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From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

Hard Talk

Is Mexico's security situation improving?

Yes: Eduardo Guerrero; No: Alejandro Hope

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Illustrations: Wesley Bedrosian.

[Yes: Violence and Murder Are Decreasing in Mexico](#)

BY

[Eduardo Guerrero](#)

Just look at the numbers; violence and murder are decreasing.

When Mexican President Felipe Calderón left office in 2012, the nation's war on the drug cartels had already claimed 60,000 lives. Now, two years into the presidency of his successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, security conditions are still far from praiseworthy, but have improved in several key areas.

Homicides, the most reliable indicator for measuring public security in Mexico, have steadily decreased over the past two years. According to Mexico's *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía* (National Institute of Statistics and Geography—INEGI) the number of murders decreased 13 percent between 2012 and 2013, and the homicide rate per 100,000 people declined from 22 to 19.

Organized crime-related deaths have decreased even faster. According to the database of Lantia Consultores, a Mexico City-based public policy consulting firm, there were 1,956 organized crime-related deaths in the second quarter of 2014, down from a peak of 4,587 in the second quarter of 2011.

The pace of the decline in organized crime-related deaths has been especially encouraging in two key

metropolitan areas. In Ciudad Juárez, once known as the world's most violent city, organized crime-related deaths have dropped from a peak of 787 during the third quarter of 2010 to 54 in the second quarter of 2014—a 93 percent drop. Likewise, in the Monterrey metropolitan area, Mexico's industrial capital, murders in this category dropped from 472 in the first quarter of 2012 to 38 in the second quarter of 2014. The improvement in Monterrey seems to be the result of a thorough revamping of state and local police departments, which is largely the result of aggressive lobbying by the city's powerful business community. This demonstrates the potential of local institution-building efforts in Mexico. Even the U.S. Department of State acknowledged as much in its August 2014 Mexico Travel Warning, which stated, "Security services in and around Monterrey are robust and have proven responsive and effective in combating violent crimes."¹

Moreover, over the past two years, peace has returned to cities throughout northern Mexico to an extent that seemed impossible between 2008 and 2012. High-profile attacks, shootings and roadblocks are less frequent. (One exception is Tamaulipas, which experienced a violent crisis as recently as last April.) Unfortunately, data for crimes other than homicide remain unreliable in Mexico. Thus, it is very hard to assess whether the downward trend in murders extends to other violent crimes, especially kidnapping and extortion, which are foremost concerns for Mexicans.

The Peña Nieto administration has also recorded a number of important operational successes. The Zetas, a particularly violent cartel founded by defectors from elite military groups, have been nearly disbanded. (The decision to have federal forces target Zetas was taken at the end of the previous administration.)

Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán—Mexico's most notorious drug lord—was captured last February by Peña Nieto's forces. His capture was skillfully executed and managed to avoid a violent conflict among factions of the Sinaloa Cartel. Some would argue that capturing such kingpins represents only a temporary setback to the cartels. However, such captures convey an important message: the Mexican state is only willing to tolerate so much violence or public notoriety, and it has the strength to prevail over drug lords.

Arguably, Peña Nieto's biggest victory thus far has been the successful operations in the state of Michoacán in early 2014, which dealt a significant blow to the Knights Templar—a drug cartel that had exercised virtually uncontested influence over political and economic activities in the state for the previous two years. Former Governor Fausto Vallejo and several mayors have acknowledged that the gang extorted protection money from almost all 113 municipal governments. A stream of recently released videos featuring mayors, state-level officials and even Vallejo's son talking and drinking with the Knights Templar leader, Servando "La Tuta" Gómez, seem to confirm the cartel's tight grip over local and state authorities.

What made the Michoacán case particularly challenging was the emergence of armed self-defense groups in the Tierra Caliente region that organized to combat ever-increasing extortion by the Knights Templar. As the initial uprising rapidly expanded, a widespread civil conflict became a serious threat. The intervention of federal troops should have begun earlier, and was triggered only when self-defense groups were about to march on Apatzingán, the stronghold of the Knights Templar in the Tierra Caliente region, risking massive bloodshed.

However, since the arrival of hundreds of federal forces in Michoacán last January, stability and security have improved. Organized crime-related deaths decreased 40 percent between the first and second quarters of 2014, and another large reduction is expected for the third quarter. Several Knights Templar leaders and some of their political associates have been arrested, avoiding an extensive witch hunt. In an effort to restore the rule of law, the federal government created the *Comisión para la Seguridad y el Desarrollo Integral en el Estado de Michoacán* (Commission for Security and Development in the State of Michoacán), which has displaced the state government as the key decision maker in the region. The Commission has brokered a ceasefire with most self-defense groups, many of which opted to join the ranks of a legal rural police.

But while Peña Nieto has enjoyed some key victories when it comes to the cartels, his security strategy is still far from perfect. For example, the steep reduction in violence has not had an impact on public perception. The percentage of people who claim to feel insecure has hovered around 70 percent for the previous four quarters.

Moreover, the federal government has failed to develop a comprehensive strategy to strengthen the rule of law throughout the country, especially in rural and impoverished areas where some criminal organizations are seeking shelter and turning into local mafias. While the president has launched a program to fund violence and crime prevention, it is not clear that it will adequately target at-risk communities and individuals. And the new 5,000-strong *Gendarmería Nacional* (National Gendarmerie) unit of the Federal Police—inaugurated in August and tasked with fighting criminal activities especially harmful to the economy—is a shadow of the 40,000-member force originally proposed by Peña Nieto and is unlikely to have a major impact on the current security situation.

Despite these shortcomings, it is clear that the security picture is gradually improving in Mexico, especially along the U.S. border and in large metropolitan areas throughout the country. With four years left in his term, Peña Nieto will need to extend his gains in lowering homicides and pacifying conflict areas, and hope that public opinion begins to shift in his favor as a result.

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No: Mexican Homicide and Crime Rates Remain High

BY

Alejandro Hope

Homicide and overall crime rates remain staggeringly high, while the government has done little to address the roots of insecurity.

As a presidential candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto promised “adjustments,” rather than any major changes, to the security strategy of the outgoing administration—and that is precisely what he has delivered as president. While there have been subtle—and not so subtle—shifts from the policies pursued by former President Felipe Calderón, there has not been a clear break with the past.

The same overall strategy is producing the same grim results. While homicides have decreased by 25 percent from a peak during Calderón's presidency in 2011, they remain at staggeringly high levels: last year Mexico's homicide rate was five times that of the United States. The number of reported kidnappings that year was at a record high, and preliminary results for 2014 remain comparably bleak. Extortion has now also become something of an epidemic: according to the latest national victimization survey, there were close to 8 million extortion attempts in 2013.

Although there is less bellicose rhetoric in what amounts to a kinder, gentler version of the Calderón strategy, no one should confuse rhetoric with reality. Two years into his six-year term, there has been some policy innovation, but Peña Nieto has failed to substantively change the policy approach set by his predecessor. In fact, the current administration is actually deepening and entrenching the previous administration's strategy in at least six key areas.

The most conclusive evidence of continuity is provided by the federal budget. Security expenditures continue to be high—and are getting higher. Under Calderón, the federal security budget doubled in real terms from \$6 billion in 2006 to \$12 billion in 2012. Based on current trends, the budget will likely double again under Peña Nieto. The Interior Ministry saw its budget increase by 17 percent in 2014 alone. Appropriations for the *Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional* (Center for Research and National Security—CISEN), Mexico's civilian intelligence agency, tripled this year. These federal expenditures fail to address the key to reducing crimes like homicide and kidnapping—increasing state and local capacity.

Another vestige of the Calderón administration concerns the growing ranks of the federal armed forces and their involvement in state and local law enforcement activities, ranging from patrolling streets to detaining alleged criminals. Under Calderón, the Federal Police tripled in size; and its numbers have increased by 18 percent since Peña Nieto took office, thanks to the recent addition of the *Gendarmería Nacional* (National Gendarmerie), a 5,000-strong division introduced this August. And while the number of deployed troops has declined somewhat—from around 45,000 under Calderón to 35,000 currently—the absence of competent state police forces in many regions leaves no immediate substitute for the army and navy. As a result, states and localities are simply passing the buck on enforcement to federal forces, and are not being held accountable for reforming inefficiencies or purging corrupt officers.

Open-ended and heavy-handed federal operations in troubled states have not ended. Indeed, current federal intervention is arguably more intrusive than it was under Calderón. In Michoacán, for example, Peña Nieto sent a federal commissioner, endowed with broad powers, who has become governor in all but name, effectively depriving *michoacanos* of their right to elected representation. In Tamaulipas, the state security apparatus was taken over by the armed forces. In the State of Mexico, the state prosecutor and the state police chief were replaced by operatives of the Peña Nieto administration. While effective in the short term, this type of intervention creates a culture of dependence on federal forces, and returning control to an incapacitated state apparatus risks undoing temporary security gains.

Peña Nieto has stressed that reducing criminal violence and homicides, not dismantling criminal gangs, is his top security priority. However, his government has not been above trumpeting major operational victories, including taking down drug kingpins. In fact, the current president has been

quite successful at it: over the past 20 months, a number of major criminal figures—including Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, the fugitive chief of the Sinaloa cartel—have been captured or killed. While these victories offer an ideal public relations opportunity, they can create power vacuums within the cartels. The result can be a shift from more predictable, hierarchical power structures to local ones that are more predatory and harder to destabilize.

Mexican security agencies also continue to maintain strong ties with their U.S. counterparts. Cooperation between both nations has become more discreet and centralized, but there has been no return to the pre-Calderón era. For example, the fingerprints of the U.S. intelligence community were all over the operation to capture Chapo Guzmán. Meanwhile, the Merida Initiative—a partnership between the U.S. and Mexico to combat organized crime in effect since 2008—is still active, and many U.S.-funded institution-building programs continue to operate. Such bilateral cooperation can and has improved some aspects of Mexico’s security picture, but the U.S. often pushes Mexican federal forces to prioritize catching the big fish, instead of investing time and resources into local-level reform and institution-building—both of which are necessary for long-term security.

While most security trends have continued from Calderón’s administration through Peña Nieto’s, the current president has changed direction on two main issues. First, there has been a significant overhaul of the federal security apparatus’s centralized administrative structure. Peña Nieto has restored the central role of the Interior Ministry, which absorbed the Public Security Ministry. This gives Interior Minister Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong control over the Federal Police and the federal penitentiary system and made him the head of the national security cabinet (both *de jure* and *de facto*).

Second, Peña Nieto has made progress on coordination among security-related government agencies. As a result, the interagency bickering and backstabbing that characterized the Calderón era has ended. The more centralized management style of the current administration and the significant powers entrusted to the interior minister have led to greatly improved coordination at the federal level. To some extent, the same can be said for intergovernmental relations. With some major exceptions, the friction that marked Calderón’s relationship with state governors is gone. The fact that 23 out of 32 governors belong to the ruling *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI) certainly helps.

But substantively improving the security outlook requires more than improved coordination and greater media savvy. It demands broad reform of law enforcement and criminal justice institutions at every level of government. Such efforts were very timid under Calderón and have been sorely missing under Peña Nieto. That is the sort of continuity Mexico certainly does not need.

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