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Lisa Hochstetler
Taylor University, Upland, lisa_hochstetler@taylor.edu

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Protecting Youth from Mexican Drug Cartel Recruitment: The Prospects of Educational Interventions

By Lisa Hochstetler

The onset of the Mexico's War on Drugs[1] in 2006 unleashed an unanticipated wave of violence as drug trafficking organizations and street gangs reorganized and diversified to ensure their profits and local control. Mexico's drug cartel network is at the center of a global illicit drug trade, as importers of drug supplies from Asia, transporters through Central America and Mexico, and suppliers to the United States and Europe. As organized crime groups carry out homicides, disappearances, and extortion at increasing levels, the social and economic development of Mexican society is severely inhibited. Mexico's most vulnerable population due to the violence of the drug cartels is its youth, who are the most at risk to become victims of homicides, disappearances, and recruitment. Youth from marginalized communities and youth who drop out of school are especially targeted by drug cartel recruiters because they desire a sense of belonging and a quick escape from poverty.

This study focuses on the young individuals of Mexico who constitute the most vulnerable sector of the Mexican population due to drug-related violence. Intricately involved in the vulnerability of youth is the education system, which has been negatively impacted by the cartel conflicts in several aspects. Mexico's education system suffers from school closures, decreases in teacher and student attendance rates, and lower academic achievement due to exposure and persistence of organized crime. Students who drop out of school or who receive a poor-quality education are more susceptible to getting lured into working for the drug cartels for

[1]From the Spanish phrase "*Guerra contra el narcotráfico en México,"* alternatively Mexico's War on Drugs or the Mexican Drug War.

various reasons. In this investigation, I discuss whether reform within the education system can be effective to protect youth from drug cartel recruitment, despite the challenges it currently faces due to the drug cartels. Existing literature primarily focuses on the ramifications of drug-related violence on the quality of education in Mexico, and therefore, this investigation addresses the need to explore the capacity for schools and educational programs to protect its youth from such violence.

To demonstrate the role of education in deterring youth recruitment into drug cartels, this paper considers the recent history of drug trafficking in Mexico and its effect on education, reasons for youth vulnerability, educational interventions that address these vulnerabilities, and the principal challenges for the education system. First, a discussion of the manifestations and drivers of organized crime in Mexico illustrate the traumatic impacts of the War on Drugs beginning in 2006. The discussion demonstrates how harmful government policies, widespread corruption, and poverty have allowed drug trafficking organizations to increase in influence and in violence. As the key drug suppliers and distributors in the international illicit drug trade, Mexican transnational criminal organizations use their power to gain profits through intimidation and violent crimes. Next, an explanation of the impact of drug cartel violence on the education system portrays the challenges for students and teachers to attend school regularly and complete their education. The structural shift of cartel organization and violence due to the War on Drugs intensified these challenges, threatening students' quality of education and increasing the probability of early dropout among youth.

Historically, education policies to prevent youth recruitment have focused on increasing student enrollment and graduation rates to deter youth from recruitment. However, the structural change of violence caused by the War on Drugs demands proactive measures that address the

root causes of youth vulnerability. Therefore, this investigation demonstrates the need for diverse educational interventions that go beyond increasing student enrollment and reach toward building identity and self-regulation skills among young individuals. Such skills are essential to healthy adolescent development, and they equip youth to overcome the psychological and social challenges caused by drug-related violence. Finally, I summarize the principal challenges to educational reform that aims to protect youth from victimization and recruitment into drug trafficking organizations. I address two examples of programs that combat a particularly pervasive issue, which is the drug cartels' use of propaganda to manipulate the perceptions of youth and broader society about drugs and the culture of drug cartels. Despite widespread challenges to the education system and the increasing aggression of drug cartels, educators and policymakers must persevere in the development of research and educational programs for the sake of Mexico's young individuals, who are the future of Mexico.

The Mexican Drug War and Its Effect on Education

Manifestations and Drivers of the Drug War and Organized Crime

After about 20 years of declining homicide rates in Mexico, President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) made a decision that would change the nature of drug cartel violence and its impact on Mexican society for generations. Eight days after taking office in 2006, Calderón declared a "War on Drugs" against the violent network of drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) across Mexico.[2] Utilizing United States intel and the Mexican military (who replaced the police forces), Calderón increased drug seizures and employed a decapitation strategy that would capture or kill

[2]Nina Lakhani, "Mexico's War on Drugs: What Has It Achieved and How Is the US Involved?" *The Guardian,* December 8, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/19/mexico-government-condemns-calderon-war-drugs.

twenty-five of the top thirty-seven drug kingpins.[3] Former Mexican Attorney General Jesús Murillo and many others have criticized Calderón´s strategy for intensifying conflict within cartels and spurring on the development of smaller, more violent gangs.[4] From the onset of the War on Drugs in 2006 to the final year of Calderón´s term in 2012, the annual number of intentional homicides nearly tripled from 10,452 to 27,213.[5] The Mexican drug cartels are responsible for more than 360,000 murders since 2006, targeting rival drug cartel members, politicians, journalists, and students.[6] Today homicide numbers continue at record levels (28 per 100,000 population in 2020, the 9th highest murder rate in the world) even as President Andrés Manuel López Obrador implements a contrasting "hugs not bullets" strategy by creating job opportunities and employing a military-led national guard.[7] A weak judicial system and widespread corruption among police forces, government officials, and military personnel undermine efforts to reduce or punish drug-related crime.[8] Waves of violence debilitate Mexican society as the network of at least nine DTOs and hundreds of street gangs contest for turf and trafficking routes, split into new groups, and form alliances.[9] Experts link the rise of organized crime and drug trafficking across Mexico to both domestic and international forces.

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[3]CFR.org Editors, "Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels," Council on Foreign Relations, February 26, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels; also see Lakhani, "Mexico's War on Drugs."
[4]Agencies in Mexico City, "Mexico's War on Cartels Made Drug Crisis Worse, Says New Government," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2012; also see Gabriela Calderón et al., "The Beheading of Criminal Organizations and the Dynamics of Violence in Mexico," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (June 2015): 1349.
[5]Laura Y. Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico* (San Diego, CA: Justice in Mexico, Department of Political Science & International Relations, 2019), 38.
[6]CFR.org Editors, "Mexico's Long War;" also see United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), "Victims of Intentional Homicide (2010-2020)," UNODC, 2020, https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims.
[7]UNODC, "Victims of Intentional Homicide (2010-2020)."
[8]Brenda Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools? Evidence on Effects and Mechanisms," *International Journal of Educational Development* 51 (November 2016): 137.
[9]Carrie Kahn, "Dozens of Candidates Killed ahead of Midterms in Mexico," *NPR*, June 2, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/1002604368/dozens-of-candidates-killed-ahead-of-midterms-in-mexico; also see Beatriz Magaloni et al., "Living in Fear: the Dynamics of Extortion in Mexico's Drug War." *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 7 (2020): 9.

Also known as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), Mexican drug cartels and related violence are at the center of a public health and safety crisis for the entire globe. Sinaloa Cartel, the oldest and most influential DTO, operates in about fifty countries.[10] Although Mexico produces most of the methamphetamine, heroin, and marijuana present in the country, drug traffickers transport cocaine from producers in Colombia, through Central America, into Mexico, and eventually to the United States and Europe. Asia is the supplier for most of the precursor chemicals needed by Mexican drug cartels to produce synthetic drugs. China, for example, is the main producer for fentanyl precursor chemicals.[11] (Mexican security forces' seizures of the synthetic opioid fentanyl, with five times the potency of heroin, increased by 486% from 2019 to 2020.[12]) In 2017 alone, the United States spent $153 billion on illegal drugs, most of which are imported through Mexico.[13] Yet Mexico suffers the greatest effects from the global drug trade, which are exacerbated by persisting drug cartel conflicts, corrupt government and police officials, and poverty.[14] Drug-related violence has serious and lasting effects on Mexico's society, costing hundreds of thousands of lives, lowering the quality of life for many others, and stifling educational and economic growth.

Impact of Drug Cartel Violence on Education

It is critical to consider the Drug War's effect on education, because education not only has the potential to improve human capital and individual returns, but also to create benefits for

[10]CFR.org Editors, "Mexico's Long War."
[11]Associated Press in Mexico City, "Mexico Security Forces' Seizures of Fentanyl Rise by 486% This Year," *The Guardian*, December 31, 2020.
[12]Associated Press in Mexico City, "Mexico Security Forces' Seizures of Fentanyl Rise by 486% This Year."
[13]CFR.org Editors, "Mexico's Long War." The United States has invested billions of dollars to sharpen Mexican security forces, improve its judicial system, and support developmental organizations that address migration at Mexico's southern border.
[14]Minor Mora-Salas and Gustavo Adolfo Urbina Cortes, "Is There a New Youth Policy in Mexico?" *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 4, no. 3 (July 2021): 263. As of 2021, 52% of the Mexican population live below the poverty line.

the larger society by reducing the number of youth available to crime and by bringing greater individual security.[15] The drug-related violence that has persisted through various presidential policies has deeply impacted the educational system, teachers, and students. The 1993 compulsory secondary education law in Mexico dramatically decreased homicide rates by 55% from 1993 to 2007.[16] Increased attendance in secondary and tertiary schools created the incapacitation effect (less available time for youth to engage in crime), deterrence (higher economic costs of involvement in crime and benefits of education build patience and risk aversion), and social bonds that weakened negative peer influence.[17] However, the positive impacts of increased school attendance for secondary students that began shortly after 1993 vanished after the onset of the Drug War in 2006. The benefits of school attendance were applicable for interpersonal violence driven by individual motives, but not for Mexico's current state of organized crime and armed conflict between cartels (and between cartels and the state).[18] Calderón´s military-led operations and decapitation strategies shifted the organizational structure of the drug cartels to fragment into regional groups that commit more sporadic and more violent crime. During the decade of 2006 to 2016, gang violence centered itself in urban areas and became more spatially clustered with socio-economically marginalized communities.[19] These changes in organized crime groups caused larger negative effects of cartel violence in poor, densely-populated urban areas, where families are more likely to be subject to extortion by the DTOs and have weaker family ties.[20] Families' compromised ability to make a living (due to

[15]Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Mauricio Rivera, and Bárbara Zárate-Tenorio, "Can Education Reduce Violent Crime? Evidence from Mexico before and after the Drug War Onset," *The Journal of Development Studies* 58, no. 2 (September 22, 2021): 303.
[16]Gleditsch, Rivera, and Zárate-Tenorio, "Can Education Reduce Violent Crime?," 303.
[17]Gleditsch, Rivera, and Zárate-Tenorio, "Can Education Reduce Violent Crime?," 297.
[18]Gleditsch, Rivera, and Zárate-Tenorio, "Can Education Reduce Violent Crime?," 298.
[19]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 135.
[20]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 136.

extortion and lack of safety) affects parents' investment decisions to their child's education.[21] The benefits that education has to offer for Mexican society are being undermined by the proliferation and adaptations of DTOs and drug-related crime.

A Unique Challenge for Education

The structural shift of the drug cartels and subsequent escalation of violence has threatened access to education and diminished the quality of education. Fear of crime and victimization of cartel violence forced school closures in eight states from 2019 to 2020, including 104 elementary schools, 51 junior high schools, and 4 high schools.[22] One study estimates that one month of drug-related turf war exposure during the school year causes a 14% reduction in the annual growth of student enrollment.[23] Additionally, drug-related violence causes teacher absences, a loss of instructional time, teacher turnover, student absences, tardiness, and tendency to leave school days early.[24] Not only does exposure to drug-related violence decrease access to school, it also diminishes students' quality of education. In a nation-wide study of elementary and lower secondary level schools, persistence and exposure of drug-related conflict reduced academic achievement, with stronger negative effects for lower secondary schools.[25] Environmental stressors of exposure to violence threatens teachers' and students' physical and emotional safety, which causes shorter attention spans, inhibits students' engagement in the classroom, and perpetuates fear.[26] Adolescents are vulnerable to victimization both in and out of school. Particularly in middle schools, students themselves may become

[21]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 136.
[22]John Zake, "MEXICO'S DRUG WAR AFFECTS EDUCATION," The Borgen Project, September 4, 2022, https://borgenproject.org/mexicos-drug-war-affects-education/#:~:text=Student%20lateness%20compared%2052.9%25%20to,reduce%20school%20enrollment%20by%2014%25.
[23]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 144.
[24]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 136.
[25]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 136.
[26]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?," 135.

involved in gang violence by being negatively influenced by their peers, by seeking friendship, or by force and intimidation.[27] It is critical to understand how drug-related violence affects access and quality of education because these are essential to breaking the cycle of youth involvement in organized crime.

Vulnerability of Youth in Mexico

Impact of the Drug War on Mexico's Youth

Drug trafficking organizations and related criminal violence have had a significant impact on Mexico's youth, who make up one-fourth of Mexico's population (ages 15-29).[28] According to one source, in 2018, the average age of organized crime-related homicides was about 33, challenging the assumptions that most of the Drug War's victims are discontented youth.[29] However, the estimates of older men may be overreported, since they are more likely to consist of deaths among the police force and be influenced by biases from media reports.[30] Between 2006 and 2018, the majority of deaths by homicide were suffered by youths with secondary education.[31] Between 2000 and 2019, 21,000 youths were murdered, 7,000 youths disappeared, and 30,000 youths were recruited into drug gangs.[32] Among the contested research on the effects of the Drug War on the youth population, most scholars agree that youth are the most vulnerable sector of Mexico's population to Drug War violence.[33] The pattern of homicides among youth tend to increase rapidly from ages 10-14 to ages 15-19 (the jump in 2011 alone went from 235 to 2,419 homicides) and continue to increase from 20-24 and 25-29, and then

[27]Jarillo et al., "How the Mexican Drug War Affects Kids and Schools?,"142.
[28]Mora-Salas and Cortes, "Is There a New Youth Policy in Mexico?," 263.
[29]Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico*, 17.
[30]Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico*, 17.
[31]Maritza Urteaga Castro-Pozo and Hugo César Moreno Hernández, "Jóvenes Mexicanos: Violencias Estructurales y Criminalización," *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no. 73 (July 2020): 16.
[32]Mark Stevenson, "In Mexico, Children as Young as 10 Recruited by Drug Cartels," *AP NEWS*, October 14, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/caribbean-mexico-city-mexico-drug-cartels-6f73f0a2277ea91eb5a39a098238ae6b.
[33]Castro-Pozo and Hernández, "Jóvenes Mexicanos," 56.

decrease slightly in the next age range.[34] While these statistics do not represent the exact relationship between youth and cartel-related violence, they do demonstrate the widespread vulnerability of Mexico's youth.

Youth as Victims and Perpetrators of Organized Crime

Youth have been the protagonists in the bloody War on Drugs that began in 2006, either as victims or perpetrators, taking different roles in criminal businesses, armed forces, and police.[35] Cartels typically assign youth recruits to drug transport and sales on the streets, then train them for extortion and kidnapping, and finally promote them to become *sicarios* (hitmen).[36] In an interview of youth offenders in three northern border states, 67 of the 89 youths were recruited into the drug cartels between 13 and 15 years old, sometime after they had dropped out of school.[37] Cartels prefer to recruit kids under 18 because they are less noticeable and cannot be given adult sentences.[38] Youth who are not part of a cartel and youth who are buying drugs may be caught in the crossfire between organized crime groups or be captured by cartel security forces who may subject them to beatings, disappearance, or death.[39] Many youth join street gangs as a defensive measure, choosing to become the predator instead of remaining the prey. Gang membership may allow youth to protect themselves and their families from threats from rival members.[40] There are various driving factors and avenues through which youth are victimized by organized crime or become involved in the work of drug cartels.

[34]Mora-Salas and Cortes, "Is There a New Youth Policy in Mexico?," 16.
[35]Castro-Pozo and Hernández, "Jóvenes Mexicanos," 49.
[36]Anel Hortensia Gómez San Luis and Ariagor Manuel Almanza Avendaño, "Impacto Del Narcotráfico En Jóvenes de Tamaulipas, México: Drogas e Inseguridad," *Revista de Psicología* 34, no. 2 (2016): 466.
[37]Stevenson, "In Mexico, Children as Young as 10 Recruited by Drug Cartels."
[38]Stevenson, "In Mexico, Children as Young as 10 Recruited by Drug Cartels." Mexican law allows sentences for 3 to 5 years for youth offenders, meaning many can be released before they turn 21.
[39]San Luis and Avendaño, "Impacto Del Narcotráfico En Jóvenes de Tamaulipas," 467.
[40]UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* 77.

A variant of the territorial organized crime groups in Mexico are the *maras*, street gangs consisting almost entirely of youth.[41] There are about 1,500 street gangs in the city of Juarez alone, which is evidence of the trend of decentralization of larger groups and proliferation of regional gangs.[42] Unlike the typical organized crime groups who ultimately aim for profits, the *maras* are mainly concerned with controlling local affairs, protection from intruders, and gaining money for loved ones. For *marenos* (members of street gangs), territorial control is not necessarily about money, but identity, respect, and belonging.[43] Their identity is oriented around who they oppose, making street gangs hyper-sensitive to insults and symbolic attacks. Conflict is a core aspect of street gangs, who defend their identity and demonstrate control over their territory through acts of violence. Historically, the street gangs did not work closely with drug trafficking organizations, who preferred not to partner with the highly unpredictable, untrained, and impulsive youth of the *maras*.[44] However, the violence of street gangs and their interactions with transnational drug trafficking groups is on the rise.[45] The dramatic surge in homicides in Mexico (300%) between 2007 and 2011 had many implications, including increased alliances between organized drug cartels and street gangs.[46] Drug cartels have expanded their use of street gangs in matters such as drug sales and transportation, kidnapping, extortion, and use of *sicarios*.[47] The mutually beneficial relationship has longevity because of the gangs' use of children and teenagers. Many children begin training in violence at the age of 12 and are experts

[41]UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, 27. In countries with limited educational and economic opportunities, the UNODC considers "youth" to possibly extend into the 20s and 30s.
[42]Patrick Corcoran, "Street Gangs to Replace Cartels as Drivers of Mexico's Violence," *InSight Crime*, January 18, 2012, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/street-gangs-to-replace-cartels-as-drivers-of-mexicos-violence/.
[43]UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* 28.
[44]UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* 28.
[45]Corcoran, "Street Gangs to Replace Cartels as Drivers of Mexico's Violence."
[46]Rafael de Hoyos, Gutierrez Fierros Carlos, and Vargas M. J. Vicente, "Idle Youth in Mexico: Trapped between the War on Drugs and Economic Crisis," *Policy Research Working Paper No. 7558*, Washington, DC: World Bank Group, (February 2016): 2, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/23885.
[47]UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* 29.

in specialized criminal violence by the time they reach 18.[48] This organizational change in crime places Mexican youth at even greater danger, particularly those that drop out of school early or that have fewer years of education.

Driving Factors for Youth Recruitment into Cartels and Gangs

A combination of economic, historical, and sociological factors increase youth involvement in drug cartels and street gangs. Mexico is one of many Latin American countries that is experiencing the *nini* crisis—the growing number of youth ages 15-24 who neither work nor attend school (from the Spanish phrase *"ni estudia ni trabaja*").[49] An estimated 1 in 4 men in Mexico are *ninis*, increasing their likelihood of involvement in criminal activities.[50] Though the homicide rates in Mexico are not necessarily correlated with the rate of male *ninis* from 1995 to 2013, the share of *ninis* is significantly correlated with homicide rates between 2007 and 2013, the few years following the onset of the War on Drugs.[51] The government's decapitation strategy increased conflict as groups struggled to fill power vacuums, creating a demand for new influxes of recruits. Cartels continually need to replace the members that died, and many times the most available group are young people.[52] The economic crisis of 2008 decreased job opportunities, especially for young unskilled workers in northern Mexico, increasing the availability of idle young men. Drug cartels recognize the economic need of most youth and offer a monetary reward in exchange for an "easy job, without risks."[53] In reality, even the supposedly elementary work of selling and transporting drugs that is typically given to new members involves great

[48]de Hoyos, Carlos, and Vicente, "Idle Youth in Mexico," 2.
[49]Rafael de Hoyos, Halsey Rogers, and Miguel Székely, *Out of School and Out of Work: Risk and Opportunities for Latin America's Ninis* (Washington DC: World Bank Group, January 2016), 1, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/22349.
[50]Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico*, 31.
[51]de Hoyos, Carlos, and Vicente, "Idle Youth in Mexico," 27.
[52]Courtney Farrell, *The Mexican Drug War*, Edina, Minnesota: EBSCO eBook Public Library Collection (North America), ABDO Publishing, (2012): 61.
[53]San Luis and Avendaño, "Impacto Del Narcotráfico En Jóvenes de Tamaulipas," 466.

risks, and risks such as being captured by security forces or getting assassinated by rival members only increase as the work given becomes more complicated over time. However, because of the economic crisis of 2008, *ninis* had fewer alternatives to involvement in the economic activities presented by the drug cartels, sending Mexico and its youth into a spiral of violence.[54]

The recruitment strategies of the drug cartels exploit the vulnerabilities that are frequently present in adolescents. Drug cartels use a progressive and systematic approach to gain a young person's trust, often using kids to recruit their peers.[55] Youth without fathers are particularly vulnerable because they are looking for a sense of belonging.[56] Drug cartels may recruit kids through drug use, an appeal to religious beliefs, or by offering a sense of belonging. In Brett and Specht's insightful monograph on factors that cause voluntary child soldiers throughout the globe, they found that young men may feel the need to protect and provide for their family or they may have the desire to be important members of their community. Brett and Specht describe a negative twist of identity in which armed groups encourage adolescents to strengthen their own identity by attacking what is different in others, making youth more susceptible to propaganda from armed groups.[57] Additionally, armed groups can have the appearance of invincibility that adolescents desire to have.[58] As adolescents undergo the journey into adulthood, elements such as identity, sense of belonging, and security have a powerful influence on their behavior.

Youth that come from contexts of poverty, abusive homes, and passive schools are especially vulnerable to drug cartel recruitment and related violence.[59] Lower-class youths are

[54]de Hoyos, Carlos, and Vicente, "Idle Youth in Mexico," 27.
[55]Stevenson, "In Mexico, Children as Young as 10 Recruited by Drug Cartels."
[56]Farrell, *The Mexican Drug War*, 61.
[57]Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers; Why They Choose to Fight*, 1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., (2004): 31.
[58] Ibid, 30.
[59]Stevenson, "In Mexico, Children as Young as 10 Recruited by Drug Cartels."

the most affected by murders carried out by the drug cartels[60] and street gangs consist of mostly marginalized, uneducated youth who are unable to read or drive a car.[61] For the most part, youth who become *ninis* do not intentionally choose that status, but grow up in poor, single-parent households or households of poorly educated teenage parents, causing disadvantages from birth.[62] It is true that the most stigmatized youth are from incredibly poor and deprived neighborhoods and that many of them are involved in organized crime. However, experts affirm that it is ignorant and harmful to assume that youth criminal behavior is simply due to their impulsive decisions and preference for *la vida loca* ("the wild life").[63] As youth search for identity and belonging in their communities, the problem of youth stigmatization by broader society only fuels the drivers for youth involvement in gangs. Importantly, the most impoverished youth are typically the victims, not the perpetrators of violence. The relationship between poverty and crime is complicated, involving individuals, the family, the community, and societal factors. The key to understanding the vulnerability of marginalized youth is the persistent, local presence of organized crime groups. The current generation of youth grew up in the Drug War; it is all they have ever known.[64]

Education Practices to Protect Youth

Research has demonstrated the importance of increasing student enrollment in schools in order to protect youth from criminal activities. Mexico has implemented several interventions to keep its youth in school, and particularly to prevent dropouts from lower to upper secondary school (middle to high school). The Progresa/Oportunidades program, for example, is world-

[60]Mora-Salas and Cortes, "Is There a New Youth Policy in Mexico?" 263.
[61]UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* 29.
[62]Eva Arceo-Gómez, "Becarios, Sí; Ninis, No," *Letras Libres,* February 1, 2018.
[63]Mora-Salas and Cortes, "Is There a New Youth Policy in Mexico?" 264.
[64]Castro-Pozo and Hernández, "Jóvenes Mexicanos," 50.

renowned for its success in increasing education rates and completion, especially among women.[65] Other programs have focused on deferred scholarships, merit scholarships, and drug-education to incentivize school completion and deter students from drug use and criminal activities. Although not all have been as successful as Progresa/Oportunidades, these programs represent past and current efforts to increase student enrollment and to reduce the number of *ninis* in Mexico. As explained previously, the organized, violent, and transnational nature of drug-related violence threatens the classroom beyond the decline of attendance rates. I contend that educators and drug policy experts must pay equal attention to what takes place inside the classroom for the students and teachers living in communities heavily impacted by cartel violence. Furthermore, youth themselves must have a voice in the conversation, as they are the most vulnerable group of individuals to Drug War violence.

The historical background of the War on Drugs and related violence in Mexico, along with its systematic victimization of youth, show the need for a creative response. Government policies and programs to increase student enrollment and school completion are necessary, but they cannot by themselves combat the cyclical aspects of the Drug War that persist through generations. Interventions in education must cooperate to maximize the positive impacts of increased student enrollment by developing students' self-regulatory skills and sense of identity. Schools offer a remarkable opportunity to equip young individuals to resist negative social pressures and to manage the psychological challenges caused by drug-related violence. Intricately involved in the physical violence of the Drug War is the psychological violence suffered by youth, which shapes youth perceptions about the Drug War and their place in it. Drug cartel recruiters will continue to take advantage of the vulnerabilities of disadvantaged

[65]de Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely, *Out of School and Out of Work*, 33.

youth unless youth are given resources for healthy development from a young age. What follows is a presentation of two types of educational interventions that address the psychological challenges of students in the classroom. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and self-regulation training are proactive educational interventions designed to ensure quality of education and to equip young individuals for long-term well-being.

Strengthening Youth Through Self-Regulation

Among several root causes for school dropouts among youth that policymakers must pay attention to, scholars mention a lack of motivation, compromised quality of education, and a tendency toward instant gratification of consumption and leisure.[66] These factors are important components of the self-regulatory skills that students must develop to be successful inside and outside of the classroom. Self-regulation includes self-regulated learning, emotion regulation, self-motivation, delay of gratification, and self-socialization. Self-regulated learning includes goal-setting skills such as effective goal setting, the use of appropriate strategies to reach the goal, and self-evaluation, all of which promote academic achievement.[67] The specific age period of adolescence is a critical turning point for the development of self-regulation, as adolescents experience growth in cognitive and social development. Young individuals begin to form adult-like self-regulation that prepares them to make well-informed decisions for interactions with their environment, especially in difficult circumstances. Adolescents develop an adaptive identity that enables them to establish future goals and plan steps to achieve them. Young people who face barriers in self-regulation development such as chronic stress, family and housing instability, and fewer resources have a lower probability of completing goals that have long-term

[66]de Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely, *Out of School and Out of Work,* 31.
[67]Megan McClelland et al., "Self-regulation," *Handbook of life course health development* (2018): 281.

consequences (such as graduating from high-school).[68] Conversely, research shows that interventions to build youths' self-regulation at one level enhance their self-regulation in other contexts.[69] For example, when youth learn self-regulated behaviors, they are likely to improve in social competence and mental well-being and be less prone to negative factors of development such as substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, depression, and anxiety.[70] Therefore, strengthening self-regulation for youth living in high-risk environments is particularly important, because youth with adaptive self-regulation skills are better equipped to cope with stressful life situations, less likely to be overwhelmed by difficulties, and more resilient.[71]

To encourage the healthy development of self-regulation in the young individuals of Mexico, the following are two examples of effective school-based interventions. Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras (Reaching Children Along the United States/Mexico Border) is a psychoeducational program designed to protect about 16,000 marginalized youth and their families along the United States/Mexico Border from the violence due to the Drug War.[72] Youth with a low self-esteem and from low socio-economic backgrounds are more susceptible to drug cartel recruitment and vulnerable to adult criminals who force their participation.[73] Therefore, this three-year program is designed to increase children and families' self-esteem and self-awareness through art therapy, somatic education, autogenic breathing, temperature control for stress relief, and music.[74] Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras aims to enhance children's cognitive and socio-emotional abilities to encourage a trajectory of productive lives instead of

[68]McClelland et al., "Self-regulation," 281, 283.
[69]McClelland et al., "Self-regulation," 284.
[70]McClelland et al., "Self-regulation," 281.
[71]McClelland et al., "Self-regulation," 282.
[72]Shari Shamsavari St. Martin, "Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras (Reaching Children Along the U.S./Mexico Border): A Program for Disadvantaged Children," *Biofeedback* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 66.
[73]St. Martin, "Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras," 66.
[74]St. Martin, "Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras," 66.

criminal activity. The program was influenced by the success of the Lomas project, which provided music education to children in a high-crime town (due to drug trafficking and gangs) and trained children in self-expression and self-awareness through art therapy, somatic education, and music education.[75] These interventions transformed the community by increasing children's academic and social performance. Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras represents the power of early intervention in the promotion of healthy adolescent development and presents promising practices for youth in middle schools.

A second educational intervention that can be implemented to enhance self-regulation among youth is the Shaking Hands Workshop proposed by Rodriguez-Pichardo and Medina. School violence was suffered by 23% of Mexican students in 2019, which is known to cause psychological damage, reduce academic achievement, and increase school dropouts.[76] Shaking Hands Workshop was born from an investigation of the relationship between academic achievement and personal protective factors against violence at the high school level, based on a sample of 4,822 Mexican high school students in Nuevo Leon state.[77] For male and female students in both private and public high schools, an increase in personal protective factors was significantly correlated with a decrease in school violence and improved academic achievement (for mathematics and language and communication).[78] The sixteen-week educational program builds personal protective factors through modules on emotional management (to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions), empathy (to develop positive networks

[75]St. Martin, "Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras," 67.
[76]Catalina Rodriguez-Pichardo and Mario Gonzalez Medina, "Relationship between Academic Achievement and Personal Protective Factors against School Violence," *BPA - Applied Psychology Bulletin (Bollettino Di Psicologia Applicata)*, no. 291 (May 2021): 38.
[77]Rodriguez-Pichardo and Medina, "Relationship between Academic Achievement and Personal Protective Factors against School Violence," 37.
[78]Rodriguez-Pichardo and Medina, "Relationship between Academic Achievement and Personal Protective Factors against School Violence," 40.

among peers), self-regulated learning for academic achievement, and decision-making systems (to identify irrational thoughts and adopt alternative thought patterns).[79] Shaking Hands Workshop is facilitated by a collaboration of parents, teachers, students, administrators, and tutors that are trained in positive psychology and that establish positive norms. By strengthening youths' self-regulation skills, Alcanzando Niños en las Fronteras and Shaking Hands Workshop create environments that enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Equipping Youth Through Cognitive Behavior Therapy

Congruent to the benefits of strengthening self-regulation among youth, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a similar type of intervention that is highly effective and flexible in its application. USAID's field study and systematic meta-review of 43 literature reviews, including over 1,400 studies, evaluated interventions that have been used to reduce community violence in the Americas (especially in the Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), the Caribbean, and Europe throughout 1990 to 2015.[80] Of the 30 strategies analyzed, the report determined that CBT is the most versatile and reliable intervention, with a 25% to 52% average decrease in recidivism (likelihood to reoffend).[81] CBT is designed to change youth offenders' deficient patterns of thinking of self-justification, misinterpretation of social cues, blame-shifting, immature moral reasoning, and schemas of dominance and entitlement, among others.[82] CBT assumes that deficient thought patterns in youth are not inherent but correctable through cognitive skills training, anger management, social skills components, moral development, and relapse prevention. Although CBT can exist on its own, it is more effective

[79]Rodriguez-Pichardo and Medina, "Relationship between Academic Achievement and Personal Protective Factors against School Violence," 46.
[80]Thomas Abt and Christopher Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle*, Bethesda, MD: Democracy International, Inc. for the U.S. Agency for International Development, (February 2016): 66.
[81]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 14.
[82]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 21.

when combined with other services such as educational programs.[83]

One exemplary intervention of CBT in youth education is the Becoming a Man (BAM) program in Chicago, which targets 7th through 10th graders during the academic year of public schools. Participants receive weekly group counseling and attend an after-school sports program that implements BAM principles of authentic youth engagement, rigorous CBT counseling, and "men's work."[84] During the time of the program, participants were 44% less likely to be arrested for violent crime, 36% less likely to be arrested for any other crime and were more engaged in school. Participants in grades 9 through 10 were 31% less likely to be arrested.[85] BAM works to reduce "automaticity" (the tendency to act impulsively) by helping youth slow down their thinking, recognize their automatic responses, and reflect on contextual appropriateness of their actions (such as in the after-school sports games). BAM confronts the common precursors to violence, especially anger, lack of respect, and conflict. CBT's role in the transformation of automatic responses is essential for youth in high-risk environments, as they may need to apply these cognitive, social, and emotional skills in everyday life.

Although the Becoming a Man program was applied for youth in the city of Chicago, CBT has been utilized successfully in diverse contexts, even in ones more challenging than the Northern Triangle.[86] The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program is a CBT-based intervention that resulted in a 20-50% reduction in crime and violence among 999 criminally engaged young men. STYL found the most significant transformation and long-term success in its young participants when they paired CBT intervention with $200 cash payments

[83]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 21.
[84]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 23.
[85]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 22.
[86]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 24.

for participation, because it increased time to practice and reinforced the training.[87] STYL participants were trained in emotion management and goal setting, and even changed their appearance by improving personal hygiene, haircuts, shaves, and fresh clothing. Finally, the program equipped young men to re-integrate into family and societal networks and into basic life activities such as shopping and banking.[88] The intervention of CBT for troubled youth in Liberia transformed their lives in many different aspects.

A study on the development of CBT across Latin America concluded that the adaptability of CBT transcends language, religion, customs, and moral values. The main challenge of CBT interventions is to continually reaffirm its veracity and to promote its utilization.[89] For example, in Uruguay, where alcohol is the main drug consumed by young individuals, CBT was applied to prevent alcohol abuse among youth. The outcomes of this intervention, which focused on identifying the main beliefs of high alcohol consumption among youth and offered workshops to re-orient these dysfunctional beliefs, demonstrated that CBT intervention is favorable in educational centers.[90] Whether the CBT intervention addresses youth in a Western city, a country North Africa, or Latin America, CBT has the potential to transform damaging thought patterns and to equip youth to develop healthy relationships with self and others. Because of the success and versatility of CBT across countries and in various types of programs, I perceive that implementing CBT in public schools in communities heavily impacted by organized crime may be a powerful avenue to redirect many youths' trajectories.

Challenges and Prospects in Educational Reform for Youth

[87]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 24.
[88]Abt and Winship, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence*, 24.
[89]Carmem Beatriz Neufeld, Karen Priscila Del Rio Szupszynski, Janaína Bianca Barletta, Fredy Alexander Romero, Guillermina Rutsztein, María Celeste Airaldi, Paul Ruiz, and Eduardo Keegan, "The Development of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Practice, Research, and Future Directions in Latin America," *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy* 14, no. 1 (2021): 243.
[90]Rutsztein, Airaldi, Ruiz, and Keegan, "The Development of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy," 243.

Thus far this study on the impact of the Drug War on Mexico's youth has examined educational interventions that address the vulnerabilities of youth, especially those that are relevant to adolescent development. Although these school-based interventions to deter youth recruitment show promising benefits, it is essential to consider the major challenges that remain for the education system due to organized crime. Among the thirty-five Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, Mexico ranks last in education. Students leave school with the lowest literacy rates, math, and science achievement with many falling short of the basic standards.[91] In addition to causing school closures and lower teacher attendance, teacher extortion by the drug cartels has increased fear among teachers and disincentivized the teaching profession. Since the reorganization of DTOs and the intensification of conflict that began in 2006, cartel groups have tripled their use of teacher extortion as a method to instill fear and demonstrate control over the education system.[92] Government efforts for reform are undermined by corruption within the Mexican teachers' union (SNTE),[93] and at the same time the government continues to cut budgets for education and for the means to carry out its reforms.[94] Among these many challenges is the proliferation of drug cartel propaganda, which aims to control youths' perceptions of drugs and cartel activities.

Drug Cartel Propaganda to Recruit Youth

Mexican drug cartels employ various methods to intimidate communities and to shape youths' perceptions about drugs and cartel culture. After the government instituted more

[91]Nina Lakhani, "'The help never lasts': why has Mexico's education revolution failed?" *The Guardian*, August 15, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/aug/15/the-help-never-lasts-why-has-mexicos-education-revolution-failed.
[92]Elisabeth Malkin, "As Gangs Move In on Mexico's Schools, Teachers Say 'Enough,'" *New York Times*, September 25, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/26/world/americas/mexican-teachers-push-back-against-gangs-extortion-attempts.html.
[93] Lakhani, "'The help never lasts.'"
[94]Carrie Kahn, "A Mexican Teachers' Strike Turns Deadly," *NPR*, July 9, 2016, https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/07/09/485274389/a-mexican-teachers-strike-turns-deadly.

aggressive policies toward drug cartels, cartel groups quickly developed advanced capabilities of intelligence, extortion, and propaganda.[95] In recent years, cartels in Mexico have promoted a media genre known as Cartel Tiktok to portray an idealized lifestyle of power and extravagance. Videos of fancy cars, police chases, piles of cash, fields of poppies, and semiautomatic weapons have generated hundreds of thousands of views.[96] This type of propaganda targets youth from marginalized backgrounds, who may consider work in the cartels their only practical escape from poverty. While propaganda targeting teen Tiktokers is fairly new, online portrayals of cartel power and an illustrious cartel lifestyle have permeated many media platforms since Mexico's militarization against the drug cartels.[97] Research shows how the news media has reinforced cartel propaganda by paying more attention to the fashion statements of the drug trafficker than the heinous crimes they committed.[98] By promoting a style of dress and receiving fame from the media, drug traffickers are able to transform a criminal to a public figure and a negative story to a normalized event.[99] Through the media, cartels have successfully conveyed their message to youth about why they should become like them.[100] Clearly, the ostentatious presentation of narcotic riches and glorified cartel members disguise a devastating reality of soaring homicides and reveal a manipulative attempt to lure in young individuals seeking financial security and belonging.

Though there is little research about the dissemination of drug cartel propaganda within the education system, it is evident that the Mexican drug cartels are attempting to educate society, especially young individuals, through other means. The pattern of youth involvement in

[95]America Y. Guevara, "Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 3 (2013): 132.
[96]Oscar Lopez, "Guns, Drugs and Viral Content: Welcome to Cartel TikTok," *New York Times*, November 28, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/world/americas/mexico-drugs-cartel-tiktok.html.
[97]Lopez, "Guns, Drugs and Viral Content."
[98]Guevara, "Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War," 144.
[99]Guevara, "Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War," 144.
[100]Guevara, "Propaganda in Mexico's Drug War," 144.

organized crime throughout the world suggests that education can be used to shape the values and attitudes of students, which means that education itself could be manipulated to socialize or politicize youth toward certain groups.[101] Therefore, it is critical to consider the consequences of drug cartel propaganda on the education system and even the potential use of education as propaganda. The school itself can be a push or pull factor.[102] Through their international research, Brett and Specht determined that it is important to consider the point of view of education from the youth and groups in society, who may consider education to be empowering or dangerous. There are two specific educational programs for youth that employ effective strategies to combat cartel propaganda and to value the youth perspective on substance abuse and drug trafficking organizations.

Youth Education Programs to Combat Propaganda

As part of the Los Angeles-based Foundation for a Drug Free World, Salomon and Lucy Dabbah of Mexico City lead the Truth About Drugs program in Mexico. Rather than using lectures or fear tactics to dissuade youth from substance abuse, Truth About Drugs simply provides youth with straightforward information about the harmful short-term and long-term effects of the most common drugs.[103] As youth are confronted with audiovisual materials (such as documentaries of young former drug users) and printed booklets that present the hard facts about the most common drugs, they are empowered to make decisions based on the truth about drugs rather than the deceptive propaganda of the drug cartels. In 2011 the program began to work with Mexico City's School Safety Unit, in which eighty School Safety officers were sent to

[101]Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers; Why They Choose to Fight*, 15.
[102]Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers; Why They Choose to Fight*, 15.
[103]"Foundation for a Drug Free World: Find Out the Truth About Drugs," Foundation for a Drug Free World, accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.drugfreeworld.org/about-us/about-the-foundation.html. Also see Maite Ballesteros, "Drug Education for Kids Can Stop Mexico's Drug War," *Freedom Magazine* 46, no. 3 (September 22, 2014): https://www.freedommag.org/issue/201410-created-equal/world/drug-education-kids-stop-mexico-drug-war.html.

distribute and present Truth About Drugs materials to students in middle schools and high schools.[104] Truth About Drugs partnered with the Mexico Ministry of Health in 2014 to schedule drug prevention activities in schools throughout Mexico.[105] This straight-forward type of drug education, which uses multimedia resources and presents high-impact stories of youth themselves, weakens the appeal of the drug cartels toward youth and thereby decreases the available workforce for the cartels.[106]

A second effective strategy to disempower cartel propaganda and protect youth is Catalyst, a comprehensive drug-education program for high school students and teachers living in communities affected by the War on Drugs.[107] As the most vulnerable group to cartel recruitment, marginalized youth are the most affected by harmful drug policies that claim to protect them. Therefore, Catalyst bridges education and drug policy by gathering together marginalized youth from several countries affected by the War on Drugs (including Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and the United States) and placing them at the center of the conversation. In contrast to both traditional and progressive drug education programs, Catalyst encourages youth to consider the broader social and political aspects of drugs, throughout a year-long curriculum and an in-person three-week summer course in Mexico.[108] The Catalyst program guides youth to explore individual questions of personal identity related to the Drug War and effects of drugs on the body as well as broader questions of how the movement of drugs, people, money, and guns affect a community, country, and even

[104]Ballesteros, "Drug Education for Kids Can Stop Mexico's Drug War."
[105]Ballesteros, "Drug Education for Kids Can Stop Mexico's Drug War."
[106]Ballesteros, "Drug Education for Kids Can Stop Mexico's Drug War."
[107]"Replanteando Las Américas," *CATALYST*, accessed December 8, 2022, https://www.catalyst-catalizador.org/catalyst-replanteando-las-americas.
[108]Theo Di Castri, "Catalyst: Expanding Harm-Reduction Education and Youth Participation in the Context of the War on Drugs," *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 6, no. 1 (October 1, 2020): 178.

continent.[109] From each years' cohort of young participants, a few alumni are selected to join the following years' cohort, establishing a strong youth voice and community. Whereas Truth About Drugs utilizes truthful information to educate and empower youth, Catalyst is an intentionally immersive program that builds a sense of belonging among youth and a source of accountability for taking meaningful actions against the injustice of the Drug War. Both programs are proactive in preventing youth victimization and recruitment into drug cartels and require the participation of youth, teachers and administrators, family, and community.

Conclusion

The tragedies of the Mexican Drug War, the increasing power and violence of drug trafficking organizations, and their systematic victimization of the youth population is an incredibly complex and urgent issue for Mexico. Though several notable weaknesses in the Mexican education system reveal significant challenges for reform, this study presented several examples of tangible steps that educators, policymakers, and the everyday citizen of Mexico can take to protect young individuals. School-based programs must equip youth with self-regulation skills, cognitive-behavioral training, and the ability to think critically about the global impact of drug trafficking. Youth themselves must be given meaningful opportunities to learn about drugs, DTOs, and the Drug War, and be empowered to respond to these global challenges in their local communities. Due to its high ratio of working-age citizens to seniors, Mexico and the region of Latin America is experiencing an incredible 20-year window of developmental opportunity (from 2015 to 2035).[110] If Mexico fails to provide the growing youth population with adequate human capital and labor market opportunities, there may be "irreversible damage to productivity

[109]Di Castri, "Catalyst," 184.
[110]de Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely, *Out of School and Out of Work*, 6-7. A low dependency ratio historically encourages economic growth and Mexico can take advantage of this by providing high-quality education and job opportunities.

and long-term growth" for Mexico.[111] Providing educational opportunities is a foundational step for the well-being of Mexico's youth, especially opportunities that target youth vulnerabilities and marginalized communities. However, the transformation of Mexico's society cannot be isolated to a single population group nor solved by a single institution such as education. Domestic violence, marital problems, and societal discrimination are examples of other social factors that cause instability for young people, causing them to look for alternative sources of social support.[112] Therefore educators, policymakers, and communities must implement diverse interventions in order to protect one generation of youth at a time.

[111]de Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely, *Out of School and Out of Work*, 7.
[112]Calderón et al, *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico*, 45.

Abbreviations

BAM	Becoming a Man program
CBT	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
DTO	Drug Trafficking Organization
TCO	Transnational Criminal Organization
STYL	Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia

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