

HOBBS ON DRUGS  
UNDERSTANDING DRUG VIOLENCE IN MEXICO

Abstract

by

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This dissertation analyzes the unprecedented eruption of organized criminal violence in Mexico. To understand the dynamics of drug violence, this dissertation addresses three questions. What explains the onset of the war on drugs in Mexico? Once the conflict starts, why does drug violence escalate so rapidly? And lastly, why is there subnational variation in the concentration of violence?

Based on a game theoretic model, the central argument indicates that democratization erodes the peaceful configurations between the state and criminal organizations and motivates authorities to fight crime, thus triggering a wave of violence between the state and organized criminals and among rival criminal groups fighting to control strategic territories. In this account, state action is not neutral: law enforcement against a criminal group generates the opportunity for a rival criminal organization to invade its territory, thus leading to violent interactions among rival criminal groups. These dynamics of violence tend to concentrate in territories favorable for the reception, production and distribution of drugs. In this way, the disrupting effect of law enforcement unleashes a massive wave of violence of all-against-all resembling a Hobbesian state of war.

To test the observable implications of the theory, the empirical assessment relies on a novel database of geo-referenced daily event data at municipal level providing

detailed information on who did what to whom, when and where in the Mexican war on drugs. This database covers all municipalities of the country between 2000 and 2010, thus comprising about 9.8 million observations. The creation of this fine-grained database required the development of *Eventus ID*, a novel software for automated coding of event data from text in Spanish. The statistical assessment relies on quasi-experimental identification strategies and time-series analysis to overcome problems of causal inference associated with analyzing the distinct - yet overlapping - processes of violence between government authorities and organized criminals and among rival criminal groups. In addition, the statistical analysis is complemented with insights from fieldwork and historical process tracing. Results provide strong support for the empirical implications derived from the theoretical model.