# The Legacy of Mexico's Drug War on Youth Political Attitudes [*]

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**Abstract**

How does childhood exposure to large-scale criminal violence and militarized law enforcement affect political attitudes and behavior? We examine the case of Mexico's drug war, where an entire generation has been raised amidst the country's most violent conflict in over a century. We surveyed nearly 3000 urban youth in person to measure their levels of political and interpersonal trust. We then matched respondents to historical data on lethal criminal violence, military operations, and military-criminal confrontations in their childhood municipalities. Using two complementary identification strategies, we find that exposure to violence and militarized enforcement during the first ten years of life significantly reduces interpersonal and political trust by up to 20 percent. Furthermore, exposure to military actions—both violent and non-violent—leads to political backlash, particularly against the parties that governed Mexico during the exposure period—the PAN and the PRI. These findings have important implications for the consolidation of young democracies affected by crime and violence and advance our understanding of how criminal wars influence political socialization.

**Keywords:** Criminal Violence, Political Socialization, Youth Politics, Trust, Mexico.

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# Introduction

Over the past two decades, an entire generation of Mexicans has come of age during the country's deadliest wave of violence since the 1910 Revolution. The ongoing "drug war" has claimed more than 400,000 lives and led to over 100,000 disappearances since December 2006, based on official data from the Mexican government.[1] Millions of Mexicans have transitioned to adulthood in communities torn apart by violence and insecurity, witnessing an unprecedented militarization of public security and public life more generally. This generation now constitutes one-third of the country's voting-age population.[2] Despite the scale and intensity of this conflict, little is known about its sociopolitical impact on the youth, and the broader literature provides limited insight into how large-scale criminal violence shapes the political beliefs of young people.

Previous research has examined the effects of organized criminal violence on political participation (Córdova, 2019; Dorff, 2017; Trelles and Carreras, 2012), electoral accountability (Carreras and Visconti, 2022; Ley, 2017), political competition (Daniele and Dipoppa, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2021), and policy preferences (García-Ponce, Zeitzoff and Wantchekon, 2021; Visconti, 2020; Laterzo, 2024), among other political outcomes. However, the political consequences of criminal violence among youths has largely been overlooked. How does growing up in communities marked by large-scale criminal violence and militarized security policies shape young people's political attitudes and behaviors? This question highlights a significant gap in the literature, as youth make up a disproportionately large share of both victims and perpetrators of organized criminal violence (Chioda, 2017; Muggah and Tobón, 2018; Rivera, 2016; Sweeten, Piquero and Steinberg, 2013). Our study addresses this gap by investigating the impacts of childhood exposure to both criminal violence and militarized law enforcement on political trust and attitudes among Mexican youth.

Drawing on insights from political socialization theories (Campbell et al., 1980; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2008; Healy and Malhotra, 2013; Hyman, 1959) and previous research on the attitudinal and behavioral effects of exposure to crime and violence (Bateson, 2012; Bauer et al., 2016; Balcells and

[1] This information is publicly available from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the National Registry of Missing or Disappeared Persons (RNPDNO).

[2] According to the National Electoral Institute, as of January 2025, Mexico has over 37 million registered voters aged under 34 years, representing nearly 37% of the national registry. See https://www.ine.mx/credencial/estadisticas-lista-nominal-padron-electoral/

Torrats-Espinosa, 2018), we posit that growing up in violent and militarized communities negatively affects political and interpersonal trust, albeit in nuanced ways depending on the source of insecurity. Specifically, we argue that exposure to lethal criminal violence in one's community during childhood is expected to negatively affect trust in both the community and law enforcement later in life. In contrast, childhood exposure to state-led militarized operations (and the violence stemming from them) is expected to decrease trust in specific institutions responsible for these operations. In the case of Mexico, the detrimental impact on trust is more likely to be observed in government authorities and state security forces such as the federal police (or national guard) and the military, which were deployed throughout the country to combat organized criminal groups.

To test our empirical expectations, we use an original in-person survey of nearly 3000 individuals representative of Mexico's urban population aged 16-29. A distinctive feature of our survey design is that respondents indicate where they spent the majority of their childhood, enabling us to match them with fine-grained municipal data on criminal violence and militarized law enforcement during their childhood. Specifically, we construct measures of childhood exposure to lethal criminal violence, military operations, and armed confrontations between military forces and drug trafficking organizations based on respondents' birth year and childhood municipality of residence.

Thus, the core of our empirical strategy exploits variation in exposure to violence and militarized law enforcement during childhood based on respondents' geographic location and date of birth. In essence, we test whether respondents exposed to varying levels of violence and military operations and confrontations during childhood exhibit different levels of interpersonal and political trust. To strengthen causal identification, we also implement a quasi-experimental design that treats the 2007 deployment of military forces to combat drug cartels as an exogenous policy shock, building upon previous research that has employed similar approaches (Brown et al., 2019; Flores-Macías, 2018; Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2023; Trejo and Skigin, 2024).

Our findings confirm our expectations: (1) Youths who grew up in the most violent environments exhibit lower levels of trust in law enforcement authorities and their communities; and (2) military operations and confrontations undermine trust in the authorities involved in the militarization of public security—specifically, the federal police, the military, and, to some extent, the government. These results are robust across identification strategies and model specifications. We also find evidence that cit-

izens may not lose trust in the government as a whole but instead hold specific politicians accountable for militarized security policies. Analyzing the impact of militarized law enforcement on vote choices among voting-age respondents in the most recent midterm election (June 2021), we find evidence of a backlash against the PAN and PRI, plausibly in response to drug war-era military actions. Taken together, these findings support the argument that citizens selectively punish politicians linked to militarized security strategies.

This study contributes to several strands of literature. First, we advance scholarship on political socialization and the formation of political beliefs (Campbell et al., 1980; De Neve, 2015; Jennings and Niemi, 2014; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017) by showing that childhood exposure to criminal violence and militarized security can have lasting effects on adult political attitudes and voting preferences. Second, while numerous studies have shown that childhood exposure to violence—particularly within the context of civil war—affects human capital accumulation (Chamarbagwala and Morán, 2011; Justino, Leone and Salardi, 2014; Leon, 2012; Shemyakina, 2011), health-related outcomes (Akbulut-Yuksel, 2017; Akresh, Lucchetti and Thirumurthy, 2012), and other aspects of human development, we show that it also shapes the degree to which youths trust institutions and their communities. Third, our study is closely related to a growing literature that examines how adult-life experiences of violence affect political attitudes and behavior (Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa, 2018; Bauer et al., 2016; Gilligan, Pasquale and Samii, 2014; Voors et al., 2012). We build on this work to explore the long-term impacts of exposure to large-scale criminal violence during childhood and formative years, an important phenomenon that has been largely overlooked in the literature. Finally, while our study is focused on Mexico, it offers broader insights for other contexts. Many countries across Latin America and beyond face unprecedented crises of criminal violence, territorial control by non-state armed groups, and increasingly militarized government responses. Understanding how these experiences influence the political attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of young people coming of age during these conflicts is vital for understanding and addressing threats to democratic governance.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first present our theoretical framework and discuss relevant literature, then provide historical background on Mexico's drug war and outline our empirical expectations. Next, we describe our data collection and empirical approach. We then report the main findings and explore their implications. We conclude by underscoring the need for further

research on how increasing criminal violence affects younger generations across the Global South.

# Theoretical Framework

The notion that early-life exposure to protracted violence can have a significant impact on the development of political attitudes and behavior finds support in two complementary strands of research. The first underscores the influence of *childhood* experiences in shaping political beliefs but fails to consider the specific influence of exposure to crime and violence. Meanwhile, the second strand establishes a causal link between exposure to violence and subsequent political attitudes and behavior but focuses primarily on the adult population. Our study weaves these two strands together to reveal the impacts of childhood exposure to lethal criminal violence and military interventions on political attitudes within the context of Mexico's drug war.

## Childhood Experiences and Political Socialization

Childhood experiences heavily influence the formation of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Psychological research has found that early life experiences—both positive and negative—affect cognitive and social skills (Heim and Nemeroff, 2001; Knudsen et al., 2006). Cornerstone research in developmental psychology and neuroscience shows that the architecture of the human brain is affected by early childhood experiences and environmental factors, particularly during the first eight to ten years of life, which provides the foundation for future behavioral development (Feldman, 2020). Adverse experiences in this formative period of development have strong influences on skill development and later employability (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000), mental health (Boullier and Blair, 2018), high-risk behaviors (Campbell, Walker and Egede, 2016), and various personality traits (Fletcher and Schurer, 2017), among other factors.

Following the seminal work by Hyman (1959) on the political socialization of children in the United States, several scholars have investigated the role of childhood experiences and environment in the formation of political identities and beliefs. Some of this research includes longitudinal, inter-generational studies among youths, consistently finding a strong and persistent relationship between processes of childhood socialization and political beliefs (Hatemi et al., 2009; Jennings and Niemi, 2014). The

adoption of political identities during childhood is a strong predictor of political views in adult life (Campbell et al., 1980; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2008; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Likewise, powerful early-life experiences can shape ideology and policy preferences. For instance, Madestam and Yanagizawa-Drott (2012) find that childhood exposure to patriotic events in the U.S. led individuals to be more likely to identify as Republican, vote for Republicans, and turn out in elections during their adulthood. In a recent study, Guo, Gao and Liang (2023) show that early-life famine severity experienced by Chinese politicians influences their policy preferences.

Furthermore, a growing body of work corroborates that social cognition in early childhood is already oriented toward group living, setting the foundation of political sensitivities and attitudes (Reifen-Tagar and Cimpian, 2022; Wegemer and Vandell, 2020). This challenges the assumption that young children lack the cognitive capacity and social understanding to develop political thought (Rizzo, Elenbaas and Vanderbilt, 2020; Guidetti, Carraro and Castelli, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Most of these studies have primarily focused on understanding the development of political beliefs in the context of the U.S. and Western Europe. However, in the context of Mexico, five decades ago Segovia (1975) discovered that Mexican children displayed political attitudes that mirrored the authoritarian tendencies of the Mexican political regime.

Although we know that childhood constitutes a formative phase in the formation of attitudes and behaviors, the existing body of research exploring the impacts of childhood experiences has overlooked the significance of exposure to violence in shaping political attitudes. Only a handful of studies have paid attention to this subject. Lupu and Peisakhin (2017) provide evidence of inter-generational effects of violence on ethnic identity and political attitudes among Crimean Tatars who suffered the violence of deportation. Looking at the case of South Korea, Hong and Kang (2017) show that individuals who experienced violence in their childhood are less supportive of the government, especially the administration and the military. Similar patterns have been highlighted in Africa (Adhvaryu and Fenske, 2023).

This nascent literature—in tandem with well-established knowledge of the larger impact of childhood events on adult attitudes and behaviors— provides strong suggestive evidence that experiences of violence, and military interventions to curb violence, during childhood should have broader impacts on political attitudes and behavior. Our study builds on this work by examining the effects of exposure to

organized criminal violence and Mexico's drug war operations during childhood on political attitudes later in life.

## Exposure to Violence and Political Attitudes

A number of empirical studies have found that adults exposed to violent conflict—either at the individual or community level—tend to become more politically engaged. For instance, in a meta-analysis of 16 studies, Bauer et al. (2016) confirm a persistent pattern: exposure to war violence tends to increase political participation and prosocial behavior. Likewise, Bateson (2012) provides evidence of a positive impact of exposure to criminal violence on political participation in multiple countries. However, more nuanced findings of the impact of violent conflict on political attitudes and behavior are presented in studies that try to isolate the divergent effects of different types of violence exposure (García-Ponce, 2019; Grossman, Manekin and Miodownik, 2015; Jones, Troesken and Walsh, 2017).

Evidence from research that specifically examines exposure to criminal violence and trust has found a detrimental effect on political trust, particularly in the case of Latin America, where organized criminal violence has become a major security threat. These studies do not connect childhood experiences to adult behaviors and attitudes, but they do show that experiences across one's lifecycle are impactful. Crime victimization and insecurity typically lead to decreased political trust toward specific, security-related institutions such as the local police and judicial system (Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015; Blanco, 2013; Blanco and Ruiz, 2013; Malone, 2010). This is not necessarily in contradiction with the fact that crime and violence can increase political participation or prosocial behavior. Indeed, crime victimization both lowers trust, especially in the police and other people, and increases participation in social and political organizations (Pazzona, 2020).

Importantly, these studies suggest that individuals are able to make clear connections between who generated insecurity in their lives and their attitudes towards these entities. In the context of Latin America, as shown by Pion-Berlin and Carreras (2017), many citizens affected by high levels of insecurity exhibit lower levels of trust in the police, in addition to less confidence in their capacity to fight crime effectively and respect human rights. Deglow and Sundberg (2021), too, find that in the context of Afghanistan, the intensity of local-level conflict can erode trust in the police and lead to the belief that police are ineffective and not procedurally just.

Effects on institutional trust are context-specific. In countries with lackluster justice systems, personal experience with crime erodes support only for the police. But the negative impacts of violence on institutional trust can travel beyond law enforcement actors and the criminal justice system (Malone, 2010). Some find that exposure to crime and insecurity decreases trust in government entities more generally. In Mexico, criminal violence both demobilizes voters (Ley, 2018) and support for the national incumbent party varies inversely with prevailing levels of violence (Ley, 2017). In poor-performing, high-crime countries, fear of crime in one's neighborhood has a negative relationship with measures of diffuse support (Blanco and Ruiz, 2013; Malone, 2010). Such studies show that crime exposure can transcend measures of specific support and affect individuals' trust in major national institutions and the entire regime.

However, not all exposure is created equal. This research has established that exposure to general violence and conflict related to law enforcement operations likely depresses trust in related institutions. But, exposure to actions such as military operations without conflict may not have this effect. Indeed, research has suggested that – without considering exposure to violence associated with law enforcement operations – military uniforms and weapons are perceived positively among the Mexican public (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021). Little research has adjudicated if exposure to military presence itself, versus presence involving violence and conflict, has differing effects on trust.

Beyond institutional trust, exposure to crime and violence can also have negative effects on interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. Experience with violence has a myriad of negative psychological effects, including a decreased ability to express empathy, increased antisocial behavior, and the normalization of aggression (Hawkins et al., 2000; Guerra, Rowell Huesmann and Spindler, 2003; Baskin and Sommers, 2015). In addition to direct cognitive and behavioral effects, exposure to violence leads to related secondary effects by increasing the likelihood that exposed individuals interact with the justice and social systems (Hawkins et al., 2000; Siegel et al., 2019). Crime victimization during adulthood has also been shown to decrease overall horizontal trust in one's community, family, and friends (Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori, 2007; Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015). Following exposure to violence, individuals tend to hold the belief that their peers and community cannot be trusted (Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori, 2007; Siegel et al., 2019).

Hence, prior work suggests that childhood exposure to violence and insecurity should have negative

effects on trust in a variety of entities, both at the government and community levels. However, it also suggests that such exposure should have differential effects on trust depending on the type of insecurity at hand. Exposure to criminal violence should have more general impacts on trust in one's community but also law enforcement agencies, who may be seen as responsible for preventing and responding to these acts. On the other hand, violence and insecurity more directly attributed to the state—such as conflicts between law enforcement and criminal groups—should affect trust in a distinct manner. That is, this insecurity may be seen more as a result of the actions of the specific entities deployed and specific officials involved in this deployment.

## A Generation Exposed to Mexico's Drug War

In December 2006, former Mexican president Felipe Calderón began a war against organized crime by deploying military forces throughout Northern and Western Mexico. Drug cartels in the country had flourished during the years prior, particularly during the era of one-party rule. Trejo and Ley (2018), for example, show that in the 1990s, cartels engaged in significant violence, particularly during periods of gubernatorial power shift. When one-party rule was broken, cartels continued their violent practices in attempts to re-establish and hold onto their power (Osorio, 2013; Ríos, 2015; Trejo and Ley, 2020).

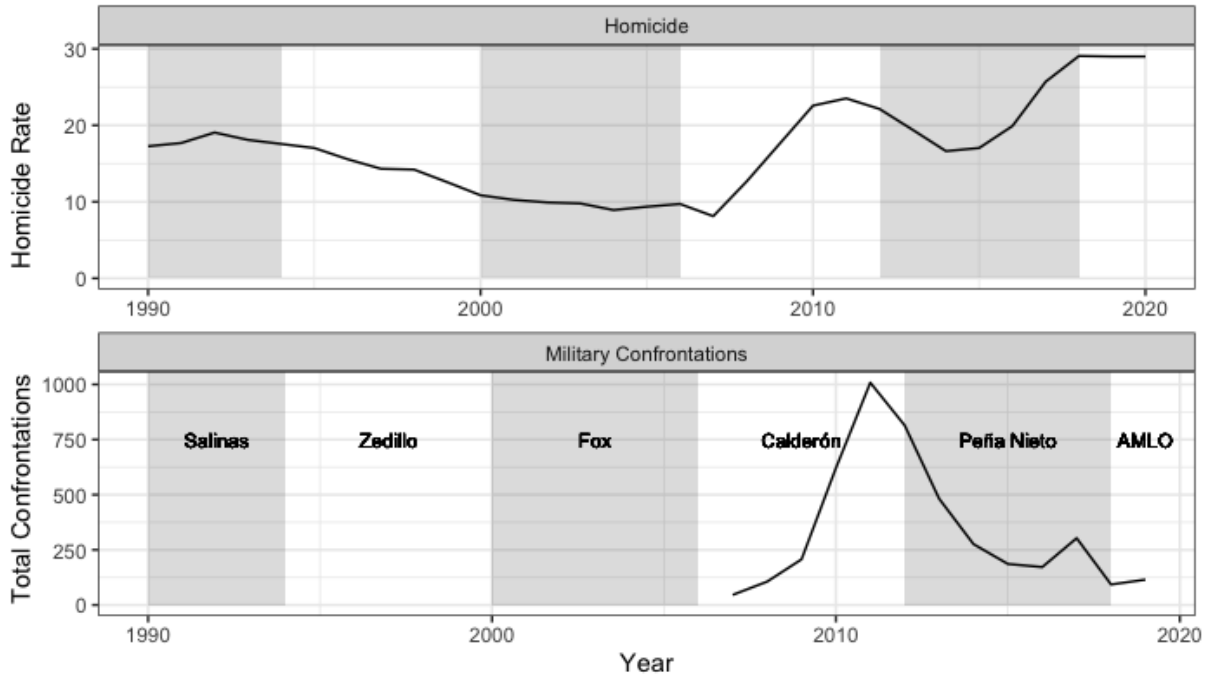
The beginning of Calderón's administration marked a significant policy shift in terms of public security. The drug war became the centerpiece of his presidency (Lessing, 2017), and the Mexican army (under the direction of the Secretariat of National Defense, SEDENA), which had not been trained to fight organized criminal groups, became the leading force behind its operations. Federal police were often deployed in tandem with these forces, while lower level police forces were often reported to be in collaboration with drug trafficking groups.[3] In this way, the country largely saw the constabularization of the military, where the armed forces assume domestic public safety tasks. In addition to constabularization, militarized policing was also present, where civilian-led police forces were equipped with military-grade weapons, gear, and engaged in military-style tactics, often in tandem with military forces (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021). Such militarization entailed the adoption of security strategies developed for war, which leading to human rights violations and the deterioration of democratic controls

[3]https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna8206233, last accessed on June 27, 2023

(Brewer and Verduzco, 2022; Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020).

During the subsequent presidential administration, President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) adopted a similar strategy towards organized crime. In addition to the domestic deployment of the military, he created a new national police force (the national gendarmerie) to assist in the efforts (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Although the number of military operations declined, the core of his public security strategy relied on capturing or killing criminal bosses, seizing drugs, and eradicating illicit crops. This approach deepened under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024), although he applied different rhetoric to combatting crime (he campaigned using a "hugs, not bullets" approach to tackle organized crime) (Deare, 2021).

Figure 1: Homicide Rate and Military Confrontations, 1990–2020




Note: Annual homicide rate and military confrontations across presidential administrations in Mexico (1990–2020), based on data from INEGI and SEDENA, respectively.

Despite these efforts, the militarization of public security has failed to reduce crime and violence in Mexico. As shown in Figure 1 (upper panel), despite a modest decline in the homicide rate at the beginning of Peña Nieto's administration, homicides began to trend up again in 2015, and remained at record-high levels during López Obrador's administration. The production of violence involves a complex network of armed actors, including organized criminal groups, state security forces, and vigilante

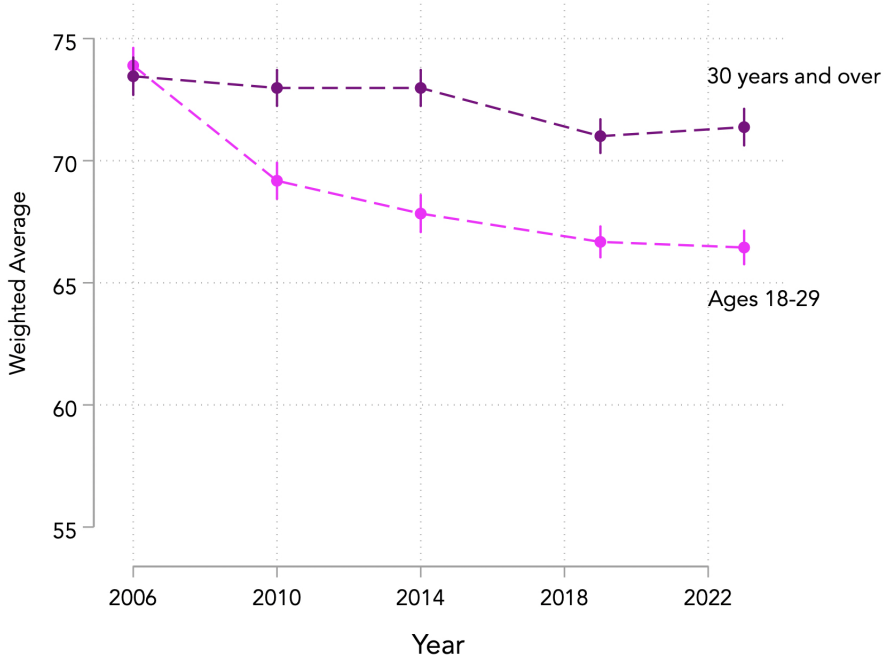
groups. Based on official data, approximately 420,000 people have been killed and around 120,000 have been reported disappeared since the start of the drug war. Although it is difficult to estimate how many homicides are strictly related to the drug war, there is growing evidence that the law-enforcement approach adopted over the past 15 years—heavily focused on the beheading of criminal organizations and the militarization of public security—has contributed to the escalation of violence (Calderón et al., 2015; Dell, 2015; Phillips, 2015). Moreover, recent research has found that the militarization of anti-drug efforts has decreased the state's capacity to provide public order and extract fiscal resources (Flores-Macías, 2018).

The drug war initiated by Calderón represents a defining era in Mexico's modern history. An entire generation of Mexicans was born, raised, and transitioned to adulthood during the most violent episode in the history of the country over the past century. Those who were school-age children in the early years of the drug war now comprise a substantial part of the voting-age population. Many of these young adults grew up in communities with unprecedentedly high levels of crime and violence, witnessing both the consolidation of the militarization of public security and the government's failures to make their communities safer.

In addition, youths account for an overwhelmingly high percentage of victims of criminal violence in Mexico. Based on official statistics from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI by its name in Spanish), the homicide rate among youths aged 15–24 increased by three-fold between 2007 and 2011. As of 2021, the year of our survey, approximately 21% of the victims of intentional homicide were 24 years old or younger—more than half were under 34 years old. As a result of this, life expectancy has deteriorated among males and it has stagnated among females (Aburto et al., 2016; Canudas-Romo et al., 2017).

The effects of criminal violence on young people's life choices and political beliefs remain understudied in Mexico and beyond. Looking at the impact on youths is particularly important for developing policies that foster social and political stability, democratic norms, and social cohesion among the younger generation. As shown in Figure 2, data from the AmericasBarometer (LAPOP Lab, 2024) indicates a significant decline in democratic support among the youngest citizens.

Figure 2: Support for Democracy Among Mexican Youth vs. Older Generations




Note: Average support for democracy (based on a 100-point scale) alculated across AmericasBarometer (LAPOP Lab, 2024) waves for Mexico.

## Empirical Expectations

In societies riddled with violence and widespread impunity, such as the case of Mexico, it would be unsurprising to observe that individuals raised in severely affected communities tend to develop mistrust toward the government, the institutions in charge of providing security, and even other members of their own communities. Drawing on the existing literature, historical accounts of Mexico's drug war, and insights from our field research, we hypothesize that childhood exposure to drug war violence and insecurity undermines trust in political and social actors. Our empirical expectations distinguish between three key types of childhood exposure: lethal criminal violence, military confrontations, and military presence. Each of these represents a distinct aspect of Mexico's drug war that may uniquely influence trust and political attitudes during the formative years of Mexican youths.

We begin by hypothesizing that exposure to higher levels of *lethal criminal violence* during childhood is expected to weaken trust in the community trust and law enforcement. The effect on community trust should manifest through the erosion of interpersonal bonds and social cohesion in violence-

affected areas . For law enforcement, we expect the effect to be concentrated on federal police rather than subnational forces, since responsibility attribution is clearer at the federal level given their explicit mandate to combat serious crime. Evidence shows that in such contexts, citizens struggle in properly attributing responsibility for public security policy (León, 2011; Carlin, Love and Martínez-Gallardo, 2015), such as the case of the subnational police in Mexico. Therefore, this differential effect between federal and subnational police provides an important test of our responsibility attribution mechanism, since subnational police mandates are more ambiguous and often overlap, making it difficult for citizens to assign clear responsibility for security outcomes.

We also contend that exposure to the government's drug war military interventions during childhood should have observable implications for trust. We distinguish between two distinct forms of exposure that we expect to have different effects on trust. The first is military *confrontations* - direct violent conflict between military/federal forces and criminal groups. We expect exposure to these confrontations during childhood to reduce trust in federal institutions (military, federal police, federal government) involved in these operations. The effect should be stronger than for military presence alone, as violent conflict represents a more severe breakdown in security and a more traumatic form of exposure during formative years.

In contrast, military presence—the deployment of forces without direct confrontation—may not significantly impact institutional trust given the military's historically high public standing in Mexico. As the armed forces ranked as one of the top institutions with regard to trust, experiencing incredible resilience even during the drug war (Bailey, Parás and Vargas, 2013), we consider that this type of exposure during childhood may not strongly affect trust in institutions associated with its deployment later in life. This provides an important comparison case to isolate the effect of violence versus presence alone. Testing whether mere exposure to militarization, absent violence, is sufficient to erode trust helps us understand if the negative effects we observe are driven by the presence of security forces or specifically by their engagement in violent confrontations.

This framework allows us to isolate the distinct effects of different types of exposure and test specific mechanisms through which violence affects trust. By examining how responsibility attribution shapes institutional trust and comparing violent versus non-violent forms of state presence, we can better understand the complex relationship between childhood exposure to violence and downstream political

attitudes. The key innovation is distinguishing between types of exposure while providing clear theoretical mechanisms for why each should matter differently for trust formation during childhood.

# Empirical Approach

## Survey and Data

Our goal is to examine how childhood exposure to lethal criminal violence and drug war military efforts shapes individuals' trust in political institutions and their communities later in life. To investigate these relationships, we leverage three primary data sources: (1) an original survey fielded in Mexico among youths (n = 2,880); (2) official municipality-level data on homicide rates over the past few decades; and (3) official records detailing the frequency of military operations and armed confrontations in each municipality.

In partnership with Buendia & Marquez, a leading survey firm based in Mexico City, and a team of local enumerators, we conducted an in-person survey of 2880 young individuals aged 16 to 29 in June 2021. The sample is representative of urban Mexico for our age group of interest. It is important to emphasize that ethical considerations were a central concern in our survey design. All participation was informed, voluntary, and confidential. Since our study did not include people under 16 years of age, parental consent was not required. The research presented no more than minimal risk to subjects, researchers, and enumerators, with the only potential concern being possible discomfort when responding to certain questions. Participants were explicitly informed of this risk and the consent process clearly emphasized their right to withdraw from the study at any time. A comprehensive description of our participant recruitment process and how our methodology adheres to established principles of ethical human subjects research is detailed in the Appendix.

We focus on urban Mexico for two reasons. First, the forms of violence experienced in urban versus rural areas of Mexico are of different nature. For instance, rural areas are more likely to experience violence associated with illicit crop production, land disputes, or the generalized extortion of agricultural workers in a context of limited state presence (Dube, García-Ponce and Thom, 2016; Herrera and Martinez-Alvarez, 2022), which is why the socio-demographic profiles of victims and perpetrators tend to be different than in urban areas (Villarreal, 2004; Muñiz-Sánchez, Fuerte-Celis and Méndez-

Ramírez, 2022). Second, 80% of Mexico's population resides in urban areas, and a similar percentage of homicides and violent crime take place in metropolitan areas, where youths are at a disproportionately high risk of becoming targets of organized criminal violence. Therefore, while rural violence is prevalent in many communities of Mexico, because of its unique circumstances, we believe it is conceptually distinct and should be studied separately.

Our survey was representative of common sociodemographic characteristics, such as income and education level. In addition to this, we employed a unique strategy to ensure representativity of the various levels of municipal violence across the country. Within this strategy, we considered three variables that capture variations in violence at this geographic level: homicide rates, reported non-homicidal crime, and perceived levels of violence. Although homicide rates are often used as a benchmark for the prevalence of violence, we chose to involve additional measures as homicide does not capture the complete reality of citizen insecurity. Because of this, we chose to examine non-homicidal violence and perceived insecurity as well.

These measures, however, are typically not available at the subnational level, particularly at units as small as the municipality. To circumvent this issue, we rely upon measures available at the national and city level from Mexico's National Survey of Urban Public Security (ENSU) and use multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) to generate subnational measures (Gelman and Little, 1997). We model respondents' perceptions of violence and reported victimization as a function of selected sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., location, age, gender, occupation, education) and generate municipal-level estimates with such models via poststratification using Mexico's 2015 intercensus. We thus create 157 municipal estimates of both reported victimization and perceived insecurity. We then utilize these estimates and the most recently reported homicide rates collected by the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security (SESNP) to stratify our survey sample. We limit our sampling frame to only include municipalities surveyed by ENSU, and order these units based on the three levels of insecurity via seriation.

To measure our key dependent variables of interest (trust in the community and in political institutions) respondents were asked to rate their trust on a 1-7 scale (where 7 represents a lot of trust, and 1 represents no trust). Respondents completed this exercise for the following groups: their community (neighbors), the police (municipal, state, federal), the military (army and navy), and the government

(federal, state, local).[4] We standardize these variables and center them at 0; this allows us to interpret results in terms of standard deviations from the mean.

To measure exposure to lethal criminal violence and the military strategy of the drug war, we match respondents with administrative data regarding these factors at the municipal level. To do so, respondents were asked where they were born (either the municipality where they currently reside, or elsewhere). This is uncommon in current public opinion surveys in the area and allows us to measure exposure to violence and militarization in one's hometown during childhood.[5] We then rely on these municipal identifiers to calculate their exposure to both violence and militarization.

First, to capture exposure to lethal criminal violence, we use municipal homicide rates reported by Mexico's National Institute for Geography and Statistics (INEGI) to create measures of homicide exposure during respondents' childhoods.[6] We calculate the average homicide rate for each respondent for the first ten years of their lives based on their birth year and the municipality where they spent the majority of their childhood. Homicide is the most complete and best proxy for lethal criminal violence for our time period.[7] Most of the dramatic increases in homicide during the Drug-War period can be attributed to inter and intra-DTO conflict (Calderón et al., 2015). Further, while measures of non-lethal violence exist, these are widely considered to be under-reported. Homicide rates are considered

[4]The federal police in Mexico was replaced by the national guard in 2020. In light of this change happening 18 months prior to the fielding of our survey, respondents were asked about their opinions regarding the federal police *or* national guard, in case they were not yet familiar with the relatively recent change.

[5]We drop all respondents who indicate that they grew up in a different municipality from the one in which they currently reside (where they were interviewed). We drop these individuals as we cannot be confident how long they spent in each of the two (or more) locations, and therefore cannot precisely estimate their exposure to lethal criminal violence, military operations, and military presence. This leaves us with 2445 remaining respondents who were surveyed in the municipality in which they were born.

[6]Note that we rely upon two sources of homicide data in this study due to issues of data availability. INEGI provides the most reliable historical data on homicides, but SESNP provided the most reliable municipal homicide data for 2020 at the time of the fielding of our survey.

[7]For this measure, we require data beginning in 1992 (birth year of the oldest individuals in our survey). To our knowledge, no other measure completely capturing lethal criminal violence at the municipal level exists for this time range. For example, the Criminal Violence in Mexico Database (Trejo and Ley, 2020) is one of the most comprehensive, but does not cover our full time frame (it spans 1994-2012).

most reliable as they are processed through the hospital system, and death certificates are coded by both medical teams and the Attorney General's Office (Calderón et al., 2015).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

| | Min. | Median | Mean | Max. | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trust: | | | | | |
| Federal Police | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.81 | 7.00 | 1.68 |
| Subnational Police | 1.00 | 3.50 | 3.59 | 7.00 | 1.52 |
| Federal Government | 1.00 | 4.00 | 4.24 | 7.00 | 1.70 |
| Subnational Governmentt | 1.00 | 4.00 | 3.76 | 7.00 | 1.52 |
| Military | 1.00 | 5.50 | 5.32 | 7.00 | 1.46 |
| Neighbors | 1.00 | 4.00 | 4.25 | 7.00 | 1.87 |
| Exposure (10 yrs): | | | | | |
| Avg Lethal Crim. Violence Exposure (10 yrs) | 0.64 | 10.41 | 13.63 | 92.67 | 12.12 |
| Avg Military Conflict Exposure (10 yrs) | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.36 | 9.62 | 1.08 |
| Avg Military Operations Exposure (10 yrs) | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.11 | 0.80 | 0.20 |
| Sociodemographics: | | | | | |
| Gender (Female = 1) | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.47 | 1.00 | 0.50 |
| SES Scale | 0.00 | 1.98 | 1.96 | 2.56 | 0.54 |
| Education | 1.00 | 7.00 | 6.69 | 10.00 | 1.92 |
| Age | 16.00 | 21.00 | 21.72 | 29.00 | 4.18 |

Note: Sample size is 2425 respondents.

Second, to capture exposure to drug war military efforts, we calculate the average level of exposure to military confrontations and operations across individuals' first ten years of life. Data for these measures were collected via right-to-information requests filed to the Mexican government.[8] First, to capture *military confrontations* we utilize municipal-level data regarding the military's confrontations with criminal groups (*enfretamientos*). This is a count variable, indicating the number of confrontations each year between SEDENA and suspected criminals across all municipalities.[9] Second, to measure *military presence*, we draw on data regarding operations, which indicates if the military (specifically

[8]These data were collected by Flores-Macías & Zarkin via right-to-information requests filed to the Mexican government (the National Institution for Transparency, Access to Information, and Personal Data Protection, INAI) and published in Flores-Macías and Zarkin (2021) and Flores-Macías and Zarkin (2023). Information requests #0000700018420 and #000070023818.

[9]While individuals were also exposed to operations and confrontations related to federal police units, data regarding the deployment of federal police is not available. However, the measures we utilize are a suitable proxy for both military and federal police deployment, as during the drug war, presidents often deployed the military along with federal police to confront drug trafficking (Felbab-Brown, 2014).

the army, or SEDENA) was deployed to a municipality to participate in law enforcement operations. Functions included patrols, checkpoints, and detentions. This is a binary variable, indicating if at least one of these functions was present or not. These two measures of militarization are complementary and allow for a nuanced assessment of military strategy and policing at the municipal level. Confrontations, our first measure, allow us to explore if drug war-interventions that explicitly involved violence and conflict has long-term effects on attitudes. Operations (our second measure) allows us to explore whether or not exposure to deployment—without necessitating violent conflict—has such effects.

Finally, our survey also collected sociodemographic information which we use as controls. These variables are respondent gender, level of education, and socioeconomic status (SES). To create our SES index, we rely on a battery of questions regarding individuals' possession of a series of assets and use principal component analysis (PCA) to create a singular variable (see Appendix 4). Descriptive statistics for all key variables are presented in Table 1.

## Methods

To test whether survey respondents exposed to lethal criminal violence, military confrontations, and military operations during their childhood exhibit different levels of trust later in life, we use two identification strategies. First, for all three variables we create a continuous measure of exposure during childhood (first ten years of life) for each respondent. Utilizing this measure as our main independent variable of interest, we run the below standard OLS model:

$$y_i = \beta_1 V_i + \beta_2 X_i + \alpha_{j[i]} + \phi_{t[i]} + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

Where $y_i$ is the outcome of interest (trust in various entities) and $i$ is each individual respondent. The parameter of interest is $\beta_1$, where $V_i$ represents childhood exposure to lethal criminal violence, military confrontations, or military operations. For each family of models, this is measured as average exposure to each variable in the individual's municipality between their birth year and their 10th year of life. For example, the mean childhood exposure to lethal criminal violence during ages 0 to 10, for two respondents born in the same municipality in years $t$ and $t+1$ is computed as the average homicide rate in years $(t, ..., t+10)$ and $(t+1, ..., t+11)$, respectively. $X_i$ is a vector of individual-level control covariates. These are gender, socioeconomic status, and education level. Further, $\alpha_{j[i]}$ captures

municipal-level fixed effects for $j$ municipalities, indexed by individuals ($i$). Finally, $\phi_{t[i]}$ captures fixed effects for birth years ($t$), indexed by individuals ($i$).

Second, the nature of the dramatic shock of military deployments in 2007 allows us to leverage a quasi-experimental design for both exposure to confrontations and operations. This strategy is in line with previous research leveraging this shock (Brown et al., 2019; Flores-Macías, 2018; Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2023; Trejo and Skigin, 2024), and supplements our previous analysis. We can only do so for military-related variables as deployment of the military was effectively zero prior to 2007, while lethal criminal violence was present in the country across all years.[10] To do so, we design a strategy to compare individuals who were born in the same municipality, but in different years, or in the same year, but in different municipalities, during the initial years of the drug war. Comparing groups of respondents in this way allows us to calculate a debiased estimator which accounts for confounding factors both at the municipal and birth-year level. By comparing across these groups, we incorporate not only a group affected by the treatment (military confrontations or operations) and potential confounding variables but also a group affected by all confounding variables without being affected by the treatment.

To effectively employ this strategy, we must first well define treated individuals and a range of treatment years. As municipalities have gone in and out of treatment for years (varying levels of military presence), and respondents have continuously aged throughout this period, we approach this by conservatively defining a range of years in which the military was domestically active and a small cohort of individuals who were consistently younger than 10 years old during this period of time. Based on our data, this approach results in examining the years 2007-2011. This period not only represents the height of the drug war's military efforts but perfectly intersects with a group of respondents under the age of 10 which we can explore utilizing our data—those born between 2001 and 2005. Defining treatment in this way is the most conservative approach. In Table 2 we show that exposure to both military confrontations and operations is balanced across those who were both eligible (born between 2001 and 2005) and ineligible for treatment. Further, in Appendix 10, we also less conservatively define the cohort eligible to be treated.

[10]Indeed, in communication with the federal government provided in information request #0000700233818, transparency officials noted that "between January 1st and December 31st, 2006 there was no personal aggressions against military personnel recorded [domestically]." Rather, confrontations began in 2007. See Appendix 10 for further evidence.

Table 2: Balance in Exposure to Military Efforts Across Cohorts

| | Mean Confrontations | Mean Operations |
|---|---|---|
| Cohort: Eligible | 1.33 | 0.35 |
| Cohort: Ineligible | 1.39 | 0.36 |

Note: Calculated as the average level of confrontations or operations (binary variable) for each group. Those eligible for treatment are those born between 2001 and 2005 in our sample.

With this in mind, we utilize standard OLS models with the following equation:

$$y_i = \beta_1 M_{j[i]} + \beta_2 D_i + \beta_3 M_{j[i]} D_i + \beta_4 X_i + \alpha_{j[i]} + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Here, the parameters $y_i$ and $\alpha_{j[i]}$ remain the same as those in Equation 1. In this model, the coefficient of interest is $\beta_3$, which approximates the interaction between $M_{j[i]}$ and $D_i$. $M_{j[i]}$ represents either the average military confrontations or operations between 2007 and 2011 for each municipality $j$ of residence, for each respondent $i$. $D_i$ is a binary indicator which is 1 if respondent $i$ was born between 2001 and 2005, and 0 otherwise. To the $X_i$ term of controls, we also include respondent age to account for differing effects within each cohort (eligible or ineligible for exposure). We do not include birth-year fixed effects in this model, as we include terms for both cohort and age.

# Results

## Exposure to Lethal Criminal Violence

Exposure to lethal criminal violence (homicides) during early childhood results in a statistically significant decrease in trust in the federal police and one's community later in life (Figure 3). Negative relationships are present for all actors explored, although others are not significant (Table 3). The magnitude of statistically significant results is also notable. For example, a child that experienced an average rate of homicide of 45 per 100,000 residents for their first ten years of life would express 11% less trust in the federal police compared to one who experienced a rate of 0, on average. These results support our expectations that exposure to criminal violence early in life should not only erode trust in law enforcement, but also one's community more broadly.

## Figure 3: Exposure to Homicide and Decreased Trust

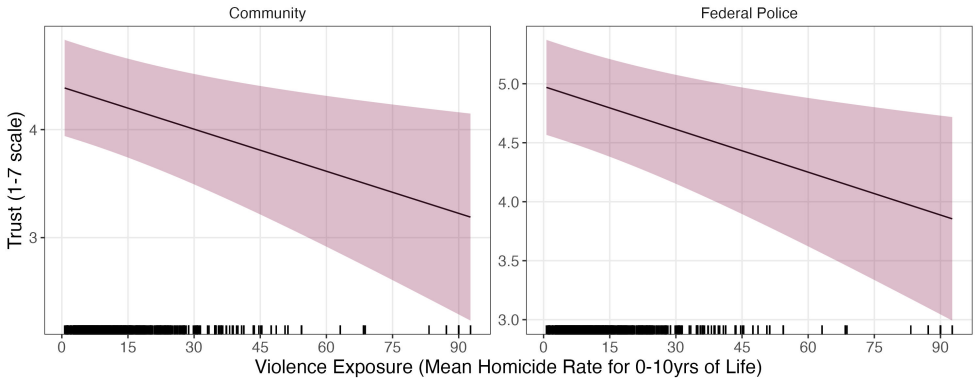



Figure Note: Predicted values from OLS models. Results correspond to models 4 and 6 in Table 3. Models used to generate predictions do not use standardized DVs or IVs for ease of interpretation. Shaded regions represent 90% CIs.

## Table 3: Exposure to Homicide and Trust

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Subnat'l Gov't | Federal Gov't | Subnat'l Police | Federal Police | Military | Community |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Homicide Exposure (0-10yrs) | −0.039 | −0.041 | −0.046 | −0.087** | −0.024 | −0.084** |
| | (0.038) | (0.038) | (0.038) | (0.037) | (0.038) | (0.037) |
| Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mun FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Birth Year FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,402 | 2,402 | 2,401 | 2,405 | 2,391 | 2,407 |
| $R^2$ | 0.091 | 0.088 | 0.085 | 0.091 | 0.083 | 0.096 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.044 | 0.040 | 0.037 | 0.043 | 0.035 | 0.049 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

## Exposure to Military Efforts

Results provided in Tables 4 and 5 correspond to an observational, non-experimental assessment of exposure to military confrontations and operations and their respective effects on trust (Equation 1). This analysis demonstrates that as exposure to both military confrontations and operations during childhood increase, trust in the federal police and military decrease. Negative relationships with all other variables explored are also present, although these do not meet traditional levels of statistical significance. However, the specific, stronger effects restricted to the federal police and military – the two entities primarily responsible for carrying out militarized operations – supports our theory, suggesting a pattern of actor-specific blame attribution.

Results provided in Tables 6 and 7 correspond to our quasi-experimental assessment of exposure to military confrontations and operations, leveraging the exogenous shock of large-scale military deployments beginning in late 2006/early 2007 (Equation 2). This strategy is a more stringent and conservative estimation of this effect, utilizing our debiased estimator. Here, we classify those who were born between 2001 and 2005 as eligible for treatment (exposure to military conflicts or operations). Our treatment is then a continuous variable of different levels of exposure to these two phenomena.

Our estimates indicate that exposure to military confrontations during one's formative years is associated with marked declines in trust in the federal government, federal police, and military. Exposure to military operations—which does not necessarily entail conflict—results in negative effects across the board, but are only statistically significant for federal police. Results are robust to a more relaxed classification of the eligible cohort (see Appendix 11).

Overall, in line with our clear expectations regarding exposure to military conflict, we find strong and method-consistent patterns for the long-term erosion of trust in the military and federal police. With respect to military operations, while we find evidence of a negative effect, this effect is more sensitive to the method deployed and is only significant at the $p < 0.10$ level across all tests. This supports the idea that exposure to military presence alone during childhood may not have a prominent effect; instead, violence associated with military confrontations may be necessary to strongly depress trust later in life.

Further, we proposed that trust in the federal government should also suffer from exposure to, at minimum, military confrontations. The effect on trust in this entity is negative, but only significant

in one instance (Table 6). To further probe this tenuous result, we consider that opinions of the federal government may be specifically targeted at officials who are co-partisans of those most responsible for drug war-era violence – namely, the PRI and PAN. This possibility is explored in the subsequent section.

Figure 4: Exposure to Military Confrontations and Decreased Trust

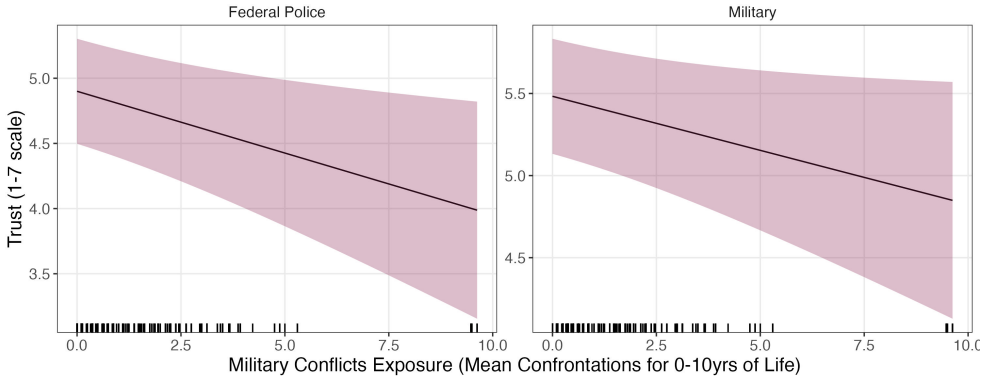



Figure Note: Predicted values from OLS models. Results in the top and bottom rows corresponds to models 4 and 5 in Tables 4. Models used to generate predictions do not use standardized DVs or IVs for ease of interpretation. Shaded regions represent 90% CIs.

Figure 5: Exposure to Military Operations and Decreased Trust

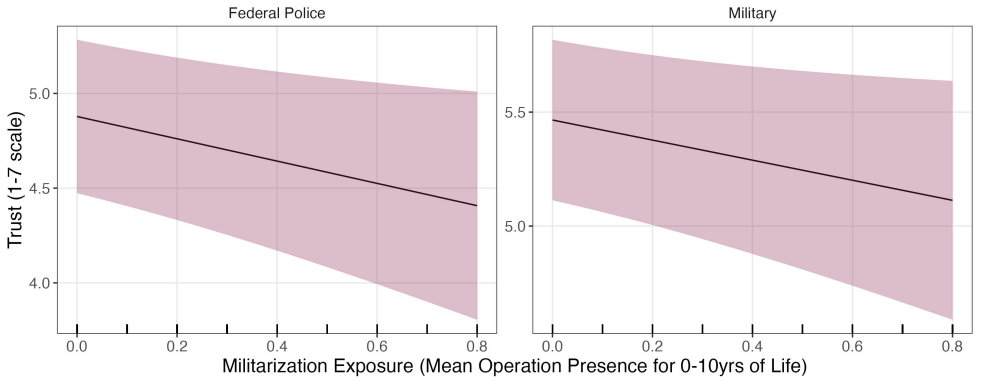



Figure Note: Predicted values from OLS models. Results in the top and bottom rows corresponds to models 4 and 5 in Tables **??**. Models used to generate predictions do not use standardized DVs or IVs for ease of interpretation. Shaded regions represent 90% CIs.

## Table 4: Exposure to OCG/Military Confrontations and Trust

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Subnat'l Gov't | Federal Gov't | Subnat'l Police | Federal Police | Military | Community |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Mil Confrontations Exposure (0-10yrs) | −0.039 | −0.047 | −0.012 | −0.061** | −0.049* | −0.024 |
| | (0.028) | (0.029) | (0.028) | (0.028) | (0.028) | (0.028) |
| Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mun FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Birth Year FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,402 | 2,402 | 2,401 | 2,405 | 2,391 | 2,407 |
| $R^2$ | 0.092 | 0.089 | 0.085 | 0.090 | 0.084 | 0.094 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.044 | 0.041 | 0.036 | 0.043 | 0.036 | 0.047 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

## Table 5: Exposure to Military Operations and Trust

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Subnat'l Gov't | Federal Gov't | Subnat'l Police | Federal Police | Military | Community |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Mil Operations Exposure (0-10yrs) | −0.042 | −0.023 | −0.009 | −0.069* | −0.060* | −0.042 |
| | (0.036) | (0.036) | (0.036) | (0.036) | (0.036) | (0.036) |
| Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mun FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Birth Year FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,402 | 2,402 | 2,401 | 2,405 | 2,391 | 2,407 |
| $R^2$ | 0.091 | 0.088 | 0.085 | 0.090 | 0.084 | 0.095 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.044 | 0.040 | 0.036 | 0.042 | 0.036 | 0.047 |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

## Table 6: Confrontations X Cohort Eligibility

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Subnat'l Gov't | Federal Gov't | Subnat'l Police | Federal Police | Military | Community |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Cohort: Eligible X Mean Conf. (2007-11) | −0.020 | −0.027* | −0.005 | −0.038** | −0.031** | −0.011 |
| | (0.015) | (0.015) | (0.015) | (0.015) | (0.015) | (0.015) |
| Mean Conf (2007-11) | −0.543 | 1.135 | −1.127 | −0.630 | −0.619 | −0.081 |
| | (1.082) | (1.085) | (1.085) | (1.084) | (1.088) | (1.080) |
| Cohort: Eligible | −0.042 | 0.038 | 0.070 | 0.131 | 0.050 | 0.045 |
| | (0.082) | (0.082) | (0.082) | (0.081) | (0.082) | (0.081) |
| Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mun FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,402 | 2,402 | 2,401 | 2,405 | 2,391 | 2,407 |
| $R^2$ | 0.088 | 0.085 | 0.082 | 0.085 | 0.080 | 0.090 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.045 | 0.041 | 0.039 | 0.041 | 0.036 | 0.047 |

*Note:* $^{*}$p<0.1; $^{**}$p<0.05; $^{***}$p<0.01

## Table 7: Operations X Cohort Eligibility

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Subnat'l Gov't | Federal Gov't | Subnat'l Police | Federal Police | Military | Community |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Cohort: Eligible X Mean Ops. (2007-11) | −0.099 | −0.101 | 0.017 | −0.194* | −0.140 | −0.090 |
| | (0.107) | (0.107) | (0.107) | (0.107) | (0.108) | (0.107) |
| Mean Ops (2007-11) | −0.577 | −0.537 | −0.516 | −0.212 | 0.402 | −0.323 |
| | (0.370) | (0.371) | (0.371) | (0.371) | (0.372) | (0.369) |
| Cohort: Eligible | −0.035 | 0.035 | 0.057 | 0.146* | 0.056 | 0.062 |
| | (0.088) | (0.088) | (0.088) | (0.088) | (0.088) | (0.087) |
| Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mun FE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,402 | 2,402 | 2,401 | 2,405 | 2,391 | 2,407 |
| $R^2$ | 0.088 | 0.084 | 0.082 | 0.084 | 0.079 | 0.090 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.044 | 0.040 | 0.039 | 0.040 | 0.035 | 0.047 |

*Note:* $^{*}$p<0.1; $^{**}$p<0.05; $^{***}$p<0.01

## Effects on Vote Choice

Previous results suggested a negative effect of exposure to military confrontations and operations on trust in the federal government, but one that varies in statistical significance based on model specification. Perhaps, rather than eroding general trust in the federal government, citizens are more targeted in their assessments. To explore this possibility, we consider that individuals exposed to local military engagements punish politicians who are co-partisans of the presidents that launched and continued the drug war. As discussed, the drug war was originally launched by Calderón of the PAN. It was later continued by his successor, Peña Nieto, of the PRI. Thus, we explore if citizens exposed to more military confrontations and operations early in life are less favorable to national-level politicians associated with these parties.

To explore this possibility, we examine the recent vote choice of the voting-aged respondents in our sample (n = 1898). Respondents were asked what party they voted for in the most recent Chamber of Deputies election (June 2021, one week prior to our survey). We examine how exposure to lethal criminal violence (homicide), military-criminal confrontations, and military operations during the first ten years of life affects respondents recent vote for PAN/PRI candidates.

Figure 6: Effect of Criminal Violence and Military Efforts on Vote for PAN/PRI Candidates

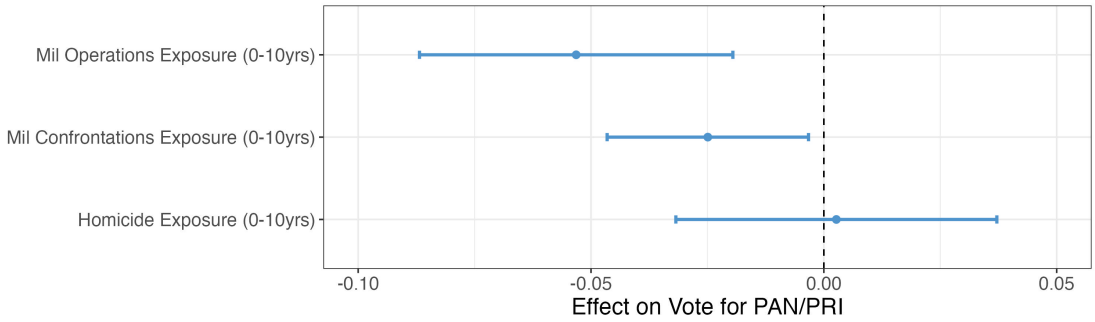



Figure Note: Models are linear probability models, where the outcome variable is whether or not the respondent voted for the PAN or PRI in the most recent Chamber of Deputies election. The main independent variables are standardized. The following controls are included: respondent gender, SES, and education. Fixed effects are included for birth year and municipality. CIs are 90%.

Results presented in Figure 6 provide evidence in support of a backlash against the PAN and PRI parties in light of exposure to drug war-era military efforts. See Appendix 8 for full results. As exposure to presence (operations) ($p < 0.01$) and confrontations ($p < 0.1$) during childhood increase, the probability of voting for the PAN or PRI later in life decreases. Notably, as exposure to lethal violence

increases, the PAN/PRI vote probability does not decrease. A one standard deviation increase in exposure to military presence, for example, resulted in a 5% decrease in the likelihood of voting for the PAN or PRI. This supports our argument regarding targeted effects on specific government-led efforts.

## Robustness

We explore the robustness of our main results to other model specifications and to the inclusion of additional variables. For our continuous model evaluation (Tables 3, 4, 5) we account for potential pre-drug war trends by controlling for drug trafficking related detentions carried out by SEDENA (the Mexican Army) prior to the drug war (Appendix 6). Further, to demonstrate that current violence levels are not driving patterns of trust, we control for the contemporary homicide rate in the municipality of residence of the respondents (Appendix 7). In all cases, results are consistent (in sign, and typically in significance) with our main results.

For our results leveraging the exogenous shock of the drug war (Tables 6 & 7), we also explore a more relaxed definition of the eligible cohort, expanding to include those born as early as 1999. Such a definition is less conservative, as it includes respondents who were 12 or 11 years of age in the years 2010 and 2011. However, it also expands to include certain respondents who were between the ages of 7 and 10 in the years 2007-2010 who were previously excluded in the main analysis (Appendix 10). Results are consistent in sign, and in most cases in significance. Further, while Table 2 shows balance in confrontations and operations across our eligible and ineligible cohorts, we also show balance across other variables, including homicide rate at the time of survey, pre-drug war detentions, respondent gender, and respondent SES (Appendix 9). This supports a lack of systematic difference in observable potentially confounding variables.

Finally, while we do not technically employ a difference-in-difference (DiD) design, our contention that the drug war represents a plausibly exogenous shock still relies upon the assumption that there are no systematic pre-shock differences (unobserved confounding variables) between communities with high vs. low levels of military interventions. Akin to the parallel trends assumption, we show a lack of pre-trends in drug-trafficking related detentions among municipalities that were first targeted in 2007 by the drug war (Appendix 9).

# Conclusion

This study documents the lasting detrimental effects of Mexico's drug war on the political attitudes of individuals exposed to the conflict during their childhood. We provide evidence that exposure to both lethal criminal violence and the military strategy employed by the government during their first ten years of life has deleterious impacts on both community and political trust among youths. Furthermore, we find evidence that this early exposure triggered a political backlash against the PAN and PRI—the parties responsible for implementing and overseeing these security policies during the formative years of this generation of Mexicans.

We introduce an important nuance in our conceptualization of exposure to militarized conflict, contending that exposure to the drug war's military engagements may not be uniform. In fact, not all exposure to the military involves exposure to violence. To operationalize this distinction, we differentiate between experiences with *military confrontations* and *military presence*. While exposure to military confrontations has persistent and robust negative impacts, the effect of exposure to military presence on its own is more tenuous. These results offer an important contribution: exposure to mass deployments of law enforcement alone may not be enough to sustain a long-term change in opinion. Rather, only if such deployments incorporate violent conflict do they truly affect trust in related government entities. In all, these results support the idea that exposure to violence during childhood—but not necessarily military deployments alone—have the power to undermine trust in the long term.

Our findings also provide strong evidence that experiencing lethal criminal violence during one's formative years negatively affects trust in federal police forces and the broader community. This second finding aligns with previous research that has shown that violence can weaken the social fabric of a community (Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori, 2007; Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015). Our results contribute troubling additional evidence that such effects are long-term and persistent. We also find a negative, although not statistically significant relationship, across all political entities examined. The fact that we only see statistically significant decreased trust in the federal police—but not other government entities—brings a new perspective to the impact of violence on trust, in light of previous research which has often found widespread negative relationships between these factors.

In addition, we move beyond existing research by demonstrating that citizens exposed to both drug war military confrontations and presence during childhood hold specific political parties accountable.

Even years later, those who experienced these elements of the drug war were less likely to vote for PAN or PRI candidates, the parties of the presidents responsible for the majority of the government's militarized operations. Notably, respondents' trust in the federal government as a whole does not consistently decline, suggesting a targeted attribution of blame to specific parties rather than generalized government distrust. Our results are based on voting preferences during the 2021 midterm election, but this pattern may be even stronger in high-profile elections such as presidential races. Future research may evaluate this possibility.

The evidence presented in this study has important implications for a variety of potential downstream consequences. Low interpersonal and political trust can reduce political participation. Existing research, for example, points to lower levels of political participation in high-crime and high-violence settings (Córdova, 2019; Ley, 2018; Trelles and Carreras, 2012). Our work suggests a potential causal mechanism for this relationship: exposure to violence during formative years may diminish trust, consequently discouraging individuals from participating in the political life of their communities. Low levels of interpersonal trust can also negatively impact individuals' willingness to engage in community problem-solving (Wollebæk, Lundåsen and Trägårdh, 2012). In cases where individuals continue to live in the same communities where they experienced violence—as in Mexico and several other Latin American countries—the erosion of social and political trust can have particularly severe and lasting consequences.

Finally, understanding the long-term effects of prolonged exposure to large-scale violence during childhood is essential for designing effective policies that foster social and political stability, strengthen democratic norms, and promote social cohesion among younger generations. Our study provides empirical evidence on the sociopolitical impact of childhood exposure to criminal violence and military deployments, addressing a critical yet understudied area within political science. Although millions of children grow up amidst violent conflicts in the Global South, little is known about how these traumatic experiences influence their political attitudes and belief systems. Further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of whether specific forms of exposure to violence are associated with the adoption of certain political ideologies in adulthood and whether impacts on trust and political engagement persist over time.

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