

# Public Security in Baja California

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## I. Introduction

The northwestern state of Baja California has been and remains an important focal point for violence and organized crime in Mexico. As previous research by Justice in Mexico has illustrated, Baja California has been subject to severe organized crime-related violence for decades, with wide-ranging implications.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, Baja California had the second highest number of homicides in Mexico, accounting for nearly one out of 10 homicides nationwide.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Baja California ended 2021 with the second-highest total number of reported homicides among all Mexican states. After Baja California's newly elected state and local officials took office in December 2021, violence surged over the next several months, including deadly attacks on journalists in early 2022 and highly public messages sent by organized crime groups in the summer of 2022. Midway through 2022 the monthly homicide rate was nearly four times greater than it had been a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup>

Given the state's elevated levels of violence and prominence in Mexico's overall security picture, a close analysis of developments in the state is critical to understanding the country's ongoing problems of violence. This report sheds light on current trends and patterns in violence and organized crime activity that have shaped security conditions in Baja California in recent years. The report begins with an overview of statewide trends in violent crime statistics, followed by a more detailed examination of violence and organized crime in each municipality. Next, the report offers a broad survey of government responses to this difficult security environment and follows this with a discussion on the impact of closures of the U.S.-Mexico border during the COVID-19 pandemic on criminal activity. Lastly, the report provides general policy recommendations for addressing the state's security challenges as they currently stand.

## II. Overview of Statewide Trends in Violent Crime

Using data from the Baja California State Attorney General's Office (*Fiscalía General del Estado*, FGE) and the National Public Security System (*Sistema Nacional de Seguridad*

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<sup>1</sup> Jaime Arredondo Sánchez Lira, Zulía Orozco, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, "The Resurgence of Violent Crime in Tijuana," *Justice in Mexico*, February 2018, <https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Organized-Crime-and-Violence-in-Guanajuato.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Lidia Arista, "La violencia aumenta en cuatro estados donde hubo alternancia y llegó Morena," *Expansión Política*, February 8, 2022, <https://politica.expansion.mx/estados/2022/02/08/la-violencia-aumenta-en-4-estados-donde-llego-morena-a-gobernar>; "Guanajuato, Baja California, Edomex, Michoacán y Chihuahua, los estados con mayor número de homicidios dolosos en 2021," *Latinus*, January 1, 2022, <https://latinus.us/2022/01/01/guanajuato-edomex-baja-california-michoacan-chihuahua-estados-mayor-numero-homicidios-2021/>

<sup>3</sup> In 2012, on average, there were 49 homicides per month statewide, compared to 195 per month in the first six months of 2022. Own data, gathered from: Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), "Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común, nueva metodología," *Gobierno de México*, December 20, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/sesnspp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-del-fuero-comun-nueva-metodologia?state=published>

*Pública*, SNSP), this section of the report provides a comprehensive examination of recent trends in violent crime at the state level, with a focus on homicides, intentional injuries, violent robberies, extortion, kidnappings, and sex crimes through the end of 2021.<sup>4</sup> Between 2014 and 2018, Baja California experienced a dramatic, year-on-year surge in intentional homicides (*homicidios dolosos*), with reported cases jumping from 714 in 2014 to 2,797 in 2018, a 291.7% increase. Annual totals of intentional homicide cases have since stabilized, falling slightly to 2,606 in 2019, and then seeing incremental increases to 2,627 in 2020 and to 2,662 in 2021. Although there has not been significant growth in homicides since 2018, total numbers of reported cases remain highly elevated, as illustrated in Figure 1. To provide context, a decade earlier, the total number of intentional homicides in 2011 stood at 673, and in 2000, this number was 424. This indicates that although homicide levels have somewhat stagnated in recent years, the numbers of reported intentional homicides have persistently remained at historically-high levels.

Figure 1: Intentional Homicide (Homicidios Dolosos) Cases Reported in Baja California by Year, 2000-2021

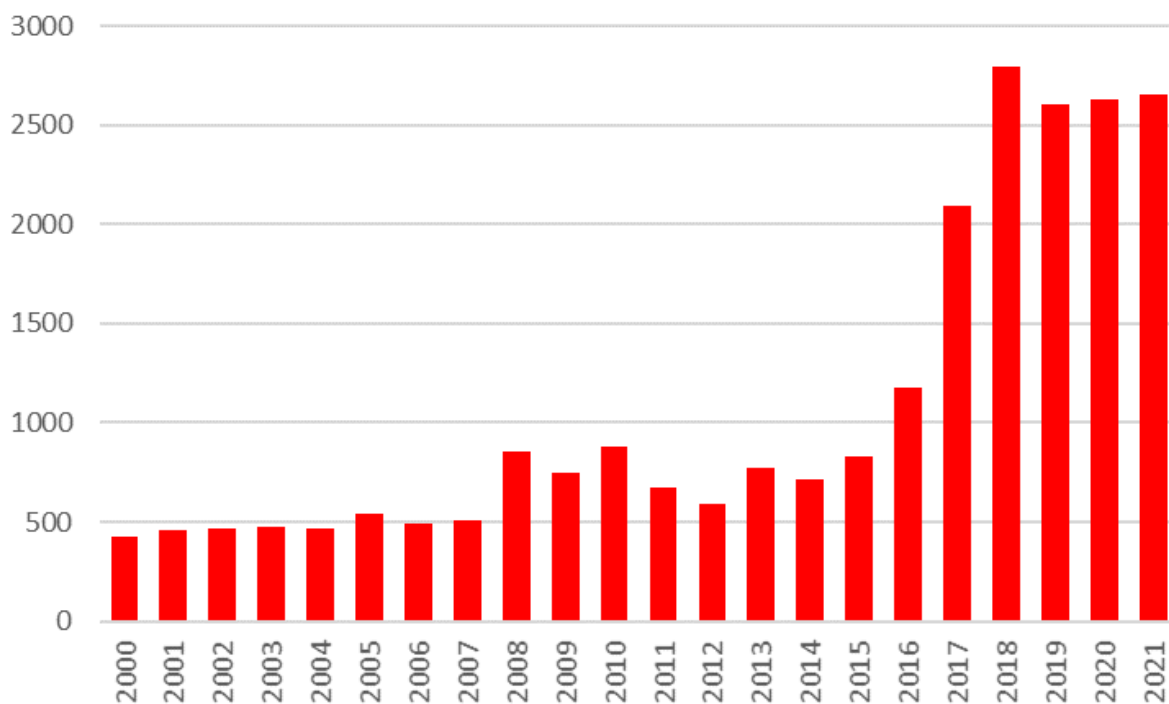
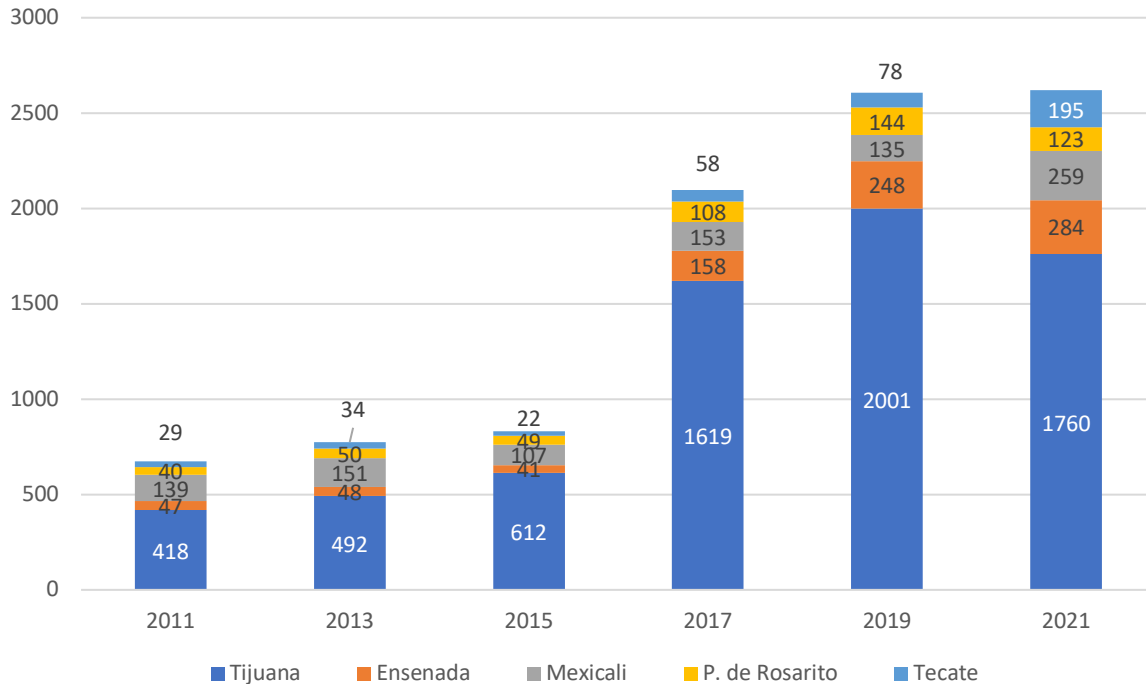


Figure 2: Share of Intentional Homicide Cases by Municipality, 2011-2021

<sup>4</sup> Data from before 2006 gathered from: Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), "Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común, metodología anterior," *Gobierno de México*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-del-fuero-comun?idiom=es>

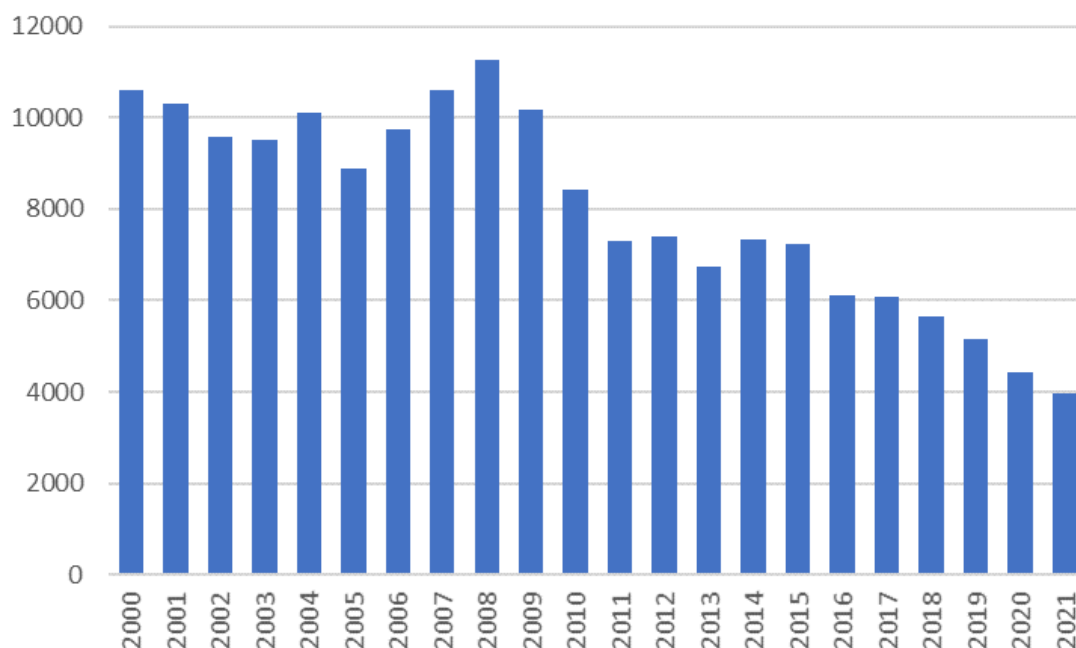


Generated by author using data from FGE

Intentional injuries (*lesiones dolosas*) were relatively stable between 2000 and 2009, before entering into a prolonged decline that has persisted ever since. Cases dropped from a high of 11,250 in 2008 to 3,957 in 2021, as shown in Figure 3. The simultaneous fall in intentional injuries during the same period that intentional homicides grew appears to be roughly consistent with a pattern observed in municipal-level data in Tijuana prior to 2018, in which rising homicide rates were accompanied by lower incidence of intentional injuries, possibly owing to greater lethality of violent assaults, as suggested by previous research.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sánchez Lira, Orozco, Rodríguez Ferreira, and Shirk, "The Resurgence of Violent Crime in Tijuana," 7-8.

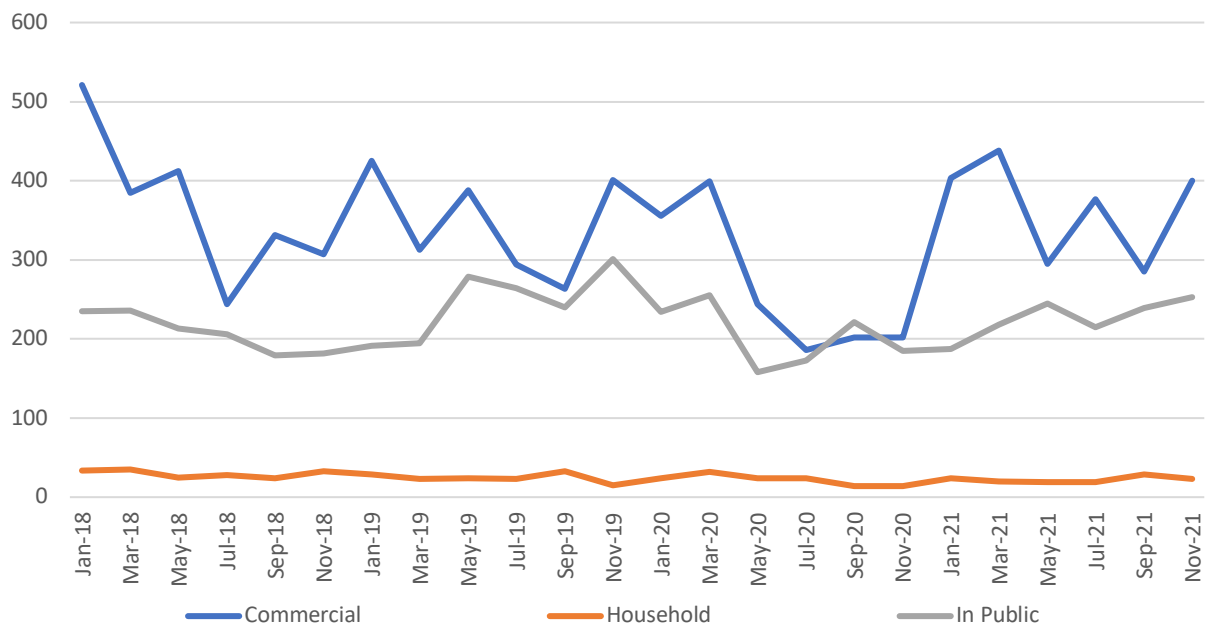
Figure 3: Intentional Injury (Lesiones Dolosas) Cases Reported Statewide by Year, 2000-2021



Generated by author using FGE and SNSP data

Between 2018 and 2021, robberies involving violence exhibited a range of trends, as illustrated in Figure 4. The overall number of violent robberies grew from 9,636 cases in 2018 to 10,449 in 2019. Cases then fell considerably to 8,362 in 2020, before rebounding to 10,177 in 2021. The prominent decrease in 2020 may be tied to restrictive measures imposed during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Violent robberies of households declined from 369 in 2018 to 285 in 2019, and fell further to 266 in 2020 and 262 in 2021. Although the downward trajectory of violent domestic robberies has persisted, the size of the annual decreases has become gradually smaller each year. Violent robberies of commercial establishments were relatively stable during this period, except for a notable drop in 2020, resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 through the end of that year. Levels of violent robberies in public spaces have been somewhat volatile. Cases increased from 2,464 cases in 2018 to 3,000 in 2019, before falling to 2,422 in 2020 only to bounce back up to 2,678 in 2021.

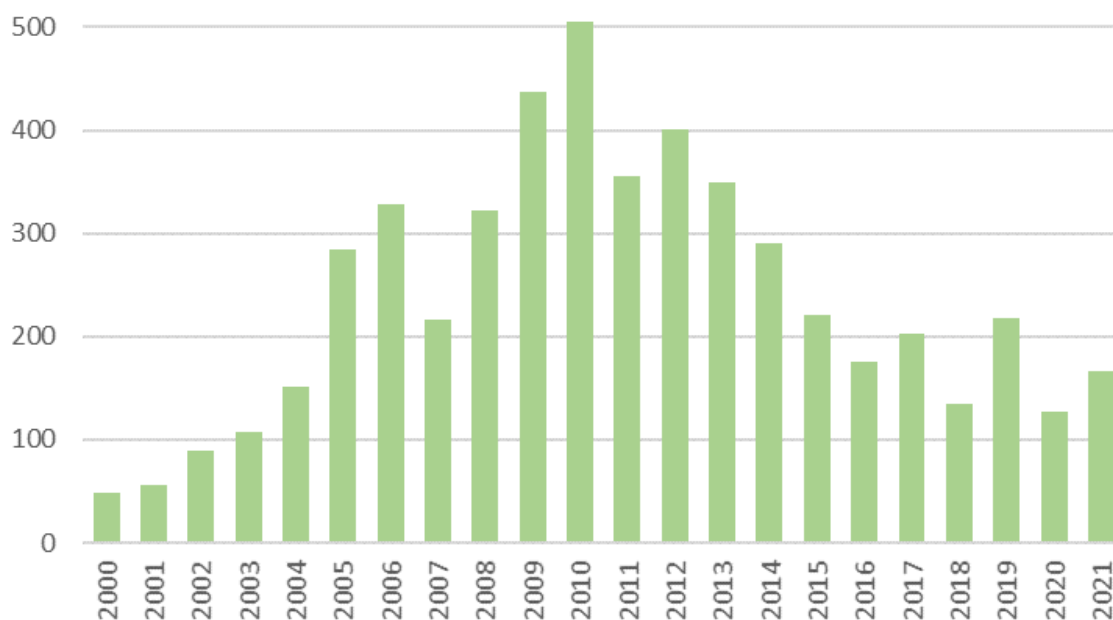
Figure 4: Monthly Commercial, Household, and Public Robbery Cases Reported Statewide by Year, 2018-2021



Generated by author using FGE and SNSP data

Reported extortion cases saw strong growth between 2000 and 2010, peaking at 505 in 2010, as illustrated in Figure 5. Extortions experienced an observable drop between 2012 and 2016, and since then levels of reported cases have generally remained mostly within the range of 100 and 200 cases each year. Notably, the 2021 total of 167 reported cases is nearly 67% lower than the statewide peak in 2010.

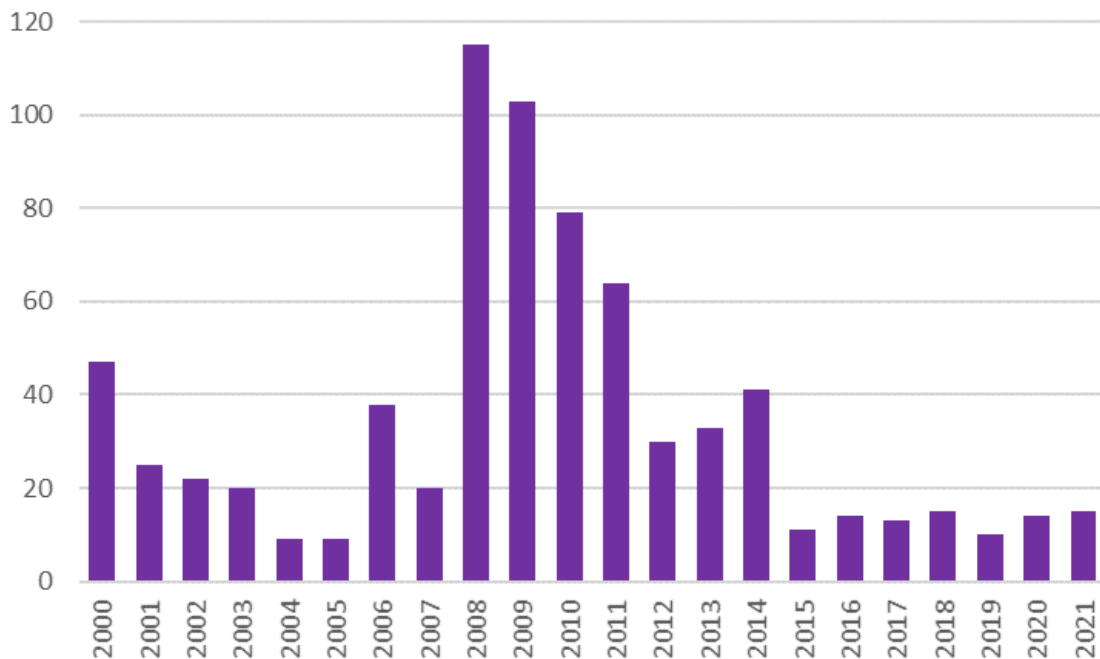
Figure 5: Extortion Cases Reported Statewide by Year, 2000-2021



Generated by author using FGE and SNSP data

Kidnappings demonstrated a dramatic spike in 2008 and 2009, with 115 and 103 reported cases respectively, as illustrated in Figure 6. Subsequently, reported kidnappings have fallen steadily. In every year since 2015, the statewide total of kidnapping cases has not exceeded 20. Nevertheless, widespread underreporting of kidnappings may make it difficult to discern trends from official statistics.

Figure 6: Kidnapping Cases Reported Statewide by Year, 2000-2021



Generated by author using FGE and SNSP data

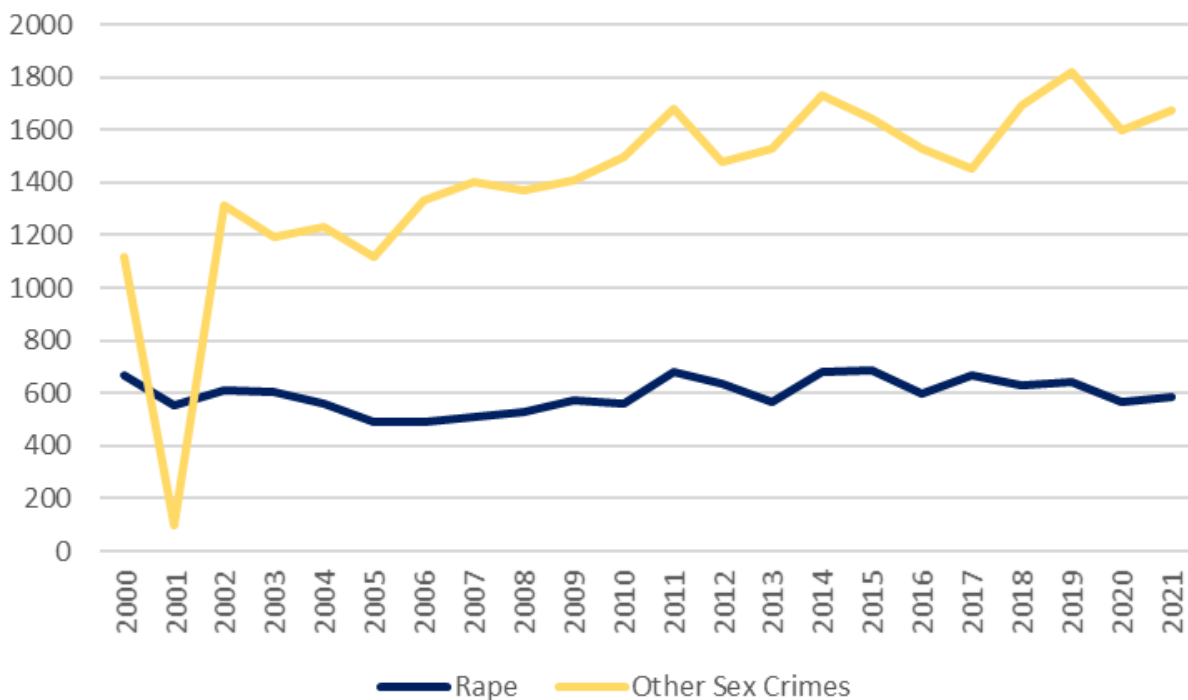
Patterns in statewide incidence of rapes and other sex crimes were fairly consistent between 2000 and 2021, with the exception of 2001 (when a seeming irregularity in reporting resulted in only 99 “other” sex crime cases reported).<sup>6</sup> While the number of reported rape cases has remained roughly within the same range during this period (see Figure 7), there has been a general slight upward trend in the number of other sex crime cases since 2002, rising from 1,312 reported cases that year to a peak of 1,822 in 2019. It appears that the anomalously low number reported in 2001 is due to an error or omission in official data reported for that year.

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<sup>6</sup> “Other sex crimes” includes offenses not covered by the categories of rape, statutory rape, and child sexual abuse. Examples include sexual harassment, incest, and certain abductions or forced confinement motivated by sexual purposes.



Figure 7: Rape and Other Sex Crime Cases Reported Statewide by Year, 2000-2021



Generated by author using FGE and SNSP data

Overall, the levels of violence in Baja California have remained alarmingly high, though the redistribution of homicides to different parts of the state suggests that the security situation is changing. As we discuss in the next section, this redistribution is partly driven by the evolving patterns of competition among organized crime groups around the state. In this sense, Baja California provides an illustration of some of the larger dynamics of violence in Mexico.

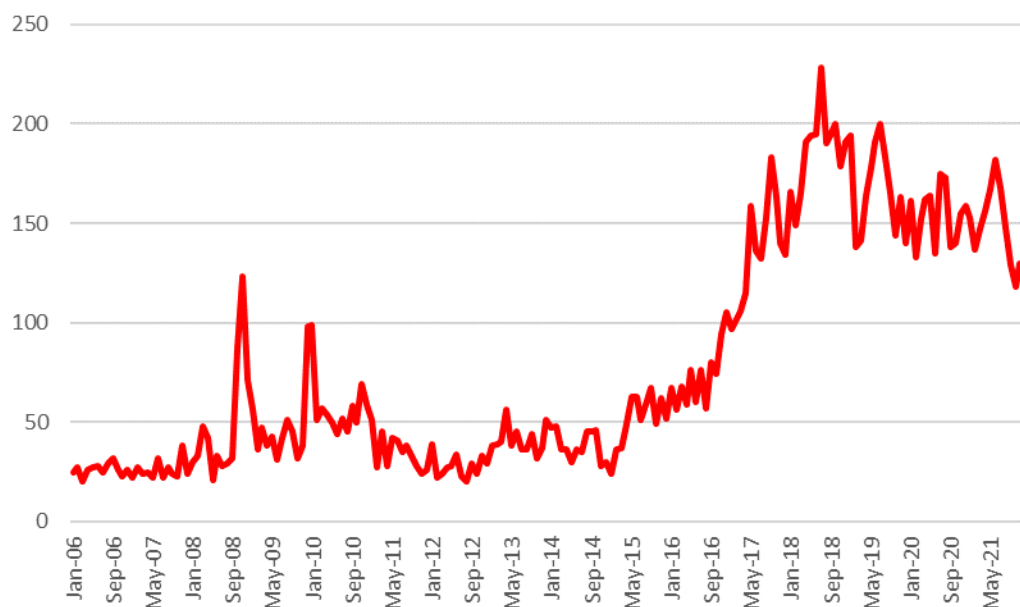
### III. Municipal Level Dynamics of Violence & Organized Crime

This section examines the underlying dynamics of violent crime in Baja California, with an emphasis on the specific trends found at the municipal level. A closer look at what is happening in Baja California's municipalities helps to better understand the role of both nationally prominent organized crime groups operating in the state, as well as smaller, more localized criminal groups.

## A. Tijuana

Tijuana continues to suffer from strikingly high rates of intentional homicides. Between January and October 2021, Tijuana reported more intentional homicides cases than any other municipality in Mexico.<sup>7</sup> However, the number of intentional homicides has been slightly decreasing in recent years. As demonstrated in Figure 8, there has been a small but continuous decline in the number of intentional homicides since 2018. Nevertheless, the annual average of intentional homicides in the last three years (2019-2021) stands at more than 1,869 cases a year, considerably higher than the annual average of slightly over 1,577 in the previous three-year period (2016-2018), which in turn is significantly more than the annual average of roughly 463 murders a year in the preceding five-year period (2011-2015). This indicates that despite the recent modest decline, levels of homicidal violence in Tijuana since 2017 have been quite elevated compared to previous years.

Figure 8: Intentional Homicide Cases Reported in Tijuana by Month, 2006-2021



Generated by author using FGE data

Areas in Tijuana's Eastern Zone (which includes La Presa, La Presa Este, and Otay Centenario delegations) and in the centrally-located delegations of Sánchez Taboada and Centro tend to report higher numbers of homicides. In 2020, the FGE identified the 10 neighborhoods (*colonias*) with the greatest incidence of homicides.<sup>8</sup> Of these, three were located in the Eastern Zone (Mariano Matamoros Centro, Mariano Matamoros Sur, Natura), four were in Sánchez Taboada delegation (3 de Octubre, Camino Verde,

<sup>7</sup> "BC entre los 5 estados más peligrosos del país en el 2021," *Uniradio Informa*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.uniradioinforma.com/noticias/bajacalifornia/655071/bc-entre-los-5-estados-mas-peligrosos-del-pais-en-el-2021.html>

<sup>8</sup> "Estas son las colonias más inseguras de Tijuana," *El Herald de México*, February 4, 2021, <https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/nacional/2021/2/4/estas-son-las-colonias-mas-inseguras-de-tijuana-253256.html>

Sánchez Taboada Subdelegation, Urbivilla del Prado 2), and three in Centro delegation (Zona Centro, Zona Norte, and Zona Urbana Río Tijuana). According to FGE data from the first 11 months of 2021, this general geographic trend has largely held.<sup>9</sup> Of the 10 neighborhoods with the highest number of reported intentional homicides between January and November 2021, four were in the Eastern Zone (Ejido Francisco Villa, El Florido, Mariano Matamoros Centro, , Terrazas del Valle), three were in Sánchez Taboada delegation (Camino Verde, Sánchez Taboada Subdelegation, Urbivilla del Prado 2), and two were in Centro delegation (Zona Centro, Zona Norte). A tenth neighborhood (Presidentes) is located in Cerro Colorado delegation, which lies adjacent to all three Eastern Zone delegations.

Concurrent with the recent decline in intentional homicides, intentional injuries have also fallen every single year since 2018. That year, there were 2,292 cases, followed by 1,992 in 2019, 1,654 in 2020, and 1,517 in 2021. The 2021 total of 1,517 cases is 56.9% less than the 3,516 cases reported a decade earlier in 2011, indicating that, unlike homicides, current levels of intentional injuries are lower than what has historically been seen in Tijuana. Recent statistical trends of other violent crimes have been characterized by considerably more fluctuation. Yearly totals of violent robbery, extortion, and miscellaneous sex crimes all saw increases in between 2018 and 2019 before dropping in 2020, only to rise again in 2021. Inversely, reported kidnappings fell between 2018 and 2019, and saw consecutive increases over the next two years. Rapes grew between 2018 and 2019, and after falling in 2020, continued to drop further in 2021.

### Organized Crime Developments in Tijuana

Owing to its location along a major trafficking corridor on Mexico's northern border with the United States, Tijuana has long been an epicenter of organized crime activity. Since the entry of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (*Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación*, CJNG) into Baja California around the middle of the last decade, the organized crime situation in Tijuana has been broadly defined by a three-way struggle between the Sinaloa Cartel, the CJNG and remnant cells of the weakened Arellano-Félix Organization (AFO) who integrated into the CJNG structure, and AFO networks that have operated independently.<sup>10</sup> This general three-sided framework has largely held, with all three organizations continuing to contest Tijuana's criminal economies. However, internal divisions within both the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have repeatedly complicated the panorama of criminal actors in the city and the ways in which they interact with one another.

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<sup>9</sup> Own data, gathered from: Fiscalía General del Estado (FGE), "Herramienta de Análisis de Información de Incidencia Delictiva," *Gobierno de Baja California*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.seguridadbc.gob.mx/MapaBC/repo.php>

<sup>10</sup> Randall Ramos, "Remnants of Arellano-Félix Organization Attracting Renewed Interest in Baja California," *Justice in Mexico*, March 11, 2021, <https://justiceinmexico.org/remnants-afo-baja-california/>

Tijuana has been affected by the internal feud within the Sinaloa Cartel<sup>11</sup> between the sons of jailed kingpin Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, known collectively as “Los Chapitos,” and their father’s former right-hand man Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada. In early 2021, “Los Chapitos” were reported to have formed an alliance with the AFO grouping headed by Pablo Edwin “El Flaquito” Huerta Nuño as part of their efforts to wrest control of Tijuana from “El Mayo.”<sup>12</sup> According to some media reporting, the alliance between “Los Chapitos” and “El Flaquito” has come into conflict with other Sinaloa Cartel-linked groups in Tijuana, such as Los Uriarte.<sup>13</sup> Reports like these suggest that Tijuana is another site of Sinaloa Cartel infighting between criminal elements loyal to either “El Mayo” or “Los Chapitos,” similar to what has been observed in recent years in other parts of northwestern Mexico.<sup>14</sup>

The CJNG has also been subject to internal fracturing in Tijuana. Beginning around late 2019, reports emerged of a split within Los Cabos, identified by a U.S. federal indictment as an armed enforcement wing of the CJNG charged with securing territories in Tijuana on behalf of the cartel.<sup>15</sup> This schism has continued to rage on in confrontations between current Los Cabos members who remain loyal to the CJNG like Israel Alejandro “El Cabo 50” Vázquez and Rodolfo “El Cabo 30” López Arellano on one side, and former members led by high-profile criminal operative David “El Lobo” López Jiménez on the other. Clashes between current and former CJNG affiliates have been driving violence in areas like Sánchez Taboada, Natura, and Otay Centenario.<sup>16</sup> Since leaving Los Cabos and the CJNG, “El Lobo” López Jiménez is reported to have joined the AFO group of “El Flaquito” that is currently allied with “Los Chapitos.”<sup>17</sup> The elaborate network of relationships between various criminal actors and the ability of alliances to shift in a way that transcends the traditional major cartel groupings underscores the highly nuanced nature of organized crime in Tijuana.

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<sup>11</sup> “Los Chapitos,” *InSight Crime*, September 21, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/los-chapitos/>

<sup>12</sup> ““Los Chapitos” disputan BC con “El Mayo”, reclutan a “Menchos” para enfrentarlo,” *Vanguardia*, February 3, 2021, <https://vanguardia.com.mx/noticias/nacional/los-chapitos-disputan-bc-con-el-mayo-reclutan-menchos-para-enfrentarlo-KSVG3571469>

<sup>13</sup> “Los Uriarte atacan policías,” *Zeta Tijuana*, July 12, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/07/los-uriarte-atacan-policias/>; “La guerra CJNG-Sinaloa lleva ola de asesinatos y secuestros a BC,” *Sin Embargo*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.sinembargo.mx/11-05-2021/3974463>

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Dittmar, “The Three Criminal Fronts Sparking Violence in Sonora, Mexico,” *InSight Crime*, January 7, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/three-criminal-fronts-behind-violence-sonora-mexico/>; “El Ruso, el sicario de ‘El Mayo’ que dividió al Cártel de Sinaloa,” *La Silla Rota*, June 5, 2020, <https://lasillarota.com/nacion/el-ruso-el-sicario-de-el-mayo-que-dividio-al-cartel-de-sinaloa/399338>

<sup>15</sup> Javier Villalba, “Internal Strife Within the CJNG in Baja California, Mexico,” *InSight Crime*, August 27, 2019, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/internal-strife-cjng-baja-california-mexico/>; “Alleged CJNG Cartel Enforcers Charged with Drug Trafficking,” *U.S. Department of Justice*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/alleged-cjng-cartel-enforcers-charged-drug-trafficking>

<sup>16</sup> “A muerte, pugna entre “Los Cabos” y “El Lobo,”” *Zeta Tijuana*, August 2, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/08/a-muerte-pugna-entre-los-cabos-y-el-lobo/>

<sup>17</sup> “CJNG amenaza a gobernadora electa y a dos alcaldesas de Baja California,” *Border Hub*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.borderhub.org/noticias/cjng-amenaza-a-gobernadora-electa-y-dos-alcaldesas/>

## Role of Retail-Level Drug Distribution in Tijuana

In addition to the trafficking of illicit drugs across the border into the United States, drug sales at the retail-level (*narcomenudeo*) represents another key illicit activity for criminal organizations operating in Tijuana. In 2018 (the first year that the FGE published statistics on *narcomenudeo* cases as an individual category) reported cases of street-level drug dealing in the city totaled 4,196. By 2020, this number had grown significantly to 7,636. Authorities have often attributed a significant portion of violence in the city to disputes over street-level drug dealing, with the municipal Security Secretary Pedro Cruz Camarena commenting in July 2021 that nine out of 10 homicides in the city was tied to *narcomenudeo*.<sup>18</sup>

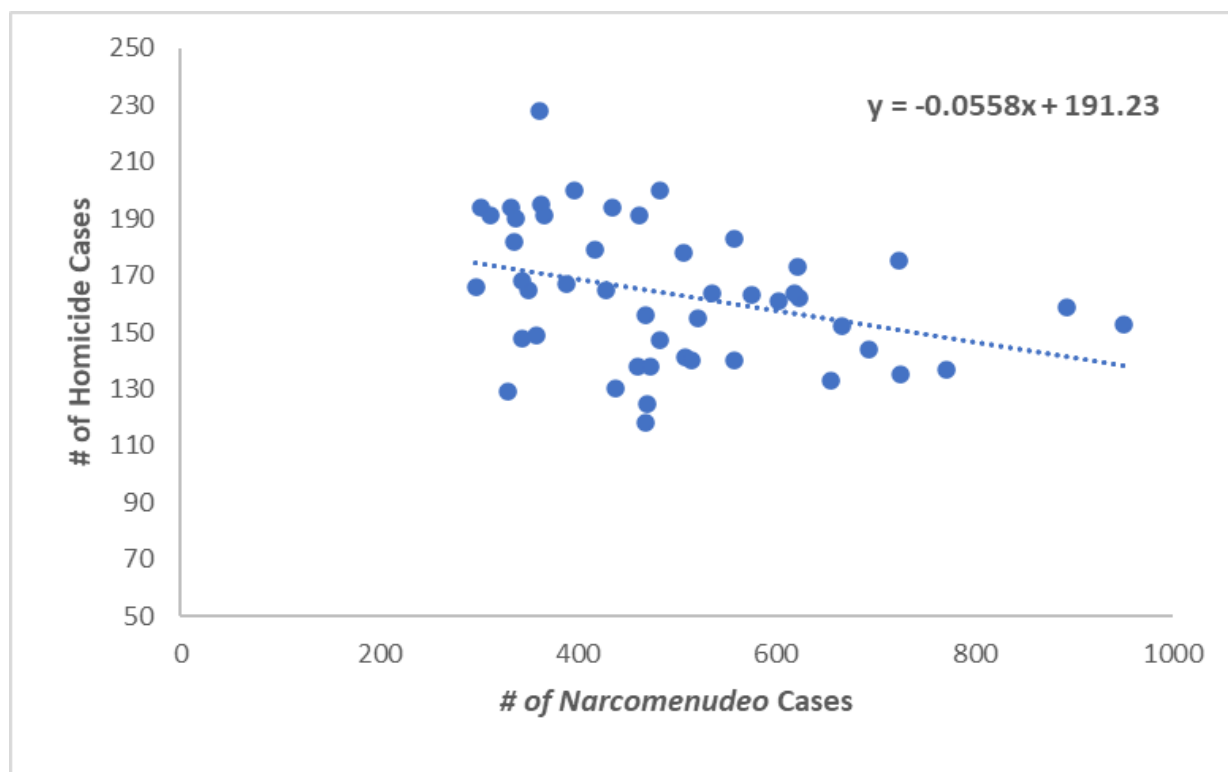
To examine the impact of retail-level drug distribution on homicides, Figure 8 presents a scatter plot featuring totals of *narcomenudeo* and intentional homicide cases in every month between January 2018 and December 2021. As can be observed in Figure 8, months that had more *narcomenudeo* cases tended to have less reported homicide cases. A regression analysis produced a p-value of 0.014, indicating a statistically significant relationship between *narcomenudeo* and homicide cases. However, an R Square figure of 0.13, meaning that the number of *narcomenudeo* cases could explain 13% of the variation in homicide cases, suggests that the impact of retail-level drug distribution activity on intentional homicide incidence is small.<sup>19</sup> These results indicate that, although it remains plausible that disputes over street-level drug sales factor into a considerable number of murders, *narcomenudeo* might not be the paramount driver of homicidal violence in Tijuana as local authorities often suggest.

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<sup>18</sup> Rodrigo Medeles, “Nueve de cada 10 homicidios en Tijuana son por narcomenudeo: Pedro Cruz,” *Noticias de Tijuana*, July 7, 2021, <https://noticiasdetijuana.com/2021/07/07/nueve-de-cada-10-homicidios-en-tijuana-son-por-narcomenudeo-pedro-cruz-%E2%94%82/>.

<sup>19</sup> Linear regression measures the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable. P-value is the likelihood that any observed relationship between two variables is due to chance. R-square indicates how much an observed variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variable.

Figure 9: Totals of Narcomenudeo and Intentional Homicide Cases in Tijuana in All 48 Months Between 2018 and 2021



Generated by author using FGE data

## B. Ensenada

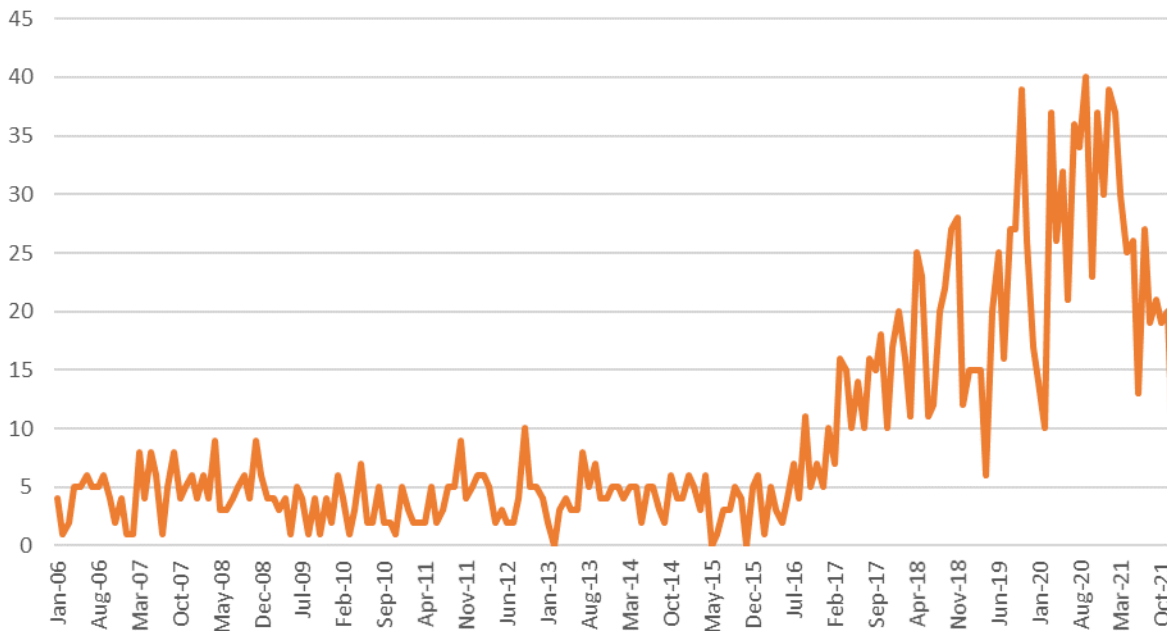
Elevated homicide levels in Ensenada have been a significant concern recently, with the number of intentional homicide cases increasing every year between 2015 and 2020, as seen in Figure 10. Reported cases in 2015 totaled 41 and by 2020, that number had grown to 340, a 729.3% increase during this period.<sup>20</sup> Although 2021 saw the first annual decrease in intentional homicides in six years, last year's total of 284 cases demonstrates that homicidal violence remains at historically high levels for Ensenada. Throughout 2021, homicides appeared to be on pace for another year-on-year increase until May.<sup>21</sup> Beginning in June, monthly totals of intentional homicides started to noticeably level off. Lower monthly totals continued to the end of the year, suggesting that the nascent downward trajectory in homicides seen in 2021 may persist into 2022 if this trend holds.

<sup>20</sup> Although the municipality of San Quintín formally separated from Ensenada in February 2020, the FGE did not begin publishing separate crime statistics for the new municipality until March 2021. As such, data from Ensenada prior to March 2021 should be understood to include reported crimes that occurred within the boundaries of the new San Quintín municipality.

<sup>21</sup> Juan Manuel Torres, "Registra Ensenada alza de 50% en homicidios; robos en vía pública suben 31%," *Monitor Económico de Baja California*, July 3, 2021, <https://monitoreconomico.org/noticias/2021/jul/03/registra-ensenada-alza-de-50-en-homicidios-robos-en-via-publica-suben-31/>



Figure 10: Intentional Homicide Cases Reported in Ensenada by Month, 2006-2021



Generated by author using FGE data

Between 2019 and 2021, the overall total of violent robberies saw a large decline from 834 cases in 2019 to 678 in 2020, followed by a slight decrease to 675 in 2021. This compares favorably with the preceding three-year period (2016-2018) in which the total number of violent robberies grew steadily from 722 cases in 2016 to 878 in 2018. Intentional injuries experienced a continual slide downward, falling from 771 in 2019 to 600 in 2020, and then down to 505 cases in 2021.

Considering its relatively large geographic size, crime in the municipality appears to be predominantly concentrated in and around Ensenada city proper (*cabecera municipal*). Throughout 2020 and 2021, FGE lists of the top areas with highest overall numbers of reported crimes featured mostly neighborhoods within the urban core. Places like Zona Centro, Popular 1989, Las Lomitas, Valle Dorado, Hidalgo, Obrera, and Los Encinos, all located in the city proper, have been regularly identified by the FGE as some of the most crime-affected areas of the municipality.<sup>22</sup> Communities outside of the city proper that have been consistently included in FGE lists of areas with the highest crime levels still tend to be relatively close to the urban core. El Sauzal and Maneadero are both

<sup>22</sup> Own data, gathered from: Fiscalía General del Estado (FGE), "Gráficas Y Mapas, Ensenada," *Gobierno de Baja California*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.seguridadbc.gob.mx/contenidos/estadisticas3.php>; "Sin control inseguridad en BC; imparable homicidios en Mexicali, Ensenada y Rosarito," *Monitor Económico de Baja California*, May 22, 2021, <https://monitoreconomico.org/noticias/2021/may/22/sin-control-inseguridad-en-bc-imparables-homicidios-en-mexicali-ensenada-y-rosarito/>; Nelly Alfaro, "Son 10 las colonias más conflictivas de Ensenada," *Cadena Noticias*, August 4, 2020, <https://cadenanoticias.com/regional/2020/08/son-10-las-colonias-mas-conflictivas-de-ensenada>

located less than 20 kilometers from central Ensenada. Notable exceptions to this general concentration in and around the city proper are often communities in the Guadalupe Valley, such as Francisco Zarco, that have high numbers of reported crimes despite their relative distance from Ensenada proper. The presence of drug production and cultivation areas in this region may be factors behind the greater totals of reported crimes in this rural portion of the municipality.

### Importance of Ensenada for Variety of Criminal Activities

Heightened levels of intentional homicides in recent years underscore Ensenada's strategic importance for a wide range of illicit activities through which criminal groups generate revenue. The municipality may be particularly valuable for criminal actors due to the Port of Ensenada, estimated in 2019 to be the fifth busiest seaport in Mexico by container volume handled.<sup>23</sup> Maritime ports have long been critically important for criminal organizations engaged in drug trafficking, as access to port infrastructure enables these groups to import precursor chemicals used in the production of synthetic drugs like methamphetamine and fentanyl.<sup>24</sup>

Authorities have determined that the Sinaloa Cartel, CJNG, and AFO all contest control of Ensenada's port.<sup>25</sup> Given that competition over seaport access has often been tied to increases in criminal violence in surrounding areas,<sup>26</sup> this may be a factor in the higher murder totals seen in Ensenada in recent years. Although bigger Pacific ports like Manzanillo in Colima and Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán appear to have the capacity to receive a larger share of the precursor chemical shipments entering Mexico,<sup>27</sup> the Port of Ensenada may be comparably attractive to drug trafficking organizations due to its closer proximity to the U.S. border. Additionally, unlike the aforementioned ports, Ensenada lies in territory that remains hotly contested by multiple organized crime groups, perhaps making it one of the few ports that has yet to be dominated by a single

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<sup>23</sup> Hugh R. Morley, "Ensenada targets LA-LB cargo with expansion," *Journal of Commerce*, March 25, 2019, [https://www.joc.com/port-news/international-ports/ensenada-targets-la-lb-cargo-expansion\\_20190325.html](https://www.joc.com/port-news/international-ports/ensenada-targets-la-lb-cargo-expansion_20190325.html)

<sup>24</sup> Steven Dudley, Deborah Bonello, Jaime López-Aranda, et. al, "Mexico's Role in the Deadly Rise of Fentanyl," *Wilson Center* and *InSight Crime*, February 2019, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/fentanyl\\_insight\\_crime\\_final\\_19-02-11.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/fentanyl_insight_crime_final_19-02-11.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Said Betanzos, "Narco intenta controlar puerto en Ensenada, advierten autoridades," *Milenio*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.milenio.com/estados/narco-controlar-puerto-ensenada-autoridades-bc>; Lorena López and Israel Navarro, "Narcotraficantes se disputan los puertos mexicanos," *Milenio*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.milenio.com/politica/narcotraficantes-se-disputan-los-puertos-mexicanos>

<sup>26</sup> Mark Stevenson, "Mexico puts military in charge of customs operations," *Washington Post*, July 17, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/mexico-puts-military-in-charge-of-customs-operations/2020/07/17/96c893e4-c841-11ea-a825-8722004e4150\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-puts-military-in-charge-of-customs-operations/2020/07/17/96c893e4-c841-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html)

<sup>27</sup> Mark Wilson, "US Sanctions Reveal CJNG's Grip on Mexico Port to Move Fentanyl," *InSight Crime*, October 8, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/us-sanctions-reveal-cjngs-grip-on-mexico-port-to-move-fentanyl/>



organization. Indeed, Ensenada has been the site of sizeable precursor chemical interdictions possibly linked to both the CJNG<sup>28</sup> and Sinaloa Cartel.<sup>29</sup>

The combination of a major maritime port that receives precursor chemical imports and quick access to the United States have made Ensenada a prime location for synthetic drug production, as these two factors together can reduce logistical costs and minimize risks of interdiction within Mexico when compared to drug production operations located farther south.<sup>30</sup> Although Baja California as a whole is a leading state in terms of synthetic drug production,<sup>31</sup> much of that activity appears to be located in Ensenada. According to the Secretary of National Defense (*Secretaría de Defensa Nacional*, SEDENA), the majority of clandestine drug laboratories seized in Baja California since 2018 have been located in Ensenada.<sup>32</sup> In a demonstration of this trend, six out of the 11 drug laboratories discovered in Baja California between May 2020 and May 2021 were located in Ensenada.<sup>33</sup> Although laboratories have been discovered in Ensenada's urban core,<sup>34</sup> most reported clandestine laboratory seizures throughout 2020 and 2021 appear to have occurred in remote rural areas, such as locations near Ojos Negros and the Guadalupe Valley.<sup>35</sup>

Along with drug trafficking and production, drug distribution at the retail level has proven to be another illicit economy generating organized crime interest in Ensenada. Competition over street-level drug dealing has been repeatedly identified by municipal authorities as a driver of criminal activity in Ensenada.<sup>36</sup> In 2021, the president of the Baja California Public Security Citizens' Council publicly urged the municipal government to address drug addiction as part of efforts to tackle violence linked to *narcomenudeo*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "México decomisa precursores de fentanilo a empresa de Hong Kong con operaciones en EEUU," *Reuters*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/delito-mexico-fentanilo-idMXL1N2HG0UH>

<sup>29</sup> Raúl Flores Martínez, "Inteligencia Naval golpea al Cártel del Pacífico en Ensenada BC," *Excelsior*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/inteligencia-naval-golpea-al-cartel-del-pacifico-en-ensenada-bc/1384804>

<sup>30</sup> Isaías Alvarado, "Producir droga cerca de la frontera con EEUU: la nueva estrategia del Cartel de Sinaloa," *Univision*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.univision.com/noticias/narcotrafico/producir-droga-cerca-de-la-frontera-con-eeuu-la-nueva-estrategia-del-cartel-de-sinaloa>

<sup>31</sup> José Réyez, "Sin freno, tráfico de metanfetaminas y fentanilo," *Contralínea*, December 14, 2021, <https://contralinea.com.mx/sin-freno-trafico-de-metanfetaminas-y-fentanilo/>

<sup>32</sup> "BC, laboratorio de drogas sintéticas," *Zeta Tijuana*, December 20, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/12/bc-laboratorio-de-drogas-sinteticas/>

<sup>33</sup> "Cártel de Sinaloa usa a Baja California para creación de Drogas," *Periódico Correo*, June 30, 2021, <https://periodicocorreo.com.mx/cartel-de-sinaloa-usa-a-baja-california-para-creacion-de-drogas/>

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Vargas, "Asegura FGR casi 11 toneladas de precursores para elaborar drogas," *Ensenada.net*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.ensenada.net/noticias/nota.php?id=65554>

<sup>35</sup> "Once narcolaboratorios en BC," *Zeta Tijuana*, June 28, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/06/once-narcolaboratorios-en-bc/>

<sup>36</sup> "Arranca Plan 'Ensenada Segura', para reducir homicidios y combatir narcomenudeo," *Hiptex*, October 22, 2020, <https://hiptex.com.mx/noticias/19194/arranca-plan-ensenada-segura-para-reducir-homicidios-y-combatir-narcomenudeo>; César Córdova, "Es narcomenudeo génesis de delitos," *El Vigía*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.elvigia.net/911/2020/7/24/es-narcomenudeo-genesis-de-delitos-351839.html>

<sup>37</sup> Gerardo Sánchez, "Ensenada sin estrategia en seguridad pública: Ccspbc," *El Vigía*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.elvigia.net/general/2021/1/14/ensenada-sin-estrategia-en-seguridad-publica-ccspbc-361724.html>

Beyond drugs, illicit trafficking of wildlife is an important revenue stream for criminal groups in Ensenada. Prior to the recent formation of the new municipalities of San Quintín and San Felipe, Ensenada's large geographic expanse encompassed a wide variety of climates and landscapes sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of California. The exceptional level of biodiversity makes Ensenada (and areas that until recently were included in its municipal borders) an unparalleled territory for criminals looking to participate in the highly profitable wildlife trade. Rare and protected species found in greater Ensenada that are frequently trafficked by criminal networks include the Cedros Island liveforever plant,<sup>38</sup> totoaba fish, Pismo clams, and certain types of sea cucumber.<sup>39</sup>

### Organized Crime Landscape in Ensenada

The organized crime scene in Ensenada can be largely viewed as an extension of the three-way conflict taking place in Tijuana. The CJNG, Sinaloa Cartel, and AFO-linked groups are all reportedly active in the municipality and compete over the aforementioned criminal economies. "El Lobo" López Jiménez is leading the efforts of the alliance between "Los Chapitos" and the AFO's "El Flaquito" to obtain territories in Ensenada, pitting his group of enforcers against those of Carlos Adrián "El Mercenario" Casas Reyes of the Sinaloa Cartel.<sup>40</sup> "El Mercenario" has been linked to Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada through the 2021 arrest of an allegedly corrupt Ensenada municipal police officer,<sup>41</sup> suggesting that the dispute between "El Lobo" and "El Mercenario" is yet another theater of operations in the factional conflict between "Los Chapitos" and "El Mayo." Further supporting the idea that the violent schism between "Los Chapitos" and "El Mayo" has extended to Ensenada are reports that elements of the AFO-Chapitos alliance have clashed with Ángel Antonio "El 6" Olguín Carrillo, assessed by law enforcement officials to be an important operative within the "El Mayo"-aligned criminal structure in Ensenada.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, "El 6" and "El Mercenario" have also reportedly targeted members of the CJNG.<sup>43</sup> CJNG presence in the municipality has been detected in both the urban center<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "CJNG en desaparición de Pescadores," *Zeta Tijuana*, December 9, 2019,

<https://zetatijuana.com/2019/12/cjng-en-desaparicion-de-pescadores/>

<sup>39</sup> Lorena Lamas, "Protestan por cierre de PROFEPA en Ensenada," *Zeta Tijuana*, July 15, 2021,

<https://zetatijuana.com/2021/07/protestan-por-cierre-de-profepa-en-ensenada/>

<sup>40</sup> "El Flaquito" en pugna por control criminal de Ensenada," *Zeta Tijuana*, January 25, 2021,

<https://zetatijuana.com/2021/01/el-flaquito-en-pugna-por-control-criminal-de-ensenada/>

<sup>41</sup> "Ejecuciones, narcomantas y terror: la huella de los Salazar en Baja California," *SonoraPresente*, January 13, 2021,

<https://sonorapresente.com/2021/01/13/ejecuciones-narcomantas-y-terror-la-huella-de-los-salazar-en-baja-california/>

<sup>42</sup> "La guerra por Baja California se vuelve más confusa y violenta," *Sin Embargo*, June 2, 2021,

<https://www.sinembargo.mx/02-06-2021/3982913>

<sup>43</sup> "El Valle, foco rojo del narco," *Zeta Tijuana*, February 22, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/02/el-valle-foco-rojo-del-narco/>

<sup>44</sup> "Con narcomanta, amenazan a comandante de la DSPM de Ensenada, Baja California," *El Debate*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.debate.com.mx/policiacas/Con-narcomanta-amenazan-a-comandante-de-la-DSPM-de-Ensenada-Baja-California-20210526-0060.html>

as well as more rural areas like La Misión and the Guadalupe Valley.<sup>45</sup> Given that the CJNG is locked in conflict with “El Lobo” López Jiménez in Tijuana as part of the Los Cabos split, it can be inferred that reported violence between the CJNG and the Sinaloa Cartel in Ensenada involves both the “El Mayo” and “Los Chapitos” factions.

In areas farther south of Ensenada city proper, including territories that were recently broken off to create the new San Quintín municipality, considerable violence has been attributed to localized criminal groups. Chief among these are Los Oaxacos and Los Venados, both with alleged ties to the Sinaloa Cartel. State officials assess that the majority of murders in San Quintín are linked to Los Oaxacos, which focuses on retail distribution of methamphetamine and trafficking of marine wildlife.<sup>46</sup> Los Venados are based primarily in Cedros Island, located off the western coast of the Baja California Peninsula. The group has employed violence against both government security forces and rival criminal groups, such as the CJNG, in furtherance of its preferred criminal activities of synthetic drug distribution and wildlife trafficking.<sup>47</sup>

### C. Mexicali

Mexicali, the state capital of Baja California, has seen a generally worsening security environment in recent years, with a sustained increase in intentional homicides (see Figure 11). The total number of cases grew from 135 in 2019 to 189 in 2020, before increasing again in 2021 to 259 cases. As a result, Mexicali has suffered a substantial 91.9% increase in intentional homicides in the last three years. This marked upswing is particularly alarming given that intentional homicides had fallen 11.8% between 2017 and 2019. The abrupt and stark reversal in the trajectory of intentional homicides suggests that the heightened murder rate is being driven by crime dynamics that have only recently emerged within the last couple of years.

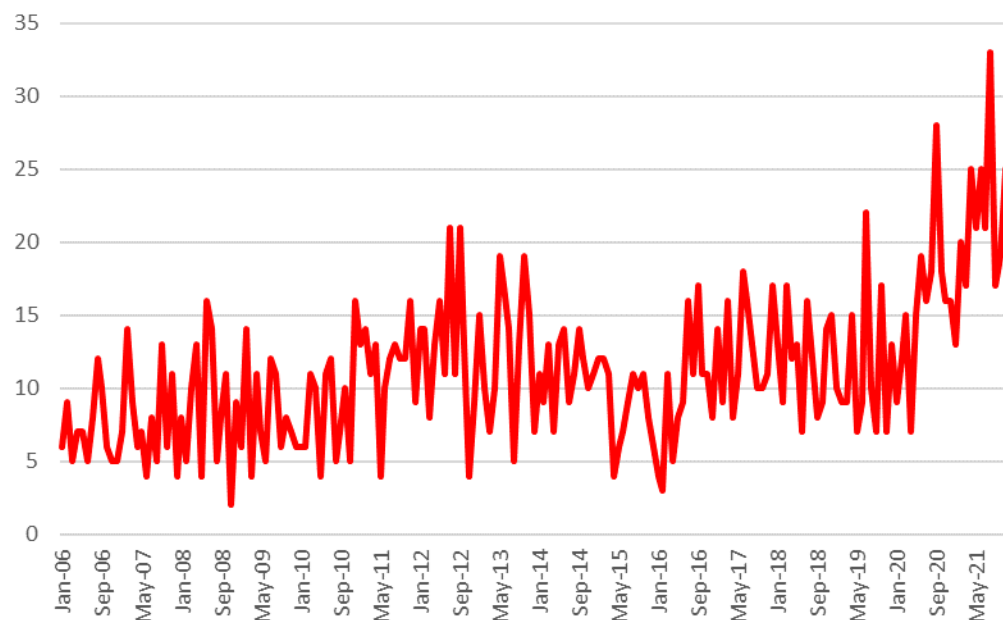
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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Vargas, “Capturaron a presunto miembro del CJNG,” *Ensenada.net*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.ensenada.net/noticias/nota.php?id=65331>; “El asesinato del Agapo: el desafío al CJNG que puede intensificar la guerra contra el Cártel de Sinaloa,” *Centro de Informes*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.centrodeinformes.com.ar/el-asesinato-del-agapo-el-desafio-al-cjng-que-puede-intensificar-la-guerra-contra-el-cartel-de-sinaloa/>

<sup>46</sup> “Asesinatos y secuestros: CJNG vs CS,” *Zeta Tijuana*, May 10, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/05/asesinatos-y-secuestros-cjng-vs-cs/>

<sup>47</sup> “Cae en Ensenada presunto líder de célula delictiva 'Los Venados',” *El Imparcial*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.elimparcial.com/tijuana/ensenada/Cae-en-Ensenada-presunto-lider-de-celula-delictiva-Los-Venados-20200624-0010.html>

Figure 11: Intentional Homicide Cases Reported in Mexicali by Month, 2006-2021



Generated by author using FGE data

Geographically, intentional homicides have tended to be more heavily concentrated in rural areas of the Mexicali Valley that lie east of Mexicali city proper and near the state boundary with Sonora. In February 2021, seven of the 10 municipal localities with the highest numbers of homicides were rural communities located in the eastern Mexicali Valley border region near Sonora. In contrast, only two of the 10 leading areas in homicides were located within Mexicali's urban core.<sup>48</sup>

However, there are signs that the geographic distribution of homicides has become more dispersed over the course of 2021, with urban areas starting to see a greater portion of reported cases. In July, the president of the Citizen Public Security Committee of Mexicali (*Comité Ciudadano de Seguridad Pública de Mexicali*) told local media that the violent conflicts seen in areas near the state border with Sonora had begun to expand towards urban Mexicali.<sup>49</sup> FGE data released months later in November 2021<sup>50</sup> seemed to echo this observation. Of the 10 areas with the most intentional homicides, four were located in rural areas near the Sonora border to the east (down from seven back in February), and the remaining six were either urban areas

<sup>48</sup> "Encabeza BC Estados más violentos del Noroeste," *El Imparcial*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.elimparcial.com/mexicali/mexicali/Encabeza-BC-Estados-mas-violentos-del-Noroeste-20210322-0029.html>

<sup>49</sup> Saúl Martínez, "Mexicali sigue tendencia a la alza en asesinatos," *El Imparcial*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.elimparcial.com/mexicali/policiaca/Mexicali-sigue-tendencia-a-la-alza-en-asesinatos-20210712-0025.html>

<sup>50</sup> Own data, gathered from: Fiscalía General del Estado (FGE), "Gráficas Y Mapas, Mexicali," *Gobierno de Baja California*, <https://www.seguridadbc.gob.mx/contenidos/estadisticas3.php>

in Mexicali city proper or peripheral areas to the immediate west or south of the municipality's urban core (up from two compared to February).

Similar to the overall statistical trend seen with intentional homicides, kidnappings in Mexicali have recently exhibited a continuous, year-on-year increase. After no kidnapping cases were reported in 2019, two cases were reported in 2020. The following year, the number of cases doubled to four reported kidnappings. Even with the small absolute numbers of reported cases, this recent pattern of constant annual growth is emblematic of the increasingly elevated levels of violence in the municipality.

Various forms of crime saw a decrease between 2019 and 2020, only to rebound in 2021. Extortions decreased markedly from 85 in 2019 to 58 in 2020, before experiencing an uptick to 66 in 2021. Similarly, reported rape cases fell from 196 in 2019 to 136 in 2020, before rising back up to 157 in 2021. Total violent robberies saw a large decrease between 2019 and 2020, falling from 3,066 to 2,495. However, violent robberies surged to 3,356 in 2021, 9.5% more than the total two years earlier. Miscellaneous sex crimes fell from 509 to 390 between 2019 and 2020, but saw an increase to 409 in 2021.

#### *Sinaloa Cartel Infighting Driving Organized Crime Violence in Mexicali*

Although some media reporting has suggested that the CJNG operates in Mexicali, the bulk of the violence in the municipality appears to be driven by the dispute between Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada and “Los Chapitos” that has taken hold within the Sinaloa Cartel.<sup>51</sup> In Mexicali, the internal conflict is being waged by two subgroups associated with each of the opposing sides.<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, *Los Salazar*, a longstanding branch of the Sinaloa Cartel is based in neighboring Sonora, reportedly has close ties to “Los Chapitos,” and gained notoriety in 2019 for its purported role in the extortion of U.S. citizens in a dissident Mormon community in La Mora, Sonora.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, *Los Rusos* is led by Jesús Alexander “El Ruso” Sánchez Félix and Felipe Eduardo “El Omega” Barajas Lozano who are assessed to be lieutenants of “El Mayo.”<sup>54</sup> According to state officials, a significant portion of homicides in Mexicali have been linked to fighting between these local affiliates of “Los Chapitos” and “El Mayo” Zambada.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “La disputa interna del Cártel de Sinaloa que provocó ‘El Mencho,’” *La Silla Rota*, April 25, 2019, <https://lasillarota.com/estados/la-disputa-interna-del-cartel-de-sinaloa-que-provoco-el-mencho/281911>

<sup>52</sup> “Histórica cifra de asesinatos en Mexicali narco, la principal causa,” *Zeta Tijuana*, January 11, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/01/historica-cifra-de-asesinatos-en-mexicali-narco-la-principal-causa/>

<sup>53</sup> Victoria Dittmar, Paige Bowman, Santiago Previde, “The Next Generation of Criminal Groups Driving Violence in Mexico,” *InSight Crime*, August 12, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/next-generation-criminal-groups-violence-mexico/>; Laura Y. Calderón, Kimberly Heinle, Rita E. Kuckertz, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico: 2020 Special Report*, Justice in Mexico, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Said Betanzos, “Detienen a ‘El Omega’, operador del Cártel del Pacífico en Mexicali, Baja California,” *Milenio*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.milenio.com/policia/detienen-omega-operador-cartel-pacifico-mexicali>

<sup>55</sup> “Narco, en el 47% de los homicidios en Mexicali,” *Zeta Tijuana*, November 15, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/11/narco-en-el-47-de-los-homicidios-en-mexicali/>



Since at least 2020, Los Salazar have been steadily crossing the state border into Mexicali to launch attacks against individuals linked to Los Rusos. Because Los Salazar are arriving in Mexicali from operational bases in Sonora, numerous violent incidents have taken place in the *ejidos* (agrarian communal lands) and small towns located in the eastern Mexicali Valley near the state boundary line.<sup>56</sup> This may explain why intentional homicides have tended to be concentrated in rural areas of the Sonora border region.

Fighting in the Mexicali Valley has been aggravated by the decision of Los Garibay, a family-based criminal network native to the area, to reportedly enter into an alliance with Los Salazar and “Los Chapitos.” Los Garibay have facilitated the entry of Los Salazar into Baja California from Sonora by providing information regarding local routes and rural roads throughout the Mexicali Valley. This has reportedly enabled Los Salazar to more easily navigate back and forth between Sonora and Baja California while avoiding detection by authorities.<sup>57</sup>

Los Rusos and other cells aligned with “El Mayo” appear to be pushing back against the cross-border incursions of Los Salazar in a bid to maintain influence in the Mexicali region. Local security officials assessed in August 2021 that Los Rusos were beginning to expand into areas of Mexicali that had traditionally not been under their control by targeting retail-level drug dealers and human traffickers operating on an independent basis.<sup>58</sup> Many independent criminal operators have been concentrated in urban neighborhoods in the southern half of Mexicali city proper,<sup>59</sup> meaning that the violent expansion of Los Rusos has likely been most evident in these areas. The systematic aggression against independent criminals who have refused to align with Los Rusos may be contributing to the increasingly equitable distribution of homicides between rural and urban areas seen throughout 2021. Indeed, by the end of the year, urban or peripheral areas located in and around the southern portion of Mexicali city proper, such as Villa Lomas Altas, Ángeles de Puebla, Progreso, and Ejido Choropo, were all included in the Top 10 list of areas with most intentional homicide cases according to FGE data.

In a potentially consequential development for Mexicali’s organized crime landscape, Felipe “El Omega” Barajas Lozano, mentioned earlier as one of the main leaders of Los

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<sup>56</sup> “La guerra entre ‘El Mayo’ y ‘Los Chapitos’ por Baja California y Sonora,” *Proceso*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/reportajes/2021/8/22/la-guerra-entre-el-mayo-los-chapitos-por-baja-california-sonora-270349.html>

<sup>57</sup> “Los Salazar’ y ‘Los Garibay’ buscan desplazar al “Mayo Zambada” de Mexicali,” *Lo de Hoy México*, February 26, 2021, <https://pue.informacion.lodehoy.com.mx/node/24301>

<sup>58</sup> “Los Rusos’ alinean a ‘polleros’ y narcomenudistas en Mexicali,” *Zeta Tijuana*, August 30, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/08/los-rusos-alinean-a-polleros-y-narcomenudistas-en-mexicali/>

<sup>59</sup> Erick Reynaga, “Lomas Altas en foco rojo de inseguridad; tierra de nadie,” *La Voz de la Frontera*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.lavozdelafrontera.com.mx/local/lomas-altas-en-foco-rojo-de-inseguridad-en-mexicali-tierra-de-nadie-7147331.html>

Rusos, was arrested in late December 2021.<sup>60</sup> Authorities have considered “El Omega” to be responsible for a significant portion of the violence in Mexicali during the internal Sinaloa Cartel conflict between cells aligned with “El Mayo” Zambada and those associated with “Los Chapitos.”<sup>61</sup> Given his position as a key figure within the “El Mayo” faction, the capture of “El Omega” could be a prelude to a violent succession struggle within Los Rusos or an offensive by “Chapitos”-aligned forces looking to capitalize on the arrest of one of “El Mayo” Zambada’s leading regional lieutenants.

#### D. Playas de Rosarito

Official FGE data in Playas de Rosarito provides an overall mixed picture of the current state of public security in the municipality, but there are encouraging indications regarding certain types of violent crime. Statistics on intentional injuries, rape, and extortion have all followed largely positive trajectories. Reported extortion cases have fallen steadily, with 8 cases in 2019, 2 in 2020, and only 1 in 2021. In 2019, there were 27 cases of rape, dipping down to 22 in 2020, and falling further to 17 in 2021. Similarly, intentional injuries have experienced a persistent decrease, with 199 cases in 2019, 175 in 2020, and 170 in 2021.

Other violent crimes have been characterized by less linear statistical patterns. Total violent robberies fell markedly from 374 cases in 2019 to 229 cases in 2020. However, incidence of robberies involving violence appeared to stabilize in 2021, with 245 cases reported, nearly 7% more than the 2020 total. Inversely, miscellaneous sex crimes saw a noticeable increase between 2019 and 2020, growing from 63 to 84, before falling back down to 68 in 2021. Data on kidnappings is largely inconclusive with regards to potential trends, especially given the low absolute totals of reported cases in Rosarito. There was 1 kidnapping case in 2019, 2 cases in 2020, and 1 in 2021.

Similar to other municipalities, Rosarito has seen tremendous growth in retail-level drug dealing. There were only 7 cases of *narcomenudeo* in 2019, followed by 25 cases in 2020. In 2021, authorities reported a total of 259 street-level drug sales cases. This means that there were 37 times as many drug-dealing cases in 2021 compared to only two years prior.

One noteworthy tendency in Rosarito has been a steady, year-on-year decline in intentional homicides since 2019. That year, a total of 144 cases of intentional homicide were reported in the municipality. This number fell to 127 in 2020 and dropped further to 123 in 2021, representing a decrease of 14.6% over this period. This trend is encouraging given that Rosarito had suffered a near-continuous increase in intentional

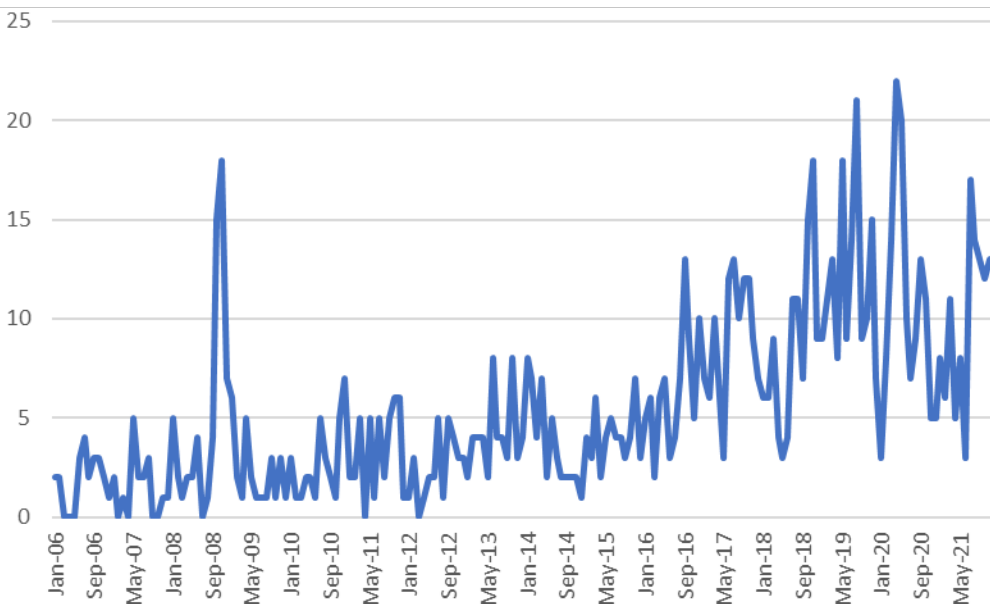
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<sup>60</sup> Cristian Torres, “Reportan sólo 4 detenidos en operativo “Omega” en Mexicali,” *La Jornada Baja California*, December 28, 2021, <https://jornadabc.com.mx/bajacalifornia/reportan-solo-4-detenidos-en-operativo-omega-en-mexicali/>

<sup>61</sup> “Detienen “El Omega”, operador de “El Mayo” Zambada en Mexicali,” *Proceso*, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/estados/2021/12/28/detienen-el-omega-operador-de-el-mayo-zambada-en-mexicali-278235.html>

homicides every year between 2014 and 2019. Despite the decline seen since 2019, however, the total number of reported cases remains high. The 2021 total of 123 homicides represented a more than 173% increase over the 2014 total of 45.

Figure 12: Intentional Homicide Cases Reported in Rosarito by Month, 2006-2021



Generated by author using FGE data

### Ties Between Organized Crime and Municipal Police in Rosarito

In comparison to other parts of the state, Rosarito has not been a major focal point of organized crime activity in Baja California. Its small geographic area and the relative absence of strategically-valuable territory for trafficking and other illicit economies may limit criminal interest in the municipality. Nevertheless, recent corruption allegations against Rosarito's local police force signal that both the CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel are present in the municipality. Specifically, media outlets have reported on an alleged group of municipal police officers who cooperate with the Sinaloa Cartel to carry out extrajudicial kidnappings of CJNG members and affiliated local drug retailers in order to hand them over to Sinaloa Cartel operatives to be tortured and executed.<sup>62</sup> In a possible corroboration of these claims, eight men believed to be affiliated with the CJNG were allegedly kidnapped by Rosarito police and were subsequently transferred to Sinaloa Cartel members in July 2021. Bodies possibly belonging to the eight disappeared men were later discovered in two separate points near highways linking Playas de Rosarito and Tijuana.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> "Policías "levantan" y asesinan," *Zeta Tijuana*, September 6, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/09/policias-levantan-y-asesinan/>

<sup>63</sup> Antonio Heras, "Asciende a ocho el número de cadáveres localizados en Tijuana," *La Jornada*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2021/07/29/estados/asciende-a-ocho-el-numero-de-cadaveres-localizados-en-tijuana/>



CJNG operatives in Rosarito have apparently responded to the alleged relationship between corrupt officers within the municipal police and the Sinaloa Cartel by engaging in confrontations with local officials. In August 2021, the deputy director of the Rosarito police was attacked by a group of armed civilians while on patrol, reportedly in retaliation for the police kidnapping of the eight CJNG members that had taken place the prior month.<sup>64</sup> Three men who were later arrested in relation to the assault claimed through their lawyers that Rosarito police forcibly disappeared an additional three suspects who were also tied to the retaliatory attack.<sup>65</sup> The following month, a Rosarito municipal police officer was shot dead while off-duty.<sup>66</sup> Less than two weeks prior to his death, the officer had been explicitly named in a narco-message that was later attributed to the CJNG.<sup>67</sup> In the written message, CJNG members accused the Rosarito municipal government, including the city's mayor, of supporting the Sinaloa Cartel and of allowing criminals to enter the municipal police force.<sup>68</sup>

If allegations that municipal authorities favor the Sinaloa Cartel are accurate, then this could imply that Sinaloa-linked operatives presumably hold the upper-hand vis-à-vis their CJNG rivals in Playas de Rosarito. Some analysts have argued that preference by local officials for a certain criminal group may tip the scale in favor of that group in a particular city or territory.<sup>69</sup> If the Sinaloa Cartel is, in fact, able to exert dominant influence in Playas de Rosarito, then that may offer one possible explanation for the recent decline in homicides. Hegemony of a single criminal organization in a particular area has been assessed at times to result in periods of lower levels of violence.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, it is difficult to evaluate the exact degree to which linkages may exist between criminal groups and local officials in Playas de Rosarito given the relatively small amount of publicly available reporting. Nevertheless, the recent accusations of collusion in Playas de Rosarito correspond firmly with reports coming out of other Baja California municipalities alleging purported operational ties between organized crime and municipal governments, particularly municipal police forces.

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<sup>64</sup> Carmen Gutiérrez, "Vinculan a proceso a presuntos responsables de ataque contra subdirector de la Policía de Rosarito," *El Imparcial*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.elimparcial.com/tijuana/rosarito/Vinculan-a-proceso-a-presuntos-responsables-de-ataque-contr-subdirector-de-la-Policia-de-Rosarito-20210823-0022.html>

<sup>65</sup> "Policías "levantan" y asesinan," *Zeta Tijuana*, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Gustavo Suárez, "Asesinan a policía municipal de Rosarito, en Tijuana," *El Mexicano*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.el-mexicano.com.mx/Noticia/Policiaca/16329/Asesinan-a-polic%C3%ADa-municipal-de-Rosarito,-en-Tijuana>

<sup>67</sup> Ángel Ramírez, "Policía de Rosarito fue baleado en Santa Fe, murió," *Cadena Noticias*, September 11, 2021, <https://cadenanoticias.com/regional/2021/09/policia-de-rosarito-fue-baleado-en-santa-fe-murio>

<sup>68</sup> "Policía fue amenazado hace semanas en narcomanta," *RCG Media*, September 13, 2021, <https://rcgmedia.mx/articulo/policia-fue-amenazado-hace-semanas-en-narcomanta-fue-asesinado-en-rosarito/>

<sup>69</sup> Steven Dudley, "How Juarez's Police, Politicians Picked Winners of Gang War," *InSight Crime*, February 13, 2013, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/juarez-police-politicians-picked-winners-gang-war/>

<sup>70</sup> Samuel Logan, *Ciudad Juárez Criminal Environment*, Southern Pulse, 2012.

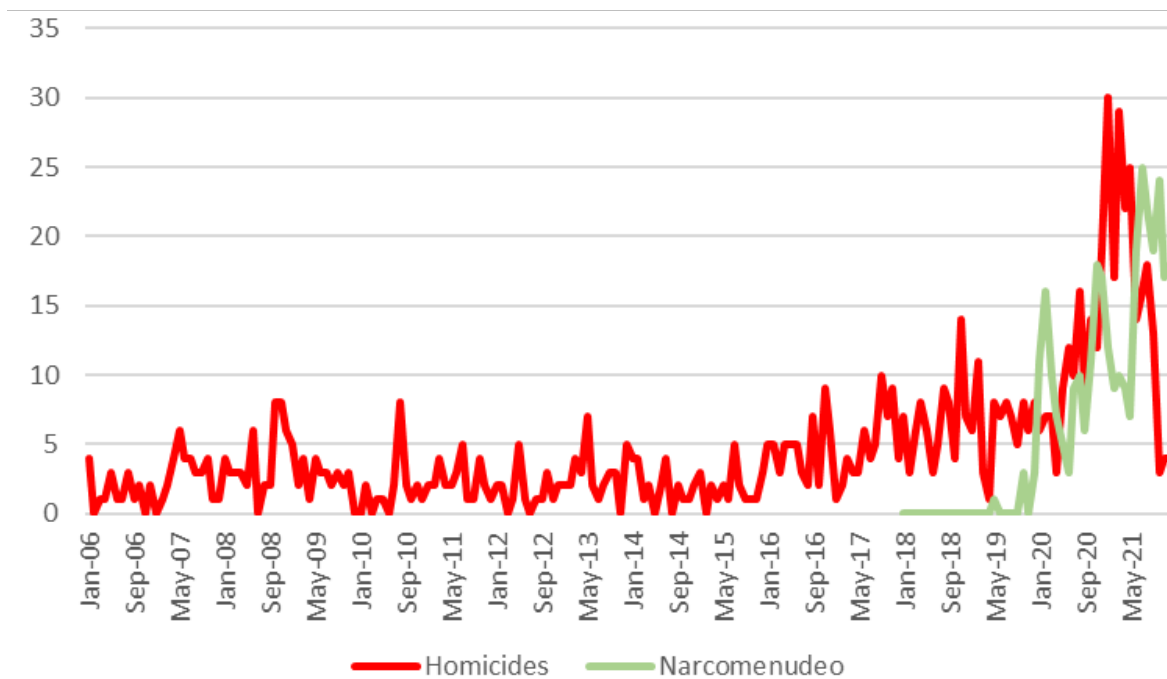
## E. Tecate

The security situation in Tecate, located between Baja California's two most populous municipalities of Tijuana and Mexicali, has become a growing cause for concern. Crime statistics since 2019 exhibit two noticeable trends in particular. Firstly, Tecate has seen an accelerated jump in intentional homicides, with the numbers of both cases and victims seeing substantial growth in relatively short periods of time. Secondly, there has been a massive increase in *narcomenudeo* cases, signaling the growth of activities linked to retail-level drug distribution in the municipality.

On intentional homicides, the total number of reported cases in Tecate has been experiencing a recent surge, as illustrated in Figure 13. In 2019, there were 78 intentional homicide cases. The following year, that number jumped to 124, and in 2021, there were 195 reported cases. Accordingly, intentional homicides in the municipality saw a 150% increase between 2019 and 2021. During this three-year period, the annual average of intentional homicide cases was slightly over 132, compared to only 65 in the preceding three years (2016-2018), illustrating a worrying acceleration in violence. The number of intentional homicide victims has also seen substantial yearly increases, going from a total of 96 in 2019, to 165 in 2020, and finally 237 victims in 2021, meaning that the number of people murdered in Tecate rose by 146.9% in the past three years.

Retail drug dealing cases grew exponentially between 2019 and 2020, going from only 7 cases to 123, an incredible 1657.1% increase over a single year. This upward trend continued in 2021 (albeit at a slower rate), with the year ending with 173 cases. Monthly totals of *narcomenudeo* cases in 2021 were noticeably higher in the latter half of the year, suggesting that the ongoing growth in retail-level drug sales may begin to accelerate again in 2022. Notably, the totals of both homicides and *narcomenudeo* cases were nearly identical in both 2020 and 2021.

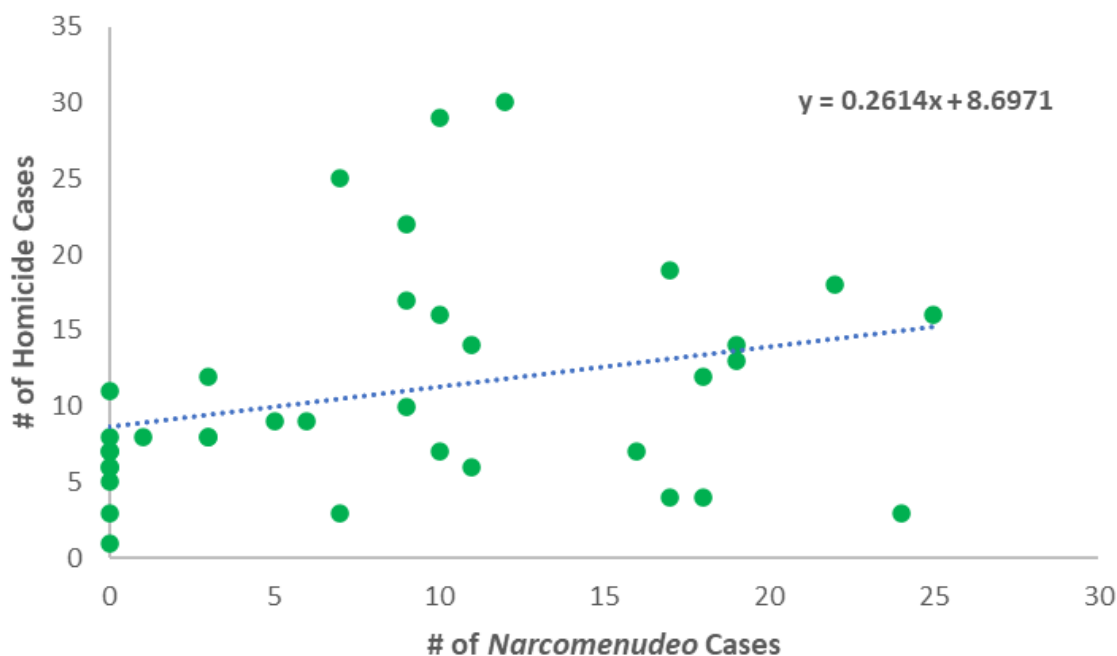
Figure 13: Intentional Homicide and Narcomenudeo Cases Reported in Tecate by Month, 2006-2021



Generated by author using FGE data

To test how closely tied the dramatic rise in street-level drug dealing cases has been to the sharp increase in reported intentional homicides since 2019, Figure 12 presents a scatter plot of the monthly totals of *narcomenudeo* cases and intentional homicide cases in all 36 months between January 2019 and December 2021. As can be seen, months that had more *narcomenudeo* cases tended to have more homicide cases. Nevertheless, a regression analysis produced a p-value of 0.122, indicating that the relationship between retail drug activity as measured by number of reported cases and homicide levels was not statistically significant. Furthermore, an R Square figure of 0.07, indicating that 7% of the variation in homicide cases could be attributed to the number of *narcomenudeo* cases, suggest that potential impact of retail drug distribution activity on homicide levels may be limited.

Figure 14: Totals of Narcomenudeo and Intentional Homicide Cases in Tecate in All 36 Months Between 2019 and 2021



Generated by author using FGE data

Other forms of crime saw drops in incidence between 2019 and 2020, but suffered increases in 2021. Extortion cases decreased from 6 in 2019 to 4 in 2020, and then jumped to 10 in 2021. Reported rapes fell slightly from 20 to 17 between 2019 and 2020, only to grow to 22 in 2021. Robberies involving violence dropped from 235 in 2019 to 166 cases in 2020, but shot back up to 251 in 2021. Of note, monthly totals of violent vehicular theft, violent robberies in public, and violent robberies of businesses tended to grow larger in the latter months of 2021. If this trend carries on into 2022, overall incidence of violent robbery may continue on an upward trajectory after dipping in 2020.

### Organized Crime Activity in Tecate

Because Tecate lies directly along the California-Mexico border and provides access to a U.S. port of entry, it is a potentially profitable territory for organized crime networks looking to import illicit drugs into the United States. In recent years, criminal elements linked to both the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have appeared to be the active in the area.<sup>71</sup> An intelligence report produced by local authorities in May 2021 indicated that the CJNG is increasing its presence in the municipality in order to make Tecate a new base

<sup>71</sup> Armando Acosta Rojas, "Localizan ejecutado de Machetazo con narcomensaje contra El Moreno," *El Mexicano*, January 6, 2021, <http://elmexicano.digital/Noticia/Policiaca/2166/Localizan-ejecutado-de-Machetazo-con-narcomensaje-contra-El-Moreno>

of operations for its efforts in Baja California, in part because of its location on the U.S. border.<sup>72</sup>

Competition over territorial influence has led to numerous CJNG-Sinaloa clashes in various parts of the municipality. In addition to incidents in multiple locations throughout Tecate's urban core,<sup>73</sup> violence has been particularly acute in certain rural zones that lie further away from Tecate city proper. Some of the most impacted communities include Paso del Águila, Valle de las Palmas, Nueva Hindú, and Cerro Azul<sup>74</sup> all of which have seen persistent fighting between the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG since at least 2020.<sup>75</sup> These particular localities may suffer disproportionately from organized crime conflicts because major thoroughfares that are of strategic value run through them. For example, Federal Highway 3, which passes directly through Cerro Azul and Nueva Hindú, connects various drug-producing areas of Ensenada municipality (such as Ojos Negros and Ignacio Zaragoza) with the U.S.-Mexico border at Tecate. When transiting between Tijuana and Tecate using Federal Highway 2, a vital link between the two cities, it is necessary to pass through a stretch that runs through Paso del Águila. This suggests that control of the area is likely important for both the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG, as it would facilitate movement and operational connectivity between the two municipalities.

Some of the broader shifts in alliances and loyalties among Baja California's criminal actors that have been detailed in previous sections have had ripple effects in Tecate. The violent rivalry between the CJNG's Los Cabos enforcer group and former members led by David "El Lobo" López Jiménez that has played out primarily in Tijuana has reportedly been extending into Tecate, particularly the municipality's northwest.<sup>76</sup> López Jiménez's entry into Tecate could foreshadow even more violence given the reported alliance between the AFO group of "El Flaquito" Huerta Nuño (of which "El Lobo" is a leading member) and the Sinaloa Cartel faction headed by "Los Chapitos." As part of the Chapitos-Flaquito pact, criminal forces working with "El Lobo" could be mobilized against affiliates of "El Mayo" Zambada in Tecate, similar to what has been observed in Ensenada. In such a scenario, Tecate would be impacted not only by clashes between the CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel, but also the internal disputes currently unfolding within both organizations.

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<sup>72</sup> "Tecate, la nueva base operativa del crimen," *El Universal*, May 15, 2021,

<https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/tecate-la-nueva-base-operativa-del-crimen>

<sup>73</sup> "Tres días de balaceras en Tecate, sicarios levantaron a dos y arrojaron bombas molotov," *Punto Norte*, May 17, 2020, <https://pontonorte.info/2020/05/17/tres-dias-de-balaceras-en-tecate-sicarios-levantaron-a-dos-y-arrojaron-bombas-molotov/>

<sup>74</sup> "Homicidios en Tecate aumenta 57%, estadísticas registradas hasta el mes de noviembre del 2020," *Tecate Informativo*, January 3, 2021, <https://tecateinformativo.com/homicidios-en-tecate-aumentan-57-estadisticas-registradas-hasta-el-mes-de-noviembre-del-2020/>

<sup>75</sup> Alejandro Arturo Villa, "Tecatenses, víctimas de pugnas entre el crimen organizado," *Zeta Tijuana*, April 26, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/04/tecatenses-victimas-de-pugnas-entre-el-crimen-organizado/>;

Alejandro Arturo Villa, "Tecatenses, víctimas del CJNG y del CS," *Zeta Tijuana*, November 2, 2020, <https://zetatijuana.com/2020/11/tecatenses-victimas-del-cjng-y-del-cs/>

<sup>76</sup> "A muerte, pugna entre "Los Cabos" y "El Lobo"" *Zeta Tijuana*, 2021.

In a Tecate-specific development, there has been considerable fallout resulting from the reported departure of Danny Isaac “El Moreno” Ortiz Covarrubias from the CJNG. For years, “El Moreno” had been identified as a leading CJNG figure in Tecate and one of the main individuals behind violence in the municipality.<sup>77</sup> However, starting in late 2020, narco-messages indicated that Ortiz Covarrubias may have split from the CJNG and joined a rival group.<sup>78</sup> In a possible demonstration of this, the CJNG is believed to have been behind a series of targeted assassinations of local officials with alleged links with “El Moreno.” Among those killed include a municipal councilman and a municipal police officer accused of having close personal ties with Ortiz Covarrubias and providing him with information on the movements of local security forces.<sup>79</sup> In early January 2022, “El Moreno” himself was murdered, presumably by his former colleagues in the CJNG.<sup>80</sup> In light of reports that Ortiz Covarrubias had been looking to affiliate with the Chapitos faction of the Sinaloa Cartel,<sup>81</sup> the intense CJNG reaction to his defection seemingly underscores the importance of the Tecate *plaza* for organized crime in Baja California.

The string of CJNG attacks against local officials with alleged ties to “El Moreno” hints towards a broader issue of collusion between criminal groups and local authorities. As seen in other municipalities, this issue is especially visible in Tecate’s municipal police. Between July 2020 and July 2021, up to 10% of the entire police force came under investigation for possible ties to organized crime.<sup>82</sup> During this time, there were a number of high-profile incidents involving relationships between Tecate police and organized crime. In July 2020, a local police supervisor was arrested by federal authorities for purported links with the CJNG.<sup>83</sup> Four months later, another municipal police officer was arrested by state officials for accepting monthly bribes in exchange for

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<sup>77</sup> Fiscalía General del Estado, “Vinculan a sujetos capturados en posesión de arsenal tras balacera en Tecate,” *Gobierno de Baja California*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.fgebc.gob.mx/boletines/1867-vinculan-a-sujetos-capturados-en-posesion-de-arsenal-tras-balacera-en-tecate>

<sup>78</sup> Berenice Barreto, “Colocan 2 narcomantas en Tecate, hay un detenido,” *Tecate Informativo*, December 23, 2020, <https://tecateinformativo.com/colocan-2-narcomantas-en-tecate-hay-un-detenido/>

<sup>79</sup> “Asesinan a policía en Baja California, aseguran que trabajaba para un cartel,” *Zócalo*, June 2021, <https://www.zocalo.com.mx/asesinan-a-policia-en-baja-california-aseguran-que-trabajaba-para-un-cartel/>; Eduardo Rubio, “Balas del narco, detrás del crimen de regidor en Tecate,” *La Silla Rota*, February 10, 2021, <https://lasillarota.com/estados/balas-del-narco-detras-del-crimen-de-regidor-en-tecate/485026>

<sup>80</sup> Inés García Ramos, “Ejecutan a El Moreno, ex líder del Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación en Tecate,” *Punto Norte*, January 4, 2022, <https://pontonorte.info/2022/01/04/ejecutan-a-el-moreno-ex-lider-del-cartel-jalisco-nueva-generacion-en-tecate/>

<sup>81</sup> “El CJNG estaría detrás del asesinato del regidor de Tecate, Alfonso Zacarías,” *Centro de Informes*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.centrodeinformes.com.ar/el-cjng-estaria-detras-del-asesinato-del-regidor-de-tecate-alfonso-zacarias/>

<sup>82</sup> “La Policía del CJNG,” *Zeta Tijuana*, July 5, 2021, <https://zetatijuana.com/2021/07/la-policia-del-cjng/>

<sup>83</sup> Said Betanzos, “Detienen a supervisor de Policía de Tecate por presuntos nexos con CJNG,” *Milenio*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.milenio.com/estados/detienen-mando-policia-tecate-presuntos-nexos-cjng>



offering institutional protection to CJNG hitmen.<sup>84</sup> Reports like these indicate that the escalating criminal violence afflicting Tecate is partly enabled by a considerable level of institutional corruption.

## IV. Mexican Government Responses

Below is an analysis of federal, state, and local governmental responses to the security situation in the state of Baja California.

### Federal Response and the Impact of the National Guard

As part of his broader security strategy, the federal administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has spearheaded deployments of the National Guard to help quell the violence in Baja California. The first National Guard deployment to Baja California took place in July 2019 and consisted of 500 officers, with 300 sent to Tijuana, 120 to Mexicali, and 80 to Tecate.<sup>85</sup> This was followed later that month by a deployment of 225 National Guard members to Ensenada,<sup>86</sup> and 200 officers sent to Playas de Rosarito and Tecate in December 2019.<sup>87</sup> Subsequent deployments included the sending of an additional 400 members starting in February 2020,<sup>88</sup> and the deployment of 100 officers to Tijuana and 500 to the rest of the state between March and August 2021.<sup>89</sup> *Animal Político* estimated in January 2022 that the total number of National Guard personnel in Baja California had swelled to 2,119.<sup>90</sup>

Following the first deployment in July 2019, reported intentional homicides appeared to decline noticeably compared to the months preceding the arrival of the National Guard, falling from 260 cases in July (the start of the deployment) to 185 by December, a nearly 29% decrease. However, the next major deployment started in February 2020 seemed to

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<sup>84</sup> "Captura la FGE a policía de Tecate por permitir fuga de sicario del CJNG," *El Mexicano*, November 3, 2020, <https://el-mexicano.com.mx/Noticia/Policiaca/770/Captura-la-FGE-a-polic%C3%ADa-de-Tecate-por-permitir-fuga-de-sicario-del-CJNG>

<sup>85</sup> Juan Miguel Hernández, "Hoy llega a BC la Guardia Nacional," *El Sol de Tijuana*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.elsoldetijuana.com.mx/local/llega-este-sabado-la-guardia-nacional-a-baja-california-3854772.html>

<sup>86</sup> "Hay 225 elementos de la Guardia Nacional en Ensenada," *El Imparcial*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.elimparcial.com/tijuana/ensenada/Hay-225-elementos-de-la-Guardia-Nacional-en-Ensenada-20190712-0021.html>

<sup>87</sup> "Llegarán a BC otros 200 elementos de la Guardia Nacional," *Hiptex*, December 2, 2019, <https://hiptex.com.mx/noticias/13579/llegaran-a-bc-otros-200-elementos-de-la-guardia-nacional>

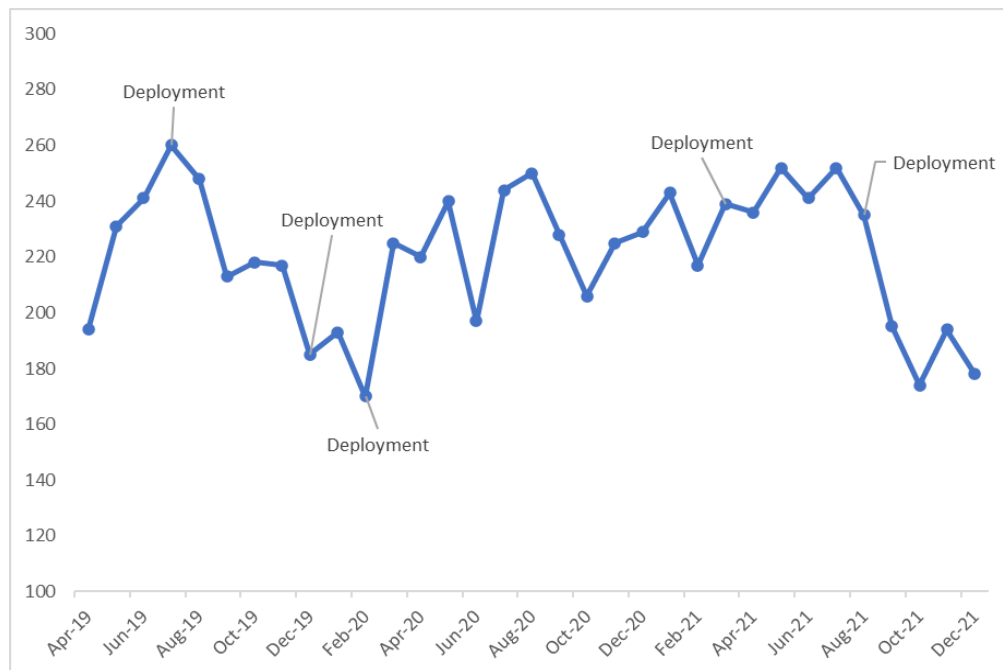
<sup>88</sup> Antonio Maya, "Llegarán más elementos de la Guardia Nacional a Tijuana," *El Sol de Tijuana*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.elsoldetijuana.com.mx/local/llegaran-mas-elementos-de-la-guardia-nacional-a-tijuana-4877080.html>

<sup>89</sup> "Arriban Mil 400 Militares Y Elementos De La GN A BC," *En Línea BC*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.enlineabc.com.mx/2021/08/25/arriban-mil-400-militares-y-elementos-de-la-gn-a-bc/>; Marinee Zavala, "Cientos de elementos de la Guardia Nacional llegarán a Baja California para combatir violencia," *Telemundo*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.telemundo20.com/noticias/local/cientos-de-elementos-de-la-guardia-nacional-llegarian-a-baja-california-para-combatir-violencia/2098361/>

<sup>90</sup> Manu Ureste, "Gobierno aumentó más del 100% los soldados en estados violentos, pero delitos siguen al alza," *Animal Político*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2022/01/estados-aumento-soldados-violencia-homicidios-siguen/>

have had the opposite effect. Statewide homicides jumped from 170 in February to 240 in May, an increase of over 41%, and elevated monthly totals would largely continue until the end of 2020. Reported deployments between March and August 2021 appeared to have negligible impact on homicide levels, with statewide totals largely stagnating during this period. However, after August, homicides entered into a downward trajectory for the remainder of the year.

Figure 15: Intentional Homicide Cases Reported Statewide and National Guard Deployments, April 2019-December 2021



It is worth noting that there are, of course, a myriad of other factors that impact homicide levels in Baja California aside from the presence of the National Guard. However, the varied and mixed impact of major deployments thus far suggests that the effectiveness of augmenting National Guard presence as a way to combat insecurity may be limited.

### State- and Municipal-Level Responses

Much of Baja California's state-level policy response to the challenge of violent crime in recent years has been characterized by constant reform and restructuring of public security institutions. In 2019, following a four-year uninterrupted increase in intentional homicides between 2014 and 2018, state lawmakers approved the creation of a new State Attorney General's Office (*Fiscalía General del Estado*, FGE) in order to merge the functions of the state Secretariat of Public Security (*Secretaría de Seguridad Pública*) and the former *Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado* (PGJE) into a single institution with



greater budgetary and operational autonomy.<sup>91</sup> The Baja California legislature also replaced the Preventive State Police (*Policía Estatal Preventiva*, PEP) with a new statewide security force called the State Guard for Security and Investigation (*Guardia Estatal de Seguridad e Investigación*, GESI) in response to longstanding allegations of corruption and malfeasance within the PEP. As part of the move to consolidate most security-related operations into a single body, GESI was also incorporated into the FGE's organizational structure.<sup>92</sup>

In late 2021, state government reversed course by beginning to decentralize the functions that had been concentrated in the FGE. Lawmakers approved a proposal by then-newlyelected Governor Marina del Pilar to establish a new Secretariat of Citizen Security (*Secretaría de Seguridad Ciudadana*) that separated certain public security responsibilities, such as oversight of prisons and command of state police forces, away from the FGE. The governor justified the move by arguing that consolidation of security-related duties under the FGE failed to improve interagency coordination between various institutions and actually impeded the state's capacity to respond to crime by placing "excessive" burden on a single agency.<sup>93</sup> As part of the reforms, GESI was replaced by another new state police body, the Citizen Security State Force (*Fuerza Estatal de Seguridad Ciudadana*), which would then form part of the new Citizen Security Secretariat.<sup>94</sup> In January 2022, Secretary of Citizen Security Gilberto Landeros Briseño – an Army general – announced that the state government's security strategy will focus attention on geographic areas of the state with the highest crime rates and will emphasize cooperation with the Armed Forces and the National Guard in combatting organized crime.<sup>95</sup>

Most municipal governments in the state have implemented or announced local-level strategies aimed at improving security conditions. While the details of each strategy vary across the different municipalities, a number of core elements appear to be prevalent across most local government responses. Increasing security force presence in geographic areas with the highest concentrations of crime, emphasizing municipal coordination with federal and state counterparts, and encouraging closer partnerships

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<sup>91</sup> "'Desaparece' Congreso a la PEP," *Agencia Fronteriza de Noticias*, October 10, 2019, [http://www.afntijuana.info/view\\_post.php?catid=informacion\\_general&postid=99927\\_desaparece\\_congreso\\_a\\_la\\_pep](http://www.afntijuana.info/view_post.php?catid=informacion_general&postid=99927_desaparece_congreso_a_la_pep)

<sup>92</sup> Congreso del Estado, "Ley Orgánica de la Fiscalía General del Estado de Baja California," *Gobierno de Baja California*, October 31, 2019, [https://www.congresobc.gob.mx/Documentos/ProcesoParlamentario/Leyes/TOMO\\_V/20201106\\_LEYORGFISCA\\_LIA.PDF](https://www.congresobc.gob.mx/Documentos/ProcesoParlamentario/Leyes/TOMO_V/20201106_LEYORGFISCA_LIA.PDF)

<sup>93</sup> Antonio Heras, "Aprueban creación en BC de Secretaría de Seguridad Ciudadana," *La Jornada*, November 18, 2021, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2021/11/18/estados/aprueban-creacion-en-bc-de-secretaria-de-seguridad-ciudadana/>

<sup>94</sup> Giovanni Urenda, "Secretaría de Seguridad Ciudadana no se parecerá a la PEP," *El Sol de Tijuana*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.elsoldetijuana.com.mx/local/secretaria-de-seguridad-ciudadana-no-se-parecera-a-la-pep-7616443.html>

<sup>95</sup> Jesús A. Cervantes, "El general Gilberto Landeros expone la estrategia de seguridad que seguirá para Baja California," *Proceso*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/estados/2022/1/5/el-general-gilberto-landeros-expone-la-estrategia-de-seguridad-que-seguira-para-baja-california-278635.html>

between police and communities are all elements featured in municipal-level public security plans articulated by officials in Ensenada,<sup>96</sup> Mexicali,<sup>97</sup> Tecate,<sup>98</sup> and Tijuana.<sup>99</sup> Tijuana's municipal Security and Citizen Protection Secretary Fernando Sánchez González has repeatedly stressed that the city's police force is understaffed, and consequently, has had to rely on federal and state security forces and use of various technologies, such as drones and surveillance camera systems.<sup>100</sup>

## V. U.S.-Mexico Border Dynamics

Because of Baja California's location along a heavily transited portion of the U.S.-Mexico border, much of the criminal activity afflicting the state are linked to its status as a strategic trafficking corridor. Accordingly, the potential effects of the partial closure of the border during the COVID-19 pandemic on crime dynamics in Baja California merit special attention.

One area that appears to have been particularly impacted has been the range of trafficking methods employed by criminal networks in Baja California to import illicit drug shipments into the United States. Between March 2020 and November 2021,<sup>101</sup> movement across the border, including at crossings in Tijuana, Mexicali, and Tecate, was restricted to "essential travel." The U.S Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has reported that most illicit drugs entering the United States from Mexico come in through official ports of entry,<sup>102</sup> meaning that reduced volumes of travel across the border possibly made attempted drug shipments more vulnerable to heightened scrutiny by U.S. border agents.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Arranca la séptima etapa del plan de acción "Ensenada Segura,"" *Gobierno de Ensenada*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.ensenada.gob.mx/?p=7608>

<sup>97</sup> Juan Carlos Noriega, "Mayor presencia policiaca para bajar índices de inseguridad," *Periodismo Negro*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.periodismonegro.mx/2021/10/08/google-mayor-presencia-policia-para-bajar-indices-de-inseguridad/>

<sup>98</sup> Berenice Barreto, "La seguridad es la prioridad y haremos todo lo que nos corresponde: Darío Benítez," *Tecate Informativo*, December 31, 2021, <https://tecateinformativo.com/la-seguridad-es-la-prioridad-y-haremos-todo-lo-que-nos-corresponde-dario-benitez/>

<sup>99</sup> Juan Pablo Guerra, "'No habrá cheques en blanco' en la policía: Sánchez González," *La Jornada Baja California*, October 12, 2021, <https://jornadabc.com.mx/bajacalifornia/no-habra-cheques-en-blanco-en-la-policia-sanchez-gonzalez/>

<sup>100</sup> Giovanni Urenda, "La Policía aprovechará la tecnología, dijo Sánchez González," *El Sol de Tijuana*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.elsoldetijuana.com.mx/local/la-policia-aprovechara-la-tecnologia-dijo-sanchez-gonzalez-7331005.html>

<sup>101</sup> Lizbeth Díaz and José Luis González, "U.S.-Mexico border reopens after 20 months of COVID shutdown," *Reuters*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-mexico-border-reopens-after-20-months-covid-disruption-2021-11-08/>

<sup>102</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration, "2020 National Drug Threat Assessment," *U.S. Department of Justice*, March 2021, [https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf)

<sup>103</sup> Steve Fisher and Kirk Semple, "Hit Hard by the Pandemic, Mexico's Drug Cartels Tweaked Their Playbook," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/29/world/americas/mexico-pandemic-drug-trade.html>

In response to the increased risk of detection, criminal groups in Baja California may have increased their use of less common tactics to move drugs into the U.S. market during this period. In January 2021, officials with the U.S. Border Patrol's San Diego Sector told local media that the use of drones to smuggle drugs across the San Diego-Tijuana border saw an "uptick in recent months."<sup>104</sup> U.S. border officials along the San Diego-Tijuana also reported a record high of maritime smuggling events during the partial border closure.<sup>105</sup> Although maritime smuggling is typically associated with irregular migration, multiple incidents during the reported "surge" in maritime smuggling off the Southern California coast have involved drugs.<sup>106</sup> This suggests the possibility that trafficking networks experimented with increasing their use of maritime vessels as a method to import drugs into the United States in order to circumvent the partial closure of the land border.

Restrictions on travel across the Baja California-California border also impacted criminal networks' southbound movements. Bulk cash smuggling, which typically flows southward from the United States to Mexico, seems to have been particularly affected. In June 2020, Mexican officials at the El Chaparral border crossing in Tijuana arrested two U.S. women attempting to smuggle over \$2.6 million in bulk currency.<sup>107</sup> The following month, customs agents in Tijuana interdicted a further \$51,000 in bulk cash arriving from the United States.<sup>108</sup> These incidents in Baja California are consistent with broader reports that restrictions on movement across the border complicated efforts by criminal organizations to bring proceeds from the United States to Mexico.<sup>109</sup> As was seen in U.S. ports of entry, the reduced size of travel flows resulting from

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<sup>104</sup> Luis Chaparro, "'Like a flying ant': An operative describes how Mexico's cartels use drones to attack enemies and smuggle drugs," *Business Insider*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-mexicos-cartels-are-using-drugs-for-attacks-drug-smuggling-2021-5>

<sup>105</sup> Karen Kucher, "Border Patrol agents seized record amounts of fentanyl, meth in FY 2020," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/story/2020-11-10/border-patrol-agents-seized-record-amounts-of-fentanyl-meth-in-fy-2020>

<sup>106</sup> Jaime Ruiz, "Maritime Smuggling Activity Increases in Orange, Los Angeles, and Ventura Counties," *U.S. Customs and Border Protection*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/local-media-release/maritime-smuggling-activity-increases-orange-los-angeles-and-ventura>; "Pilot of Boat that Capsized 7.5 Miles West of Mission Bay Sentenced in Drug and Human Smuggling Event," *U.S. Department of Justice*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/pilot-boat-capsized-75-miles-west-mission-bay-sentenced-drug-and-human-smuggling-event>

<sup>107</sup> Servicio de Administración Tributaria, "Decomisa Aduanas divisas por más de 2.6 millones de dólares provenientes de Estados Unidos," *Gobierno de México*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.gob.mx/sat/prensa/decomisa-aduanas-divisas-por-mas-de-2-6-millones-de-dolares-provenientes-de-estados-unidos-25-2020?idiom=es>

<sup>108</sup> Servicio de Administración Tributaria, "Decomisa AGA 51 mil dólares en aduana de Tijuana; suman 62 mdp por delito de contrabando en una semana," *Gobierno de México*, <https://www.gob.mx/sat/prensa/decomisa-aga-51-mil-dolares-en-aduana-de-tijuana-suman-62-mdp-por-delito-de-contrabando-en-una-semana-27-2020?idiom=es>

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Blankstein, Tom Winter, and Rich Schapiro, "COVID-19 is costing drug cartels millions of dollars," *NBC News*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/crime-courts/covid-19-costing-drug-cartels-millions-dollars-n1213181>

pandemic-related restrictions, even with southbound controls less strict than in the opposite direction, may have rendered illicit cross-border movements more susceptible to elevated scrutiny by Mexican authorities.

## VI. Policy Recommendations

In light of the recent trends and developments that are shaping crime in Baja California, the following are broad policy recommendations that may be helpful in addressing the state's public security challenges as they currently stand:

### 1) Bolster drug rehabilitation to help curb violence driven by retail-level drug distribution

Authorities at various levels of government routinely attribute a significant portion of violence in Baja California to disputes related to drug sales at the retail-level. Large increases in the number of *narcomenudeo* cases seen in recent years and survey data indicating growing rates of drug use suggest that local drug dealing is an important revenue source for criminal organizations, and thus, helps fuel part of the ongoing violence.

#### a. Increase access to treatment

Rehabilitation and treatment services continue to be out of reach for many due to financial restraints, particularly for those from low-income and marginalized communities where drug use and dealing are often more prevalent. State and municipal officials should look for creative ways to improve accessibility to drug treatment, including by working with federal counterparts, international organizations, charitable groups, civil society, and other partners to expand offerings of low-cost or free rehabilitation centers.

#### b. Emphasize prevention and treatment among youth

Children and adolescents remain especially susceptible to drug addiction. Health agencies, social services, and community actors should revisit the efficacy of existing drug education initiatives and develop changes as necessary. Designing rehabilitation and treatment plans that are specifically tailored for the medical needs of children, teenagers, and young adults may be an idea that merits consideration.

#### c. Secure treatment facilities from criminal exploitation

Rehabilitation centers continue to be targeted by criminal networks looking to exploit the vulnerability of individuals with substance abuse issues by recruiting them to serve in low-end, largely expendable roles such as lookouts, hitmen, and street-level dealers. Authorities should take steps to limit the ability of external parties to access and interact with patients during treatment. Improved monitoring of patients' activities might also hinder criminal attempts to communicate with those seeking treatment and can enable individuals to focus exclusively on their recovery.

## 2) Improve coordination between security agencies

Shortcomings in cooperation between security and justice agencies at different levels of government and across different jurisdictions undermine the ability to effectively respond to criminal activities that are contributing to levels of violence.

### a. Invest in interoperability at the local level

Municipal security institutions should collaborate to ensure that operations can take place seamlessly across municipal borders. This might help address the problem of criminal groups moving back and forth between municipal jurisdictions as a means of disrupting pursuits by municipal police. A February 2021 agreement between Ensenada and Playas de Rosarito to establish joint patrols in areas along the boundary that separates the two municipalities may serve as a model of how local governments can detect and restrict movement of criminal groups through greater interoperability.

### b. Develop mechanisms for communication and information-sharing with other states

Baja California authorities should work to develop clearer standards and procedures for communication and information-sharing with security and justice agencies of other states. These could be institutionalized into formal mechanisms facilitating the exchange of operational and investigative intelligence between Baja California and other states. As demonstrated by the situation in Mexicali, flawed coordination with officials in neighboring Sonora and San Luis Río Colorado has allowed inter-state criminal activity to persist and fuel growing levels of violence. Given that Baja California is regularly impacted by national and regional organized crime dynamics that often originate outside of its borders, improved and sustained cooperation with other states is especially crucial in tackling the state's security challenges.

## 3) Reassess vetting procedures for municipal police officers

Corruption and possible ties with organized crime beset security forces at all levels of government, but municipal police officers may be more vulnerable to criminal influence due to factors such as lower pay and deficient oversight. The considerable number of reports of links between municipal police forces in Baja California and criminal organizations suggest that efforts to address malfeasance within security forces is particularly urgent at the municipal level.

### a. Implement probationary evaluation period for new recruits

Municipal police forces should consider requiring all new recruits to successfully undergo a fixed period of time in which they will be closely monitored while serving as a police trainee or cadet. This prolonged period of monitoring while “on-the-job” may enable detection of concerning behavioral traits or personality aspects that may otherwise go undetected in a standard background investigation.

b. Explore feasibility of “continuous vetting”

Instead of periodic, comprehensive purges of municipal police forces, security agencies should explore the feasibility of incorporating “continuous evaluation” into their vetting procedures. This would subject all police officers to vetting on a permanent, ongoing basis. Such a move would enable internal affairs units and background investigators to receive alerts in real time if there are new record entries concerning an individual police officer in any federal, state, or international database containing criminal, financial, or other information that may cast doubt on a police officer’s suitability.

## VII. Conclusion

The public security challenges facing Baja California remain significant. Communities continue to be impacted by elevated levels of violence, and emerging patterns in violent crime incidence serve as a reminder of persistent volatility in the security situation. Furthermore, the enduring and widespread activity of criminal organizations in Baja California has been exacerbated by rapidly evolving organized crime dynamics. Given the complex nature of criminal violence in the state, a sustained improvement in Baja California’s security situation can only be achieved through comprehensive and multidimensional responses that involve the participation of actors from all sectors of society.