

MEXICO SECURITY INITIATIVE

Mexico Security Initiative Student Paper
September 2018

Territorial Tensions: Explaining Baja California's Recent Wave of Violence

By Christian Soenen

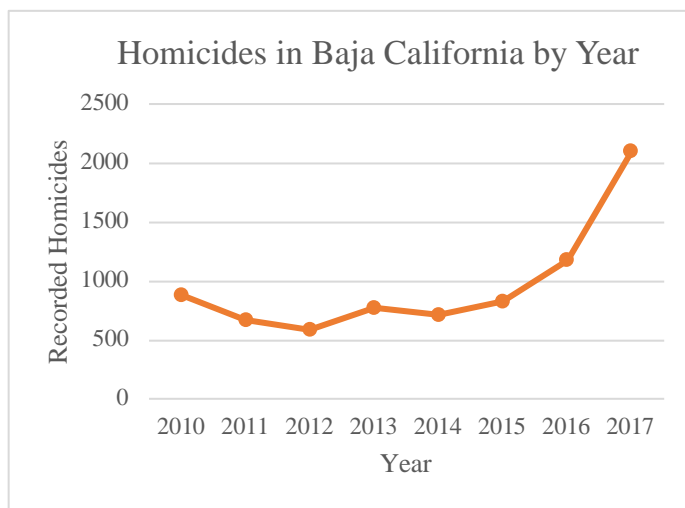
Introduction

In 2012, a mass grave was uncovered on the La Gallera ranch east of Tijuana in Baja California. In June 2017, another collection of anonymous human remains was found on the same property. While two months later in August 2017, the discovery of a third mass burial site on the same tract of land resulted in the recovery of over 100 human bones. Santiago Meza Lopez, who was formerly employed by one of Baja California's dominant drug trafficking organizations, the Cartel Arellano Felix, confessed to having disposed of over 300 bodies on the ranch.

These types of situations have played out over the past two decades throughout Mexico, as authorities have struggled to contain high levels of violence. During the past two years, conditions have worsened, and by the government's count, 2017 was the most violent year since 1990, when it began collecting the statistics. Last year, the more than 29,000 recorded homicides surpassed any of the previous peaks of Mexico's organized crime-related conflict.¹ Yet the number of recorded homicides reflects only those reported to police, with the true body count likely even higher. Mass graves are regularly uncovered across the country, hinting at the magnitude of hidden victims.

¹ This figure is published by the Secretaria de Gobernación (SEGOB) and reported by Mexican police. INEGI, which also provides national homicide figures, places 2017's death toll at over 31,174, and compiles the data from morgues. It is therefore more accurate than the SEGOB data but of course does not account for those homicides in which the victims are not yet located, like those discovered in mass graves.

Throughout 2017, Baja California was among the Mexican states with the greatest increases in its homicide rate. Homicide figures from the past decade dwarf the 260 murders that occurred in 1990, the first year on record. But the most recent surge in violence has been the most dramatic. In 2014, Baja California registered 714 murders, while only three years later, there were 2,300 murders, an increase of more than 320 percent. The violence has extended across the entire state, with the largest increases occurring in the municipalities of Tijuana, Ensenada, and Playas de Rosarito, which saw rates more than double between 2015 and 2017 (Ensenada's more than tripled in this timeframe). Tijuana, the largest city in the state, saw murders increase from 612 to 1,744 during the same timeframe.



This paper attempts to better understand the dynamics and perpetrators of Baja California's current wave of violence. It uses open source material, such as newspapers covering Ensenada, Tijuana, Rosarito, and all of Baja California, and homicide and drug use data provided by various government entities in both the United States and Mexico. The paper concludes that in 2016 and 2017, Baja California found itself in the midst of a perfect storm. The existing dominant criminal organizations—the Sinaloa and Arellano Felix Organizations—were weakened by the removal of top leadership and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) simultaneously made a dramatic debut in Baja California as an independent large-scale drug trafficking organization. While this conflict unfolded and intensified, both Baja California and the United States' expanding methamphetamine abuse created an ever more lucrative market. The CJNG was eager to provide methamphetamine in the United States, while local dealers fought for control of Baja California cities' drug dealing territory.

The unfolding violence in Baja California can be categorized as occurring on two levels: the transnational level, given competition between large-scale transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), and at the local level, as a result of smaller-scale conflicts between drug dealers in Baja California's cities.

Explanations for Escalating Violence

THE TRANSNATIONAL LEVEL OF VIOLENCE

Baja California is an important area for smugglers hoping to traffic drugs—especially methamphetamines—into the United States. The presence of the Port of Ensenada means that precursor chemicals for methamphetamine can be shipped to the state, transported to a remote area to be synthesized into methamphetamine, and then moved into urban centers along Mexico’s Interstate Highway 1. It can also cross the border into the United States, and quickly reach major cities in California and up the West Coast via U.S. Interstate 5.

For the past three decades, Baja California’s lucrative drug smuggling routes—commonly referred to as plazas—and particularly the Tijuana drug trafficking territory have been under the control of various criminal organizations. In the early 2000s, the Arellano Felix Organization, or AFO, controlled the drug trade in and through Tijuana, supplying local dealers and keeping them under control, while also monopolizing access to drug smuggling routes into the United States through San Diego.² Around 2008, the Sinaloa organization, another transnational criminal organization (TCO) operating in Baja California, began making its way into Tijuana.³ The AFO was in the midst of internal turmoil, and the Sinaloa organization led by Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman Loera was able to overtake the weakened organization to become the dominant player in Baja California. This dominance corresponded with a period of relative stability in the state in 2011 and 2012 (although the period of Sinaloa’s territory contestation between 2008 and 2011 was marked by a spike in homicides), most likely as the Sinaloa Cartel and the AFO negotiated peace.⁴

In 2014, Mexican authorities arrested Guzman and several AFO leaders, breaking down the established criminal agreements and leading to clashes for control among competing groups.⁵ The lack of a dominant criminal player was enticing to the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, or CJNG, which is an offshoot organization of the now-nonexistent Milenio Cartel on Mexico’s Pacific coast. The CJNG began to force entry into the Baja California drug market, recruiting former members of the AFO and Sinaloa Organization.⁶ Today, the CJNG has managed to both acquire and develop methamphetamine transit routes through Baja California and into the United States.

² Sandra Dibble, “New Group Fuels Tijuana’s Increased Drug Violence,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, February 13, 2016, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sdut-nueva-generacion-cartel-moves-tijuana-2016feb13-story.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jaime Arredondo Sanchez Lira, Zulía Orozco, Octavio Rodríguez Ferrerira, and David A. Shirk, “The Resurgence of Violent Crime in Tijuana,” *Justice in Mexico*, February 2018, https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/180205_TJViolence.pdf, 4.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ For more information on the history of CJNG, see:

Lucy La Rosa and David A. Shirk, “The New Generation: Mexico’s Emerging Organized Crime Threat,” *Justice in Mexico*, https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/180319-Policy_Brief-CJNG.pdf

EXPANDING U.S. METHAMPHETAMINE MARKET ACCESSIBLE THROUGH BAJA CALIFORNIA

Over the past few years, the U.S. methamphetamine market has become increasingly lucrative. Measures of U.S. meth consumption indicate that abuse is on the rise. The number of admissions to public treatment facilities for methamphetamine abuse increased from 107,242 in 2011 to 135,264 in 2014. While the number of workplace drug tests with positive results for meth usage increased steadily and markedly from 2011-2015.⁷ Further, methamphetamine abuse poisoning deaths reached 5,716 in 2016, a more than fourfold increase since 2008, when the number was 1,302.⁸ While this increase in deaths may be a result of increased meth purity, all signs point to an expanding U.S. demand for methamphetamines.

Yet while consumption is up across the United States, domestic meth production has decreased. The Drug Enforcement Administration's 2017 National Drug Threat assessment (NDTA) reports that since 2012, there has been a 67 percent decrease in seized meth laboratories in the United States, and that "in 2016, 86 percent of all methamphetamine laboratories seized in the United States were small laboratories; capable of producing two ounces or less."⁹ As a result, the DEA concludes that "methamphetamine production in Mexico has increased, as Mexican TCOs have adapted to precursor chemical restrictions on the precursor pseudoephedrine" and taken to new production methods to take advantage of the U.S. market.¹⁰

Most of the methamphetamines trafficked through Mexico enter the United States via the San Diego corridor, meaning that they first passed through Baja California. The corridor experienced by far the greatest amount of meth trafficking in 2016, with 10,030 kg of seized methamphetamine, nearly four times the amount seized in the Tucson corridor (2533 kg), which is the second most used trafficking corridor. From 2015 to 2016, there was a 9 percent increase in meth seizures along the San Diego corridor, which represented the second largest volume increase in seizures along the United States' southern border, surpassed only by the Tucson corridor.¹¹

VIOLENT IMPLICATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL METHAMPHETAMINE MARKET EXPANSION

The CJNG's emergence as a major methamphetamine trafficking organization in Baja California may have fueled much of 2017's violence. While it is difficult to determine from open-source data whether the homicides are a result of transnational vs. local competition, there are various indications that inter-TCO conflict led to the homicide rate increases.

The most notable indicator is the display of *narcomantas*, or threatening banners, that TCOs use to address one another. *Narcomantas* can be tricky for investigative purposes since the language is often cryptic, frequently referring to the target audience through nicknames, or issuing general

⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Drug Enforcement Administration, *National Drug Threat Assessment*", 75.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹¹ Ibid., 78.

threats without addressing another group. For example, a message hung in July of 2018 claims the Ensenada plaza for “El Bryan,” while addressing no particular group or person.¹² Such vagueness makes it difficult to decode the threats without extensive knowledge of the relationships among drug traffickers and drug trafficking organizations. More problematic, however, is that the messages may also be faked, with criminal organizations using them as a tool to intensify conflicts between other rival organizations. Nonetheless, the existence of *narcomantas* is generally an indication of conflict between TCOs.

In Baja California, many *narcomantas* point to ongoing conflict between the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion, or CJNG, and the Sinaloa Cartel. One *narcomanta* posted by CJNG (which also refers to itself as “la nueva” in some messages) threatens a local musical group that was expected to sing a *narcocorrido* praising the Sinaloa cartel at a popular dance club in Tijuana. Another banner hung in Tijuana in January 2018 addressed a leader of the Sinaloa organization and claimed that CJNG is stronger than ever in Tijuana.¹³ These public threats reveal an ongoing territorial dispute, with control over Baja California’s trafficking routes becoming more profitable.

LOCAL LEVEL VIOLENCE

In addition to serving as a transit route for large-scale drug trafficking, Baja California is also a lucrative drug market. A growing portion of the state’s population reports abusing illegal drugs and local drug dealers and gangs have profited by selling drugs in urban areas. Small-scale drug dealers often exhibit unofficial ownership of certain areas in neighborhoods within a city, claiming unique control of the drug market within these geographic spaces. And similar to the way TCOs fight over trafficking plazas, these local drug gangs fight over drug dealing territory. In the past, the dominant TCO in the state—whether the AFO or Sinaloa—controlled these local distributors and prevented disputes among the local drug gangs. However, the CJNG has not played this role and local-level dealers can contest territory without any arbitrating criminal organization to stop them. The University of San Diego’s Justice in Mexico Project outlines this further, saying that the CJNG lacks the capacity or desire to control neighborhood level gangs’ criminal activities and lets them fight out their disagreements over street-level drug dealing.¹⁴

Much of today’s violence in Tijuana appears to be linked to these confrontations, in contrast with previous large-scale clashes between TCOs. When criminal organizations feud over territory, violence is often closely interlinked with a desire for publicity (such as via the *narcomantas* mentioned above), and the intimidation of the rival organization and law enforcement. As such, it is not uncommon to see gunfights in public and crowded areas, bodies hanging from highway bridges, or *narcomantas* displayed prominently. However, many of Baja California’s recent

¹² Lorena Lamas, “Cuelgan Narcomanta en Ensenada,” Zeta Tijuana, July 31, 2018, <http://zetatijuana.com/2018/07/cuelgan-narcomanta-en-ensenada/>

¹³ “En Tijuana Cuelgan Narcomanta con Mensaje para ‘El Atlante’ Capo de Cartel de Sinaloa,” Proceso, January 4 2018, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/517275/en-tijuana-cuelgan-narcomanta-con-mensaje-para-el-atlante-capo-del-cartel-de-sinaloa>

¹⁴ Ibid.

homicides have been low-profile and concentrated in marginalized neighborhoods that are entirely devoid of a public spectacle.¹⁵

This trend is not only happening in Tijuana but across other parts of Baja California, such as Ensenada and Playas de Rosarito, two other municipalities with surges in homicides during 2017. In the city of Ensenada, over a quarter (40 out of 157) of the total homicides occurred in the ten most violent neighborhoods (out of 124 neighborhoods). In Playas de Rosarito, 38 of the 108 homicides, or over 35 percent, occurred in the ten most violent neighborhoods.¹⁶ These homicides were not in major public areas with the goal of capturing public attention.

| Ensenada Neighborhoods | Homicides | Percent of Total Homicides |
|------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| Poblados Ojos Negros | 7 | 4.5 |
| Zona Centro | 5 | 3.2 |
| Ejido Nacionalista | 5 | 3.2 |
| San Quintin | 5 | 3.2 |
| Vicente Guerrero | 3 | 1.9 |
| Francisco Zarco | 3 | 1.9 |
| San Vicente | 3 | 1.9 |
| Los Encinos | 3 | 1.9 |
| Aeropuerto | 3 | 1.9 |
| Playa Ensenada | 3 | 1.9 |
| Total | 40 | 25.5 |

| Playas de Rosarito Neighborhoods | Homicides | Percent of Total Homicides |
|----------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| Colonia Constitucion | 5 | 4.6 |
| Lucio Blanco | 4 | 3.7 |
| Playas de Rosarito | 4 | 3.7 |
| Los Arroyos | 4 | 3.7 |
| Blvd. 2000 | 4 | 3.7 |
| Rancho el Toro | 4 | 3.7 |
| Canon Rosarito | 4 | 3.7 |
| Constitucion | 3 | 2.8 |
| Lienzo Charro | 3 | 2.8 |
| Ampliacion Plan Libertador | 3 | 2.8 |
| Total | 38 | 35.2 |

¹⁵ Jaime Arredondo Sánchez Lira et al., “Violent Crime in Tijuana,” 6.

¹⁶ Data was provided by the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica de Baja California: Incidencia Delictiva Estatal, Secretaria de Seguridad Publica del Estado de Baja California, accessed July 8 2018, <https://www.seguridadbc.gob.mx/contenidos/ESTADISTICAS.php>

Expanding Illicit Drug Markets within Baja California

The local-level disagreements outlined in the previous section arise from the lack of a controlling TCO and also Baja California's expanding drug market. In 2016, Baja California had an estimated methamphetamine consumption rate of 3.1 percent of the population, the highest meth usage rate of any Mexican state. (Colima had the next highest rate with 2.4 percent of the population.) This portion of the population increased almost 15 percent since 2008, when 2.7 percent of the population of the state consumed amphetamines. Taken in the absolute form, this increase represents a methamphetamine market expansion of approximately 13,000 people, given Baja California's population of 3.3 million people.¹⁷

This growing market represents a lucrative business activity for criminal groups. A conservative estimate of one dose per day per new user, at approximately US\$10 per dose, yields a market value increase of roughly US\$47.5 million per year.¹⁸ For small-scale drug dealers in Baja California, this profit potential provides an incentive for controlling drug dealing areas, which is almost always achieved through violence. Data of small-scale meth seizures from news reports (indicative of local-level dealing instead of transnational trafficking) in Ensenada reveal that the majority of meth seizures occur in the same ten neighborhoods where a quarter of Ensenada's homicides occur.¹⁹

In Baja California, this growing demand and corresponding violence rate arises in two different scenarios. First, people may begin to use drugs in neighborhoods with previously few users and with no established dealers or local drug gangs. In these cases, rival groups or individuals may violently compete to establish exclusive access over the new market. The second scenario arises if more people begin using drugs in a neighborhood that already has an established dealer, causing the territory to become more valuable and rival gangs to contest the territorial control. Drug dealers will fight amongst themselves to determine who is able to make money from new drug users.

While methamphetamine consumption seems to be the primary drug use-related problem in Baja California, expanding markets for other drugs may also be contributing to the increased violence.

¹⁷ Inés García Ramos, "La Metanfetamina se Impone a la Frontera," ZETA Tijuana, September 12, 2016, <http://zetatijuana.com/2016/09/la-metanfetamina-se-impone-en-la-frontera/>.

¹⁸ Information in newspapers about meth prices range from 20 pesos (\$1) per dose to up to \$20 per dose in some reports. They are usually provided as a way to estimate the value of drug seizures and the number of doses kept off the streets when a shipment is intercepted by authorities. There is also no consensus on what measure ought to be referred to as a single "dose." The amount of meth that constitutes a dose ranges anywhere from 10mg to 1g per unit referred to as a "dose," causing significant problems in determining the value of this new market. The range in value and dosage likely arises from differences in purity and in individuals' usage habits. I have decided to use a value of \$10 per dose, as it is both the most common price reported in news articles covering seizures of meth and is also near the center of the range of values provided. Since I am basing my estimation of the market expansion on the entry of new users and not on the volume increase in meth production, and because the amount of meth found in a single dose will vary per user, it is both unnecessary and potentially misleading to settle on a single quantity to consider a "dose" in my rough calculations. I have instead decided to use one dose per day per user as a measure of meth consumption, with each dose valued at \$10.

¹⁹ Admittedly, the number of news reports of small-scale seizures in Ensenada was quite low compared to the number of homicide reports. The data is somewhat weak in this regard, and the satisfactory establishment of a correlation requires further study.

Overall, Baja California has the highest rate of illegal drug use among any Mexican state, at 4.4 percent, an increase from 4.1 percent in 2008. Notably, marijuana consumption increased in Baja California, from 7.5 percent in 2008 to 12.8 percent in 2016, the second highest rate in Mexico. Yet while Baja California's marijuana consumption has jumped, the quantity of seized marijuana shipped into the United States appears to be decreasing, with San Diego-Tijuana corridor seeing a 26 percent decrease in marijuana seizures from 2015 to 2016.²⁰ Fewer seizures may be indicative of decreasing transnational marijuana trafficking, with local drug gangs fighting over both the ability to supply marijuana (control of growing territories) and to control profitable distribution areas (neighborhoods where demand is concentrated).²¹

Conclusion

While Baja California's increasing homicide rate has been dramatic, the state is not an anomaly. Other states in Mexico, including Nayarit, Baja California Sur, and Colima, experienced simultaneous and equally large surges in casualties related to drug trafficking violence. While the explanations provided in this paper may offer some insight into those factors that affect Baja California, it is possible that some of these factors also influenced nationwide dynamics among TCOs and contributed, to some degree, to the violence across Mexico.

Changing violence levels and patterns also demand an evolving strategy to address organized crime-related conflict. This research paper reveals the need for discussions on violence in Mexico to reflect different levels of violence, from high profile criminal organizations to disputes among local-level small-scale distributors, and the ties to growing drug abuse within Mexico. Any strategy and national discussion on security will need to take these factors into consideration, not just to address the current violence today but to prevent similarly high levels in the future.

Special thanks to Stephanie Leutert, whose guidance was essential to the composition of this paper.

²⁰ United States Drug Enforcement Administration, *2017 National Drug Threat Assessment*, October 1 2017, 113.

²¹ It is also possible that the legalization of marijuana in the United States has caused TCOs to shift their focus to harder drugs, especially as demand for those harder drugs increases in the U.S. The market for harder drugs, which are all significantly more expensive than marijuana, tends to be much more violent for two reasons: First, control of trafficking routes is much more lucrative when more expensive drugs are pushed through those routes, so there is an increased incentive to control them, leading to more frequent and violent turf wars between TCOs. Secondly, As Caulkins et al. posit, a TCO is more likely to use violence to defend their production and shipment of harder drugs because there is more money at stake with any particular shipment. A trunk full of heroin is worth much more than a trunk full of marijuana, so there is a greater incentive to ensure that the heroin shipment is not intercepted. (Jonathan P. Caulkins, Angela Hawken, Beau Kilmer, and Mark Kleiman, *Marijuana Legalization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY (2012) p 131.) This trend towards shipment of harder drugs and its effect on level of violence are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is an important area for further investigation.