Enduring Rates of Criminal Violence and the Changing Living Arrangements of Mexican Children: Exploring Possible Links

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It is well known that Mexico is going under a security (violence) crisis, which economic, social and demographic consequences are not yet fully understood. Previous research and diagnostics have focused mainly on assessing the etiological aspects of the current upsurge of violent crime in the country. From these studies we know that more than a nationwide phenomena, violent crime rates vary across the country and are correlated with regional dynamics. For instance, changes in around 5% of the Mexican municipalities explain most of the country level variance in violent crime rates. In this areas the factors linked to criminal violence are mostly heterogeneous since the degree of institutional development, corruption, organized crime, drug trafficking, economic development and geographic characteristics vary substantially from municipality to municipality. It is possible, however, to identify common individual factors associated with high prevalence of violent crime such as age, sex, education, income and family structure (REF).

Unfortunately, the consequences of crime on transforming social and demographic characteristics of the Mexican population are largely unknown. There are, however, few studies focusing on such direction. For example, some have examined the cost of homicides on life expectancy (e.g., Canudas-Romo, Garcia-Guerrero & Echarri Canovas 2015) or the impact of local homicide on educational outcomes of children (Caudillo & Torche 2014). These studies have shown this particular form of violent crime has indeed transform demographic and social outcomes in the Mexican population. Following this line of research, in this paper we ask if prolonged violence and criminality at the local level is related to changes in family structure. Specifically, we focus on the impact of increasing homicide rates on living arrangements of children residing in municipalities with a history of extreme high crime, high crime and low crime.

The rising proportion of children living with only one parent is related to changes in separation and divorce, single-mother fertility, nonfamily migration and mortality, factors that increased from 1990 to 2010. The first two did so slowly but steadily (Arceo Gómez y Campos Vázquez 2014; Perez Amador & Ojeda 2015) while absent parents as result of migration grew noticeably but mostly in regions of high migration (Nobles 2013). Despite the rise in Mexican deaths due to diabetes and homicide in the last decade, no research has focused on its potential effects on the prevalence of single-parent families. Attending this gap in the literature is particularly important given that the victims of homicide are not longer limited to the young, unmarried or childless. It is well possible that in communities with high prevalence of violent crime the propensity of children to live with both parents has fallen for this distressing reason.

This research has three goals: (1) to document how the increase of deaths by homicide over the past two decades has change children’s living arrangements i.e., the proportion of them living in one-parent families; (2) to estimate the relative contribution of homicide, versus
other sociodemographic sources, to the increase of one-parent families; and (3) to assess whether these processes are located disproportionately in localities with a history of extreme high crime, high crime and low crime. Documenting shifts in Mexican children’s family structure due to homicide is important because of mounting evidence that growing up in a single-parent family has negative consequences for children well-being, including health and educational outcomes (e.g., McLanahan, 2004); Moreover in institutional contexts where no State policies are directed to alleviate single mothers from falling into poverty (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2004). Exposure to violence, therefore, might contribute to intergenerational reproduction of disadvantage by directly affecting family structure and living arrangements.

Our analysis is based on Mexican census data from 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010 and intentional homicide rates at municipal from 1990 to 2013. Our analytical strategy acknowledges the difficulty on disentangling the effect of local violence on family structure and living arrangements from its common correlates by using causal inference techniques. Our outcome of interest is the change in the proportion of children living in one-parent households, which we calculate from census data using the relationship to the household head. Beginning in 2010, the Mexican Census included parents and partner identifiers for all household members, allowing a direct measure of our dependent variable. For the remaining censuses, we follow the method of linking children to mothers developed by IPUMS-I, which allow us to identify probable mothers of children not reported as children of the head.

We first use cluster analysis to classify municipalities (N= 2,456) according to their history of crime in groups of extreme high crime, high crime and low crime, identifying outliers. Then we use this classification to stratify our multivariate fixed effects models. Through the comparison of different levels of violent crime prevalence through time and controlling for socioeconomic and demographic variables at the municipality and state level, we expect to find measurable differences in family structure according to the prevalence and history of local homicide. On the light of our findings we will discuss possible theoretical links between violent crime and changing family structure in the Mexican current context. Our results will help us to better understand the pervasive effects that criminal violence might have on communities, families and children’s well-being as well as it possible consequences on the social and intergenerational reproduction of disadvantages.

References


