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**Title: The upsurge of homicides in Mexico and its impact on life expectancy and ilifespan inequality in perspective**

[798 words]

In Mexico, life expectancy increased for more than six decades but then slowed down between 2005 and 2015. This decade coincides with the unprecedented rise in violence. The number of homicides per 100,000 males increased by more than 50% between 2005 and 2015 (from 20.4 to 31.2 per 100,000 males). As a result, gains in life expectancy for young males due to reductions in other causes of death, such as infectious and respiratory diseases, were reversed[https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0068] in this period.

Life expectancy is usually used to monitor population health. However, this indicator masks substantial variation in length of life. Inequality in length of life is the most fundamental of all inequalities as it refers to individuals’ age at death. Larger variation in lifespans implies greater uncertainty in the timing of death at the individual level and has implications for the planning of life’s events. In Mexico, although lifespan inequality declined substantially between 1995 and 2005, a decade later, this progress was stagnant[[http://dx.doi.org/](http://dx.doi.org/10.1130/G32273.1)10.2105/AJPH.2018.304878]. The increase in homicide mortality among young males accounted for most of this outcome. From a public health perspective, larger lifespan inequality implies increasing vulnerability at the societal level, which suggests ineffectiveness of policies aiming to protect individuals against life’s downturns. For example, in Mexico, the expected years lived vulnerable to becoming victim of violence increased by 30.5 million person-years between 2005 and 2014[<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech-2015-207015>].

At the subnational level, the strongest effect occurred in Guerrero, a state in the southern region where 43 students disappeared in 2014, where life expectancy was reduced by 2 years and lifespan inequality increased substantially. Followed by Chihuahua and Sinaloa in the north, with life expectancy losses of 1 year each. To put these figures in perspective, in 2010, males aged 15 to 50 years in Chihuahua (bordering state with Texas, USA) had 3 times higher mortality than the US troops in Iraq between 2003 and 2006.

The sudden increase of violence in Mexico is associated with military interventions that aimed at mitigating illicit drug operations and organized crime since 2006, when president Felipe Calderón launched a “war” against drugs and criminals. This, along with the so-called kingpin strategy of apprehending or killing the most prominent leaders in organized crime, increased competition and violence within criminal organizations. The persisting dispute led to the fragmentation of criminal organization, which fed the violent cycle.

At the same time, drug-trade flows were retooled with a boom in the contraband of opiates and opioids to make up for the shortfall in the price of cocaine and the decrease of marihuana exportations due to its legalization in United States. However, drugs did not seem to be enough to maintain the fire-power in the criminal world, which created incentive for the diversification of the portfolio of criminal businesses to protection rackets, migrant kidnappings, oil theft, extortions, contraband of weapons and persons, among others. The so-called War on Drugs became an unfinished violent cycle that decimated the social fabric.

Mexico has systematically failed to recognize and correct the detrimental consequences in health and human rights that suppressive and drug prohibition policies have had on the population. The new government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador has promised to take care the deep causes of violence. His diagnostic blames violence to the lack of opportunities and economic growth created by neoliberal policies during the last forty years.

New social programs focused in creating job and educative opportunities for the youth and other vulnerable groups are at the heart of his strategy, rather than military action, even though he insists in asking Congress to reform the Constitution to legalize the usage of the armed forces for public security and investigative tasks against crime.

The Mexican government new focus on improving social and human capital through education, community support and employment programs should be celebrated. This implies a transition from seen drugs as a source of a national security problem to recognize its violent consequences as a social justice challenge. However, this new diagnostic does not take into consideration that there is not conclusive evidence to sustain inequality as the main cause of violent behaviour, even though it is a great factor of vulnerability, while the evidence of punitive and prohibitionist drug policies as the trigger of the current violence, human rights and health crisis piles up.

Anyhow, the well-intended policy of combating poverty and inequality as the main prevention strategy does not justify leaving drug policy reform in a second level of priority. Substantiating a promised end to the “War” on Drugs through the promised regulation of marihuana and poppy, in Mexico, would be a necessary step to prevent the tremendous effect in the human rights, health and security problems reflected in the reduction of life expectancy, but also a necessary recognition of the social injustice reflected in the inequalities of its distribution.