

# The Legacy of Mexico's Drug War on Youth Political Attitudes<sup>\*</sup>

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[Link to Appendix here](#)

## Abstract

We investigate the impact of childhood exposure to organized criminal violence and militarized policing on sociopolitical attitudes in Mexico, where an entire generation of youths has been raised amidst the country's most violent conflict over the past century. We fielded an in-person survey to nearly 3,000 urban youths, measuring their trust in various political institutions and their communities. We then constructed measures of childhood exposure to violence and militarization for each respondent by matching them with historical trends in homicide rates, military presence, and military confrontations against drug-trafficking organizations from the municipality where they grew up. Using two different identification strategies, we find that exposure to both homicidal violence and militarized policing during the first ten years of life is associated with up to a 20 percent decrease in reported interpersonal and political trust. Our findings have significant implications for the consolidation of Mexico's young democracy and contribute to a better understanding of how childhood exposure to protracted violence shapes political beliefs more generally.

**Keywords:** Organized Crime, Violence, Militarization, Sociopolitical Attitudes, Trust, Mexico, Democracy, Social Cohesion, Youths.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, an entire generation of Mexicans has been raised amidst the most violent conflict in the country since the 1920s *Cristero* rebellion. The so-called “drug war” that started in December 2006 has led to a staggering toll of more than 400,000 homicides and around 100,000 disappearances.<sup>1</sup> Millions of Mexicans have transitioned to adulthood witnessing sharp increases in criminal violence in their communities and an unprecedented militarization of public life. This generation represents nearly one-third of the country’s voting-age population.<sup>2</sup> Despite such a profound transformation, our understanding of the sociopolitical impact of this conflict among the youth remains limited. In this study, we shed light on the legacy of Mexico’s drug war on youth political attitudes and contribute to a better understanding of how exposure to criminal violence during childhood shapes political beliefs more generally.

Previous research has examined the impacts of organized criminal violence on various political outcomes, including political participation (Córdova, 2019; Dorff, 2017; Trelles and Carreras, 2012), electoral accountability (Carreras and Visconti, 2022; Ley, 2017), party competition (Ponce, 2019; Trejo and Ley, 2021), and policy preferences (García-Ponce, Zeitzoff and Wantchekon, 2021; Visconti, 2020), among others. Nonetheless, limited research has been conducted to explore how growing up in communities affected by rising criminal violence and heightened militarization—often intertwined phenomena—shape the political attitudes, identities, and beliefs of young citizens. This is particularly important because youths account for an overwhelmingly high percentage of the victims and perpetrators of criminal violence in Latin America and elsewhere (Chioda, 2017; Muggah and Tobón, 2018; Rivera, 2016; Sweeten, Piquero and Steinberg, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup>These figures are based on data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the National Registry of Missing or Disappeared Persons (RNPDO).

<sup>2</sup>Based on official data from the National Electoral Institute, as of September 2023, Mexico has 26.4 million registered voters aged under 29 years, representing over 27% of the national registry. See <https://www.ine.mx/credencial/estadisticas-lista-nominal-padron-electoral/>

Scholarly work on the formation of political beliefs and on the causal effects of violence on political behavior suggests that childhood exposure to violence can have a significant and lasting impact. On the one hand, scholars have shown that childhood experiences and socialization processes heavily influence political attitudes, behavior, and preferences in adult life (Campbell et al., 1980; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2008; Healy and Malhotra, 2013; Hyman, 1959). On the other, a growing literature indicates that exposure to crime and violence, either at the individual or community level, causally affects political attitudes and behavior (Bateson, 2012; Bauer et al., 2016; Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa, 2018). Building on insights from these complementary lines of research, we investigate the causal effects of childhood exposure to criminal violence and militarization—within the context of Mexico’s drug war—on downstream interpersonal and political trust.

We posit that growing up in violent and militarized communities negatively affects political and interpersonal trust, albeit in nuanced ways. We argue that exposure to general criminal violence in one’s community during childhood should negatively affect trust in both the community and law enforcement later in life. However, exposure to the militarization of public security and the violence stemming from it should result in decreased trust in specific institutions. In the case of Mexico, the detrimental impact on trust is more likely to be observed in government authorities and state security forces such as the federal police and the military, which were deployed throughout the country to combat organized criminal groups.

To test our hypotheses, we leverage an original in-person survey of close to 3000 individuals representative of Mexico’s urban population aged 16-29. Unlike many other surveys that inquire about political attitudes, we ask respondents to indicate where they spent the majority of their childhood. This is a crucial component of our survey design since we use fine-grained municipal data to measure respondents’ exposure to violence and militarization during their childhood. Specifically, we measure respondents’ exposure to general homicidal violence, domestic military operations, and domestic confrontations between the military and drug trafficking organizations, based on their year of birth and municipality of residence during childhood.

Thus, the core of our empirical strategy exploits variation in exposure to violence and militarization during childhood based on respondents' geographic location and date of birth. In other words, we test whether respondents exposed to varying levels of violence or militarization during childhood exhibit different levels of interpersonal and institutional trust. In addition, we employ a quasi-experimental design that uses the onset of militarization in 2007 as an unexpected policy shock for a plausibly causal identification. Evidence from our analyses supports our expectations: (1) When children are exposed to high levels of homicidal violence, they exhibit lower levels of trust in law enforcement authorities and their community; and (2) military operations and confrontations have negative effects on trust in authorities involved in the militarization of public security, namely the federal police, the military, and to some degree the government.

Our study contributes to several strands of literature. First, it adds to scholarly work showing that childhood experiences influence the formation of political identities and beliefs (Campbell et al., 1980; De Neve, 2015; Jennings and Niemi, 2014). Second, numerous studies have shown that violence during childhood impacts education (Justino, Leone and Salardi, 2014; Leon, 2012), health (Akresh, Luchetti and Thirumurthy, 2012), and other development outcomes. We show that political attitudes are also affected by exposure to violence during childhood. Finally, our study is closely related to a growing literature that examines how exposure to violence affects political attitudes and behavior (Gilligan, Pasquale and Samii, 2014; Blattman, 2009; Voors et al., 2012; Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa, 2018). We build upon this work to examine the long-term impact of violence exposure during childhood and formative years, which has often been overlooked.

The article is structured as follows. We first present our theoretical framework and discuss relevant literature. Next, we describe the historical background of Mexico's drug war and outline our hypotheses. Subsequently, we explain our data collection strategy and empirical approach. We then report our main findings and discuss their implications. We close the paper by emphasizing the importance of further research to elucidate the impact of escalating criminal violence on younger generations across many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The notion that early-life exposure to protracted violence can have a significant impact on the development of political attitudes and behavior finds support in two complementary strands of research. The first underscores the influence of childhood experiences in shaping political beliefs but fails to consider the specific influence of exposure to crime and violence. Meanwhile, the second strand establishes a causal link between exposure to violence and subsequent political attitudes and behavior but focuses primarily on the adult population. Our study weaves these two strands together to reveal the impacts of childhood exposure to violence on political attitudes within the context of Mexico's drug war.

### **Childhood Experiences and the Formation of Political Beliefs**

Childhood experiences heavily influence the formation of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. Psychological research has found that early life experiences—both positive and negative—affect cognitive and social skills (Heim and Nemeroff, 2001; Knudsen et al., 2006). Cornerstone research in developmental psychology and neuroscience shows that the architecture of the human brain is affected by early childhood experiences and environmental factors, particularly during the first eight to ten years of life, which provides the foundation for future behavioral development (Feldman, 2020). Adverse experiences in this formative period of development have strong influences on skill development and later employability (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000), mental health (Boullier and Blair, 2018), high-risk behaviors (Campbell, Walker and Egede, 2016), and various personality traits (Fletcher and Schurer, 2017), among other factors.

Following the seminal work by Hyman (1959) on the political socialization of children in the United States, several scholars have investigated the role of childhood experiences and environment in the formation of political identities and beliefs. Some of this research includes longitudinal, inter-generational studies among youths, consistently finding a strong and persistent relationship between processes of childhood socialization and political beliefs (Hatemi et al., 2009; Jennings and Niemi, 2014). The

adoption of political identities during childhood is a strong predictor of political views in adult life (Campbell et al., 1980; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2008; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). Likewise, powerful early-life experiences can shape ideology and policy preferences. For instance, Madestam and Yanagizawa-Drott (2012) find that childhood exposure to patriotic events in the U.S. led individuals to be more likely to identify as Republican, vote for Republicans, and turn out in elections during their adulthood. In a recent study, Guo, Gao and Liang (2023) show that early-life famine severity experienced by Chinese politicians influences their policy preferences.

Furthermore, a growing body of work corroborates that social cognition in early childhood is already oriented toward group living, setting the foundation of political sensitivities and attitudes (Reifens-Tagar and Cimpian, 2022; Wegemer and Vandell, 2020). This challenges the assumption that young children lack the cognitive capacity and social understanding to develop political thought (Rizzo, Elenbaas and Vanderbilt, 2020; Guidetti, Carraro and Castelli, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Most of these studies have primarily focused on understanding the development of political beliefs in the context of the U.S. and Western Europe. However, in the context of Mexico, five decades ago Segovia (1975) discovered that Mexican children displayed political attitudes that mirrored the authoritarian tendencies of the Mexican political regime.

Although we know that childhood constitutes a formative phase in the formation of attitudes and behaviors, the existing body of research exploring the impacts of childhood experiences has overlooked the significance of exposure to violence in shaping political attitudes. Only a handful of studies have paid attention to this subject. Lupu and Peisakhin (2017) provide evidence of inter-generational effects of violence on ethnic identity and political attitudes among Crimean Tatars who suffered the violence of deportation. Looking at the case of South Korea, Hong and Kang (2017) show that individuals who experienced violence in their childhood are less supportive of the government, especially the administration and the military. Recent work by Adhvaryu and Fenske (2023) on the formation of political beliefs in Africa suggests that only the most severely impacted individuals within a conflict-exposed cohort exhibit substantial changes in political engagement.

This nascent literature—in tandem with well-established knowledge of the larger impact of childhood events on adult attitudes and behaviors— provides strong suggestive evidence that experiences of violence during childhood should have broader impacts on political attitudes and behavior. Our study builds on this work by examining the effects of exposure to organized criminal violence during childhood on political attitudes later in life.

## **Adult Exposure to Violence and Political Attitudes**

A number of empirical studies have found that adults exposed to violent conflict—either at the individual or community level—tend to become more politically engaged. In a meta-analysis of 16 studies, [Bauer et al. \(2016\)](#) confirm a persistent pattern: exposure to war violence tends to increase political participation and prosocial behavior. Likewise, [Bateson \(2012\)](#) provides evidence of a positive impact of exposure to criminal violence on political participation in multiple countries. However, more nuanced findings of the impact of violent conflict on political attitudes and behavior are presented in studies that try to isolate the divergent effects of different types of violence exposure ([García-Ponce, 2019](#); [Grossman, Manekin and Miodownik, 2015](#); [Jones, Troesken and Walsh, 2017](#)).

Evidence from research that specifically examines exposure to criminal violence and trust has found a detrimental effect on political trust, particularly in the case of Latin America, where organized criminal violence has become a major security threat. These studies do not connect childhood experiences to adult behaviors and attitudes, but they do show that experiences across one’s lifecycle are impactful. Crime victimization and insecurity typically lead to decreased political trust toward specific, security-related institutions such as the local police and judicial system ([Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015](#); [Blanco, 2013](#); [Blanco and Ruiz, 2013](#); [Malone, 2010](#)). This is not necessarily in contradiction with the fact that crime and violence can increase political participation or prosocial behavior. For example, [Paz-zona \(2020\)](#) finds that crime victimization lowers trust, especially in the police and other people, but increases participation in social and political organizations.

Taken together, these studies suggest that individuals are able to make clear connections between

who generated insecurity in their lives and their attitudes towards these entities. In the context of Latin America, as shown by Pion-Berlin and Carreras (2017), many citizens affected by high levels of insecurity exhibit lower levels of trust in the police, in addition to less confidence in their capacity to fight crime effectively and respect human rights. Deglow and Sundberg (2021), too, find that in the context of Afghanistan, the intensity of local-level conflict can erode trust in the police and lead to the belief that police are ineffective and not procedurally just.

Malone (2010) argues that the effects on institutional trust are context-specific. In countries with lackluster justice systems, personal experience with crime erodes support only for the police. But the negative impacts of violence on institutional trust can travel beyond law enforcement actors and the criminal justice system. Some scholars find that exposure to crime and insecurity often decreases trust in government entities more generally. In Mexico, there is evidence that criminal violence demobilizes voters (Ley, 2018), and that support for the national incumbent party varies inversely with prevailing levels of violence (Ley, 2017). In poor-performing, high-crime countries, fear of crime in one's neighborhood has a negative relationship with measures of diffuse support. Crime exposure can transcend measures of specific support and affect individuals' trust in major national institutions and the entire regime (Blanco and Ruiz, 2013; Malone, 2010).

Beyond trust in institutions and the government, exposure to crime and violence can also have negative effects on interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. Exposure to violence has a myriad of negative psychological effects, including a decreased ability to express empathy, increased antisocial behavior, and the normalization of aggression (Hawkins et al., 2000; Guerra, Rowell Huesmann and Spindler, 2003; Baskin and Sommers, 2015). In addition to direct cognitive and behavioral effects, exposure to violence leads to related secondary effects by increasing the likelihood that exposed individuals interact with the justice and social systems (Hawkins et al., 2000; Siegel et al., 2019).

Crime victimization during adulthood has also been shown to decrease overall horizontal trust in one's community, family, and friends (Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori, 2007; Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015). Following exposure to violence, individuals tend to hold the belief that their peers and



community cannot be trusted. [Siegel et al. \(2019\)](#), for example, show that victims of gun violence tend to have lower trust in other citizens. This effect is present if exposed either during adulthood or childhood. Further, [Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori \(2007\)](#) demonstrate that victimization and exposure to news about crime can decrease social trust among adolescents.

Hence, prior work suggests that childhood exposure to violence and insecurity should have negative effects on trust in a variety of entities, both at the government and community levels. However, it also suggests that such exposure should have differential effects on trust depending on the type of insecurity at hand. Generalized insecurity—such as exposure to high-crime societal contexts or instances of victimization—should have more general impacts on trust in one’s community but also law enforcement agencies, who may be seen as responsible for preventing and responding to these acts. On the other hand, violence and insecurity more directly attributed to the state—such as militarization—should affect trust in a distinct manner. That is, this insecurity may be seen more as a result of the actions of the specific entities deployed and specific officials involved in this deployment.

## **A Generation Exposed to Mexico’s Drug War**

### **Historical Background**

In December 2006, former Mexican president Felipe Calderón began a war against organized crime by deploying military forces throughout Northern and Western Mexico. Drug cartels in the country had flourished during the years prior, particularly during the era of one-party rule. [Trejo and Ley \(2018\)](#), for example, show that in the 1990s, cartels engaged in significant violence, particularly during periods of gubernatorial power shift. When one-party rule was broken, cartels continued their violent practices in attempts to re-establish and hold onto their power ([Osorio, 2013](#); [Ríos, 2015](#); [Trejo and Ley, 2020](#)).

The beginning of Calderón’s administration marked a significant policy shift in terms of public security. The Mexican army (under the direction of the Secretariat of National Defense, SEDENA), which had not been trained to fight organized criminal groups, became the leading force behind drug

war operations. Federal police were often deployed in tandem with these forces, while lower level police forces were often reported to be in collaboration with drug trafficking groups.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the country largely saw the constabularization of the military, where the armed forces assume domestic public safety tasks. In addition to constabularization, militarized policing was also present, where civilian-led police forces were equipped with military-grade weapons, gear, and engaged in military-style tactics, often in tandem with military forces (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021). Such militarization entailed the adoption of security strategies developed for war, which leading to human rights violations and the deterioration of democratic controls (Brewer and Verduzco, 2022; Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020).

During the subsequent presidential administration, President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) adopted a similar strategy towards organized crime. In addition to the domestic deployment of the military, he created a new national police force (the national gendarmerie) to assist in the efforts (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Although the number of military operations declined, the core of his public security strategy relied on capturing or killing criminal bosses, seizing drugs, and eradicating illicit crops. This approach deepened under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-present), although he applied different rhetoric to combatting crime (he campaigned using a “hugs, not bullets” approach to tackle organized crime) (Deare, 2021).

Despite these efforts, the militarization of public security has failed to reduce crime and violence in Mexico. As shown in Figure 1 (upper panel), despite a modest decline in the homicide rate at the beginning of Peña Nieto’s administration, homicides began to trend up again in 2015, and have remained at record-high levels during López Obrador’s administration. The production of violence involves a complex network of armed actors, including organized criminal groups, state security forces, and vigilante groups. Based on official data, 420,000 people have been killed and around 100,000 have been reported disappeared since the start of the drug war. Although it is difficult to estimate how many homicides are strictly related to the drug war, there is growing evidence that the law-enforcement approach adopted over the past 15 years—heavily focused on the beheading of criminal organizations and the militariza-

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna8206233>, last accessed on June 27, 2023

tion of public security—has contributed to the escalation of violence (Calderón et al., 2015; Dell, 2015; Phillips, 2015). Moreover, recent research has found that the militarization of anti-drug efforts has decreased the state’s capacity to provide public order and extract fiscal resources (Flores-Macías, 2018).

The drug war initiated by Calderón is a defining event in contemporary Mexican history. Of particular relevance is the fact that an entire generation of Mexicans was born, raised, and transitioned to adulthood during the most violent episode in the history of the country over the past century. Those who were school-age children in the early years of the drug war now comprise a substantial part of the voting-age population. Many of these young adults grew up in communities with unprecedentedly high levels of crime and violence, witnessing both the consolidation of the militarization of public security and the government’s failures to make their communities safer. Further, youths have accounted for an overwhelmingly high percentage of victims of criminal violence in Mexico. Based on official statistics from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI by its name in Spanish), the homicide rate among youths aged 15–24 increased by three-fold between 2007 and 2011.

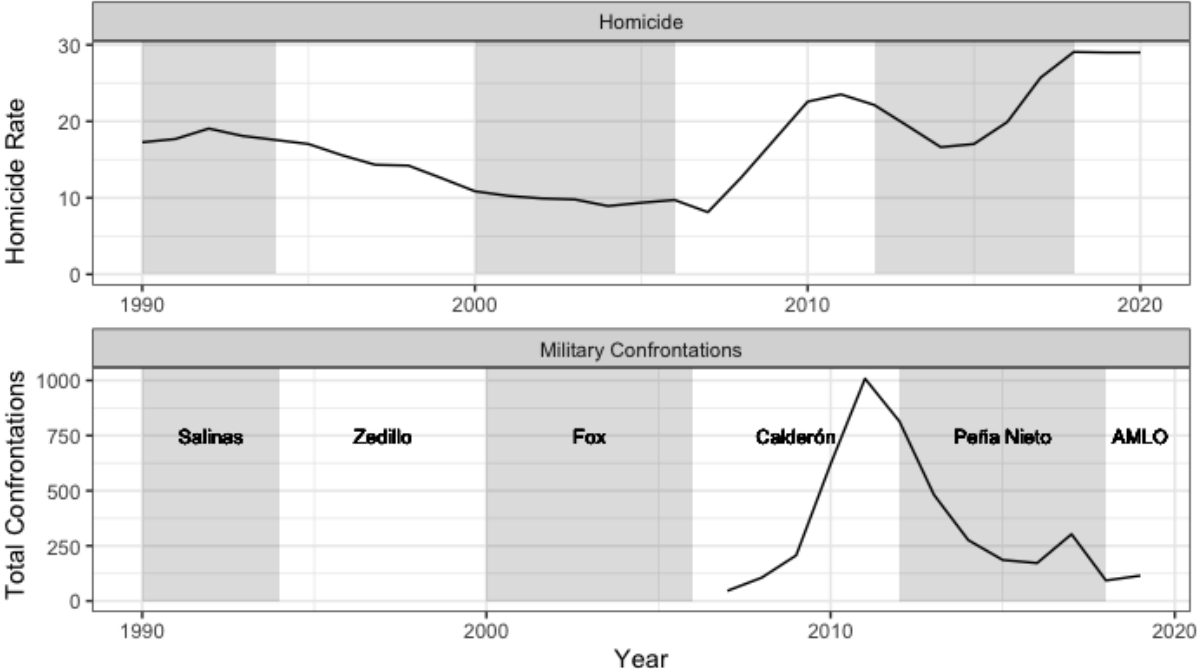


Figure 1: Annual Homicide Rate and Military Confrontations Across Presidential Administrations in Mexico (1990–2020)

The drug war has represented a defining era in Mexico's history. Yet, we have much ground left to cover in terms of understanding its long-term impacts on the Mexican population. As reviewed, much work has demonstrated how violence has widespread impacts on attitudes and institutional outcomes. However, a great deal of this work has focused on adults, leaving much remaining to be understood about the impacts on youths. In the context of Mexico, this is made even more important by the fact that many of the youths exposed to violence are currently coming to age, including reaching voting age. In this article, we explore how this childhood exposure influences the political attitudes of individuals later in life.

## **Empirical Expectations**

In societies riddled with violence and widespread impunity, such as the case of Mexico, it would be unsurprising to observe that individuals raised in severely affected communities tend to develop mistrust toward the government, the institutions in charge of providing security, and even other members of their own communities. Building upon the body of work previously discussed, the historical accounts of Mexico's drug war, and our own field research, the main testable implication of our study is that childhood exposure to drug war violence and insecurity should negatively affect trust in relevant political and social actors. Specifically, we examine whether exposure to (1) general violence and insecurity, and (2) exposure to militarization and militarized conflict during the formative years of Mexican youths have affected their levels of political and interpersonal trust.

We set forth two series of empirical expectations. First, we consider that those who were exposed to more generalized insecurity during their youth should have lower levels of trust in entities that are most associated with that violence. Based on the literature and the Mexican context, this would be the community and law enforcement (i.e., police). With regard to the community, research suggests that general violence exposure can erode interpersonal trust. Further, communities affected by high levels of violence likely experienced the presence of illicit organizations. With regard to law enforcement, general violence exposure should erode specific trust in this institution due to its failure to properly

address and prevent the issue. We thus present the following hypotheses:

**H1A:** *Increased exposure to general violence during childhood should result in lower levels of interpersonal trust later in life*

**H1B:** *Increased exposure to general violence during childhood should result in lower levels of trust in the police later in life*

With respect to H1B, we do not set prior expectations as to which level of law enforcement (municipal, state, or federal) should be most affected by this phenomenon. Indeed, evidence shows that citizens struggle in properly attributing responsibility for public security policy (Carlin, Love and Martínez-Gallardo, 2015) and attribution of responsibility is particularly difficult in instances where entities have overlapping areas of responsibility (León, 2011) such as the case of the police in Mexico. As a result, it may not be clear to citizens as to the exact police force which is most responsible. Thus, it is possible that citizens may decrease their trust at all levels.

Second, we argue that in the context of Mexico's drug war, exposure to militarization and militarized conflict during childhood should also have effects on trust later in life. During this time, the government mobilized multiple institutions to carry out operations and engage in conflict. Thus, we argue that trust should be eroded specifically in the entities responsible for this conflict. In this case, the government (state and federal) were largely responsible for deploying and permitting forces to confront DTOs. Primarily, the military and federal police were involved in these operations. We thus hypothesize the following:

**H2A:** *Increased exposure to militarization during childhood should result in lower levels of trust in the government later in life*

**H2B:** *Increased exposure to militarization during childhood should result in lower levels of trust in the federal police later in life*

**H2C:** *Increased exposure to militarization during childhood should result in lower levels of trust in the military later in life*

With regard to H2B, we do not have strong prior expectations as to which levels of government

should see the most erosion in trust. Although the national government was primarily responsible, significant variation in militarization and conflict existed across states and municipalities (Hiskey, Malone and Diaz-Dominguez, 2020). Further, in many cases, there has been a substantial alteration of power in executives across these entities. Second, for H2C, we in particular anticipate that trust should erode in the Army (SEDENA), versus the Navy (SEMAR). While both have been used during the drug war, SEMAR is smaller, has primarily been utilized for maritime operations, and has been used to a lesser degree than SEDENA. On the other hand, the Army has been deployed considerably domestically across the country.

## **Empirical Approach**

### **Data**

Our goal is to explore the effects of violence and militarization during childhood on individuals' trust in a variety of actors. To examine these relationships, we rely on three main data sources: an original survey fielded in Mexico among young adults, official records of municipal homicides across the past few decades, and data regarding militarization. We will describe each of these data sources in turn in this section.

To measure the sociopolitical attitudes in question, we fielded an in-person survey of 2880 young adults age 16-29 in June of 2021 across urban Mexico. Within the survey, we asked a series of questions to isolate trust in the community and in political institutions. We asked respondents to rate their trust on a 1-7 scale, where 1 represents no trust at all and 7 represents a lot of trust. Respondents completed this exercise for the following groups: neighbors and family, the police (municipal, state, federal), the military (army and navy), and the government (federal, state, local).

We focus on urban Mexico because of three main reasons. First, the forms of violence experienced in urban versus rural areas of Mexico are of different nature. For instance, rural areas are more likely to experience violence associated with illicit crop production, land disputes, or the generalized extortion

of agricultural workers in a context of limited state presence (Dube, García-Ponce and Thom, 2016; Herrera and Martínez-Alvarez, 2022), which is why the socio-demographic profiles of victims and perpetrators tend to be different than in urban areas (Villarreal, 2004; Muñiz-Sánchez, Fuerte-Celis and Méndez-Ramírez, 2022). Second, 80% of Mexico's population resides in urban areas, and a similar percentage of homicides and violent crime take place in metropolitan areas, where youths are at a disproportionately high risk of becoming targets of organized criminal violence. Therefore, while rural violence is prevalent in many communities of Mexico, because of its unique circumstances, we believe it is conceptually distinct and should be studied separately.

Our survey was fielded in a face-to-face format by a leading survey firm based in Mexico. The sample is representative of urban Mexico for our age group of interest. In addition to ensuring our sample was representative of common sociodemographic characteristics, such as income and education level, we also employed a unique strategy to ensure it is representative of the various levels of municipal violence across the country (Laterzo, 2021; García-Ponce et al., 2023). Within this strategy, we particularly considered three variables that capture variations in violence at this geographic level: homicide rates, reported non-homicidal crime, and perceived levels of violence.

Although homicide rates are often used as a benchmark for the prevalence of violence, we chose to involve additional measures as homicide does not capture the complete reality of citizen insecurity. Because of this, we chose to examine non-homicidal violence and perceived insecurity as well. These measures, however, are typically not available at the subnational level, particularly at units as small as the municipality. To circumvent this issue, we rely upon measures available at the national and city level from Mexico's National Survey of Urban Public Security (ENSU) and use multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) to generate subnational measures (Gelman and Little, 1997). MRP is a method of small-area estimation that allows for the generation of survey variable estimates at units below the survey's level of representativity. We model respondents' perceptions of violence and reported victimization as a function of selected sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., location, age, gender, occupation, education) and generate municipal-level estimates with such models via poststratification

using Mexico's 2015 intercensus. We thus create 157 municipal estimates of both reported victimization and perceived insecurity. We then utilize these estimates and the most recently reported homicide rates collected by the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security (SESNP) to stratify our survey sample. We limit our sampling frame to only include municipalities surveyed by ENSU, and order these units based on the three levels of insecurity via seriation. Via this method, we generate a sample that is not only representative of urban Mexico for our age group of interest, but also of reported insecurity, reported victimization, and homicide rates at the municipal level.

Within our survey, we ask respondents where they were born (either the municipality where they currently reside, or elsewhere). This is uncommon in current public opinion surveys in the area and allows us to measure exposure to violence and militarization in one's hometown during childhood.<sup>4</sup> To do so, we rely upon two data sources. To capture exposure to violence, we use municipal homicide rates reported by Mexico's National Institute for Geography and Statistics (INEGI) to create measures of homicide exposure during respondents' childhoods.<sup>5</sup> To do so, we calculate the average homicide rate for each respondent for the first ten years of their lives based on their birth year and the municipality where they spent the majority of their childhood.

Second, to capture exposure to militarization, we utilize two measures that vary by both municipality and year. First, we utilize a measure of operations that indicates if the military (specifically the army, or SEDENA) was deployed to a municipality to participate in law enforcement operations. Functions included patrols, checkpoints, and detentions. These data were collected by [Flores-Macías and Zarkin](#)

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<sup>4</sup>Importantly, we drop all respondents who indicate that they grew up in a different municipality from the one in which they currently reside (where they were interviewed). We drop these individuals as we cannot be confident how long they spent in each of the two (or more) locations, and therefore cannot precisely estimate their exposure to violence and militarization.

<sup>5</sup>Note that we rely upon two sources of homicide data in this study due to issues of data availability. INEGI provides the most reliable historical data on homicides, but SESNP provided the most reliable municipal homicide data for 2020 at the time of the fielding of our survey.



(2023) via right-to-information requests filed to the Mexican government (the National Institution for Transparency, Access to Information, and Personal Data Protection, INAI). Second, we utilize municipal-level data regarding the military’s confrontations with criminal organizations collected by Flores-Macías and Zarkin (2021) from 2007-2018. These were also collected via right-to-information requests. Data regarding the deployment of federal police is not available. However, we use these measures as a proxy for both as during the drug war, presidents often deployed the military along with federal police to confront drug trafficking (Felbab-Brown, 2014). These measures of militarization are complementary and allow for a nuanced assessment of militarized policing at the municipal level. Operations (our first measure) allows us to explore whether or not exposure to deployment (without necessitating violent conflict) has long-term effects on attitudes. Confrontations, on the other hand, allow us to explore if militarization that explicitly involved violence and conflict has such effects.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

	Min.	Median	Mean	Max.
Trust:				
Federal Police	1	5	4.808	7
State-level Police	1	4	3.748	7
Municipal Police	1	3	3.424	7
Federal Government	1	4	4.244	7
State-level Government	1	4	3.847	7
Municipal Government	1	4	3.679	7
Army	1	5	5.176	7
Navy	1	6	5.470	7
Family	1	7	6.526	7
Neighbors	1	4	4.254	7
Exposure (10 yrs):				
Homicidal Violence	0.411	6.373	8.913	80.815
Military Conflict	0	0	0.380	7.800
Military Operations	0	0	0.129	0.818
Gender (Female = 1)	0	0	0.466	1
SES Scale	0	1.981	1.955	2.559
Education	1	7	6.686	10
Age	16	21	21.722	29

Note: Sample size is 2880 respondents.

## Identification Strategy

To test whether survey respondents exposed to higher levels of community violence (homicide) and militarization during their childhood exhibit different levels of trust later in life, we deploy two types of identification strategies: 1) a continuous examination of exposure, and 2) a quasi-experimental assessment using a de-biased estimator.

First, for all three quantities of interest (community violence, militarization, and militarized conflict) we create a singular measure of continued exposure for each respondent's first ten years of life. This measure is a calculated average that varies based on their year of birth and their municipality of residence. Utilizing this measure as our main independent variable of interest, we run the below standard OLS model:

$$y_i = \beta_1 V_i + \beta_2 X_i + \alpha_{j[i]} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where  $y_i$  is the outcome of interest (trust in various entities) and  $i$  is each individual respondent. The parameter of interest is  $\beta_1$ , where  $V_i$  represents childhood exposure to violence or militarization (e.g., operations, confrontations). For each family of models, this is measured as average exposure to homicide, militarization, or militarized conflict in the individual's municipality between their birth year and their 10th year of life. For example, the mean childhood exposure to community violence during ages 0 to 10, for two respondents born in the same municipality in years  $t$  and  $t + 1$  is computed as the average homicide rate in years  $(t, \dots, t + 10)$  and  $(t + 1, \dots, t + 11)$ , respectively.  $X_i$  is a vector of individual-level control covariates. These are gender, socioeconomic status, education level, and age.<sup>6</sup> Finally,  $\alpha_{j[i]}$  captures state-level fixed effects for  $j$  states, indexed by individuals ( $i$ ), which accounts for factors that may vary by state.

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<sup>6</sup>To create our socioeconomic status control variable, we rely upon a series of survey questions that determine respondents' possession of a series of assets. We then use principal component analysis (PCA) to create this variable.

Second, the nature of the dramatic shock in militarization in 2007 allows us to leverage a quasi-experimental design for both exposure to militarization and militarized conflict. This supplements our previous analysis. We can only do so for militarization (and related conflict) as it was effectively zero prior to 2007, while homicide has had a constant presence in the country across all years. To do so, we design a strategy to compare individuals who were born in the same municipality, but in different years, or in the same year, but in different municipalities, during the initial years of the drug war. Comparing groups of respondents in this way allows us to calculate a debiased estimator which accounts for confounding factors both at the municipal and birth-year level. By comparing across these groups, we incorporate not only a group affected by the treatment (militarization and militarized conflict) and potential confounding variables but also a group affected by all confounding variables without being affected by the treatment.

Table 2: Balance in Exposure to Militarization Across Cohorts

	Mean Confrontations	Mean Operations
Cohort: Eligible	1.33	0.35
Cohort: Ineligible	1.39	0.36

Note: Calculated as the average level of confrontations or operations (binary variable) for each group. Those eligible for treatment are those born between 2001 and 2005 in our sample.

To effectively employ this strategy, we must first well define treated individuals and a range of treatment years. As municipalities have gone in and out of treatment for years (varying levels of militarization), and respondents have continuously aged throughout this period, we approach this by conservatively defining a range of militarized years and a small cohort of individuals who were consistently younger than 10 years old during this period of time. Based on our data, this results in examining militarization between the years 2007-2011. This not only represents the height of militarization but perfectly intersects with a group of respondents under the age of 10 which we can explore utilizing our data – those born between 2001 and 2005. Defining treatment in this way is the most conservative approach. In Table 2 we show that exposure to militarization is balanced across those who were both eligible (born between 2001 and 2005) and ineligible for treatment. Further, in the Appendix, we also

less conservatively define the cohort eligible to be treated.

With this in mind, we utilize standard OLS models with the following equation:

$$y_i = \beta_1 M_m + \beta_2 D_i + \beta_3 M_{m[i]} D_i + \beta_4 X_i + \alpha_{j[i]} + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Here, the parameters  $y_i$ ,  $X_i$ , and  $\alpha_{j[i]}$  remain the same as those in Equation 1. In this model, the coefficient of interest is  $\beta_3$ , which approximates the interaction between  $M_{m[i]}$  and  $D_i$ .  $M_{m[i]}$  represents either the average militarization or average number of military confrontations between 2007 and 2011 for each municipality  $m$  of residence, for each respondent  $i$ .  $D_i$  is a binary indicator which is 1 was born between 2001 and 2005, and 0 otherwise.

## Results

### Exposure to Homicides

In this section, we examine results corresponding to our first set of hypotheses, which posited that increased exposure to community violence during one's youth would result in decreased community-level (interpersonal) trust and trust in law enforcement. Visualizations of our results (shown as predicted values) appear in Figure 2. Overall, the results support our hypotheses.

First, we find that increased exposure to municipal-level homicide during the first ten years of one's life is associated with decreased interpersonal trust. Specifically, it is associated with decreased trust in one's family and neighbors. Second, we find that such exposure is also associated with decreased trust in all levels of police: federal, state, and municipal. These results support our expectations.

Importantly, we find that this exposure is not associated with a decreased level of trust in the military (army or navy) or the government (federal, state, or municipal). This lends further credence to our findings, and supports the idea that decreases in trust are associated with the type of violence experienced. That is to say, respondents seem to associate community-level violence with their community

and those who, in theory, should protect them from violence: law enforcement. Trust in institutions that are less associated with such violence is not affected.

## **Exposure to Militarization**

In this section, we present results regarding exposure to militarization and militarized conflict. We first proceed with results from our measure of average exposure, and then present results from our debiased estimator analysis.

### **Continuous Evaluation**

First, we find that increased average exposure to militarization and militarized conflict is associated with decreased trust in government, however, this effect is in most cases not significant. We do find that there is a negative and statistically significant relationship between exposure to military confrontations and trust in the state government. Thus, Hypotheses 2A experiences little support. However, we find that Hypothesis 2B sees strong support. Both increased exposure to militarization and militarized conflict during childhood are associated with lower levels of trust in the federal police during adulthood. This effect is statistically significant. Finally, Hypothesis 2C is also supported. Increased exposure to military operations during childhood is associated with decreased trust in SEDENA (the army), and interestingly, SEMAR (the navy). Increased exposure to militarized conflict is only associated with decreased trust in SEDENA.

Furthermore, we find statistically insignificant relationships between exposure to militarization and related conflict with respect to the majority of other entities, including non-federal police and one's community, with one exception. An increase in exposure to military operations is associated with lower levels of trust in the family. However, these spillover effects are not entirely unexpected, as research does suggest that increased exposure to violence – such as militarization – can affect one's overall levels of interpersonal trust (Kijewski and Freitag, 2018).

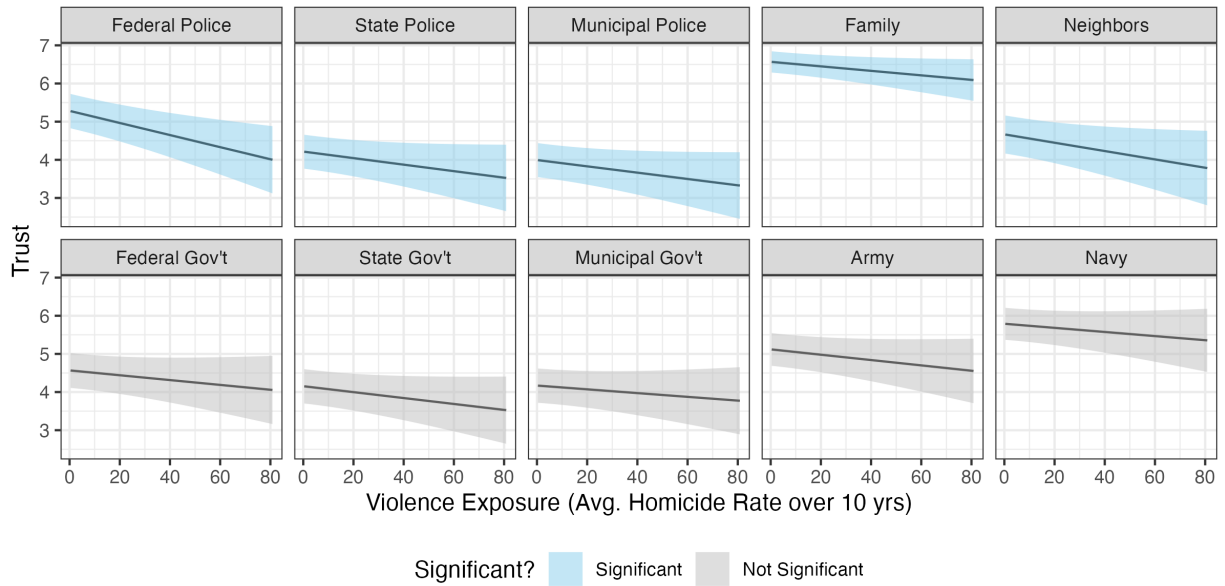


Figure 2: Exposure to Homicide and Trust Levels

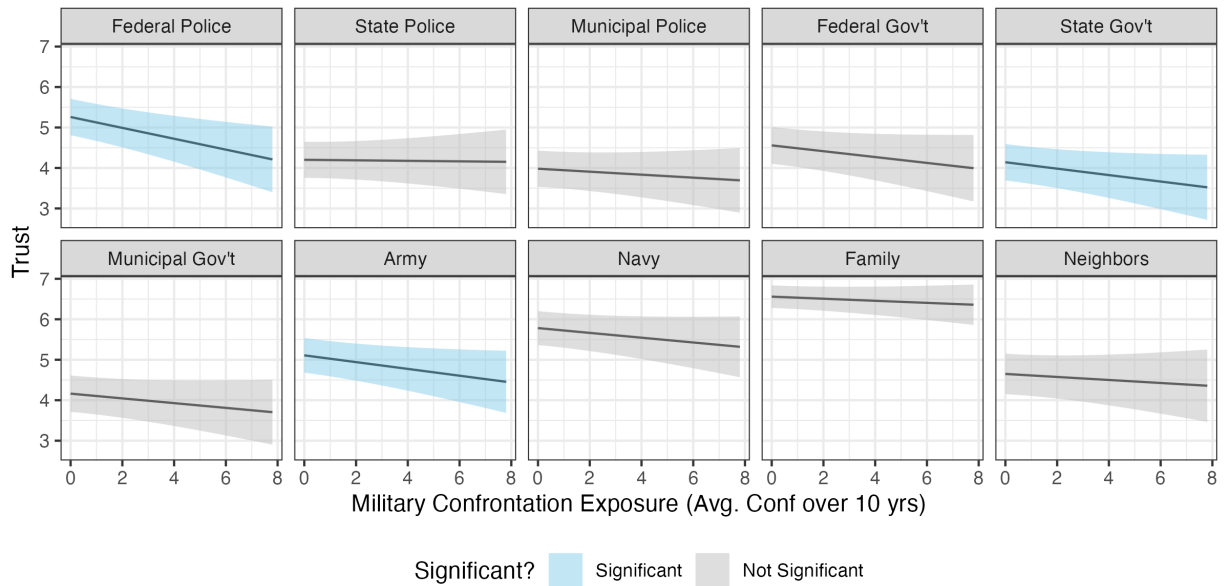


Figure 3: Exposure to Military Confrontations and Trust Levels

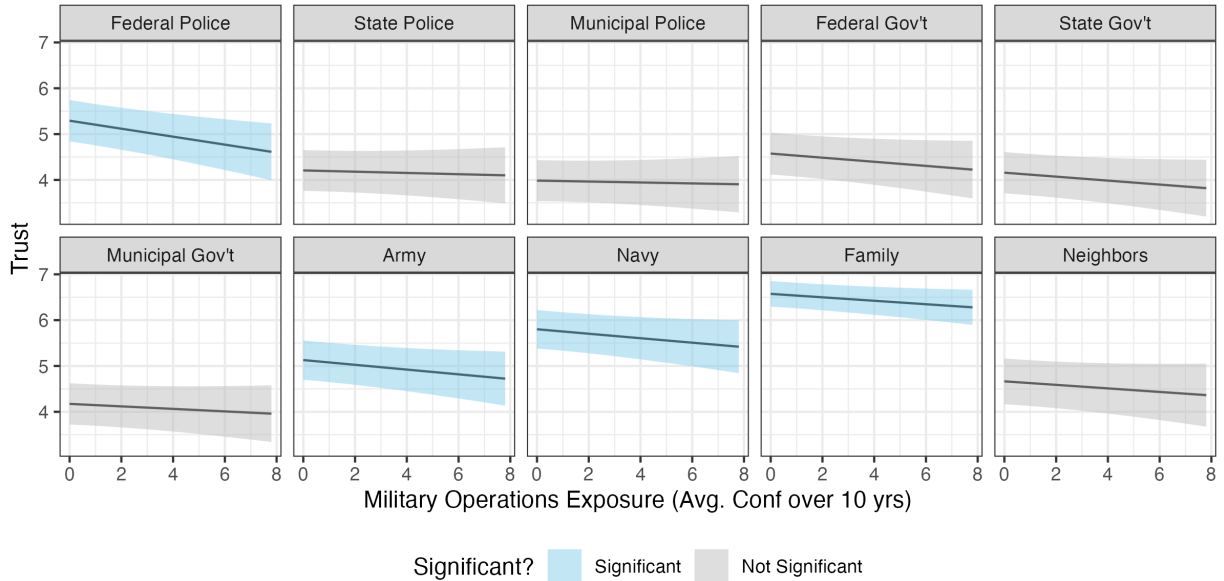


Figure 4: Exposure to Military Operations and Trust Levels

### Debiased Estimator Evaluation

We next move to our more stringent and conservative estimation of this effect utilizing our debiased estimator. Here, we classify those who were born between 2001 and 2005 as eligible for treatment (exposure to militarization or militarized conflict). Our treatment is then a continuous variable of different levels of exposure to these two phenomena. In Figure 6, we present our results from this quasi-experimental analysis.

These results largely echo those resulting from our measure of average exposure. We find a statistically significant interaction effect between eligibility for treatment and exposure to our first treatment variables, militarized conflict, on trust in three entities: federal police, the state government, and the army. This provides support for hypotheses 2A, 2B, and 2C. We find no statistically significant interactive effect when examining trust in all other entities.

With regard to our second treatment – exposure to military operations – we find a statistically significant interaction effect with respect to trust in the federal police, the army, and one’s family. However, when examining trust in the federal police, the nature of the interaction does not provide strong support for our hypotheses, although it is significant. Both our younger and older cohorts exhibit de-

creased trust in the federal police as exposure to operations increases, although the effect on the younger cohort is most dramatic. However, when both groups are consistently exposed to military operations (a value of 1 on the x-axis) they exhibit similar levels of trust.

Overall, these results reinforce our previous analysis, although provide a more stringent test. In particular, we find strong evidence that exposure to militarization and military operations has the most substantial effect on trust in the army. Further, we yet again find that exposure to military conflict has more prominent effects in comparison to exposure to military operations, regardless of whether or not said militarization involved confrontations with organized crime.

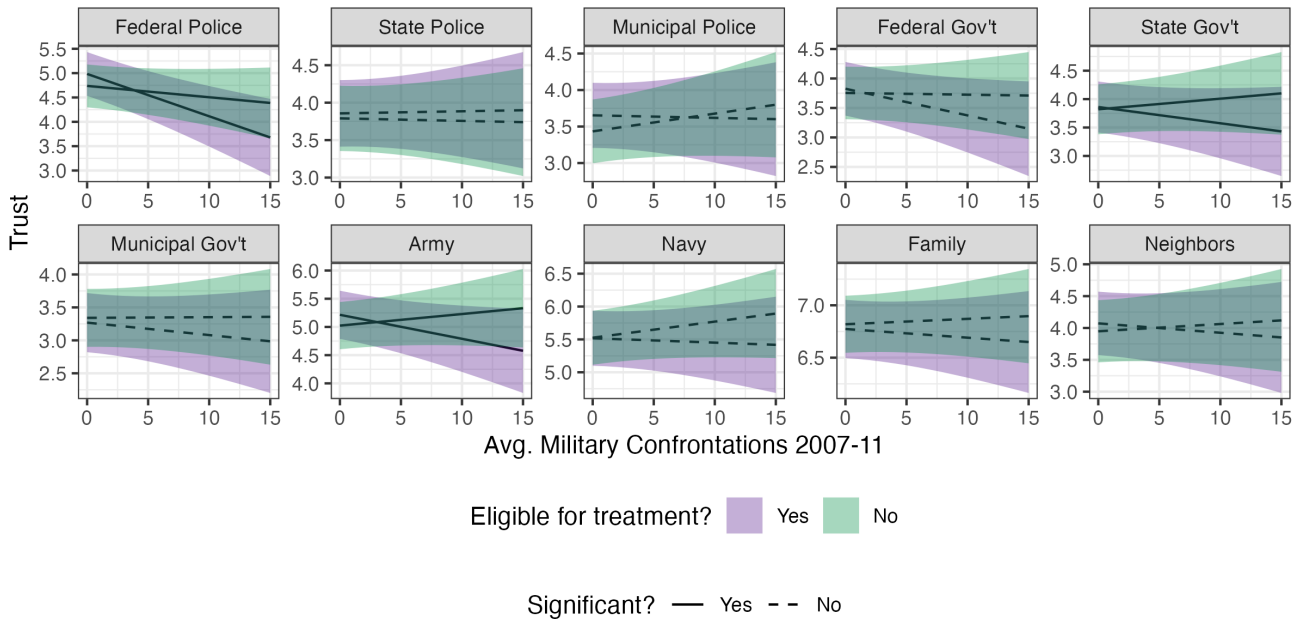


Figure 5: Exposure to Military Confrontations and Trust Levels (Quasi-Experimental Approach)

Second, we find that both exposure to militarization and militarized conflict during childhood have more substantial effects on those below the age of 10. See Figure 6. Indeed, the interaction effect is most extreme when examining militarized conflict. As can be seen, as exposure to conflict increases, those below the age of 10 experience a dramatic decline in their reported trust in federal police later in life, while those who were over 10 do not. Results thus support H2B.

Finally, results also support H2C. As both militarization and militarized conflict increase, those



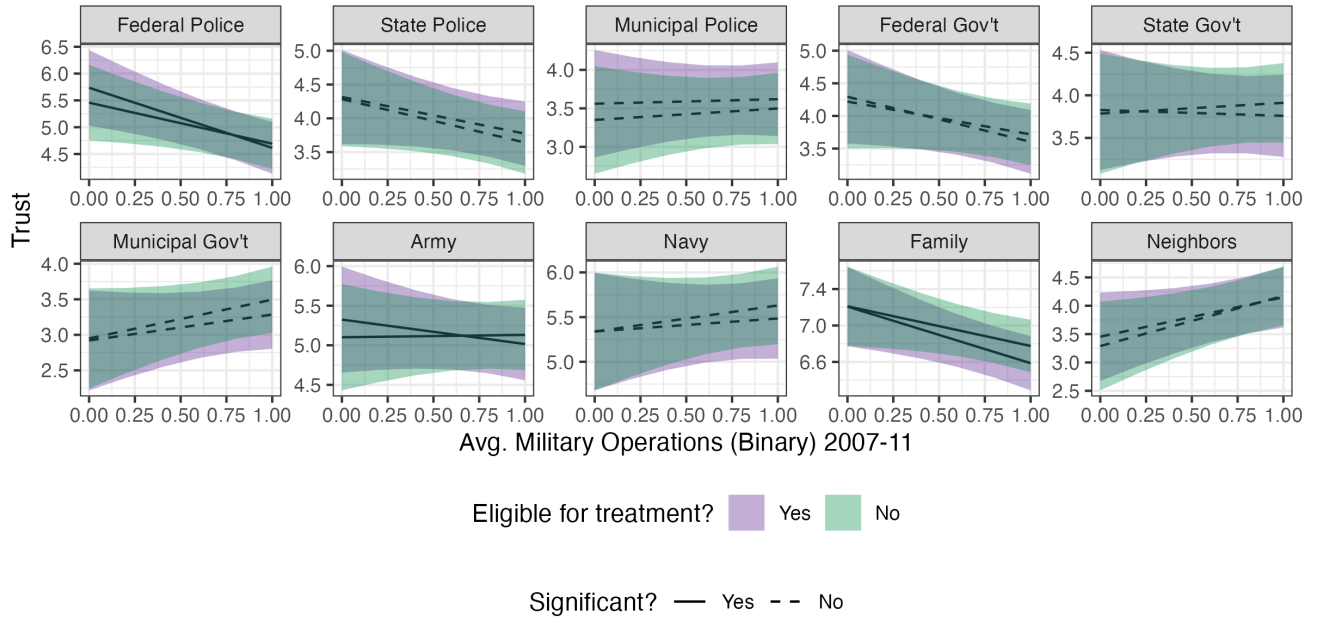


Figure 6: Exposure to Military Operations and Trust Levels (Quasi-Experimental Approach)

who were exposed under the age of 10 experienced decreased trust in the army later in life. Those who were over 10 years of age during exposure often increase their trust in the police. Results are more extreme when examining militarized conflict. This makes sense, as militarized conflict implies increased levels of violence compared to militarization alone. With this conservative test, we find no statistically significant interaction when examining the Navy. We also once again see a small interactive effect between mean operations and trust in family, suggesting some spillover effect.

## Discussion

We set out to determine the degree to which violence during Mexico's drug war has impacted both political and community trust among those who grew up during this conflict. We sought to isolate how exposure to 1) general violence and 2) internal militarization by the Mexican government affected expressed levels of trust. With regard to general violence, we extend previous literature which often found a robust negative relationship between violence and trust to determine if this relationship exists specifically when exposure occurred during one's formative years. Further, we move past considerations

of general violence to examine if exposure to militarized internal conflict – where violence was carried out by the state across the country – similarly impacts levels of trust later in life.

We find strong evidence that exposure to generalized violence, measured by homicide rates, during one's formative years has a negative impact on both political and community trust. This effect is significant for almost all police forces, as we hypothesized (H1B). This generalized effect across security forces supports the idea that citizens may have difficulty in attributing responsibility for public security failures (Carlin, Love and Martínez-Gallardo, 2015; León, 2011), resulting in generalized distrust across responsible authorities. We find that trust in other institutions is largely immune from such an effect.

The fact that we see decreased trust in law enforcement – but not in government – was hypothesized, but warrants further consideration. This finding brings a nuanced new perspective to the impact of violence on trust, in light of previous research which has often found widespread negative relationships between violence exposure and political trust. Possibly, individuals exposed during their youth are less trustful of law enforcement because they believe these groups led to higher levels of violence and/or were ineffective in protecting their communities. Particularly with regard to the police, it is likely that the latter explanation is true. According to the Pion-Berlin and Carreras (2017), across Latin America, citizens tend to believe the police are highly ineffective. Thus, these results suggest those exposed to higher levels of violence during their youth likely perceive law enforcement to be particularly ineffective, leading to low levels of trust later in life. However, this perception of inefficacy seems to be separate from perceptions of the government generally speaking.

We also find that exposure to general violence decreases trust in one's community (family and neighbors) later in life (H1A). This finding builds on work which demonstrates how violence can weaken the social fabric of a community (Salmi, Smolej and Kivivuori, 2007; Corbacho, Philipp and Ruiz-Vega, 2015). Our results contribute troubling additional evidence that such effects are long-term and persistent. Notably, however, although we see a negative effect on trust in family members, we still find comparatively high levels of reported trust; this suggests that while trust in the family may decrease, this effect is slight. Effects regarding the broader community – such as neighbors – are more notable.

Beyond general violence, we provide compelling evidence that exposure to both military operations and militarized conflict also have long-term, negative effects on political and community trust. We report significant effects both when leveraging a continuous measure of exposure and a quasi-experimental test of exposure to these phenomena. Hypothesis 2A (regarding federal police) sees the strongest and most consistent support. Across all models, those exposed to increased violence during their formative years report lower levels of trust in the federal police later in life. We also find relatively broad support for Hypothesis 2B (trust in the military). The most consistent results suggest that lower levels of trust in the army result from more exposure to military operations during youth. This makes sense, as the army was involved in more drug war operations compared to the navy.<sup>7</sup>

Hypothesis 2C sees the most mixed support: in very few cases we find that trust in the government is negatively affected by increased exposure to military operations and conflict. We may see the federal government as isolated from such negative effects as three presidential administrations were involved, each with a different political identity. Indeed, the two presidencies responsible for the majority of drug war operations – Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto – originate from competing political parties (the PAN and PRI, respectively). The degree to which citizens blame each president may vary significantly based on the citizen’s partisanship. As research shows, citizens prefer to blame officials from an opposing party for a policy issue (Brown, 2010). However, we do find, at times, that trust in the state government is negatively affected. Evidence suggests that, particularly prior to the drug war period, subnational political dynamics strongly influenced intercartel violence (Trejo and Ley, 2018). It is possible citizens connect state-level and subnational politics to heightened levels of violence, and subsequent conflicts between the state and illicit groups. This could affect these trust dynamics.

Our findings have implications for a variety of possible downstream consequences. Low levels of trust (both interpersonal and political) can affect other important societal factors such as political participation. Research, for example, points to lower levels of political participation in high-violence envi-

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<sup>7</sup>Notably, we do not see a significant negative relationship between our continuous measure for exposure to military operations and trust in the Army, however the effect is still negative.

ronments (Ley, 2018); Our work suggests a new possible causal mechanism for this relationship where higher violence exposure may decrease trust, and possibly have negative effects on political involvement. Low levels of interpersonal trust can also negatively harm an individual's likelihood of engagement in community problem-solving (Wollebæk, Lundåsen and Trägårdh, 2012). This problem may be compounded as the respondents studied in our sample continue to live in the communities where they grew up; thus this low trust and its implications are likely to be felt at the community level, leading to larger scale implications.

## Conclusion

Understanding the long-term effects of exposure to violence during childhood is critical for designing effective policies to promote social and political stability, democratic norms, and social cohesion among the younger generation. In this study, we provide empirical evidence of the sociopolitical effects of childhood exposure to criminal violence and militarization. We contend that this phenomenon remains understudied and deserves more attention in political science. We show that, within the context of Mexico's drug war, early-life exposure to homicidal violence (often perpetrated by organized criminal groups) and militarized policing erodes political and interpersonal trust. Millions of youths in Mexico have been raised amidst a violent conflict of unprecedented intensity and pervasiveness, yet little is known about its impact on the formation of political beliefs and its implications for the consolidation of Mexico's young democracy.

Our findings shed light on some the sociopolitical ramifications of childhood exposure to criminal violence. We find differential effects based on the type of exposure. Exposure to homicidal violence during one's formative years has an overall negative impact on multiple political and interpersonal trust measures. However, when exploring the effects of militarization, we find that the strongest negative effects of exposure to military operations and confrontations on institutional trust are observed among institutions largely involved in Mexico's drug war, such as the federal police, the federal and state gov-

ernments, and the army.

These findings suggest that exposure to violence during one's youth has long-lasting effects, and can affect the social fabric of a society going forward. This is of paramount importance for understanding the political landscape of modern-day Mexico, as many young individuals are victims of heightened violence. The broader implications of our research are relevant to several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, where youths have been (and in several cases still are) exposed to protracted violence in their communities. Various paths remain open for future research. Further contributions are needed to improve our understanding of whether different types of exposure to violence during childhood are associated with the adoption of certain political ideologies in adult life, and whether the impacts on trust and political engagement persist over time.

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