and dynamics of competition among these organizations was also affected by the interventions and law enforcement successes of the Mexican government. Over the course of 2010, at least 20 of the country’s most wanted criminals were either captured or dead, including Ignacio ‘Nacho’ Coronel (killed), Teodoro “El Teo” García Simental (arrested), Edgar “The Barbie” Valdez (arrested), Ezequiel “Tony Tormenta” Cárdenas Guillén (arrested), and Nazario “El Chayo” Moreno (killed). These blows were especially damaging to the BLO, the LFM organization, and the Zetas, leading to some speculation as to whether the government’s tactical strategy was biased in favor of the Sinaloa cartel or simply followed the pragmatic goal of targeting the most vulnerable DTOs.

Mexican officials have long insisted that such arrests are part of a comprehensive strategy to break the cartels into smaller, more manageable pieces. They want to downsize drug traffickers from a national security threat to a local security problem. For the time being, the result appears to be a much more chaotic and unpredictable pattern of violent conflict among drug trafficking groups than in the past. Indeed, Calderón’s critics point to recent data as evidence that the government’s strategy of direct confrontation has actually exacerbated the violence. As drug trafficking organizations have fought and splintered, their targets have increasingly included officials and ordinary civilians and their illegal activities have become more diversified. With no end in sight, some analysts and civic groups have called for a drastic change in strategy. Nonetheless, the Calderón administration remains steadfast that the government should continue its direct confrontation of Mexican DTOs

—along with the continued deployment of the armed forces— until the country’s civilian public security agencies can be strengthened to manage the task.

To this end, in the effort to reduce crime, violence, and corruption, Mexican authorities have begun to implement major reform to the criminal justice system. Specifically, a series of reforms has introduced new provisions to strengthen due process, increase transparency, and improve efficiency in criminal procedure. Also, the Mexican government has established new professional standards and procedures for police throughout the country, as well as federal grants for training, technology, and equipment. Some of these changes may have destabilizing effects in the short term. For example, the removal of corrupt officers from a police force may harm one organized crime group while allowing another new entry to operate in the same territory. Likewise, as court procedures are modified to strengthen due process, the failures of ill prepared or incompetent judges, prosecutors, and public defenders may allow some criminals to walk free. In short, because systems of professional recruitment, training, and oversight (such as internal investigations and citizen councils) in the criminal justice system are currently inadequate, the current battle against organized crime will most likely be long and protracted, with significant and costly setbacks.

## Conclusions

Mexico is presently confronted by multiple well-armed and elusive non-state actors that — at least in the view of the Mexican government— present an existential threat to the state. Drug cartels and other violent criminal organizations have been able to leverage the multiple opportunities presented by the new global system —rapid transfers of capital, expanded trade infrastructure to move their goods, and high tech weapons and equipment— to develop highly sophisticated operations that seriously challenge the Mexican government. Even “strong” governments would be challenged to respond effectively to such widespread security threats. Yet, in view of the institutional weaknesses in Mexico’s police and judicial sectors, these challenges are even more difficult to manage.

Drawing on recent developments, it is worth considering the best- and worst-case scenarios for Mexico’s near term future. In the best case scenario, Mexico’s drug-related violence will soon reach a turning point at which —due to a shift in the balance of power that produces a new equilibrium among DTOs— violence will die down significantly. This appears to be what has happened in Baja California, where the weakening of the Tijuana cartel has allowed the Sinaloa cartel to make new inroads. While it is difficult to know whether a similar shift could occur after recent blows against the BLO, LFM, and the Zetas, government efforts targeting these breakaway organizations will almost certainly have a significant impact on the course of events in 2011.

In the worst case scenario, the number drug related homicides will continue to increase over the coming year, with continued spikes in locations previously unaffected by drug violence and a growing number of officials and ordinary citizens caught in the crossfire. It is not likely that such an increase in violence would necessarily lead to the collapse of

the Mexican government, widespread political insurgency, or a sudden military takeover. Despite even higher levels of violence than currently found in Mexico, the governments of Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala remain intact. Even so, any further increases in violence could result in more severe damage to the Mexican economy, internal population displacement, and negative impacts for neighboring countries in Central America, where Mexican DTO operations and violent clashes have already spread. Moreover, given evidence of significant political penetration by DTOs, there are real risks for democratic governance that could increase with the approach of the country's 2012 presidential elections.

Most likely, the proximate future lies somewhere in between these two scenarios. With no sign of surrender on the part of the government or the DTOs, Mexico's drug war is far from over. Nor is it even clear that the worst has passed. Indeed, the start of 2011 seems to herald a continuation or increase in violence in the coming year. In the first three weeks of January 2011, *Reforma* reported 245 drug-related killings per week, 41 more than during the same period a year ago and 20 more than the average for 2010. At the same time, with the presidential elections looming, the Calderón administration needs to shift to a strategy that will help build political support for his party in 2012. This may lead the federal government to focus on regions that are easily controllable and efforts that will yield high-impact results. However, this may leave the most difficult cases, such as Ciudad Juárez, in turmoil, with violence keeping the same high but steady trend that occurred in 2010.

## Appendix: Comparison of Alternative Sources of Drug Violence, By State, 2007-2010

COMPARING REFORMA & MEXICAN GOVERNMENT ANNUAL TALLIES OF DRUG VIOLENCE												
	Reforma	Reforma	Reforma	Reforma	Reforma	Official	Official	Official	Official	Official	Official	2009-10
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2007	2008	2009	2010	TOTAL	AVERAGE	Percent +/-
<b>National Total</b>	<b>2120</b>	<b>2280</b>	<b>5153</b>	<b>6587</b>	<b>11583</b>	<b>2826</b>	<b>6837</b>	<b>9614</b>	<b>15273</b>	<b>34550</b>	<b>8637.5</b>	<b>141.9%</b>
Chihuahua	130	148	1649	2082	3185	244	2118	3345	4427	10134	2533.5	32.3%
Sinaloa	350	346	680	767	2028	426	1084	1059	1815	4384	1096	71.4%
Guerrero	186	253	287	638	984	299	412	879	1137	2727	681.75	29.4%
Baja California	163	154	604	320	315	209	778	484	540	2011	502.75	11.6%
Durango	64	130	268	637	777	108	276	674	834	1892	473	23.7%
Michoacan	543	238	233	371	259	328	289	590	520	1727	431.75	-11.9%
Edomex	31	111	359	354	464	111	364	440	623	1538	384.5	41.6%
Tamaulipas	181	89	110	49	725	80	96	90	1209	1475	368.75	1243.3%
Sonora	61	125	137	152	249	141	252	365	495	1253	313.25	35.6%
Jalisco	45	93	145	212	545	70	148	261	593	1072	268	127.2%
San Luis Potosi	1	13	32	7	102	10	34	8	135	187	46.75	1587.5%
Nayarit	1	2	5	22	211	11	28	37	377	453	113.25	918.9%
Nuevo León	50	107	78	99	610	130	105	112	620	967	241.75	453.6%
Colima	2	0	3	12	72	2	12	33	101	148	37	206.1%
Morelos	10	17	26	77	251	32	48	114	335	529	132.25	193.9%
Coahuila	17	29	53	151	199	18	78	179	384	659	164.75	114.5%
Quintana Roo	9	34	18	27	52	26	29	32	64	151	37.75	100.0%
Oaxaca	17	34	49	6	48	62	122	87	167	438	109.5	92.0%
Puebla	4	2	15	26	36	6	22	28	51	107	26.75	82.1%
Hidalgo	16	37	37	36	28	43	38	34	52	167	41.75	52.9%
Aguascalientes	3	27	35	34	21	37	38	31	46	152	38	48.4%
Distrito Federal	137	145	137	173	197	182	144	135	191	652	163	41.5%
Veracruz	25	48	30	55	52	75	65	133	179	452	113	34.6%
Tabasco	19	24	20	54	30	27	35	65	73	200	50	12.3%
Chiapas	14	12	30	30	37	57	82	88	77	304	76	-12.5%
Zacatecas	12	13	24	30	21	18	25	50	37	130	32.5	-26.0%
Guanajuato	25	40	61	146	50	51	79	234	152	516	129	-35.0%
Querétaro	0	4	7	14	23	5	6	13	13	37	9.25	0.0%
Campeche	3	2	3	2	2	8	7	6	10	31	7.75	66.7%
Yucatán	0	1	17	0	0	4	18	1	2	25	6.25	100.0%
BC Sur	1	1	0	1	6	6	2	1	10	19	4.75	900.0%
Tlaxcala	0	1	1	3	4	0	3	6	4	13	3.25	-33.3%

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> For example, references to “drug violence” are deemed by some scholars to be imprecise and insufficiently focused on the relationship to organized crime. References to “narco-violence” are problematic because “narcotic” refers more properly to only one subset of illicit drugs. Other security experts avoid references to Mexican organized crime groups as “cartels,” since the term has different connotations in the field of economics. Still others bristle at the use of the term “drug war” because of the policy approaches that follow from metaphorical references to warfare. While these arguments have merit, they ultimately come down to semantic differences beyond the scope of this discussion.

<sup>2</sup> These figures from PGR/SEDENA were reported on January 5, 2010 and obtained by the Trans-Border Institute from the news agency Imagen del Golfo ([www.imagendelgolfo.com.mx](http://www.imagendelgolfo.com.mx)). According to this article, there were 560 killings in 2006, 3,537 in 2007, 5,903 in 2008, and 7,742 in 2009. The same report indicates that there were 195 females killed in 2008 and 425 in 2009; 535 police in 2008 and 470 in 2009; and 52 and 35 military personnel in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Meanwhile, a recent *El Universal* article reports the same figure for 2009, but different figures for all previous years: 1,573 in 2005, 2,221 in 2006, 2,673 in 2007, and 5,630 in 2008. Esther Sánchez, “Aumenta nivel de violencia del narco,” *El Universal*, January 1, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> “Un ejecutado cada hora durante 2009,” *Milenio*, January 2, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Milenio*, for example, reports nearly 700 cartel related killings in Baja California, a figure that appears to include virtually all homicides for the state.

<sup>5</sup> This could reflect a lack of access to complete information from official sources, as well different classification systems by official sources, and even erroneous reporting on the part of either the government or the media.

<sup>6</sup> These criteria were outlined for the Trans-Border Institute by a *Reforma* reporter who works closely with these data.

<sup>7</sup> Moloznik, M. P. (2009). “Principales efectos de la militarización del combate al narcotráfico en México.” *Renglones*(61).

<sup>8</sup> In Mexico, a country of more than 100 million people, the odds of being killed in a drug-related homicide in 2009 were one in 16,328; almost three times less likely than being killed in an automobile accident in the United States (about one in 6,500). Bailey, Ronald. “Don’t Be Terrorized: You’re More Likely to Die of a Car Accident, Drowning, Fire, or Murder.” *Reason.com* (<http://reason.com/archives/2006/08/11/dont-be-terrorized>).

<sup>9</sup> Drug Enforcement Agency, “La Familia Michoacana Fact Sheet,” <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr102209a1.pdf>

## About the Authors:

**Viridiana Ríos** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Government in Harvard University. Her research focuses on understanding the causes and consequences of increments in drug-related violence in Mexico by analyzing changes in the structure, size and organization of drug trafficking organizations, as well as changes in Mexico's corruption, judicial system and electoral institutions. Her investigation has been recognized with various grants and awards such as the Merit Scholarship, given to outstanding graduate students at Harvard University, and a position as fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Inequality and Criminal Justice Program. Currently, Viridiana is a research fellow at the Center for US-Mexican Studies in the University of California at San Diego. She coauthored the last version of this report (with Duran-Garcia and Hazard, 2010) and regularly publishes journalistic pieces in newspapers and political magazines in the US and Mexico.

**David A. Shirk**, Ph.D., is the director of the Trans-Border Institute and assistant professor of political science at the University of San Diego. Dr. Shirk is currently the principal investigator for the Justice in Mexico project ([www.justiceinmexico.org](http://www.justiceinmexico.org)), a bi-national research initiative on criminal justice and the rule of law in Mexico. Recent publications include *Shared Responsibility: U.S. and Mexican Policy Options for Combating Organized Crime* (2010); *Judicial Reform in Mexico* (2010); *Drug Violence in Mexico* (2010); *Justiciabarómetro: Results from the Survey of Municipal Police in the Zona Metropolitana de Guadalajara* (2009); *Police and Public Security in Mexico* (2009); *Contemporary Mexican Politics* (2008); *Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico* (2007); *Evaluating Accountability and Transparency in Mexico: National, Local, and Comparative Perspectives* (2007); and *Mexico's New Politics: The PAN and Democratic Change* (2005).



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