



Photo by Mark Lennihan, Associated Press.

## MEXICO'S DRUG WAR

An officer patrols New York's Washington Heights neighborhood, 1998.

# Lessons From New York?

by Celeste Kauffman

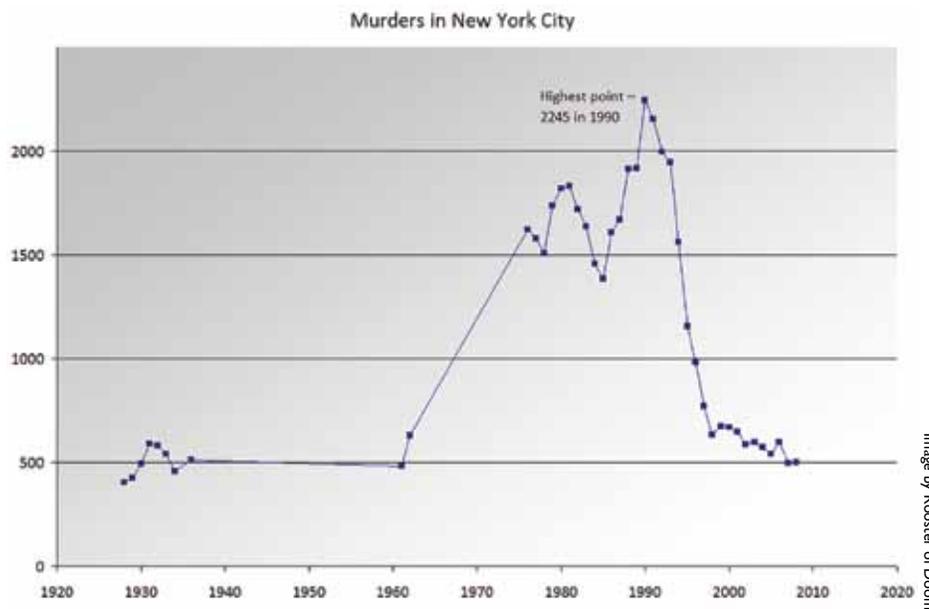
**T**he 40,000-plus, drug-related murders that have rocked Mexico over the past six years are not a necessary result of drug trafficking. Furthermore, U.S. strategy, which seeks to end narco-violence by eliminating the drug trade, is misguided. So argued noted legal scholar Frank Zimring during his talk for the Center for Latin American Studies. Taking New York City as a model, Zimring proposed that a crime prevention strategy that concentrates resources on limited priorities and specific geographic areas could control the violence that has ravaged Mexico.

During the early 1990s, violent crime exploded in New York, linked to the rise in cocaine as an urban recreational drug. At the height of the violence, there were some 600 drug-related deaths in the city each year. The dramatic rise in drug use and the accompanying crime wave led to

a societal debate on how to address the problem. Hardline “drug warriors” insisted that only massive reductions in drug use could decrease the violence, and therefore, the war on drugs should target absolutely every drug, every use and every sale. At the other end of the spectrum were harm reductionists. Their strategy focused on identifying the most problematic impacts of drug use, such as the violence that often accompanied it, and concentrating resources on those specific problems, rather than fighting the entire universe of illicit drug use.

Ultimately, the harm prevention strategy proved more effective than the war on drugs. In New York, officials chose to focus on reducing drug-related violence by shutting down open-air markets on the streets, rather than focusing on drug-use reduction. As a result, while drug use has remained stable, drug-related violence in New York has

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Trends in New York City homicides.

Image by Reoster of Doom.

a billion dollars to help the Mexican government control drug and weapons trafficking — both governments have made remarkably little progress in interrupting this trade. Meanwhile, drug-related violence, human rights abuses and lack of accountability among crime-fighting units have spiraled out of control.

In analyzing the failure of both governments to stop the spread of violence, Zimring pointed to a fundamental flaw in the strategy adopted by the United States: the false assumption that the violence can only be contained if the drug trade is halted. New York proved the inaccuracy of that assumption in the 1990s. According to Zimring, if the attempt to eradicate drugs was bad in the United States, it is poisonous in Mexico. If anything, the efforts of the past five years have intensified the violence that continues to grip border cities and expand across the country.

Instead of combating drug trafficking, Zimring suggests an alternative. Given the state of emergency, in the short term, officials need to concentrate their resources, both thematically and geographically, on the most troublesome aspects of the drug trade and resist the temptation to try to address the entire universe of illegal drug trafficking. Thus, while New York focused on eliminating open-air markets on city streets, in Mexico, Zimring believes the top two priorities should be to reduce drug killings and corruption. Second, just as New York police targeted the most dangerous areas, Mexican officials should concentrate their resources in overwhelming strength on one particularly violent city. Success in one region would be an important demonstration of the will and capacity of Mexican law enforcement to contain and combat violence.

declined more than 90 percent. In fact, New York experienced one of the steepest drops in violent crime ever recorded: in 2009, the homicide rate was 18 percent of the 1990 rate, while robbery and burglary dropped to 16 and 14 percent, respectively.

According to Zimring, the harm-reduction policy that proved so successful in New York is simple, and includes two steps. The first requires a conceptual focus, a decision to concentrate resources on one or two problems. In New York, the focus was on eliminating open-air markets on city streets. In the second step, officials must prioritize geographically, zeroing in on hot spots and concentrating resources in those areas until the prioritized problems have been addressed. Thus, in New York, police went in force to the most dangerous areas and stayed until violent crime rates plummeted.

Given the success of this strategy in New York, and the failure of both Mexico and the United States to control drug violence, Zimring believes that both governments should adopt the New York model to curb narco-violence in Mexico.

Mexican drug cartels currently dominate the transport and wholesale supply of drugs to the United States. It is an immensely profitable industry. Wholesale drug sales in the United States are believed to total somewhere between \$13 and \$48 billion annually. An estimated \$8.3 to \$24.9 billion in drug proceeds are smuggled back into Mexico every year.

While the drug trade has always been a rough game, narco-violence in Mexico has skyrocketed since 2006, when President Calderón announced his crackdown on drug trafficking and sent 6,500 federal troops to Michoacán to combat the cartels. The traffickers responded by waging war on government troops and rival gangs, leading to a downward spiral where cartels react to crackdowns by increasing the amount and severity of violence. Because of this cycle, there are now some 45,000 federal troops involved in Calderón's campaign to control the drug trade, and more than 40,000 people have lost their lives in the conflict.

Despite the immense resources that have been directed at battling the flow of drugs north and weapons and drug-money south — the United States alone has invested more than



Photo by Felix Marquez, Associated Press.

Mexican marines take over policing in the city of Veracruz after the entire police force was disbanded in an attempt to root out corruption.

Zimring is not blind to the vast differences between New York City and Mexican hot spots like Ciudad Juárez that may make his strategy inappropriate to Mexico. Drug sales in New York were small-scale and handled by disorganized dealers and small gangs. Mexican cartels, on the other hand, run the most sophisticated and dangerous organized crime syndicates in U.S. law enforcement history, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Large gangs operate without major opposition, and broad geographic areas are run by narco-trafficking groups. In addition, New York has a large, developed and reliable police force, while Mexico's crime-fighting infrastructure is ineffective at best and corrupt at worst, leaving 95 percent of crimes to go unsolved. New York also has a functioning criminal justice system; in Mexico, corruption and epic inefficiency have left the criminal justice system so crippled that even the most notorious criminals have not been prosecuted.

Zimring has two responses to this critique. First, these are emergency measures to halt the seemingly unstoppable violence that threatens to rend Mexico's social and economic fabric, rather than a solution to drug trafficking. Second, this strategy was successfully implemented in New York without regard to the underlying social or economic

forces driving either the violence or the drug trade; it was focused exclusively on regaining control of the city.

While federal troops and drastic measures are necessary to combat the horrific violence metastasizing along Mexican drug routes, Zimring recognizes that this solution is a short-term band-aid rather than a long-term cure. In order to truly address the entire universe of drug-trafficking, Mexico needs a complete restructuring of many of its social institutions. Mexico's law enforcement structure needs to be redesigned in order to address issues of corruption and poverty in the police force; inefficient courts require reform; and viable alternatives to drug trafficking need to be developed for the poor. However, such reforms take time, and Mexico cannot afford to wait for these changes to take root before addressing the violence ravaging the country.

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