

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.