

# An Analyze of Anti-Drug Policy and Its Effects of Enrique Peña Nieto's Government in Mexico

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The drug problem has gradually penetrated into Mexican politics, economy, culture, and other fields since the 20th century, and has become an important factor affecting Mexico's development. Enrique Peña Nieto took office in 2012, and implemented a new anti-drug policy. His government has made reducing violence a major goal of the anti-drug operation, using the national gendarmerie to counter the drug violence, and reforming the judiciary to prevention crime. Enrique Peña Nieto's anti-drug policy has achieved certain results at the beginning of his term. However, the weakness of the national gendarmerie, corruption, and the sluggish economic development have affected the anti-drug policy, and caused it to fail. The drug problem in Mexico is affected by multiple factors, and its solution is a long one.

*Keywords:* Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico, anti-drug policy, crime prevention, drug violence

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the drug problem has plagued Mexico's development. During the period of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)'s rule in 20th century, drug trafficking organizations formed the informal "asylum relationships" with government officials to ensure their survival and development. And then, drugs have gradually penetrated into all aspects of Mexico's politics, economy, and culture, becoming one of the important factors restricting Mexico's development. In 2000, the National Action Party (PAN) came to power, cut off the "asylum relationship", and took anti-drug actions. However, instead of solving the drug problem in Mexico, it has caused the serious escalation of drug violence. Enrique Peña Nieto won the presidential election in 2012, and his political party PRI returned to power. His anti-drug policy has a profound impact on the drug problem in Mexico. This is the main content of this article.

## Historical Evolution of the Drug Problem in Mexico

At the end of the 15th century, Spanish immigrants introduced cannabis cultivation to Mexico for the first time. Poppies were introduced to Mexico by Asian immigrants in the mid-19th century. And then, Mexico became an important drug supplier to the United States. After the 1970s, Mexico's economy is weak, crises are growing, the poor are growing, and the demand for drugs in international markets is increasing. At that time, Colombia's drug cartel declined, and Mexican drug trafficking organizations were developing rapidly.

The influence of drugs has penetrated into all aspects of Mexico's politics, economy, society, and culture after the 1970s. Politically, PRI's government formed an informal "patron-client" relationship with drug trafficking organizations, latter having significant impact on local governments. Economically, drugs have

become an important driving force for Mexico's economy. It is important means for some poor farmers in Mexico to support their families to engage in drug cultivation and serve drug cartels. In 1998, about 300,000 farmers in Mexico were engaged in drug production, and nearly 468,000 peoples were directly or indirectly related to drug smuggling (Rios, 2008, pp. 7, 9). Culturally, a new form of music chanting drug lords—Narcocorrido, appeared and became popular music within a certain range (Edberg, 2004, p. 126). Drug lords, because of their wealth and generosity, became the object of respect and worship for some poor (Malkin, 2001, p. 117).

Vicente Fox, belongs to PAN, was elected as president in 2000, the 71-year-long rule of the PRI ended. The "asylum relationship" between the government and drug cartels broke down completely. President Vicente Fox has taken tougher anti-drug measures to counter the growing drug violence. On the one hand, the Mexican government has stepped up its efforts to seize drugs and arrest drug dealers, and vigorously eradicated illegally grown poppies and cannabis (Storrs, 2004, pp. 4, 6, 10). On the other hand, the Mexican government has strengthened anti-drug cooperation with the US government. In 2001, the Fox government established the Agencia Federal de Investigacion (AFI); it's personals were trained in the United States. The number of drug dealers, who was extradited by Mexican agency to United States, was increased from 12 to 63 (Seelke, 2017, p. 14).

Mexico's anti-drug action has played a certain role in combating drug cartels, but the arrest of cartel leaders has led to the division of big drug cartels. The struggle between cartels for territory, resources, and human resources has risen sharply. This triggered an escalation of drug violence. During President Vicente Fox's tenure, the number of deaths caused by drug violence increased from 1,080 in 2001 to 2,100 in 2006 (Chabat, 2010, p. 6).

In 2006, Felipe Calderón, also the candidate of PAN, was elected as president. He waged a full-scale drug war on drug cartels. The Felipe Calderón believes that the federal army is more effective than the police, and small, segmentary drug trafficking organizations are less harmful than large drug cartels (Felbab-Brown, 2011, p. 37). Therefore, he does this in two actions. On the one hand, the so-called "fragment and control" strategy was implemented to mobilize the army on a large scale to combat big drug cartels. After only 11 days in office, he sent 6,000-person armies, and took military action in Michoacan. In 2009 alone, he sent 48,750 troops to combat drug cartels (Grayson, 2013, p. 3). On the other hand, the "kingpin strategy" was taken to combat large drug cartels and arrest large drug lords. From 2007 to 2012, 22 of Mexico's 37 major drug lords were arrested or killed (Hope, 2016, p. 6).

At the same time, Mexico's government has also strengthened anti-drug cooperation with the United States. President Felipe Calderón has stepped up extradited drug dealers to United States. There are over 100 drug dealers extradited to the United States each year in Felipe Calderón's tenure (Seelke, 2017, p. 14). Mexico signed an anti-drug cooperation agreement with the United States. In October 2007, the United States and Mexico formally signed the "Merida Initiative". According to the agreement, the United States and Mexico cooperate in anti-drug cooperation. The United States provided Mexico with 1.4 billion U.S. dollars in the following three years to support Mexico in purchasing anti-drug inspection equipment (such as helicopters), train the army and update military equipment, upgrade communication systems, and strengthen law enforcement capabilities (Weintraub & Wood, 2010, p. 38).

The Mexican army captured 41.23 million suspects of drug trafficking and killed 2,321 drug dealers from 2006 to 2011 (Grayson, 2013, p. 3). But by the end of Calderon's administration, drug violence had spread to

84% of Mexico's cities (Zedillo & Wheeler, 2012, p. 33). The number of drug cartels in Mexico doubled from 2007 to 2011 (Zedillo & Wheeler, 2012, p. 34). Throughout the Calderón administration, INEGI reported 121,669 homicides, an average of over 20,000 people per year, more than 55 people per day, or just over two people every. Under Fox, the number documented by INEG was only 60,162 homicides (Calderón, Ferreira, & Shirk, 2018, p. 4).

### **The Anti-Drug Strategy in Enrique Peña Nieto's Government**

Enrique Peña Nieto, the candidate of PRI, was elected as president of Mexico in 2012, which means the PRI came to power again after 12 years. In the challenge of unprecedented drug violence, and the desire of the Mexican for national security and economic growth, Enrique Peña Nieto's Government has made the reducing violence as the core of its anti-drug policy, which includes the following aspects.

#### **Abandon the "Kingpin Strategy", Reduce the Drug Violence**

Felipe Calderón's "Kingpin Strategy" made big drug cartels to split into a large number of small ones. In 2014, the four major drug cartels in Mexico split into 60-80 (Liu, 2015, p. 52). These organizations lost external restraint. They compete for territory, markets, and drug trafficking routes; the conflict between them has intensified. Otherwise, the violence against the government, police, politicians, and even the media by drug organizations has begun, leading to a surge in drug violence.

Therefore, Enrique Peña Nieto promised to adjust Calderon's anti-drug strategy, and shift the focus of the anti-drug policy to reducing violence that affects people's lives, such as killings, abductions, and extortion. The goal is to reduce drug violence by 50% in office (Shirk, Wood, & Olson, 2014, p. 265). His top security priority will not be arresting the leaders of the organizations that move hundreds of millions of dollars of narcotics each year into the United States. Instead, he and his advisers say, they will focus the government's resources on reducing homicide, kidnapping, and extortion (Weissenstein, 2012).

However, the Enrique Peña Nieto government did not completely abandon military means to combat drug trafficking organizations. It continues to use military forces and polices to combat drug organizations such as Sinaloa cartel, Gulf cartel, and Los Zetas. From 2013 to 2016, the Mexico government allocated a total of 485 million US dollars to intervene in areas with high crime rates (Seelke, 2017, p. 21).

#### **Establish the National Gendarmerie to Combat Drug Violence**

The reinstatement of the PRI has not restored the "asylum system" with drug trafficking organizations. At the end of Calderon's administration, 80% of the Mexican population still supported the government's anti-drug policy—use of the army to combat drug cartels (The PEW Global Attitudes Project, 2012, p. 1). But the drug war was not a long-term solution. There are serious deficiencies in anti-drug action by the army. Some Mexican people believe that the drug war makes the country "militarizing", and may exacerbate the social violence. They blame the government's anti-drug operations for being too violent and forcing land and natural resources (Grayson, 2013, p. 1).

Enrique Peña Nieto has proposed the establishing a 40,000-person "national gendarmerie" during the presidential campaign, sending them to areas with high level violence, supporting the local government and local police. As a result, Enrique Peña Nieto government formed a 5,000-member National Gendarmerie on August 22, 2014. The function of gendarmerie is both military and police, and able to be mobilized where it is needed quickly (Rico, 2016, p. 613).

In order to make the gendarmerie as “new model army” without corruption, the Enrique Peña Nieto government rigorously screened the personnel of the gendarmerie. At the same time, the government also provided huge funding to the gendarmerie in terms of funding, training, and equipment, to ensure that members of the gendarmerie can receive relatively high salaries. The gendarmerie can receive high-quality training and have modern weapons (Rico, 2016, p. 615). In addition, the government has also built infrastructure such as airports, roads, and ports in remote areas to ensure that the gendarmerie can effectively enforce the law.

### **Carry Out Anti-Corruption Actions to Improve the Efficiency of Drug Control**

Local governments in Mexico, especially the police, have been infiltrated by drug trafficking organizations. Corruption is one of the key factors affecting the effectiveness of anti-drug policy of Mexico. As Eduardo Almaguer, attorney general of Jalisco, said: roughly one in five actively collaborate with gangs and about 70 percent “do not act” against them, and 1,733 serve police in Jalisco, or nearly 16 percent of the municipal force, had failed evaluations known as “loyalty tests” (Graham, 2016).

Therefore, Enrique Peña Nieto government passed the “transparency reform” program in February 2014, and created the “National Transparency System” to ensure that investigating agencies can smoothly obtain what they need information. On April 16, 2015, the General Transparency Law was passed, which requiring all government officials to disclose their work and task related information, and set a timetable for the actual and complete disclosure of information of every government departments. This law also requested government to have disclosed their violations of “crimes against humanity” and serious violations of human rights (Merino, 2015, pp. 10-13).

In April 2015, “National Anticorruption System” was established, requiring federal and state governments to collaborate in anti-corruption. It composed: (1) independent and effective authorities coordinated around a common mission to prevent and combat corruption; (2) a new comprehensive and integrated system of administrative responsibilities; (3) a new criminal regime to fight corruption; and (4) a new control and oversight system to coordinate state and local authorities (“The Road Towards Ending Corruption: Mexico’s National Anticorruption System”, 2016, p. 5).

It also required a new integrated and unified administrative responsibility system, a new criminal anti-corruption system, a new control and monitoring systems. In addition, Enrique Peña Nieto government has established a Special Anticorruption Prosecution Office. The main function of the agency is to identify criminal corruption cases reported by the public, and to investigate these cases as the Mexican government (“The Road Towards Ending Corruption: Mexico’s National Anticorruption System”, 2016, p. 6).

### **Implement Socio-Economic Reforms and Crime Prevention**

Enrique Peña Nieto government took socio-economic and educational improvement as an important measure for drug control and crime prevention. He hoped that this would weaken the social foundation of the drug problem, criminal violence, and finally change the situation of poor people relying on drug organizations for public services and socio-economic benefits.

On the one hand, Enrique Peña Nieto government is committed to improving the living and welfare of the people across the country. On January 21, 2013, President Enrique Peña Nieto issued a decree for the anti-hunger campaign nationwide, which outlined a five-point plan to tackle hunger in 400 of Mexico’s roughly 2,500 municipalities, urging community action, local government responsibility and pledging to strengthen agricultural production in afflicted areas.

This campaign includes: (1) zero hunger through adequate food and nutrition for those living in extreme poverty and those with lack of access to food; (2) eradicate acute childhood malnutrition and improve childhood weight/size standards/averages; (3) increase food production and income of peasant farmers and small-scale producers; (4) minimize post-harvest food loss during storage, transport, distribution, and sale; (5) promote community participation toward the eradication of hunger (The Hunger Project, 2013).

The Enrique Peña Nieto government also increased fiscal expenditures to extend the scope of federal pensions to housewives, and increased funding for the Oportunidades project, which is one of Mexico's major poverty alleviation projects. Its main purpose is to support poor families in urban and rural Mexico, improve their children's education, health, and nutrition, and promote their ability to work in the future, thereby reducing poverty. It aimed to provide 6.5 million poor families with medical care and their children's schooling (Seelke, 2013, p. 9).

On the other hand, the Enrique Peña Nieto government has taken special crime prevention program in some areas with high levels of violence and crime. In 2013, Mexico government allocated \$190 million for crime prevention programs in 57 high-risk areas of drug violence (Felbab-Brown, 2014, p. 28). The plan includes: (1) promoting full-time education, keeping students in school, reducing their access to criminal gangs and drug trafficking groups, reducing the possibility of being recruited by these groups, (2) strengthening treatment of drug users and adopting effective drug use prevention measures, (3) promoting the development of small and medium enterprises, increasing employment, etc.

#### **Renew “Merida Initiative” to Cooperation With the United States**

The Merida Initiative, signed in 2007, is the basis for cooperation between the United States and Mexico in anti-drug. United States and Mexico renewed the “Merida Initiative” in 2013. They agreed to focus on justice sector reform, money laundering, police, and corrections professionalization at the federal and state level, border security both north and south, and pilot approaches to address root causes of violence (Seelke, 2017, p. 10). The United States provided Mexico with \$682.9 million aids from 2013 to 2016 (Seelke, 2017, p. 11).

The United States supports Mexico's efforts to increase anti-drug capabilities. The United States has provided direct assistance to Mexico's anti-drug operation. The United States had provided aid to purchase inspection equipment, weapons; also provided training for anti-drug in Mexico. On the other hand, the United States supports the reform of police and judiciary in Mexico. The United States trained 230,000 preventive police and 30,000 ministerial (investigative) police (Seelke, 2017, pp. 16-17).

Two countries work together to maintain border security. In order to effectively prevent drug smuggling, the United States has used automated license plate readers along the US-Mexico border. US has helped to establish a Mexican Customs training academy to support professionalization and promote the Mexican customs' new role of performing inbound inspections (Seelke, 2017, p. 20).

Two countries are actively implementing crime and violence prevention programs. In order to eliminate crime and violence at its source, the Mexican government has adopted a series of actions, such as strengthening the crime prevention capacity of federal polices, encouraging state and local governments to strengthen prevention of crime and violence, and increasing attention to people with a criminal tendency. According to USAID's plan, at the same time, the United States will provide Mexico with \$9 million to prevent and combat crime and violence from 2014 to 2018 (USAID, 2016).

In short, reducing violence is the focus of Enrique Peña Nieto government's anti-drug policy, which is a continuation and development of Calderon government. In this respect, the Enrique Peña Nieto government wanted to end the drug war, created a new national gendarmerie, launched anti-corruption operations, implemented criminal prevention program, and so on, in an effort to achieve the desired results.

### Evaluation of the Enrique Peña Nieto's Government's Anti-Drug Policy

The violence in Mexico did decrease during the Enrique Peña Nieto's first two years in power. The number of deaths due to violence in Mexico decreased from 25,967 in 2013 to 23,063 in 2013, and further reduced to 1,669 in 2014. From 2013 to 2014, the homicide rate decreased from 22 per 100,000 to 19 per 100,000, and reduced to 16 per 100,000 in 2015. But the drug violence has sharply risen after 2015. By the end of 2015, the number of deaths due to violence had once again increased to 20,525, and the death rate had risen to 17 per 100,000. In 2017, the homicide rate in Mexico reached 25.7 per 100,000, and the violence in Mexico in 2018 reached a record high. The homicide rate increased to 27.3 per 100,000, and 33,341 people were murdered (Calderón, Heinle, Ferreira, & Shirk, 2019, p. 3).

With regard to the distribution of drug violence, the scope of violence in Mexico showed a certain trend of reduction in the early days of President Enrique Peña Nieto. According to statistics from INEGI, 1,073 of the 2,450 municipalities across Mexico were zero homicides in 2007. By 2013, the number of "zero homicides" municipalities had been reduced to 817. The number of municipalities with zero homicides had grown to 889 in 2015. However, the scope of the violence in Mexico has expanded since 2016. 70% of municipalities were threatened by violence in 2017, highest level since 1990 (Calderón et al., 2019, pp. 18-19).

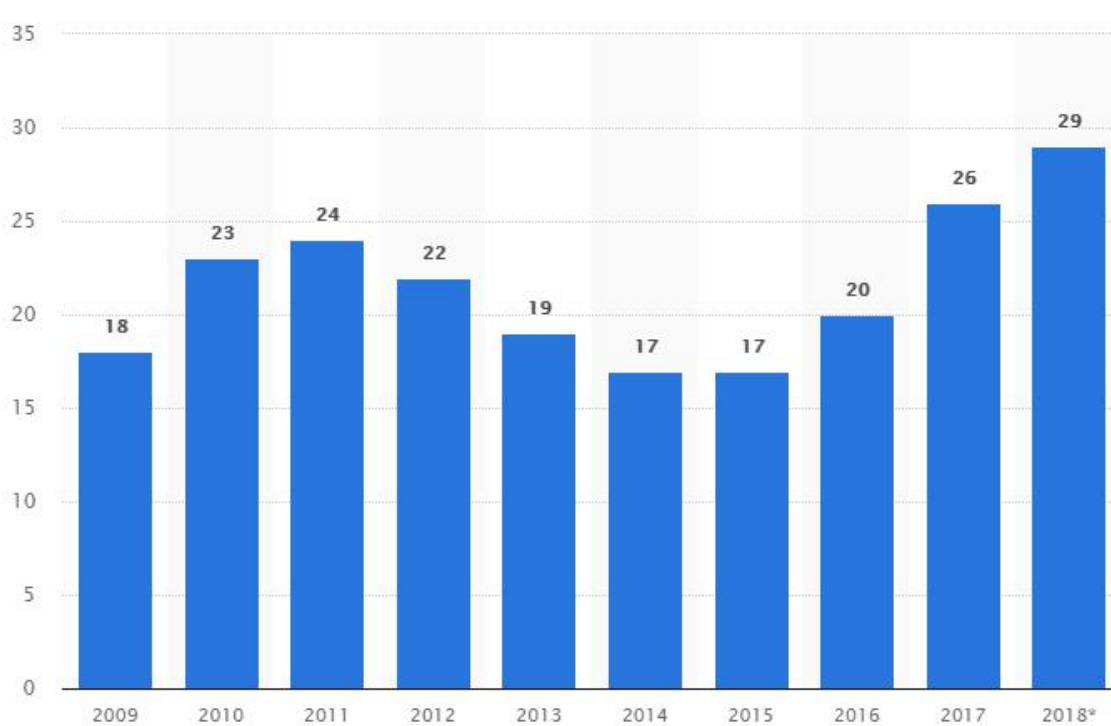


Figure 1. Number of murders committed per 100,000 inhabitants in Mexico from 2009 to 2018. Note: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/714113/mexico-homicide-rate/>Laura Y. Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico*, Justice in Mexico, 2019, pp. 11-32.

The reasons for the failure of the Enrique Peña Nieto government's drug policy are as follows:

Firstly, the Mexican National Gendarmerie is too weak. Affected by the drug war under Felipe Calderón government, the relation between government and drug cartels was broke completely, and drug cartels gradually divided, expanded across Mexico. In particular, drug war has broken the original balance of drug trafficking organizations, causing them to fight each other endlessly for contention and smuggling routes. They are out of control. They attacked the government, politicians, and civilians. Some small drug trafficking organizations transformed into criminal groups focused on kidnapping and extortion.

After Enrique Peña Nieto came to power, it was no longer possible to restore the asylum relationship between the PRI and drug trafficking organizations. The National Gendarmerie has only 5,000 people, and it takes time to improve the Gendarmerie's combat effectiveness. Therefore, Enrique Peña Nieto government abandons military strikes against drug trafficking organizations, relying only on the gendarmerie to maintain social security, will inevitably lead to an escalation of violence.

Secondly, the problem of corruption in Mexico remains unresolved, which limits the anti-drug actions. Although the Enrique Peña Nieto government is concerned about corruption problem, corruption still exists in Mexico. According to the Transparency International, the corruption of Mexico has deteriorated greatly after 2015, and the score of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) has dropped to 30 points. Among the 176 countries counted, Mexico ranks 123 ("Corruption Perceptions Index 2016", 2017). By 2016, 90% of the murders of journalists have not been detected, and most of the criminals are in impunity. Mexico's CPI score dropped to 28 points and ranked 138 ("Corruption Perceptions Index 2016", 2019). This severely constrains the Enrique Peña Nieto's anti-drug strategy. Even after Enrique Peña Nieto stepped down as president in 2019, he was even caught in a corruption scandal.

Thirdly, social poverty in Mexico is an important factor affecting the drug problem. From the 1940s to the late 1960s, the average GDP growth rate in Mexico was 6%, while the rural areas were only 2%. The wealth owned by the poorest 50% of Mexico's population decreased from 19% to 15.7% from 1950 to 1969. Mexico's unemployed population increased by 487% from 1960 to 1970 (Watt & Zepead, 2012, p. 46). A large number of poor people are forced to make living to engage in drug cultivation, production, and trade. Drugs are also a part of Mexico's economy. By 2010, the average annual profit from drug in Mexico still is as high as US \$30 billion (Nieto, 2012, p. 29). Some scholars called the "drug trafficking, the engine of the Mexican economy" and others nicknamed the NAFTA as the "North American Drug Trade Agreement" (Nieto, 2012, p. 28). This is an important reason for the emergence and development of the drug problem in Mexico.

The PAN government of Mexico has adopted a strict anti-drug policy since 2000. However, the overall economic of Mexico during this period was not good, and the number of unemployed increased. The average annual Mexico's GDP was about 1.9% from 2000 to 2005, and about 2.18% from 2007 to 2012 (Watt & Zepead, 2012, p. 156; Global Finance, 2017). At the same time, unemployment in Mexico has sharply raised. About 700,000 people did not have formal job from 2000 to 2006, and increased to two million in Calderón's government (Watt & Zepead, 2012, pp. 162-163). Many unemployed people, especially young people, are in the arms of drug trafficking organizations. They became the social foundation of Mexican drug trafficking organizations. Many unemployed people, especially young people, join drug trafficking organizations. They became the social foundation of these organizations.

The Enrique Peña Nieto government tried to improve the lives of the poor by developing the economy, thereby eliminating the basis for the drug problem. He has made some achievements. The proportion of

unemployment people in Mexico decreased from 54.7% to 52.5% (OECD, 2017, p. 40). However, the gap between poverty and the rich remains severe. The wealth of the richest Mexicans has increased five-fold since 1992. Mexico's richest 1% of the population owns 43% of the country's wealth by 2015 (Lee, 2015). For these poor people, drug production and trade remain the important viable means of subsistence.

### Conclusion

In the early 20th century, the PAN government launched the drug war for more than a decade, caused the division drug cartels, and a serious escalation of drug violence. Today, the drug problem has become an important factor affecting Mexican social security. After Enrique Peña Nieto came to power in 2012, he tried to abandon the drug war, replace the army with the gendarmerie to combat drug cartels, strengthen the capacity of the government and the judicial institutions, improve the education and living conditions of the poor, and then resolve drug violence. However, his anti-drug policy focused on judicial and administrative reforms, and with limited success. Under his administration, drug violence in Mexico has escalated sharply, and was unprecedented. In fact, Mexico's drug problem and violence are not only a matter of health and public safety, but also reflect the long-term disadvantages of Mexico's modernization. These problems are already deep and cannot be reversed by a single government. With Obrador elected president of Mexico in 2018, he has to face the challenges faced by his predecessors. Therefore, drug violence in Mexico will continue, and the solution to the drug problem is still a long way off.

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