

# Violent Crime and Public Security in Tijuana

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## Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze the problem of violent crime in Tijuana, the largest and most dynamic of Mexico's border cities, with an emphasis on evolving trends over last two decades. The first section describes the historical and political context surrounding the involvement of organized crime in increasing violence, with an emphasis on the role of increasing fractionalization and balkanization as a key driver of the city's elevated levels of criminal violence. Then, the authors review the statistical indicators of crime trends based on official data and provide a description of the public security policies employed over time by the main political parties that have governed in the city: PAN, PRI, and Morena. Finally, the articles offer a series of general policy recommendations aimed at strengthening citizen security from a more effective approach to the city's crime problems.

**Keywords:** Tijuana, Baja California, Organized Crime, Homicides, Violent Crime, Security Policy

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## **Violent Crime and Public Security in Tijuana**

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### INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to analyze the problem of violent crime in Tijuana, the largest and most dynamic of Mexico's border cities. Despite its modern importance as a manufacturing hub and commercial center, Tijuana has long suffered a reputation as a city of vice, dating back to the Prohibition-era of the 1920s. Moreover, in recent decades, Tijuana has grown increasingly violent, serving as a battleground between powerful organized crime groups vying for control over drug trafficking routes and illegal activities throughout the border metropolis. Amid these conflicts, Tijuana has also experienced elevated levels of violent crime, thanks in part to predatory rent-seeking crimes such as extortion, kidnapping, and robbery.

To shed light on the problem of violent crime in Tijuana, this paper provides a comprehensive examination of recent local crime statistics and related security trends in Tijuana. The authors begin with a general background organized crime in Tijuana, with consideration of the role that the fractionalization or "balkanization" of organized crime networks has played in recent surges in violence. Next, the authors make an original contribution by compiling and analyzing the available data from official government sources, and examining the varied trends in the major categories of violent crimes in Tijuana: homicide, assault, robbery, extortion, kidnapping, and sex crimes. Finally, the authors provide an analysis of the public security responses and policy options available to address Tijuana's current security crisis. The authors conclude with some general policy recommendations for addressing the city's challenges with criminal violence.

### BACKGROUND: ORGANIZED CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN TIJUANA

With an estimated 1.9 million inhabitants in 2020, Tijuana is home to more than half of Baja California's population, thanks to a growing population of national and international immigrants drawn to the city's vigorous industrial labor market. One of Mexico's fastest growing cities, Tijuana reportedly has typically grown at an annual rate of 35,000 people per year, or nearly 96 new inhabitants per day, drawing large numbers of immigrants from elsewhere in Mexico to join the city's robust economy.<sup>1</sup> A longtime destination for cross-border tourism, Tijuana prides itself on being the "world's most visited city." Nearly 190,000 people cross the border between Tijuana and neighboring San Diego on a daily basis for work, commerce, schooling, fine dining, family gatherings, and other recreational pursuits. Moreover, an estimated 200,000 U.S. citizens reside in the state of Baja California (roughly

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Dibble, "What drives Tijuana's next mayor?," San Diego Union Tribune, July 14, 2013, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sdut-what-drives-tijuanas-next-mayor-2013jul14-story.html>

one in five of all U.S. citizens estimated to reside in Mexico), with many of them living in Tijuana. Moreover, Tijuana lies at the heart of the dynamic and intertwined region known as *Calibaja*, a cultural, social, industrial and economic corridor comprising San Diego County, Imperial County, and the state of Baja California.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, since the Prohibition era (1920 - 1933), Tijuana has also suffered a reputation as “Satan’s playground” in the words of historian Paul Vanderwood.<sup>3</sup> This is in part because its geographical location has made Tijuana a historically important destination for U.S. pleasure-seekers and a vital transit point for illicit smuggling and transnational organized crime. What began as a black market for opium and alcohol in Baja California during the Prohibition era—followed by heroin and marijuana in the 1930s—paved the way for the development of Tijuana’s contemporary intercontinental and cross-border organized crime networks.<sup>4</sup>

Tijuana's relative importance as a drug-trafficking hub grew significantly in the 1970s, during the era of noted traffickers like Cuban-national Alberto Sicilia Falcón and Rogelio Buelna Reyes, a Mexican national. By the 1980s, these organizations were displaced by the Guadalajara cartel, a powerful organized crime group originating from Sinaloa. In addition to dramatically expanding the illicit marijuana trade, the Guadalajara cartel also worked with Colombian organized crime groups—notably, Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, leader of the Medellín Cartel—to pioneer the wholesale smuggling of Andean cocaine into the United States.

When the operations of the Guadalajara cartel were disrupted by a series of arrests in the late 1980s, some of its affiliates from the Arellano-Felix family went on to form the so-called “Tijuana Cartel.” The AFO cultivated ties to law enforcement and government officials—allegedly doling out \$1 million a week in bribes—as well as to the young scions, or “Juniors,” of wealthy and powerful families in Tijuana.<sup>5</sup> However, encroachment from rival criminal organizations led to violent clashes over the course of the 1990s, most notably with the “Sinaloa Cartel” headed by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada.

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<sup>2</sup> On weekends and holidays, the binational corridor can expand from Los Angeles (United States) to Valle de Guadalupe (Baja California). The region is also home to a vibrant manufacturing sector, especially in electronics and medical devices. The region accounts for 40% of all audio-visual manufacturing in North America. Alejandro Bruges, Michael Combs, Marney Cox, Alejandro Díaz Bautista, Daniel Flyte, Noe Aron Fuentes, Christina Luhn, Cheryl Mason, David A. Shirk, and Tim Wright, *Jobs Without Borders: Employment, Industry Concentrations, and Comparative Advantage in the Calibaja Region*, (La Jolla and Tijuana: Calibaja Mega-Region Initiative; Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UC San Diego; Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Vanderwood, *Satan’s Playground: Mobsters and Movie Stars at America’s Greatest Gaming Resort*, Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, historical records register opium in Baja California since the 19th century (Astorga, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Miró, Ramón, *Organized Crime and Terrorist Activity in Mexico, 1999-2002*, ed. Glenn E. Curtis (Report Prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress.; Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2003).

Amid its conflict with the Sinaloa Cartel, the AFO was also publicly blamed for the 1993 assassination of Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo in Guadalajara.<sup>6</sup>

Still, despite a rash of murders in the late 1990s—including the massacre of 19 men, women, and children in 1998—absolute levels of homicide in Tijuana were largely stable for most of the early 2000s, averaging around 250 murders per year until 2008 (INEGI, 2017). That year brought an abrupt increase in the number of homicides in Tijuana and other parts of the country, as the Sinaloa Cartel embarked on a violent campaign targeting both its long-standing rivals and former allies in key drug trafficking areas.

In 2008, a key lieutenant of the AFO, Teodoro "El Teo" García Simental split from that organization with the alleged support of the Sinaloa Cartel. That year, the number of homicides in Tijuana increased almost 300%, and elevated levels of violence continued until 2010, reaching a new record of 1,250 homicides that year. As a result, between 2008 and 2010, the annual homicide rate in Tijuana rose from 49 to 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. In early 2010, el "Teo" and his most important lieutenants were captured in the state of Baja California Sur, found in the company of high-ranking Tijuana police officials.<sup>7</sup> García Simental's arrest and the subsequent dismantling of his criminal organization through continued law enforcement efforts caused a brief increase of violence in the following months, but homicides rates began to decline significantly briefly thereafter.

As conditions improved, many heralded Tijuana as a model for improving Mexico's security situation. Some explanations for the city's turnaround cited more effective policing, better military-law enforcement collaboration, and greater civic engagement. Others suggested that the reduction in violence was due to the Sinaloa cartel's emergence as the dominant drug trafficking organization in Baja California and a negotiated "pax mafiosa" pact between Sinaloa and the AFO.<sup>8</sup> The arrangement in Tijuana bore similarities to the "pax Sinaloa" that some observers described in Ciudad Juárez around 2011.<sup>9</sup> The pact ensured peace among

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<sup>6</sup> Official accounts suggested that AFO gunmen seeking to assassinate Guzmán confused the Cardinal's limousine for that of the drug kingpin. There were also allegations that Posadas Ocampo was in fact the actual target of the assassination, which raises controversial questions about possible links between the Church and traffickers.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Corcoran, "Mexico's Shifting Criminal Landscape: Changes in Gang operation and structure during the past century," *Trends in Organized Crime*, September 2013, 16 (3); González, María de la Luz. 2010. *Cae 'El Teo', sin un solo disparo*. [El Teo' falls, without a single shot] El Universal, <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/174731.html>

<sup>8</sup> InSight Crime, *Tijuana Cartel*. InSight Crime, 2014. <http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-mexico/mexican-tijuana-cartel>

<sup>9</sup> The earliest reference to the term "Pax Sinaloa" can be found in O'Rourke and Byrd's 2011 book, which speculates about the relationship of Sinaloa's growing dominance of the Mexican drug trade to trends in violence in Ciudad Juárez. O'Rourke and Byrd cite an Associated Press report on April 9, 2010 that intelligence from confidential informants had "led U.S. authorities to believe that the Sinaloa cartel has edged out the rival Juarez gang for control over trafficking routes through Ciudad Juarez, ground zero in the drug war." See: Beto O'Rourke and Susie Byrd, *Dealing Death With Drugs: The Big Business of Dope in the U.S. and Mexico*, El Paso, Texas: Cinco Puntos Press, 2011, p. 27.

significant drug trafficking organizations, with most violence resulting from minor skirmishes between small-scale drug traders.

Under this arrangement, other criminal organizations—such as the La Familia Michoacán (LFM) and the Knights Templar Organization (KTO)—appeared to operate in the state of Baja California, possibly paying tribute to the Sinaloa Cartel in order to move drugs into the United States.<sup>10</sup> The pact ensured a period of peace among major drug trafficking organizations, with most violence resulting from small skirmishes between small scale drug traders, or “narcomenudistas.” However, this arrangement appears to have broken down sometime in 2014. After a series of arrests targeting the AFO, including the arrest of its alleged leader Fernando “El Ingeniero” Sánchez Arellano in June 2014, there was a clash among organized crime groups that resulted in growing levels of violence in Tijuana.

In the months that followed, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán was recaptured by Mexican authorities, and inter-cartel violence began to intensify throughout the country in the lead up to and after Guzmán’s extradition to the United States in January 2017 and later life sentence in July 2019.<sup>11</sup> Once Joaquin Guzman Loera was sentenced to a US maximum-security prison in 2019, his sons—Ivan Archivaldo, Alfredo, and Ovidio Guzman, who are known as “Los Chapitos”—took over his operations and had a falling out with Ismael Zambada and his sons. The Zambada family appears to have attempted to marginalize the Guzman brothers from Sinaloa operations and has long been rumored to have betrayed Guzman himself.<sup>12</sup> Other Sinaloa operatives, such as “Los Dámasos” also appeared to openly challenge the Guzman brothers.

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<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to determine the extent to which groups like LFM and KTO utilized Baja California as a trafficking route. Still, a review of news articles during the period from 2009-2012 appears to indicate to some level of activity due to the arrest of purported operatives of these organizations in Tijuana. “Detienen en Tijuana a ‘El Rigo’, operador de ‘La Familia’,” *Ultranoticias*, January 13, 2011, <http://www.ultra.com.mx/noticias/distrito-federal/Nacional/3796-detienen-en-tijuana-a--quot-el-rigo-quot--operador-de--quot-la-familia-quot-.html>; “Detienen a célula de ‘La Familia’ en Tijuana,” *El Informador*, February 12, 2011, <https://www.informador.mx/Mexico/Detienen-a-celula-de-La-Familia-en-Tijuana-20110212-0033.html>; “Golpe a ‘familia michoacana’,” *El Vigía*, November 24, 2012, <https://www.elvigia.net/911/2012/11/24/golpe-afamilia-michoacana-100154.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico. Data and Analysis through 2016*. University of San Diego, Justice in Mexico Project. San Diego: Justice in Mexico, March 2017. [https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017\\_DrugViolenceinMexico.pdf](https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2017_DrugViolenceinMexico.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Marguerite Cawley, “Was Mexico’s ‘El Chapo’ Betrayed by His Sinaloa Cartel Partner?,” *Insight Crime*, March 10, 2014, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/was-mexicos-el-chapo-betrayed-by-his-sinaloa-cartel-partner/>; Alan Feuer, “At El Chapo’s Trial, a Son Betrays His Father, and the Cartel,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/nyregion/el-chapo-trial.html>; Ed Vulliamy, “A tale of blood, betrayal and family bonds. How El Chapo came to trial,” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/03/el-chapo-trial-betrayal-sinaloa-cartel>; Don Winslow, “The Dirty Secret of El Chapo’s Downfall,” *Vanity Fair*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/02/the-dirty-secret-of-el-chapo-downfall>

In Tijuana, the internecine conflicts of the Sinaloa Cartel and its ongoing conflicts with rival cartels played out in the form of clashes among local cartel cells and affiliates, with violence reaching unprecedented levels starting in 2017. In part, the greater levels of violence seen during this period were attributable to the arrival of a new organized crime group in Tijuana: the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, CJNG).<sup>13</sup> The CJNG entered the picture due to the vacuum created after 2014 by the significantly weakened AFO operation and the disruption of Sinaloa Cartel leadership in 2015-17. According to the Tijuana weekly newspaper *Zeta*, some CJNG cells later allied with elements of the AFO to force out the Sinaloans (*Zeta*, 2017a; *Debate*; 2017).

Meanwhile, affiliates of the Sinaloa cartel—notably the Arzate Garcia brothers (better known as "Aguiles" and the "Frog") and members of the "Uriarte" criminal cell—fought back against CJNG expansion in Eastern Tijuana. This contributed to a surge in violence in some regions of the city: La Presa, Zona Norte, Los Pinos, and especially Sánchez Taboada, the alleged headquarters of the CJNG in Tijuana (*Zeta*; 2017a). Other Sinaloa operatives in Baja California, such as "Los Dámasos" appeared to split from the Sinaloa Cartel after an unsuccessful effort to challenge the sons of "Chapo" Guzman for control of the organization.

In recent years, Tijuana has become balkanized, with control of organized criminal activities divided among a few groups, including the AFO, CJNG, the Chapitos, and the Zambada faction of the Sinaloa Cartel. These higher-level criminal organizations each have local, territorially based cells operating 17 different sections of the city, according to the weekly *Zeta*.<sup>14</sup> These local cells appear to frequently develop alliances with one another, including groups working for rival criminal organizations. For example, in addition to working with remnants of the AFO, some CJNG cells appear to be allied with local cells of the Sinaloa Cartel, specifically Ismael Zambada Garcia's division.

Meanwhile, according to local authorities, David Lopez Jimenez, a local criminal leader in the Sanchez Taboada district, works in parallel with the AFO and the Chapitos and has influence throughout Tijuana, Ensenada, and Tecate. Some groups even draw on independent operatives that also work for opposing gangs, as well as members of criminal organizations from other parts of the country and even from the United States and Central America. These networks of local affiliations and alliances appear to break from the more centralized and hierarchically structured organized crime operations found in Tijuana in the past, or perhaps simply reveal that the city's criminal networks were always more decentralized and amorphous than previously believed.

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Woody, "2 of Mexico's most powerful cartels are clashing just across the US border," *Business Insider*, February 28, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/cjng-and-sinaloa-cartel-violence-in-tijuana-2016-2>; Sandra Dibble, "," *San Diego Union Tribune*, February 13, 2016. <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sdut-nueva-generacion-cartel-moves-tijuana-2016feb13-story.html>

<sup>14</sup> CITE



This scenario presents a challenge for public authorities, who have typically tended to try to reduce violence by targeting the leadership structures of Mexican criminal organizations, a strategy often referred to as the “kingpin strategy.” Many scholars have pointed out that this has not been an effective strategy for reducing violence, and has even perpetuated violence. Tijuana’s situation points to at least part of the reason why this is the case. As human rights activist and security expert Victor Clark Alfaro has noted, “It’s not the ones at the top that are killing each other... What’s happening is that the one at the top cannot control the ones at the bottom.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, higher level organized crime groups appear to lack the capacity or inclination to control the criminal activities of neighborhood level gangs or cells involved in street-level drug dealing, or “*narcomenudeo*.”<sup>16</sup> To better understand the implications of the Tijuana’s balkanized criminal landscape, below we examine official data on criminal violence in the city, which illustrates the important shifts and changes underlying this trend.

## VIOLENT CRIME STATISTICS IN TIJUANA

In this section, the authors examine the effects of the balkanization of Tijuana’s organized crime networks, drawing on official crime statistics from 2006 through mid-2022. Specifically, this discussion focuses on four official categories of violent crime that include homicides, armed robberies, extortion and kidnapping cases, and rape and sex crimes. Along with the growing competition among organized crime groups described above, the data presented show a clear increase in homicides during the period from 2015 through 2018, with a slight, gradual decline thereafter. The data presented in this section also illustrate the trends for other categories of violent crime, which had more mixed trajectories.

### Homicides

Municipal level data on law enforcement investigations in homicide cases are available from the Baja California State Secretary of Public Security after 2006, and data on individual victims in those cases is available since 2015. According to these data, the first major surge in homicidal violence in Tijuana came in 2008 and 2009, when there were over 1,000 murders in the city each year (See Figure 1). However, as noted above, Tijuana experienced an even more substantial increase in the number of homicides beginning in 2015, which peaked at unprecedented levels in 2018 and partially receded thereafter.

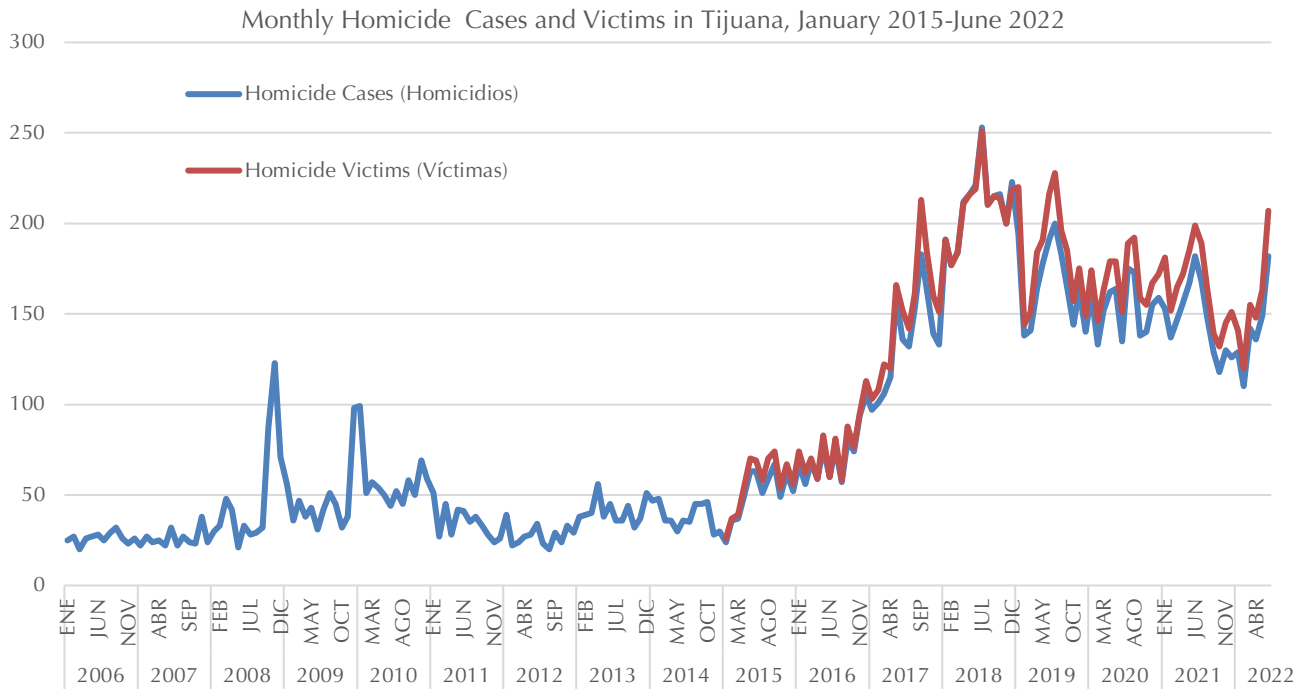
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<sup>15</sup> Sandra Dibble, John Gibbins, and Alejandro Tamayo, “The Deadliest Year,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 17, 2017. <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sd-me-tijuana-killings-20170809-htmlstory.html>

<sup>16</sup> This was the view of Daniel de la Rosa in assessing the situation in 2016: ““As far as a visible head of Grupo Jalisco Nueva Generación, we don’t have one... You don’t see the presence of their operators, their hit men, criminal logistics. The only thing that we’ve detected is smuggling, and the protection of their loads heading to the United States, and the importing of cash and weapons from the United States.” Sandra Dibble, “New group fuels Tijuana's Increased Drug Violence,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, February 13, 2016. <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sdut-nueva-generacion-cartel-moves-tijuana-2016feb13-story.html>



**Figure 1: Intentional Homicides (*Homicidios Dolosos*) and Homicide Victims in Tijuana, by Month, 2006-2022**



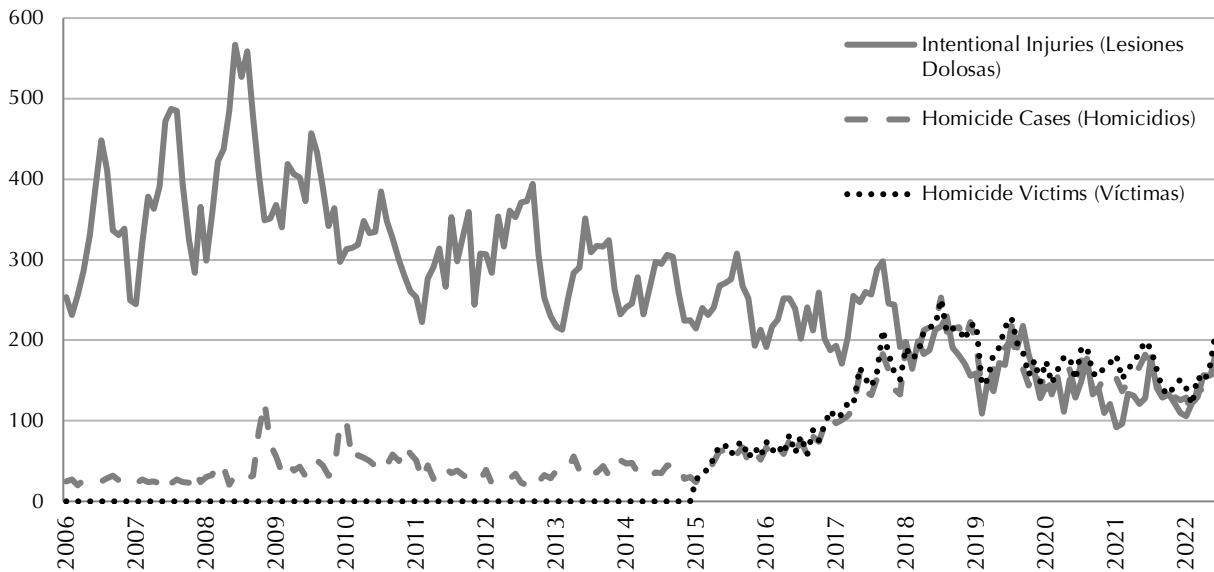
SOURCE: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California.

Specifically, there 612 murder cases with 674 victims in 2015, 872 cases with 919 victims in 2016, 1,618 cases with 1,780 victims in 2017, and 2,242 cases with 2,507 victims in 2018. Subsequent years saw a slight reduction, given 2,001 cases with 2,196 victims in 2019, 1,847 cases with 2,026 victims in 2020, and 1,974 cases with 2,026 victims in 2021. Despite the modest decreases after 2018, Tijuana continued to rank among the municipalities with the highest number of homicides nationally, and accounted for more than 1 in 20 (6%) of all homicides in Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the vast majority of these murders went unsolved, according to Baja California attorney general Perla del Socorro Ibarra Leyva, since the proportion of murder cases in which a suspect was identified and brought to justice in Tijuana was around 10%.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Dibble, “Control for street drug trade pushes Tijuana to grisly new record: 1,744 homicides,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, January 14, 2018, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sd-me-homicides-tijuana-20180102-story.html>

<sup>18</sup> These numbers of impunity are higher than the national average, where 78.6% of homicides don’t get solved (Zepeda Lecuona, 2016). “Convocan a reunión de seguimiento a la Cruzada por la Seguridad,” *Uniradio Informa*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.uniradioinforma.com/noticias/tijuana/490521/convocan-a-reunion-de-seguimiento-a-la-cruzada-por-la-seguridad.html>; Guillermo Zepeda and Jimenez Paola. *Impunidad Frente Al Homicidio Doloso En México*, 2016.

**Figure 2: Comparing Monthly Reported Intentional Homicide and Intentional Injury Crimes in Tijuana, January 2006-June 2022**



SOURCE: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California.

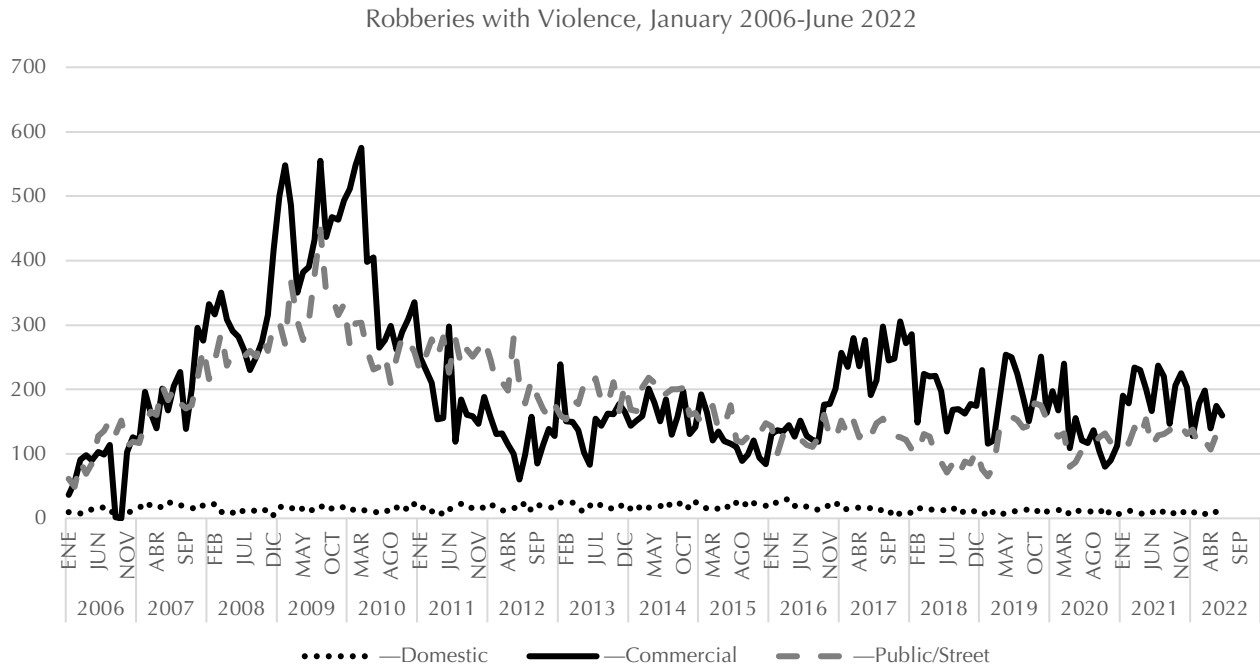
Finally, as illustrated in , a notable crime trend concerning Tijuana's rising number of homicides is the relative decrease in the number of cases of intentional injuries (*lesiones dolosas*) reported after the peak of such crimes in 2008. Reports of intentional injuries were relatively high even before the period of intense violence between 2008 and 2010 but gradually subsided in the ensuing years. Yet, even as the number of homicides increased in early 2015, the number of intentional injuries has remained well below 2008-2010. Unfortunately, the increasing number of murders relative to assaults may reflect the increased lethality of violent confrontations in Tijuana, owing partly to the widespread availability of powerful unlawful firearms. It is also worth noting that there appear to be seasonal patterns, with sizeable mid-year peaks in the number of intentional injuries and generally fewer reported cases from October through December. Further research on this trend is needed, as it may reflect the effects of higher levels of activity and aggression during hot summer months, more effective youth supervision during the school year, or possibly even a greater willingness to report such crimes during the longer daylight hours of summer months.

### Robberies

Of the different categories of violent robbery reported by Baja California authorities, domestic armed robberies, commercial armed robberies, and armed robberies in public places (“street robberies”) are the most prevalent. Since 2006, the trends in these three categories of crime were mixed. Commercial and street armed robberies surged during the 2008-09 wave of violence in Tijuana, reaching an average of more than 300 reported incidents per month, but subsequently diminished quite substantially thereafter and remained relatively low—an average of around 100 incidents per month—during the post-2015 surge. Domestic armed

robberies steadily increased from an average of 12 per month in 2006 to 144 in 2016, but gradually declined to around 12 per month each year from 2019 to 2021. Of the three categories, only commercial robberies appeared to decline substantially during the first several months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as lockdowns restricted commercial activities.

**Figure 3: Reported Armed Robberies in Households, Commercial Establishments, and in Public in Tijuana, January 2006-June 2022**



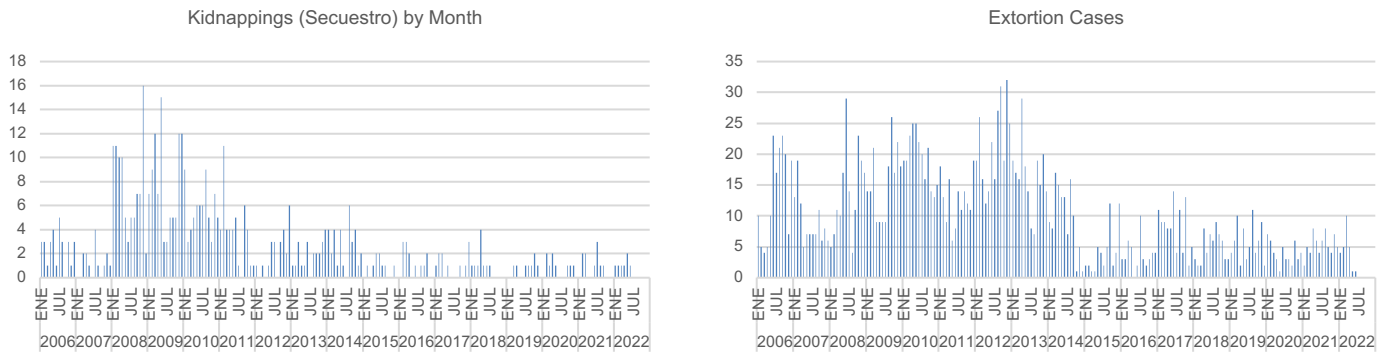
SOURCE: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California.

### Extortion and Kidnapping

Data on extortion and kidnapping are problematic because rates of reporting for these crimes tend to be lower than for some other violent crimes, like homicide. Still, official data provide some insights into trends. Protection rackets constitute one of the primary methods of extortion in Tijuana, consisting of shakedowns for the payment of "dues" (*derecho de piso*) to organized crime groups. In 2017, the local party chairman of the PRI asserted that all businesses were essentially required to pay protection "dues" in Eastern Tijuana, especially along the Casa Blanca and Cucapah boulevards.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Sonia de Anda, "PRI pide medidas de seguridad urgentes; sigue cobro de piso, denuncia," *Uniradio*, August 29, 2017. <http://www.uniradioinforma.com/noticias/tijuana/492136/pri-pide-medidas-de-seguridad-urgentes-sigue-cobro-de-piso-denuncia.html>

**Figure 4: Reported Kidnappings and Extortion Cases, January 2006-June 2022**



SOURCE: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California.

According to local sources, many extortion rackets are conducted by telephone from locations far away from Tijuana, with authorities tracing calls to the states of Chihuahua, Jalisco, Mexico City, and Nuevo León. According to Tijuana's Public Security Secretary, out of 4,600 reported extortion calls, the threatened parties made a payment (\$1,000-2,000) in about 4% of cases.<sup>20</sup> In addition, numerous criminal organizations employ "virtual abductions" (*secuestros virtuales*) in which victims receive fraudulent phone calls indicating that someone they know has been abducted. In recent years, such "virtual abductions" constituted the primary form of kidnapping reported to Tijuana's 089 emergency line.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding kidnapping, there was a general decline and subsequent stability in the number of reported cases after the surge of violence in 2008-10. As with other sensitive crimes, lower reporting rates may reflect a decline in the incidence of a crime, the degree to which victims feel comfortable reporting crimes or both. Many recent kidnappings in Tijuana can be characterized as "express abductions," in which the kidnappers demand small amounts of money—\$300-1,000 USD—that can be obtained relatively quickly, possibly from one or more withdrawals from the victim's ATM card.

### Violent Sex Crimes

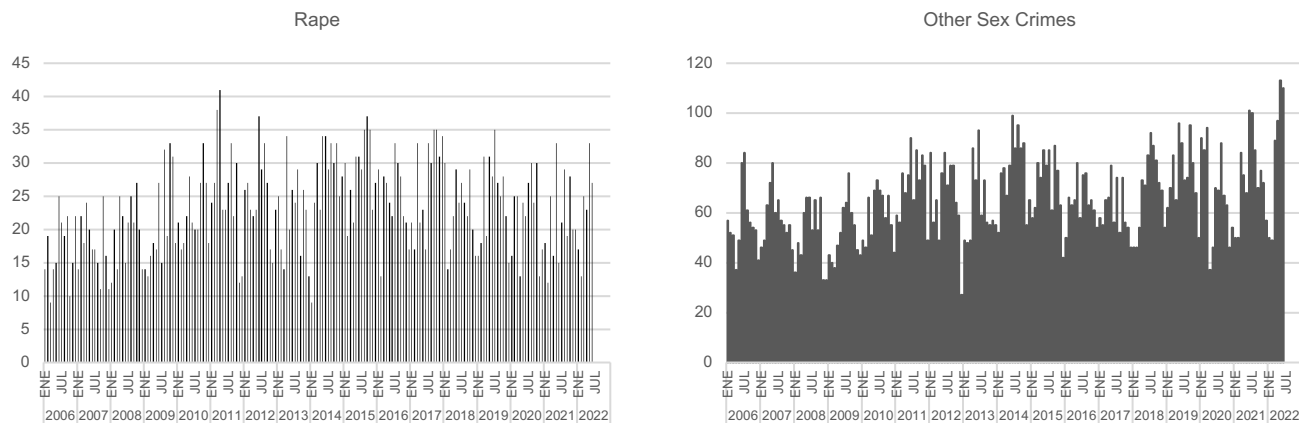
None of the above crime trends in Tijuana appear to be related to reported rates of rape and other forms of sexual violence, which have remained fairly consistent over the last decade when compared to other crimes (See **Error! Reference source not found.**). Reporting of rape and other sex crimes is highly sensitive and such crimes tend to be greatly underreported, but there do appear to be seasonal surges, with the reporting of these crimes appearing to rise mid-year and fall in winter. This suggests that, during the winter months, there is either a

<sup>20</sup> Andrade Luis Gerardo, "Extorsionadores aprovechan clima de inseguridad," *Frontera*, July 15, 2017, <https://frontera.info/Movil/EdicionEnLinea/Noticias/Notas/1236311.html>

<sup>21</sup> "Secuestro virtual, modalidad de engaño telefónico más denunciada al 089," *Frontera*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.frontera.info/EdicionEnLinea/Notas/Policiaca/09052016/1079260-Secuestro-virtual-modalidad-de-engaño-telefonico-mas-denunciada-al-089.html>

decline in sexually motivated criminal activity or a decreased willingness to report such crimes, or both.

**Figure 5: Rape and Other Sex Crimes, January 2006-June 2022**



SOURCE: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California.

Also, it is noticeable that there is an unusual spike in the reporting of rape and other sex crimes in the first six months of 2022, which coincides with the start of Tijuana’s first directly elected female mayor, Monserrat Caballero. The increase in reported cases for both categories may reflect a greater emphasis on targeting gender crimes in the Caballero administration.

All the above figures refer to preliminary official data on known crimes and are frequently called into question as authorities document previously undiscovered evidence (e.g., clandestine graves). Also, while the available data clearly show overall crime trends to date, up to 85% of all crimes do not get reported in the State of Baja California.<sup>22</sup> Still, the available data clearly show current overall crime trends. Still, what is quite noteworthy about Tijuana's recent crime trends is the significant increase in the number of homicides between 2015 and 2020 and the consistency of the high number of homicides reported monthly. Meanwhile, increases in other forms of violence have been relatively less severe, particularly compared to the previous surge of violent crime occurring from 2008-2010.

As discussed above, the number of reported assaults, armed robberies, kidnappings, and extortion cases in 2015-2021 remained significantly lower than that reported in 2008-2010. Arguably, the relatively lower incidence of such crimes reflects a certain degree of law enforcement success in Tijuana. Even as poor street kids kill each other in Tijuana's outlying neighborhoods, law enforcement authorities have managed to maintain lower levels of violent crimes—such as extortion, kidnapping, and armed robbery—targeting wealthy individuals and commercial establishments. This suggests a need not only to increase Tijuana's public security capacity but for more significant efforts to address the needs of its

<sup>22</sup> INEGI. *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE) 2021*.

most marginalized communities. Meanwhile, although there has been no significant increase in rape and other sex crimes reported in recent years, this is probably reflective of the lower reporting rates for such crimes, particularly in the winter.

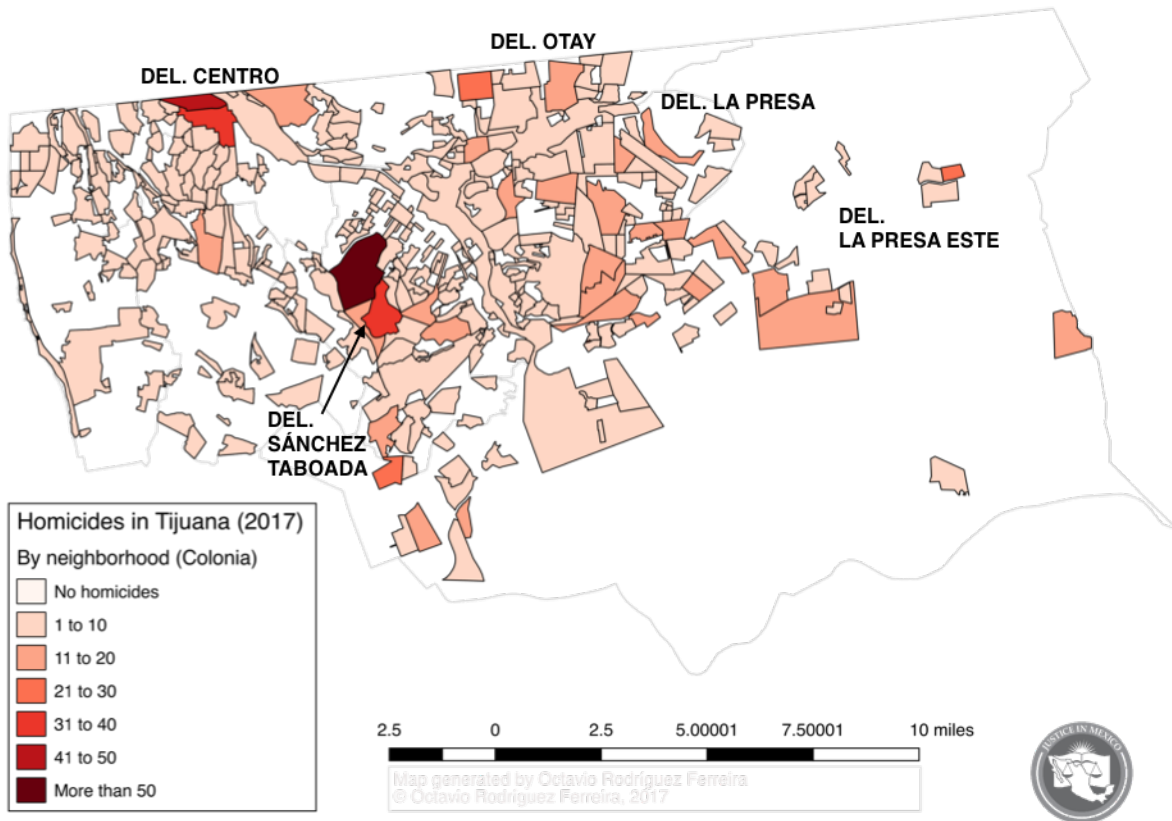
## NEIGHBORHOOD-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The municipality of Tijuana is divided into nine administrative units, called delegations (*delegaciones*), and hundreds of neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> Given the surge in homicides in Tijuana, a deeper exploration at this level is merited to understand the citywide patterns underlying this trend. Using map files provided by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and data released by the Baja California State Secretary of Public Security on crimes occurring at the neighborhood level (*colonias*), the authors also conducted a geospatial mapping of homicide cases using the latest available data and maps (2017). Examining homicide data using the neighborhood as units of analysis, the authors identified three clusters of violence that correspond to specific zones within the city: Eastern Tijuana (comprising the delegations of La Presa, La Presa Este, and Otay), the Sanchez Taboada delegation, and the Centro delegation.

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<sup>23</sup> The Tijuana police department divides the city into 11 policing districts, that roughly coincide with the city's delegations. Available street officers are roughly equally divided among these sections, with typical work shifts of eight hours per day. To avoid corruption and collusion, officers are regularly rotated to different geographical areas. Police commanders identify areas of high crime prevalence using local COMPSTAT information and work to develop special programs to reduce high-impact crimes.

**Figure 6: Homicides in Tijuana by Delegation and Neighborhood in 2017**



SOURCE: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California. Colonia-level shape files provided by SANDAG.

Analyzing the geospatial distribution of violence in Tijuana, there is a high concentration of homicides in a relatively small number of neighborhoods. Indeed, 20% of all homicides in the time period analyzed (2017) were concentrated in only 10 of the roughly 850 neighborhoods in Tijuana. Of those, the three most violent neighborhoods accounted for 10% of all homicides in the municipality: Camino Verde (75), Zona Norte (49), and Zona Centro (32). The most violent neighborhood, Camino Verde, accounted for one out of twenty homicides in this period.



**Table 1: Number of Homicides by Delegation and in the Top 10 Most Violent Neighborhoods (*Colonias*) in Tijuana in 2017**

DELEGATION	HOMICIDES REGISTERED	% OF ALL HOMICIDES	TOP 10 COLONIAS	HOMICIDES REGISTERED	% OF ALL HOMICIDES
La Presa Este	328	21.4%	Camino Verde	75	5%
Sanchez Taboada	262	17.1%	Zona Norte	49	3%
La Presa	206	13.4%	Zona Centro	32	2%
Mesa de Otay Centenario	146	9.5%	Sanchez Taboada (PRODUTSA)	31	2%
San Antonio de los Buenos	140	9.1%	Urbivilla Del Prado	29	2%
Centro	134	8.7%	Villa del Campo	26	2%
La Mesa	121	7.9%	Nueva Tijuana	24	1%
Playas de Tijuana	102	6.7%	Fideicomiso El Florido	21	1%
Cerro Colorado	93	6.1%	Altiplano	20	1%
			Terrazas del Valle	18	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1532</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>20%</b>

Source: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública de Baja California. Note: Data at the delegation and neighborhood level do not add to the total number of homicides reported for the year.

Most of the high violence neighborhoods noted above are in delegations of the city where there are clusters of homicides within the same area. The most significant number of homicides can be found in Eastern Tijuana, including neighborhoods in the La Presa, La Presa Este, and Otay delegations. Eastern Tijuana includes industrial parks, newly developed residential areas, and shanty areas where poor and newly arrived families from other parts of Mexico set up makeshift homes. These areas suffer from various factors—from problems with social integration to severe economic marginalization—that weaken the societal fabric and contribute to moderately high levels of violence. Bordering the municipality of Tecate, La Presa Este accounts for the most significant number of homicides (328) out of all delegations in Tijuana.

In 2017, the highest rates of homicides in a neighborhood could be found in the delegation of Sánchez Taboada, a middle- and low-income area located in the city's center. This delegation is surrounded by ravines and close to one of the leading manufacturing zones in Tijuana (Parque Industrial Pacífico). The neighborhoods located just north of this area are also some

of the most exclusive of the city (i.e. Colinas de Agua Caliente), only divided by one of the main highways in the city (libramiento Sur). The Sánchez Taboada delegation has been identified as a hot spot for homicides in previous years and is believed to be the central base of operations of the CJNG criminal organization in Tijuana.<sup>24</sup> Camino Verde, the most violent neighborhood in the city, forms part of the delegation, along with other neighboring *colonias* that experienced relatively high numbers of homicides in 2017: Sánchez Taboada-PRODUTSA (31), Reforma (17), Tres de Octubre (13), and Sánchez Taboada Anexa (12). The nearby neighborhood of Urbivilla Del Prado had 29 homicides and ranked among the top ten most violent neighborhoods in 2017.

The third cluster of homicides in 2017 could be found in the Centro delegation, in the northwest area of the city, immediately adjacent to the U.S.-Mexico border. In the northern portion of this delegation, the Tijuana River canal (known as "El Bordo") divides both countries and is a common place for open-air drug markets. In 2014, it was calculated that almost 1,000 people lived in this area, primarily deportees from the United States.<sup>25</sup> This part of the city has experienced frequent police raids to clean the public space.<sup>26</sup>

Within the Centro delegation, the neighborhood of Zona Norte, next to the border wall, had the highest number of homicides, with 49, the second highest of all neighborhoods in Tijuana. The Zona Norte neighborhood also has a prominent sex industry, including brothels, street prostitutes, and nude dancing establishments. The adjacent neighborhood of Zona Centro had 32 homicides in 2017, with many bars and commercial establishments, including the tourist zone of Revolution Avenue. There are also several drug-dealing sites (*narcotiendas*) in this zone, and previous crime level analyses have shown a consistent pattern of hot spots with other crimes such as drug possession arrests.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Tijuanaapress.com, resiliencia en la delegación más peligrosa. June 4<sup>th</sup> 2015.

<https://tijuanaapress.com/2015/06/04/resiliencia-en-la-delegacion-mas-peligrosa-de-tijuana/>; Zetatijuana.com. Las zonas del crimen en BC. February 6, 2017. <http://zetatijuana.com/2017/02/las-zonas-del-crimen-en-bc/>

<sup>25</sup> Velasco, L., Albicker S.L. Estimacion y caracterizacion de la poblacion residente en el Bordo del canal del rio Tijuana. COLEF. 2013. <http://www.colef.mx/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Reporte-ejecutivo-El-Bordo-FINAL.pdf> Accessed: June 2014

<sup>26</sup> Frontera.info. Buscan desalojar a 150 indigentes de canalización. August 13, 2017. <http://www.frontera.info/EdicionEnLinea/Notas/Noticias/13082017/1245621-Buscan-desalojar-a-150-indigentes-de-canalizacion.html>

<sup>27</sup> "Five Dead in Tijuana's Zona Norte Linked to Drug Trade," *San Diego Union Tribune*, March 12, 2017.

<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sd-me-tijuana-dead-20170312-story.html>; Gaines TL, Werb D, Arredondo J, Alaniz VM, Vilalta C, Beletsky L. "The spatial-temporal pattern of policing following a drug policy reform: triangulating self-reported arrests with official crime statistics," *Substance Use & Misuse*. January 28, 2017; 52(2):214-22.

## PUBLIC SECURITY CONCERNS, POLICY RESPONSES, AND CHALLENGES

Tijuana's security crisis has caused considerable consternation among residents. A June 2022 survey found that 83 percent of city residents felt that the city was unsafe.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, much of local residents' concern stems from a sense that authorities are not in control, or may themselves be involved in criminal activities. According another survey from 2017, roughly 70% of *tijuanenses* feel distrust towards the Municipal Police, 68% towards the State Police, 53% towards the Federal Police, and 41% towards the Armed Forces.<sup>29</sup> In the same survey, roughly half of *tijuanenses* (48%) did not feel safe walking alone at night, and 80% felt it unsafe to use automatic teller machines (ATMs). There is also enormous lack of social trust in the city: 87% of Tijuana residents say they do not trust most other people.

These cynical assessments of the public security situation are perhaps understandable when taking into consideration the ineffective responses of public officials to the problem. In this section, we examine the efforts of the different local administrations to manage Tijuana's public security situation. Over the years, Tijuana officials have employed several different strategies and public policy measures to address public concerns and frustrations, with mixed results at best. Like other local entities in Mexico, mayors (*presidentes municipales*) Tijuana have three-year terms. Yet, the fact that no public security secretary completed a full three-year term after 2004 illustrates the administrative challenges and public pressure faced by local police commanders in Tijuana (See Table 2).

During his term, PRI Mayor Jorge Hank Rhon (2004-2007) hired hundreds of new officers to address the surge in violent crime associated with the conflict between the Sinaloa-AFO cartels. However, this action reportedly enabled many corrupt officers to join the city's roughly 2,000-member police force. The Hank administration also invested substantially in video surveillance cameras, though conflicts over the maintenance contracts led to its abandonment in the next administration.<sup>30</sup> Also, during the Hank administration, there was reportedly a lack of coordination—and several violent clashes—between municipal and state law enforcement authorities.

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<sup>28</sup> Antonio Heras, "Aumenta percepción de inseguridad en Mexicali y Tijuana: Inegi," *La Jornada*, July 19, 2022. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2022/07/19/estados/aumenta-percepcion-de-inseguridad-en-mexicali-y-tijuana-inegi/>

<sup>29</sup> In a 2017 Citizen Perception Survey, 92% of Tijuana residents indicated that they lived in an unsafe city, and overwhelming numbers of *tijuanenses* indicated that they personally witnessed various forms of crime, including vandalism (81.2%), drugs sale or consumption (77.4%), robberies or assaults (72%), and gunshots (31.4%). Hernandez, Esther, "Se siente inseguro el 92% en Tijuana," *Frontera*, December 27, 2017, <http://www.frontera.info/EdicionEnLinea/Notas/Noticias/22062017/1227869-Se-siente-inseguro-el-92-en-Tijuana.html>

<sup>30</sup> Sabet Daniel. "Police reform in Mexico: Advances and persistent obstacles," Andrew Selee, Eric Olson, and David A. Shirk, *Shared Responsibility: U.S.- Mexico Policy Options for Confronting Organized Crime*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/shared-responsibility-us-mexico-policy-options-for-confronting-organized-crime>

**Table 2: Municipal Secretaries of Public Security by Mayoral Administration, 2004-2017**

Mayor	Mayoral Term	Secretary of Public Security	Public Security Secretary Term
Jorge Hank Rhon (PRI)*	2004 - 2007	Ernesto Santillana Santillana	12/2004 – 03/2006
		Luis Javier Algorri Franco	03/2006 – 11/2007
Jorge Ramos Hernández (PAN)	2007 - 2010	Alberto Capella	12/2007 – 12/2008
		Julián Leyzaola	12/2008 – 11/2010
Carlos Bustamante Anchondo (PRI)	2010 - 2013	Gustavo Huerta Martínez	12/2010 - 10/2011
		Alberto Capella	10/2011 – 12/2013
Jorge Astiazarán Orcí (PRI)	2013 - 2016	Alejandro Lares Valladares	12/2013 – 02/2016
		José Luis López Medina	02/2016 – 11/2016
Juan Manuel Gastelum Buenrostro (PAN)	2016 - 2019	Marco Antonio Sotomayor	12/2016 – 10/2019
Luis Arturo González Cruz (Morena)	2019-2021**	Jorge Alberto Ayón Monsalve	10/2019 – 11/ 2020
		Juan Valdez Moreno	11/ 2020 – 2/ 2021
Karla Patricia Ruiz McFarlan (interim) – (Morena)	2021-2021	Pedro Cruz Camarena	2/ 2021 - 9/ 2021
Luis Arturo González Cruz (Morena)	2021-2021	Miguel Alejandro Cabrera Medina	9 / 2021 – 10/ 2021
Montserrat Caballero Ramirez (Morena)	2021-present	José Fernando Sánchez González	10/ 2021-present

\* Note: Kurt Honold Morales served as interim mayor from 2006-07.

\*\* Note: Luis Arturo González Cruz left office twice for an unsuccessful bid to run for governor, assuming his position as the city mayor three times from 2019 to 2021. During his absence, González Cruz was replaced twice by his alternate (*suplicante*) Karla Ruíz McFarlan, first from October 16 to November 5, 2020, and again from February 12 to September 28, 2021.

In July 2006, Tijuana elected PAN candidate Jorge Ramos to take office as mayor on December 1, 2007, for a three-year term (2007-2010). However, in the days before he took office, Ramos' pick as the incoming head of Public Security—the anti-crime and corruption activist Alberto Capella Ibarra—was allegedly attacked at his home by an armed commando of roughly 20 men who shot 250 rounds. Capella reportedly fended off his attackers with an R-15 automatic rifle in a gun battle around 2:30 am, just 100 meters from a local police station, with no immediate response from authorities.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Marc Lacy, "Tijuana's New Police Chief Touts an Achievement: Survival," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2008.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/23/world/americas/23capella.html?n=Top/News/World/Countries%20and%20Territories/Mexico>

As noted above, during the Ramos administration, there was a substantial decline in the number of violent crimes in the city, particularly in 2010. Many portrayed this rapid drop in violence as successful coordination among Mexican military forces and law enforcement agencies. Authorities especially cited the leadership of General Alfonso Duarte and Tijuana Police Chief Julian Leyzaola, who replaced Capella as Public Security Secretary after he was dismissed in December 2008.<sup>32</sup>

Leyzaola worked closely with General Duarte and—as a former military officer—maintained his residence on the Tijuana military base. Leyzaola is credited with lowering levels of corruption within municipal police—purging 600 departmental personnel—and dismantling the city's criminal organizations. Most notably, the feud between Teodoro "El Teo" García Simentel and the A.F.O. ended after García was arrested in early 2010.<sup>33</sup> The Ramos administration also received a block grant of more than 200 million pesos from the federal security fund (SUBSEMUN) for investments in better equipment (e.g., guns, bulletproof vests, police cars, etc.), personnel time (e.g., more police deployments more significant presence in neighborhoods), and infrastructure (e.g., new offices and police academy) for the police. However, Leyzaola was also accused of severe human rights violations, including torture and extrajudicial executions, and after his term, he departed to take command of local security operations in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>34</sup>

The incidence of violent crimes continued to decline after the election of PRI. Mayor Carlos Bustamante, who took office in December 2010. Initially, Bustamante appointed one of Leyzaola's top police captains, a former military officer and Rosarito police chief Gustavo Huerta, as Tijuana's Secretary of Public Security. However, Huerta was dismissed from the position in 2012 and later transferred to serve with Leyzaola in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>35</sup> After Huerta's

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Marosi, "General battles Tijuana drug traffickers," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 2009. Sandra Dibble, "Tijuana Violence Slows, Drops From Spotlight," *San Diego Union Tribune*, April 26, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Without firing a shot, Mexican authorities arrested "El Teo" García on January 12, 2010 in an upscale neighborhood in Baja California Sur. The fact that high ranking members of the Tijuana police department—including two top officers handpicked by Leyzaola—were found in García's company raises questions about the extent to which local authorities were actually in leagues with organized crime, and more specifically with the Sinaloa organization. It is also plausible, that a pact or agreement had been negotiated between the Tijuana and Sinaloa that enabled (or even instructed) authorities to arrest García as part of the deal. Thereafter, the Sinaloa organization is widely believed to have gained the upper hand in Tijuana and most of Baja California, and the level of violence in the state diminished dramatically. María de la Luz González. "Cae 'El Teo', sin un solo disparo." *El Universal*, January 13, 2010. <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/174731.html>

<sup>34</sup> Human rights abuses spiked dramatically in Mexico in the 2008-10 period, particularly because of the increased role played by the Mexican military and military personnel in domestic law enforcement. Catherine Daly, Kimberly Heinle, and David A. Shirk. *Armed with Impunity. Curbing Military Human Rights Abuses in Mexico*. Justice in Mexico. San Diego: University of San Diego, 2012. <https://justiceinmexico.org/armed-with-impunity-curbing-military-human-rights-abuses-in-mexico/>

<sup>35</sup> In 2013, Leyzaola and Huerta were sanctioned by the city government for alleged human rights violations when the city attorney (*síndico*) attempted to ban both from serving in municipal public office for a period of eight years, a decision that was reportedly overturned. Huerta was also later arrested and convicted in January

dismissal, Mayor Bustamante re-appointed Alberto Capella to serve as police chief for the remainder of his term through December 2012.<sup>36</sup>

During this period of reduced criminal activity, local authorities and civic leaders worked to recover from the adverse effects of previous surges of violence. To change the narrative for the city of Tijuana, authorities and civic leaders in Baja California worked to attract business and rebuild the city's reputation. Tijuana's local business community has collaborated to raise the city's profile and celebrate its achievements through an annual convention known as "Innovative Tijuana" (*Tijuana Innovadora*). In response to these promotional efforts, various international media outlets—the New York Times and the LA Times, for example—featured glowing articles about the resurgence of civic life in Tijuana.

department, who worked with the USD Justice in Mexico program to implement a major diagnostic survey of the department in 2014-15. Following on the heels of that study, Lares implemented a major effort to modernize the Tijuana police department, providing officers new uniforms, equipment, and body cameras.<sup>37</sup> The widely-hailed use of body cameras was a first in Mexico and part of an effort not only to ensure officer accountability, but also to document misconduct and attempted bribes by crime suspects.

Despite these measures and even as other forms of violent crime continued to decline, Tijuana's homicides began to rise again in 2015 and early 2016, as noted above. In response to this worrying trend, Lares' resigned from his position in February 2016, along with police chief Omar Green de la Cerda. Lares was replaced by José Luis López Medina, who had previously served as the director of the Tijuana police department's commercial division, charged with protecting local businesses. At the time that López assumed his position, the city had already experienced more than 100 homicides, a 30% increase over the first two months of the previous year.<sup>38</sup> As noted above, the situation continued to deteriorate over the remainder of López's term.

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2015 for abuse of authority in a dispute with a gas station attendant. "Inhabilitan a Leyzaola y Huerta por 8 años en BC," *Lindero Norte*, August 29, 2013. <https://linderonorte.com/tag/gustavo-huerta/>; Vicente Calderón, "Regresa El Capitán Gustavo Huerta," *Tijuanapress.com*, <https://tijuanapress.com/2015/04/14/regresa-el-capitan-gustavo-huerta/>; "Dictan sentencia contra el capitán Huerta," *Agencia Fronteriza de Noticias*, January 20, 2015. [http://www.afntijuana.info/seguridad/36301\\_dictan\\_sentencia\\_contra\\_el\\_capitan\\_huerta](http://www.afntijuana.info/seguridad/36301_dictan_sentencia_contra_el_capitan_huerta)

<sup>36</sup> Reportedly the godson of Bustamante, Capella was credited with continued decreases in crime and violence in Tijuana, and subsequently moved on to serve as head of the Morelos State Public Security Commission from January 2014 until his resignation in December 2016. Jaime Luis Brito, "Renuncia secretario de Seguridad Pública de Morelos," *Proceso*, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/466093/renuncia-secretario-seguridad-publica-morelos>

<sup>37</sup> Sandra Dibble, "Tijuana police to use body cameras," *San Diego Union Tribune*, March 1, 2015, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sdut-tijuana-police-use-body-cameras-2015mar01-story.html>

<sup>38</sup> Gabriela Martínez, "Seguridad en Tijuana, en manos de José Luis López Medina," *La Jornada de Baja California*, February 29, 2016, <http://jornadabc.mx/tijuana/29-02-2016/seguridad-en-tijuana-en-manos-de-jose-luis-lopez-medina>



Tijuana mayor Juan Manuel Gastélum Buenrostro (2016-19) was a PAN candidate elected in July 2016.<sup>39</sup> On becoming mayor in late 2016, Gastélum appointed Marco Antonio Sotomayor as the new Tijuana Secretary of Public Security. Sotomayor was a former undersecretary at the State Ministry of Public Safety in charge of the “C4” or Center for Control, Command, Communications and Computing (*Centro de Control, Comando, Comunicaciones y Cómputo*). The C4 is a command center that coordinates emergency services, video surveillance, and relies on the COMPSTAT information model developed by the New York Police Department.

Within the first year of the Gastélum administration, the deterioration of the security situation in Tijuana led the mayor to sign on to the Baja California state security strategy entitled the “Security Crusade” (*Cruzada Estatal por la Seguridad*) in collaboration with the state Public Security Citizens’ Council (*Consejo Ciudadano de Seguridad Pública de Baja California*) and the Citizen’s Public Security Observatory (*Observatorio Ciudadano de Seguridad Pública de Baja California*). The “Security Crusade” focused on security cooperation between civilian, military, and law enforcement authorities to improve responses and prosecutions for homicides, vehicular thefts, and robberies of commercial establishments.<sup>40</sup> This strategy drew on stop-and-frisk, and zero-tolerance models found elsewhere, under the controversial assumption that these measures would allow for the detection of arms and drugs and arrest potential criminals.<sup>41</sup>

In defending his department's performance, Sotomayor blamed the increase in violence on the nationwide shift to oral, adversarial trial procedures in Mexico’s criminal justice system.<sup>42</sup> Still, many faulted the local police department itself for failing to develop a clear and deliberate strategy for reducing violent crime. As a result, by late 2017, local government officials strongly urged the Gastélum administration to take additional measures to address the

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<sup>39</sup> Gastélum had previously served as interim mayor in 2000-01 and federal deputy from 2012-15.

<sup>40</sup> “Convocan a reunión de seguimiento a la Cruzada por la Seguridad,” *Uniradio Informa*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.uniradioinforma.com/noticias/tijuana/490521/convocan-a-reunion-de-seguimiento-a-la-cruzada-por-la-seguridad.html>

<sup>41</sup> Kyle Smith. “We Were Wrong about Stop-and-Frisk”. *National Review*. January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/455035/new-york-city-stop-and-frisk-crime-decline-shows-conservatives-were>”

<sup>42</sup> In May 2017, Sotomayor had publicly indicated that the city’s crime problems were the result of the poor performance of local law enforcement authorities, but by 2017 he began to blame the new criminal justice system. These new procedures were approved in Baja California in 2007 and implemented in 2010 and introduced higher due process expectations of police and prosecutors, thereby strengthening the rights of individuals accused of a crime. A federal reform in 2008 mandated nationwide implementation in June 2016, which several Mexican governors and other officials have tried to scapegoat for the declining security situation in many areas of the country. “Insatisfecho Marco Antonio Sotomayor ante resultados de la SSPM,” *La Jornada de Baja California*, May 24, 2017. <http://jornadabc.mx/tijuana/24-05-2017/insatisfecho-marco-antonio-sotomayor-ante-resultados-de-la-sspm>; Camarillo, José Luis, “Año más violento, culpa del NSJP: Marco Antonio Sotomayor,” *UniRadio Informa*, November 21, 2017, <http://www.uniradioinforma.com/noticias/bajacalifornia/502507/ano-mas-violento-culpa-del-nsjp-marco-antonio-sotomayor.html>



city's crime problems, and some critics began to call for Secretary Sotomayor's resignation.<sup>43</sup> In response to these pressures, in November 2017, Sotomayor announced that the department would hire 200 new officers in early 2018, with an additional 300 new officers in 2019.<sup>44</sup> Thereafter, public attention shifted to other pressing issues facing the city, as the Gastelum administration came to a close amid allegations of corruption linked to his family members, the arrival of large caravans of Central American migrants to the city, and political controversies over the 2018 gubernatorial and state elections, which were ultimately swept by the Party Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA).

The next few years brought several chaotic developments for the city and its local government. MORENA candidate Arturo González Cruz took office as mayor in October 2019, appointing Jorge Alberto Ayón Monsalve as Tijuana's new secretary of public security. In the months that followed, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the partial closure of the U.S.-Mexico border, thanks to an order by the Trump administration prohibiting foreign nationals from entering through land-bound ports of entry. This was a unique situation, never before experienced at the Mexican border. This point is relevant because when the checkpoints were closed, the legal and illegal markets were destabilized, and prices skyrocketed for cross-border goods and services. In addition, of course, the production, distribution, and sale of drugs on both sides of the border were influenced by the dynamics and criminals were forced to make severe adjustments in the territory and the social organization of crime.

Meanwhile, adding to the city's troubles, Mayor González Cruz and the state's governor, Jaime Bonilla, engaged in a very public clash that involved mutual recriminations for alleged illegal conduct.<sup>45</sup> Specifically, Mayor González Cruz accused the governor of misappropriating federal funds intended for the city of Tijuana, while Governor Bonilla claimed that the mayor had been involved in the murder of a local social media influencer and convicted extortionist named Mariano Soto.<sup>46</sup> In this context, on October 16, 2020, González Cruz took a leave from his post, during which he was briefly replaced by his alternate (*suplente*), interim-Mayor Karla Ruíz McFarlan, who took office as the city's first female mayor. González Cruz returned from office on November 5, 2020 and Ayón Monsalve with a new Public Security Secretary, Juan Valdez Moreno, on November 16. Just

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<sup>43</sup> "Piden cambiar a Sotomayor," *Agencia Fronteriza de Noticias*, November 15, 2017, [http://www.afntijuana.info/informacion\\_general/76458\\_piden\\_cambiar\\_a\\_sotomayor](http://www.afntijuana.info/informacion_general/76458_piden_cambiar_a_sotomayor)

<sup>44</sup> "Urgen a SSPM plan sectorial en Tijuana," *Agencia Fronteriza de Noticias*, December 3, 2017. [http://www.afntijuana.info/informacion\\_general/77102\\_urgan\\_a\\_sspm\\_plan\\_sectorial\\_en\\_tijuana](http://www.afntijuana.info/informacion_general/77102_urgan_a_sspm_plan_sectorial_en_tijuana)

<sup>45</sup> Juan Miguel Hernández, "Desde hoy, Tijuana tiene una alcaldesa," *El Sol de Tijuana*, <https://www.elsoldetijuana.com.mx/local/desde-hoy-tijuana-tiene-una-alcaldesa-5895163.html>; Salvador Rivera, "Tijuana mayor accuses governor of withholding millions earmarked for city," *Border Report*, December 16, 2020. <https://www.borderreport.com/regions/california/tijuana-mayor-accuses-governor-of-withholding-millions-earmarked-for-city/>.

<sup>46</sup> Soto had accused González Cruz and Ayón Monsalve of diverting cocaine seized by authorities. "Mariano Soto executed, creator of 'Tijuana sin Censura,'" *Borderland Beat*, October 5, 2020, <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2020/10/mariano-soto-executed-creator-of.html>

three months later, on February 12, 2021, González Cruz stepped down from office again to have Ruíz McFarlan serve as interim-mayor again while he made an unsuccessful bid for the governorship. McFarland appointed a new public security secretary, Pedro Cruz Camarena, and a new director of the Tijuana municipal police, Hector Villegas Barquero.<sup>47</sup> In the months that followed, the number of homicides reported increased from 152 murders in February to 199 in June 2021 but then fell dramatically through the summer. By October 2021, the number of homicides had reached a four year low, with just 118 murders that month, suggesting a reduction in frictions among the city's criminal organizations.

However, thereafter the number of homicides began to fluctuate and reverse course, seemingly in relation to changes in local law enforcement. Indeed, at the very end of the administration's term, interim-Mayor McFarlan stepped down and González Cruz returned for an unusual two-day stint as mayor on September 29-30, 2021. In that 48-hour period, Tijuana Public Security Director Camarena and Police Chief Villegas were replaced by Miguel Alejandro Cabrera Medina and Javier Castellón González, respectively.<sup>48</sup> According to *Zeta*, the local independent newspaper, there were more than 120 personnel changes made by Cabrera Medina and Castellón González in the two day period before the next administration took office in October 2021, allegedly as part of a massive corruption scheme in which positions were granted in exchange for bribes.

On October 1, 2021, Monserrat Caballero became the city's first directly elected female mayor. Over the next several weeks, her administration attempted to reverse the last-minute changes made by Cabrera and Castellón to the local police force. This caused a noticeable fluctuation in the number of homicides in Tijuana over the next several months, with a sharp increase by mid-2022 and a remarkable end-of-summer spectacle that drew international attention. On the weekend of August 13-15, 2022, organized crime groups set fire to dozens of vehicles throughout the city, alongside similar demonstrations of violence in the states of Chihuahua, Guanajuato, and Jalisco.<sup>49</sup> Social media posts allegedly sent by members of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel warned of impending attacks on civilians who left their homes, local authorities urged residents to shelter in place, and consular officials and leaders in neighboring San Diego recommended against travel to Tijuana.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "Cartels' Deadly Fight to Place Corrupt Officers in Key Positions in Tijuana," *Borderland Beat*, November 4, 2021, <http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2021/11/cartels-deadly-fight-to-place-corrupt.html>

<sup>48</sup> According to *Borderland Beat*, there were more than 120 personnel changes made by Cabrera Medina and Castellón González before Caballero administration officials took office in December 2021, allegedly as part of a massive corruption scheme in which positions were granted in exchange for bribes.

<sup>49</sup> Alexandra Mendoza and Kate Morrissey, "Tijuana Goes into Lockdown After Cars Burned Across City," *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 13, 2022. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/story/2022-08-13/tijuana-goes-into-lockdown-after-cars-burned-across-city>

<sup>50</sup> Wendy Fry and Alexandra Mendoza, "Troops patrol Tijuana as city emerges from cartel-fueled night of terror," *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 13, 2022. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/story/2022-08-13/tijuana-cartel-threats>

## FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Overall, the security situation in Tijuana poses serious challenges. Organized crime groups have had a long-standing influence in the city, and new dynamics among criminal organizations have contributed to increased patterns of homicide in recent years. At the same time, it is clear that the distribution of violence in Tijuana is uneven and reflects geographic, economic, and social divisions in the city. In this sense, over the last decade, the conflicts among major organized crime groups operating in Tijuana appear to be the spark that has ignited violence in the city's poor and marginalized communities, which are highly susceptible to eruptions because of conditions of social disorganization and marginalization.

However, these conditions are nothing new. The increased competition and violence among organized crime groups in Tijuana also partly reflects the fragmentation or balkanization of criminal networks in the city. In this context, shifting and intersecting alliances among local crime cells vying for control over localized criminal activities has led to the proliferation of violence—especially homicides—among warring groups. This much less “organized” pattern of criminal activity creates a significantly more complicated scenario for law enforcement, and constitutes a vexing problem for Tijuana’s local authorities. The apparent persistence of corruption among local police and authorities presents further challenges that may not be resolved without a negotiated bargain (*ajuste de cuentas*) or surreptitious pact (*pax mafiosa*) among corrupt and criminal elements.