Check for updates

Research Note

GIGA | Journal of Politics in Latin America

Yucatán as an Exception to Rising Criminal Violence in México

Journal of Politics in Latin America
2022, Vol. 14(1) 103–119
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1866802X221079636
journals.sagepub.com/home/pla
SAGE

Shannan Mattiace[1] and Sandra Ley[2]

Abstract

Yucatán state's homicide level has remained low and steady for decades and criminal violence activity is low, even while crime rates in much of the rest of the country have increased since 2006. In this research note, we examine five main theoretical explanations for Yucatán's relative containment of violence: criminal competition, protection networks and party alternation, vertical partisan fragmentation, interagency coordination, and social cohesion among the Indigenous population. We find that in Yucatán, interagency coordination is a key explanatory variable, along with cooperation around security between Partido Revolucionario Institucional and Partido Acción Nacional governments and among federal and state authorities.

Resumen

El nivel de homicidios del estado de Yucatán se ha mantenido a la baja a lo largo de varias décadas, junto con baja actividad del crimen organizado, aún cuando las tasas de violencia aumentan en el resto del país desde 2006. En esta nota de investigación, examinamos cinco explicaciones teóricas principales para la relativa contención de la violencia en Yucatán: competencia criminal, redes de protección y alternancia partidista, fragmentación partidista vertical, coordinación interinstitucional y cohesión social entre la población indígena. Encontramos que en Yucatán, la coordinación

[1]Political Science, Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, USA
[2]Political Studies, CIDE, Mexicocity, Mexico

Corresponding Author:
Shannan Mattiace, Political Science, Allegheny College, Quigley Hall, 520 North Main Street, Meadville, PA 16335, USA.
Email: smattiac@allegheny.edu

Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).

interinstitucional es una variable explicativa clave, junto con la cooperación en materia de seguridad entre los gobiernos del PRI y el PAN y las autoridades federales y estatales.

Manuscript received 19 July 2021; accepted 12 January 2022

Keywords
Criminal violence, Yucatán, security, police, drugs

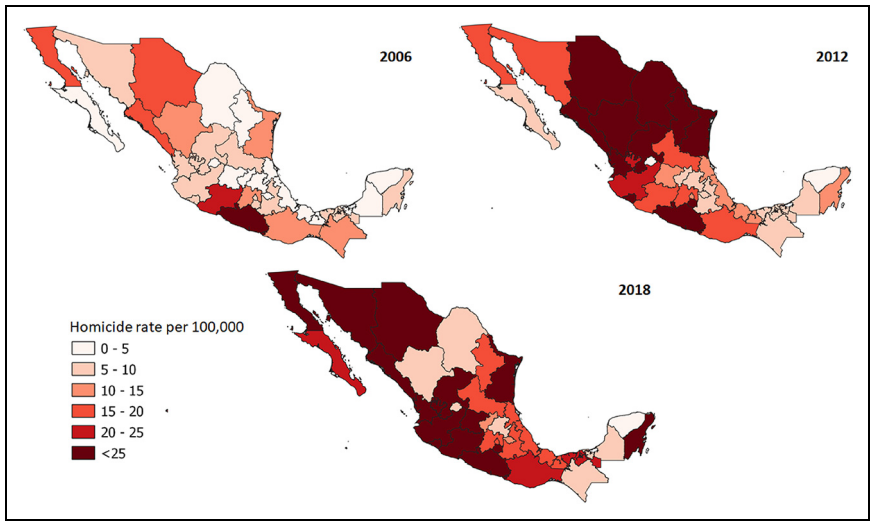
Palabras clave
violencia criminal, Yucatán, seguridad, policía, drogas

While drug-related criminal violence began to escalate in different parts of Mexico in the 1990s, it increased after President Felipe Calderón declared a War on Drugs in December 2006, almost immediately after assuming office.[1] Despite changes in party rule at the national level, no president or party has been successful at curbing or significantly reducing criminal violence, despite myriad promises and multiple initiatives to tackle the problem. Experts place the number of deaths related to criminal violence at more than 250,000 since 2006. Adding to this number are the thousands who have been forcefully displaced and who have disappeared, along with the multiplication of clandestine graves across the country (Guillén et al., 2019). Even for Latin America, the world's most violent region, this number is staggering, especially for a country not currently at war. While Mexico's annual homicide rate is lower than that of Venezuela and Honduras, it is higher than most countries in Latin America, including Brazil and Colombia (Statista, 2021).

Notwithstanding, criminal violence within Mexico has varied quite significantly across space and over time (Map 1). States in the north and Pacific coast have been particularly violent, as measured by homicide rate. In contrast, the Yucatán peninsula has exhibited relatively less violence, but even within that region, there are significant differences. The state of Quintana Roo has experienced a significant increase in homicidal violence, while Yucatán's homicide rate has been remarkably stable and low, at roughly 2.5 per 100,000, since the beginning of the War on Drugs in 2006 (Figure 1).

In the wake of the country's Drug War and escalating violence, scholars, as well as the national press, have routinely touted two Mexican cities as comparatively "safe": Querétero and Mérida (Durin, 2019). The international and national press routinely publish articles about Yucatán as a safe tourist destination. In 2019, CEOWORLD Magazine ranked Mérida as the second safest city in North America and the safest city in Latin America, based on overall levels of crime (Papadopoulos, 2019).

There are some straightforward explanations for Yucatán's low homicide rate. The first explanation is geographical, emphasizing the relative isolation of Yucatán, without direct access to the rest of the Mexican territory or to Central America (Jiménez, 2020). However, Yucatán's location offers some advantages for drug trafficking, given its coastal location and its proximity to Florida and to Central America. At the same time, as we will explain below, Yucatán's relative isolation has not kept organized criminal groups (OCGs) from employing violence in Yucatán. The second argument also focuses on geography, emphasizing the relatively few lootable resources (e.g. mining,



Map 1. State Homicide Rate per 100,000 (selected years).

Source: INEGI Homicide Statistics.

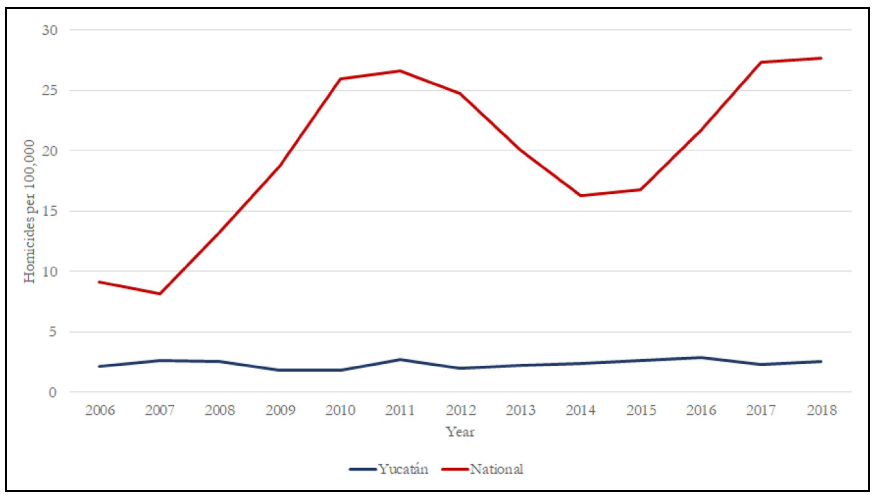


Figure 1. Homicide Rate Trend, 2006–2018.

Source: INEGI Homicide Statistics.

forests and fertile land for drug cultivation) available in Yucatán that make the state less lucrative for OCGs. However, neighboring Quintana Roo and Campeche also have few lootable resources and have experienced comparatively higher levels of criminal violence and organized crime presence. Another possible explanation focuses on policing institutions, from training to the budgets for Yucatán's police. However, according to the *World Justice Project*, the level of training among Yucatán's state police forces is below the

national average (2019). State public security ministry budgets, as well as national government transfers for public security activities (Fondo, 2014), are comparable to those of neighboring states (México Evalúa, 2019).

To be robust, these straightforward reasons for Yucatán's low homicide rate would have to address some troubling signs of criminal violence in the state. In 2002, for example, a state deputy from Valladolid, Pánfilo Novelo Martin, was killed, along with his son and driver, on the Mérida-Cancún highway. Novelo had been outspoken in denouncing rising drug use in Valladolid and the possible involvement of local officials and "outsiders" (Morita, 2002). The most serious incident occurred in August 2008 when 11 decapitated corpses draped with narco messages were found near an abandoned hacienda on the northeastern outskirts of Mérida. An additional body was later found in Buctzotz, 180 km east of Mérida (Ellingwood, 2008). Narco messages on the bodies read: "Saidén, this is your mirror." On the corpse found in Buctzotz, the message said, "For violating the agreements, you are guilty of whatever happens, Luis Felipe Saidén Ojeda" (Eiss, 2014; Santana, 2008). No one was unaware to whom the messages referred: Luis Saidén, the powerful head of the State Security forces (SSP) since 2007.

High-ranking leaders of several OCGs have been arrested in Mérida in recent years. In February 2017, Roberto Nájera Gutiérrez, "La Gallina," from the Sinaloa Cartel, was captured in a western suburb of Mérida (Mandujano, 2017). In December 2018, Eleazar Medina Rojas, "El Chelelo," tied to the Gulf cartel, was arrested in the affluent northern suburb of Montebello, for a traffic violation (Novedades, 2018). In January 2019, the leader of a drug trafficking cartel based in Oaxaca said to control the sale of marijuana in the south of Mérida, Herbert Armando Bautista Epitacio, was detained on homicide charges in the northern suburb of Temozón Norte (Yucatán Ahora, 2019). Additionally, lower-profile leaders of OCGs have been detained in routine SSP traffic checkpoints. In September 2012, two individuals tied to Los Zetas' drug operations in Cancún and Cozumel were detained: Mateo Domínguez Bouloy and José Francisco Cárdenas Gallegos (Cabrera, 2012). A 2020 report from the Unidad de Inteligencia Financiera (UIF) noted that Yucatán is one of the 14 states where the Gulf Cartel is engaging in financial operations; the same report documented that Los Zetas are laundering money in Yucatán state (Aguilar, 2020). Lantia Intelligence, a renowned security consulting agency, documented the presence of the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, and the Gulf Cartel in Yucatán state between 2019 and 2020, emphasizing, however, that such criminal presence has not resulted in visible violence (Lantia, 2020).

There is also evidence of illicit activities at the port of Progreso, located just north of Mérida on the Gulf of Mexico. In May 2020, the Secretary of Hacienda's UIF submitted official complaints about possible acts of corruption and money laundering in the customs offices of three Mexican ports, among them Progreso (Angel, 2020). Guillermo César Calderón, a former customs official in Progreso until January 2020, is currently being investigated by the UIF for alleged money laundering (Mosso, 2020). The UIF has also investigated the use of sharks to transport cocaine to other Mexican states and to the United States through Progreso (Angel, 2020). Multiple news reports have been filed about the illegal fishing of "pepino del mar," which may be tied to trafficking of

the valuable sea creature that links Yucatecan fishermen to OCGs active in the north of Mexico and Chinese businessmen (Alvarado et al., 2016). In sum, while visible violence and the homicide rate remain low in Mérida and in the state, these newspaper accounts and policy reports demonstrate the presence of OCGs in the state and some illicit market activity.

Why have these incidents not led to greater levels of criminal violence? This is the puzzle at the heart of our paper. In the first section, we introduce five theoretical explanations from political science for why criminal violence is more prevalent in some areas of Mexico than in others: criminal competition, protection networks and party alternation, vertical partisan fragmentation, interagency coordination, and social cohesion among the Indigenous population. In the second section, we examine the applicability of these explanations to the Yucatán case. We conclude with a call for future research that focuses on other types of violence present in the state not directly related to criminal violence but potentially relevant for a comprehensive understanding of violence in Yucatán.

Prevailing Explanations for the Containment and Explosion of Criminal Violence

There is a growing political science literature on criminal violence that has provided compelling explanations behind the geographic variation in criminal activity across Mexico, several of which are relevant for understanding the relative containment of violence in Yucatán.

A consistent finding across studies on organized crime—from economists, sociologists, and political scientists alike—refers to the association between criminal competition and violence. Higher levels of competition over a given territory result in higher homicide rates (Atuesta and Ponce, 2017), extortion (Magaloni et al., 2020), attacks against political authorities (Trejo and Ley, 2020), violent expressions of criminal governance (Arias, 2017), among other violent outcomes. This largely results from OCGs' goal to monopolize criminal markets to maximize their profits. In the particular case of the drug trade industry, trafficking routes are indivisible goods for which rival cartels cannot share control (Calderón et al., 2015; Lessing, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2020). The competition over such valuable resources is necessarily reflected through the use of violence (Schelling, 1971). Given the illegal nature of organized crime, criminal organizations use violence to resolve disputes for turf, as well as to drive out competitors (Durán-Martínez, 2017).

However, as emphasized by recent works within Political Science, protection networks are an essential element in any analysis of organized crime. As noted by Trejo and Ley (2020), organized crime cannot spend a single day without protection. Moreover, any changes within protection networks generate instability and induce vulnerability within criminal markets, ultimately leading to increases in criminal violence (Snyder and Durán Martínez, 2009). This is true regardless of the level of criminal competition. In a monopolistic market, a new incoming protector induces at least momentarily some degree of uncertainty, which can lead to the proliferation of new private mechanisms of armed protection—private armies—and an eventual arms

race, as other criminal organizations replicate said model to increase their own protection (Trejo and Ley, 2020). In a competitive market, new protectors or their reconfiguration opens opportunities for turf wars, as competitors attempt to conquer new and unprotected territory. In particular, party alternation in the gubernatorial seat can affect prevailing protection arrangements profoundly, as newly elected party officials make changes in key security positions and competing organized crime groups attempt to gain protection among incoming officers (Trejo and Ley, 2020). Therefore, an analysis of the containment or explosion of violence by organized crime also requires an understanding of the dynamics of local protection networks and their potential (in)stability.

Governors are not the only relevant actors in the explanation of criminal activity. From different perspectives, Durán-Martínez (2017) and Trejo and Ley (2020) emphasize the role of intergovernmental relationships. In particular, party alignment between federal and local governments can help explain the success or failure in the implementation of security policies within a federal context like Mexico. A growing literature has shown the detrimental effects of militarization for the containment of criminal violence (Atuesta, 2017; Espinosa and Rubin, 2015; Flores-Macías, 2018). However, as Trejo and Ley (2020) show, military interventions can be *largely* ineffective when national and subnational authorities fail to cooperate. According to these authors, when electoral incentives and partisan conflict influence the logic of militarized strategies, local opposition authorities are left unprotected and this opens opportunities for organized crime to fight over local control. In contrast, coordination among copartisan or legislative allies results in the relative containment of criminal violence.

Durán-Martínez (2017) expands on the role of state actors, beyond intergovernmental relationships, and refers to interagency relationships—especially within the security sector—and the importance of assessing time horizons across enforcement agencies. The author's argument focuses on state cohesion, which, she contends, can be useful for both effective enforcement and effective protection. According to Durán-Martínez, when enforcement agencies do not work in a coordinated fashion—perhaps due to conflicting views on security strategies between military and police forces—the state lacks cohesive capacity to fight crime and/or provide predictable protection. Also, when there is high rotation in key security positions, time horizons are affected and may increase conflicts between agencies and government authorities. In these cases, the state becomes less cohesive and the resulting rise in conflict ultimately reduces the effectiveness of the security apparatus.

Finally, social cohesion can be crucial for the containment of violence. The studies on urban crime (Sampson et al., 1999), civil war (Arjona, 2016), and organized crime (Ley et al., 2019) have revealed the importance of collective organization to resist violence. In this regard, Indigenous ethnic institutions in some Mexican states have been relatively successful at providing public goods (Díaz-Cayeros et al., 2014), including the containment of criminal violence (Romero and Mendoza, 2015). Specifically, scholars have found that Indigenous peoples' ethnic organizations can provide alternative justice and policing

institutions. When these ethnic institutions are scaled up regionally, Indigenous communities can successfully resist organized crime groups' attempts to establish criminal governance regimes (Ley et al., 2019).

Given these relevant prevailing explanations for the understanding of criminal violence, there are several questions to consider in the case of Yucatán. To what extent has the history of state party alternation affected potential protection arrangements for OCGs in Yucatán? Who are the relevant security actors in the state and how have they coordinated across enforcement agencies, as well as with elected party authorities? Have the Yucatec Maya played a role in the relative containment of violence?

What Explains—or Does not Explain—the (Relative) Containment of Criminal Violence in Yucatán?

Yucatán is one of the three federal states that make up the Yucatán peninsula, along with Quintana Roo and Campeche. Its population is approximately 2 million people, with roughly half of the population living in the capital city of Mérida. In recent years, Mérida has become a service-oriented economy, as well as a hub for higher education and health care. There is some tourism, although it is relatively modest compared to Cancún and Playa del Carmen in Quintana Roo.

The Social Cohesion Argument

As we have noted, Yucatán and Mérida have been different from much of the rest of the country in terms of homicide rate. Historically, however, the state has not been exempt from violence, most notably a devastating Caste War beginning in 1847, in which about half of the population died or fled the state.

One of the many consequences of the Caste War was to divide Maya into two separate groups: the pacified Maya who stayed in western and central Yucatán and laid down their arms; and those who fled to eastern Yucatán and to autonomous communities in Quintana Roo and continued to resist. Unlike Indigenous peoples throughout Mexico who have proudly taken up the use of the term Indian to describe themselves and their struggles, Yucatec Maya have not (Mattiace, 2009).

Today, Yucatán has the largest Indigenous population in the country in percentage terms at 50%.[2] However, unlike Oaxaca or Chiapas, other states with large Indigenous populations, Maya communities in Yucatan do not, in general, govern themselves through local ethnic institutions, possibly due to the devastating consequences of the Caste War. In Yucatán, ethnic identity has not become politicized and Yucatec Maya are the least formally organized of Mexican Indigenous peoples, particularly given their large numbers (Mattiace, 2009).

Overall, the Yucatec Maya lack a history of social mobilization as well as traditional Indigenous institutions and communal practices that have been shown to empower communities to resist organized crime. Therefore, the relative containment

of violence in Yucatán cannot be explained by its large Indigenous population and local organizational practices. We now turn to arguments that focus on the political causes of violence and examine their explanatory power in the case of Yucatán.

Party Alternation, Intergovernmental Relationships, and Criminal Competition

Yucatán was under the rule of Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) until 2001. Throughout the 1990s, criminal presence was limited to sporadic activity by the Gulf and Juárez cartels, mainly concentrated in the capital city of Mérida. In 2001, Patricio Patrón Laviada, from the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), won the state gubernatorial seat. Patrón began his political career in his late 20s in Acción Nacional and served as mayor of Mérida, from 1995 to 1998. Like other newly elected PAN governors in other states,[3] Patrón hired new staff in key security positions as soon as he assumed power, including the head of the state police. Luis Saidén, who had served as Public Security Secretary under PRI governor Víctor Cervera Pacheco (1995–2001), was replaced with Javier Medina Torre, a former veterinarian with no previous experience in public administration or security-related tasks (Alegre, 2002). Unlike other states that experienced alternation during the same period; however, there were no major confrontations between the two criminal groups present in Yucatán at the time. This contrasts with other states that experienced alternation during the same period, such as Michoacán (in 2002), where the Zetas openly fought against the Sinaloa Cartel, soon after a new party came to power, and inter-cartel violence exploded (Trejo and Ley, 2020). In fact, throughout Patrón's gubernatorial term, Yucatán's homicide rate remained at an average of 2.25 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2002 when the state government faced new criminal activity (Morita, 2002a), violence was contained nonetheless. Threats by organized crime against local authorities became publicly known in late 2006 and early 2007 (Morita, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), as President Calderón began the War on Drugs, and the Beltrán Leyva Organization entered Yucatán state (Coscia and Ríos, 2012). Patrón Laviada then even hired private security from abroad (Morita, 2007b). New coordinated operations with the federal government, as well as with the neighboring police forces in Quintana Roo and Campeche, were implemented (Campos, 2007; Morita, 2006). Such coordinated efforts resonate with Durán-Martínez (2017) argument that emphasizes the cohesion of interagency relationships for the effectiveness of anti-crime interventions.

A new party came into office, however, just as Calderón's militarized strategy against organized crime was on the rise, along with increasing violence. Ivonne Ortega Pacheco (PRI) won the governorship by an unexpectedly wide seven-point margin of victory. Ortega's term in office, from August 2007 to September 2012, coincided entirely with Felipe Calderón's administration. Despite local party alternation and rising criminal activity across the country, violence remained stable throughout Ortega's administration. As noted in Figure 1, the homicide rate per 100,000 remained low, with its highest peak at 2.7 in 2011. This statistic continued to show stability through the subsequent PRI administration under Rolando Zapata.

As a new criminal actor, the Sinaloa Cartel, stepped into Yucatán in 2007 (Coscia and Ríos, 2012), Governor Ortega also faced challenges by organized crime. As noted, in 2008, 12 decapitated corpses were found draped with narco messages for the Public Security Secretary, Luis Saidén, who had resumed his previous position as SSP head. How and why did such violent events not multiply as in other states, amid the War on Drugs? Following Durán-Martínez (2017) and Trejo and Ley (2020), we argue that close and cooperative intergovernmental relations, both vertical and horizontal, contributed to the containment of criminal violence in the state.

In their analysis of the influence of vertical party alignment on violence in Mexico, Trejo and Ley (2020) emphasize that, unlike the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), the PRI did not contest Calderón's electoral victory in 2006 and was a legislative ally for his economic agenda. As a result, the relationship between the PAN federal government and PRI governors was characterized by cooperation, whereas conflict and confrontation permeated the relationship between the president and PRD local authorities. Such divergent treatment of the opposition, Trejo and Ley (2020) argue, had profound consequences for the coordinated and effective implementation of security policies. Violence increased significantly in PRD states; it was relatively contained in states under PRI rule; and it diminished in those governed by the PAN.

Consistent with this argument, Calderón did not question Ortega's victory in the 2007 state election. He quickly congratulated her the day after the election, despite it being a hard blow to the PAN. Yucatán was the first state election the party lost under Calderón's watch, after the wide support he received from the state in the contested 2006 election. Although Ortega and Calderón had fundamental disagreements regarding the federal government's approach to crime (Hernández, 2009), they were able to work together on key security challenges, including the case of the 12 decapitated corpses in 2008. In fact, municipal, state, and federal security forces closely collaborated. The same night of the decapitations, for example, Ortega Pacheco was called to Mexico City to meet with the National Defense Secretary, Guillermo Galván, and other high-level security officials (Proceso, 2008). Despite the narco messages that directly accused Saidén of negotiating with organized crime, Calderón reiterated his full support for the Ortega administration and did not question Saidén's reputation (Reforma, 2008). Saidén corresponded with his full support and coordination with the federal Armed Forces to combat drug trafficking in the state. By the summer of 2012, over 2000 Mexican military troops were stationed in Yucatán (Pachin, 2013, 80). This is not an argument about the efficacy of militarization, which numerous works have shown to stimulate criminal violence. Instead, this episode confirms, as other scholars have argued, that coordination across levels of government is crucial for the containment of violence. Saidén himself has consistently stressed the importance of coordinating with police and military forces at all levels of state security (Yucatan Times, 2020).

This is a case that lends support to the arguments of both Durán-Martínez (2017) and Trejo and Ley (2020). First, the decapitation of 12 corpses is a clear example of the *visible* violence that Durán-Martínez (2017) argues is intended to show power and inspire fear; its use by OCGs depends on state–criminal interaction. In this case, the close interagency

collaboration contributed to state cohesion, ensuring the capacity and resources available to fight crime. Second, Calderón's decision to ignore the accusations against Saidén also signaled low vertical fragmentation, despite ideological disagreements, which empowered Yucatán's government. This cohesion disincentivized OCGs to continue to intensify violence, both in terms of frequency and visibility.

Luis Saidén's presence and permanence as head of Yucatán's SSP has been a crucial element in the containment of violence. He is a key figure in the execution of the state government's security policy and has now served under four different gubernatorial administrations. His résumé and longevity are noteworthy. In 1984, Saidén served as Chief of Security for then interim governor Víctor Cervera Pacheco (PRI, 1984–1988). During Cervera's second term as governor (1995–2001), Saidén was Secretary of Safety and Motor Vehicles. In 2003–2004, Saidén moved to Cancún to take the job of Director of Public Security, Transit, and Fire. In 2007, he returned to Mérida as Head of Public Security in Yucatán state under Governor Ortega Pacheco (PRI) and continued in that post during Rolando Zapata's (PRI, 2012–2018) gubernatorial term. In 2018, Mauricio Vila Dorsal (PAN) reconfirmed Saidén, where he remains until at least 2024.

Following Durán-Martínez (2017) and her argument on long-term time horizons as an additional element of state cohesion, we contend that Saiden's continued time in office has expanded the time horizons of security agencies and OCGs alike, while at the same time providing some sense of stability to their interactions and, therefore, reducing conflict within the state and between the state and OCGs.

We have no direct evidence that OCGs active in Yucatán have been protected by Saidén. However, there are some troubling signs of Saidén's proximity to OCGs. Saidén served in both Cervera administrations (1984–1988 and 1995–2001) and Cervera reportedly had a close relationship with Rosalinda Díaz García, wife of Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, who formerly led the Juárez cartel (Morita, 2002).[4] In 1999 during his second term in office, Cervera met with then governor of Quintana Roo, Mario Villanueva (1993–1999), the day Villanueva fled office as a fugitive, 2 weeks before his gubernatorial term ended (along with his immunity). Villanueva was charged with crimes related to drug trafficking, and later served time in both Mexico and the United States. Cervera was never charged with any wrongdoing in the Villanueva case, but it did raise suspicions (Garduño and Pérez, 1999). The most serious accusations against Saidén came while he served as Director of Public Security in Cancún from 2003 to 2004. Saidén was alleged to have been involved in the narco executions of 13 people, among them 3 elements of the Agencia Federal de Investigaciones (AFI) in "Caso Cancún." He was ultimately absolved in 2007 and cleared of all charges (Santana, 2008).

Long-term relationships across security agencies enable the coordinated implementation of consistent policies across administrations. In this regard, Yucatán has had a single coordinated organizational structure (*mando único*) for a decade, under the command of Saidén. The state police control security in the state's 106 municipalities (Jiménez, 2020). In Mérida, where Mario Arturo Romero has been Mérida's Chief of Police since 2012—serving under five different mayors—state and municipal police forces meet daily. Along

with Saiden's continuity, Romero's permanence has also been a source of stability and cohesion despite vertical partisan fragmentation in Mérida—between PAN mayors and PRI governor, Rolando Zapata (2012–2018)—the recent party alternation at the state level, and the incursion of new criminal actors in Yucatán.

Based on the above analysis, Table 1 summarizes the processes of party alternation, partisan fragmentation, and intergovernmental relations in Yucatán. Unlike other states, consecutive party alternation in Yucatán—from PRI to PAN in 2001 and from PAN to PRI in 2007—did not result in major spikes of violence. For instance, in Nuevo León, the first party alternation—from PRI to PAN in 1997—is associated with a significant increase in criminal violence (Trejo and Ley, 2020) and it continued to increase in the subsequent period of gubernatorial alternation—from PAN to PRI in 2003 (Ley and Guzmán, 2019). We argue that beyond the relatively limited presence of organized crime historically in Yucatán, violent criminal activity in the state was largely contained as a result of limited vertical partisan fragmentation, as well as a cohesive security apparatus and close interagency relations. In this regard, the continued presence of Luis Saidén as head of Yucatán's public security has been a crucial element in the containment of violence, providing stability to the interactions between federal and local security forces, as well as between and among the state and OCGs.

Concluding Remarks

Organized crime-related violence in Yucatán has remained at comparatively low levels. While Yucatán's geographic location may not be as attractive as other states, OCGs have nonetheless exerted public and visible violence, which, unlike in other states, has not escalated. In this paper, we examine possible explanations behind such containment of violence. Although there is a large Indigenous population in Yucatán, local Indigenous communities lack social cohesion as well as shared history of mobilization that can enable them to resist organized crime, as has been the case in other Indigenous regions of Mexico. We argue instead that violence in Yucatán has been contained due to the close intergovernmental relationships across levels of government—federal and state—as well as across security agencies. The role of Luis Saidén is particularly relevant. His continuous presence and work as the head of public security across different administrations, has resulted in stable interactions between government officials, as well as between the state and OCGs. Dependence on one single actor, while violence in neighboring states is rising, may put this delicate equilibrium at risk. Changes to Yucatán's security apparatus could dramatically change the trends of violence that the state has experienced so far.

The considerably low homicide rate in Yucatán, along with the containment of massacres, such as the one that occurred in 2008, confirm that criminal violence is not a major problem in the state. We are not suggesting, however, that there is little violence in general. Two specific types of violence are notable in the Yucatán case: police torture and violence against women.

Table 1. Party Alternation, Partisan Fragmentation, and Intergovernmental Relations in Yucatán.

Period	Partisan Fragmentation		State Public Security Secretary	Presence of Criminal Groups
	President	Governor		
1995–2001	Ernesto Zedillo (PRI)	Víctor Cervera Pacheco (PRI)	Luis Saidén	Gulf cartel Juárez cartel
2001–2007	Vicente Fox (PAN)	Patricio Patrón Laviada (PAN)	Javier Medina Torre	Beltrán Leyva Organization Gulf cartel Juárez cartel Zetas
2007–2012	Felipe Calderón (PAN)	Ivonne Ortega Pacheco (PRI)	Luis Saidén	Beltrán Leyva Organization Gulf cartel Juárez cartel Sinaloa cartel Zetas
2012–2018	Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI)	Rolando Zapata Bello (PRI)		Gulf cartel Jalisco New Generation cartel Sinaloa cartel Zetas
2018–2024	Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Morena)	Mauricio Vila Dosal (PAN)		Sinaloa cartel Jalisco New Generation cartel Gulf cartel

Source: For the 1990–2010 period, we relied on Coscia and Ríos (2012). For the 2012–2018 period, we conducted a systematic review of more than a dozen international, national, and local newspapers, and gathered complementary information from CIDE-PPD (2020). For the 2018–2020 period, we drew on data from Lantia (2020).
PAN: Partido Acción Nacional; PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional.

According to World Justice Project, as of 2016, Yucatán stands among the states with medium–high levels of police torture (2019).[5] While in other parts of Mexico, police use torture mainly to extract a confession, human rights organizations in Yucatán suggest that torture under police custody is used as a punishment for crimes committed and not to extract confessions (Elementa, 2019). Violence against women in Yucatán is also notable and on the rise. According to the 2016 National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relationships (ENDIREH), Yucatán ranks sixth in the proportion of women reporting overall violence and seventh with the highest level of intimate partner violence (INEGI 2016).[6]

In this paper, we are unable to analyze the causes and logic behind the presence and increase of police and gender violence in Yucatán or their connection to the conditions that sustain criminal violence in this state. However, we believe that recognizing these parallel forms of violent practices is crucial for an objective assessment of violence in Yucatán. For years, governmental officials have touted Mérida as a City of Peace and Yucatán as a safe state. Both police and gender violence have risen in the past years and it is crucial for future research to pay attention to their evolution.

Future research on violence in Yucatán would also benefit from a thorough comparison with other states. As we have shown in this research note, multiple criminal organizations are present in Yucatán, yet this presence has not resulted in visible violence. Comparing Yucatán to states with similar degrees of political alternation, partisan fragmentation, and economic profile, for example, would allow scholars to weigh the relative importance of our explanatory variables and to assess their role in the containment or expansion of violence in the face of criminal competition. Given the space limitations of a research note, as well as COVID-19 era restrictions, we focused our attention on a single case study. We look forward to future work that inserts Yucatán more fully into the Mexican national panorama regarding research on security and violence.

Acknowledgements

The authors are very grateful to Paul Eiss for his careful reading of our work. For illuminating conversations, we thank Rosa Santana, Eduardo Lliteras, Lilia Balam, Jorge Fernández, Luís Ramírez Carrillo, Rodrigo Llanes, and Patrick Sigoret. We are grateful to those who attended our panel at LASA 2021 and offered comments. We thank the two anonymous readers at JPLA who greatly improved the quality of this piece. Finally, thanks go to our student assistants, Alejandra Quezada at CIDE and María Cabrera at Allegheny College.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Shannan Mattiace https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4653-9664

Notes

1. Trejo and Ley (2020) argue that homicide rates related to criminal violence increased in the 1990s as democratization expanded at the sub-national level.
2. The most recent data places Yucatán with the largest percentage of Indigenous peoples in the country (50.2%), followed by Oaxaca (43.7%) and Chiapas (32.7%) [CNDI (2016)]. As noted, Yucatecans avoid using the word Indigenous or Indian to describe themselves.
3. Trejo and Ley (2020) show that newly elected opposition governors in the mid-1990s and early 2000s appointed new officials to key security positions, which profoundly altered local protection networks.
4. In the early 2000s, Zambada worked with "El Chapo" in the Sinaloa Cartel.
5. See also Indignación (2014).
6. Additionally, Mérida is now a significant hub for money laundering, a crime tied to criminal organization and violence that is largely invisible ("Yucatán, centro de lavado", 2018).

References

Aguilar R (2020) Nuevo mapa del crimen. *Animal Político,* 9 October. https://www.animalpolitico.-com/lo-que-quiso-decir/nuevo-mapa-del-crimen/.

Alegre L (2002) Mosaico de perfiles contra delincuencia. *Reforma,* 10 February.

Alvarado E, Estrada AM and Melgoza A (2016) Arrasan con manjar mexicano. *El Universal,* 6 March. https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/periodismo-de-investigacion/2016/03/6/mafia-china-arrasa-con-pepino-de-mar.

Angel A (2020) Denuncian corrupción y lavado en aduanas de Progreso, Tuxpan, y Mexicali. *Animal Político*, 4 May. https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/05/denuncian-corrupcion-lavado-aduanas-progreso-tuxpan-mexicali/.

Arias ED (2017) *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arjona A (2016) *Rebelocracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Atuesta L (2017) Militarización de la lucha contra el narcotráfico: los operativos militares como estrategia para el combate al crimen organizado. In: Atuesta L and Madrazo A (eds) *Las violencias: en busca de la política pública detrás de la guerra contra las drogas*. Mexico City: Editorial CIDE Coyuntura y Ensayo: 99-132.

Atuesta LH and Ponce AF (2017) Meet the Narco: Increased competition among criminal organisations and the explosion of violence in Mexico. *Global Crime* 18(4): 375–402.

Cabrera E (2012) Capturan a líder de célula del narcotráfico en Mérida. *Excelsior,* 20 September. https://www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/09/20/nacional/860136.

Calderón G, Robles G, Díaz-Cayeros A, et al. (2015) The beheading of criminal organizations and the dynamics of violence in Mexico. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(8): 1455–1485.

Campos N (2007) A balazos atacan base policiaca en Mérida. *La Crónica,* 1 February. http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2007/283654.html.

CIDE-PPD (2020) Presencia de grupos criminales en México (2018-2019). https://politicadedrogas.org/site/OGrafica/id/137.html.

Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas [CNDI] (2016) Indicadores Socioeconómicos de los Pueblos Indígenas de México, 2015. https://www.gob.mx/inpi/documentos/indicadores-socioeconomicos-de-los-pueblos-indigenas-de-mexico-2015.

Coscia M and Rios V (2012) Knowing Where and How Criminal Organizations Operate Using Web Content. CIKM, 12 (October – November). https://www.michelecoscia.com/?page_id=1032.

Díaz-Cayeros A, Magaloni B and Ruiz-Euler A (2014) Traditional governance, citizen engagement, and local public goods: Evidence from Mexico. *World Development* 53: 80–93.

Durán-Martínez A (2017) *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Durin S (2019) Chapter 8. In: *Sálvese quien pueda: violencia generalizada y desplazamiento forzado en el noreste de México*. Mexico City: La Casa Chata: 331-57.

Eiss PK (2014) The Narcomedia: A reader's guide. *Latin American Perspectives* 195(41): 78–98.

Elementa DDHH (2019) Derechos Humanos en Contexto: Aproximaciones para el Fortalecimiento de la Sociedad Civil Yucatán. https://www.elementa.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Derechos-Humanos-en-contexto-aproximaciones-para-el-fortalecimiento-de-la-sociedad-civil-digital-en-Yucatan-.pdf.

Ellingwood K (2008) Mexico under siege; Drug trade mayhem crisscrosses nation; The pile of bodies in Yucatan shows that no region is immune. *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August

Espinosa V and Rubin DB (2015) Did the military interventions in the Mexican drug war increase violence? *The American Statistician* 69(1): 17–27.

Flores-Macías G (2018) The consequences of militarizing anti-drug efforts for state capacity in Latin America: Evidence from Mexico. *Comparative Politics* 51(1): 1–20.

Fondo de Aportaciones para la Seguridad Pública (2014) Presupuesto 2014 https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/documentos/presupuesto-2014-fasp?state=published.

Garduño R and Pérez C (1999) Mario Villanueva sí se reunió con Víctor Cervera Pacheco: Madrazo. *La Jornada*, 29 April.

Guillén A, Torres M and Turati M (2019) Mexico, a country of 2,000 clandestine graves. *Visionscarto,* 2 July. https://visionscarto.net/2000-clandestine-graves.

Hernández E (2009) Se solidariza Ivonne Ortega con Godoy. *Reforma,* 21 June.

Indignación (2014) Eradicar la tortura, exige Indignación al gobierno de Yucatán. http://indignacion.org.mx/erradicar-la-tortura-exige-indignacion-a-gobierno-de-yucatan/.

INEGI (2016) Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares (ENDIREH) 2016 - Principales Resultados. https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/endireh/2016/doc/endireh2016_presentacion_ejecutiva.pdf.

Jiménez C (2020) Protegen a Yucatán del crimen. *AM*, 25 February. https://www.am.com.mx/guanajuato/noticias/Protegen-a-Yucatan-del-crimen-20200225-0007.html.

Lantia Intelligence (2020) Mapa Criminal de México, 2019-2020. https://lantiaintelligence.com/storage/document/10/Mapa%20criminal%20de%20Me%CC%81xico,%202019-2020,%20versio%CC%81n%20ejecutiva,%20Lantia%20Intelligence.pdf.

Lessing B (2017) *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ley S and Guzmán M (2019) Doing business amid criminal violence: companies and civil action in Mexico. In: Avant et al. D (ed) *Civil Action and the Dynamics of Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.147–177.

Ley S, Mattiace S and Trejo G (2019) Indigenous resistance to criminal governance: Why regional ethnic autonomy institutions protect communities from Narco Rule in Mexico. *Latin American Research Review* 54(1): 181–200.

Magaloni B, Robles G, Matanock AM, et al. (2020) Living in fear: The dynamics of extortion in Mexico's Drug War. *Comparative Political Studies* 53(7): 1124–1174.

Mandujano I (2017) Recapturan a 'La Gallina" presunto operador del Cártel de Sinaloa. *Proceso,* 15 February. https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2017/2/15/recapturan-la-gallina-presunto-operador-del-cartel-de-sinaloa-179010.html.

Mattiace SL (2009) Ethnic Mobilization among the Maya of Yucatán. *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 4(2): 137–169.

México Evalúa (2019) Hallazgos 2019 Seguimiento y evaluación del sistema de justicia penal en México. https://www.mexicoevalua.org/mexicoevalua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/hallazgos2019-27oct.pdf.

Morita M (2002) Extiende capo red del narco hasta Yucatán. *El Norte: Monterrey*, 5 October.

Morita M (2006) Refuerza Yucatán vigilancia con estados. *Reforma,* 28 September.

Morita M (2002a) Plantean estrategia contra narco en Yucatán. *Reforma,* 17 September.

Morita M (2007a) Refuerzan vigilancia en Yucatán. *Reforma,* 31 January.

Morita M (2007b) Incrementan seguridad a Gobernador de Yucatán. *Reforma,* 6 May.

Mosso R (2020) Ex-administrador de aduana en Yucatán obtiene suspensión provisional contra órden de captura. *Milenio*. 5 October. https://www.milenio.com/policia/guillermo-cesar-calderon-obtiene-suspension-orden-captura.

Novedades Yucatán (2018) Arresto del 'Chelelo' en Montebello, al norte de Mérida 6 December. https://sipse.com/novedades-yucatan/arresto-detencion-chelelo-narco-cartel-golfo-merida-montebello-318583.html.

Pachin PM, 2013. *Pacific[ations]: Security, non-violence, and the 'war on drugs' in Mérida, Yucatán, 2007-2012*. MA Thesis. University of British Columbia, Canada.

Papadopoulos A (2019) The world's safest city ranking, 2019. *Ceoworld Magazine*, 1 August https://ceoworld.biz/2019/08/01/the-worlds-safest-cities-ranking-2019/.

Proceso (2008) El narco en Yucatán. 30 September. https://www.proceso.com.mx/reportajes/2008/9/30/el-narco-en-yucatan-28242.html.

Reforma (2008) Despliegan operativo por decapitados. 29 August

Romero V and Mendoza C (2015) *Are Indigenous Societies Less Prone to Organized Crime than Nonindigenous Societies? The Cases of Mexico and Guatemala*. Chicago: Midwest Political Science Association.

Sampson RJ, Morenoff JD and Earls F (1999) Beyond social capital: Spatial dynamics of collective efficacy for children. *American Sociological Review* 64(5): 633–660.

Santana R (2008) Yucatán, el horror. *Proceso,* 31 August

Schelling TC (1971) What is the business of organized crime? *The American Scholar* 40: 643–652.

Snyder R and Durán-Martínez A (2009) Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets. *Crime, law and social change* 52(3): 253–273.

Statista (2021) Homicide rates in selected Latin American and Caribbean countries in 2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/947781/homicide-rates-latin-america-caribbean-country/.

Trejo G and Ley S (2020) *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

World Justice Project (2019) Indicadores sobre la función policial en México. http://tabpolicia.-worldjusticeproject.mx/estado/MX31.

Yucatán Ahora (2019) Violenta detención de los Epitacio en el Norte de Mérida. 26 January. https://yucatanahora.mx/violenta-detencion-del-lider-de-los-epitacio-en-el-norte-de-merida.

"Yucatán, centro de lavado de dinero del narco." (2018) *El Diario de Yucatán* 15 December.

Yucatan Times (2020) Public Security State Secretary Luis Felipe Saidén Ojeda reveals 'Yucatan's security secret' 17 January.

Author Biographies

Shannan Mattiace is a professor of political science and international studies at Allegheny College in Meadville, PA. She teaches and writes on Indigenous and social movements in the Americas, immigration and identity, and criminal violence in Mexico. Her work has been published in *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studie*s, *Latin American Research Review*, *The Journal of Economic History*, *Estudios Mexicanos/Mexican Studies*, among other academic journals. She is the author of *To See With Two Eyes: Peasant Activism and Indian Autonomy in Chiapas, Mexico*, and a co-editor of *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias*. She joined Roderic Camp in the seventh edition of *Politics in Mexico: the Path of a New Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Sandra Ley is associate professor at the Political Studies Division at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE). Sandra studies criminal violence and political behavior with a focus on political participation and accountability within the Mexican context. She coauthored the book *Votes, Drugs, and Violence. The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Her work has been published in *British Journal of Political Science, Comparative Political Studies, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Politics & Society, Latin American Politics and Society, Latin American Research Review,* among other academic journals. Sandra received her PhD in Political Science from Duke University in 2014.