Escaping Precariousness: Criminal Occupational Mobility of Homicide Inmates During the Mexican Drug War

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ABSTRACT

One of the main inquiry topics within crime and conflict studies is how inequalities or poverty fosters or deters participation in organised violence. Since the late 1990s, the increase in violence in Latin America has boosted the use of Global North criminology and conflict studies to explain this phenomenon. Although helpful, the question about the link between inequality and violence remains elusive. Instead, this research uses occupational mobility and life course approaches to analyse the latest Mexican inmate survey data. With this data, we can understand the factors behind youth recruitment into violent criminal organisations during the current drug war. The main findings point to youth transitions from school and low-skilled manual employment towards criminal violent activities as an option out of work precariousness. This research proposes researching transitions to organised violence as an occupational choice in market economies and post-conflict settlements as a possible causal mechanism that explains inequalities and violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Some consensus exists around the importance effect of certain forms of socioeconomic deprivation (i.e., inequality, poverty, racial discrimination, or urban disorganisation) to explain organised violence recurrence. However, the most compelling explanation of the nexus between participation in violent crime or conflict remains elusive. Furthermore, scholars have used traditional criminological discussions about violent crime in the United States and Europe and conflict studies about civil wars in Africa to explain the current violence trends in Latin America (Kalyvas 2015). In some cases, it sheds light on several trends. However, in others, it brings contentious discussions to a different region where these approaches were not meant to be explained.

Consequently, there is a need for a careful adaptation process, seeking a more parsimonious approach to close the gaps between conflict studies, criminology, and development inquiry. With this goal, I adopt a social occupational mobility approach. Rather than discuss variables and competing theories, it is important to situate these within Latin American violence and developmental processes. Mainly, there is an ongoing debate about how inequalities affect the region with the most registered homicides worldwide since the late 1990s. We need a new view integrating convergences to study findings, adapt theory, and formulate regional policies.

Latin American scholars have produced significant research about criminal violence in the region, emphasising the role of the democratisation process, state formation, and security policy (Duran Martinez 2017). However, this article will focus on the research addressing socioeconomic factors. Furthermore, rather than compare countries, this article will craft new lenses in the nexus of crime, conflict, and development by using the data obtained from Mexican Drug War homicide inmates. The primary purpose is to use in-depth case study data as an example of how socioeconomic factors shape a criminal war in Latin America. Particularly, to study why these trends are behind the recruitment of young men into violent criminal organisations. The newly issued Inmate Survey (ENPOL in Spanish) by the National Institute of Statistics in Mexico (INEGI in Spanish) is a remarkable tool for understanding the nexus mentioned above, because it contains an extensive questionnaire on socioeconomic processes that this research addresses. Most of the previous research on the region has been performed using aggregated national data rather than understanding the profile of the perpetrators of violence.

Moreover, the Mexican Drug War case effectively showcases the conceptual transposition of Global North research addressed here. Notably, with this data regarding homicide inmates, we can craft a more detailed profile of violence perpetrators in Mexico beyond fixed Global North categories, such as Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) youth used by international organisations (Furlong 2006). In this article, I defend that those male youth in work precariousness are the most commonly recruited as perpetrators of violence because criminal markets are one of their occupational choices to attain social mobility beyond poverty.

This article is organised in the following order. First, a literature review addresses the conceptual transposition of conflict studies and criminology to study the recent violence trends in Latin America. Second, I summarise the previous research on the Mexican case and its relevance for Latin America. Third, I propose a social mobility perspective on violent crime and conflict as a causal mechanism behind youth recruitment in criminal organisations. Fourth, I summarise the methods used and data trends from ENPOL. Fifth, I interpret the results from a binomial logit regression with the most relevant socioeconomic variables from a life-course perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The nexus between organised violence and many forms of deprivation remains elusive because of two main issues: first, there are too many proxy variables to measure the relationship between socioeconomic deprivation, inequalities, and violence (Dixon 2009); second, each implies different causal mechanisms that are not entirely adaptable to every context in which they are being used. This section discusses these two problems and proposes a different angle of analysis: understanding these competing theories within an occupational mobility approach.

There are parallel convergences about inequalities and violence between the field of conflict studies (i.e., war studies, conflict, or peace studies) and criminology (i.e., deviance sociology). Overall, the debate about socioeconomic factors in conflict studies points to income inequality,

racial discrimination, poverty, unemployment, stress, and large youth bulges as essential drivers behind civil wars' onset, duration, and characteristics (Urdal 2006; Stewart 2008). In the criminology debate, these scholars posed variables similar to those mentioned in conflict studies, but mainly in countries where the state could not be challenged by political violence and with other sources of information such as georeferenced urban homicide data (Sampson & Groves 1989; Agnew 1992; Messner, Thome & Rosenfeld 2008). Nonetheless, scholars like Malešević (2010) argue that this is not a simple coincidence but a reinterpretation of the leading sociological and economics theories.

Nonetheless, criminal wars in Latin America (Lessing 2017) challenge both literatures, because we have cases of extensive organised violence, such as civil wars, but mainly motivated by private profit and drug trafficking in countries with relatively weak but semi-functional states. Therefore, understandably, conflict studies and criminology research echo with Latin America. However, the transposition of this literature to this region has proved complicated because the basic assumptions of these theories are based on the Global North context (Pereda 2022) in which they were formulated.

For example, early mafia approaches depended on rational choice assumptions that violence is costly and usually avoided (Gambetta 1996). In addition, some civil wars in Africa or Eastern Europe are cases where state weakness is so chronic that we see constant violent replacement of countries' elites by revolts and military coups. In the meantime, criminal violence requires semi-functional states to operate (Flom 2022). In addition, these organisations are not looking to replace the government elites but to thwart their capacities using corruption (Trejo & Ley 2020).

CONVERGENCES ON DEPRIVATION: THE DEBATE ABOUT LATIN AMERICA AND MEXICO

Consequently, understanding deprivation and its role in organised criminal violence in Latin America requires acknowledging the state's role and regional inequalities. The case of Mexico brings light into this discussion, because there has been an extensive debate on how the abovementioned variables have interacted with homicide rates. This review is not an extensive account of all research about Latin American violence but only the section that discusses inequalities from a quantitative point of view. For an extensive review, read Vilalta (2020).

Economists have found a correlation between violent crime and income inequality in recent years. Bourguignon (1999) found that this correlation becomes more substantial during economic crises. Similarly, Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza (2002) studied crime rates in 39 countries over several decades and found a correlation with the Gini Index that measures income inequality. On the contrary, Neumayer (2005) argued that this was a spurious correlation due to cultural differences and argued instead that the transition to democracy is the moment when there are increases in homicide rates.

In a recent critique of previous studies on armed conflict, Cederman and colleagues (2013) argued that scholars relied too much on the cross-country comparison of homicide rates for civil wars. Moreover, when studies were performed with different geographical levels of aggregation, inequality and violence were correlated. These findings are similar to those of criminologists in the United States regarding the correlation between homicides, income, and neighbourhood disparities.

Scholars have tested this debate for Latin America. First, Soares and Naritomi (2010) argued that inequality correlates to crime when weak social protection regimes exist. Second, Rivera (2016) compared homicide rates using conflict and criminology approaches and found that youth bulges and entering into post-civil war status correlate with high homicide rates. This is also the argument of Yashar (2018) for Central American homicide rates. Third, Bergman (2018) argues that rapid growth in the region is culpable for increasing crime rates rather than inequality. Thus, as we can see in the broader debate about inequality and violence worldwide, there is no agreement on Latin America.

Even further, there is a contested debate about the socioeconomic factors behind the homicide rise in Mexico since 2006, when Mexican president Felipe Calderón deployed the army against drug trafficking organisations. To review the broader debate beyond inequalities, read Zepeda (2018).

On the Mexican case, reseachers such as Enamorado and colleagues (2016) have found a correlation between income inequality, measured with the Gini Index, and homicide rates on municipal levels paired with low schooling and the effects of the 2008 financial crisis. However, Vilalta and colleagues (2023) used the same data and found results in the opposite direction. Corona and colleagues (2022) used data on state-level aggregation. They posited that low school achievement and youth unemployment were correlated with homicide rates. It is clear, therefore, that there is no consensus. Interestingly, the rise of vigilantes against drug trafficking organisations is correlated with high inequality (Phillips 2017).

Beyond these factors, other socioeconomic variables have been proposed. Ayala and Merino (2012) and De Hoyos and colleagues (2016) suggested that a large share of NEET youth was correlated with homicide rates on the northern border. Also, Ingram (2014) and Gleditsch and colleagues (2022) found that increasing schooling reduced homicide rates, and vice versa; lower education rates fostered violence. Also, there seems to be no correlation between poverty and high homicide rates, including in the case of states like Yucatán (Mattiace & Ley 2022).

As this research argues, the problem with the previous discussions is that it is widely focused on the causal direction between socioeconomic deprivation, inequalities, or other social policy, but not enough on the causal mechanisms and violence perpetrators. This diversity of explanations requires studying other forms used to link deprivation, choices, inequalities, and life trajectories in sociology based on work precariousness or poverty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: OCCUPATIONAL CHOICE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Gurr (2015) argued that individuals participating in collective violence are frustrated because they cannot achieve their valued life standards. Therefore, these individuals direct their frustration towards wealthier groups in society. Strains scholars reached a similar conclusion regarding participation in criminal violence: instead of politically directing that frustration, they commit crimes to extract wealth. I coincide with these positions and take a step forward: crime is a work occupation that satisfies this frustration. In other words, criminal violence is a labour market, and killing for revenue is a way to attain social mobility and close this frustration gap. Nonetheless, the particular frustration that individuals participating in criminal violence in Latin America are facing and seeking to avoid is work precariousness or poverty.

Some researchers have also pointed out that violence is labour because it is physically and emotionally extractive, is like soldiering or policing, is based on organisational and entrepreneurial activities, and entails wage-salary relations (Hoffman 2011; Atkinson-Sheppard 2023). Consequently, killing in organisational settings, based on profit, has distinctive characteristics as an occupational activity. I argue that, for criminal violence, the underlying ideology behind this type of activity is capitalist motivation to attain higher social mobility at all costs (Evans 2007), including risky or immoral work such as killing.

They are killing as an occupation in the illicit labour market of criminal protection. The demand side of this labour comes from criminal entrepreneurs. When high violence is deployed against them by other organisations or the state, they must recruit more members to counterbalance forces in battle (Andreas & Wallman 2009). From a political economy of war perspective, the workforce becomes a labour commodity in the conflict. The supply side of this labour market is the usually deprived young boys in the areas where these organisations are present. In other words, this is a labour-matching process (Sørensen & Kalleberg 2019).

As Collins (2008) argued, most young deprived men do not choose to participate in crime and violence. In addition, gangs or criminal organisations do not grow *ad infinitum* (Densley 2015). Therefore, as discussed in the literature about youth, their socioeconomic conditions are just part of the landscape of critical life junctures in which they make choices (MacDonald 2006). Young men face bounded choices pre-determined by their circumstances (Evans & Furlong 2019). They make these choices while living or learning about work precariousness and poverty, before transitioning from school to employment. This is the same for labour and educational choices to attain social mobility (Breen & Jonsson 2005): with resources, facing hectic life circumstances, and socialising with other young boys in crime, these young men join criminal organisations to attain higher salaries and prestige.

Therefore, two sequential events form the stock of young men that criminal organisations can recruit. The first is their segmentation by the labour markets into low-skilled and low-salary occupations. Torche (2014) argued that social mobility in Latin America has been stagnant, and inequality has risen because there are large shares of the young population without access to education. Growth has not created enough skilled employment for them. Therefore, this stock of young, deprived men accumulates over time because of low intergenerational social mobility. The second event is the onset of a criminal war. This event demands young men be brought into the ranks of criminal organisations. In other words, a conflict creates a new labour market option for them that promises high salaries without education credentials. The labour-matching process between the supply and demand of workforce for criminal organisations that researchers have found in the process of recruitment by violence entrepreneurs includes socialisation by peers (Chomczyński & Guy 2021), affluence cultural influences (Chávez 2020), and the formation of desirable masculine breadwinners' identities (García 2022).

Occupational choice theory and life course perspective (Torche 2015; Elder 1998) consider that during a lifetime or between generations, individuals choose to move from one occupation to another. Upward occupational social mobility involves changing from low-skilled manual labour occupations to others attached to higher salaries (Heckman & Mosso 2014). In criminal violence, killing is a highly skilled occupation that entails learning tactics and using machinery (weapons) to protect other organisations—this occupation in the legal world is known as protection services. Protection services also range from policing to the military and the services of private guards. The critical difference is the legality of the employer and of the use of force. Nonetheless, whether legal or not, both are forms of subordinate employment; their labour is a commodity in the market, and those skills can be used freelance. In the end, as with any other occupation, it is paid subordinate labour.

For this research, homicide inmates during the drug war—as the best approximation to a hit man for drug cartels—decided to join this violent occupation. Their sociodemographic profiles help explain the commonality and complexity of research about inequalities and deprivation with organised violence. The profile I will show in the following sections portrays young men's vulnerability before participating in criminal markets.

REVISITING THE PROFILE OF THE MEXICAN DRUG WAR PERPETRATORS

The previous research about Latin America and Mexico is based on the study of homicide rates. This essay argues that this data, although helpful, is limited for two main reasons. First, there is an underlying assumption that homicide victims were also perpetrators. Death certificates or judicial cases of homicides provided by authorities do not offer such information, however. Therefore, all studies about violence in Mexico are approximations. Second, even if we assume homicide victims were also perpetrators of violence, the data on death certificates is limited. So far, we know the age, gender, location of the death, place of birth, affiliation to health services, and employment. Therefore, studies about violence in Mexico rely on other aggregated data of socioeconomic indicators of the locality where the homicide happened. Some studies might suffer from ecological fallacy with respect to the profile of perpetrators of violence (Idrovo 2011).

Therefore, it is essential to study available data on homicide perpetrators. Data scarcity is a usual problem for researchers on crime and conflict. Most studies were published before the issuing of the inmate survey ENPOL by INEGI in 2021. With this survey, we can test the limits of previous literature and open new research on variables not studied before, mainly because we have a better approximation to a more likely group of perpetrators of violence with data from socioeconomic interviews with inmates sentenced for homicide. This also allows for studying occupational variables. Although it would be preferable to study longitudinal data as other studies (Thornberry et al. 2003), that data type is unavailable for Mexico.

Due to the inability of ecological studies of homicide rates to elucidate if the NEET condition, poverty, or other forms of inequality are valid to explain this phenomenon, I chose a life-course approach. There are two additional justifications behind this decision. The practical one is that INEGI (2021) produced ENPOL with an extensive sociodemographic questionnaire that obtained data from a sample representative of all inmates in Mexico. This data allows us to

study events, socioeconomic markers, and control by other criminal justice factors, considering that crime involvement is a career and an occupation. An additional justification is that inmate surveys allow us to look at transitions toward crime offending (Pyrooz et al. 2020).

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON THE YOUTH LABOUR MARKET OF VIOLENCE PERPETRATORS

First, I will compare homicide victims and homicide inmates to understand relevant commonalities and diversity so as to assess previous research findings on the Mexican case. Figure 1 charts homicides in Mexico from 2006 to 2022, showing the overall total and some shares based on standard indicators: age, gender, school achievement, and employment. On average, the majority were men (89%), with less than nine years of schooling (70%), between 10 and 35 years old (52%), and had a registered employment 72%). Table 1 shows a coincidence with the sociodemographic profile of homicide inmates in Mexico shown in ENPOL: 71% of homicide inmates in 2021 had less than nine years of schooling. However, the profile of homicide inmates skews towards more male (94.8%), more in the 10 to 35 years old cohort (74.47%), and more reported having employment before their capture (91%). Thus, studies about violence in Mexico before ENPOL probably overestimated the role of unemployment and age but rightly identified the crucial role of education rates.
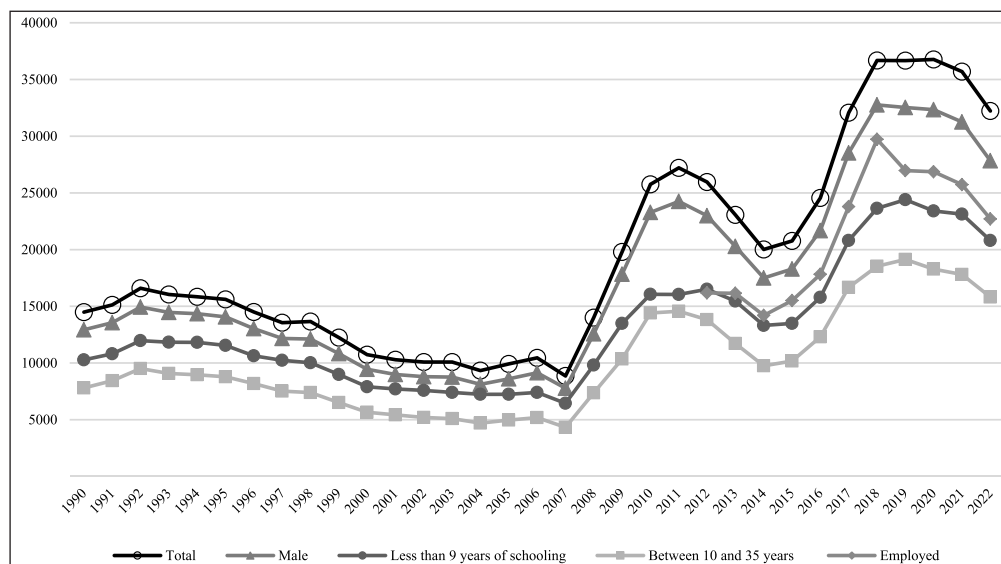
Figure 1 Homicides in Mexico by sociodemographic categories from 1990 to 2022.

Source: INEGI, Homicide statistics. Note: Infanticide (homicide of minors of 10 years) has excluded.

| THE INMATE WAS OR HAD …	TOTAL AND PERCENTAGES
Total:	29, 411
under 29 years old when detained	52.2%
male	94.8%
a parent	61.3%
single	54.7%
parents with criminal records (parents)	5.1%
been abused by parents (abuse)	19%
left school because of bullying (bullying)	19.2%
been in prison before (prison)	13.3%
previous experience working in police or military forces (military)	9.6%
not enough income to eat (poverty)	90.7%
income lower than the higher income bracket (income)	79.5%
left school because of the need to work (work dropout)	**54.8%**

Table 1 Frequencies of variables of interest regarding the homicide inmate population in ENPOL 2021 captured after the onset of the Mexican Drug War in 2006.

Source: INEGI, ENPOL 2021.

(Contd.)

| THE INMATE WAS OR HAD …	TOTAL AND PERCENTAGES
left school to support family members (family dropout)	0.5%
less than nine years of schooling (low schooling)	**66.8%**
living in a female-led household (single mother)	13.3%
born in a southern state (southerner)	19.7%
born in a northern border state (northerner)	25.5%
was unemployed and not in school (NEET)	**5.27%**
was employed (employed)	**93.6%**
a farmer or a manual worker (worker)	70.7%
an Indigenous language speaker (indigenous)	5.7%
darker skin colour than the average population in Mexico (dark skin)	57.1%
a lawyer present when he was presented to the prosecutor (lawyer)	19.7%
tortured by police or prosecutors while detained (torture)	39.7%
received threats to declare himself guilty (threats)	50.2%
regular alcohol consumption (alcohol)	82.5%
regular drug consumption, except alcohol (drugs)	59.3%

Education and age are vital markers that identify the stratified labour market in Mexico. Figure 2 exemplifies this by showing the median income of Mexico's general and youth population in 2006 when the drug war began. Essentially, having less than nine years of schooling (in the Mexican education system that is secondary level) allows the young population (under 29 years old) to earn salaries above extreme poverty but close to poverty. This data provided one of the primary intuitions in the reviewed literature. There is a critical income inequality intersected by school achievement and age cohort. Regarding poverty, this data shows that even if the majority of youth in Mexico do not live in poverty, they are close to that situation.
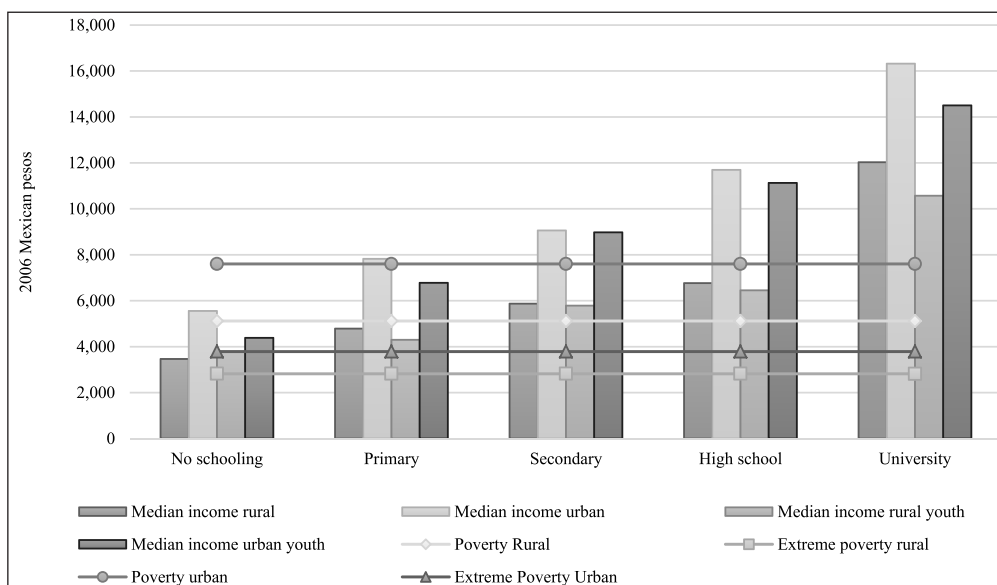
Figure 2 Monthly salaries in 2006 by age group and education achievement.

Source: National Household Income and Expenditure Survey (ENIGH in Spanish), INEGI.

Research has shown a strong correlation between low-skilled and informal employment with lower salaries in Mexico (Solís 2018). To show this, researchers have used the EGP Class Schema to compare occupational classes in Latin America (Solís et al. 2019). For the present research, I applied this schema to homicide victims and homicide inmates. As shown in Figure 3, both samples are highly skewed towards manual, informal, agricultural, and routine occupational classes. The main difference between the two sources is informality, which can be measured with homicide victims because we have social security affiliation data and we do not have employment information of all homicide victims.

Two insights come from this data. First, again, it seems there is an overemphasis on unemployment in the literature for Mexico. Second, most homicide inmates transitioned from informal, low-skilled, precarious manual labour to criminal involvement. Thus, we can assume that data of homicide inmates and homicide victims do not back up the theory of Mexican male marginalised youth transitioning from NEET idleness towards criminal activity. These data figures show that some previous studies had ecological fallacy assumptions. Furthermore, we can see that instead of focusing on the axis of unemployment–poverty, precarious employment has a more analytical potential for the Mexican case.
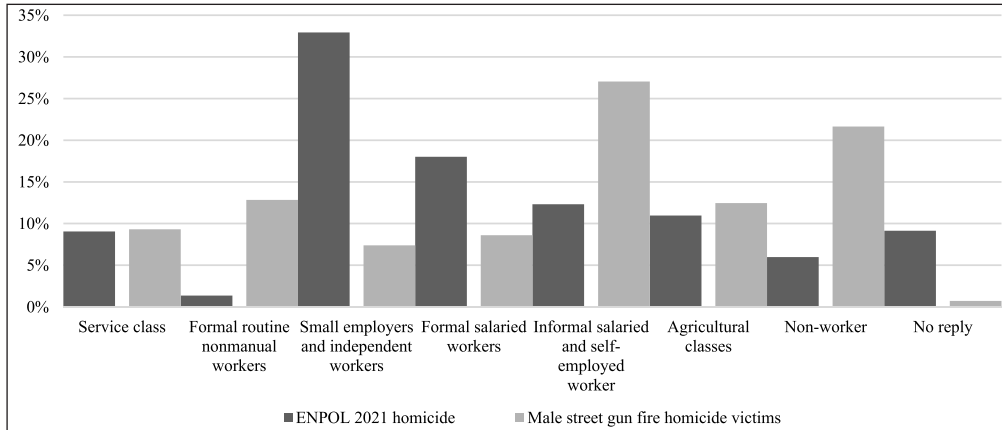
Regarding age, as can be noticed in Figure 4, the age of the victims begins to increase from 13 and peaks around 25 years old, then gradually decreases. This trend concurs with the broad evidence accumulated in the United States and Europe about the age of onset and decline of criminal activity. There are at least three explanations regarding youth and crime. First, like any other career, crime begins young and does not require schooling (Piquero et al. 2003). Second, biosocial research shows that some men develop personalities prone to risk at a young age in their emotional maturation period (Loeber & Le Blanc 1990). Third, weakening controls (school, family, and religion) at a critical age increases the propensity to crime (Sampson & Laub 1995). All theories complement the life-course development framework: some events are relevant in critical ages and transitions.
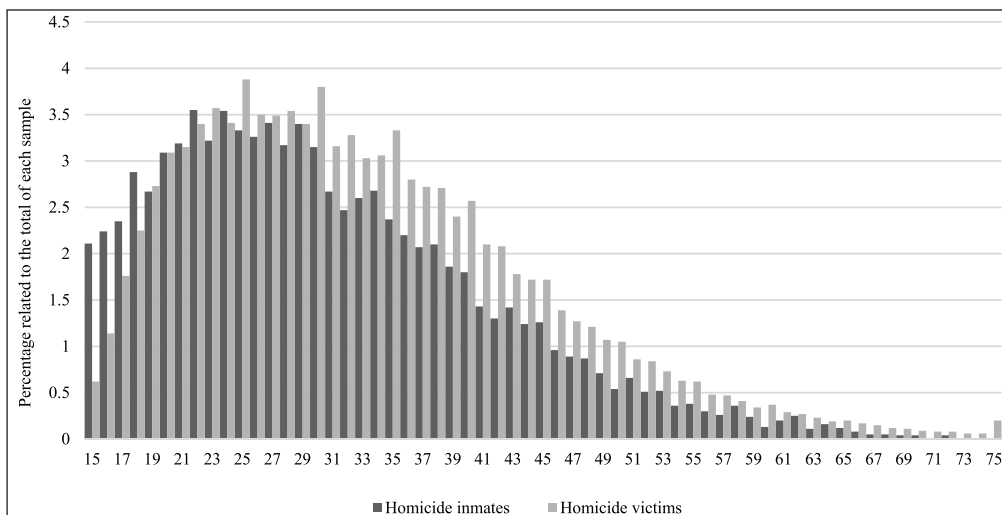
DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE OF HOMICIDE INMATES AFTER THE WAR ON DRUGS

Now, I comment the homicide inmate's data on Table 1. The profile of the majority is male, declared having not enough income to buy food at some point in their life, having an income lower than the highest income bracket (over 11,000 Mexican pesos) of those who declared in the survey, had employment as farmers or manual workers, and had regular alcoholic consumption. Subsequently, more than half were under 29 years old when they were detained, were single parents, left school because they needed to work, had less than nine years of schooling, had darker skin tones than the general population, and consumed drugs. Less than

half were in prison before, or had parents who were in prison, were abused by their parents, lived in a mother-only household, and were born either in the northern or southern states. Finally, the less represented in the survey were NEET, indigenous language speakers, and those who left school to support their parents or had experience working in the military or the police. Inmate data portrays a different profile than what the literature for the Mexican case has shown so far. This profile is not unique and steady but trends incrementally towards socioeconomic marginalisation and precarious work.

METHODS

The previous data crafts a more detailed profile of homicide perpetrators in the context of the Mexican Drug War. Rather than interpreting this profile as a fixed marker of criminal propensity, it must be read as a picture of the conditions homicide inmates face before transitioning to the criminal labour market.

With that purpose, I performed binomial categorical logistic regression for the probability of being sentenced for homicide as an approximation (Britt & Weisburg 2010). These variables must be interpreted as covariates. All variables were codified as 1 or 0 if they matched with the condition of the variable. The interpretation of results shows how much the probability of being sentenced for homicide varies among all inmates. This distinction is essential because all inmates share similar sociodemographic characteristics. For example, inmates with less than nine years of schooling are predominantly male. The binomial logistical model is used in criminology for inmate surveys and other survey crime data. Recently, studies with surveys about gang members and other criminal inmates have shown similar results (Mitchell et al. 2022).

I will show data before and after the Mexican Drug War onset in 2006. As reviewed above, research on the Mexican case shows that some socioeconomic indicators became relevant after this year or after the 2008 financial crisis (Ayala and Merino 2012; Enamorado and colleagues 2016). Finally, I will perform some models excluding employment and schooling to test NEET youth as a category. I will use two youth cohorts: the UN youth definition below 24 years and the OECD definition under 29 years as two ways to represent segmented labour markets. I present the significance of the results calculated by marginal effects because it is more understandable to present the effects rather than odd ratios (Long & Mustillo 2021).

DATA AND LIMITATIONS

I control for several variables available on the ENPOL database that are also reported in the literature about violent crime. From the criminal career paradigm, I included gender, parental influence, previous criminal records, school bullying, and experience working in the police or the military (Piquero et al. 2003). From the social disorganisation and control theories, I included poverty, low income, school dropout, female-led households, birth in some areas of Mexico, and employment. To control judicial system biases, I included darker skin than the average population, indigenous affiliation measured by speaking a non-dominant language, presence of a lawyer, torture, and threats by authorities (Magaloni & Rodriguez 2020). Finally, from a sociobiological perspective, I included the consumption of alcohol and drugs (Vaughn, Salas & Reingle 2018). Table 2 shows the percentages of those variables for homicide inmates after the onset of the Mexican Drug War.

ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

Two robustness checks are usually done for logit models. First is the likelihood ratio chi-square test to revise goodness to fit that is 0.0 that the model predictors converge after multiple iterations, which is the case of this model (Britt & Weisburd 2010). In addition, the probability of multicollinearity is possible. A Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test is performed, and all variables must be under 5.0 (Daoud 2017). For this model, all variables showed a VIF under 2.0. The model testing is provided with the replication data annexed to the paper.

RESULTS

The results of the logistic binomial regressions in marginal are shown in Table 2. Paired with the descriptive data in Table 1, we notice that NEET is not a valuable categorisation for homicide inmates. Separately, low schooling, experiences of unemployment, and school dropout perform better in the modelling. In some models, unemployment reduces the probability of being sentenced for homicide. In addition, both tables show a case for those inmates who reported having a manual, farm, or armed employment before incarceration. Therefore, instead of the NEET conditions, we can see that most homicide inmates who experienced poverty transitioned from precarious employment towards illicit violent crime.

(1 FOR THOSE WHO REPLIED) THE INMATE WAS OR HAD …	ALL INMATES	NEET, SCHOOLING, AND EMPLOYMENT				JUST NEET			
		BEFORE 2006		AFTER 2006		BEFORE 2006		AFTER 2006	
		UN YOUTH	OECD YOUTH	UN YOUTH	OECD YOUTH	UN YOUTH	OECD YOUTH	UN YOUTH	OECD YOUTH
NEET	0.0006	0.003	–0.001	–0.003	0.001	0.002	–0.001	–0.003	0.001
Low schooling	0.001	0.008***	0.009***	–0.008***	–0.009***				
Unemployed	0.0007	–0.02***	–0.016***	0.022***	0.016***				
Work school dropout	0.005***	–0.008***	–0.008***	0.008***	0.008***				
Male	0.006	–0.006	–0.010*	0.006*	0.010*	–0.009	–0.012*	0.008	0.012***
Parent	0.004*	–0.009***	–0.016***	0.009***	0.016***	–0.008**	–0.016***	0.009***	0.016***
Single	–0.0007	0.013***	0.008***	–0.013***	–0.008***	0.013***	0.008***	–0.014***	–0.008***
Parents with criminal records	0.006	–0.043***	–0.035***	0.043***	0.035***	–0.043***	–0.035***	0.043***	0.035***
Parental abuse	0.013***	–0.009***	–0.009***	0.009**	0.009***	–0.009***	–0.010***	0.009***	0.010***
School bullying	0.002	0.012	0.012	0.012	0.012	0.012***	0.012**	0.012**	0.012***
Were in prison	–0.017***	0.011***	0.016***	–0.011**	–0.016***	0.011***	0.016***	–0.011***	–0.016***
Military or police background	0.026***	–0.001	–0.012***	0.001	0.012***	–0.001	–0.012***	0.001	0.012***
Suffered poverty	0.026***	–0.009***	–0.010***	0.009**	0.010***	–0.009**	–0.010***	0.009**	0.010***
Low income	0.0009	–0.003	–0.007*	0.003	0.007*	–0.003	–0.007*	0.003	0.007*
Family school dropout	0.006	0.011	0.001	–0.011	–0.001	0.019	0.006	–0.016	–0.006
Single mother	0.039***	–0.023***	–0.020***	0.023***	0.020***	–0.023***	–0.020***	0.023**	0.020***
Southerner	–0.003	0.012***	0.013***	–0.012***	–0.013***	0.009**	0.010***	–0.009**	–0.010***
Northerner	–0.012***	0.019***	0.016***	–0.019***	–0.016***	0.019***	0.016***	–0.019**	–0.016***
Worker	0.014***	–0.007**	–0.011***	0.007**	0.011**	–0.007	–0.011***	0.007	0.011***
Indigenous	0.083***	–0.093***	–0.068***	0.093***	0.068***	–0.092***	–0.068***	0.092***	0.068***
Dark skin	0.02***	–0.017***	–0.011***	0.017***	0.011***	–0.017***	–0.011***	0.017***	0.011***
Had a lawyer	–0.035***	0.034***	0.024***	–0.034***	–0.024***	0.034***	0.024***	–0.034***	–0.024***
Suffered torture	0.037***	–0.011***	–0.019***	0.011***	0.019***	–0.011***	–0.019***	0.011***	0.019***
Received threats	0.015***	–0.008**	–0.008***	0.008**	0.008***	–0.008**	–0.008***	0.008**	0.008***
Consumed alcohol	0.003	0.009*	0.006*	–0.009*	–0.006*	0.009***	0.006**	–0.009***	–0.006**
Consumed drugs	–0.006	0.004	0.005*	–0.004	–0.005*	0.005	0.007	–0.006*	–0.007***
Number of observations	222,226	61,844	100,658	61,844	100,658	61,844	100,658	61,844	100,658

From the life-course perspective, being male and under 29 years old increases probabilities. In this case, it is confirmed that there is a basic young male profile and early transitions to crime before transitions to other markers of adulthood, such as marriage or becoming a parent. Parental influence is relevant in the model: parents' abuse and criminal records increase probabilities.

Table 2 Logistic binomial regressions for the probability of being sentenced for homicide (presented in marginals).

*p < 0.10 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01.

The results show a relation between being sentenced for homicide and schooling, inequality, poverty, leaving school to work, and being a manual or farm worker. These outcomes show the necessity to work in marginalised conditions and that crime provides income. Living in female-led households increases the probability of being sentenced for homicide. Research has pointed out that a lack of parental vigilance and care can foster criminal involvement (Farrington 2011). An essential share of working-woman, single-mother household heads in Latin America do not have access to childcare services due to high informality rates (Acevedo et al. 2021). Finally, alcohol consumption is related to aggressive behaviour and increases the probability of being sentenced for homicide.

On the set of variables of the criminal justice system and discriminatory labels, probabilities increase for inmates who speak indigenous languages without translators at trial, for people with darker skin measured with the PERLA scale (Dixon & Telles 2017), and for those who were tortured or intimidated to declare themselves guilty. Discrimination and abuse are essential to explain that youth and young adults are sentenced for homicide.

How do we interpret the negative probabilities in the results? I believe including some positive covariates turns others into negatives when applying the logit. In the case of bullying, the effect of abuse by parents probably causes the change. In the case of nine years of schooling, this variable changes because they transitioned to work. The presence of a lawyer reduces legal system biases. The consumption of alcohol is overrepresented with respect to the effect of other drugs. Furthermore, the case of those born in a northern state, with no effect of being born in a southern state, shows that criminal organisations are probably not only recruiting in those regions.

There are three relevant covariates: being manual or farm workers, previous experience from the police or the military, and parents with criminal records. I argue that we are viewing transitions from legal to illegal occupations rather than directly from school to crime. In the case of former soldiers and police force members, they have the right skills for being violence workers: training on security and weapons. Furthermore, there are transitions as a survival choice to overcome precarious labour (Evans & Furlong 2019), from a farmer or manual worker to violent crime. In sum, young men in conditions of inequality and poverty, low schooling, with a propensity to aggressiveness due to early childhood abuse, and previous precarious employment, or employment in the military or the police are led to violent crime.

There is a complex life-course transition from youth to adulthood: from school to work, or police or military enrolment, and from there to criminal occupations. Furthermore, precarious employment and enrolment into criminal organisations are also related to a history of abusive family relations or parental absence because of the lack of childcare for working mothers, alcohol consumption, and skin-tone discrimination. All these factors bound their agency while choosing to attain occupational mobility with criminal organisations (Evans 2007).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These research results display a complex transition from school to criminal violence as an occupation in Mexico and probably Latin America. However, an underlying assumption of transition from idleness (being NEET) to crime or conflict in the literature about violence and inequalities is that violence offers 'easy money'. However, as Hoffman (2011) argued, violence is also hard labour, physically and emotionally. Furthermore, Latin American gang literature does not support the cultural trend to call violence labour easy, effortless money (Rodgers & Baird 2015). Despite this, the Mexican government recently pushed the first employment policies based on the idea that most Mexican perpetrators of violence are in NEET condition (Mora & Cortes 2021). Although some policies on first employment could be helpful, these must be designed based on the complexity of transitions to adulthood.

This research shows the necessity to reframe this field with insights into social mobility and life-course perspectives. Transitioning to work after school is the critical life-course conjuncture to analyse. This transition results from the initial conditions in which marginalised youth are born. Other experiences also shape young men's decisions and life situations towards gaining social mobility: peer pressure, sociality, psychological development, parental abuse,

drug consumption, and racial discrimination, but many of them are also determined by the socioeconomic conditions of the young men's parents and guardians. Therefore, policymakers of crime prevention must address the complexity of life-course development from early childhood towards the later crucial conjunctures, such as school dropout, employment precariousness, and the formation of socioemotional connections with peers. Decisions young men make in this context are chained to social mobility by gaining status and performing breadwinner masculinity (Baird 2012). In a wider violent conflict such as in Mexico, young men utilise the features of aggressive masculinity to become violence specialists and gain social mobility through criminal labour.

This paper shows that performing studies with inmate information is necessary but complicated in Latin America with chronic data scarcity (Bergman 2018). New datasets must be developed in the future: longitudinal panels, psychological testing, and improving current inmate surveys to untangle the discussed variables. On the qualitative side, progress has been made by several researchers in understanding Mexico (Chávez 2020; Azaola 2018; García 2022), and some of their findings coincide with the profile shown in this paper: for example, masculine identities, marginalisation, and neoliberal discourses of wealth inequality. This side of the research agenda addresses something quantitative data cannot: how to explain why some young men decide to join risky labour. Income cannot be the only explanation because not all risk calculations are the same for everyone.

From the broader theoretical perspective of this research, there are essential lessons to emphasise. First, research on violent crime and conflict must inquire further into causal mechanisms between many forms of deprivation and recruitment by criminal or political entrepreneurs. Second, these causal mechanisms constantly interact with the political economy in which organised violence occurs. For example, Mexico has low unemployment, informality, low occupational mobility, and high impunity rates. These factors shape how labour markets and opportunities operate for young men in each scenario.

Third, the literature identifying correlations between organised violence and socioeconomic variables has the appropriate insight but probably not the best approach. Social and occupational mobility studies allow us to understand the intersection between agency and socioeconomic structures. Escaping from precariousness is a clear example of this intersection. Viewing violence from labour lenses allows bringing the richness of sociology, anthropology, and economics of work into the realm of conflict and crime. However, this must be done with precaution, particularly in understanding the diversity of manifestations of this phenomenon in the Global South.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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