

Spike in Mexico murder rate poses major test for embattled Peña Nieto

The Mexican government had touted the effectiveness of its security initiatives. But homicides have climbed since January, with a particularly sharp spike in Mexico City.

By Whitney Eulich, Correspondent

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MEXICO CITY — The murder rate in Mexico grew this year for the first time since President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in 2012, a stinging statistic for an administration that's boasted about the success of its security policies (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2013/0213/A-glimpse-of-Mexico-s-new-crime-fighting-strategy>) in combating homicides.

Despite high profile cases like the disappearance of 43 teacher's college students

(<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2015/0925/Mexico-s->

missing-students-Search-for-justice-reveals-changing-society) last year, which implicated elected officials, public security forces, and organized crime, murder rates had been trending down since the previous (http://www.inegi.org.mx/saladeprensa/boletines/2015/especiales/especiales2015_07 administration's war on drug cartels.

But since January, homicides have gone up 5 percent (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/rise-in-violent-crime-shakes-mexico-city-1443398548>), reports The Wall Street Journal. And in Mexico City alone, the increase was 21 percent, climbing to 566 murders, on track for a rate of roughly 14 murders per 100,000 people (<http://us10.campaign-archive2.com/?u=3882541618fbc6471691042c1&id=8524dcf4bf&e=3612642269>). That poses a major challenge to the embattled Mexican president, the Journal reports:

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“... [Peña Nieto's] administration had trumpeted the decline in murders over the past two years as proof that the government's security initiatives, such as improved coordination between crime-fighting agencies like the army and federal police, were working.

But the rising rate can be seen as evidence the government had little to do with the decrease in homicides during the past two years.

“Our authorities keep improvising. Peña Nieto promised to reduce homicides but he has never said exactly how,” said Ernesto López Portillo, the head of security think tank Insyde. ...

Experts say the rising murder rate is the result of an increase in common crime as well as murders linked to the country's drug war. Raúl Toledo, a security consultant and former city official, said the rise in Mexico City's crime rate coincides with estimates by local authorities of a 17% increase in drug consumption in the capital over the past three years.

August marked the fourth consecutive month that homicides grew here, the kind of “streak” the country hasn’t seen since 2010 ([http://us10.campaign-archive2.com/?](http://us10.campaign-archive2.com/?u=3882541618fbc6471691042c1&id=696505471f&e=3612642269)

[u=3882541618fbc6471691042c1&id=696505471f&e=3612642269](http://us10.campaign-archive2.com/?u=3882541618fbc6471691042c1&id=696505471f&e=3612642269)), writes security analyst Alejandro Hope in his daily newsletter Silver or Lead.

For Mr. Hope, this increase may have less to do with how the streets are patrolled, and more to do with Mexico’s struggling justice system.



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[H]omicides are rarely investigated and punished in Mexico. “Getting away with murder” is a meaningless phrase in this country. Most everyone that tries it literally gets away with murder. Between 2000 and 2013, 215,000 people (<http://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/olap/proyectos/bd/continuas/mortalidad/de s=est>) were killed intentionally in Mexico. But as of 2013, only 30,800 (http://www.inegi.org.mx/Sistemas/Olap/Proyectos/bd/censos/gobierno2013/C s=est&c=319441&proy=cngspspe2013_pobcentpenit) were in prison for murder and manslaughter. And no, not all are serial murderers.

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There is very little effort to find, capture, and prosecute murderers because homicide victims tend [to] belong to politically marginalized groups. They are mostly young, poor, and uneducated, living in fringe urban areas.... Murder will become rare when it becomes expensive, i.e., when most murder cases are solved. But that will not happen unless structural political imbalances are corrected. Thus, we are in for the long haul.

Just over half of the Mexican population says the country isn’t safe, according to the most recent AmericasBarometer report, published in 2014. That has an impact on trust in the overall governing system (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2014/1206/Can-reforms-change-Mexico-s-corrupt-police-culture-video>), Elizabeth Zechmeister, director of LAPOP at Vanderbilt University, told The Christian Science Monitor late last year.

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Across Latin America, citizens' fears about insecurity have risen over the past decade, according to 2014 data released by the (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/free-access.php>) Latin American Public Opinion Project's (LAPOP) AmericasBarometer. Approval for local police performance has fallen, and the average level of trust for national justice systems has hit its lowest level since the survey began in 2004.

“When there's less trust in a justice system, it tends to decrease support for the [government] system as a whole,” says [Ms.] Zechmeister.... “The exact consequences will vary across countries, but ... it's symptomatic of a system failing to deliver,” she says, adding that citizens may decide to circumvent institutions like the police or courts, as seen in Mexico with the rise of vigilante self-defense (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2014/0309/Mexico-s-vigilantes-the-aftershocks-of-ousting-a-cartel-video>)groups.

President Peña Nieto's approval ratings reflect this dissatisfaction. His approval has fallen dramatically, from 55 percent in August 2014 to 35 percent a year later, according to a Buendia&Laredo poll published earlier this month. And according to a recent Pew Research Center survey, approval is also low on "hot-button issues" (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2015/0916/Mexican-president-s-independence-cry-gets-a-testy-response>) like the government's management of security (35 percent), the economy (34 percent), and education reform (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2015/0602/How-a-Mexican-teacher-union-thwarted-president-s-education-reform>) (43 percent)," The Christian Science Monitor reports.

In his state of the nation address earlier this month, Peña Nieto recognized that violence, corruption, and Mexico's economy were creating an environment of distrust among citizens (<http://www.cp24.com/world/mexican-president-acknowledges-crime-corruption-poverty-in-state-of-the-nation-speech-1.2545291>), reports The Associated Press. He pledged that he would spend the last half of his administration combating corruption and crime.

"The last year has been a difficult one for Mexico," the president said in his speech. "Our country has been deeply wounded by a series of regrettable cases."