



Research Paper

Mourning our dead: The impact of Mexico's war on drugs on citizens' depressive symptoms

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research has shown the substantial impact on mental health for victims of drug-related crime in Mexico, especially individuals who have been heavily exposed to violence. However, the effect of drug-related violence in non-victims has been less studied because causal pathways via indirect violence are more ambiguous. We argue that drug-related violence does have an influence on the mental health of non-victims: For example, because of how violence is publicized by criminal groups, including their use of gruesome killing methods in executions, or via news about government confrontations with these criminal groups.

Methods: We estimate linear models of the effect of drug-related violence (CIDE-PPD database) on depression symptoms (MxFLS 2009–2012). We use lagged violence variables to match the time when individuals' depression symptoms were reported, using different proxies of violence.

Findings: Our findings suggest a negative effect of drug-related violence on the mental health of individuals, specifically in relation to communication used by criminal groups (narcomessages), the brutality of executions, and the confrontations between government forces (specifically local police) and criminal groups.

Conclusions: Our findings suggest that the general population is a direct victim of the psychological violence imposed by the use of narcomessages. This additional effect of the war on drugs should be considered when deciding how to address the psychological effects of drug-related violence. The government should provide safer public spaces to improve perceptions about security, and more mental health services in communities that are most affected by organized crime violence. Mental health is also affected when police forces fight criminal groups. These findings corroborate the crisis of local institutions, the low confidence citizens have in police, and/or the infiltration of organized crime in local police corps. Mexico requires police reform, not only to avoid the involvement of the military in public security operations, but also to avoid social and psychological damage produced by weak police forces fighting organized crime.

Introduction

Research has found that the impact on mental health of victims of drug-related crime in Mexico is substantial and long-lasting, especially in those who have been heavily exposed to violence (Feinstein, 2012; Flores, Reyes, & Reidl, 2014; Leiner et al., 2012; Lusk & McCallister, 2013). However, the effect of drug-related violence on the mental health of non-victims has been less studied and more contested because causal pathways via indirect violence are more uncertain. The literature on crime shows that the mental health of non-victims is influenced by vicarious exposure to violence (witnessing and hearing about it), fear, and the victimization of individuals' close acquaintances (Brück & Müller, 2010; Clark et al., 2008; Dustmann & Fasani, 2014; Lopes et al.,

2015; Paula et al., 2008; Scarpa, Hurley, Shumate, & Haden, 2006).

We build on these findings to analyze the effect that drug-related violence has on the mental health of non-victims, using data for Mexico. Our empirical strategy tests several hypotheses. First, we posit that, once we control for sociodemographic variables and municipal characteristics, drug-related violence at the municipal level influences the mental health of the population (not necessarily direct victims). Moreover, when the executions include gruesome methods of killing or narcomessages, the effect is greater. We also claim that media coverage of violent events, active advertising of the murders by criminal organizations, and the direct victimization of individuals' relatives and acquaintances, work as stress transmission channels for non-victims. Finally, we propose that the effect of violent events on the population's

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Table 1
Summary of studies analyzing relationship between violence and mental health of victims.

Study	Country	Subjects	Type of Violence	Mental health problem
Saunders, Kilpatrick, Resnick, and Tidwell, (1989)	USA	391 adult females (aged 18 or older)	Sexual and community violence	PTSD
Barthauer and Leventhal (1999)	El Salvador	Women aged 18–70	Sexual violence	Psychiatric symptoms
Barbarin, Richter, and de Wet, (2001)	South Africa	5-year-old children	Domestic, sexual and community violence	Psychological functioning
De Jong, Kompro, and VanOmmeren, (2003)	Algeria	Population aged 16–65	Armed conflict-related violence	PTSD and common mental disorders
Eisenman, Gelberg, Liu, and Shapiro, (2003)	Cambodia Ethiopia Palestine Mexico	919 primary care patients from Latin America	Political violence	PTSD and common mental disorders
Norris et al. (2003)	Mexico	Population aged 18–92	Domestic, sexual and community violence	PTSD
Qouta, Punamäki, and El Sarraj, (2003)	Palestine	Children aged 6–16	Military violence	PTSD
Medina-Mora et al. (2005)	Mexico	Population aged 18–65	Domestic, sexual and community violence	PTSD
Zlotnick et al. (2006)	Chile	2,390 people aged 15 to 64	Domestic, sexual and community violence	PTSD
Roberts, Oatka, Browne, Oyok, and Sondorp, (2008)	Uganda	Adults aged 18 and over	War-related traumatic events	PTSD and depression
Paula et al. (2008)	Brazil	Children aged 11–14	Domestic and urban violence	Psychiatric disorders
Espié et al. (2009)	Palestine	1,254 patients aged 15–83	Armed conflict-related violence	PTSD Depression Anxiety PTSD
Fowler, Tompsert, Braciszewski, Tiura, and Baltes, (2009)	USA	Lit review	Community violence	PTSD and mental disorders
Ribeiro, Andreoli, Ferri, Prince, and Mari, (2009)	19 countries in South America, Africa and Asia	Lit review	Domestic, sexual and community violence	PTSD and mental disorders
You and Conner (2009)	USA	322 undergraduates	Interpersonal violence	Depressive symptoms
Mendelson et al. (2010)	USA	677 adolescents and young adults aged 16–23	Stressful life events	Depressive symptoms
Do & Iyer, 2012	Bosnia & Herzegovina	7,000 individuals	Crime Sexual violence	Greater recalling of war experiences
Cornaglia and Leigh (2014)	Australia	5,096 individuals	War-related violence Crime	Reduced mental health (social functioning)
Londoño, Romero, and Casas, (2012)	Colombia	84 individuals aged 20–30	Violence related to armed conflict	Depression/anxiety
Moya (2012)	Colombia	A sample of internally displaced and non-displaced rural households in Colombia	Civil conflict and population displacement	Anxiety disorders and higher risk aversion behavior
Ribeiro et al. (2013)	Brazil	3,744 individuals aged 15–75	Domestic violence Sexual violence Community violence Drug related violence Crime War-related violence Terrorism	PTSD and common mental disorders
Lopes et al. (2015)	Brazil	3,058 civil servants in Rio de Janeiro	Direct, indirect (witnessing) and contextual violence	Psychological distress

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