

# BUSINESS INSIDER

## 'We have seen a significant amount of deaths': Inside Latin America's brutal war on crime



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Carlos Jasso/Reuters

Riot police walk through a cloud of smoke from a fire extinguisher during a protest over the 43 missing Ayotzinapa students, near the Benito Juárez International airport in Mexico City November 20, 2014.

Crime has become the most prevalent threat to security in Latin America, and one of the most vexing problems for the region's governments.

A common reaction has been the deployment of the [military and militarized police forces](#), despite evidence that militarized responses to insecurity have limited success.

From the industrial zones of northern Mexico to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, militaries are in the streets in an effort to maintain order.

As the examples of Mexico and Venezuela show, the results have been brutal — and ineffective.

### **Mexico: soldiers in the streets**

For much of the 20th century, Mexico's military was deployed in drug-eradication efforts and generally eschewed domestic politics.

But in recent decades, particularly starting in the 1990s, the Mexican military has played a more active role "in terms of how it's deployed, but also [in] the national policies and policy-making framework," said [David Shirk](#), a professor at University of San Diego and the director of the school's [Justice in Mexico Project](#).

According to Shirk, as a result of this shift, the military has generally had a greater role "in determining domestic security matters."



AP

A soldier guards marijuana that is being incinerated in Tijuana, Mexico.

The Mexican military's domestic deployment accelerated in the mid-2000s, when President Felipe Calderon took office.

Upon his inauguration in late 2006, "Calderon himself really embraced and sort of projected a more prominent role for the military," Shirk told Business Insider. Calderon, who came to power as the result of a [disputed presidential election](#) in which he captured [36% of the vote](#), "signaled his intention to give the military a prominent role in domestic security and particularly counter-drug operations," Shirk said.



AP Photo/Guillermo Arias

Wearing a military cap and jacket, Mexican President Felipe Calderon, center, arrives at the base of the 43th Militar zone, to meet with federal forces involved in ongoing anti-crime operations in Apatzingan, Michoacan, Mexico, January 3, 2007. President Calderon sent 7,000 troops to his home state of Michoacan immediately after taking office on December 1.

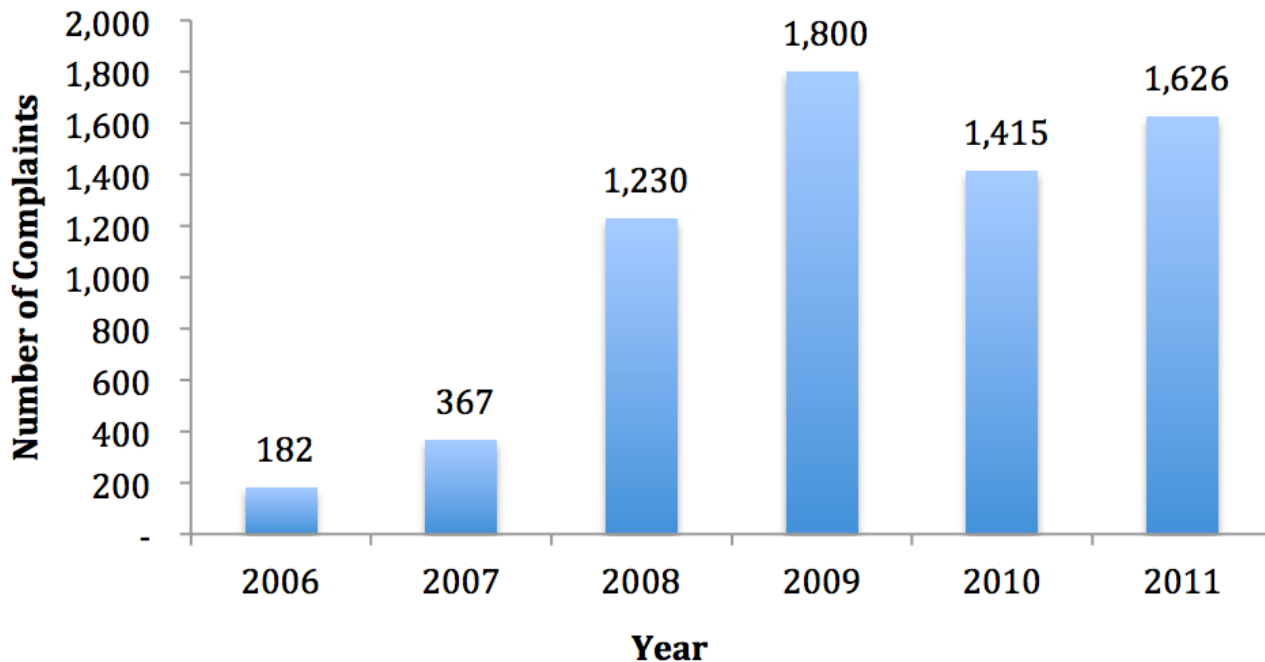
In 2007, Calderon increased troop deployments throughout Mexico from 20,000 to 50,000 soldiers. Calderon shifted troops into urban areas, like Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana, as part of a new focus on drug-trafficking hubs rather than on rural production zones, according to “[Armed with Impunity](#),” a 2012 report from the Justice in Mexico project.

“You saw, literally, cops and soldiers patrolling ... in various neighborhoods in Juarez” and elsewhere, said Shirk.

The large-scale deployment of military personnel — trained to engage opponents with military-grade force — stirred concern over issues of due process and other civil rights, Shirk noted.

Those concerns were justified.



**Figure 3: Complaints Registered With CNDH Against SEDENA**

*Armed with Impunity/Justice in Mexico Project*

Complaints filed with the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) against the National Defense Secretariat (SEDENA) rose steadily throughout Felipe Calderon's term.

Between 2006 and 2011, the number of complaints filed with Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) against the National Defense Ministry (SEDENA) **rose dramatically**, from 182 in 2006 to a peak of 1,800 in 2009, declining only slightly to 1,626 in 2011.

In 2011, **researchers found** that between 2007 and 2010, there was “a causal effect between the deployment of joint military operations and the rise in the murder rate” in states where those joint operations took place, with **data indicating** that there could have been nearly 7,000 fewer homicides in 2008 and 2009 had the military not been deployed to combat Mexico's drug traffickers.



Jorge Carballo/Reuters

Federal policemen arrest men on suspicion of possessing drugs during an anti-narcotics operation in the Alvaro Obregon district in Mexico City May 3, 2007.

Calderon left office in late 2012, and Enrique Peña Nieto took his place as the country's president. Despite a roughly 15% decline in homicides during Peña Nieto's first year in office compared to the previous year — a trend some attribute to the [exhaustion of cartels](#) after years of warfare — other, often high-profile, abuses continued.

In 2013, there were 1,505 reported [cases of torture](#) or abuse by security officials, a 600% increase compared to 2003. In the summer of 2014, military personnel were [implicated](#) in the execution of 22 suspected criminals in central Mexico. That September, 43 students were [abducted and likely killed](#) by a local gang in Iguala, in southwest Mexico, [allegedly on the orders of the town's mayor](#); military personnel [observed the crime](#) but failed to stop it. And on two occasions in 2015, [federal police](#) have been accused of [gunning down civilians](#).

This year, the US took the [symbolic step](#) of withholding aid from Mexico due to human-rights concerns. A UN official also called on the Peña Nieto government to begin removing troops from policing functions, [describing](#) a “very bleak” outlook for a country “wracked by high levels of insecurity.”





REUTERS/Jorge Dan Lopez

Personal objects are seen next to the body of an unidentified man who was shot dead outside a mall in Chilpancingo, Guerrero state, January 27, 2015.

Yet there is evidence the Mexican government is not ready to [scale back](#) its military's role in domestic security or take soldiers off the streets.

"The de facto reality is that you have a situation that would be very shocking to the average American citizen. The idea of soldiers driving up and down the main streets of your city with M16s is exactly what the NRA is terrified of," Shirk told Business Insider. "And this is the everyday of reality for millions of people around Mexico."

## Venezuela's 'schizophrenic' security policy

As [James Bosworth](#), the director of analysis at the advisory firm Southern Pulse, [has noted](#), Calderon and late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who was in office from 1999 to 2013, took similar approaches to fighting organized crime.

Both [sent](#) military units into the streets to replace police. Both focused on military operations at the expense of promised police reforms. And both saw a surge in rights abuses by security forces while in office, presiding over periods during which [citizen security deteriorated](#).





REUTERS/Mariana Bazo

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, left, talks with Mexican President Felipe Calderon during the closing session of the European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Summit (EU-Latam) in Lima, May 16, 2008.

Like Mexico, Venezuela has seen a sharp increase in crime since the 1990s, something that's likely attributable to spillover from Colombia's longstanding [civil conflict](#) (and related drug-trafficking activity), widespread impunity, and the "schizophrenic" way Chavez addressed crime, according to [Alejandro Velasco](#), a professor at New York University.

Venezuela's approach to citizen security had long been repressive. "There is a longstanding belief actually among the population, and this predates Chavez ... that the only real way to address crime is through 'mano dura,' or 'iron fist,' policies, said Velasco, whose recent book, "[Barrio Rising](#)," examines Venezuela's urban politics.

"And the exemplar of mano dura is the military or some sort of highly repressive force," Velasco added, "whether it's the military or the national guard."





REUTERS/Carlos Garcia Rawlins

Venezuelan national guardsmen detain a group of anti-government protesters during a protest against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government in Caracas, May 14, 2014.

The Chavez government took [limited steps](#) to address crime. Some regarded its efforts at [police reform](#), which were aimed at producing police who were less inclined [to use force](#), as a [shift away](#) from the country's legacy of heavy-handed enforcement.

But these reform efforts stalled not long after their introduction in 2009. Elements [within](#) Venezuela's Justice and Interior Ministry, which was pushing the reforms, remained [committed](#) to the military's role in law enforcement. The same ministry [oversaw](#) the country's national guard, where many officers were hardly supportive of the new changes in policy.

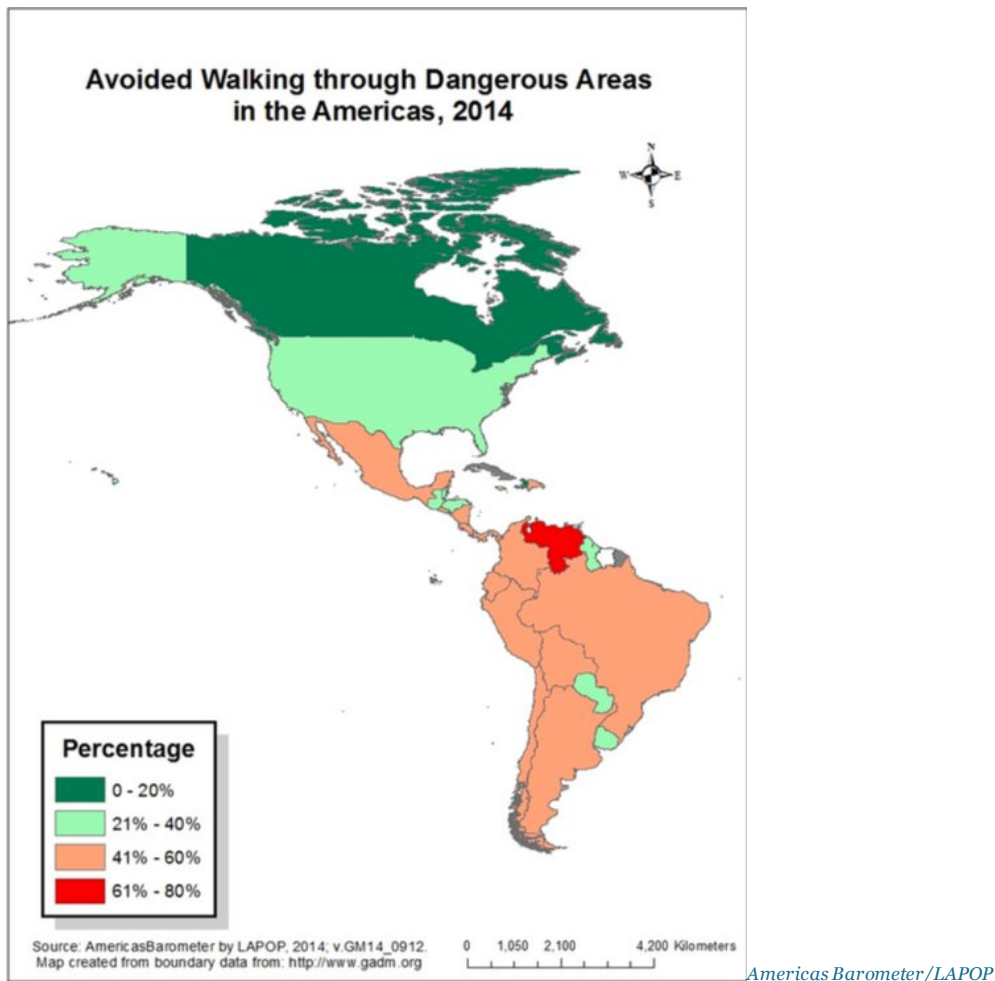
Chavez died in early 2013, and the government of his successor, Nicolas Maduro, has shown wavering commitment to police reform. Maduro [appointed](#) an army general as head of the country's national security university, which was established to move police training away from [the influence of the military](#). He also put a retired army general [in charge](#) of the national police. Maduro's major anticrime initiative during his first months in office [put military forces](#) back on the streets.

While mano dura policies remained [broadly popular](#), rights abuses by military personnel, as well as public discomfort with the military's [presence](#) in the streets, are both increasing.

In July and August 2013 alone, military personnel were accused of numerous [human-rights violations](#), including the shooting deaths of a woman and her child, the execution-style killing of two homeless people, and forcing a man to drink gasoline. Several officers were arrested in relation to the incidents.

A report from the Venezuelan daily El Universal chronicled the "[terror](#)" citizens felt when passing through the





Seventy percent of Venezuelans said they avoid dangerous areas of their neighborhoods because of crime, a percentage higher than in any other country in the region.

country's frequent military roadblocks.

In a country believed to have had the world's second-highest [homicide rate](#) in 2014, mounting evidence indicates military personnel are contributing to the insecurity.

A [UN report](#) released last year found more than 3,000 cases in which people were abused after being detained during anti-government protests in the spring of 2014. The report also found that only 12 officials had been convicted of rights violations between 2004 and 2014, despite more than 5,000 complaints over the same period.

“When the army is deployed to do citizen security they follow the rules of engagement that are conventionally military,” Velasco told Business Insider. “Their rules of engagement are so discretionary and broad that we have seen a significant amount of deaths.”

Some especially stark examples of abuse and legal impunity demonstrate just how much the country's security services can expect to get away with. Over the last two years, [soldiers](#) as well as high-ranking [police officials](#) have been arrested for running kidnapping rings. The deployment of [the military](#) into close proximity with criminal elements has also given [some personnel](#) the ability to [move into](#) the drug-trafficking industry.

“Because there's been this greater militarization of society in general,” and because of the military's larger role in domestic policy, Velasco said, there have been “greater opportunities for corrupt elements within the military to ... cement their operations and their presence in the drug trade.”



REUTERS/Edwin Montilva

Venezuela's Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami, right, walks over confiscated cocaine packs presented to the media in Puerto Ordaz in the southern state of Bolivar, June 26, 2011.

In addition to allegations of smuggling drugs through Venezuela, members of the military, which **currently oversees** much of the country's frontier with Colombia, are **suspected** of profiting from the smuggling of gasoline over the country's western border, an illicit trade worth roughly \$3.6 billion in 2014.

The armed forces' growing profile in Venezuelan policymaking "gives them a lot of say about what's going on in the country, but it also creates a lot of opportunities for corruption," Harold Trinkunas, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, **told** Bloomberg.

## The most violent region in the world?

Despite their problems, Mexico and Venezuela are not outliers in Latin America. The region, including the Caribbean, had 43 of the 50 **most deadly non-warzone cities** in the world in 2014, and has registered **one-third** of the world's total homicides, despite having just 8% of its population.

A militarized response to insecurity, often at the **behest of the US**, has also become common. Honduras **created** a military-police force, while an army general runs its security ministry. Guatemala has also **deployed** joint police-military task forces.

El Salvador has sent elite military brigades to **combat** urban gangs, and its deployments of soldiers and police has had severe consequences. "We have had cases of arbitrary deaths, situations that could verge on torture, and we are investigating possible executions at the scenes of armed confrontations between police and supposed criminals," **said** David Morales, the director of El Salvador's attorney general's office for the defense of human rights (PDDH).



Morales also reported that of 2,202 human-rights complaints the PDDH received between June 2014 and May 2015, [92% were against state security forces](#).



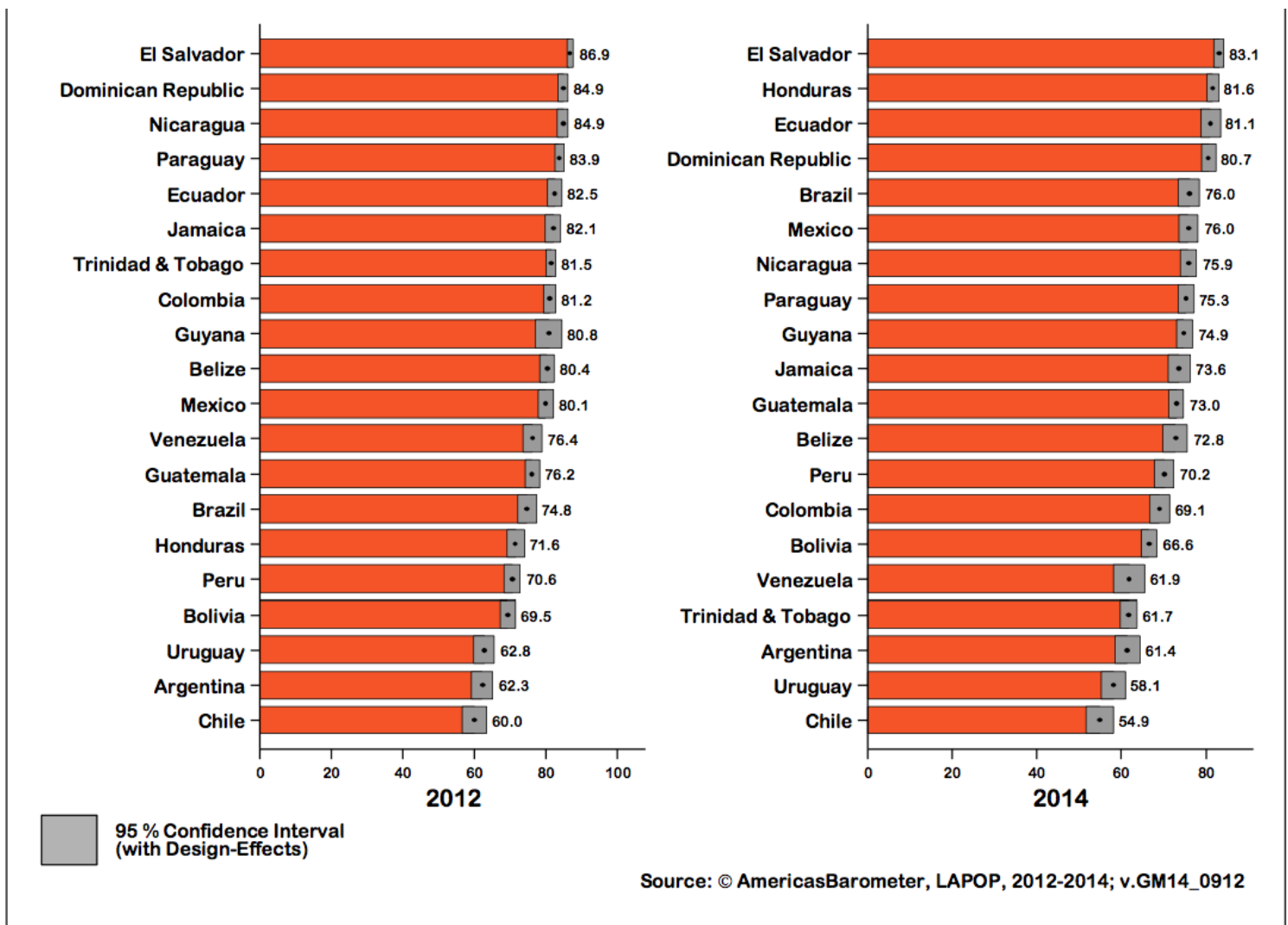
REUTERS/Jose Cabezas

Salvadoran policemen arrest two suspected gang members during an anti-gang search operation in San Salvador, June 21, 2015.

Brazilian military police deployed in São Paulo state [killed 11,358 people](#) between 1995 and 2015, more than the number of people killed by all US police forces between 1983 and 2012. In Colombia, where the current government has made an increasing effort to improve its human-rights record, [evidence of military abuses](#), along with various state elements' [links](#) to paramilitaries and organized crime, continued to emerge in recent years.

Despite growing evidence casting doubt on the effectiveness of putting the military in a domestic security role, countries like [Argentina](#) and [Ecuador](#) continue to pursue this policy — and [the public](#) throughout [the region](#) continues to [support it](#).

"Everyone is talking about repression and the stronger the better," Mario Vega, a pastor who works with gang members in El Salvador, [told](#) Vice, "because that fits with people's conviction that the solution lies in the use of force."



**Figure 3.26. Support for Military Role in Domestic Security in the Americas, 2012-2014**

*Americas Barometer/LAPOP*

Support for a military role in domestic security dipped slightly in many countries between 2012 and 2014, but remained strong throughout Latin America

The pressure on Latin American governments from both their citizens and from organized crime is immense, and “just seeing soldiers out on the streets sends a strong message,” Adam Isacson, a senior associate at the Washington Office on Latin America, [told](#) Insight Crime.

But militarized policing also sends an ominous message about the basic functionality of states that are weak, corrupt, or overwhelmed by problems they're apparently incapable of solving.

“It’s an admission that all other government institutions have failed,” Isacson [told](#) The Christian Science Monitor.