

# Criminal Conflicts and the Assassination of Law Enforcement Officers in Mexico

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## Abstract

Despite criminal organizations regularly perpetrating violence against law enforcement in Latin America, the phenomenon has received little scholarly attention. Existing research contends that militarized government crackdowns create incentives for criminal organizations to violently confront law enforcement. Yet, in Mexico, where hundreds of law enforcement officials are assassinated by organized crime each year, most victims belong to subnational agencies that are not responsible for implementing the federal crackdown. What explains when and where law enforcement is violently attacked, who is targeted, and how they are killed? This article contends that local criminal conflicts over illicit activities create incentives for warring criminal organizations to violently confront law enforcement, particularly local law enforcement, and to make this violence more egregious. To evaluate the argument, I create two original datasets on the assassination of law enforcement officers in Mexico. The data reveal that assassinations predominantly target local officials, with approximately one-quarter being high-ranking officers and about two-thirds being off-duty. Assassinations take four key forms: Coordinated attacks, executions, confrontations, and kidnappings, with coordinated attacks being the most prevalent. Combining these datasets with data on cartel conflicts at the local level, I find a strong association between these conflicts and the killing of law enforcement personnel, and more specifically, that criminal conflicts drive cartels to kill local officers with more gruesome forms of violence.

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<sup>†</sup>I thank Luis Astorga, Viviana Porto, Joel Herrera, and participants of the organized crime workshop at UNAM for their comments. I also thank Andres Gomez-Sarmiento, Daniel Barquero, Tiffany Vasquez, and Manuel Aguilera-Prieto for their research assistance.

# Introduction

Most modern definitions of the state emphasize its dependence on coercion and the use of violence, with perhaps the most recognized definition upon which contemporary interpretations are based positing that a state is a ‘community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ (Weber 1946). As the embodiment of the state’s coercive power, law enforcement<sup>1</sup> institutions are responsible for exercising violence, establishing the rule of law, and enforcing crime or social control. Yet, in Latin America, law enforcement is routinely targeted by non-state actors, and in particular, by criminal organizations (COs). Each year, multiple, if not dozens or hundreds, of law enforcement officers are assassinated by COs in Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Haiti. This is surprising given the common assumption that COs using violence against the state is ‘extremely’ costly and thus wide-scale confrontation should be a rarity (Gambetta 1993; Bailey and Taylor 2009; Durán-Martínez 2017).

COs being able to routinely perpetrate violence against law enforcement has significant consequences for these institutions, state capacity, and the rule of law, since it allows COs to operate with more impunity, more freedom, and engage in more predatory behavior towards citizens and the state. While scholars have noted the existence of violence against law enforcement as part of broader violent trends in Latin America (e.g., Sullivan and Elkus 2008; Reuter 2009; Bailey and Taylor 2009; Sabet 2010; Shirk and Wallman 2015; Durán-Martínez 2017), the phenomenon has unfortunately received little scholarly attention—in part due to the lack of data on violence against law enforcement. Nevertheless, the literature on government crackdowns, or intensified enforcement efforts targeting COs, does offer one explanation: militarized crackdowns against COs inadvertently create incentives for COs to

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<sup>1</sup>I define law enforcement as any security force with authorized to use force domestically. Typically, the military is excluded from definitions of law enforcement, thus why much existing research focuses on *policing*. Yet, given the widespread use of the military for *domestic* policing in the Global South, I include the military within the scope of this article and use the term ‘law enforcement’ to refer to these institutions.

move away from evading or capturing law enforcement and towards violently confronting those implementing crackdowns (Lessing 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020; Barnes 2022). While these studies have advanced our understanding of why and when COs use violence against those implementing militarized crackdowns, they also remain limited in important ways. Analytically, they restrict their focus to law enforcement actively implementing crackdowns, but violence against law enforcement regularly affects other officers. Empirically, they are either descriptive (Lessing 2017) or only focus on a single city (Magaloni et al. 2020; Barnes 2022). Thus, these explanations do not tell us about broader patterns, including why COs would kill law enforcement personnel that are not actively implementing crackdowns, target law enforcement personnel from different agencies, or attack some officers using more gruesome forms of violence.

This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature by developing a theory of violence against law enforcement by COs and providing an initial empirical analysis of the broader phenomenon. This article argues that local criminal conflicts over illicit activities in specific territories create incentives for warring COs to violently confront law enforcement. When COs face no competition, they have no incentives to confront law enforcement personnel that either tolerate their activities or collude with them. However, when competing against a rival organization over local illicit economies, COs face incentives to violently target law enforcement personnel that tolerate the activities of their rivals, actively collude with rivals, impose costs on them on behalf of their rivals, refuse to protect them from their rivals, as well as those who refuse to target their rivals. The use of more egregious forms of violence serves additional functions, as it intimidates some law enforcement personnel into colluding with them and deters others from protecting their rivals. Additionally, these local conflicts occurring within the jurisdiction of local law enforcement turn them into relevant actors and thus prime targets.

To evaluate the argument, the article focuses on Mexico, where the assassination of law enforcement officers by ‘cartels,’ what COs in the country are colloquially called, is strikingly

common: Between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2023, at least 2,638 police officers were assassinated ([Causa en Común 2024](#)), which translates to more than one assassination per day. Mexico provides a puzzling case because federal law enforcement provided protection to cartels for decades (see [Shirk and Wallman 2015](#); [Lerch 2024](#)) and the crackdown that began in December of 2006 was spearheaded by federal forces, and yet, over 90% of assassinated law enforcement officers in 2018 belonged to subnational agencies, particularly local level agencies (see Data section for details).

Empirically, the article leverages two original datasets on the assassination of law enforcement officers by COs in Mexico: (1) all assassinated law enforcement officers in Mexico in 2018, and (2) all assassinated law enforcement personnel in the central state of Guanajuato between 2000 and 2020. To the best of my knowledge, these are the first datasets of their kind. Given the novelty of the subject, the article first unpacks the phenomenon by analyzing the datasets descriptively. This analysis finds that most assassinations fall within four general categories: (1) Coordinated attacks, (2) executions, (3) confrontations, and (4) kidnappings. In both datasets, coordinated attacks make up more than half of all killings, with executions being the second most common form of violence. I also find that the majority of killings are of personnel in municipal agencies, followed by state and federal agencies, respectively. In other words, those charged with implementing the federal crackdown are targeted the least. I further find that just over 20% of victims were high-ranking officers rather than low-level street officers, a surprisingly high proportion. Finally, I find that 31.1% of victims in the national sample and 40.2% in the Guanajuato sample were assassinated while off duty, but uncover that most of these killings show clear signs of being directly linked to their duties as officers rather than unrelated killings.

The article then uses data on local criminal conflicts to analyze how they impact the prevalence of violence, who is being targeted, and how. Specifically, I combine the national dataset on killings with municipal-level data on the geographic presence of cartels ([Sobrino 2023](#)) from the Mapping Criminal Organizations in Mexico (MCO) project ([Signoret et al.](#)

2021), and the data on assassinations in Guanajuato with a fine-grained dataset on cartel presence and wars in the state from [Alcocer \(2023\)](#). Together, these two samples add robustness by providing different measures of criminal conflict and covering different geographic areas and time periods.

Through a series of linear regression models, I find that cartel presence is not enough to explain assassinations, but rather that criminal wars *at the local level* drive violence against law enforcement in Mexico. Looking at who is targeted, I find that criminal wars push COs to target *local* law enforcement more than state or federal law enforcement. I do not find evidence that criminal wars help explain the targeting of high-level law enforcement officers. Finally, investigating the type of violence, I find that criminal wars lead cartels to kill law enforcement personnel through more appalling tactics, that is, through coordinated attacks where multiple armed individuals shoot the officers numerous times, typically in public spaces. To illustrate the findings and the different incentives outlined by the theory, I provide four short case studies of assassinations by different cartels in various regions of the country. These results suggest that cartels are actively eroding state capacity and the ability of the state to provide quality governance to citizens. As the arm of the state responsible for establishing the rule of law, law enforcement institutions being degraded by COs presents a grave challenge for democracies like Mexico.

This article makes three key contributions. First, it provides a theoretical framework to understand violence against law enforcement by organized crime beyond militarized crackdowns. Second, it introduces two novel datasets on assassinated law enforcement personnel in Mexico and provides the first quantitative analysis focusing specifically on the assassination of law enforcement officers by COs. Third, to the best of my knowledge, it is the first empirical analysis to identify and analyze different forms of violence perpetrated by COs when assassinating high-profile individuals, including law enforcement, journalists, or politicians. Substantively, this article complements and extends scholarship investigating the collusive arrangements between COs and law enforcement ([Auyero and Sobering 2019](#);

Morris 2012; Flom 2019; Lerch 2024) and violence by COs against other state actors, primarily politicians (Blume 2017; Daniele and Dipoppa 2017; Alesina et al. 2019; Trejo and Ley 2021). Through these contributions, this article seeks to shed light on a crucial subject that has received insufficient attention and hopes to give rise to further research on the topic. More broadly, this article answers calls to bring greater attention to policing and law enforcement, which remains largely understudied in political science (Crabtree 2018; Flom 2018; Eck et al. 2021), particularly in the Global South (Crabtree 2018; Flom 2018) and violent contexts (Flom 2018; Eck et al. 2021). Even more, the literature has largely focused on police-citizen interactions, police accountability, and violent behavior by police (Eck et al. 2021), while largely overlooking the use of violence against law enforcement by non-state actors.

## COs and violence against law enforcement

COs are profit-maximizing actors who do not seek to take over the state or establish a monopoly over the use of violence vis-à-vis the state, and instead often share the same spaces (see Lessing 2021). Nevertheless, as the enforcers of the state, law enforcement agencies impose costs on COs. They can affect profits by targeting revenue-generating activities, for example, interdicting drug shipments, eradicating illegal crops, seizing goods and assets, freezing bank accounts, and arresting accountants, among others. They can also target these organizations directly by, for example, capturing or killing members, seizing safehouses, and confiscating weapons. While the literature has largely focused on the costs law enforcement can impose on COs, law enforcement can also provide benefits even beyond protecting COs through selective non-enforcement. For example, they can serve as bodyguards for CO members, target and arrest individuals for not complying with the CO, provide information on ongoing and future investigations and operations, help collect extortion payments, escort illegal shipments to assure their delivery, re-rout patrols away from specific communities

during key moments, provide COs with official uniforms and weapons, among others.

Thus, in contexts with powerful COs, law enforcement personnel can choose to actively impose costs on COs, passively tolerate COs and their activities, or even actively collude with and protect COs (Sabet 2010). COs, on their part, also have three general strategies to deal with law enforcement: evade, capture, or confront the state (Bailey and Taylor 2009; Sabet 2010).<sup>2</sup> Together, the strategies each actor pursues shapes the relationship and interactions between COs and law enforcement.

As scholars have noted, COs should prefer to evade or collude given that actively confronting the state is costly and brings unwanted attention (Gambetta 1993; Bailey and Taylor 2009; Durán-Martínez 2017). Yet, under certain circumstances, COs may turn away from evading or capturing and into confronting the state, and in particular, using violence against law enforcement. The literature, while limited, offers one key explanation for why COs turn towards confronting the state: government crackdowns. This article offers an additional explanation: criminal conflicts.

## **Existing explanation: government crackdowns**

The state intensifying law enforcement operations may inadvertently create incentives for COs to use violence against the law enforcement officers implementing the crackdown. Lessing (2017) argues that under conditional crackdowns (crackdowns that only target violent COs), COs may choose to abstain from violent behavior and forego the costs of the crackdown, allowing them to continue evading or capturing. However, when militarized crackdowns are unconditional, that is, they target COs irrespective of their violent behavior, CO may face incentives to fight back against the law enforcement officers implementing the crackdown in order to reduce their enforcement efforts.

Other scholars have noted violence against law enforcement as part of general increases

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<sup>2</sup>Barnes (2022) provides an alternative set of actions: fight, hide, or flee. This article considers hiding and fleeing as components of evading. Blume (2022) uses the terms collude, co-opt, and evade, where co-optation includes violent strategies to infiltrate politics.

in violence resulting from militarized crackdowns. For example, looking at crackdowns by the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs), a militarized police force, against COs in various favelas (impoverished and informal neighborhoods) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, [Magaloni et al. \(2020\)](#) find that crackdowns increased homicides, killings by police, crime, and killings of UPP officers when the intervention targeted COs with monopoly control and cooperative relations with their community. In contrast, [Barnes \(2022\)](#) argues that under militarized crackdowns, violence, including against those implementing the crackdowns, increases when COs face active threats from rival COs. The author then provides in-depth ethnographic evidence from the Complexo de Maré favela in Rio de Janeiro during UPP crackdowns. Finally, [\(Durán-Martínez 2017\)](#) argues that a fragmented security apparatus inhibits the state's ability to enforce the law and protect CO, creating incentives for COs to use visible violence.<sup>3</sup> The author highlights that deploying the military to crack down on COs fragments the state security apparatus, driving COs to use violence against citizens, rivals, and the state, including security personnel. Case studies of three cities, Medellín, Colombia and Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, Mexico, are used to provide evidence for this argument.

These studies have advanced our understanding of when and why COs choose to confront the state and use violence against those implementing militarized crackdowns. Yet, they also remain limited in important ways. Analytically, they restrict their focus to law enforcement actively implementing crackdowns, and empirically, they are either descriptive ([Lessing 2017](#)), only focus on a single favela ([Barnes 2022](#)), a single city ([Magaloni et al. 2020](#)), or three cities ([Durán-Martínez 2017](#)). Thus, existing studies do not tell us about broader patterns, including why COs would kill law enforcement personnel that are not actively implementing crackdowns, target law enforcement from different agencies, or use more gruesome violence in some instances.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Visible violence is defined as violence that is public.

<sup>4</sup>A related concept is that of ([Durán-Martínez 2017](#)), who examines conditions under which drug markets create *visible* violence, with the author defining visible violence as 'instances where traffickers publicly expose violence or claim responsibility for attacks' (2). In contrast, I focus on the forms of violence, regardless of whether it is more or less public or whether the perpetrators claimed responsibility.



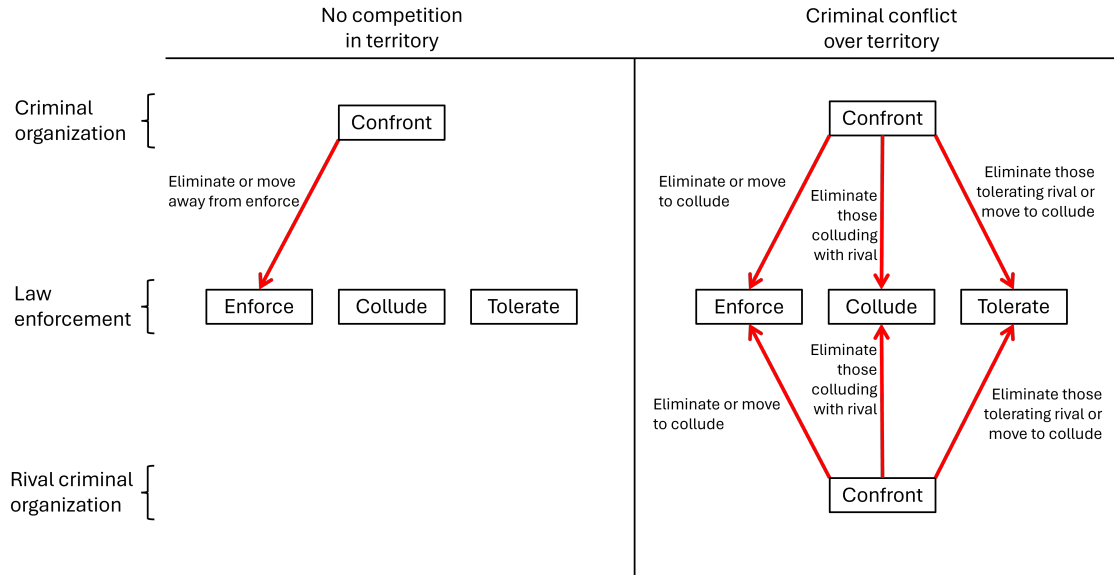


Figure 1. Outline of theory showing incentives for COs to confront law enforcement (red arrows) depending on the action taken by law enforcement personnel. Left pane shows incentives under no competition. Right pane shows incentives under criminal conflict.

## Criminal conflicts

This article contends that criminal wars, or wars between COs over territories to control illicit markets, exacerbate the incentives pushing COs away from evading or capturing and towards the use of violence against law enforcement. This leads not only to higher levels of violence against law enforcement, but also pushes COs towards more local law enforcement and changes the nature of the violence by making it more egregious. Figure 1 outlines the theory presented in this section and visualizes how criminal conflicts create multiple incentives that push COs towards confronting law enforcement.

When COs face no competition from rivals, they can choose to deal with law enforcement by evading, capturing to secure non-enforcement or gain benefits, or fighting them to reduce enforcement. As existing research argues, the state choosing to impose costs on COs through crackdowns may push them towards confrontation. However, even when not enforcing a crackdown, law enforcement can exert costs that may push COs towards confronting law enforcement to move them towards tolerance or collusion. Nevertheless, absent a crackdown, COs should generally prefer to evade or collude when they do not face competition.

The central argument of this article is that criminal conflicts over illicit markets and turf fundamentally alter the incentives COs face and push them towards confronting the state. Under criminal conflicts, COs now face encroachment on their illicit markets by rival groups, making state protection by law enforcement even more imperative, as they can provide essential protection during deadly wars. This not only puts law enforcement personnel that choose to enforce the law in danger, but also those that choose tolerance or collusion who were safe under no criminal competition.

First, law enforcement personnel enforcing the law and imposing costs against a CO now imposes those costs *to the benefit of* the rival CO. This intensifies the need for COs to either eliminate this threat or intimidate them towards colluding with them. Second, while law enforcement personnel who choose to tolerate COs and their activities can be ignored by COs when they face no competition, criminal conflicts imply that these individuals are choosing to tolerate the activities of rival COs. This selective non-enforcement, which rival COs benefit from, becomes undesirable under conflict. COs therefore face incentives to confront these law enforcement personnel and nudge them towards colluding and protecting them against rival groups or towards enforcing the law *only* against rival groups.

Likewise, when COs face no criminal competition, there exist few incentives for COs to violently confront law enforcement personnel who choose to collude. When COs face threats from rival COs, law enforcement personnel colluding with one CO and providing them with protection or benefits become prime targets for rival COs. When rival COs are able to capture law enforcement officers, COs now face a higher threat from the state. Officers captured by rival COs not only exert the routine costs, now they impose these costs *to the benefit of* a rival organization. Captured officers can provide the CO they collude with information on their rivals, arrest members of the rival group, plan operations against activities and members of the rival group, and even hand over members of rival groups to the organization they are colluding with. Thus, COs face incentives to confront law enforcement personnel colluding with rivals to either eliminate them or intimidate them away from protecting or

providing benefits to rival COs.

These altered dynamics heighten the need not only for *more* violence, but for more egregious forms of violence. During local criminal conflicts, the use of more egregious forms of violence can serve additional functions (beyond eliminating the targeted officer). Primarily, it can serve as a credible signal to intimidate other law enforcement personnel into colluding with or tolerating them, and deterring others from protecting their rivals.<sup>5</sup> All of these incentives created by criminal competition push COs away from evading and capture and towards attacking the state in more heinous ways.

Additionally, I argue that criminal wars not only push COs towards attacking the enforcement arm of the state and in more egregious ways, but also makes *local* law enforcement agencies more relevant and important targets. This is due to various factors, such as the local nature of illicit markets, the importance of controlling local territory vis-à-vis rivals to exploit these markets, the localized nature of violence and criminality that often falls within the jurisdiction of local law enforcement, local law enforcement’s detailed knowledge about local criminal actors, and the role of local police in regulating local illicit markets in Latin America (Auyero and Sobering 2019; Flom 2019). These factors aggravate the incentives created by criminal conflicts to target law enforcement, making local law enforcement prime targets. This follows Sabet (2010), who states that ‘impunity for many organized crime leaders would simply not be possible without the support of *local* law enforcement [emphasis added]’ (6).

## Scope conditions

Violence against law enforcement by COs is prevalent across Latin America, but the dynamics presented here may manifest differently across contexts depending on key conditions.

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<sup>5</sup>What I call ‘more egregious’ forms of violence has overlap but is different than the ‘visible’ or public violence concept presented by Durán-Martínez (2017). Conceptually, egregious violence meant to intimidate other law enforcement personnel can be public (e.g., an officer being shot dozens of times) or private (e.g., the murder of a police officers and their family inside their home), and is meant to intimidate law enforcement personnel directly, not necessarily the public or other audiences.

First, this article analyzes a country that has been under a federally-led crackdown for nearly two decades. This may be relevant if federal crackdowns create additional perverse incentives driving COs towards targeting subnational law enforcement. For example, top-down government crackdowns may provide federal officials greater bargaining power when negotiating collusive arrangements, increasing the cost of capture, and driving COs to seek protection from subnational law enforcement, inadvertently making them targets. Second, the argument assumes that the COs under analysis possess sufficient coercive capacity to carry out attacks against law enforcement. In Brazil, [Magaloni et al. \(2020\)](#) find that COs that react the most violently towards crackdowns are those with high military capacity. Analyzing weaker or smaller COs without this capacity may restrict them from systematically using violence against law enforcement even if the incentives are present. Finally, part of the framework assumes a security system where law enforcement agencies operate at different levels of government. The specific incentives outlined that push COs to target more local law enforcement may manifest differently in unitary or centralized systems.

## Context

This study looks at Mexico, a federal system composed of three levels of government (federal, state, and municipal), each having law enforcement powers per the Constitution. Centrally, by ‘law enforcement’ I mean any security agency authorized to use force domestically. Standard definitions of law enforcement typically exclude the military because these are seen as forces that engage in external conflicts, hence the common use of the term *policing* in the literature when referring to domestic enforcement.<sup>6</sup> Yet, given the widespread use of the military for *domestic policing* in Latin America, I include the military within the scope of this article and use the term ‘law enforcement’ to refer to policing and military institutions.

Crimes in Mexico are classified as either federal crimes (*fuero federal*) that fall within the

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<sup>6</sup>For example, [Eck et al. \(2021\)](#) and the 2018 Comparative Politics Newsletter on policing, named ‘Symposium: The Comparative Politics of Policing.’

jurisdiction of federal agencies (e.g., drug trafficking, illegal firearms possession, contraband, and involvement in organized crime), or common crimes (*fuero común*) that fall within the jurisdiction of subnational agencies (e.g., homicides, property theft, fraud, sexual crimes). Generally speaking, law enforcement in Mexico is divided into three broad institutions: the military, public security agencies charged with enforcing the law, and the Attorney General’s (AG) Office within the judiciary branch charged with investigating crimes and prosecuting criminals. Within the military there are two agencies, the army and marines<sup>7</sup>. Within the AG, there is the judicial police (*policía ministerial*) that is responsible for investigating crimes on behalf of state prosecutors. Public security agencies exist at all three levels of government, though not all municipalities have them, and are charged with policing and prisons. These public security agencies include municipal preventive police, municipal transit police, state police, and federal police (transformed into the National Guard in 2019), among others.<sup>8</sup> These agencies are outlined in Table I.

Table I. Main law enforcement agencies in Mexico by institution and level of government

Level of Government	Institution	Agency (main agencies in data)
Federal	Military	Army*
		Marines*
	Public Security	Federal Police* (dissolved in December 2019) National Guard* (created May 2019)
	Attorney General	Ministerial Police
State	Public Security	State Police Corrections
	Attorney General	Judicial Police
Municipal	Public Security	Municipal Police
		Transit Police

*Note:* \* Denotes agencies spearheading government crackdown against criminal organizations that began in December of 2006.

Since the 1990s, Mexico’s criminal underworld was dominated by a handful of powerful COs that specialized in trafficking drugs to the United States. COs in Mexico are known as

<sup>7</sup>In Mexico, the army and marines are two separate institutions within the executive branch.

<sup>8</sup>Some states and municipalities have other police agencies, though these only exist in some places and vary in type. For example, auxiliary police agencies, financial and bank police agencies, and rural police, among others.

cartels. The subnational democratization process Mexico underwent during this time period meant that the hegemonic PRI party could no longer provide or coordinate protection to these cartels across the country (see [Shirk and Wallman 2015](#)). [Trejo and Ley \(2020\)](#) argue that this detonated a series of deadly wars between these cartels during the 1990s and early 2000s. In response to increasing violence, newly elect president Calderón declared war against drug trafficking in December of 2006 and deployed the military to his home state of Michoacán. Through the following years, the military was deployed across the country in a militarized crackdown against Mexico’s powerful cartels. Among other important consequences, the crackdown fragmented Mexican cartels and gave rise to dozens of new cartels, many of which went to war with the cartel they fragmented from and each other. Consequently, cartel fragmentation, which increased dramatically after 2010, resulted in an ever increasing number of criminal wars across the country.

## Data

The literature on violence against law enforcement by COs remains limited due to the lack of data. To overcome this limitation, I create two original datasets of assassinated law enforcement personnel in Mexico. The first dataset identifies all assassinated law enforcement officers in 2018 and covers all of Mexico. The second dataset identifies all assassinated law enforcement personnel in the central state of Guanajuato between 2000 and 2020. For each observation, both datasets include the following key information: date of assassination, agency and level of government, their position, which state and municipality they worked in, which state and municipality they were killed in, whether they held a leadership position, how they were killed, and whether the killing was possibly associated with organized crime.

I choose Guanajuato because it serves as an important and relevant case. First, Guanajuato was the state with the most police officers assassinated between 2018 and 2021, making it a key case to explore. Second, it complements the national cross-sectional dataset

by providing a panel data that spans 21 years. Lastly, given the detailed data on organized crime created by [Alcocer \(2023\)](#) in the state of Guanajuato, focusing on this state allows me to investigate how criminal conflicts help explain the killing of law enforcement officers in better detail. Moreover, by triangulating evidence from two different datasets, I add robustness to the findings. The following subsections present these two datasets in more detail. Figures 2 and 3 show the number of assassinations in both samples by level of government and geographic distribution.

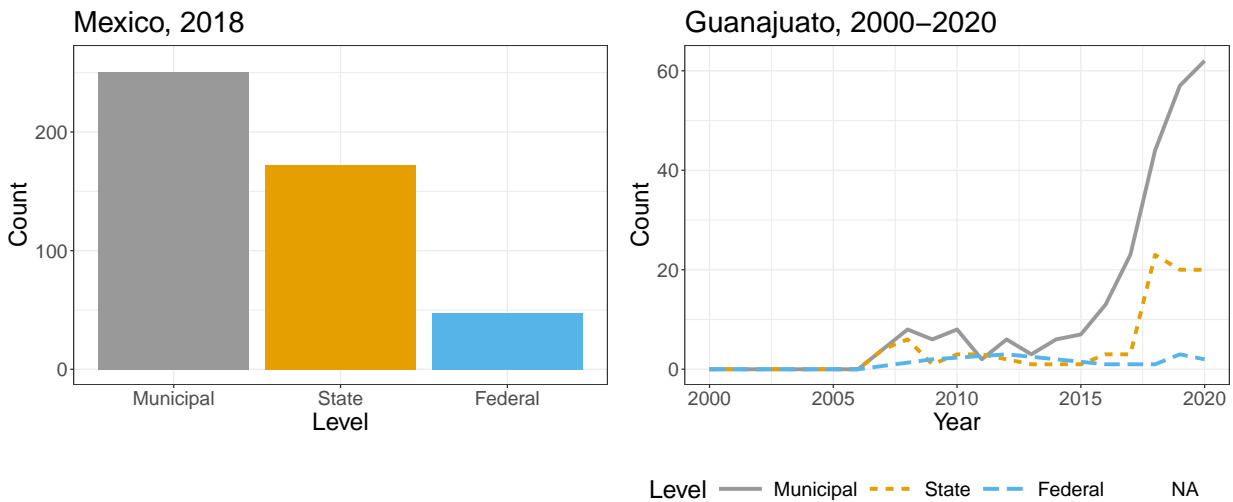


Figure 2. Number of assassinations of law enforcement officers by level of government in Mexico during 2018 and Guanajuato from 2000-2020. Original data collected by author.

## Mexico, 2018

The first dataset covers all assassinations of law enforcement officers in Mexico in 2018. The dataset includes 493 individual assassinations, of which 469 are analyzed here due to their possible link to organized crime.<sup>9</sup> To create the dataset, I rely on data from [Causa en Común \(2024\)](#), a think tank specializing on public security issues in Mexico, Mexico’s statistical agency (INEGI), the army (SEDENA), and the marines (SEMAR). First, Causa en Común monitors news to identify killings of police officers each year since 2018. This

<sup>9</sup>I discard killings that are clearly not related to organized crime. See Online Appendix for details.

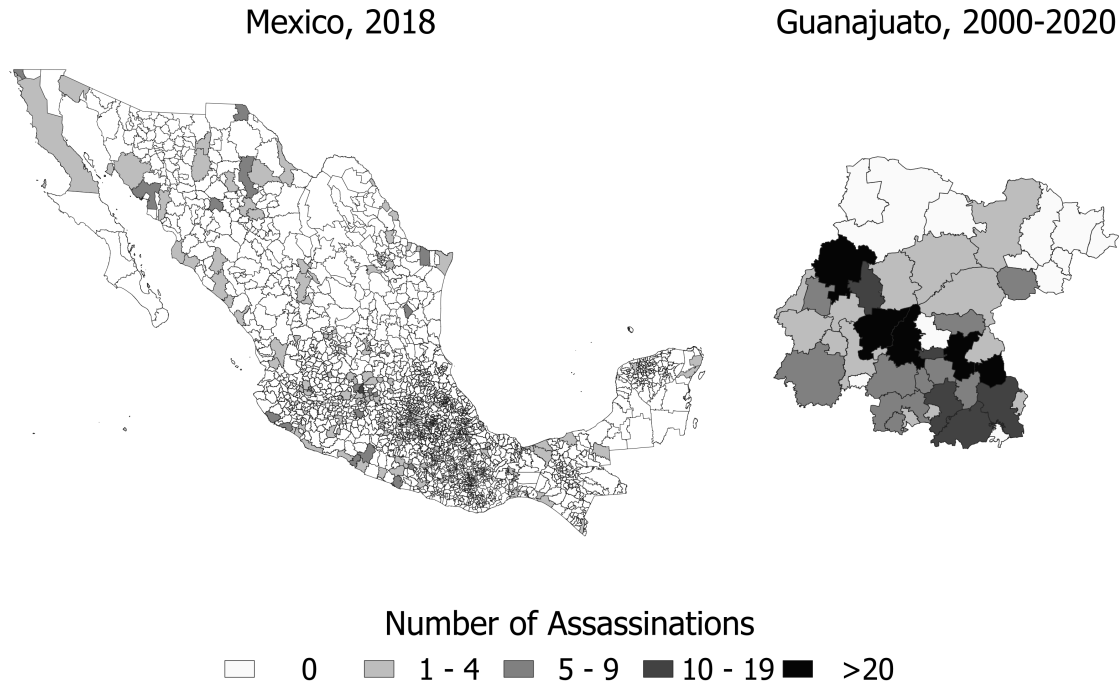


Figure 3. Number of assassinations of law enforcement officers by municipality in Mexico during 2018 and Guanajuato from 2000-2020. Original data collected by author.

data includes the date, state, and municipality of the killing and a link to a news article verifying the observation. Second, INEGI provides data from federal, state, and municipal government censuses where a question asks how many public security personnel were killed in 2018. Third, SEMAR and SEDENA provide information on the number of personnel killed on the job in 2018 and include whether it was a homicide and the municipality where it happened. I merge these datasets, independently verify each observation, and collect additional information. Because the Causa en Común data only includes police and the INEGI data does not cover all municipalities, I conduct additional qualitative research to cover the gaps by searching for articles stating the total number of police officers killed per state in 2018, and if I am missing observations, finding these. I also conducted online searches with three-month windows per state to look for additional assassinations. For each observation I include at least one link to the source of the information.



## Guanajuato, 2000 - 2020

The second dataset covers the assassination of law enforcement personnel in the state of Guanajuato between 2000 and 2020. The dataset includes 351 individual assassinations, of which 345 are analyzed here due to their possible links with organized crime. To create this dataset, I rely on extensive qualitative research and systematic online searches.<sup>10</sup> For each observation I include at least one link to the source of the information. To validate a subset of the observations, I use data on assassinated *police* officers in Guanajuato from [POPLAB \(2024\)](#), a non-profit organization specializing on political analysis on Guanajuato, and Causa en Común. I only use these to validate the data collection efforts since both datasets only cover 2018-2020 and only include police officers and not military or judicial police.

An additional strength of the Guanajuato data is that it includes not only law enforcement *officers*, but also assassinations of administrative staff and other employees of these agencies. I consider these relevant as part of the phenomenon. To illustrate why, I provide this example: On March 13, 2018, eight armed men in two vehicles stopped in front of a State Attorney General's Office in Irapuato, Guanajuato. Three of them, armed with AR-15 automatic assault rifles, entered the building and opened fire, shooting 80 bullets in 25 seconds. The attack killed a secretary working at the office ([AM 2018](#)). I include the assassination of this secretary as part of the phenomenon of COs targeting law enforcement institutions and *personnel* even though the secretary was not, strictly speaking, a law enforcement *officer*.

## Understanding law enforcement assassinations

Given the novelty of the topic and that this is the first data of its kind, this section presents descriptive findings, including the types of assassinations and who cartels target by level of government, agency, leadership positions, and whether the officers were on or off duty.

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<sup>10</sup>See Online Appendix for details.

## Types of assassinations

An initial finding is that the manner in which the assassinations are carried out varies greatly. Despite the heterogeneity, I find that most assassinations fall within four general categories: (1) Coordinated attacks, (2) executions, (3) confrontations, and (4) kidnappings.<sup>11</sup> These categories were created inductively after collecting and reading the description of all assassinations. In Table II, I define each category and provide examples of common types of assassinations that fall within each. These categories are not mutually exclusive and their borders are fuzzy conceptually and empirically due to the very limited information available for the majority of cases. Nevertheless, killings do differ in kind and classifying them, even if imperfectly, is important as it provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Figure 4 shows the distribution of killings by type of attack.

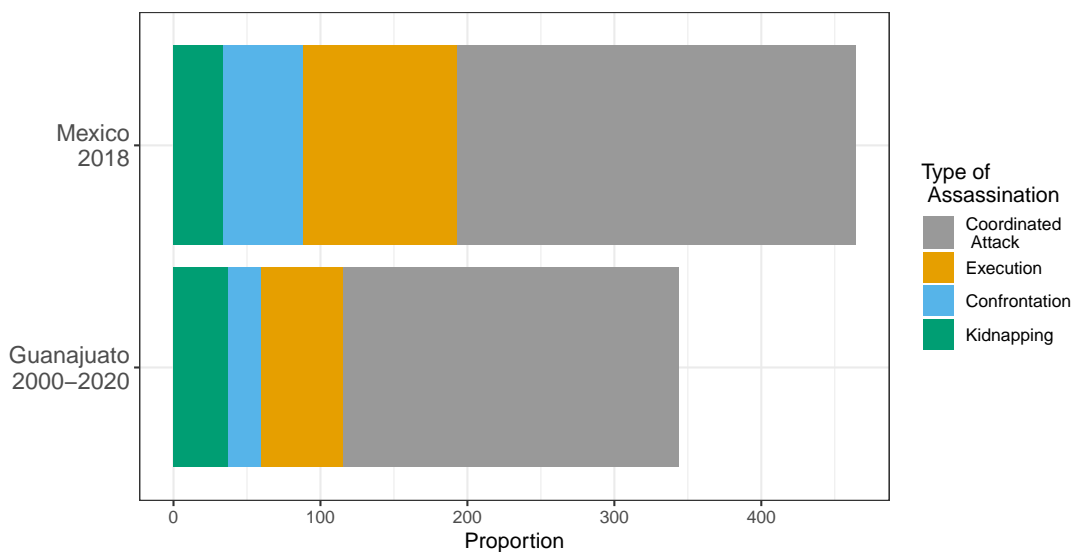


Figure 4. Assassinations of law enforcement officers by type of attack in Mexico during 2018 and Guanajuato from 2000-2020. Original data collected by author.

First, and perhaps surprisingly, coordinated attacks are the most common form of assassination, making up 58.5% of killings in Mexico in 2018 and 66.8% in Guanajuato between

<sup>11</sup>Trejo and Ley (2020) classify high-profile violence into three categories: kidnapping, public death threats, assassination attempts and murders. I break down ‘murders’ into three more detailed categories: coordinated attacks, executions, and confrontations. I do not include public death threats since the data is on assassinations.

Table II. Types of assassinations and examples of each category

<b>Types</b>	<b>General definition</b>	<b>Typical examples</b>
Coordinated attack	Attack against law enforcement personnel in public spaces. Tends to be perpetrated by multiple armed individuals and typically involve multiple gunshots. These crimes appear to be premeditated most of the time. Targets one or multiple officers.	(1) Armed individuals in multiple vehicles stopped police officers while they were patrolling and shot them with automatic rifles. (2) Police officers were met with gunshots when attending a call. The officers were killed before they could react. (3) An officer was shot twenty times by multiple armed men when leaving their home.
Execution	Directed attacks in public or private spaces. Tends to target only one officer and be perpetrated by one or two assailants and entail one or two gunshots or stabbings. Seems premeditated sometimes but also occurs spontaneously. Less scandalous and more targeted than a coordinated attack.	(1) Officer was eating lunch when an assailant walked up to the officer and shot them twice in the head. (2) An officer responded to a reported robbery and was shot in the head by the alleged criminal. (3) Armed individuals entered the officer's home in the middle of the night and killed the officer.
Confrontation	Violent altercations with armed individuals. Can be result of law enforcement operation against suspected criminals, but often results from an attack against law enforcement officers who return fire.	(1) Police officers were pursuing a vehicle when they were met with gunshots. The officers fired back, but one officer died in the exchange. (2) A group of armed individuals ambushed a group of officers, who subsequently fired back. Two officers died in the firefight.
Kidnapping	Law enforcement personnel are kidnapped or taken alive and killed or disappeared in a different location.	(1) The officer was reported missing by their family. Their dismembered body was found a week later. (2) A group of armed individuals entered the officer's home and took the officer with them. The officer was found dead two days later by the side of a road with signs of torture.

2000-2020. These types of assassinations are especially egregious, as they most often entail very visible violence. These percentages are also a slight undercount, as coordinated attacks that fail to kill the officer(s) immediately and allow them to fire back are categorized as confrontations. The frequency of these brazen attacks appears to speak against the common assertion that COs should not use this type of violence because it brings unwanted government attention. If that was the case these attacks would be rare. This may speak to the coercive capacity of these groups and to the high levels of impunity present in Mexico.

The second most common type of assassination can be broadly categorized under execution, which makes up 22.6% of killings in Mexico in 2018 and 16.2% in Guanajuato between 2000-2020. These are the types of killings that, perhaps, would be most expected if the costs of killing enforcement actors were high and COs wanted to be discrete about them. Yet, while they are frequent, they are clearly not a majority of killings.

Third, I find that only 11.6% of killings in Mexico in 2018 and 6.4% in Guanajuato between 2000-2020 occurred during confrontations. This is puzzling given that Mexico began a war against drug trafficking in December of 2006, deployed federal forces throughout the country to confront cartels, and that the existing explanation for this violence centers on cartels and the state confronting each other. This may suggest that the proportion of killings directly related to crackdown operations is relatively small.

Lastly, kidnappings make up 7.3% of killings in Mexico in 2018 and 10.7% in Guanajuato between 2000-2020. The modal type of kidnappings includes the officer being taken by armed men when on or off duty and later found dead, sometimes with signs of torture, at a different location, and in some cases, never located and presumed dead.

## **Level of government and agency**

Given that Mexico is federal system with enforcement agencies *across* and *within* levels of government, an important question is *which* agencies cartels are targeting. Figure 2 shows the number of assassinations both samples by level of government. Across samples, I find

that the majority of killings are of personnel in municipal agencies, followed by state agencies and then federal agencies. Specifically, in the national sample, 10% of killings were of federal personnel, 36.9% of state personnel, and 53.2% of municipal personnel. In Guanajuato, 3.8% of killings were of federal personnel, 25.4% of state personnel, and 70.1% of municipal personnel.

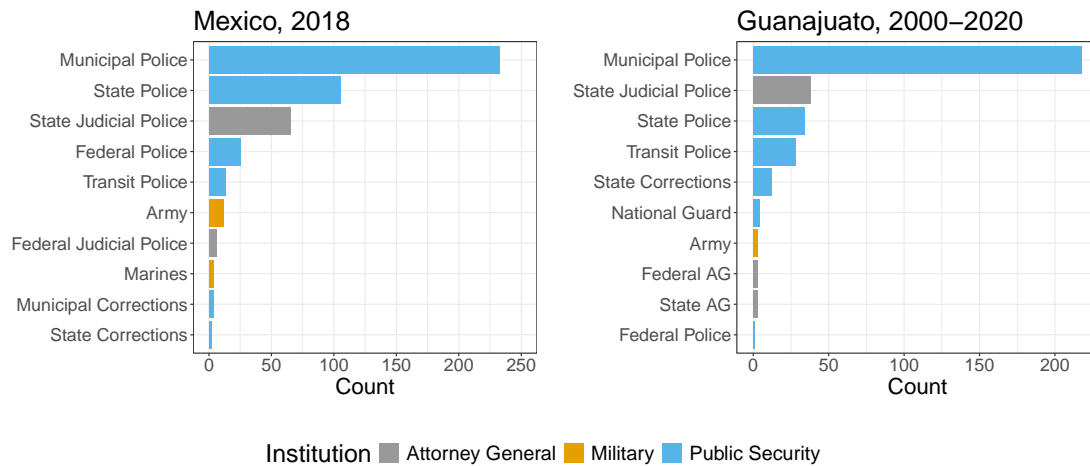


Figure 5. Assassinations of law enforcement officers by level of government and institution in Mexico during 2018 and Guanajuato from 2000-2020. Original data collected by author.

I also disaggregate killings by agencies (following Table I) in Figure 5. In the national sample, the main targets are municipal police (52.3%), state police (22.3%), and judicial police (14%). These three agencies make up 88.7% of victims. In Guanajuato, the main targets are also these agencies, with municipal police first (71.1%), judicial police second (11.8%), and state police third (9.8%), totaling 92.8% of all killings.

These findings clearly show that cartels are not primarily targeting law enforcement agencies leading the implementation of the federally-led government crackdown. Rather, they are principally targeting local police, who, in Mexico, cannot preemptively investigate crimes (by law and in practice).<sup>12</sup> This suggests that most victims are not those implementing militarized crackdowns, and highlights that violence against law enforcement is a much

<sup>12</sup>Municipal police in Mexico are preventive or transit police without the legal jurisdiction to investigate crimes that have not yet been perpetrated. For these reasons, these agencies do not have investigative capacities. For example, they do not have detectives.

broader issue than has been recognized.

## **High-ranking officers**

Are cartels targeting low-level officers who conduct everyday operations or the leaders making high-level decisions about policies and operations? To examine this question, I identify whether each victim held a leadership position within their agency when they were killed, for example, whether they were police chiefs, commanders, subdirectors, coordinators, or supervisors. I find that 21.1% and 22.3% of victims in the national and Guanajuato samples, respectively, held leadership roles. In other words, the assassination of enforcement leaders is remarkably common—in 2018 alone, 99 officers in leadership roles across Mexico were assassinated.

More specifically, as Figure 6 shows, with the exception of seven assassinations across both datasets, all personnel killed with leadership positions worked in state and municipal agencies. Interestingly, excluding federal agencies in the national sample, the proportion of high-ranking personnel killed by level of government in both samples is around 22% (low of 17.8% and high of 27.3%). While no data exists on the proportion of high-ranking personnel in Mexican law enforcement agencies, this data suggests that individuals in leadership positions are assassinated at higher proportions than low-level officers.

## **In the line of duty**

While it may be reasonable to assume that most assassinations of enforcement officers occur while they are carrying out their responsibilities, many officers are killed while off duty. These killings could be initially discarded as random killings or killings unrelated to their job, but descriptions of the killings suggest that most are due to their duties as officers. For example, a significant number of these assassinations occur when an officer is on their way to work or just leaving their shift. In many attacks, even when the officers are not going to or leaving work, the attacks appear to be directly targeting these individuals. For example,

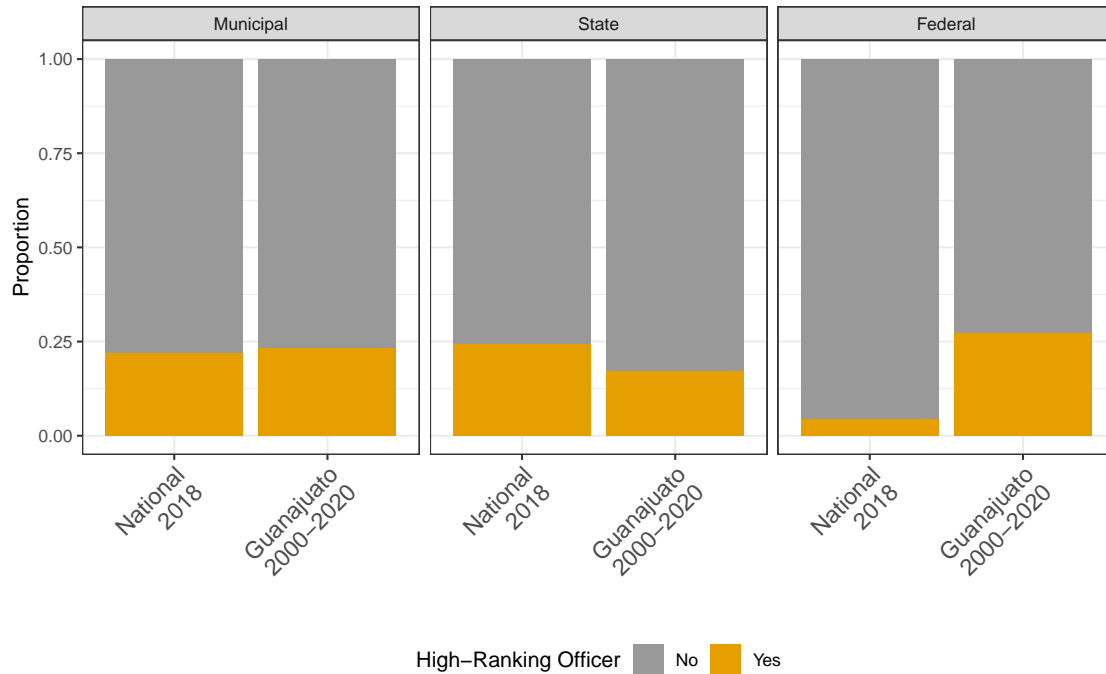


Figure 6. Proportion of assassinations of high and low ranking law enforcement officers by level of government in Mexico during 2018 and Guanajuato from 2000-2020. Original data collected by author.

in April of 2018, an off-duty municipal police officer in Juchitán, Oaxaca was preparing to receive guests for his daughter’s 15th birthday when a group of armed individuals arrived at the event center, went up to the officer, and executed him ([El Heraldó 2018](#)). The same month in Manzanillo, Colima, two off-duty federal police officers were sitting in chairs at the beach in front of their hotel when a group of armed individuals walked up to them and shot them point blank ([El Universal 2018](#)). When looking at the data, I find that 31.1% of victims in the national sample and 40.2% in the Guanajuato sample were assassinated while off duty. These are surprisingly high proportions, and may imply that officers are especially vulnerable during these times.

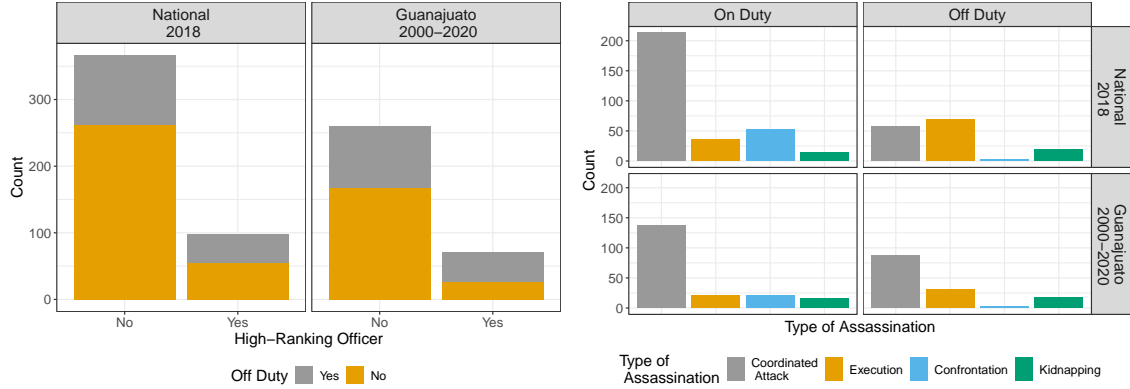


Figure 7. Assassinations of on and off duty law enforcement officers by position and type of attack in Mexico during 2018 and Guanajuato from 2000-2020. Original data collected by author.

## Criminal conflicts and law enforcement assassinations

Beyond the descriptive findings, do criminal conflicts affect the prevalence and types of law enforcement assassinations? This section combines the original data on assassinations with data on local presence of cartels in Mexico to analyze this relationship. The analysis offers an initial assessment and is not meant to be causal. Yet, by uncovering correlations while controlling for key covariates and triangulating results from different datasets, the article seeks to advance the argument and hopes to inspire future research.

### Empirical strategy

I triangulate evidence from two datasets. First, I use the cross-sectional data on assassinations that covers all of Mexico in 2018, along with data on criminal presence at the local level from [Sobrinho \(2023\)](#). Second, I use the panel dataset on assassinations in the state of Guanajuato along with a detailed, hand-coded dataset on cartel dynamics from [Alcocer \(2023\)](#). I conduct both analyses for robustness since each sample has its strengths and limitations. The national dataset has the strength of covering all of Mexico’s municipalities, assuring generalizability across different regions. However, it only covers one year and the cartel data is based on scrapped media reports that measure geographic presence with dummy variables,



and does not include information on criminal wars. The second dataset, on the other hand, is a panel dataset that includes 21 years, allowing the inclusion of unit and time fixed effects. Moreover, the cartel data is hand-coded and includes details the national data does not, such as which municipalities were being actively fought over across time. Yet, this dataset only covers one state. Summary statistics for both samples are provided in the Online Appendix.

The main dependent variable in all models is the number of law enforcement officers assassinated per municipality per year. The main models use data on where the law enforcement personnel worked, in the Online Appendix I include results using information on where they worked when it differs from where they were killed. To then test how cartel wars influence *who* is targeted, I use both the total number of municipal and high-level officers law enforcement officers killed and the percent of these assassinations relative to all killings. To investigate *how* they are being targeted, I focus on the most egregious types of assassinations—coordinated attacks—and use the number of police killed by coordinated attacks and the percent relative to all assassinations. I use this category to measure egregious violence following existing research that notes that ‘ambush killings represent the most severe, traumatic form of violence against police’ (White 2020, 466).<sup>13</sup>

The main explanatory variable is criminal wars. For the national dataset, I create a dummy variable,  $Competition_i$ , measuring whether two or more cartels were present in a given municipality in 2017, and another dummy variable,  $Monopoly_i$ , which takes a value of one if a municipality only has one cartel present in 2017. I use cartel presence data from 2017 to avoid endogeneity concerns, principally that COs killing law enforcement personnel impacts criminal wars. While I believe that it is unlikely that killing a single law enforcement officer could quickly begin (or end) local criminal conflicts, I nevertheless use 2017 data. I also include results using cartel data from 2018 in the Online Appendix for robustness. For the Guanajuato dataset, I combine the data on geographic presence and dyad data on rivalries and alliances to identify which municipalities were actively contested each year. Using this

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<sup>13</sup>While not all coordinated attacks are ambush attacks in my data, most are.

data, I create a dummy variable,  $War_{it}$ , that takes a value of 1 when two or more cartels are actively contesting a municipality and 0 otherwise. I also create a dummy variable,  $Peace_{it}$ , that takes a value of 1 when one or more cartels are present in a municipality but not at war and 0 otherwise. Given the detailed qualitative data collection methodology used to create this data, I do not lag this variable in the main models, but do include a lagged model in the Online Appendix for robustness.

For the national model, I control for the following key covariates. First, the total number of law enforcement personnel at different levels of government likely matters for whether and how many assassinations we observe. I thus control for the log number of personnel in municipal public security agencies at the end of 2017 using official data from INEGI<sup>14</sup> and, separately, for the log number of personnel in state public security agencies at the end of 2017. Unfortunately, there is no data on how many federal police or military personnel operate in each state. Second, a leading argument in the literature is that intergovernmental coordination helps the state shield itself from COs and leaves those without higher-level protection vulnerable to attacks (Rios 2015; Durán-Martínez 2017; Trejo and Ley 2016; González and Cáceres 2019; Alberti et al. 2023). To control for intergovernmental coordination, I use local and state level election data from Magar (2018) and create three dummy variables: whether the mayor shares political affiliation with (1) only the governor, (2) only the president, and (3) both the governor and the president. Third, given the evidence that crackdowns create incentives to violently confront the state, I use data from the federal police to control for the number of operations taken per state in 2017. While data on military operations would perhaps be a better measure, this data is not available. Fourth, state capacity may affect the incentives to use or not use violence against law enforcement by making it more costly. To control for state capacity, I use two variables from 2017 for each state: the log of fiscal revenue in the form of total income from taxes and the log number of AG agents and prosecutors. Finally, I also include a series of state dummy variables to take into account

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<sup>14</sup>I calculate the log of the number of personnel plus one given that some municipalities have zero personnel.

differences across political jurisdictions.

The panel structure of the Guanajuato data allow me to keep various factors constant. Given that the data only covers one state, state-specific factors like security policies that are implemented statewide, the capacity of the state government, and the political party in power at the state level, among others, are accounted for. Additionally, the panel structure allows me to include time and municipality fixed effects, allowing me to control for municipality-specific time invariant factors and any common shocks across time. I also control for key covariates. First, I control for the log number of personnel in the municipal public security agencies in 2010, the earliest year this data is available for and which is before most assassinations took place. Second, starting in 2010, some municipalities in Guanajuato began implementing a police reform known as Unique State Command (*Mando Unico Estatal*) where they dissolved the local police and state and federal forces took over public security, while others implemented a reform called Unique Police Command (*Mando Unico Policial*) aimed at improving coordination between police departments, but local police departments continued operating. I use data from [Alcocer \(2024\)](#), who identifies the year municipalities in Guanajuato adopted the reform, and create a dummy variable for each reform that takes a value of 1 for municipality-years where the respective reform was in place. Third, to account for the national crackdown declared in December of 2006, I include a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 starting in 2007. Fourth, I also control for political vulnerability across time for each municipality using the same three dummy variables introduced in the previous paragraph.

With the national data I estimate both linear OLS and negative binomial models. In addition to the control variables, I also include state fixed effect which controls for state-specific covariates and allows me to compare municipalities within the same state. Robust standard errors are estimated. For the Guanajuato panel dataset, I estimate two-way fixed-effect models that include covariates and municipality and year fixed effects that control for unit-specific time invariant covariates and for any common shocks across time. Standard

Table III. Criminal wars and assassinations of law enforcement officials

	Mexico 2018				Guanajuato 2000-2020	
	(1)	<i>OLS</i> (2)	(3)	<i>NB</i> (4)	(5)	<i>TWFE</i> (6)
Cartel monopoly	-0.015 (0.048)	-0.044 (0.045)	-0.021 (0.043)	0.563 (0.318)		
Cartel competition	0.346*** (0.052)	0.289*** (0.048)	0.209*** (0.050)	1.153*** (0.245)		
Cartel peace					0.423 (0.518)	0.378 (0.500)
Cartel war					0.449** (0.160)	0.393* (0.153)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
State FE	No	No	Yes	Yes		
Municipality FE					Yes	Yes
Year FE					Yes	Yes
Num.Obs.	2456	2410	2410	2410	966	966
R2 Adj.	0.122	0.127	0.173		0.281	0.290
AIC				1813		

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Mexico models: Robust standard errors. Guanajuato models: Clustered standard errors.

errors are clustered at the municipality level.

## Results

Table III shows the main results using both datasets and various model specifications. First, a result that stands out and is consistent across models is that cartel presence at the local level does not help explain violence against law enforcement: none of the coefficients for cartel monopoly or cartel peace are statistically significant. For the national models, the coefficients are also substantially smaller than those of cartel competition. Thus, cartel presence, in the absence of criminal conflicts, does not appear to be sufficient to observe violence against law enforcement, even in a context with an active government crackdown.

The main finding is that criminal conflicts at the local level are the main variable associ-

ated with the assassination of law enforcement. All models across samples show statistically significant results. The coefficients are also substantively large and nearly identical in relative size across both samples. In both the national and Guanajuato samples, the coefficients of Models (3) and (6) suggests that criminal conflicts are associated with an increase of just over a 100% in the number of killings of law enforcement personnel relative to the mean of the dependent variable in each respective sample. These results suggest that local criminal conflicts are driving violence against law enforcement in Mexico.

In the Online Appendix, I use different measures of cartel conflicts for robustness. For the national sample, I include models using cartel data from 2018 rather than 2017. For the Guanajuato sample, I lag the cartel war and peace variables to address possible endogeneity concerns. All results are not only consistent, but the coefficients are slightly larger than the models presented here, suggesting that the coefficients in Table III may be conservative estimates.

Turning to who is targeted and how, Table IV shows the results of this analysis using both the number of assassinations and the percent of overall assassinations corresponding to each type. Again, the results are consistent across samples and models and support the argument.

First, a key finding is that criminal conflicts are associated with the killing of *local* law enforcement officers and personnel, both in total number and in percent to all assassinations. The only coefficient that is not statistically significant at the  $p \leq 0.05$  is model (1) in the Guanajuato sample, where  $p = 0.053$ . The coefficients also suggest a large substantive effect: In both samples, criminal conflicts are associated with an increase in the number of assassinated municipal law enforcement of nearly 100% compared to the average municipality. Relative to all assassinations, criminal conflicts are associated with a 4.2 percentage point increase in the percent of assassinations of municipal police in the national sample and 10.6 percentage points in Guanajuato.

I do not find evidence that criminal conflicts help explain why or where law enforcement

Table IV. Criminal wars and assassinations of law enforcement officials

	Mexico, 2018					
	Municipal police (1)	High-ranking (2)	Coordinated attack (3)	Municipal police (%) (4)	High-Ranking (%) (5)	Coordinated attack (%) (6)
Cartel monopoly	0.005 (0.031)	0.010 (0.017)	-0.016 (0.032)	0.813 (1.516)	1.217 (1.071)	-0.398 (1.260)
Cartel competition	0.097** (0.031)	0.023 (0.015)	0.142*** (0.038)	4.185** (1.297)	1.262 (0.755)	5.186*** (1.225)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Num.Obs.	2410	2410	2410	2410	2410	2410
R2 Adj.	0.126	0.094	0.102	0.109	0.060	0.093
	Guanajuato, 2000-2020					
	Municipal police (1)	High-ranking (2)	Coordinated attack (3)	Municipal police (%) (4)	High-Ranking (%) (5)	Coordinated attack (%) (6)
Cartel peace	0.186 (0.367)	0.260 (0.145)	0.235 (0.304)	15.028 (9.118)	12.149 (8.012)	5.762 (9.129)
Cartel war	0.230 (0.116)	0.071 (0.041)	0.263** (0.090)	10.580** (3.742)	3.655 (2.768)	10.071** (3.245)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Num.Obs.	966	966	966	966	966	966
R2 Adj.	0.267	0.140	0.234	0.276	0.083	0.246

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ 

Mexico models: Robust standard errors. Guanajuato models: Clustered standard errors.

personnel with leadership positions are targeted more. This suggests that either leaders are targeted in similar proportions by cartels during and outside conflicts or that some other factor not considered here is driving this dynamic. Future research could investigate why and when COs target high-ranking law enforcement personnel.

Lastly, I find that criminal conflicts are strongly associated with the assassination of law enforcement in more gruesome manners. The models suggest that criminal conflicts are associated with a 5.2 percentage point increase in the percent of assassinations that are perpetrated through coordinated attacks in the national sample and 10.1 percentage points in Guanajuato. These results strongly suggest that criminal conflicts are driving COs to use more visible and egregious forms of violence against state actors, a phenomenon that may have consequential effects on law enforcement institutions, the rule of law, and citizen perceptions of the state. Identifying factors leading COs to use more egregious forms of violence against state actors is not only important, but a novel contribution.

Taken together, the results from both samples show clear and robust patterns: local criminal conflicts increase the frequency of lethal attacks against law enforcement personnel, push cartels to target local law enforcement, and drive cartels to use more egregious forms of violence against law enforcement.

## **Interpreting the results**

To illustrate the findings, I provide three real-world examples of criminal conflicts leading to violence against law enforcement. While there is, unfortunately, scant information on most assassinations beyond brief descriptions of the event, the few that are better documented provide invaluable insights that help interpret the violence unfolding in Mexico.

In 2008, a war broke out between the Sinaloa Cartel and the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO). On May 21, 2008, two kidnapped law enforcement officers—one a high-ranking officer and the other an agent of the judicial police—were found dead with signs of torture in the trunk of a car on the outskirts of Mexico City. The two bodies were left with messages next

to them: ‘This is going to happen to those who [work with] El Chapo and Mayo Zambada [leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel]’ ([Reuters 2008](#)).<sup>15</sup> The signal was clear: law enforcement officers colluding with the Sinaloa Cartel would be violently targeted by the BLO.

In 2010, the South Pacific Cartel (CPS) was engaged in a bloody war with the CO led by Édgar Valdés Villarreal over the state of Morelos. In May of 2010, a group of armed cartel members—allegedly on behalf of Valdés Villarreal—ambushed a high-ranking member of the municipal police of Cuernavaca, the state capital, killing one police officer. Just a few hours later, CPS left various public messages in Cuernavaca and the neighboring municipality of Jiutepec accusing and directly threatening, by name, three high-ranking members of the state’s public security agency for protecting Valdés Villarreal and allowing his organization to perpetrate this violence ([Redacción 2010](#)).

Since 2017, the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG) and Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima (CSRL) have been engaged in a intense war to control illicit markets in southern Guanajuato, with many law enforcement officers caught in the crossfire. For example, in October of 2019 in the municipality of Cortazar, three municipal police officers working with CSRL kidnapped three state police officers and handed them over to CSRL. CSRL then published a video online showing armed men torturing two of the kidnapped state officers, with the officers claiming that their superiors worked for CJNG. One of the officers was subsequently found dead, and the other two remain missing ([infobae 2019](#)). Just two months later, 15 members of CJNG armed with automatic rifles and grenades attacked a police station in the neighboring municipality of Villagrán, a CSRL stronghold, killing three local police officers, injuring one, and kidnapping four. CJNG then published a video online showing them interrogating the four kidnapped police officers, who outlined the services they provided CSRL in their function as police officers. The four officers were later found lifeless on the side of a main road ([Crónica 2019](#)).

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<sup>15</sup>Translated by author.



## Conclusion

This article provides the first systematic analysis of violence against law enforcement by COs. It argues that local criminal conflicts create incentives for COs to violently confront law enforcement. It then leverages two original datasets on the assassination of law enforcement personnel in Mexico to show who is being targeted and how. Using local-level data on cartels, it then shows that local criminal conflicts help explain when and where law enforcement is assassinated, and in particular, local law enforcement personnel. Moreover, it finds that criminal conflict makes the use of violence against law enforcement more egregious.

This article highlights dynamics with dire consequences for state capacity, citizen security, the rule of law, and public safety. Cartels being able to routinely perpetrate violence against law enforcement means they can erode the state's coercive capacity and thus operate with more impunity, more freedom, and engage in more predatory behavior towards citizens and the state. This presents a grave challenge for countries in Latin America.

By providing the first examination of the topic, this article hopefully opens the door to future research. Identifying additional drivers of this violence is imperative in order to design and implement policies that protect law enforcement and prevent this type of violence. Moreover, while this article uncovers factors triggering this violence, future research should evaluate the impacts of this violence on law enforcement institutions, public safety, and criminal governance, and other outcomes.

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