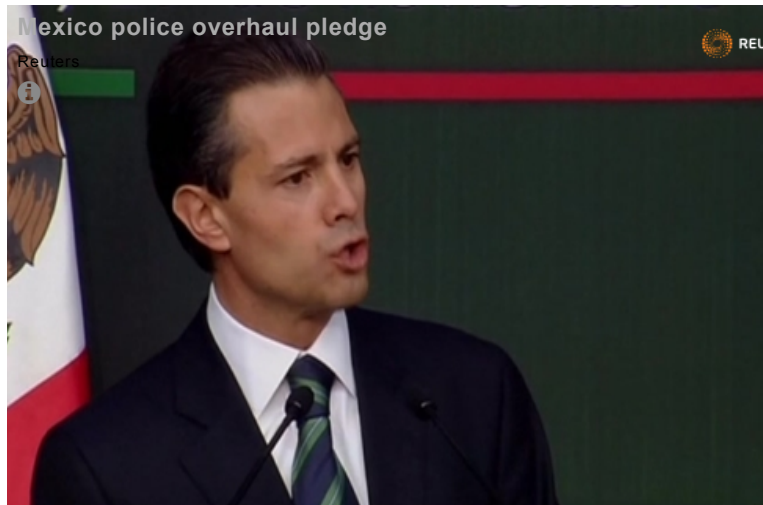


Can reforms change Mexico's corrupt police culture? (+video)

Police practices came under harsh scrutiny after the disappearance of 43 college students. Mexico's Congress is debating security reforms, including one that would put a state police command over local police forces.

By **Whitney Eulich**, Staff writer | DECEMBER 6, 2014

[About video ads](#) ([/About/Contact/Feedback/About-video-a](#)



Editors' Picks

MEXICO CITY — Mexico (/csmlists/topic/Mexico)'s president, Enrique Peña Nieto, was in Guerrero this week for the first time since 43 students were kidnapped and likely murdered there more than two months ago.

Farther north, in Mexico's capital, Congress spent the week debating security reforms, including a provision that would replace the most corrupt local police forces – like those brazenly involved with the students' disappearances – with ones under state control.

The reforms, part of a 10-point plan recently announced by President Enrique Peña Nieto, were in response to the Iguala ([/csmlists/topic/Iguala](#)) case in Guerrero state, which displayed such extreme levels of corruption ([/World/Latest-News-Wires/2014/1104/Mexican-mayor-wife-arrested-in-connection-with-students-disappearance](#)) that demonstrations against the government ([/World/Americas/2014/1202/Out-with-Pena-Nieto-For-Mexicans-missing-students-case-overshadows-all.-video](#)) have swept the nation for more than two months.

Recommended: How much do you know about Mexico? Take our quiz. ([/World/Americas/2012/0701/How-much-do-you-know-about-Mexico-Take-our-quiz/What-does-the-5th-of-May-commemorate-in-Mexico](#))

But the decision to move toward a “mando único,” or single police command, is coming under scrutiny in a country where corruption has been found at all levels of the police. Some say professional standards for all police must rise, as opposed to simply changing jurisdiction, while others advocate focusing more on the justice system and putting a dent in high rates of impunity.

The concern is not limited to Mexico. 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 Elizabeth Zechmeister, director of LAPOP at Vanderbilt University. “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 ([/World/Americas/2014/0309/Mexico-s-vigilantes-the-aftershocks-of-ousting-a-cartel-video](#)) groups.

Mexico has the fifth lowest level of satisfaction with its local police in the region, and just over half the population say the country isn't safe, according to the 2014 AmericasBarometer report. The surveys in Mexico took place before the mass abduction ([/World/Americas/2014/1031/Briefing-What-s-next-for-Mexico-in-case-](#)

of-missing-students) and suspected massacre in Iguala
(/World/Americas/2014/1108/Drug-gang-confesses-to-killing-43-students-
Is-this-Mexico-s-Moment-video).

“Wherever you put [police] control, there needs to be accountability. The real problem we’ve seen is the sense that police at any level can get away with abuses,” says Daniel Wilkinson, managing director of the Americas division at Human Rights Watch (/csmlists/topic/Human+Rights+Watch) in New York. “There needs to be a change, where the sense that police who commit crimes will actually be held accountable.... Instead [Mexico] is reforming the command structure.”

Police and protesters

Monday evening, as protesters called for the return of the 43 teacher’s college students, missing since Sept. 26, Mexico City
(/csmlists/topic/Mexico+City) riot police stood two-lines deep along a city block just off the protest route.

“We’re here for preventative reasons,” one officer says.

Later that night, the police were present as the largely peaceful protest took a violent turn, with some demonstrators smashing store windows and lighting fires. At least three people were arrested, and one video circulating in the aftermath (<https://news.vice.com/article/plainclothes-police-officers-are-rioting-in-mexico-city-protests-videos-show>) allegedly shows a plainclothes police officer participating in the rioting.

Socoro Ramirez, a college student marching down Mexico City’s vast boulevard, Reforma, earlier that evening, is dismissive of the president’s targeting of local police.

“We suddenly are going to trust that the police or military or government is actually looking out for us? After everything that’s happened this year? No way,” Ms. Ramirez says, referring to both the disappearances in Iguala and a suspected massacre and cover-up by the military
(/World/Americas/2014/1115/Mexico-soldiers-face-charges-but-not-officials-who-tried-to-hide-massacre) in Tlatlaya this summer.

A major complaint with the reform, which would eliminate 1,800 municipal police forces across the country and replace them with forces under each state’s control, is that Mexico has tried that before – and it’s failed to make a difference.

David Shirk, director of the Justice in Mexico Project at the University of San Diego, says single command police models are often brought up as the solution to corruption, “as if police forces were a structural problem. It may make it easier to coordinate, but it doesn’t address accountability,” he says. “There’s no silver bullet.”

Mexico has had a major police reform every six to eight years since the 1980s, Mr. Shirk says. “There’s a new acronym, a new agency, as though it is going to be the solution to all of Mexico’s problems, but it always leads down the same road.”

Some say the loss of community knowledge (<http://www.eluniversalmas.com.mx/editoriales/2014/12/73615.php>) in disbanding local police presents a problem. Mexican security analyst Alejandro Hope wrote in El Universal this week that, “It’s necessary to remember that the police don’t just chase delinquents. They maintain public order, regulate traffic, and resolve civil disputes. To achieve this work effectively, the police need to be anchored in the community, be close to the population, and know the sources of conflict. Police ... brought from outside the community can’t do this.”

Shirk suggests professionalizing the police, such as doling out promotions based on police exams and requiring certain levels of education. Nearly 12 percent of local police have only completed elementary school, and 40 percent of municipal police earn \$325 a month. The average monthly minimum wage in Mexico about \$150.

Merit doesn't count

Shirk's team has conducted three municipal police surveys in Mexico over the past several years, published in reports called Justiciabarómetros, which found that local police “don’t believe in mechanisms and practices for advancement.”

Shirk says it’s a “huge problem, because police themselves express that they aren’t being rewarded based on merit, but politics and personal relationships. That won’t change if you move it to the state level. In fact, it could get worse.”

In the 1980s, when drug trafficking here was on the rise, the highly centralized police directorate, the DFS, experienced problems of corruption and infiltration at the national level.

“If you centralize the police, you also centralize the problem of corruption,” he says. “There may be much more control over crime, but not in a good way.”

Mr. Wilkinson from Human Rights Watch says he wouldn't write off the proposed reforms, but “what's needed is real follow-through.”

Take Iguala, he says. “How do you get to a situation where police actually think, and local authorities actually think they can get away with rounding up 43 students and handing them over to Guerreros Unidos [a criminal gang] and get away with it? That's reflective of an environment and a reality where no one is held accountable.”