

The Impact of Drug-Related Violence on Mexican Youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contextualize the broader impacts of Mexico's drug epidemic by studying the collateral consequences its associated violence has on the fate of educational programming. The consequences of violence disrupting education, exacerbating mental health challenges, and pushing numerous young individuals toward criminal behavior gives rise to a cycle of instability and socio-economic problems. Highlighting a need for ample policy responses and interventions, the article highlights the importance of investing into education and creating economic opportunities to minimize the effects of violence and pave the way for a bright future to give Mexico's younger generations.

Introduction

Mexico's struggle with drug-related violence has significantly altered its society and citizens by affecting necessary stages of life crucial for positive development. The violence perpetrated by drug cartels has turned many regions into conflict zones, breeding fear and insecurity among communities (Rulac Geneva Academy, 2022). The concept of drug-related violence in Mexico encompasses various forms of violence, including but not limited to gang conflicts, turf wars over drug trafficking routes, and targeted attacks on civilians and authorities involved in anti-drug operations.

This surge in drug-related violence has had profound effects on the educational landscape, marking a transition from pre- to post-violence eras. School closures have escalated, with educational institutions becoming casualties of the conflict. Student absences have surged due to safety concerns, and academic performance has witnessed a decline in affected areas (Jarillo, Magaloni, Franco, Robles, 2020). Kattan & Székely (2016) further underline the impact of drug-related violence on students residing in these areas, indicating lower academic achievement and heightened dropout rates among them (Kattan & Székely, 2021).

The enduring repercussions of drug-related violence on educational pathways and societal outcomes are unmistakable, particularly among the youth demographic (Furlong et al., 1997). Apart from the immediate disruptions, the psychological toll on young minds is substantial, resulting in heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, 2020). Socio-economic instability exacerbates these psychological effects, with a notable association between exposure to violence and the prevalence of psychological disorders (Santacruz & Reyes, 2018).

Methods

To conduct a comprehensive review of the existing literature on how drug-violence affects Mexico, a systematic search across Google Scholar and Open Access Journals were used as search engines. The keywords searched

to obtain information were “drug-related violence” OR “Mexico” OR “youth education” OR “socio-economic” OR “school closures” OR “crime and violence impact OR “human impact “ OR “family cycles”.

Findings

Knowledge Plateaus and Declination

Educational systems play a foundational role in nurturing academic growth, and by extension, the leaders of upcoming generations. The growth in drug-related violence in Mexico has jeopardized the future of the nation's success by substantial crime in the country, evident evidence is available of students being exposed to high levels of violence and its implications. Students in violence-prone areas score significantly lower in mathematics and language arts compared to their peers in more stable regions (Orraca-Romano, 2018). The constant stress and trauma associated with living in violent environments impair students' concentration and performance. The phenomenon of "ni-nis" and the vulnerability of youth to cartel recruitment highlight the dire socio-economic consequences of violence (Rivera-Aguilera et al., 2019). In Ciudad Juárez, a city heavily impacted by cartel violence, the number of students finishing primary school decreased by more than 50% between 2010 and 2020, correlating closely with the rise in violence (Alvarez, 2024).

In regions heavily affected by drug violence, schools frequently close due to security threats, reducing the number of school days available to students. Increased criminal activity correlates with higher rates of student and teacher absences (Jarillo et al., 2016). Teachers, fearing for their safety, often attend school irregularly, leading to inconsistencies in students' instruction and management (Yang et al., 2021). The normalization of violence and the need to overcome daily dangers also distract from the focus required for educational success (Grineski et al., 2013).

The disruption of education extends beyond primary education. Secondary and higher education institutions also face significant challenges, with universities in high-violence areas reporting lower enrollment rates as a majority of students do not even make it past secondary school (Barton, 2019). This enrollment decline reduces the pool of future skilled workers needed for economic growth. This reduction in educated individuals preserves a cycle of poverty and violence, as fewer people become equipped with the skill set to pursue lawful employment. (Zúñiga & Molina, 2008)

Additionally, the quality of education suffers as teachers in violence-prone areas often lack the necessary resources to effectively teach their students. Schools in these regions frequently deal with inadequate funding, outdated materials, and poor infrastructure (ICF, 2024). This worsens educational disparities between students in violent areas and those in more stable regions. The lack of investment in education in these areas highlights a

broader issue of neglect and underfunding, showing the challenges faced by students and educators.

Psychological Implications

The psychological implications of drug-related violence are significant. Constant exposure to violence can lead to severe mental health issues in students, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD, which further impede educational attainment (SRSG VAC, 2020). The connection between violence exposure and mental health outcomes accentuates the detrimental effects on students' well-being and academic performance (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012). Children exposed to violence often exhibit aggressive behavior and struggle with concentration and discipline in school settings (UNU-WIDER, 2023). A normalization of violence within communities amplifies these issues, as children begin to internalize the violent behaviors they witness as coping mechanisms or survival strategies in their environments (Boxer, Sloan-Power 2018).

The long-term psychological effects of violence on children can affect them into adulthood, by altering their ability to maintain a stable employment and create healthy relationships. Trauma experienced during a

child's formative years can later develop into chronic mental health issues that can require long-term treatments (UNU-WIDER, 2023). Unfortunately, mental health services in Mexico are often underfunded and inaccessible, particularly in regions affected by drug related violence. This lack of support means many young people are unable to receive the help they need to overcome the psychological traumas left by their experiences (Martinez et al., 2016).

Moreover, the fear created by violence can lead to a sense of hopelessness among youth. When young people cannot visualize a viable future for themselves, they are more likely to disengage from their educational pursuits. This disengagement can manifest into higher dropout rates and lower aspirations, furthering the cycle of poverty and violence (Fernandez-Haddad & Gonzalez, 2021). Through this the psychological impact of violence creates struggles for the development of the country and the well being of its citizens.

Impact on Career Choices

The violent environment affects education and shapes the career choices of young Mexicans. High levels of unemployment and limited economic opportunities drive many youths away from lawful careers and into a criminal lifestyle as a means of survival (Hoyas et al., 2016). The relationship between youth employment, violence, and gender dynamics validates the challenges faced by vulnerable youth in accessing legitimate employment opportunities (Villegas, 2015). The allure of high earnings in criminal organizations, despite the risks, often outweighs the potential benefits of scarce legal employment opportunities. The role of family and community support in mitigating the effects of violence on youth emphasizes the importance of social networks in shaping career choices (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009). Growing up in an environment where violence and crime are normalized, many begin to view involvement with cartels as a natural progression (UNU-WIDER, 2023).

For many young people living in impoverished areas, the fast money offered by drug cartels is hard to resist. The sense of power, respect, and belonging that comes with a cartel association can be especially appealing to those who feel powerless in their communities (Largo, 2023). This social influence is reinforced by the glorification of cartel culture in local media and music, further embedding the notion that illicit activities are a legitimate career path (Pforzheimer, 2024).

Limited economic opportunities also exacerbate the problem. A majority of the youth who have joined these criminal groups do so because they see no other viable option, with such high rates of unemployment, it is difficult for many young people to earn a decent wage or live a fair work-life balance (Villegas, 2015). This pattern of instability brings along socio-economic vulnerability and has great implications for the future of the country. Not only are young people putting their futures at risk by engaging in such criminal activities, but they also become part of the violence that continues to afflict so many territories in Mexico (Hoyas et al., 2016).

Making efforts to provide alternative career pathways or economic opportunities for young people are necessary actions in breaking this cycle. Programs offering job placement programs can help youth develop the skills needed for lawful employment (González-Velosa, 2012). Additionally, forming community based programs can encourage a sense of purpose and provide positive role models or support networks for young people, steering them away from criminal activities (González-Velosa, 2012).

Discussion

Socio-Economic Impact

The socio-economic impact of drug-related violence goes beyond individuals choices but affects society as a whole. The implications of youth violence in Mexico exposes a connection between violence, economic development, and social unity. The Mexican Peace Index reported that the economic cost of crime and violence in 2017 amounted to 4.72 trillion pesos, equivalent to 21% of the country's GDP. This financial strain affects

educational infrastructure, limiting resources available for schools and community programs designed to support at-risk youth (Gutiérrez-Romero, 2017). Additionally, the tourism industry, a significant economic driver, suffers from violence, with violence deterring tourists leading to revenue losses and reduced employment opportunities in tourism-related sectors (Inés de la Torre & Escobedo, 2018).

The economic burden of violence also affects public health systems, as resources are diverted towards addressing the immediate consequences of violence rather than preventative measures and long-term health care (UNU-WIDER, 2023).

The strain on public services reduces the quality of life for residents in violence-prone areas, prolonging cycles of poverty. The long-term socio-economic impact of violence creates significant difficulties toward creating sustainable development and economic growth in Mexico (Imbusch et al., 2011). Addressing the socio-economic impact of violence will require comprehensive policy responses. Investment into education and job creation within violence-affected regions is essential to provide young people with viable alternatives to criminal activities (Weiling, 2010)

Long-Term Implications

The long-term implications of drug-related violence on youth education and career choices are profound as exposure to violence during formative years disrupts educational journeys, leading to decreased interpersonal, undermining democratic norms and society (Jain et al., 2019). This break of trust can illy affect civic engagement and political participation, weakening the foundations of democratic society (Seligson, 2020). Additionally, the continuation of violence and instability ruins efforts to build a skilled workforce, essential for economic development. Childhood exposure to violence results in lower education rates and reduced lifetime earnings, sustaining cycles of poverty and economic issues (Jaffee et al., 2018).

The impact of violence on trust extends beyond an individual level, affecting communities and institutions. Communities heavily affected by violence often experience a breakdown in social cohesion, as fear and mistrust fill daily interactions (Tung et al., 2018). This breakdown in social bonds can affect collective action to address local issues, furthering the challenges faced by these communities. The lack of trust in public institutions from the community also undermines efforts to implement effective policies aimed at reducing violence and improving community conditions (Tung et al., 2018).

A loss of human capital because of disrupted education and the series of youth in criminal activities affects the potential for economic growth and development in the country (Strong, 1988). The deprivation of potential skilled workers hinders the country's ability to compete in the global economy and attract foreign investment. This economic hindrance furthers the challenges faced by violence-affected regions, creating a cycle of instability (Strong, 1988).

Conclusion

Drug-related violence in Mexico has a great impact on youth, affecting their education, career choices, and the overall socio-economic stability of the country. Violence disrupts schools and causes psychological harm, which hinders youths' academic and personal growth. Limited economic opportunities push many young people into criminal activities, furthering generation cycles of violence and poverty. This broader socio-economic impact strains public services and reduces trust in state institutions, posing significant issues for sustainable development. To tackle these issues, comprehensive policies and targeted interventions are needed. Investing in education and job creation is crucial to providing young people with alternatives to crime. Strengthening mental health services and offering support for those affected by violence can help reduce its psychological toll. Additionally, improving governance and restoring trust in public institutions are important for creating a stable future for Mexico. By addressing the root causes of violence affecting the country and taking action by offering

opportunities for education and employment, Mexico can create a brighter future for its young people and create a more stable society.

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