

Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

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Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

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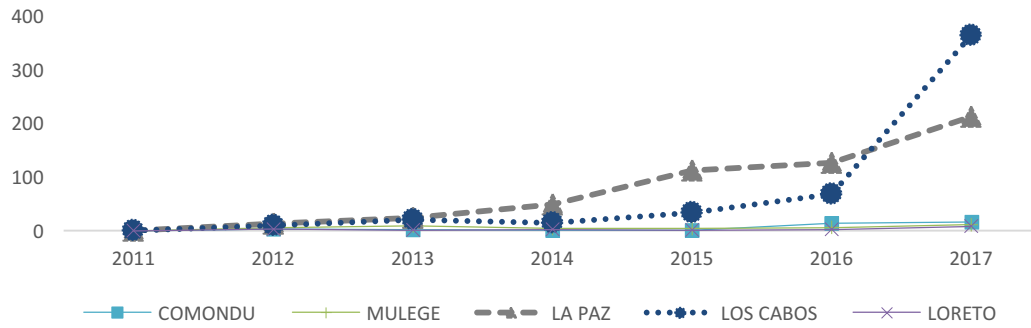
1. Introduction

During the last decade, Mexico has witnessed elevated levels of violence, reaching a total of almost 300,000 victims of intentional homicide from 2000 to 2017. Violence, however, is now affecting areas that it did not reach before, turning vacation paradises into hotly contested areas of control for organized crime groups in recent years. Such has been the case of Manzanillo, Cancun, Acapulco, and most recently, the case of Baja California Sur cities, Los Cabos and La Paz, as the state's homicide levels increased by almost 300% in 2017¹.

¹ Data extracted from the National System of Public Security (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, SNSP) shows different total numbers of intentional homicides in Baja California Sur. At the state level, the total number was 560 for 2017 while the aggregate total at the municipal level was 610 for the same year.

Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

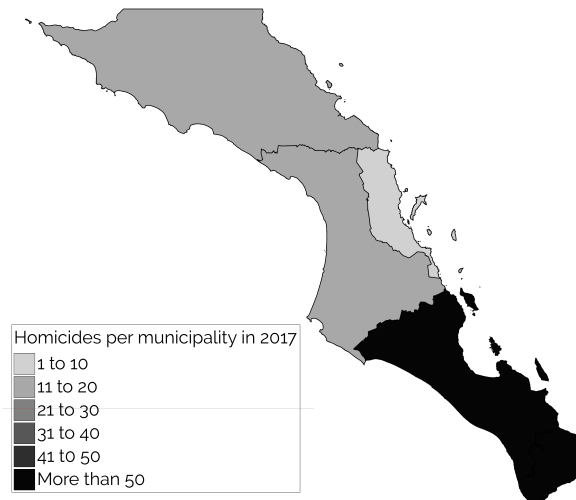
Figure 1: Intentional Homicides in Baja California Sur by municipality from 2011 to 2017



Source: SNSP, 2017.

There is a significant need for objective analysis on the recent surge of violence in these areas in order to properly assess the risks posed both to locals and visitors. This brief examination of recent violence is focused on the western coastal state of Baja California Sur, where the resort cities of La Paz and Los Cabos are located.

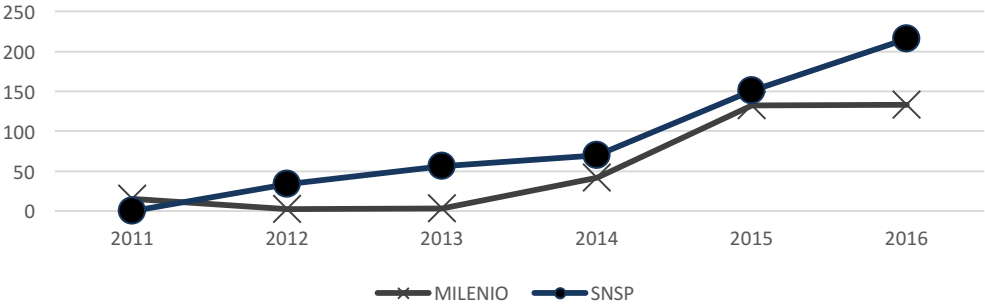
Figure 2: Spatial distribution of homicides in BCS in 2017



Source: SNSP, 2017. Map generated by Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira

Overall, this analysis discovered that much of the violence in Baja California Sur is linked to organized crime groups fighting for control of key drug trafficking areas and subsequently reviews the recent efforts by Mexican authorities in addressing the problem.

Figure 3: Organized crime-related homicides (Milenio) compared to intentional homicides (SNSP)



Sources: Milenio, 2017 and SNSP, 2017.

2. Background

The state of Baja California Sur occupies the southern half of the Baja California peninsula in Northwestern Mexico. Surrounded by water, Baja California Sur borders only one other Mexican state: Baja California, a major transit point for drug trafficking. Baja California Sur is primarily urban with an economy heavily dependent on tourism and commerce. Historically, Baja California Sur was portrayed as a rather peaceful region of Mexico, visited by vacationing foreigners and home to expatriates and retirees.

Until recently, local police forces in Baja California Sur were primarily occupied with targeting white collar crimes (like fraud), protecting hotel zones, and dealing with the

Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

occasional rowdy tourist. Yet, over the last decade, Baja California Sur has gradually become an important nexus for drug trafficking operations in Mexico, contributing to the state's recent surge in violent crime.

Baja California Sur's recent violence trends include a dramatic increase in the number of homicides in the state. From 2016 to 2017, the number of intentional homicides increased from 192 to 560, a net increase of 292% and an increase in the state's homicide rate from 24 to 75 per 100,000 inhabitants. While Baja California Sur ranks 19th nationwide in total number of homicides, its homicide rate places it in 2nd place, following Colima. As for other forms of violent crime, there has been a decrease of 5% in violent robberies, and an increase of 63% in extortion².

Given this recent surge in violent crime, the U.S. State Department issued a security warning in 2017 for U.S. citizens to be cautious about travelling to Baja California Sur, which read as follows:

“Baja California Sur (includes Los Cabos and La Paz): Criminal activity and violence, including homicide, remain an issue throughout the state. Exercise caution as Baja California Sur continues to experience a high rate of homicides. According to Government of Mexico statistics, the state of Baja California Sur experienced an increase in homicide rates compared to the same period in 2016. While most of

² Kidnaps also showed a net increase from 0 in 2016 to 3 in 2017 according to data reported by SNSP

these homicides appeared to be targeted, criminal organization assassinations, turf battles between criminal groups have resulted in violent crime in areas frequented by U.S. citizens. Shooting incidents, in which innocent bystanders have been injured, have occurred during daylight hours."

This warning deals a significant blow to a state that depends so highly on tourism, especially considering that the number of reported incidents of violence directly targeting tourists have been low. The discussion below summarizes the major trends in organized crime that provide context for current dynamics of the violence in Baja California Sur.

3. Drug-trafficking re-organization

Since around 2010, the dominant criminal organization on the Baja California peninsula – both Baja California and Baja California Sur– has been the Sinaloa cartel, which until recently was headed by famed drug trafficker, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán. From 2008-10, Guzman’s organization made a violent bid to oust rival organized crime groups operating on the Baja California peninsula. At the time, most of the violence was concentrated in the state of Baja California, and centered in the border city of Tijuana. However, during this period, there were also occasional incidents of violence in Baja California Sur. One such example includes a shooting at a popular bar- in which one person was killed and three severely injured- leading to the arrest of Sinaloa’s cartel lieutenant Teodoro Garcia Simental, a.k.a “El Teo,” in La Paz in 2010.

Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

Once the Sinaloa cartel achieved a territory monopoly on the peninsula, violence fell to relatively low levels. The state of Baja California Sur became an increasingly important transit point between the western mainland state of Sinaloa and Baja California, which gave the Sinaloa cartel access to the western U.S. market for illicit drugs. With the arrest of the organization's leader, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, in January 8, 2016, the drug trafficking organization was significantly debilitated. In January 2017, Guzmán was transferred from a maximum-security facility in Mexico, extradited to the United States, and relocated to the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan, New York, where he has been kept in solitary confinement ever since. The resulting leadership vacuum led to internal conflicts and incursions by rival criminal groups.

On the one hand, two of Guzmán's children—Jesus Alfredo Guzmán Salazar and Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán Salazar—have attempted to sustain his organization's operations, with the support of one of Guzmán's oldest collaborators, Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada. On the other hand, Dámaso "Mini Lic" Lopez Serrano—son of Guzmán's financial operator Dámaso "El Licenciado" Lopez Núñez, and considered by many Guzmán's most trusted man-in-the-field—made an ill-fated bid against his former boss's heirs. Before Guzmán's arrest, Lopez Núñez and his son were in charge criminal operations in the regions of El Dorado, Sinaloa, and areas in Baja California and Baja California Sur, including La Paz, with the consent of Zambada.

After Guzmán's arrest, the two factions of the Sinaloa cartel began an intense battle over the leadership of the entire organization, not only over their territories. Zambada

reportedly proposed a truce, arranging a formal meeting with Lopez Núñez and the Guzmán Salazar brothers, in order to come to an agreement. However, Lopez Núñez did not attend the meeting; instead, he plotted a failed attack against Guzmán's sons. Zambada and the Guzmán Salazar brothers managed to escape safely, but the idea of an alliance was completely destroyed.

While Mexican authorities targeted major kingpins like Guzmán Loera, a new cartel was starting to gain prominence in Mexico: the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). Headquartered in Guadalajara, Jalisco, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel is headed by Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes "El Mencho," an alleged, former policeman turned *sicario* (assassin) with organized crime origins in the Valencia family and later, Milenio Cartel. Not officially recognized by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) until 2015, the growth of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has been exponential. They quickly became the main competition for the Sinaloa cartel in Asia, Europe, and Oceania, according to the DEA. In addition, in the last couple of years, Oseguera has managed to gain presence in at least 17 states in the Mexican republic, including Aguascalientes, Colima, Ciudad de Mexico, Querétaro, Jalisco, San Luís Potosí, Michoacán, Guerrero, and Guanajuato (La Rosa, Rodriguez & Shirk, forthcoming).

Guzmán's arrest fueled Oseguera's expansionist desires, increasing the stakes for Jalisco New Generation to conquer some of Sinaloa cartel's major plazas, including La Paz, Ensenada, and Tijuana. The entrance of a new cartel, in conjunction with the internal disputes that the Sinaloa cartel is facing, fueled levels of violence typical of a major drug

Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

trafficking territory (*plaza*) across Baja California Sur (and especially in La Paz and Los Cabos).

There were similar levels of violence on the peninsula in 2014, due to a dispute between the Sinaloa cartel and a branch of Jalisco New Generation Cartel that was referred to as the “Tijuana New Generation Cartel” (TNGC). The TNGC allegedly formed an alliance with the remnants of the Arellano Felix cartel in Tijuana. At the time, the factions were fighting over Los Cabos and the potential of a new route “Los Cabos-Tijuana- United States” primarily for cocaine shipment, though possibly for subsequent diversification into other drugs as well. Accordingly, Baja California Sur suffered a dramatic increase in violence, locals born witness to narcomessages, mass executions, public threats, beheadings, killings of public officials, etc.-all tactics often used by organized crime groups as deterrence mechanisms.

On Tuesday, May 2, 2017, members of the Mexican Army and the Criminal Investigation Agency (*Agencia de Investigación Criminal, AIC*) captured Dámaso López Núñez along with his wife, in their eleventh-floor luxury apartment in an exclusive northern zone of Mexico City called Nueva Anzures. According to authorities, López Núñez was instrumental in Guzmán Loera’s first escape from Puente Grande prison in 2001, where he oversaw internal security for a brief period. This led López Núñez to enter the Sinaloa cartel and develop a very close relationship with Guzmán Loera, becoming one of his most trusted men within the criminal organization. While López Núñez was considered by many to be Guzmán’s successor, he was never able to fully consolidate his

power as the head of the criminal organization after Guzmán's extradition and due to his heated conflicts with Guzmán's sons.

As previously explicated, the conflict between Guzmán Salazar brothers and López Núñez and Zambada's failed attempts at mediation, only exacerbated the struggle. The two groups divided completely, leaving López Núñez in command of only four internal divisions under the umbrella of the Sinaloa cartel.

Because of the Guzmán Salazar brothers' unwillingness to cede leadership of the cartel to López Núñez, some observers speculate that the latter pursued an alliance with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel to bolster his position and seize control of the entire Sinaloa organization. Weeks before being arrested, López Núñez is believed to have met with CJNG leader Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes ("El Mencho") to plan an operation against the brothers. The attack was to be conducted by López Núñez's own group of hitmen in collaboration with the CJNG and the Juarez cartel (under the leadership of César Carrillo, Amado Carrillo Fuentes' son and now leader of the organization).

Soon after López Núñez was arrested, his son, López Serrano turned himself in to U.S. authorities in Calexico, a border city in Baja California, presumably out of fear for retaliation from the Guzmán Salazar brothers after his father's failed plots to murder them. As a result, the armed groups working under López leadership- called *Special Forces of Dámaso* and *The Anthrax*- allegedly joined forces with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel to continue in the battle against the Guzmán Salazar brothers in the Baja California peninsula.

4. Mexican Government Response

Since April 2017, more than 1,000 soldiers have been deployed to Los Cabos and La Paz in an attempt to lower homicides by *deterrence* through a commanding show of force of military presence in key hotspots, as well as increased collaboration between municipal, state, and federal forces. This strategy, however, has not had positive results in either of these two major tourist cities, as violence has continued to escalate in Los Cabos and La Paz. In an effort to curb violence in the area, both private and public investment has been directed to increasing security measures, but with little immediate impact.

Arguably, the most urgent and prominent problem faced in the region is the lack of qualified police forces. With less than 2,000 police officers, who often have not received adequate training nor have the necessary equipment to counteract the level of violence they are now facing, local law enforcement is becoming increasingly surpassed in terms of resources by organized crime groups.

5. Explanations

One explanation for recent violence in Baja California Sur is the spillover effect from other, more violent states nearby. According to scholars Pan, Widner, and Enomoto (2012), there is a spillover effect for violent crime in Mexico: when a neighboring state experiences negative economic growth in a given year, its immediate neighbors tend to experience increased crime rates as a result of the worsened economic conditions in the region. This was the case of the Baja peninsula at least for the years tested by Pan,

Widner, and Enomoto, which illustrate that whenever Baja California had negative economic growth, Baja California Sur had higher crime rates in comparison to the previous year.

The same scholars also argue that the militarization strategy implemented by the Mexican government from 2006 to 2012 that targeted certain organizations and weakened major cartels, only resulted in opportunistic behavior from other drug trafficking organizations who were fighting to establish their routes into the American market. Such was the case of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

As Justice in Mexico reported in the March 2017 report on *Drug Violence in Mexico*, the period of “stability” achieved through the dominance of the Sinaloa cartel—referred to as *Pax Sinaloa*—has deteriorated. With the Guzmán Salazar brothers and López Núñez fighting over the cartel’s leadership, homicides and violence have risen. Some experts also highlight that Chapo’s most recent arrest is different from others in that the Sinaloa cartel is no longer in a period of re-organizing, but rather in a period of serious internal struggling due to the lack of partnerships, which were lost once the founding collaborators are either killed or removed from the organization. The Jalisco New Generation Cartel has taken advantage of that situation in order to penetrate and take over Sinaloa’s territory. In the case of Baja California Sur, the Sinaloa cartel still dominates almost the entire state, except for the key –and now disputed– areas of La Paz and Los Cabos. Thus, if the Jalisco New Generation Cartel intends to continue its bid to challenge

Organized Crime and Violence in Baja California Sur

the remnants of the Sinaloa Cartel, there will likely be continued violence in Baja California Sur for at least the coming few months.

6. Conclusion

Thanks largely to the downfall of Chapo Guzmán, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel has managed to expand into at least 17 Mexican states, competing with Sinaloa to become the largest organized crime group in Mexican history, targeting not only the U.S. drug market, but regions of Europe, Asia, and Oceania. This expansion has contributed to rising violence in areas where the Sinaloa cartel and other criminal organizations are able to present an effective challenge to the rise of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

The bottom line for those trying to understand the recent increase in violent crime in Baja California Sur is that most of this violence has been limited to internecine battles among organized crime groups. While international and domestic tourists should clearly exercise caution, given the upsurge in crime, they should also note that remarkably few tourists have been directly targeted for violent crimes. In the meantime, Mexican authorities will need to work quickly to address the rise in violence or risk jeopardizing tourist flows, which represent the major source of revenue for the state of Baja California Sur and one of Mexico's leading industries.

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