



## Welfare and Crime in Mexico

Jerjes Aguirre Ochoa and Jorge Álvarez Banderas

Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo ININEE-School of Law and Social Sciences, MEXICO

Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in), [www.isca.me](http://www.isca.me)

Received 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013, revised 17<sup>th</sup> October 2013, accepted 7<sup>th</sup> November 2013

### Abstract

*A substantial factor in explaining the high crime rate currently happening in Mexico can be found through the concrete analysis of social policy in the country. This article shares the observations found that despite the existence of social programs that attempt to solve the problem of poverty, specifically one called "Opportunities," a high crime rate still exists, especially of severe crimes and organized crime actions. This situation leads us to think that the lack of success of such social programs to fight poverty are not to blame for the increase in violent crimes, but instead other factors such as the profound weakness of the Mexican government, especially local governments, could be a fundamental cause for this high crime rate. The results shared in this article align with the existing literature on other countries, particularly the United States, where other studies have observed and gathered solid evidence of increased social violence even with the implementation of anti poverty social programs.*

**Keyword:** Crime rate, Mexico, concrete, social policy, poverty, opportunities.

### Introduction

The wave of violence and crime in the hard-hit and diverse regions of Mexico have been explained by various theories ranging from those relating to the territorial infighting of organized criminal groups<sup>1</sup>, cultural factors<sup>2</sup> to regional and political factors<sup>3,4</sup>. In general, the emergence of crime and violence has motivated few scientific discussions about the nature of the violence and of the peculiarities of the violence in Mexico in relation to studies about crime and violence reported in other parts of the world.

In Mexico, the drug cartels make up social organizations that commit criminal acts, thereby making their study difficult due to the violent nature of their activities and of their members. The ignorance of the peculiarities and the nature of these groups and of concrete aspects, such as their interaction with society and small communities, has been studied very little and this ignorance has contributed to the misinformation and bad results obtained by governmental strategies and actions to fight these criminal groups. In general, the prevailing emphasis has been one of reaction instead of prevention, and the criminal structure of the problem has not been addressed. One of the strategies that could be followed with a preventive theme would be increasing the budget for social programs, thereby improving the quality of life of the population and reducing the incentives that criminal groups offer by providing a viable alternative instead of using a military combative approach against criminal activity.

An approach of this type implicates the absence or low presence of social spending combined with other factors, such as unemployment, governmental weakness, commercial incentives for drug-trafficking, and family factors, generates a situation in

which individuals feel the need to commit crimes in order to survive facing the deplorable social conditions of minimum subsistence. This affirmation presupposes insufficient social spending which has been a determining factor of criminal activity.

However, in the case of Mexico, the role that social spending plays in relation to the levels of violence seen in the past few years is not clear<sup>5</sup>. This uncertainty is particularly relevant in the context of the design of a medium-term strategy that could attack the structural causes of criminal activity and transcend police and military strategies.

In this context, this article specifically analyzes the social policy as a substantial factor in the explanation of the high crime rate, concretely looking at the case of five municipal districts in the region called 'Tierra Caliente' in the state of Michoacán, Mexico<sup>1</sup>. The article demonstrated that despite the existence of social programs which address the problem of poverty, especially the so-called program called "Opportunities"<sup>ii</sup>, a high crime rate is still noted, with violent crimes being the most notable. This situation might lead the reader to think that the lack of social programs that address poverty might not be the cause of such a high crime rate, but instead other factors might be to blame, especially institutional weakness of local governments. These results aligned with the existing literature in the case of other countries, particularly the United States, in which no solid evidence was observed that social programs did not make a difference in the crime rate.

**Theoretical Framework:** The relationship between crime and social policy can be derived from the theories of anomia and social disorganization. Social programs help to alleviate economical difficulties, which reduces tension and

disorganization within the community, and therefore reduces crime. This general theoretical viewpoint is grounded in the theories of institutional anomia<sup>6,7,8</sup> as well as in the theories of social disorganization<sup>9, 10</sup>.

According to the strain theory, the economical programs that members of a community receive as social support help to mitigate the pressure that individuals feel due to lack of resources and through these programs avoid committing criminal activities. Referring to the scheme of social disorganization, government assistance will reduce the lack of regulation of economical institutions.

De Fronzo<sup>11</sup> produced the first work that pointed out the relation between social spending and crime and found a negative statistical effect in social spending and homicide rates, the rates of rapes and other sex crimes and other types of theft. Grant and Martinez<sup>12</sup> found a negative relationship between social spending and all types of crimes, although the relation was significant only in some cases. Zhang<sup>13</sup> carried out a transversal analysis using multiple measures of well being using as a measurement, the criminality of the crimes against property. In general, he found that public assistance programs had a negative effect on crime, and that the effect was in general, very significant.

Burek<sup>14</sup> investigated the relationship between social spending and crime utilizing a demonstration including different counties in the state of Iowa. This research demonstrated that social spending did not contribute significantly to the explanation of crime.

Worall<sup>15</sup> examined the relationship between social spending and crime using the social support theory as his theoretical base. He presented his findings in a panel containing the data of 58 counties in California from the years 1990 to 1998. The results indicate little or no relationship between social programs and severe crimes.

The investigation realized in Mexico contains no studies realized measuring the correlation between social spending and social programs and levels of crime. The majority of articles vaguely show the need to integrate social policy and the fight against crime. Buvnik<sup>16</sup> studied without an empirical base and presents the need to design long-term political programs that mitigate the levels of violence. Montero<sup>17</sup> demonstrated the need to integrate social policy against crime. Other authors show general references to the importance of public spending to reduce crime<sup>18,19</sup>. In general, no investigation that measures with greater precision and methodology exists to demonstrate the relationship between social spending, or social programs and violent crime.

## **Methodology**

The analysis of delinquency and crime in Mexico, and specifically the case of Michoacán, should take into account the complex and distinct situations of the type of crimes observed in other parts of the world and include that of Mexico also. In

Mexico, the analysis should take into account the distinct Mexican criminal groups which present differences and subtle variations in their operational manners and the way they relate with the population. Some groups dedicate their energies exclusively to pure criminal activity. Others incorporate social struggle principles in their activities. In the region under analysis in this article, the social criminal group studied presents their intentions as a necessity to help the population of their region socially. This organization presents a scheme of work that provides safety and security for the inhabitants of the region while maintaining a moral code of conduct within the context of moral justification; the moral justification is providing safety and security to the inhabitants of the region from violence and threats posed by other criminal groups. In the context of anarchy and the Mexican governmental weakness to provide basic services, this scheme has been well accepted by an important part of the population and very probably by those who are involved themselves in politics. In this complex panorama of complex shades and hues, the research team opted for a qualitative investigation that through its focus permitted a discovery of specific particularities and details about the object of study.

This study is based on the data from 120 interviews made in depth and their observations, which took place in the region of Tierra Caliente during February of 2012. The interview in depth is a qualitative research instrument that permits the researcher to obtain information from the interviewees from a wide concept of angles and allows the observer to notice particularities and details of the object of study that cannot be found in other methods of investigation. These interviews were face-to-face meetings between the investigator and the interviewees and were aimed at the comprehension of different perspectives that a given event might have.

The interviewees were divided into three groups: those between the ages of 15 and 35, those between 36 and 55 and those of the age of 56 and older. The stratification of the study by age permitted the researchers to discover different features conformed by each age group.

The interviews took between one and four hours and were conducted in places where the interviewees felt comfortable; in the majority of cases they were held in their houses or local cafes or restaurants. The interviews were recorded by professional transcriber software, AtlasTi. This permitted the possibility of attaching categories of word codification to pertinent parts of the transcripts and allowed the researchers to compare similar portions of coded text throughout the interviews. The phases of recompilation, and analysis were processed simultaneously in this project.

Therefore, the investigation used a phenomenological focus<sup>20</sup>, using the personal experiences of the author as well as the interviewees, who had the opportunity of analyzing the phenomena of insecurity in Michoacán through his own

experiences, the interactions with young people from different parts of the state, and the continuing meetings with people involved at all levels, from local politicians, functionaries, academics and members of the offices of the justice system in the state.

This study argues that in the case of the selected municipalities, the social programs do not play an important role in the reduction of the levels of violence. Violence and crime have more to do with factors that are related to institutional weakness and the process of political change that has originated structural conditions of weakness in the government and its institutions. Unlike other studies, especially the studies made in the United States, the relationship between social spending and crime in Mexico and in the Tierra Caliente region does not exist in a structural condition of order and social legitimacy. The superior efficiency of the police and the justice systems in the United States provides factors in social policy that are found as secondary factors in the explanation of crime in the United States.

One of the most frequent problems that this investigation found concerning social spending and crime is the determination to understand specifically what is meant by social spending. For this study, we used a specific program called "Opportunities," which is one of the social programs of the Mexican government. Although other social support programs exist in Mexico in the areas of education and health through public health schemes such as "Seguro Popular,"<sup>21</sup> "Opportunities" is the principal program. Other programs exist, such as the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS), or the Social Security Institute for State Workers (ISSTE) that attend formal workers. Still other programs exist to provide milk and free school breakfasts for school children, which fall under the global reach of "Opportunities." For the purpose of this investigation, researchers considered global social programs under the reach of "Opportunities," such as the milk program. Other social programs, although they do exist, were not taken into account for the study, such as school supplies and schoolbooks. "Opportunities" is the most global social program in the region. It should be noted that in Mexico there is no unemployment insurance nor is there any type of direct funding for those who are out of work.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the investigation reflect a variety of interesting factors. The investigation considered that social support referred to all type of social spending that the government offers, such as for health, food and educational support programs as well as spending and financial support that the government offers to promote productive activity, which is understood as those that can improve the immediate conditions of life of the population.

In first terms, the majority of the interviewees showed knowledge of the existence of members of criminal groups that

operated in their own communities. They were neighbors, cousins or even brothers. The fact that they were involved with criminal groups that organized criminal acts and violated the legal established norms did not prove to cause social aversion. People accepted involvement with criminal groups as a normal happening, and in the interviews of some of the younger people, involvement with a criminal group was viewed as a social grace.

Knowing of people who committed crimes, or violated the law, or even knowing community members who belonged to criminal groups was a common factor among the interviewees. The majority of those interviewed lived their lives between legitimacy and illegitimacy. For example, those business people who were interviewed paid their taxes to the state, and at the same time paid their rights or "dues" to operate to members of organized crime.

In reference to social spending, the same situation was observed. The large part of the interviewees receive some type of social assistance, social security, free children's breakfast, governmental agricultural subsidies, or food packages. During the interviews, the people were asked if these social supports avoided becoming involved in criminal activities. The response that the majority gave was that light crimes such as theft or mugging were reduced with this sort of governmental support. The interviewees said, "governmental support helps many people financially." When asked if further support would help to alleviate the more serious crimes, the majority of people, referring to hit men, laboratory workers, or mercenary soldiers of organized crime, responded that these were activities that helped community members earn a daily living. However, the leaders of criminals of higher rank did not depend upon the social programs for daily survival.

Another interesting aspect appeared in the younger interviewees (less than 25 years of age). They reported that if there existed good jobs, scholarships and opportunities to live with dignity, many of the younger people, including the interviewees, would not dedicate themselves to criminal activities. Textually in Spanish they said, "*de existir buenos salarios y escuelas, muchos de los chavos no andarían por ahí con la maña*". They showed that scholarships did not exist for Young students and those families in which young people wanted to study did not have sufficient financial resources to continue with their education. Many of the young people in the interviews pointed out that they did not continue studying not because of lack of interest, but due to the financial impossibility.

The general tone of other interviews was harder on the relation between the lack of financial resources and minimum subsistence. They showed that "many families did not have enough even to eat, they barely had enough to harvest some limes or pay farm workers; the bad ones can attract the young people easily, paying them with wages in one day what we might earn in a week."

Referring to health aspects, those interviewed showed that the Popular Health Benefits (Seguro Popular) only covered certain ailments and there were complaints about the quality of the services that were offered. An important part of the interviews stated that they had to attend generic pharmacies and private doctor offices in order to attend simple emergencies, thus generated medical costs that were not covered by their health insurance.

Another interesting aspect observed in the study had to do with the received support from PROCAMPO. Given the agricultural vacation of the region, these subsidies are important for the subsistence of agricultural activity. If these subsidies are not considered as social welfare in the classic sense of the term, they are important in maintaining the economy of local agricultural producers. To that effect, many of the people interviewed pointed out that the agricultural subsidies were necessary in order to earn enough for their basic needs. "We would be even worse off if they did not give us these resources; you know how hunger is a dog."

## Conclusion

The results observed are only partial from the perspective that a greater social spending budget would reduce the levels of criminality. Some crimes, those related to petty theft and minor infractions, appear to lower at the point when the Mexican state provides satisfactory basic materials to the population and in this manner reduces the commitment of these lesser crimes. The support of the Opportunities program appears to have impact on the population with lower economic resources.

However, in the case of graver crimes, such as that of organized crime, there does not seem to exist a clear correlation between greater social spending and a reduction in the actions of organized crime. The criminals of greater magnitude do not seem to be bothered by the lack of basic needs. The lesser criminals are more susceptible and able to be influenced by social spending. The average pay of a high-ranking criminal's assistant is 900 dollars per month, which indicates that social spending, could still influence these individuals.

This perspective should be viewed from the framework of a wider strategy against crime and delinquency in this conflictive region of the state. Social spending is not the only strategy that will reduce the violence and the crime rate but is only one strategy within a wider vision to fight crime, which includes as part of its base the strengthening of the state's institutions of law and order.

These results align with the observations made in the United States, principally, in relation to welfare programs and the crime rate. It is clear that crime is a multifaceted phenomenon, which does not obey a specific or clear cause. However, an important point for the region under study is what the younger people interviewed stated about their educational prospects. The

younger people showed that if scholarships and opportunities existed for young people, then they would not become engaged in criminal activities. Many of the interviewees of all ages agreed in this aspect: that social program of educational content could provide better results.

Community based organizations (CBOs) in co-operation with Local Self Government Institutions, could help in design this programs<sup>22</sup>. Also, it is necessary to take into account public perceptions of the relation among welfare and crime. Citizens perceptions of crime are relevant since they shape how society think and respond to crime<sup>23</sup>. Police Corps could collaborate in these programs<sup>24</sup>. Other issues like Domestic violence<sup>25</sup> and its relation to crime must be studied for the Mexican case. It is also important, to include in educational content topics like systematic violence against woman<sup>25</sup>.

Finally, the results pointed out the necessity to realize further investigations concerning the relationship between social policy and crime. The specific conditions of this study could not be extrapolated to other parts of Mexico. Other quantitative studies could be of interest and contribute elements of analysis which derive in better public policies and the reduction in the immense human pain that crime has generated in Mexico.

## References

1. González Héctor, Violencia en Tamaulipas se debe al reacomodo de grupos delictivos, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/09/17/nacional/859480> (2012)
2. Cardona Ramírez Mayté, 2007, La cultura del narcotráfico en Michoacán [http://www.contralinea.com.mx/archivo/2007/febrero2/htm/cultura\\_narco\\_michoacan.htm](http://www.contralinea.com.mx/archivo/2007/febrero2/htm/cultura_narco_michoacan.htm), (2007)
3. Aguirre Jerjes, Institutional weakness and organized crime in Mexico: the case of Michoacán, *Trends in Organized Crime*, **16**, 221-238 (2013)
4. Astorga, Luis, El siglo de las drogas. El narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio. Eds. Grijalvo y Proceso. México, julio del 2012 (2012)
5. Villalobos Joaquín, Doce mitos de la guerra contra el narco, Revista Nexos, (2010)
6. Merton, Robert K, Social Structure and Anomie, *American Sociological Review*, **3**, 672-682 (1938)
7. Agnew, Robert, Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency, *Criminology*, **30**, 47-87 (1992)
8. Messner, Steven F. and Richard Rosenfeld, Crime and the American Dream, 3rd Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, (2001)
9. Sampson, Robert J. and W. Byron Groves, Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory, *American Journal of Sociology*, **94**, 774-802 (1989)

10. Shaw, Clifford and Henry D. McKay, Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1942)
11. DeFronzo, James, Economic Assistance to Impoverished Americans, *Criminology*, **21**, 119-136 (1983)
12. Grant II, Don Sherman, and Ramiro Martinez Jr, Crime and the Restructuring of the U.S. Economy: A Reconsideration of the Class Linkages, *Social Forces*, **75(3)**, 769-799 (1997)
13. Zhang Junsen, The effect of welfare programs on criminal behavior: a theoretical and empirical analysis, *Economic Inquiry*, **35(1)**, 120-137 (1997)
14. Burek, Melissa W, AFDC to TANF: The effects of welfare reform on instrumental and expressive crimes, *Criminal Justice Studies*, **19(3)**, 241-256 (2006)
15. Worrall, John L, Reconsidering the Relationship between Welfare Spending and Serious Crime: A Panel Data Analysis with Implications for Social Support Theory, *Justice Quarterly*, **22(3)**, 364-391 (2005)
16. Buvinic, Mayra; Morrison, Andrew; Orlando, María Beatriz. Violencia, crimen y desarrollo social en América Latina y el Caribe. Papeles de Población, Enero-Marzo, 167-214 (2005)
17. Montero, Juan Carlos, La estrategia contra el crimen organizado en México: análisis del diseño de la política pública, *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*, Enero-Junio, 7-30 (2012)
18. Vilalta Perdomo and Carlos J, El miedo al crimen en México. Estructura lógica, bases empíricas y recomendaciones iniciales de política pública, *Gestión y Política Pública*, 3-36 (2010)
19. Gutiérrez Cuéllar, Paola; Magdaleno del Río, Gabriela; Yáñez Rivas, Viridiana, Violencia, Estado y crimen organizado en México, *El Cotidiano*, Septiembre-Octubre, 105-114, (2010)
20. Creswell JW, Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing Among Five Traditions, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, (1998)
21. Sosa-Rubí, S.,O. Galárraga, et al, Heterogeneous impact of the 'Seguro Popular' Program on the Utilization of Obstetrical Services in Mexico, 2001-2006: A Multinomial Probit Model with a Discrete Endogenous Variable" , *Journal Health Economics*, **28**, 20-34, (2008)
22. Kenneth Kalyani1 and Seena P.C., Socio-Economic Changes of Women through Kudumbasree A Study from Puthenvelikkara (Gp) of Kerala State, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, **1(2)**, 1-7 (2012)
23. Clark, April, and Michael Clark; Mind the Gap: Public Attitudes on Crime Miss the Mark, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, **2(3)**, 1-11 (2013)
24. Avdija Avdi S; Police Use of Force: An Analysis of Factors that Affect Police Officer's Decision to Use Force on Suspects, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* **2(9)**, 1-6 (2013)
25. Waghmode R.H., Desai Bhavana and Kalyan J.L; Domestic Violence against Women: An Analysis, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, **2(1)**, 34-37 (2013)