

Although organized crime-related violence was already on the rise during the 1980s and 90s (Trejo and Ley 2020), the security situation in Mexico declined even further when former president Felipe Calderon declared war on the nation's drug cartels in 2006. Since then, criminal organizations have started to engage more frequently in armed struggles not only with each other, but with the state as well (Lessing 2015). These events prompted political scientists to think more carefully about how the state should respond to violence perpetrated by criminal organizations now that the "Drug War" has been initiated. The scholarly consensus is that militarized tactics such as leadership decapitations and armed confrontations only lead to more violence and insecurity (Calderón et al. 2015; Osorio 2015) and, as a result, national governments should employ "conditional" approaches when dealing with criminal organizations—that is, only engage with the most violent cartels as it is inefficient to target all of them at once (Lessing 2017). However, one question that remains underexplored in the literature is how the dynamics of the drug conflict impacts police reform at the subnational level. Studying how criminal governance—and the state's militarized response to it—affects police reform is important because these civilian-oriented reforms have implications for how effectively the state can provide public safety to ordinary citizens in Mexico.

Through the support of the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, I traveled to Mexico in Summer 2022 to learn more about a very narrow aspect of police reform: the centralization of municipal police forces under state-level command through the *Mando Único Policial* program. But upon traveling to Guadalajara, Jalisco, and Mexico City, I now see that the story is much bigger and more complex than subnational police centralization. According to academics and police reform experts that I interviewed in the field, the security situation in Mexico can be characterized not only by centralization, but the militarization of law enforcement agencies and personnel across all levels of government (municipal, state, and federal). Despite his "hugs, not bullets" approach, AMLO is criticized because he appears to be militarizing law enforcement functions through the dissolution of the Federal Police (FP) and the creation of the National Guard, which consists of members of the armed forces and the now defunct FP. However, my contacts in the field suggest that the National Guard cannot be an effective police organization because it is trained to use brute force to solve problems, but it falls short from knowing how to detain suspects and transferring them to other security and justice institutions, which tend to be weak in certain places.

Moreover, it has been suggested that the National Guard has [committed human rights violations](#) in some parts of Mexico, particularly due to the state's response to an influx of migrants traveling from Central American to the United States. At the same time, the National Guard is being deployed to assist with civilian-oriented construction projects, such as the new airport being built near Mexico City. These recent developments prompted me to question how the militarization of law enforcement at the national level—although somewhat incoherent and contradictory from a policy perspective—can affect police reform at the subnational level. Some scholars have suggested that the use of military personnel as law enforcement tools may dissuade politicians from taking reform seriously since militarization is a quick and easy way to address the deteriorating security situation (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). I think the way forward is to begin thinking about how police and police reform works at the subnational level as well as what is at stake given reform and militarization for several actors, including politicians, police organizations, criminal organizations, and citizens. Once we situate this growing discussion

alongside a criminal governance framework, we can begin theorizing how militarization affects reform. While it may be true that subnational governments face political pressures and economic incentives to reform their police forces, local politicians may also be facing pressures from organized crime groups to not take reform seriously.

In sum, while researchers are increasingly studying how the militarization of law enforcement within drug war conflicts affects public safety outcomes, there is still more work to be done to understand how these processes affect efforts to reform the police at the local level. But we should proceed by considering further how criminal organizations respond to militarization, especially those that seek to govern territories that give them strategic advantages within the illicit economy. It may be the case that criminal organizations may have a lot to lose from police reform and therefore strive to shape the policy environment at the local level, even as the national government continues to deploy the military in various places to crack down on these groups.

References

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