

Organized Crime and Violence in Guanajuato

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I. Introduction

Mexico had the most violent year in its history in 2019, reporting 29,406 intentional homicide cases, resulting in 34,588 individual victims.¹ However, violence remains a highly focalized phenomenon in Mexico, with 23% of all intentional homicide cases concentrated in five municipalities and three major clusters of violence with homicide rates over 100 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Following the national trend, the state of Guanajuato also had its most violent year in 2019, with one of its largest cities featured in the country's top five most violent municipalities. This paper will analyze the surge in violence in Guanajuato in 2019, comparing the number of intentional homicide cases with the increasing problem of fuel theft in the state, and describing some of the state and federal government measures to address both issues.

II. Background

The central Mexican state of Guanajuato is a traditional agricultural-producing region, a major manufacturing hub, and a popular vacation and retirement destination for foreigners. Considered a relatively wealthy state and constituting 4.4% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Guanajuato boasts the sixth largest economy in Mexico. The state also holds second place in terms of growth in the manufacturing sector, which makes up 26% of the state's GDP. Guanajuato is home to economically-important industries that attract considerable foreign direct investment to Mexico, including the automobile and chemical industries, among others.²

However, over the last several years, Guanajuato has been one of Mexico's top 10 most violent states, and two of its largest cities – León and Irapuato – were among Mexico's top 10 most violent municipalities in 2018 and 2019. The state of Guanajuato also had the highest number of organized-crime-related homicides in 2019 with 2,673 cases,

¹ Laura Y. Calderón, Kimberly Heinle, Rita E. Kuckerts, et. al, "Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico," Justice in Mexico, July 2020, <https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/OCVM-2020.pdf>.

² Rodrigo A. Rosales Contreras, "Guanajuato registra el mayor avance en la aportación al PIB nacional," *El Economista*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.economista.com.mx/estados/Guanajuato-registra-el-mayor-avance-en-la-aportacion-al-PIB-nacional-20191218-0009.html>.

according to *Reforma*.³ Additionally, Guanajuato was featured in *Milenio*'s top five states with the highest number of murders every month in 2019, calculating 2,934 organized-crime-related deaths.⁴ Furthermore, Guanajuato was tied with Estado de México as the second most dangerous place for elected officials in 2019, according to Justice in Mexico's *Memoria* dataset.⁵

Guanajuato attracted media attention especially in 2019 because of a dramatic increase in violence. While there are few available studies exploring the origins and source of increased violence in Guanajuato, there seems to be one factor that has not been fully studied in terms of violence trends: fuel theft.

III. *Huachicoleo* and Organized Crime Groups

Fuel theft is one of the most recent developments in Mexico's violent crime spectrum, gaining nation-wide notoriety in early 2017. Gasoline truck drivers, or *chupaductos* (pipeline suckers), were the first to adopt the name *huachicol* to refer to stolen hydrocarbons in Mexico.⁶ It is still complicated to track the origin of the word, as technically, it refers to an adulterated alcoholic beverage derived from cane alcohol. However, *huachicol* is also believed to come from the Mayan culture, where the word "huach" or "waach" means "foreigner," and in some Mayan regions, "thief."⁷ This term led to the colloquial name *huachicolero* to refer to petroleum thieves.⁸ The practice of *huachicoleo* has been an increasing problem in Mexico, with organized crime groups (OCGs) competing to control its revenues in a manner similar to the way in which they compete over drug-trafficking territories, or *plazas*. *Huachicoleo* takes place in two different forms: through puncturing gas pipelines, which carry 20% of the country's supply, or by stealing it on-the-go from the fuel distribution gas trucks on Mexico's main highways.⁹

In socio-economic terms, the increase of fuel theft is partially attributable to the rise of oil prices in Mexico over the last few years, when gas went from an average of 5.00

³ "Ejecutómetro," *Grupo Reforma*, 2019, <https://gruporeforma.reforma.com/offlines/ejecutometro/>.

⁴ Own data collected from *Milenio*'s homicide news reports, <https://www.milenio.com/buscador/page/18?text=homicidios>.

⁵ *Memoria* is a project that belongs to the Justice in Mexico program at the University of San Diego. The project collects data on organized-crime-style homicides, such as location, name of the victim, cause of death, among other relevant factors in order to identify, report, and geolocate crimes, as well as memorialize victims of violence and organized crime. *Memoria* also encompasses data on assassinations of special victims such as elected officials, police officers, military officials, and media workers. Learn more: *Memoria*. Justice in Mexico. <https://justiceinmexico.org/memoria/>

⁶ "¿Quiénes son los huachicoleros?," *El Debate*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.debate.com.mx/mexico/Quienes-son-los-huachicoleros-20170504-0254.html>

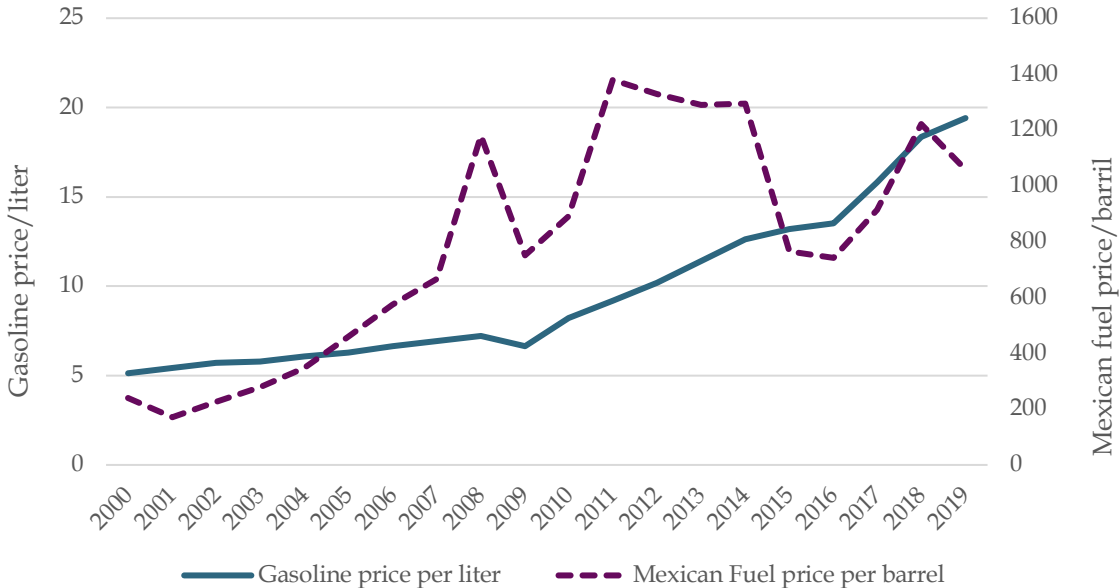
⁷ "¿Qué significa y de dónde proviene la palabra 'huachicol'?" *La Razón de México*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.razon.com.mx/mexico/que-significa-huachicol-significado-huachicolero-robo-combustible-bebida-adulterada-forastero-huachicolero-pemex-petroleo-combustible-alcohol-huache/>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Huachicoleo: The art of stealing fuel in Mexico," *PetrolPlaza*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.petrolplaza.com/news/23059>.

Mexican pesos per liter (roughly 0.27 USD) in 2000, to 19.40 Mexican pesos per liter (roughly 1.03 USD) by December 2019 as shown in the chart below.¹⁰ The population's alleged inability or unwillingness to pay such high prices is believed to have created a greater demand for lower-cost gas – a demand that OCGs were willing to fulfill. Highway-side vendors started selling stolen gasoline from 5 to 10 Mexican pesos per liter (roughly 0.27 to 0.54 USD), depending on the distance from actual pipelines.¹¹ Networks of *huachicoleros* have established their vending points along major highways throughout Mexico, especially in central Mexico, where some of these vending points are disguised as legal commercial establishments such as tire shops, car repair workshops, coffee shops, restaurants, and other informal businesses.

Figure 1: Historical Gasoline Prices Compared to Mexican Mixture Fuel (Petróleo Mezcla Mexicana) Prices, 2000-2019



Generated by author. Data sources: *Sistema de Información Energética, Comisión Reguladora de Energía, and Banco de México*

The main petroleum-producing company in Mexico, state-owned *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX), declared in 2018 that the company lost an average of 58,200 oil barrels daily, totaling an estimated loss of 66,300 million pesos (about 2.9 billion USD)¹². The daily

¹⁰ "Precio público ponderado de productos petrolíferos seleccionados," *Sistema de Información Energética*, <http://sie.energia.gob.mx/bdiController.do?action=cuadro&subAction=applyOptions>.
 "Ubicación de gasolineras y precios comerciales de gasolina y diésel por estación," *Comisión Reguladora de Energía*, July 2020, <https://datos.gob.mx/busca/dataset/ubicacion-de-gasolineras-y-precios-comerciales-de-gasolina-y-diesel-por-estacion>.

¹¹ Octavio Angulo Soto, "¿A qué se debe el incremento del robo de combustible en México?," *Revista electrónica EXLEGE*, Issue 3, http://bajio.delasalle.edu.mx/revistas/exlege/pdf_3/exlege_03_art_02-angulo-soto.pdf.

¹² Arturo Solís, "Pemex reconoce más pérdidas por robo de combustible durante 2018," *Forbes México*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com.mx/pemex-reconoce-mas-perdidas-por-huachicoleo-durante-2018/>.

average for stolen oil barrels decreased from 57,400 in 2018, to 5,100 in 2019, meaning a 4.2 billion Mexican pesos (about 1.9 million USD) reduction in losses. However, the reductions were not enough to balance PEMEX's earnings, as the company reported a total loss of \$99,211 million pesos (about 4.3 billion USD) due to a combination of *huachicoleo*, lower prices, and decreased sales. Making legally-obtained gasoline and diesel competitive to stolen fuels was supposed to stimulate popular consumption and have a negative impact on the demand for *huachicol*. However, PEMEX still showed a 51% reduction in barrels sold compared to 2018.¹³

Puncturing pipelines has been the preferred method for *huachicoleros* because of its relative simplicity. According to *Zona Franca*, there were 10,220 illegal taps registered in 2019 throughout Mexico – an increase of almost 23% with respect to 2018. Guanajuato is the second Mexican state, following the state of Puebla, with the highest number of illegal pipeline taps, totaling 5,091 cases from 2015 to 2019, constituting 16.14% of the total taps nationwide.¹⁴ Inside Guanajuato, the municipality of Salamanca held the highest number of illegal taps with 107, followed by Irapuato with 103. Both municipalities showed decreases compared to 2018 (about 35% and 31% respectively). However, small municipalities like Villagrán and Apaseo El Alto showed dramatic increases in the number of illegal taps. In the case of Villagrán, the municipality reported 101 taps – a 130% increase from the 44 it reported in 2018. Meanwhile, Apaseo El Alto reported 93 taps, representing a 133% increase from the 40 taps the municipality had reported in 2018.¹⁵

Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación

The Jalisco New Generation cartel (*Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*, CJNG) is currently the most predatory, fast-growing OCG in Mexico. According to La Rosa and Shirk, in 2018 the CJNG was active in 21 out of the 32 states in Mexico.¹⁶

The CJNG was born in Michoacán, led by Erick Valencia Salazar, a.k.a “El 85,” and Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, a.k.a. “El Mencho,” as a group to counter the Zetas, originally called “The Zeta Killers” (*Mata Zetas*).¹⁷ The CJNG has been under the sole direction of Oseguera Cervantes since 2012, after the Mexican army arrested Valencia Salazar.

¹³ Karol García, “Pemex dejó de vender más que lo ‘recuperado’ por robo,” *El Economista*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.economista.com.mx/empresas/Pemex-dejo-de-vender-mas-que-lo-recuperado-por-robo-20200128-0013.html>.

¹⁴ Jorge Hernández, “Es Guanajuato la segunda entidad con más tomas clandestinas,” *Zona Franca*, April 20, 2020, <https://zonafranca.mx/politica-sociedad/es-guanajuato-la-segunda-entidad-con-mas-tomas-clandestinas-en-mexico/>.

¹⁵ Data gathered from: Oscar Reyes, “Aumentan tomas clandestinas en la región,” *El Sol del Bajío*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.elsoldelbajio.com.mx/local/aumentan-tomas-clandestinas-en-la-region-4321471.html>.

¹⁶ Lucy La Rosa and David A. Shirk, “The New Generation: Mexico’s Emerging Organized Crime Threat,” *Justice in Mexico*, March 19, 2018, https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/180319-Policy_Brief-CJNG.pdf.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Under “El Mencho,” the CJNG has been able to expand its presence and operations using extreme violence, often recording their attacks and making them public in order to display their power. According to *Milenio*, the CJNG holds an interest in Guanajuato because the state bisects its fastest route from Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán (a major port already under CJNG’s control) to Reynosa, Tamaulipas, the border city that the CJNG aims to control in order to transport drugs to the United States.¹⁸

Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima

The Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel (*Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima*, CSRL) was born in Guanajuato as a criminal group that handled local drug dealing and *huachicoleo* in the state.¹⁹ Emerging from Santa Rosa de Lima, a small town in the municipality of Villagrán, Guanajuato, the group managed to establish a strong presence in the surrounding municipalities of Apaseo el Grande, León, Irapuato, Celaya, and most importantly, Salamanca – a region later termed “The Bermuda Triangle” (*El Triángulo de las Bermudas*). Salamanca is especially important for *huachicoleros* because it hosts the second largest refinery in Mexico, in addition to being close to Mexico’s main highways. The CSRL gained national relevance in 2017 when José Antonio Yépez Ortiz, a.k.a “El Marro,” assumed leadership and decided to stop the encroachment of CJNG in Guanajuato, declaring a violent war against the CJNG’s leadership. Yépez Ortiz publicly defied Oseguera Cervantes through a video, promising to eradicate the CJNG’s criminal presence in Guanajuato.

An article from *Milenio* indicates that “El Mencho” tried negotiating with “El Marro” back in January, 2017. “El Mencho” sent his nephew to Irapuato to handle the negotiation and offer “El Marro” to join the CJNG and keep the *huachicoleo* operations under his command. The meeting ended in the assassination of Oseguera Cervantes’ nephew and a strengthened “El Marro” declaring that CSRL was strong enough not to serve anyone.²⁰

The dispute between CJNG and CSRL brought an unprecedented wave of violence to Guanajuato, from massive attacks against the police and narco-messages (*narcomensajes*) threatening government officials, to several videos posted on social media threatening more violence.

¹⁸ Jannet López Ponce, “La guerra entre ‘El Mencho’ y ‘El Marro’ por Guanajuato, clave en ruta de la droga a EU,” *Milenio*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.milenio.com/policia/la-guerra-entre-el-mencho-y-el-marro-por-la-plaza-guanajuato>.

¹⁹ Some sources claim that the CSRL was originally a local group that worked for the CJNG, later becoming a splinter group. These claims, however, could not be confirmed. See Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Mexican Cartel Tactical Note #41: Cártel Santa Rosa de Lima (CSRL) Logo and Symbols Identification,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 3, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/mexican-cartel-tactical-note-41-cartel-santa-rosa-de-lima-csrl-logo-and-symbols>; Ruben Torres, “Dónde nace el cártel Santa Rosa de Lima,” *El Economista*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.economista.com.mx/politica/Donde-nace-el-cartel-Santa-Rosa-de-Lima-20190207-0008.html>.

²⁰ Jannet López Ponce, “La Guerra entre ‘El Mencho’ y ‘El Marro,’” *Milenio*, 2020.

IV. Government Reponse

Federal-level Response

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) decided to attack oil-theft networks through a frontal strategy with the purpose of weakening their operations to the extent that they would eventually stop relying on this crime for revenue. His plan consisted of identifying the main points for fuel theft, and firing suspected aides within the refinery plants. He proposed to close down any gas station that provided false data when reporting the number of liters legally purchased versus the amount of liters sold.²¹ Lastly, he implemented a new distribution mechanism that moved away from a reliance on pipelines, tasking fuel tankers with the majority of gas deliveries. Since pipelines were responsible for most of the distribution, this change in strategy resulted in significant consequences for the Mexican public. At the beginning of 2019, the gasoline shortage was such that people had to wait for hours in line to fill their vehicles with fuel (not to mention the number of gas stations that were forced to close for weeks because the fuel was not getting to them). Naturally, this inconvenience upset most citizens in central states like Jalisco and Guanajuato, where the shortage allegedly hit harder than it did in northern states.

Several months after López Obrador's tactics were set in motion, the Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection (*Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana*) declared that fuel theft decreased from 81,000 barrels and 800 gas trucks stolen per day in 2018, to 5,000 barrels and 40 gas trucks stolen per day by July 2019.

In terms of security, President López Obrador decided to make Guanajuato one of his top priorities, along with Michoacán and Jalisco. In July 2019, the first stage of the security strategy began with the deployment of 1,889 National Guard officers and 480 federal police officers to Guanajuato.²² By December 2019, violence in Guanajuato had not ceased, so the National Guard agreed to send 1,100 more elements to aid the state.²³ The first group was sent to the municipalities of León, Irapuato, Celaya, Salamanca, and San Luis de la Paz, while the second was distributed between Irapuato, Salamanca, Celaya, Villagrán (home of the CSRL), Cortazar, Juventino Rosas, and Los Apaseos.²⁴

²¹ Jorge Luis Castillo Durán, "La estrategia del combate al robo de combustible en México. Una acción pública de oposición a la tradición," *Más Poder Local*, Issue 37, February 2019.

²² Rocío Hernández, "Llega la Guardia Nacional a Guanajuato," *El Financiero*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/bajo/llega-la-guardia-nacional-a-guanajuato>.

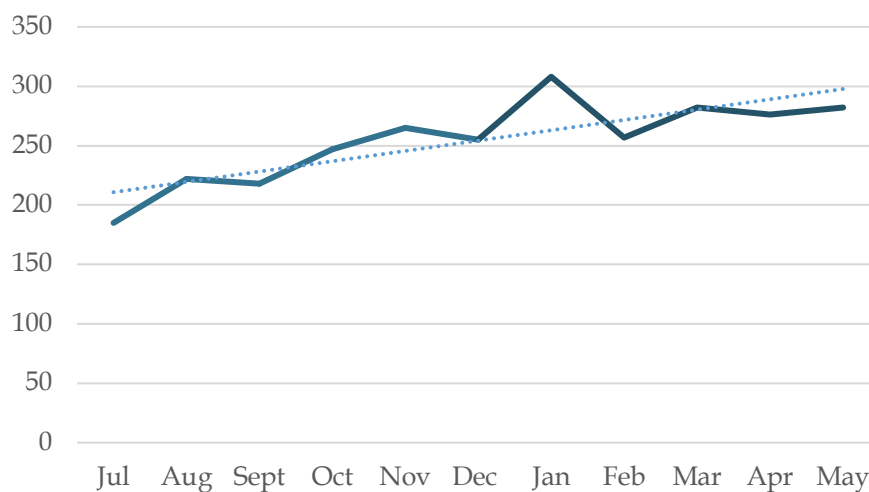
²³ Lulú Vázquez, "Anuncia Diego Sinhue más elementos de la Guardia Nacional," *Periódico Correo*, December 13, 2019, <https://periodicocorreo.com.mx/anuncia-diego-sinhue-mas-elementos-de-la-guardia-nacional/>.

²⁴ Rocío Hernández, "Llega la Guardia Nacional a Guanajuato," *El Financiero*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/bajo/llega-la-guardia-nacional-a-guanajuato>; Lulú Vázquez, "Anuncia Diego Sinhue más elementos de la Guardia Nacional," *Periódico Correo*, December 13, 2019, <https://periodicocorreo.com.mx/anuncia-diego-sinhue-mas-elementos-de-la-guardia-nacional/>.

Despite the National Guard’s efforts in the state, specialist Alejandro Hope argues that the deployment of security forces to Guanajuato was not enough.²⁵ Using data from the National Guard’s annual report, Hope highlights that even though Guanajuato is the second most violent state in Mexico, it ranks much lower in terms of the total number of National Guard troops. While Guanajuato is also the fourth state with the highest homicide rate, it is not even in the top five in terms of National Guard presence, either in absolute numbers or in rates per 100,000 inhabitants.²⁶

After the first deployment of National Guard in July 2019, the monthly number of homicides in Guanajuato demonstrated significant fluctuation. From July to August, there was a 20% increase in homicides; in September, there was a 1.8% decrease; in October, there was another increase of 13%; in November, there was a 7.3% increase; and finally, in December, there was a second decrease of 3.8%. After the second deployment in December 2019, the number of homicides suffered an increase of 20.8% in January, followed by a decrease of 16.6% in February. The rate increased again in March by 9.7%, saw a decrease of 2.1% in April, and finally increased again by 2.2% in May.²⁷

Figure 2: Intentional Homicide Cases After Each National Guard Forces Deployment, July 2019- May 2020



Generated by the author using SNSP data

²⁵ Alfonsina Ávila, “Despliegue de la Guardia Nacional en Guanajuato, no corresponde a violencia: Alejandro Hope,” *Zona Franca*, June 30, 2020, <https://zonafranca.mx/seguridad/despliegue-de-la-guardia-nacional-en-guanajuato-no-corresponde-a-su-violencia-alejandro-hope/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Own data, gathered from: Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), “Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común, nueva metodología,” *Gobierno de México*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-del-fuero-comun-nueva-metodologia?state=published>.

State-level Response

Following the deployment of National Guard forces, the state government launched a special operation known as *Golpe de Timón*, equivalent to “steering the wheel,” that at first aimed to find and arrest “El Marro,” setting up highway checkpoints, deploying helicopters to strategic zones, inspecting incoming and outgoing traffic, and securing properties in Santa Rosa de Lima. After several attempts, none of these measures helped identify the location of “El Marro.” Nonetheless, and despite local resistance, it did lead to the arrest of cartel affiliates crucial to the operations of the CSRL, weakening the criminal organization by 80%, according to Guanajuato’s Security Commissioner Sophia Huett.²⁸

In the face of the local resistance generated by the *Golpe de Timón* strategy and due to the plan’s inability to capture “El Marro,” Commissioner Huett emphasized that the focus of the strategy was to address the lack of rule of law and stabilize Villagrán, rather than solely capturing the *huachicoleo* kingpin.²⁹ Huett also declared that while “every security strategy must contemplate detaining the organization’s leader, detaining an organization’s leader should not be the security strategy per se” [author’s translation].³⁰ Instead, she points out that *Golpe de Timón* also aims to interfere with the CSRL’s logistics and diminish their capacity to generate violence.³¹

In addition to *Golpe de Timón*, state government launched a social revamping strategy to recover social structures and foster a culture of peace in Villagrán. The social impulse strategy consisted of the rehabilitation of highways and streets; the installation of additional streetlights; the improvement of school facilities; and the creation of a state-level police academy.³² *Impulso 2.0* was designed to develop a partnership with Villagrán’s society in order to strengthen family values as well as the community’s ability to foster development, ultimately leading to peace in the region.³³

²⁸ Luciano Vázquez, “Cártel de Santa Rosa de Lima está debilitado en más del 80%: Seguridad de Guanajuato,” *El Financiero*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/cartel-de-santa-rosa-de-lima-esta-debilitado-en-mas-del-80-seguridad-de-guanajuato>.

²⁹ Carlos Olvera, “Golpe de Timón fue para recuperar estado de Derecho,” *Milenio*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.milenio.com/policia/golpe-de-timon-fue-para-recuperar-estado-de-derecho>.

³⁰ Bryam Torres, “Cartel de Santa Rosa de Lima ya opera al 50%, afirma Huett,” *Telediario*, May 8, 2019, <https://bajio.telediario.mx/local/cartel-de-santa-rosa-de-lima-ya-opera-al-50-afirma-huett>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, “Continúa Estrategia Impulso Social 2.0 en Santa Rosa de Lima,” *Comunicación Social De Gobierno*, <https://noticias.guanajuato.gob.mx/2019/09/continua-estrategia-impulso-social-2-0-santa-rosa-lima/>.

³³ To learn more about *Impulso 2.0*, visit <https://desarrollosocial.guanajuato.gob.mx/impulsosocial/>.

V. Analysis

Split-plaza Conflict

As mentioned before, the CJNG has a vested interest in controlling Guanajuato, as the state is located in the middle of one of the key drug-routes the cartel is trying to conquer. With negotiation out of the question, the CJNG is pushing for the violent extinction of the CSRL, and the CSRL is responding with the same aggressiveness. The increased violence in Guanajuato over the last several years has been largely attributed to this cartel rivalry. For example, data gathered by *Reforma* on organized-crime-related killings shows that Guanajuato had the highest number of murdered police officials in 2019 with 56 victims.³⁴ One of the worst strings of violence against public security forces occurred in late 2019, when 13 police officers were murdered in just 11 days. The CJNG claimed responsibility for these attacks, targeting the Villagrán Police Station, local officials in León, Celaya, and Irapuato, and state authorities working in Public Security and the Antinarcotics Unit. The CJNG has also threatened judicial officials suspected to be collaborating with the CSRL.³⁵

As Viridiana Rios points out, violent territorial conflicts arise when a single organization does not have total control over a criminal market.³⁶ Competition for the *plaza* creates an unstable environment because of the “lack [of] formal mechanisms and systematic rules to deal with disputes and disagreements between organizations.”³⁷ This is especially inconvenient for criminal leaders because it “increases the costs of corruption, reduces the share of local market that it can supply, and makes production inputs scarce.”³⁸ Following this rationale, although the CJNG has not showed clear interest in Guanajuato’s *huachicoleo*, sharing the *plaza* would mean assuming costs that the CSRL is not willing to pay, intensified by the personal hatred between the two main leaders.

OCCs in Guanajuato have also started to use improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to deter their rivals. While it remains unclear which group was responsible for an intended attack in November 2019, residents of Apaseo el Alto reported the presence of a vehicle with an IED. The device did not explode, but the state Attorney General’s office tied it to the violent competition between the CJNG and the CSRL. This strategy

³⁴ “Ejecutómetro,” *Grupo Reforma*, 2019.

³⁵ Kimberly Heinle, “Attacks Against Police Highlight Violence in Guanajuato,” *Justice in Mexico*, December 25, 2019, <https://justiceinmexico.org/attacks-against-police-highlight-violence-in-guanajuato/>.

³⁶ Viridiana Rios, “Why did Mexico become so violent? A self-reinforcing violent equilibrium caused by competition and enforcement,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16, no. 2 (2013): 138-155, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/vrios/files/rios2013_trendsorgcrime.pdf.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 4

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

allegedly resembles FARC's model of leaving IEDs with remote detonators inside vehicles in plain sight to induce public fear.³⁹

Finding a "Safer" Source of Income

Criminal organizations have gradually taken a greater interest in fuel theft. Different studies suggest that *Los Zetas* and the Gulf Cartel were the earliest known participants in oil theft, later expanding to include *La Familia Michoacana*, the Sinaloa cartel, the CJNG, and ultimately, the CSRL.⁴⁰ The increased adoption of fuel theft in established OCGs in Mexico is mainly because it produces significant revenue—comparable to drug-trafficking gains—while also presenting fewer risks and logistical challenges. Furthermore, as a result of measures adopted during the 2008 war on drugs, the criminal sentences for fuel theft are far less aggressive than those of drug trafficking, ranging from three to 10 years in prison.⁴¹

However, one unprecedented event in 2019 shed light on the dangers *huachicoleros* and civilians face when they extract fuel directly from pipes. On January 18, 2019, a pipeline in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo, violently exploded as the delayed result of an illegal fuel tap. The explosion killed approximately 98 people and injured at least 48 more when members of the community approached the site of the tap looking to salvage free oil from what appeared to be a harmless leak.⁴² This incident came in the midst of one of the greatest gasoline shortages in Mexico—a result of President López Obrador strategy to combat fuel theft.⁴³

While the federal strategy did help to reduce gasoline theft, it also created an opportunity for criminal groups to diversify their operations, resulting in the adoption of liquified petroleum (LP) gas theft. Stealing LP gas is not significantly different from

³⁹ Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, "Mexican Cartel Tactical Note #41: Cártel Santa Rosa de Lima (CSRL) Logo and Symbols Identification," *Small Wars Journal*, April 3, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/mexican-cartel-tactical-note-41-cartel-santa-rosa-de-lima-csrl-logo-and-symbols>.

⁴⁰ J. Jesús Lemus, "Ligan con el narco a bandas huachicoleras," *Reporte Índigo*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.reporteindigo.com/reporte/puebla-robo-combustible-control-carteles-drogas-bandas/>; Eimhin O'Reilly, "Muerte del 'Rey de la Gasolina', fin de era para huachicoleros en México," *InSight Crime*, March 16, 2020, <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/analisis/rey-de-la-gasolina-mexico/>; Nathan P. Jones and John P. Sullivan, "Huachicoleros: Criminal Cartels, Fuel Theft, and Violence in Mexico," *Journal of Strategic Security* 12, no. 4 (2019), <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1742&context=jss>; Arturo Solís, "Estos son los grupos que roban combustibles de Pemex," *Forbes*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com.mx/estos-son-los-grupos-que-roban-los-combustibles-de-pemex/>.

⁴¹ Octavio Angulo Soto, "¿A qué se debe el incremento del robo de combustible en México?," *Revista electrónica EXLEGE*, Issue 3

⁴² "A deadly explosion in Mexico punctures the optimism of a new era," *The Economist*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/01/23/a-deadly-explosion-in-mexico-punctures-the-optimism-of-a-new-era>.

⁴³ Kevin Sieff, "Gas stations in Mexico run out of gas as government cracks down on fuel theft," *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/gas-stations-in-mexico-run-out-of-gas-as-government-cracks-down-on-fuel-theft/2019/01/09/a9e71da8-1431-11e9-ab79-30cd4f7926f2_story.html.

huachicoleo, since the stealing strategy is the same as for fuel: puncturing pipelines and stealing LP gas trucks. However, LP gas theft has not received as much attention as fuel has. The Institute for Municipal Management, Administration, and Affiliation (*Instituto para la Gestión, Administración y Vinculación Municipal*, IGAVIM) reported a 484.67% increase in illegal pipeline gas outlets in 2019 compared to 2018.⁴⁴ From January 2019 to September 2019, the number of illegal taps on LP gas pipelines rose from 42 to 123, representing a 192.8% increase in an eight-month period.⁴⁵ As a result, two out of 10 vending points in central Mexico operated with stolen LP gas, ensuing an estimated loss of 5.8 billion Mexican pesos (roughly 300 million USD) in 2019 alone.⁴⁶

In Guanajuato, the problem of LP gas theft has been a relatively constant problem. Data from IGAVIM also shows that the state registered nine illegal taps in 2018 and 10 from January to September 2019.⁴⁷

Violent Crime: Homicide, Extortion, and Kidnapping

While violence has increased in Guanajuato on the whole, it is important to distinguish between the hubs of violence in the state in order to have a better understanding of this violent wave. Despite its relative successes in downsizing *huachicoleo*, the implementation of AMLO's security strategy in Mexico did have a more nuanced negative effect on other crimes in the state. According to Sukanti Bhave from *InSight Crime*, OCGs in Guanajuato started targeting local businessmen and clergy for extortion through a practice known as *pago de piso* (renter's fee), which consists of paying organized crime enterprises for protection.⁴⁸

Data reported by the Executive Secretariat at the National System for Public Security (*Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública*, SNSP) shows that extortion has been steadily increasing in Mexico, reaching a total of 8,601 cases nationally in 2019. However, analyzing data on extortion is problematic for a diverse set of reasons. In the case of extortion, like with many other crimes in Mexico, most of the cases are not reported. The fact that extortion comes in a variety of forms adds yet another layer of complexity, since most victims prefer not to file an official police complaint, ignoring the extortion attempts and avoiding to give personal information.

⁴⁴ "Robo de GAS L.P. en ductos," IGAVIM Observatorio Ciudadano, November 2019, <http://igavim.org/Documentos%20Generados/Reportes/2019%20RoboGasLP%20ene%20-%20sep.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

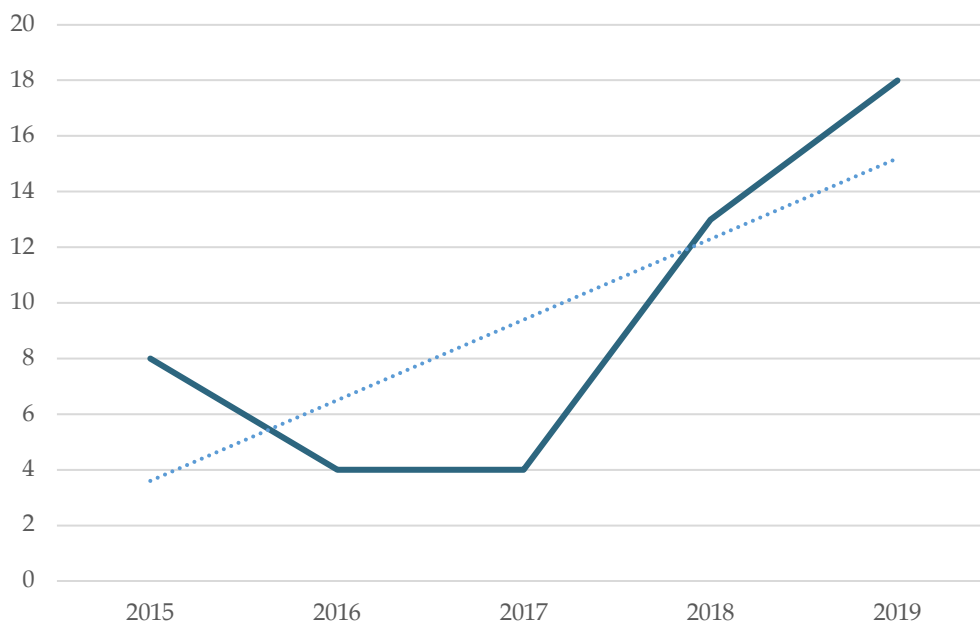
⁴⁶ Arturo Solís, "Pemex reconoce más pérdidas," *Forbes México*, 2018.

⁴⁷ "Robo de GAS L.P. en ductos," IGAVIM Observatorio Ciudadano, November 2019.

⁴⁸ Sukanti Bhave, "Huachicoleros se cambiaron a la extorsión en Guanajuato, México." *InSight Crime*, November 15, 2019, <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/noticias-del-dia/huachicoleros-se-cambiaron-a-la-extorsion-en-guanajuato-mexico/>.

That being said, Guanajuato experienced an increase in the reported cases of extortion since 2017, when the state went from four reported cases of extortion to 13 in 2018, to then reach 18 in 2019.⁴⁹ The most affected municipalities are Celaya with five cases in 2019, Cortazar with four, and Irapuato and San Miguel de Allende with two. Historically, Celaya has been the most affected by extortion, registering 14 official cases since 2015. Because of the limitations explained afore, these figures are illustrative, most likely not encompassing all real cases of extortion.

Figure 3: Reported Cases of Extortion, 2015-2019



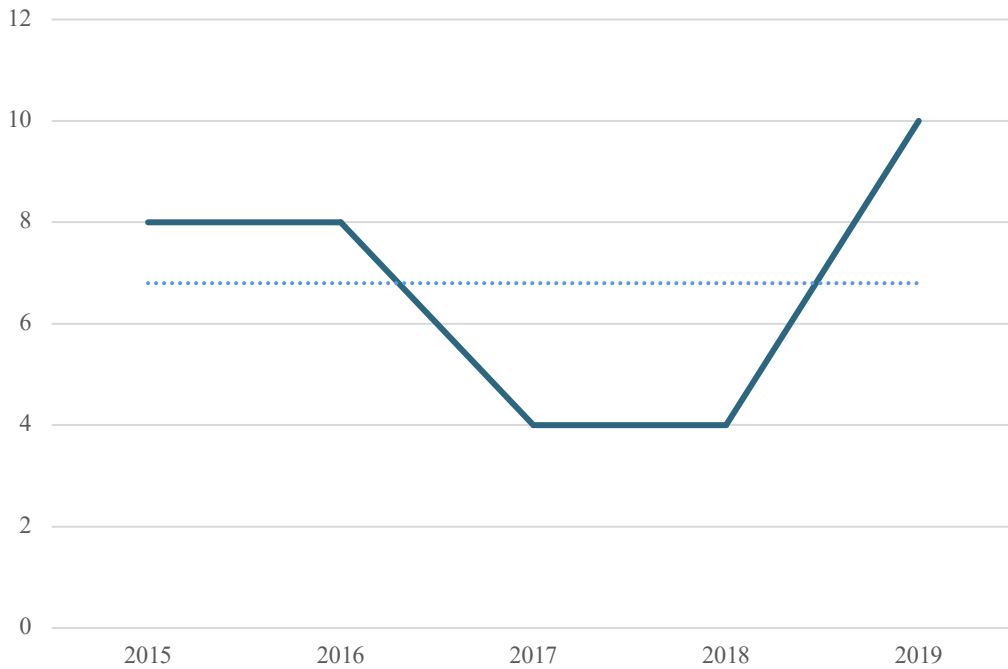
Generated by the author using SNSP data

Facing a similar array of challenges is reporting kidnapping cases. Similar to extortion, kidnapping is often underreported in Mexico, making it hard to assess this data. However, to provide some perspective, Mexico has seen small increases in kidnapping cases reported for the last few years, reaching a total of 1,323 cases nationwide in 2019. At the state level, reported kidnappings in Guanajuato, as tallied by SNSP also showed a steady increase from four cases in 2018, to 10 in 2019. Although this represents a 150% increase, the figure of kidnappings is also affected by the problems discussed. The most affected municipalities were Celaya and Salamanca, with three cases each in 2019. Historically, Celaya is the municipality that reports most of the kidnapping cases in the

⁴⁹ Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Publica, "Incidencia Delictiva," Gobierno de Mexico, July 20, 2020, <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-87005?idiom=es>.

state, accumulating 11 reported kidnappings since 2015, followed by Salamanca with four.

Figure 4: Reported Cases of Kidnapping, 2015-2019



Generated by the author using SNSP data

In recent years, homicides in Guanajuato have received the greatest media and political attention because of the drastic increase experienced from 2017 to 2018, ultimately making it one of the most unsafe states in Mexico. However, it is important to note that the increasing trend in intentional homicides in Guanajuato can be observed as early as 2016. What makes 2018 a turning point is that it demonstrated a 140.68% increase compared to 2017. In comparison, other recent years show an annual percentage change from 6.36% to 14.47%.

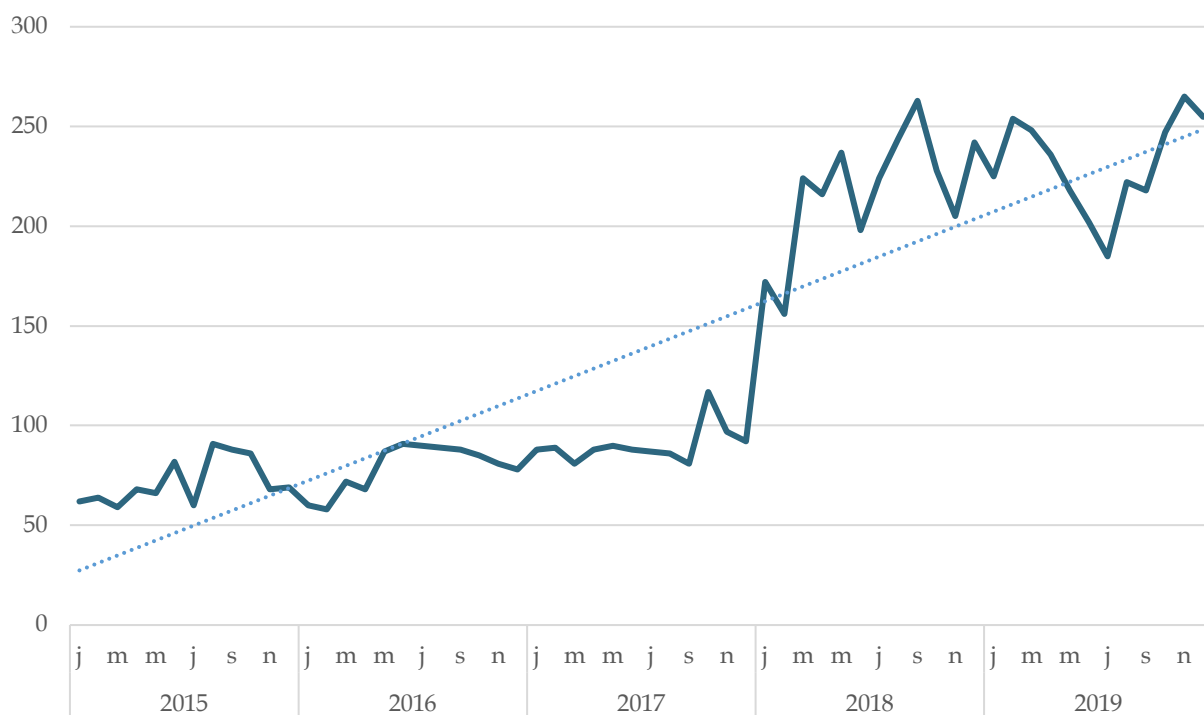
Table 1: Cases and Percentage Change in Intentional Homicides, 2015-2019

Year	Intentional homicides	%Δ
2015	863	
2016	947	9.7
2017	1,084	14.5
2018	2,609	140.7
2019	2,775	6.4

Generated by the author using SNSP data

Although the percentage increase did improve compared to 2018, the problem of intentional homicides in 2019 cannot be mistaken for having improved, since 2,775 is still the highest number of cases recorded for Guanajuato in at least the last five years. In a monthly comparison, November 2019 holds the highest number of intentional homicides with 265 cases, followed by September 2018 with 263, and December 2019 with 255.

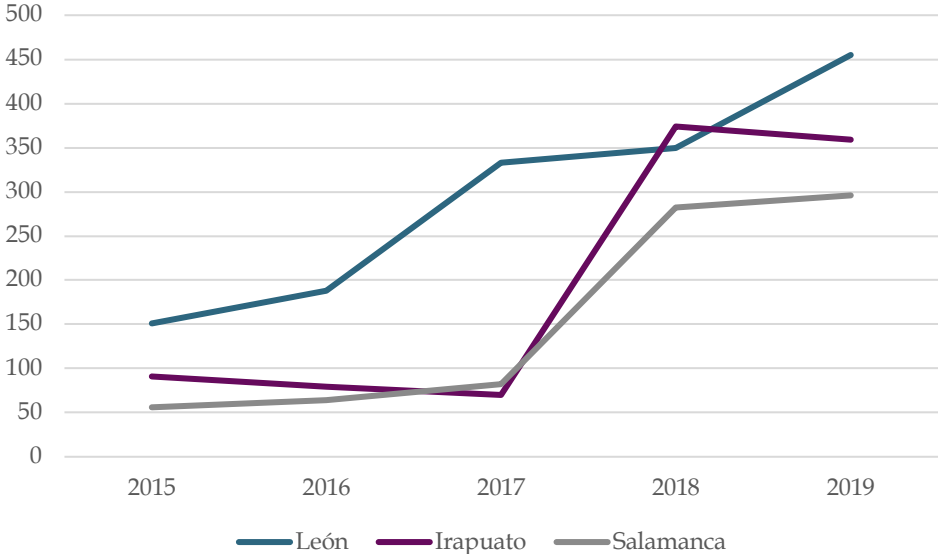
Figure 5: Intentional Homicide Cases Reported by Month, 2015-2019



Generated by the author using SNSP data

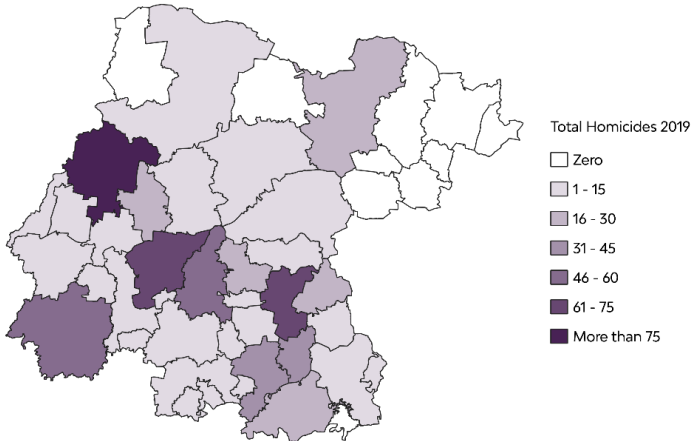
At the municipal level, León, Irapuato, and Salamanca hold the highest share of intentional homicides. León registered a total of 1,477 cases from 2015 to 2019. Of that total, 455 occurred in 2019, setting a new record for the state, which was previously held by Irapuato. Irapuato follows this trend with 973 intentional homicides registered from 2015 to 2019, 359 of which were recorded in 2019. Lastly, Salamanca recorded a total of 780 intentional homicides from 2015 to 2019, 296 of which took place in 2019.

Figure 6: Municipalities with the most Homicide Cases, 2015-2019



Generated by the author using SNSP data

Figure 7: Map of Guanajuato's Homicide Cases by Municipality in 2019

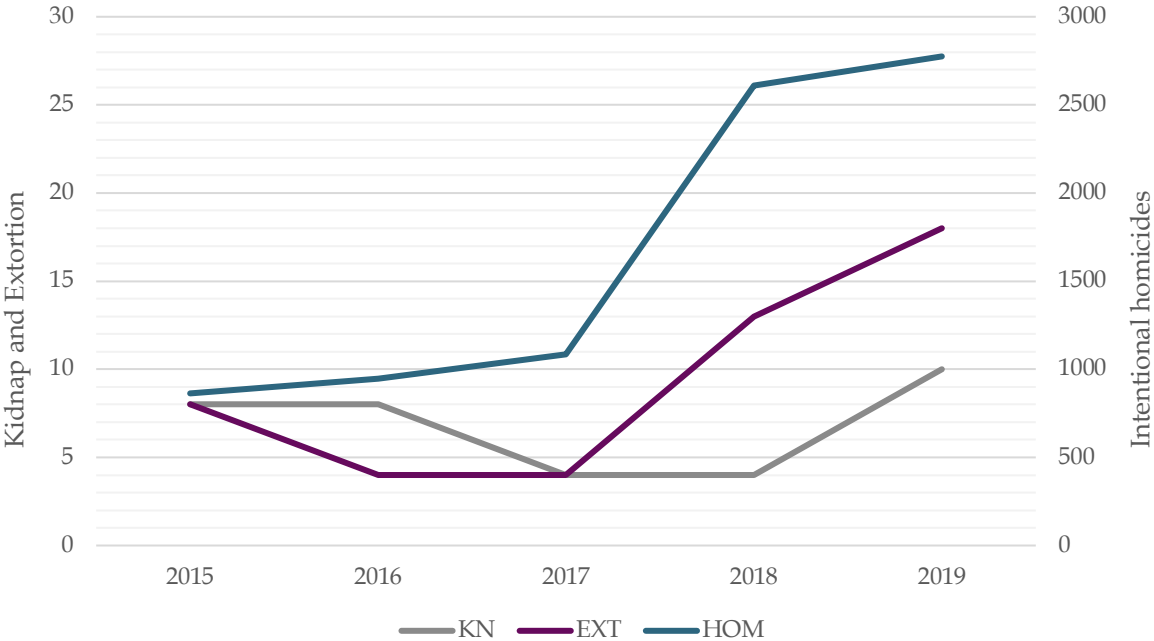


Justice in Mexico © 2020

In terms of homicide rates, when controlled for population, Salamanca had the highest homicide rate in 2019, with 105 intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. To put this figure in perspective, municipalities in Mexico traditionally considered to be the most violent, such as Tijuana, Baja California and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, had a homicide rate of 113.4 and 72.7 intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively.

In the state of Guanajuato, Salamanca was followed by Acámbaro with a rate of 103, and Valle de Santiago with 81.⁵⁰ It is important to note that the municipalities of Irapuato (61 per 100,000), San Miguel de Allende (48 per 100,000), Celaya (39 per 100,000), and León (29 per 100,000) also demonstrated high homicide rates compared to the already high national average of 29 intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

Figure 8: Yearly Cases of Kidnaping, Extortion, and Homicide



Generated by the author using SNSP data.

⁵⁰ When calculating and comparing homicide rates (the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants), it is important to control for municipalities that have fewer than 100,000 inhabitants because in those areas the rate has a magnifying effect. Additionally, the municipality of Salvatierra had a homicide rate of 83 per 100,000 inhabitants. However, it is not considered in the analysis because it has 100,750 total inhabitants and had 84 homicides, demonstrating the magnifying effect of homicide rates.

Illegal Taps and Homicides

As mentioned before, governmental initiatives to eradicate illegal taps have had unintended consequences, for example, the merge to LP gas theft. Nevertheless, it is still unclear how this strategy actually affected violence trends in Guanajuato. According to *México Evalúa*, when illegal tapping became a policy strategy for the federal government, starting in 2018, there was a 70% decrease in the number of illegal taps. However, this decrease has resulted in a 6.2% increase in the intentional homicides in Guanajuato.⁵¹

In order to determine if there is any relationship between the efforts to eradicate illegal taps with violence in the state, I conducted a statistical analysis model that consists of correlation and linear regression exercises. A Pearson correlation is used to determine the strength and direction of a given pair of variables, in this case illegal taps and cases of intentional homicide. The Pearson coefficient, or R, ranges from -1 to 1, where -1 is a perfect negative relation and 1 is a perfect positive relation.⁵² A linear regression is used to predict how an independent variable affects a dependent variable.⁵³ In this case, the independent variable was the number of illegal taps reported, while the dependent variable was the number of intentional homicide cases reported for the years 2018 and 2019.

The results of this statistical analysis indicate that there is indeed a relationship between illegal tapping and homicides. For 2018, the Pearson coefficient was 0.73 ($p < 0.00$), representing a strong relationship between the two variables. Additionally, a regression analysis revealed an R Square figure of 0.53, indicating that the number of illegal taps in a given municipality could indeed explain 53% of the observed variation in homicides.⁵⁴ This provides for strong evidence to suggest that illegal tapping was the primary driver for homicides in Guanajuato in 2018, explaining over half of the intentional homicides in the state.

For 2019, the Pearson coefficient was 0.50 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a strong to moderate relationship between the two variables that year. Similarly, a regression analysis suggested that 25.4% of the observed variation in homicides could be explained by

⁵¹ "Guanajuato: territorio en disputa," *Mexico Evalúa*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.mexicoevalua.org/guanajuato-territorio-en-disputa/>.

⁵² "Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation using SPSS Statistics," *Laerd Statistics*, <https://statistics.laerd.com/spss-tutorials/pearsons-product-moment-correlation-using-spss-statistics.php>.

⁵³ "Linear Regression Analysis using SPSS Statistics," *Laerd Statistics*, <https://statistics.laerd.com/spss-tutorials/linear-regression-using-spss-statistics.php>.

⁵⁴ The percentage of homicides that are affected by either extortion or kidnap is based on the R^2 results for Pearson Correlation tests. R^2 explains how much of the dependent variable (homicides) can be explained by the independent variable (extortion or kidnappings).

Statistical significance levels or p-values, refer to the probability that the analyzed association is a result of "chance" or a null hypothesis. Suggested reading: "Significance in Statistics & Surveys," *The Survey System*, [https://www.surveysystem.com/signif.htm#:~:text=05\)%20chance%20of%20not%20being,a%2099%25%20\(1%2D](https://www.surveysystem.com/signif.htm#:~:text=05)%20chance%20of%20not%20being,a%2099%25%20(1%2D)

illegal tapping. Although the relation is lower than in 2018, in 2019 illegal tapping were still a major driver for intentional homicides, amounting to one fourth of the cases.

Table 2: Statistical Analysis Values for Illegal Taps and Homicides, 2018-2019

Year	Correlation Coefficient	R-square	Significance
2018	R = 0.73	R ² = 0.53	p < 0.01
2019	R = 0.50	R ² = 0.25	p < 0.05

Data sources: *SNSP Incidencia delictiva* and *LANTIA Consultores*

Upon further analysis, it was interesting to note that in 2019, there seemed to be a geographic shift in homicide clusters, with homicides becoming less frequent in populated areas with over 100,000 inhabitants and more frequent in municipalities with smaller populations. Notably, this geographic trend was accompanied by an increase in illegal taps, with less densely-populated municipalities seeing increases in illegal taps from 2018 to 2019.

The most notable case of this phenomenon was in Apaseo el Alto, where the number of illegal taps on record grew from 40 in 2018 to 93 in 2019, representing a 133% increase. Based on the above analysis demonstrating the strength of illegal taps as a predictor of homicides, this shift likely contributed to the 47% increase in intentional homicides experienced in that same year.⁵⁵ Following this trend, Abasolo saw a 100% increase in illegal taps and a corresponding 34% increase in intentional homicides. Interestingly enough, the municipality of Villagrán also experienced a dramatic 130% increase in illegal taps, but contrary to the previous cases, it showed a 32% decrease in the number of intentional homicides, probably reflecting CSRL's strong hold on their home municipality. All three municipalities share borders with one or more of the 2018 hubs for *huachicoleo* activity.

Nonetheless, there were cases wherein the reduction of illegal taps did not result in decreases in intentional homicides. For example, the municipality of León has received greater attention in the last several years for its high levels of violence. León experienced a considerable 46% reduction in illegal taps from 2018 to 2019. However, the number of intentional homicides also rose, hitting a 30% increase in cases, totaling 455 homicides. This can be explained, in part, as a result of the municipality's higher

⁵⁵ Calculations made from data collected by *LANTIA Consultores*, available at: Oscar Reyes, "Aumentan tomas clandestinas en la región," *El Sol del Bajío*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.elsoldelbajio.com.mx/local/aumentan-tomas-clandestinas-en-la-region-4321471.html>.

level of urbanization and higher population density, which make a more complex scenario to reduce violent crime significantly.

Salamanca demonstrated a similar pattern. As previously noted, Salamanca is a major *huachicoleo* hub because of its prominent refinery, and as such, the municipality has suffered large numbers of intentional homicides. While there was a recorded 35% reduction in illegal taps in the area from 2018 to 2019, Salamanca reported a 5% increase in intentional homicides, totaling 296 cases in 2019. As of 2020, Salamanca has positioned itself as the fourth most dangerous municipality in the state, with 160 intentional homicides and a homicide rate of 54.6 per 100,000 inhabitants in the first five months of the year.

However, not all of the state's most violent municipalities follow this trend. For example, Irapuato achieved a 31% reduction in illegal taps, resulting in a 4% decrease in intentional homicides in 2019. When analyzed in terms of absolute numbers of homicides, Irapuato was still the second most violent municipality in Guanajuato as of 2019 with 374 homicides. This can also be a reflection of a higher population density, in addition to the municipality's location. Irapuato is strategically located between Salamanca and León, the mainland of *huachicoleo* and the state's largest city.

Despite these accounts, there are several success stories that demonstrate a relationship between reductions in illegal taps and corresponding decreases in intentional homicides. For instance, in the case of the small municipality of Yuriria, which experienced a 56% decrease in illegal taps from 2018 to 2019, and a considerable 45% decrease in intentional homicides. Similarly, Pueblo Nuevo and Uriangato experienced 91% and 24% decreases in illegal taps, and 33% and 25% decreases in intentional homicides, respectively. In the case of Pénjamo, while the municipality did achieve a 68% reduction in illegal tapping and a 16% decrease in intentional homicides, when analyzed in terms of absolute homicide numbers, it was still among the state's top 10 most violent cities, ranked in eighth place.

Table 3: Percentage Changes in Illegal Taps and Intentional Homicides in Guanajuato, 2018 to 2019

Municipality	%Δ in Illegal Taps	%Δ in Homicides
Abasolo	100.00	33.96
Apaseo el Alto	132.50	47.46
Irapuato	-31.33	-4.01
León	-46.00	30.00
Pénjamo	-67.96	-16.28
Pueblo Nuevo	-90.91	-33.33
Salamanca	-35.15	4.96
Uriangato	-23.53	-25.00
Villagrán	129.55	-32.00
Yuriria	-56.67	-45.98

Generated by the author using SNSP and LANTIA

VI. Conclusion

Until May 2020, Guanajuato had not seen an improvement in terms of public security. Intentional homicides in the state reached 1,405 cases and 8,132 victims. León was the municipality with the largest share of intentional homicides with 247 cases, followed by Celaya with 207 and Irapuato with 173. In terms of homicide rate, the most notorious cases were Apaseo el Alto with 70.6 and Salamanca with 54.6 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, more than three and two times the national average, respectively.

CSRL Arrests

2020 has also brought several blows to the powerful CSRL. Between February and June, three close collaborators to “El Marro” were arrested. The first was Luis Angel Lara Belman, a.k.a “El Tortugo,” arrested in Celaya in mid-February. Later that month, Fabián Lara Belman, a.k.a “La Vieja,” was arrested in Baja California in a condo located in the Rosarito-Ensenada highway. Finally, and most notably, Noé Israel Lara Belman, a.k.a “El Puma,” was arrested in San Luis Potosí in late June. Authorities identified “El

Puma” as a co-founder of the CSRL and presumably the second-in-command until he betrayed “El Marro” and joined the CJNG to help them kill him.⁵⁶

Furthermore, authorities also managed to detain both of “El Marro’s” parents. His father, Rodolfo Juan Yepez Godoy, was arrested on March 5, 2020 in Celaya. The arrest was because Yepez Godoy was driving a vehicle that was reported to have been stolen.⁵⁷ “El Marro’s” mother was arrested on June 20, 2020, also in Celaya, in an operation that also led to the detention of the cartel leader’s sister and cousin.⁵⁸ National Guard officials led both arrests.

Following the arrest of his mother, “El Marro” released two videos of himself. On his videos, “El Marro” thanks his supporters and cartel collaborators, asking for their continued help. He also addresses the government, promising to increase violence in Guanajuato, claiming that authorities have tortured and humiliated his family.⁵⁹ He also mentions that he will continue his operations even if it means working with criminal groups from the border region or from Sinaloa in order to fight the government and the CJNG.⁶⁰ Yet, there is no official confirmation of a CSRL- Sinaloa alliance or presence of the Sinaloa cartel in Guanajuato.

Approximately one week after the arrest of “El Marro’s” mother, a judge in Guanajuato ordered the release of Rodolfo Juan Yepez Godoy, under the justification that because of his age – 60 years old –, he was in great danger of contracting COVID-19 if he stayed imprisoned. The judge ordered him to pay a bail of \$10,000 Mexican Pesos (about \$440 USD) to continue his criminal process in home arrest.⁶¹ In addition, Yepez Godoy was mandated to return the stolen vehicle back to the insurance company and to pay all associated fees.

⁵⁶ Manuel Espino, “Mexican authorities arrest ‘El Puma,’ as one of the founders of the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel,” *El Universal*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/mexican-authorities-arrest-el-puma-one-founders-santa-rosa-de-lima-cartel>.

Veronica Esponisa, “Detienen en SLP a ‘El Puma’, cofundador del Cartel de Santa Rosa de Lima,” *Proceso*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/635675/detienen-en-slp-a-el-puma-cofundador-del-cartel-de-santa-rosa-de-lima>.

⁵⁷ “Así fue la detención del papa de El Marro, el líder del Cartel de Santa Rosa de Lima,” *El Debate*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.debate.com.mx/policias/Asi-fue-la-detencion-del-papa-de-El-Marro-el-lider-del-Cartel-de-Santa-Rosa-de-Lima-20200306-0072.html>.

⁵⁸ Kimberly Heinle, “Tension and Violence Rise in Guanajuato Following Arrests of Cartel Leader’s Mother,” *Justice in Mexico*, June 30, 2020, <https://justiceinmexico.org/tension-and-violence-rise-in-guanajuato-following-arrests-of-cartel-leaders-mother/>.

⁵⁹ Diana Lastiri, “‘El Marro’ vows to wreak havoc in Guanajuato after his family members were arrested,” *El Universal*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/el-marro-vows-wreak-havoc-guanajuato-after-his-family-members-were-arrested>.

⁶⁰ Cesar Martinez, “Amaga ‘El Marro’ con mas violencia en Guanajuato,” *Reforma*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.reforma.com/amaga-el-marro-con-mas-violencia-en-guanajuato/ar1970993?referer=-7d616165662f3a3a6262623b727a7a7279703b767a783a-->.

⁶¹ La Redacción, “Juez libera a padre de ‘El Marro’ líder del cartel Santa Rosa de Lima,” *La Jornada*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/estados/2020/06/26/juez-libera-a-padre-de-2018el-marro2019-lider-del-cartel-santa-rosa-de-lima-4045.html>.

Two days later, on June 28, 2020, “El Marro’s” mother was also released due to a lack of evidence. In addition, the defense claimed that the prosecution team committed irregularities in the process, such as torturing the defendant, altering evidence, and conducting domiciliary searches without judicial warrants.⁶²

In one of his morning addresses, President Lopez Obrador lamented the release of “El Marro’s” mother. Lopez Obrador attributed the wrongful liberation to local inefficiencies and corruption, which he claimed have led Guanajuato to be the deadliest state in Mexico.⁶³ In response to the accusations, Governor Diego Sinhue Rodriguez Vallejo said the cartel leader’s mother was released because the national Attorney General’s Office (*Fiscalía General de la República*, FGR) failed assert its jurisdiction over the case, claiming that the state’s Attorney General’s Office (*Fiscalía General del Estado*, FGE) just acted as an aid to the case, which was under the competence of the FGR.⁶⁴

The Fall of “El Marro”

Just a few weeks after his appearance in the public videos, José Antonio Yépez Ortiz “El Marro,” was arrested. “El Marro” was detained on August 2, in the municipality of Santa Cruz Juventino Rosas, presumably at the same location where he recorded his videos back in June.⁶⁵ The operation to arrest “El Marro” required cooperation of federal and state forces, an unprecedented “show of force” in the state. Luis Cresencio Sandoval, Mexico’s Defense Secretary, declared that they received tips on addresses that “El Marro” frequented, tips that were confirmed when they detected a black truck and a food delivery vehicle in one of them.⁶⁶

“El Marro” will be transferred to the maximum-security Altiplano penitentiary, famous for the escape of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán in 2015, according to Mexico’s Federal Secretary for Public Security and Citizen Protection (*Secretario Federal para la Seguridad Pública y Protección Ciudadana*), Alfonso Durazo.⁶⁷

⁶² Luis Negrete, “Liberan a mama de ‘El Marro’ por falta de pruebas,” *Excélsior*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/liberan-a-mama-de-el-marro-por-falta-de-pruebas/1390863>.

⁶³ Pedro Villa y caña, “AMLO anuncia investigación por liberación de madre de ‘El Marro,’” *El Universal*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/amlo-anuncia-investigacion-por-liberacion-de-madre-de-el-marro>.

⁶⁴ Redacción, “Tras liberación de mama de ‘El Marro’... reparten culpas,” *Milenio*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.milenio.com/politica/marro-amlo-rodriguez-vallejo-confrontan-liberacion-mama>.

⁶⁵ David Saúl Vela Luciano Vázquez, “Esto es todo lo que tienes que saber sobre la detención del ‘Marro,’” *El Financiero*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/cae-el-marro-en-operativo-del-ejercito-y-fiscalia-de-guanajuato>.

⁶⁶ “El Marro ‘never slept two nights in the same place,’” *Yucatan Times*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.theyucatantimes.com/2020/08/el-marro-never-slept-two-nights-in-the-same-place/>.

⁶⁷ Forbes Staff, “Trasladan a ‘El Marro’, líder del Cártel Santa Rosa de Lima, a penal de Guanajuato,” *Forbes*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com.mx/noticias-trasladan-al-lider-del-cartel-santa-rosa-de-lima-a-penal-en-la-cdmx/>.

President López Obrador declared the arrest to be a very important event, showing that his government will not protect any OCG. In addition, he labeled this event as evidence that it is no longer true that the government deceives its population by persecuting one criminal group and protecting others, “the law must be applied evenly” [author’s translation].⁶⁸

It is both the federal and state’s hope that arresting “El Marro” and dismantling the CSRL will have a positive effect, reducing violent crime in Guanajuato. However, it is still unclear how the arrest of Guanajuato’s kingpin will actually lead the state to peace.

CJNG Moving Forward?

On the one hand, it is very likely that with the virtual dismantling of CSRL, CJNG will be able to obtain control of the territory, hiring former CSRL affiliates to gain local support. The full entrance of a new cartel, especially one originated in a different state, does not mean immediate peace. This is especially true when dealing with CJNG, a cartel that has repeatedly proven to be unafraid of violent consequences if challenged, either by a different cartel or by the government.

On the other hand, there have been no explicit demonstrations that CJNG is interested in Guanajuato other than as a transit route, which could open an opportunity for a splinter criminal group to take over fuel theft.⁶⁹ If a new group rises to control *huachicoleo* activity in Guanajuato, and it is not subject to CJNG leadership, the possibility for cartel dispute would again threaten the state’s stability.

Final Thoughts

This paper found that there are other factors that can affect violent crime, especially intentional homicides. It is of utmost importance to develop a federal and local strategy to weaken *huachicoleo* operations without relying solely in the eradication of illegal taps, as it has proven to be a policy measure with grave unintended consequences in terms of security. Furthermore, the response of President López Obrador to “El Marro’s” arrest, suggests a lack of a coherent security agenda. Declaring that no OCG will go unprosecuted, President López Obrador contradicts his promise to approach violence in a non-confrontational manner. In addition, the publication of pictures of “El Marro”

⁶⁸ “El presidente de México dice que el arresto del Marro es ‘muy importante,’” *Agencia EFE*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/politica/el-presidente-de-mexico-dice-que-arresto-del-marro-es-muy-importante/20000035-4310866>.

⁶⁹ At the publication of this report, CJNG had not made any public demonstrations in Guanajuato nor commented on “El Marro’s” arrest.

during his arrest, goes against his promise to not “conduct arrests as public spectacles, or otherwise continue on the same path as previous leaders.”⁷⁰

In late 2019, President Lopez Obrador reconfirmed his commitment to a non-confrontational security strategy, when he ordered the release of Ovidio Guzman Lopez, a.k.a “El Ratón,” son of drug kingpin Joaquin Guzman Loera, a.k.a “El Chapo.” Guzman Lopez was arrested in Sinaloa, allegedly by a group of rogue security forces that did not have the proper authorization to carry out the detention.⁷¹ After the arrest, the cartel launched a large attack in retaliation, threatening to kill civilians if authorities did not meet their demand for the release of Guzman Lopez. Seeing the potential bloodshed provoked by the arrest, President Lopez Obrador ordered the release of the alleged criminal, arguing that in his government, civilian lives have more value than arresting a kingpin. President Lopez Obrador confirmed that though his government was not protecting any OCG, the use of force, violence, and massacres was not a strategy he would pursue.⁷²

While it is still unclear why President Lopez Obrador decided to support the arrest of “El Marro,” after repeatedly declaring that he would not prosecute kingpins, there are a few significant differences between the detentions. First, it is important to highlight the increased pressure received by Guanajuato’s state governor Rodriguez Vallejo, claiming that the state was not able to conduct arrests and further prosecute cases without the national Attorney General’s office support. Second, although CSRL managed to create some local support, the organization did not yet have the reach and violent capabilities that Cartel de Sinaloa has, making a retaliation as big as Culiacan’s somewhat unlikely for Guanajuato. Third, the operation that led to the arrest of “El Marro” was planned and supported by local, state, and federal authorities. While the operation to detain “El Raton” was a more divided effort, with allegedly rogue authorities deciding to go for the arrest instead of continuing the surveillance strategy until they had authorization to execute an extradition arrest warrant issued by a federal judge in the United States.

It is uncontested that improving Guanajuato’s security situation would be a major achievement for both the state and federal governments. However, it will be interesting to see how much they consider the diversity of factors affecting violence, and to what extent this collaboration to make one notorious arrest continues as they now face the challenge to re-design policies for the state.

⁷⁰ Azam Ahmed, “Mexico Seizes Crime Boss El Marro, Under Pressure to Cut Violence,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/02/world/americas/mexico-el-marro-capture.html>.

⁷¹ Kate Linticum and Cecilia Sanchez, “Eight killed in Mexico as cartel gunmen force authorities to release El Chapo’s son,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-10-17/chaos-in-mexico-as-el-chapos-son-a-leader-of-the-sinaloa-cartel-is-reportedly-captured>.

⁷² Redacción AN / GH, “¿Quién liberó a Ovidio Guzmán López? Esto respondió AMLO,” *Aristegui Noticias*, October 18, 2019, <https://aristeguinoticias.com/1810/mexico/quien-libero-a-ovidio-guzman-lopez-esto-respondio-amlo/>.

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