

# **Violence within:** Understanding the Use of Violent Practices Among Mexican Drug Traffickers

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**By Dr. Karina García**



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**About this Publication:**

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# Violence within: Understanding the Use of Violent Practices Among Mexican Drug Traffickers

By Dr. Karina García, Assistant Teacher, School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol

## Executive Summary

- **This paper provides first-hand data regarding the perpetrators' perspectives about their engagement in practices of drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico such as murder, kidnapping and torture.** Drawing on the life stories of thirty-three former participants in the Mexican drug trade—often self-described as “narcos”—collected in the North of Mexico between October 2014 and January 2015, this paper shows how violent practices serve different purposes, which indicates the need for different strategies to tackle them.
- There are four dimensions of drug trafficking-related violence identified in participants' narratives: **1) as a business activity, 2) as a means of industry regulation, 3) as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment, and 4) as a ritual in the cult of the holy death** [*la santa muerte*].
- **Practices of violence are normalised by participants in the Mexican drug trade as if it were any other business activity.** The logistics of violence in the Mexican drug trade include the casualisation of work: workers at the bottom of the hierarchy are conceived as disposable, usually street drug dealers; a clear specialization and division of labour: not all participants in the drug trade—often described as “narcos”—engage in the same type of violence, some focus on torturing people, others on murder, and others transportation and/or disappearance of their bodies.
- **“Narcos” understand corporal punishments, mutilation and even death, as a way of establishing the ground rules for working within the drug trade.** It is taken for granted that, given the illegal nature of the industry, violence is the only way in which drug traffickers can communicate and enforce norms and agreements among themselves, both within their own networks and in relation to their enemies.
- **Murdering and torturing people are practices linked to releasing adrenaline, and even positive emotions such as happiness.** Participants suggest that, in the context of poverty, performing acts of violence was the only way they had to feel powerful. Having control over other people's lives gave them a sense of power that they could

not obtain in any other way. Some participated in violence not only as a necessary business activity, but as a hobby.

- **Former Zetas pointed out that most members are invited to be part of the cult of the holy death [*la santa muerte*] and some of them are forced to worship her.** This cult requires blood, torture and human sacrifices in exchange for protection. Participants explained that they joined this cult in order to have a dignified death rather than living a good life.
- **Drug trafficking-related violence is likely to continue or increase as long as vulnerable groups prone to joining drug cartels remain neglected.** In the context of the new administration of López-Obrador, and the creation of the controversial National Guard, this paper's findings suggest that whereas this new security force may be necessary in some areas of the country, it cannot be the only strategy to minimise drug trafficking-related violence in the long run.
- **In order to address the first two dimensions of violence, decision makers should consider the legalisation of drugs as a way to minimise both violence in Mexico and the quantity of drugs smuggled into the US.** Crucially, legalisation should be understood as part of a wider strategy to tackle violence in Mexico. Considering that Mexico is one of the biggest producers of cannabis and opium, it is suggested to fully legalise the production, distribution, and consumption of these drugs in order to reduce the revenue potential of violent, illicit enterprises.
- **The Mexican government should invest more on research and social programmes targeted at the poorest and most dangerous neighbourhoods in the North of Mexico.** Tackling everyday insecurities that children and young men have to cope with is of paramount importance to prevent increased labour pools for drug cartels.

# Violence within: Understanding the Use of Violent Practices Among Mexican Drug Traffickers

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By **Dr. Karina García**, Assistant Teacher, School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), University of Bristol

## 1. Introduction

Since the launch of the war on drugs in 2007, Mexico has experienced a large increase in violence with an estimated tally of over 270,000 homicides, 121,613 in Calderón's administration, and 150,000 during Peña's administration (Calderón et al., 2019: 38-39). Both administrations embarked upon a militarised campaign against organised crime which repeatedly failed to improve security and has increased the levels of violence in the country. The current administration of Andres Manuel López-Obrador (2018-) seems to be heading in the same direction. Despite the government's rhetoric of change expressed in the National Development Plan, Mexico's public security de facto remains a largely militarised response to the problem of drug trafficking and the violence associated with this illicit industry.

This paper provides a qualitative sociological analysis of violent practices in the Mexican drug trade based on the narratives of former drug traffickers. In contrast to most of the scholarship on this subject, this approach does not assume or theorise about how perpetrators think, or how they make decisions. Instead, drawing on in-depth field interviews, this study relies on the direct accounts of the perpetrators themselves, who explain their everyday jobs, the benefits and the challenges of being part of the drug trafficking business, and the violent practices employed in this industry.

The paper is organised as follows. I first describe and explain the process of data collection in the North of Mexico and the discursive approach used in analysing participants' narratives. The next section provides a detailed analysis of the four dimensions of violence linked to the business of drug trafficking. Finally, I summarize President López Obrador's strategies to tackle drug trafficking-related violence, focusing on the creation of the National Guard, which has been the primary focus of the administration to date. My findings suggest that the continued militarisation of the public security will only perpetuate violence among Mexican drug traffickers. Thus, I offer four policy recommendations for decision makers in Mexico and the United States to minimise and prevent drug trafficking-related violence in the long run.

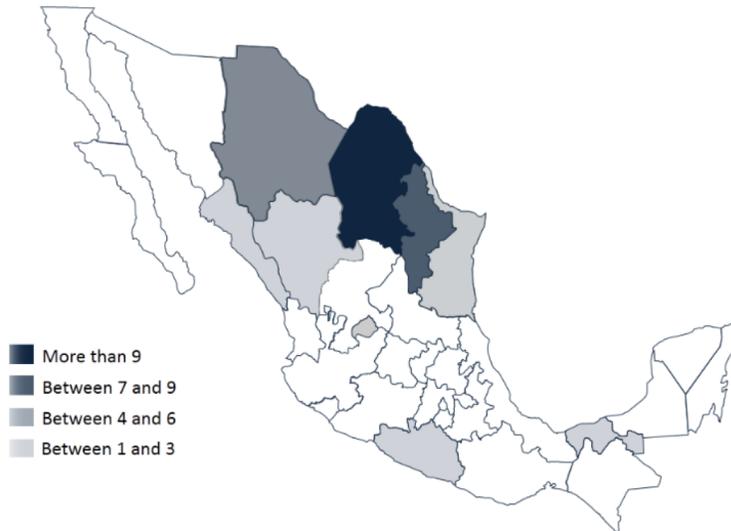
## 2. Methodology: A Bottom-up Approach to Studying Violence in the Drug Trade

To conduct this study, data was collected by carrying out thirty-three semi-structured interviews that took place in the northern state of Coahuila, Mexico, from October 2014 to January 2015. Participants were recruited through a religious organisation called *Cristo Vive* (Christ is alive), which aims to help individuals with drug and alcohol dependency. This organisation provides peer support and religious therapy, and serves approximately 750 people per year, the majority of whom are male. Everyone accepted into the organisation is expected to reside at the centre full time for at least three months (ideally one year) in order to overcome their addictions. Nevertheless, they are free to leave the centre whenever they wish.

The interviews lasted between one and four hours (depending on the age, personality and the time that participants spent working for drug cartels). Interviews addressed multiple topics including a) family background; b) socio-economic conditions; c) drug and alcohol abuse; d) relationships; e) cultural constructs such as respect, dignity and *machismo*; e) religion and spirituality, amongst other topics. For safety reasons, all interviews took place within the premises of the *Cristo Vive* organisation and there was always at least one male chaperone present in the interview room. Prior to the interviews, the participants received a detailed explanation of the project.

Inclusion criteria for participation in this study required participants to be: a) Mexican men aged between 18 and 45 years old and b) to have participated in activities related to drug trafficking. To minimise participants' emotional distress and to secure the researcher's safety, participants were also selected only if c) they had a minimum stay of a year or more in the rehabilitation centre, and d) they had been directly nominated by their spiritual guides. There was no place of origin criteria for participants of the study, other than being Mexican, but given that the research setting is located in the North of Mexico, most participants came from the northern states of Chihuahua (4), Coahuila (11), Nuevo León (9), all bordering with the U.S. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participants' origin



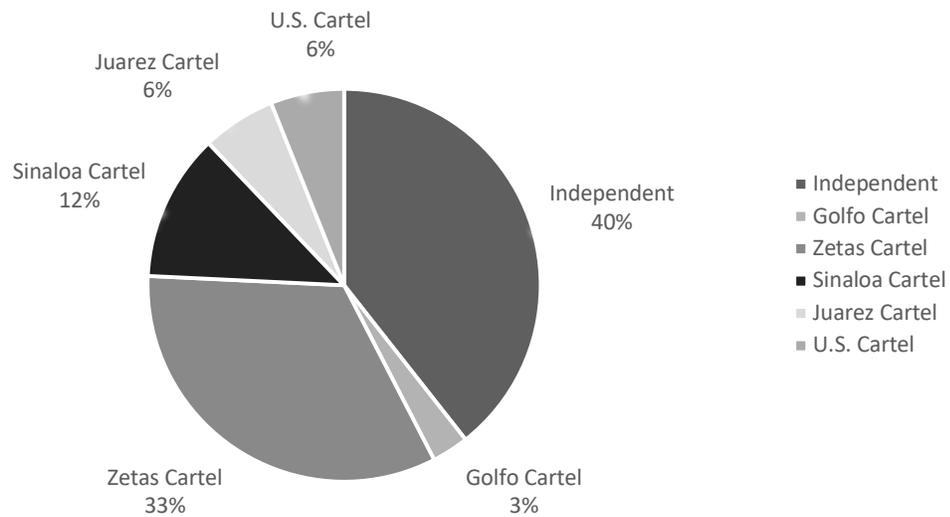
For the purposes of this research, only men that met these selection criteria to be part of this study were invited to participate. Those who were interested were then provided with all the necessary information about the research before confirming their participation. They were also advised that their participation was voluntary; that they would not be paid nor receive any other material incentive, and that they were free to stop the interview at any given time. Interviews were carried out in Spanish and translated into English by the author. In order to protect participants' identities, participants were assigned pseudonyms (see Table 1). In addition, all quotes providing information which can be linked to participants' identities were anonymised.

**Table 1. Pseudonyms Used for Study Participants**

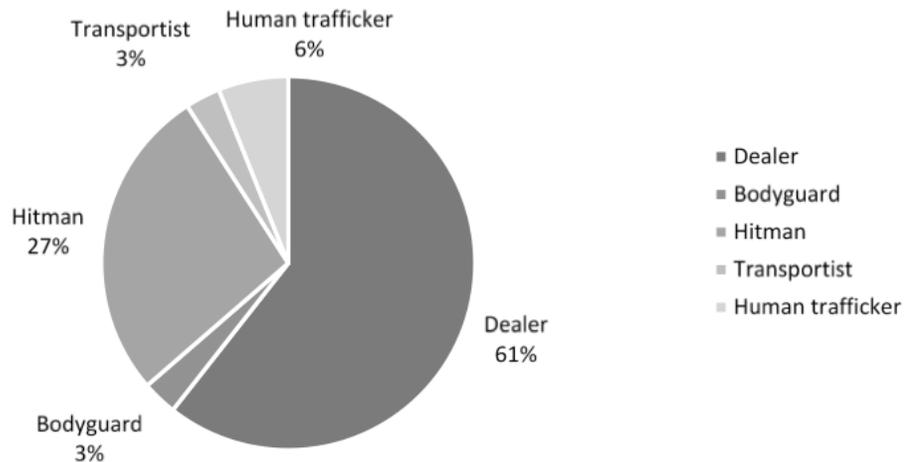
Number	Pseudonym	Number	Pseudonym
1	Alan	18	Lamberto
2	Balente	19	Memo
3	Bidegaray	20	Paco
4	Canastas	21	Palomo
5	Chito	22	Pancho
6	Chufo	23	Peque
7	Cristian	24	Piochas
8	Dávila	25	Pitufu
9	Difos	26	Ponciano
10	Dionisio	27	Pato
11	Eduardo	28	Rigoletto
12	Facundo	29	Rorro
13	Fausto	30	Tabo
14	Inmaculado	31	Tigre
15	Jaime	32	Wilson
16	Jorge	33	Yuca
17	Kevin		

Given that cartels usually operate in a *control-of-territory* paradigm, participants were also invited to indicate which cartel they belonged to. Figure 2 shows a distribution of interviewees' cartel membership. The Zetas appear as the most common cartel, an expected fact due to its strong leadership in the northeast region of Mexico. Interviewees were also invited to categorise their activities within the criminal organisation. Figure 3 sets out the answers obtained when participants were asked to describe their most common activity. In addition to their roles within drug cartels, 88% of participants stated that they also participated in other illegal activities not strictly related to the drug markets, such as assault or theft.

**Figure 2. Participants' cartel membership**



**Figure 3. Participants' Former Roles in the Cartels**



### 3. Analysis: The Four Dimensions of Drug Trafficking Violence

The analysis of participants' life story interviews was informed by a discourse theoretic approach which draws on a constructivist ontological position. This entails a particular conception of social reality which, in turn, informs implicit and explicit assumptions about what the world is, and what the best ways are to generate knowledge about it. In this view, 'reality' is socially constructed. The material world does not 'objectively' have or express meaning outside discourse. Instead, meaning is rather constructed by social actors through

discourses which are usually but not necessarily linguistic (Milliken, 1999). My research departs from this premise, there is no pre-existing or objective social reality. This claim does not imply that material reality does not exist. Social constructivists do not deny that there is a material reality outside discourse: “[o]f course earthquakes occur, and their occurrence is independent of consciousness; but it is their construction in discourse that determines whether they are ‘movements of tectonic plates’ or manifestations of ‘the wrath of the god’” (Purvis and Hunt, 1993: 492). In the context of my research, for example, whether practices of drug trafficking-related violence are conceived as a ‘business’, as a ‘hobby’, as ‘empowerment’ or as ‘crime’ is determined within discourse. Therefore, a key aim in my analysis of participants’ narratives, was to identify and unpack the meanings produced and reproduced in discourse.

Drawing on poststructuralist conceptions, I understand discourse as a set of regularities and as a form of knowledge. In the former, discourse is a group of related statements and relationships which shape particular discursive practices. Discursive practices are understood “as the process through which social ‘reality’ comes into being” (Doty, 1993: 303), or, in other words, the practices of discourse (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014: 174). Essentially, discourse is determined by time and space in a given society (Foucault, 1972: 117-182). That is, discourses are historically contingent and consequently, changeable (Milliken, 1999). Thus, what constitutes a dominant discourse today may not be the same tomorrow. In this sense, discourses are never complete and always open to change. As a form of knowledge, discourse defines the statements that can be considered to be ‘true’ or ‘false’. Discourse constitutes what is possible to say within what is regarded as true, or untrue, rather than a reflection of ‘reality’ (Foucault, 1972: 224). In this way, discourse produces ‘truth’ which is accepted in a given society, in a particular time and space. To put it in other words, discourses provide justification for actions which promote certain ways of thinking, being and acting towards the world (Hall, 1985). That is not to say, however, that discourses are ‘truth’ but rather that they obtain such status through repetition and discursive practices (Doty, 1996).

Informed by this understanding of discourse, I conceptualise the set of meaning production regularities which I identified in the narratives of participants of this research as the narco discourse. I see these regularities, and the logic they produce, as an indicative of a particular discourse, i.e. the ‘narco’ discourse. Additionally, drawing on the Foucauldian conception of a discourse as knowledge, such as the ‘clinical discourse’, I also use the term narco discourse in relation to the group of statements producing ‘truths’ (i.e. knowledge) which construct narcos’ social reality. From this perspective, the narco discourse is understood as a form of knowledge which so far has been neglected in academic literature.

Furthermore, my understanding of the narco discourse as a set of regularities and as a form of (subjugated) knowledge has a significant analytical implication. My analytical approach “...obviates the need for recourse to the interiority of a conscious, meaning-giving subject, either in terms of psychological and cognitive characteristics of individuals or...social collectivities” (Doty, 1993: 302). This refers to the poststructuralist conception of the subject as constituted in discourse, as opposed to the humanist approach which conceive it as a “thinking, knowing, speaking subject” (Foucault, 1972: 55). The narco

subject is the effect of and constituted in discourse. In the case of the narco discourse, this entails the understanding that its productive nature discussed above does not necessarily depend on or coincide with participants' motivations or perceptions. Whether participants consciously try to portray drug trafficking-related violence in a particular way, or if they try to justify their involvement in it, is not relevant to my research. My analysis is rather concerned in examining how the particular set of regularities I identified in their narratives, come into play in the production of meanings and knowledge and how these enable practices of drug trafficking-related violence.

Specifically, in analysing participants' narratives, I identified four different types of violence linked to drug trafficking. First, practices of murder, kidnapping and torture are constructed as a business. The terms used in the narco discourse to refer to drug trafficking are '*el narco*', which is the shorthand for *narcotráfico* [drug trafficking] in Spanish, and '*este negocio*' [this business]. Among both outside observers and participants in the Mexican drug trade, these terms are often used interchangeably to signify both the illegal business of drug trafficking and the different codes of violence that are implicit due to the illegality of such a business. There is a chain of connotation linking drug trafficking-related violence to 'job', 'workers' and in turn to 'torture', 'kidnapping' and 'murder' as practices that narcos typically engage with as part of the business. The second type of violence relates to inter and intra cartel violence, such as beatings, mutilations and murder, as the ground rules of working in *el narco*. Under this conception, violence is linked to the rules of working in this business and, in turn to 'beatings', 'torture' and 'murder' as a 'fair' currency 'to pay for mistakes' within cartels and as a way to convey a message to rival cartels. The third type of violence is associated with perpetrators' personal satisfaction such as releasing adrenaline and as a source of empowerment. Practices of 'torture', 'violence' and 'murder' are linked to feelings of 'joy', 'excitement', 'adrenaline' and 'power'. Finally, the fourth type of violence that indirectly relates to drug trafficking is linked to the cult of the holy death. This cult is mainly associated to the Zetas cartel which invited, or sometimes forced, its members to participate in ritual ceremonies that included practices of mutilation, torture and murder in exchange for protection.

In the following subsections I address each type of violence in turn. As explained previously, due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed on this paper, including participants' explicit engagement in practices of torture and murder, most of the quotes are anonymised to ensure full confidentiality to participants.

### **3.1 Drug Trafficking Violence as a business**

Drug trafficking is articulated in the narco discourse as 'any other business' (Dionisio) that requires workers to have qualities such as leadership and courage and to be 'disciplined', 'clever' and 'loyal'. Accordingly, drug trafficking is also normalised as just like any other occupation [*oficio*]: "Cultivating and smuggling drugs was an occupation that I learned and performed like the best gardener" (Rigoletto). Working in drug trafficking is also constructed

as a possibility for career progression, which entails narcos' possession of attributes that are usually required and praised in legal careers, such as 'acquisitiveness', 'loyalty', 'courage' and 'efficiency'. In this regard, drug trafficking, as a business, provides individuals with similar possibilities to other jobs. For example, drug trafficking provides them with the possibility of becoming subjects of knowledge: 'I learned', 'I was trained', 'I was taught'. As was the case with Yuca and other research participants: "I was trained in a ranch to use fire arms"; "I was trained to be a sniper" (Dionisio), "I learned how to be aggressive" (Pato), "I was trained for three years. Each year you learn something different...like in a school" (anonymous).

The conception of drug trafficking as 'any other business' is not something new and it has been widely studied (Aguilar, 2014; Cruz, et al., 2013; Dell, 2015; Osorio, 2013; Rios, 2012; Solís-González, 2013). What is noteworthy, however, is that practices of violence such as kidnapping, torture and murder are also understood as a business. In this sense, the logistics of the illegal business of drug trafficking, such as producing, transporting or selling drugs, includes a myriad of violent practices, from scheduling kidnappings to planning how to get rid of bodies on a weekly basis. For instance, Canastas' job included activities ranging 'from distribution to recruiting. At the beginning my job I was selling drugs, collecting money from other dealers and kidnapping [*levantar*] people". What seems odd in this quote is that selling drugs, distributing drugs and kidnapping people are equally constructed as a 'job'. The main difference between legal jobs and drug trafficking is that in the drug trafficking business workers are also required to be "...able to do whatever it takes to do the job. The bosses want efficient people that get the job done. If you need to kill, torture, make people disappear, bribe politicians, kill mayors who do not want to cooperate you do it!" (anonymous).

In constructing drug trafficking-related violence as a 'normal' business, participants recurrently compare narcos' violence to that of the military or the police, and even evoke militaristic terms such as 'major' [*comandante*], 'intelligence squads', 'deserters', 'martial discipline' and qualities such as 'loyalty', 'courage' and 'stoicism'. As Facundo said: "to me it was a normal job, like the job of a military man or a cop...we were also trained under a martial discipline". In this quote, not only is violence normalised but, more significantly, narcos are positioned vis-a-vis the military and the police. Law enforcement individuals and narcos are portrayed as actors performing similar roles with few differences. As explained by a narco who worked for 'both sides', as a police officer and as a narco: "the only difference was that when you work for the government we were backed up by a warrant" (anonymous). That is, violence produced by state actors and narcos is essentially the same with the 'only' difference being that the military and the police are legitimised by law. As Tabo explains: "The military does the same or even worse things than we did in the cartel. They also torture people, they also kidnap people...That is their job and many of them, like us, did not like it but they had to do it because it was their job. Same with us, but we did not have the uniform". In this regard, drug trafficking-related violence and the violence produced by state institutions are understood by participants as two sides of the same coin.

Crucially, the understanding of practices of violence as a 'business' in participants' narratives entails the main principles of capitalism, such as the law of supply and demand,

as well as logistics and management strategies such as recruitment, efficiency and productivity. Due to the 'high demand', the drug business is constructed as a "twenty-four seven job. There is no Christmas or holidays for us" (Canastas). Drug trafficking is constructed as an unrelenting business, which implies a high demand for employees: "we were always recruiting because there are never enough hands in this business" (anonymous). Recruitment is constantly evoked not only as an area comparable with human resources in a legitimate enterprise, but also as a key process for cartels considering that an imperative of the business is to kill those employees who either betray or steal from the cartel. As one narco put it, part of the job of those recruiting people is also to eradicate the 'rats', 'traitors' or drug addicts who "...jeopardised the stability of the business or betrayed the bosses" (anonymous).

The narco discourse assumes that employees, especially those at 'the base' of the pyramid, are casual workers, which leads to a high turnover of personnel and therefore a need for constant replenishment through recruitment: "We knew that our base [street dealers] was not reliable and that most of our hitmen would sooner or later end up either in jail or shot dead" (anonymous). Casual workers, those who are not part of the 'payroll' [*nómina*] are thus assumed to be disposable: "...we did not care too much about them because we knew there were many more where they came from" (anonymous). In this quote, 'where they came from' means from poor neighbourhoods where this participant used to recruit little boys and teenagers. As Canastas explained: "poor neighbourhoods proved the best places to recruit because poor boys always desire what they cannot afford: the best trainers, TVs, cars, gold chains, money. I would just come and ask: who wants to make easy money?"

There is, however, a higher stratum of workers who are considered less disposable depending upon the position they occupy within the hierarchy of the drug cartel and how specialised they are. For example, those closer to individuals positioned at the highest levels of the hierarchy are chosen more carefully: "I was chosen to protect the commandant because I already know how to use weapons. They knew I was in the military, so they would not have to train me. That is why they chose me to protect one of the most important men in the cartel" (anonymous). In this regard, 'training' and 'teaching', as well as 'disposable' personnel, are recurrently evoked in the narco discourse as part of the process of sustaining the business. Teaching is constructed mainly in terms of mentoring: "Sometimes, according to the abilities of the new guy, he would have to be taught by one of the older ones. We would not leave a young boy on his own" (anonymous). Interestingly, the training for some narcos implied a similar routine to that of the military. One narco, for example, was trained, along with five other teenagers, in "how to load arms, how to use them in a moving vehicle, how to position ourselves and how to shoot. They [the shooting instructors] put lambs at a certain distance and we had to shoot them in particular areas of their body so we could practice our aim".

The narco discourse also evokes a bespoke business terminology, which entails not only a division of labour but also the affirmation of murder, kidnapping and torture as part of the everyday logistics of drug trafficking. That said, not all narcos engage in the same violent practices. There is a clear division of labour which dictates the type of activities that

each position entails. For example, in the Zetas cartel, “stakes [*estacas*] were the ones in charge of collecting the money [*cuota*] and abducting [*levantar*] people” (anonymous). In contrast to hitmen, *estacas* do not make money principally out of murdering, torturing or kidnapping people. Their job description mainly entails collecting money. In this sense, *estacas* are expected to engage in violent practices only as a means to an end, ensuring that they collect the money “without missing a peso” (Canastas). Therefore, as one of the narcos put it, the job description of *estacas* would imply that individuals need to have both accountancy skills as well as the temper and ability to “abduct, beat and torture people if necessary” (anonymous). In the case of bodyguards, their job is to defend particular individuals within the cartel. In contrast to *estacas* and hitmen, they are not expected to use violence in any context apart from defending the person they are guarding.

In terms of practices of torture, kidnapping and murder, there is an underlying pragmatic logic which produces violence as a business. The narco discourse constructs the practice of torture and the disposal of bodies as regular activities within the business, which, as with other activities in drug trafficking, are designed to optimise time and resources. The disposal of bodies, for instance, was explained with a time optimising logic: “...we piled the bodies during the week, because we had to drive them far away from the city...On the weekends we drove our trucks full of bodies...and like that every weekend” (anonymous). The disposal of bodies is also constructed in strategic terms to save time and resources: “some of them were not even dead so it was part of the punishment...we did not have to spend more time torturing them” (anonymous). In this case, the narco discourse evokes the rationale of cost-effectiveness. In order to avoid the human and economic costs of transporting them, the victims’ bodies were piled in a warehouse. At the end of the working week, on Fridays and Saturdays, the driver’s job was to transport the bodies from the place of execution or torture, to the ranch located at the outskirts of the city. In the second quote, there is a similar logic of optimising resources. Instead of paying somebody to torture somebody for hours, or even days, narcos torture individuals to a point at which they remain alive but are unable to move: “...you mutilated them for a couple of hours and then threw them into the pile, so they spent their last moments surrounded by body limbs and dead people. That saved us lots of time” (anonymous). In this way, drug trafficking-related violence is rationalised and understood as part of the ‘business’ and as one of them explained it, ‘nothing personal’. The articulation of murder, kidnapping and torture as a ‘job’ in the drug trafficking business is grounded in the normalisation of violence and responds to what Sayak Valencia (2012) defines as slasher capitalism.

Slasher capitalism is the exacerbated neoliberal economic model that, in contexts of poverty such as Mexico, causes extreme violence (Valencia, 2012). In turn, this economic model gives rise to the logic of the criminal entrepreneur (Saviano, 2008: 128), which normalises violent dystopic practices, such as murdering, torturing people and smuggling drugs, as acceptable jobs. As one narco put it: “Would you question a butcher for killing pigs or chickens? No! You do not question him because it is his job. The same with us. Our job was killing people”. In this statement, the narco is positioned as a worker whose job is as ordinary as that of the butcher. As a result, murder is normalised and articulated as an

everyday practice equivalent to the butchery trade<sup>1</sup>, and murder is stripped of any ethical, moral or legal considerations and reduced to any other 'job'. In this way, the narco discourse not only normalises violence, it constructs it as something that, as any other occupation, would be done regardless of who works in the business: "It has to be done" (Paco); "If it was not me, somebody else would have done it" (Difos). Not surprisingly, participants are desensitised to murder and the suffering of others: "When I killed people, I felt nothing" (anonymous). Similarly, another narco said: "I honestly felt nothing. I had no compassion for my victims". Violence is, indeed, part of the 'job': "I knew that somebody had to do that job [murder and disposal of bodies]" (anonymous). In this manner, practices of violence are conceived not only as mundane or 'normal' practices, they are conceived as inevitable.

### **3.2 Drug Trafficking Violence as the Ground Rules of Working in the Industry**

Before discussing how the narco discourse constructs violence as the tacit rules of working in the business of drug trafficking, it is necessary to contextualise this. In narco discourse, the rules, or the 'terms and conditions' of working in 'this business', are what scholarship on the subject refers to as violence resulting from inter- and intra-cartel fighting (Chindea, 2014). Although such violence has been registered before the launch of the war on drugs in 2006, its public display is a relatively new phenomenon (Ovalle, 2010; Lantz, 2016). During the 1980s and 1990s, and at the beginning of the millennium, violent confrontations between and within drug cartels were confined to remote areas outside the cities, the countryside or a minority of cities along the U.S. border (Aguilar, 2014). However, since the launch of the war on drugs in 2006, the communication process and the levels of rivalry between drug cartels have changed dramatically (Lantz, 2016). As a result of the state's militarised crackdown on drug cartels, narcos responded with new ways of conveying messages to society, the government and rival cartels. By 2008, public displays of "battered human heads, some thrown into plazas or placed on car rooftops", bodies hanging from meat hooks, and "video-postings of torture and beheadings on YouTube, became part of drug cartels' modus operandi" (González, 2009: 69).

*La familia michoacana*, a drug cartel that originated in the state of Michoacán in 2006, was the first cartel to use *corpse messaging*. This is defined as handwritten messages that drug cartels leave on dead bodies: "usually it involves a mutilated body, or a pile of bodies, or just a head, and a handwritten sign, for example "talk too much", "so that they learn to respect", or "you get what you deserve"" (Finnegan, 2010). Sometimes the message is the body itself. For instance:

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<sup>1</sup> This should not be considered as indicating that animal slaughtering is or should be regarded as unproblematic. However, in this context it serves to highlight how the narco discourse compares murder, which is typified as a crime under the law, and animal slaughter for food, which is not only legal but still widely socially accepted in Mexican society.

‘dedos’ are those victims found with their index finger cut, which means they were most likely killed for alerting the authorities...those found with their tongues cut out were likely executed for the same reason. Men who have sexual relations with cartel members’ girlfriends are often found castrated with their testicles stuffed into their mouths (Lantz, 2016:261)

This type of messaging within and between cartels is the terms and conditions, or the acknowledged code, that narcos adhere to when accepting work in the business of drug trafficking. The meaning of the gruesome ways in which drug cartels torture and expose their victims’ bodies can be regarded as symbolic. Drug cartels have adapted to the ‘war on drugs’ by increasing the level of violence because they are not willing to give away what they have reached over the last two decades: power, status and money (Bunker et al., 2010). The new discourse of war and violence has produced a new tragic and unique lexicon in regard to describing drug trafficking crimes: “*encajuelado*: put body in car trunk; *encobijado*: body wrapped in blanket; *entambado*: body put in drum; *pozoleado* (also *guisado*) body in acid bath” (Bunker et al., 2010: 146). This is part of the lexicon evoked in the construction of drug trafficking-related violence as the terms and conditions of working in ‘el narco’.

Violence as the ground rules of working in drug trafficking is constructed in two different but related ways. First, violence is used as a deterrent and to convey a message to cartel employees. Violent practices, such as torture, beatings and, ultimately, cruel murders, are portrayed in the narco discourse as the legitimate currency with which people involved in drug trafficking pay for mistakes, treason and theft: “we would put their hands in sulfuric acid when they stole from us because for us it was not fair that after trusting them with the money they betrayed us” (anonymous). Similarly, another narco explained: “we would hit them [*tablazos*], torture on the fingers, apply electric shocks. We would break each finger with tweezers, so the others understood that in this business this is how you pay for your mistakes” (anonymous). If the offense was too serious, such as stealing big sums of money and running away, or swapping drug cartels, then: “they would end up *pozoleados* or *entambados*” (anonymous).

At first glance, one may find it hard to understand why these forms of corporal or capital punishment are deemed ‘necessary’, would it not be enough to make the ‘employees’ pay for their debt or, at least, avoid crippling them for life? This rationale, however, misses two key points. First, drug cartels work illegally. Therefore, in the absence of bureaucracies that would allow for the control of ‘employees’, drug cartels resort to violence in order to impose discipline on them. (Bergman, 2012). Furthermore, as Rotella explains, to outsiders, drug trafficking-related violence might seem “frenzied and murky” but for the participants “the violence had very specific codes and objectives, a logic all its own. The choice of the victim, the method and the location were all calculated to make a statement...It all has meaning. It is like a language” (in Williams, 2012:266). This type of violence can certainly be understood as a ‘symbolic language’. More significantly, this

violence is accepted and legitimised by participants as the ground rules of working in drug trafficking.

Those who betray or steal from the cartel are dehumanised and portrayed as ‘rats’ who must pay with a gruesome death for their ‘betrayal’: “the rats stink. If you let one survive, then the others will come and when you least expect it you have a rats’ nest... we would make the rats suffer, we mutilated them slowly, torture them or behead them and put their heads where the others saw it” (anonymous). Similarly, other participants refer to snitches as ‘cockroaches’ or ‘pigs’: “...the cockroaches are the snitches who told the police all the information about our security houses, bank accounts and gave the names of the bosses... that was high treason and that is why we had no mercy” (anonymous). Another narco said: “we would take them to the ranch where we thought they belonged. To us they were a bunch of dirty pigs, so we would slaughter them as such”. As it has been widely analysed in violence studies, dehumanising the victims is an essential element used by perpetrators in order to undertake inhuman murders (Ovalle, 2010, Cavarero, 2009). In this sense, the tropes ‘rats’, ‘cockroaches’ and ‘pigs’ are not an innocent coincidence but rather a discursive element, often evoked in contexts of ethnic wars, and reproduced in the narco discourse. Alternatively, seen through the lens of the criminal entrepreneur, these acts of violence can be understood as serving “a regulatory purpose as part of a larger system of social control” within drug cartels “instead of being mere haphazard expressions of monstrosity” (Lantz, 2016: 254).

In addition to violence as a way to convey a message for employees within the same cartel, violence as terms and conditions is also referred as a way to convey a message to other cartels: “we chopped the bodies up into little pieces, put them in black bin bags and threw the bag in front of their family’s house. We always left a message [*pancarta*] stating why they died and why the cartel killed them...other times we just left them *encajuelados* in a family’s car” (anonymous). In this sense, violence serves an expressive more than an instrumental purpose; it is a type of violence that does not have an economic objective, as is the case in violence as a business, but rather seeks to make a statement. That is, as discussed above, violence itself, through the victims’ tortured bodies, serves to send whatever message the perpetrators want to convey to rival cartels. As one narco put it:

between cartels it is a different story. There is always a competition between who can do more than the other. If they kill one of our men, we would kill two of them. But not just kill them and that is it! We would make sure that their bodies were found by their bosses when they least expected it. On one occasion, I sent two gift boxes [containing the limbs and the heads of two men] to the boss of the rival cartel just when he was coming out of his daughter’s holy communion. It was unfair for the poor family but that was the idea. You mess with us; we will screw you up twice! (anonymous)

In this quote one can appreciate the difference between violence as a business, and violence as a way to convey a message to drug cartels. It is clearly stated that ‘between cartels it is a

different story' in reference to other types of violence that narcos engage in. As Williams put it:

Even what initially appears to be senseless and gratuitous violence has its own logic and rationale. From this perspective, many of the beheadings, which have become commonplace since 2006, and other grotesque actions such as disfiguring corpses or hanging them from bridges, can be understood as a rational part of a strategic competition designed to intimidate rivals. In effect, the drug trafficking organisations are using what in military parlance is called "strategic communications" (2012: 266)

Death is also part of the ground rules of working in the business of drug trafficking. That is, death is normalised as an exchange currency, as a pact that is signed when accepting work in drug trafficking: "when you get in this business you know the deal, you can die at any moment" (Canastas). Murder, torture and abduction are articulated as the order of things in the business of drug trafficking: "this is how it works, you murder those who do not pay the bribe we ask [*cuota*], those who betray the cartel, those who give information to other cartels. You torture people to obtain information from them or to make them pay for mistakes they made" (anonymous). In this sense, death and torture are accepted as way to pay debts or mistakes in drug trafficking: "I was sure they would kill me because I stole a lot of drugs. I knew how things worked...I told them, I understand, I myself did it many times" (anonymous). This is not to say, however, that narcos are constructed as fearless individuals but mainly as acquiescent with these ground rules.

Ultimately, there is an assumption of a common awareness of the conditions of engagement and interaction in drug trafficking. The construction of violence as terms and conditions, is the underlying rationale that explains what otherwise would be understood as illegal, immoral or even unthinkable (i.e. torture, kidnapping and murder). The logic of the narco discourse dictates that there is 'no mercy' because the rules, or the 'deal', are unequivocal and subjects are made responsible for their fate: "I did not have mercy on those that I tortured because I thought that they were there for a reason. I thought that it was their fault because they knew what they were doing" (anonymous). Interestingly, there is a sense of reciprocity: "...why would they have mercy on me if I did not have it with others?" Another narco said: "When I was kidnapped, I thought that they were going to kill me because I never hesitated to kill a person...To me it was just simply my turn. I killed a lot of people and now it was my turn to be murdered". The pact in the business of drug trafficking is as simple as it is macabre. As a narco explained, in relation to practices of torture and mutilation: "we do it to them, and maybe somebody will do it to us". This is the price for enjoying the benefits of earning easy money. As Jaime put it: "working in this business is risky. No doubt about it but nothing in this world is free. We all have to pay a price. I thought that it was worth it, I would die in a horrible way, but I was also having the best life I could have". For other narcos, however, violence provided them with non-economic gains which are conceived as of equal importance as money and material gains.

### 3.3 Drug Trafficking Violence as a Source of Excitement, Adrenaline and Empowerment

Drug trafficking-related violence is also constructed as a source of excitement, adrenaline and empowerment in the narco discourse. Practices of murder, kidnapping and torture are constructed as something that provides excitement: “I liked having firearms, beating people, insulting people and humiliating them...it was exciting” (Rigoletto). Another narco said: “torturing people got me really excited, that was my passion”. Torture is likewise articulated as a practice that empowers narcos, which, in turn, provides them with ‘pleasure’. This pleasure is constituted as the opportunity to inflict pain on other subjects and to have control over their bodies. Inflicting pain on others, in turn, is linked to ‘power’: “I liked hearing the screams. It was music to my ears. It made me feel powerful” (anonymous). Violence is even conceived as a hobby and as something that provides subjects with high ‘adrenaline’: “My hobby was releasing adrenaline by shooting things and people. I liked hearing the screams. Sometimes we would go to a small town and shoot in the air. We would laugh out loud at how people cried and got scared” (Dionisio). In this quote, shooting people and scaring people is linked to releasing adrenaline, which implies that there is a sadistic satisfaction to be gained from people’s fear. Similarly, violence is recurrently linked to ‘happiness’: “The first time I hit a man I liked it. I felt that I was releasing all my anger and I wanted more... [violence] made me feel happy” (anonymous).

Furthermore, stemming from the sense of power that violence provides, ‘revenge’ is conceived as a perk of working in ‘el narco’: “When they had just joined the cartel, we [the bosses] asked them: who do you want us to kidnap [*levantar*]? We would go for that person, so the new guy would take revenge and if they wanted to kill him. We told them, “if that makes you happy then kill him!” (anonymous). Violence was also constructed as something ‘addictive’: “The more you see the more you get used to it and the more you want” (Difos). Rigoletto explicitly stated: “I was so addicted to violence that sometimes I hit myself”. And Yuca as well: “I was the classic man looking for a fight. Once you start in this business violence becomes like an addiction”. In this way, violence is constructed as a source of self-empowerment through intimidation and ‘fear’, which are conceived as a source of ‘respect’: “I wanted people to be afraid of me, I wanted them to respect me” (Rigoletto). Pato explained: “I was the one who asked the narcos to give me the job. I saw how people feared them and I wanted to be feared as well. I wanted respect”. What is essential, in both cases, is the understanding of ‘respect’ in terms of ‘fear’.

Because violence is often described as gratuitous and heinous (Lantz, 2016; Ovalle, 2010), violence as a source of adrenaline, happiness or excitement, is perhaps less intelligible than the previous conceptions of it as a ‘business’ and as ‘ground rules’ of drug trafficking. However, practices of violence are not something new to narcos. Participants explained that their first contact with man to man violence was when they become members of a street gang (*pandilleros*). As Kevin explains, violence and crime are inherent to the *pandillero*’s life: “We liked smashing windows, provoking fights between gangs ... Our life was stealing, doing drugs, hanging out on street corners looking for trouble until dawn”.

Not surprisingly, gang violence is also portrayed as life-threatening for those involved: “Every time our gangs fought, there was at least one man seriously hurt, at least one got stabbed and sometimes men died” (Kevin). Gang violence is articulated in the narco discourse as both lethal and cruel. Canastas, for example, narrates how his gang tortured members of rival gangs: “We beat him up really bad. I was the one who grabbed a broomstick and took one of his eyes out.” Similarly, Dionisio acknowledges that his gang was one of the bloodiest in his community: “We would tie them up and kick them, we would also hit them with sticks and throw cement blocks at their heads”. Cristian narrates how he almost died when he was caught by a rival gang: “They smashed a beer bottle over my head. They kicked me once I was on the floor and the rest I do not know. I woke up in the hospital. They told my mum that I would probably lose one of my eyes or my sight and, because I was in a coma for a week, they said that if I woke up, I would never be the same”. Yuca also narrates how he was a victim of humiliating and violent treatment by a rival gang: “They tied me to a post completely naked and kicked me several times. One of them burned me with a cigarette and the others threw stones at me”.

In this context, violence is constructed as something ‘natural’, something occurring on a regular basis in the ‘jungle’. Also, if we try to understand drug trafficking-related violence as a source of adrenaline through an ethical or moral prism, then violence is unnecessary and sadistic. As opposed to the construction of violence in instrumental terms, as a business and as the terms and conditions of working in this business, violence as a source of excitement, adrenaline or empowerment is the end rather than the means. This refers to the conceived perks of working in drug trafficking which entail not only the possibility to obtain material objects but also the opportunity to gain nonmaterial things such as respect, that were not available through other means: “I worked with them because I wanted to be respected, to be feared” (Tigre). Similarly, Rigoletto said: “I wanted respect and I wanted power. In my arrogance, I raised my hands and yelled: I am the master of the world”. This type of violence gives rise to the logic of necro-empowerment.

Necro-empowerment is a process that transforms conditions of vulnerability or subalternity into the possibility of self-determination, power and agency (Valencia, 2012: 84). These processes are framed and informed by the economic model of slasher capitalism discussed earlier. Hence, these processes of empowerment are based on dystopic practices such as torture, murder and kidnapping, which are not only conceived as profitable but also as a source of empowerment. As Williams points out, this type of violence also serves as a “channel for self-definition and self-assertion: *killing provides a sense of power* for those who are alienated and disenfranchised and does so whether it is purposeful or purposeless” (Williams, 2012: 273, emphasis added). In this sense, violence as a source of excitement and adrenaline is not gratuitous, it has the purpose of empowering marginalised individuals who do not see other alternatives to empower themselves.

### 3.4 Drug Trafficking Violence linked to the cult of the holy dead

Overall, as discussed above, practices of drug trafficking-related violence are constructed in secular terms in the narco discourse. However, certain violent practices that are constructed in religious terms can also be considered as violence since they are linked to specific drug cartels and to the business of drug trafficking. In particular, the narco discourse associates these practices with the cult of the holy death. These practices are linked to 'rituals', to 'offerings' and to 'sacrifices' which, in turn, enable 'torture', 'mutilations', 'decapitations' and 'murder' as a trade-off for 'protection'.

Since the 1980s there are different cults that have been associated with particular drug cartels. For example the cult to San Malverde is linked to the cartel of Sinaloa, San Judas Tadeo is considered the saint of drug traffickers, and the cult to the holy death is associated to the Zetas cartel (Maihold and Sauter, 2012; Astorga 1995, Sánchez, 2009; Bunker et al., 2010; Córdova, 2011; Edberg, 2004). The narco discourse only highlights the cult of the holy death which can be described as

a set of ritual practices offered on behalf a supernatural personification of death. The personification is female, probably because the Spanish word for death, muerte, is feminine and possibly also because this personification is a sort of counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe...The origin of the cult is uncertain; it has only been expanding recently. The cult appears to be closely associated with crime, criminals, and those whose lives are directly affected by crime (Freese, 2005: 1)

The holy death is referred to as both a religion and as a cult in the narco discourse. However, given the particular meaning attached to it, the holy death is better understood as a cult which refers to "a group of individuals whose beliefs and/or practices are unorthodox or extreme in nature..." (Bunker et al., 2010).

The cult to the holy death is constructed in the narco discourse as a metaphysical source of protection against evil and a painful death. Different religious practices and cults are articulated as a source of protection: "I think that we did it for protection because we wanted to feel that we were protected by something superior. Every time we committed a crime, we offered it to her in exchange for protection" (anonymous). In this manner, the narco discourse justifies narcos' engagement in different rituals which involve torture, mutilation, animal slaughter and murder. In addition, the cult of the holy death entails symbolic practices in order to ensure money, justice, protection and safety:

We drew a star. A pentagon, a five points star and in each point, you must put a figure of the holy death. You light up candles of different colours: gold for money, green for justice, white is life and black is for protection and safety...You light up the candles and then you can start doing your

rituals with animals and then with people. We must spill human blood in order to make a pact with Satan and to make a pact with the holy death.  
(anonymous)

According to the narco discourse, the holy death requires blood, torture and murder in exchange for protection. This positions the narco subject as a passive and helpless subject vis-à-vis a paranormal entity: “we had to do what the holy death asked you to do. You hear voices when you make the pact, and the death or the devil tell you what they want: ‘bring me the blood of a child a certain age, or a blonde baby” (Anonymous). In this quote the phrase ‘we had to’ implies obligation, the desires of the holy death are assumed to be unquestionable, rendering the narco subject helpless and, therefore, not responsible for the violence carried out in her name.

In contrast to the self-responsibility acknowledged by the narco subject regarding other types of drug trafficking-related violence, the violence linked to the holy death is articulated in terms of duty rather than in terms of pleasure or business. The cult to the holy death is explicitly associated with “a satanic cult. You commit to worship the holy death above all. At the beginning you just put an altar, candles, some food and flowers but later on you are forced to kill people” (anonymous). Again, the narco subject distances himself from the actions that the holy death ‘forced’ him to do. Following a dogmatic logic, the desires, rituals and violent requests attributed to the supernatural entity referred to either as the holy death or Satan, are taken for granted under the assumption that ‘the holy death claims death’ (anonymous). Drawing upon this logic, the narco discourse justifies actions that otherwise would have been conceived as problematic, even in the business of drug trafficking. For example: “the holy death asks you to kill your own friend and even if you don’t want to, you have to kill him because if it’s not him it’s you” (anonymous). In this quote, there is an implication that in any other circumstance the speaking subject would not kill a friend. However, the desires of the holy death are constructed as unquestionable. Murdering a friend is justified because otherwise their own life would have been in danger: “you cannot question the holy death; you cannot question Satan because your life is in their hands” (anonymous). In contrast to the rational and pragmatic logic through which the narco discourse explains and justifies torture and murder as part of a business, as a way to re-pay a debt or even as a pure source of adrenaline; violence linked to the holy death is constructed as a ‘tribute’: “you have to offer tributes to the holy death. That is, you have to offer them lives” (anonymous).

Even though the logic and justification for violence linked to the rituals of the holy death and drug trafficking-related violence are set apart; the practices of torture, mutilation and disappearing of bodies are very similar in both cases. The only difference is the symbolic meaning attached to each of them. For example, the decapitation of bodies, as a form of torture by chopping the person’s head off when they are still alive, is portrayed as one of the common ways to seal a pact with the holy death: “we would chop their heads off and put the blood in a wine glass” (anonymous). The meaning of decapitating people is different when this practice is linked to drug trafficking as a business: “decapitating people was one of the ways we preferred to kill people because it was quick, and we would use the head to

send a message” (anonymous). In this quote, beheading people is linked to a technique of murder that both saves time and serves the purpose of sending a message.

In a similar way in which money is considered too little to pay honour or economic debts in drug trafficking, death is not enough to please the holy death:

cruelty is related to worshiping the holy death. The cult not only forces you to kill people but also to make them suffer. It is not the same to put a person into the acid as it is to hook him to a chain and lower him little by little and listen to his agony (anonymous).

Again, the supernatural entity is made responsible for the cruelty with which narcos torture and murder their victims. Murders and torture are constantly portrayed in ritualistic terms ‘tribute’, ‘worship’, and ‘offer’: “we mutilated people at parties, it was a way to worship the holy death and offer them to her” (anonymous). Moreover, engagement with the holy death justifies narcos’ sadistic behaviour: “After I made the pact with the holy death, I was more bloodthirsty, more sadistic and paranoid” (anonymous). The narco subject is, therefore, positioned as helpless to what is represented as the holy death’s desires: “I once killed a person and I did not know how. My friends said that I stood up and I shot the man in the head and that their bodyguards did not do anything.” (anonymous). In this way, the narco subject is not only made oblivious to his own actions but implicitly situated as a victim of the holy death’s ‘supernatural powers’. Thus, an effect of worshiping the holy death is that “...you become more sadistic. You come up with new ideas of how to make people suffer slowly. We used to put men alive into a tree shredder and with the resulting mince we would feed the lions we stole from a circus” (anonymous).

The narco discourse repetitively articulates worship to the holy death as a duty, as something imposed on narcos, especially those belonging to a particular cartel: “To me all those things were normal because it is what we used to do in our cartel” (anonymous). In this quote, the cult to the holy death is normalised as part of the identity of being a member of this cartel. Other narcos, however, conceived this cult as an imposition from the cartel:

I was forced to worship the holy death. I did not want to do it at the beginning, but they told me I had to worship her. They asked me to draw a tattoo, but I did not accept. It was a woman who introduced me to it. We were in the bedroom and she made me say a prayer that she had on her back as a tattoo. I had a supernatural experience. When I finished the prayer, the windows smashed, the light bulbs burned out and her face started to distort (anonymous)

In the above quote, the holy death is endowed with supernatural powers which, in turn, justifies the narco subject’s involvement in this cult. The emphasis of the ‘supernatural’ powers of the holy death is a way to respond to those who would question the veracity of the cult and, consequently, question his own actions such as abducting babies in public

hospitals to offer (i.e. murder) them to the holy death. In this way, by establishing the veracity of the holy death's supernatural powers, the narco discourse practices of torture and murder are framed as a means to appease the holy death and disavow personal accountability:

We had different techniques to torture people. We used tweezers to take their teeth out, we removed their toes and fingers with tweezers, we hung them by their feet and put their heads in water, we applied electric shocks. We took their eyes out with a spoon. We offered all that suffering from our enemies to the holy death (anonymous)

This construction of drug trafficking-related violence brings to light the main assumptions of the narco discourse. The world is understood as a hostile place, where survival of the fittest prevails and where the life of the poor is considered as disposable; the cult to the holy death can be understood as a response, or as a resistance, to the condition of vulnerability of the narco subject. The terms and conditions are, indeed, acknowledged by the narco subject. However, as one of the narcos said: "the main point was to have a proper death. I just wanted that my mum had a corpse to bury". What is more telling about the cult of the holy death is that, besides the gruesome and highly problematic practices in which narcos engage with, the purpose of these rituals is not to have a good life but rather to have a dignified death. The meaning of life in the narco discourse is attached to 'suffering' and constructed as 'meaningless'. Conversely, the meaning of 'death' is linked to 'relief' and constructed as an escape of what is seen as 'worthless' life.

#### 4. The Limits of Current Strategies to Cope with Violence in the Mexican Drug Trade

There are three main strategies addressing drug trafficking-related violence outlined in López-Obrador's National Development Plan. First, it is stated that the president will undertake a paradigm shift in both national security and public security. In recognition that "violence incites more violence" the government will move from a war approach to a peace policy and a more comprehensive approach which tackles "the very roots of delinquency disarray"<sup>2</sup> (National Development Plan, 2018: 18). This idea seems right, but it is too abstract. There is no specification of how the government is planning to tackle the roots of delinquency and what they mean by a 'comprehensive approach'. This goal possibly leads to the social programme '*Jovenes construyendo el futuro*' [young people building the future] for young people who are neither working nor studying, usually known as '*ninis*'. This aid is addressed to individuals aged between 18 and 29 years, it provides a monthly stipend of

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<sup>2</sup> This and further quotes from the National Development Plan are the author's translation.

3,600 pesos for up to a year while they find either a job or start a career (Rodríguez, 2019). This programme, however, does not address the most vulnerable groups, children and women living in conditions of poverty who are exposed to violence, abuse and different levels of scarcity.

Second, reformulating the war on drugs. The government acknowledges that the prohibitionist paradigm is not sustainable anymore, not only in terms of the violence it has generated, but also in terms of public health. In this regard, the new approach to drug addictions entails abandoning the criminalisation of individuals who suffer from drug addiction. Instead, the government will offer medical help and personalised detox treatments followed up by specialised personnel (National Development Plan, 2018: 20).

The brief paragraph in the National Development Plan document discussing this new approach echo the voices of several academics, NGOs and activists around the world. The government recognises the need to move away from policies that have caused numerous deaths and disappearances in Mexico. However, this change of paradigm is acknowledged to be subjected to bilateral “negotiations” (for which one might infer approval) of the United States, as well as the United Nations. Unfortunately, if moving away from the prohibitionist paradigm depends on the US, this is unlikely to happen in the short run. I will return to this point in section 5.1.

Finally, the third strategy linked to tackling drug trafficking-related violence is the creation of the National Guard. The purpose of the establishment of the National Guard responds to

the lack of a professional police at a national level capable of coping with the challenges of insecurity and violence...This new corporation will be the primary instrument of the Federal Executive in crime prevention, the preservation of public security, the recovery of peace and the fight against organised crime in the country (National Development Plan, 2018: 23).

This new security force was officially inaugurated on the 30 June 2019. It draws its membership from the members of existing institutions such as the navy, the federal police and the Mexican Army. It is attached to the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection (SSPC for its initials in Spanish). Its secretary, Alfonso Durazo, presides over the council in charge of designing and making all strategic decisions regarding the National Guard. This council is formed of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Ministry of Defence, the ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of the Navy. The National Guard is under the civil command of the SSPC, but its members work under a military hierarchy and martial discipline.

It is too soon to determine whether the National Guard will be capable of coping with the multiple challenges that Mexico has been enduring for over twelve years. What it is clear is that whatever the nomenclature, be it the federal police, army, marines or National Guard, the strategy remains the same, and that the goal of shifting the militarised public security paradigm will not be achieved. Moreover, to the disappointment of many of us, it

appears the intention of abandoning the prohibitionist paradigm will not be achieved either in this administration.

That said, it is important to highlight that the main purpose behind the creation of the National Guard is to eradicate the embedded corruption within the military and most importantly of the federal police. There is no doubt that the collusion between local, state and federal police and drug cartels has undermined the most exhaustive attempts to dismantle drug cartels and tackle insecurity in the country. In this regard, the National Guard is potentially a good idea, at least on paper. However, it is not clear how exactly the government has managed to prevent or minimise the inclusion of corrupt members. More importantly, the government has not explained how they will alleviate the temptation of corruption.

The creation of the National Guard has already presented some issues and controversies regarding its formation. Members of the federal police went on strike on 03 July 2019, just three days after the official inauguration of the National Guard. Amongst other complaints, protesters denounced that the government was violating their labour rights. Salaries were reduced from 15,000 to 12,000 pesos. Also, rest days were eliminated. As members of the federal police, they had the right to have five rest days for every 25 working days. These rest days are key as they are mostly used by members to travel back to see their families from wherever they were assigned (Guerrero, 2019). Protesters also complained about the president's lack of respect for their institution. López-Obrador has recurrently declared that the federal police were the most corrupt force. Although this statement is based on some evidence showing how the federal police has been infiltrated by organised crime, it is rather questionable the way in which the government has handled the 'cleansing' of the members of the federal police. What it is more concerning is the way in which the president has publicly delegitimised the federal police forces on several occasions, including his speech at the inauguration of the National Guard when he claimed that only one third of the federal police passed the anti-corruption test.

There are at least three issues with the president's public claims about the endemic corruption in the federal police. First, it has established a moral difference between the federal police members and the others. Second, in doing so, he is reproducing a very harmful discourse of 'us' versus 'them'. This binary discourse can potentially create a division between former members of the federal police and members of the navy and the army. A divided new security force will be unlikely to succeed if we add to this division the challenges of putting together members with different training and diverse goals. Third, members of the federal police who could not or did not want to join the National Guard and who feel humiliated by the president's constant attacks could potentially retaliate against the government. Let's not forget that the Zetas cartel emerged from a similar context when some members of the military felt that the government let them down. After the federal police strike, an anonymous police member declared to a Mexican newspaper that the Gulf Cartel has already offered them a monthly salary of over 35,000 pesos (Palafox, 2019). Regardless of the reliability of this declaration, the fact that thousands of members of the federal police feel betrayed, and that some of them have explicitly manifested their disdain

for the government of López-Obrador, should be taken seriously by the SSPC and Palacio Nacional.

## **5. Policy Options for Reducing Violence in the Drug Trade**

As it has been shown in this paper, there are diverse dimensions of violence linked to the business of drug trafficking, from an everyday business to ritualistic sacrifices, which cannot be tackled by a single policy, however effective this may be. This multifaceted phenomenon, therefore, requires a multidimensional approach. Also, as it has been pointed out by several scholars, it is important to acknowledge that there is no easy fix, no quick or monolithic strategy to tackle the roots and the different dimensions of violence in Mexico. This paper brought to the fore four sources of drug trafficking-related violence that I identified in the narratives of thirty-three former narcos. This approach not only offers a unique perspective, in terms of shedding light on how perpetrators understand and experience violence themselves, but more importantly, it provides a starting point for rethinking and designing more effective policies to minimise drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico. In the following sections I discuss four policy recommendations aimed at both the Mexican and the U.S. government. These suggestions draw on the findings discussed above.

### **5.1 Legalising Cannabis and Opium**

Based on analysis of the first two dimensions of violence addressed in this paper, violence as a business and violence as the ground rules of working in drug trafficking, I suggest a reconsideration of the debate regarding legalising drugs as one of the main strategies to tackle violence and insecurity in Mexico. Crucially, this recommendation should be understood in the light of three considerations. First, the possibility of legalising drugs in Mexico will not have realistic grounds for success without the support of the U.S. Second, because drug cartels have diversified their businesses, it must be recognised that violence will not be minimised completely if drugs are legalised. Third, and most significantly, legalisation should be understood as part of a comprehensive plan which includes long-term socio-economic and public security policies oriented to protect and prevent the most vulnerable groups, such as boys and young men living in conditions of poverty from joining drug cartels.

The suggestion of legalising drugs in Mexico would have been politically impossible twelve years ago when the war on drugs was launched. In the current administration of López-Obrador, this is no longer such a stigma, at least not on paper. As explained above, there is an explicit claim in the National Development Plan, that Mexico needs to move

away from the prohibitionist paradigm in order decrease the high levels of violence in Mexico. In fact, the secretary of interior, Olga Sánchez-Cordero, had already presented an initiative to legalise the whole supply chain for cannabis sales (Forbes, 2018). This, unfortunately, seems unlikely under the current U.S. administration. That said, it cannot be ignored that there is an international trend of legalising drugs. At a national level in Uruguay (2013) and more recently in Canada (2019). In the United States medical marijuana is legal in 33 states, eleven of these have legalised cannabis for recreational use: Washington (2012), Colorado (2012), Oregon (2014), Alaska (2014) California (2016), Nevada (2017), Massachusetts (2018), Maine (2018), Vermont (2018), Michigan (2018) and soon Illinois (2020) (Governing, 2019).

In response to this trend in the American continent, and the growing shift from the prohibitionist paradigm at a state level in some regions of the US, it is reasonable to suggest that Mexico joins its North American neighbours. The fact that cannabis has been legalised in eleven states in the U.S. is and should be considered as a sign for the Mexican government to rethink its approach to the subject. Both governments can no longer ignore the double moral standard of demanding Mexico uphold the prohibitionist paradigm, whereas eleven states, including the most populated state of California are now making considerable profits from selling cannabis. The current administration of López-Obrador has opened the door to the possibility of legalising marijuana. However, it seems that this strategy will remain on pause until the U.S. at a federal level opens a window to discuss alternative options to the war on drugs.

Stakeholders in the U.S. and Mexico should consider the legalisation of cannabis in Mexico as a way to cope with different related issues such as stopping marijuana crossing the border, minimising violence in Mexico and hitting the drug cartels' economy. Legalising cannabis in some states of Mexico, including Mexico City, can be the starting point of a new bilateral agenda led by the U.S. Mexico can learn from the experiences of the U.S. states that have already legalised cannabis. In parallel, Mexico and the U.S. can also benefit from the Canadian blueprint of legalisation. In this sense, if the political will allows it, the three governments can create a special commission on legalising cannabis in North America.

In the hypothetical case that Mexico legalises cannabis, we have to consider that other popular drugs such as heroin, cocaine and pills will remain illegal. Therefore, drug cartels will still operate. However, this first step can potentially minimise violence in the regions where marijuana is produced and provide economic benefits for its local inhabitants. In these regions, the production of marijuana can provide sources of legal jobs (with attendant protections of legitimate employment) to those peasants who had been forced to undertake such work illegally. Considering that Mexico is the biggest producer of marijuana in the world with a production of over six million tons (UNODC, 2018), its commercialisation would likely translate into extensive jobs for Mexicans across the country.

The economic benefits of legalising cannabis have already been demonstrated in the states of Colorado and Washington where cannabis was first legalised. According to Forbes, by 2018, the estimated revenues from selling cannabis was \$1.56 billion in Colorado and \$1 billion in Washington (DePietro, 2018). These are the estimated profits for the private

sector, and there are also considerable profits for the U.S. government as recreational and medical marijuana have 15% tax plus additional local taxes (DePietro, 2018). Initially, the most benefitted states would be those where marijuana is produced, which coincide with many of the poorest and/or most violent states in Mexico: Chihuahua, Durango, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacan, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Sonora, Sinaloa and recently Baja California, where in 2011 the Mexican Army discovered the biggest harvest of marijuana ever found in Mexico (Villa, 2019).

The second step in the process of legalising drugs in Mexico should be the legalisation of opium. Mexico is the second largest producer of opium after Afghanistan, with a production of over 586 tons (Infobae, 2019). Despite the significant drop in demand and the prices of opium, there are still potential benefits to legalisation. Similar to the benefits of legalising cannabis, legalising opium would provide jobs for poor peasants and potentially would benefit the pharmaceutical industry producing morphine (Le Cour, Morris and Smith, 2019: 25). In addition, legalising opium would help in reducing the high levels of violence in the communities where opium is farmed such as the states of Guerrero, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua (Infobae, 2019). Finally, a key benefit for the US agenda is that if both drugs are legalised the illegal immigration would decrease as poor peasants in these regions are typically the groups that are most likely to immigrate due to lack of opportunities in their communities (Semple, 2019).

Even if all drugs are legalised, drug cartels do not rely exclusively on drug trafficking but also on other illicit business such as human and arms trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and piracy among others (Dickinson, 2011; Global Commission on Drugs, 2014). Therefore, the legalisation of drugs does not translate to the panacea for minimising violence in Mexico. As mentioned above, legalisation, starting with cannabis and opium, will be more effective if it is complemented with socio-economic policies targeting the most vulnerable groups of society such as boys and poor young men.

## **5.2 Focus on Violent Street Gangs in Border States**

It is well known that drug cartels recruit gang members mainly because they know and control key neighbourhoods, but also because they are already desensitised to violence (Cedillo, 2018). Whereas poor peasants are the most vulnerable group in the South of Mexico, in the urban areas of the North, gang members are the natural recruits for drug cartels. This should be acknowledged by policy makers on both sides of the border. There is no point in cracking down on drug cartels if the sources of recruiting new members are neglected. In this regard, more attention should be paid to how the local and the state polices deal with petty crime and street gangs. Rather than criminalising them a priori, local governments need to know the realities of the most dangerous neighbourhoods in their municipalities. That is, in order to avoid more young men joining the ranks of drug cartels, authorities need to understand the context in which they grow up and their everyday challenges. This will allow them to design more effective policies to prevent and tackle

violence in these communities and potentially prevent more individuals from feeling attracted to work in the drug trafficking business.

In the discussion of how practices of murder, kidnapping and torture are conceived by former narcos as a source of empowerment, I highlighted that their first contact with these types of practices was through street gangs. Before joining drug trafficking, or while being part of it, research participants self-identified as *pandilleros* (gang members). This membership meant exposure to life and death threats on a regular basis. Street gangs, besides being involved in crimes such as theft, extortion and vandalism, engage in extremely violent fights which sometimes end up in crippling rivals for life, and even murdering them in cruel ways such as pulverising the rival's skull or torturing them with torches. For most of the participants, being involved in street fights was initially a duty which later became something they enjoyed. Boys and young men in poor neighbourhoods have to become violent as the only way to save themselves from other young men's predatory violence. In this way, violence is understood by former narcos as something natural and inevitable in poor neighbourhoods. Eventually boys will become violent, they 'have to' in order to survive. It does not come as a surprise that practices of torture and murder are regarded as something narcos enjoy. Violence has been embedded as part of their lives since early ages, and it is the only way, as they argue, in which they feel other men respect them.

Another common denominator in the narratives of former narcos, is that most of them suffered from domestic violence. For this reason, they sought the support of the gang controlling the neighbourhood. According to participants, violence is embedded in poverty. It starts at home, where the father beats the mother, and the mother beats the children. In turn, children turn to street gangs which teach children how to fight, initiate them in drug misuse, drinking alcohol and involve them in activities of theft and vandalism. Several questions arise from the association of practices of torture and murder to respect, adrenaline and empowerment: how is this possible? What are the psychological and sociological factors that allow individuals to enjoy another person's suffering? The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but I bring them to the fore for further research.

What we can learn from these narratives is that in order to prevent more children become desensitised to other people's suffering, a first step is to reduce children's exposure to domestic violence and joining violent gangs. This can only be achieved through a tailored strategy to the needs of each neighbourhood, and by investing in local police forces and social programmes targeting street children and young men who belong to street gangs. In this regard, it is of paramount importance that state and local authorities work together in order to prevent and tackle violence in poor neighbourhoods. Each border state has its own subcultures and challenges. The characteristics of gangs in Tijuana are not the same as the ones in Monterrey, Reynosa or Ciudad Juarez. Therefore, it is necessary that each state undertakes a thorough investigation and diagnosis of the most urgent problems in the most dangerous neighbourhoods.

### 5.3 Address Drug Addiction as a Health Problem

Drug addictions are portrayed in the narratives of former narcos as their worst nightmare. Most of participants, started doing drugs at an early age, so they were already addicted to some drugs by the time they became adults. The common factor amongst participants for doing drugs was to forget their problems at home. As explained above, participants suffered domestic violence and were constantly exposed to bullying from elder boys. In order to cope with this reality, participants typically turn to drugs as an escape from such reality. Some of them describe their childhoods as so painful and frustrating that doing drugs, and the peer support from their gang, was the only reason why they did not commit suicide. In fact, all participants acknowledged that at some point in their lives, when they were already working in drug trafficking, they tried to commit suicide.

Both, street gangs and drug addictions are conceived by participants as the key features of living in poor neighbourhoods. Some of them even commented that, because they saw what happened to other young men, they were resigned to die either from a bullet or from an overdose. It is taken for granted that boys living in poor neighbourhoods have no future, and what is more alarming is that they grow up thinking that they are worthless. As one of them put it: who would care about a drug addict?

This is precisely the stigma that needs to be addressed in Mexico. Drug addictions should be understood as a health issue and the state should provide both the psychological and the medical assistance to help individuals suffering from addiction to find a way to cope with it in a constructive manner. In particular, attention must be given to the poorest neighbourhoods where men die every day from an overdose. In this regard, participants pointed out that this is a common tragedy for them. Once again, when talking about drug addictions and overdose, participants inferred that their lives and those of their peers, were disposable and that they knew society would not care if they died or not.

I suggest that in order to combat the stigma it is necessary to run a parallel strategy. On the one hand, there should be an official campaign launched in all mass media raising awareness of drug addiction of as health problem rather than a crime. On the other hand, detox clinics and psychological help should be offered first in the regions where addictions pose a more pressing problem. Equally important, the government should identify and investigate all rehabilitation centres operating in the country. Participants commented that some centres, referred to as 'anexos', used physical and psychological torture techniques, as a way to motivate them to overcome their addictions. There is no official data regarding the number and quality of rehabilitation centres in Mexico. Hence, the first step should be mapping out where and how many centres there are, at least in the most affected areas in the country. Once rehabilitation centres are found and approved to continue working, the government should regularly monitor them and provide common safety and ethical parameters to be observed by all centres. It is of paramount importance that individuals with these problems have access to the best quality services. Otherwise, as participants pointed out, addictions come back stronger, as well as their willingness to do whatever it takes to

obtain more drugs. This is the cycle that participants regard as the point of no return, mainly because they believed there was no cure for their addictions.

Participants agreed that the only way in which they were able to finally overcome their addictions was when they were treated with respect and love. More importantly, they highlighted that what made them feel that life was worth living was the second opportunity they were given at the rehabilitation centre where they currently live. The key is that they were given a new purpose in life. This is, of course, in the context of a religious faith, which is the centre of their new lives. Yet, this approach can be replicated from a secular approach. If new rehabilitation centres are to be designed, I strongly suggest learning from successful models that are already operating in the country. The government can benefit from this and other successful organisations which can contribute in the design of better and more effective rehabilitation centres.

#### **5.4 Conduct Further Research on the Holy Death and Other Cults linked to Drug Cartels**

To date, there is little research on the role that cults play in drug cartels and its relationship to homicides and disappearances in Mexico. There are several cultural studies addressing religion as part of the so-called narcoculture (Córdova, 2011; Edberg, 2004; Maihold and Sauter, 2012; Sánchez, 2009; Valenzuela, 2003). In particular, attention has been focused on the figure of San Malverde as the main saint worshiped by the Sinaloa Cartel member. Although the characteristics and history of this saint are intimately linked to the Sinaloa Cartel, it can be considered as a local saint in the state of Sinaloa. The saint is worshiped in a similar way in which other recognised saints are worshiped within the Catholic faith. In this sense, San Malverde and other saints, such as San Judas Tadeo, do not pose a threat because homicides or human sacrifices are not linked to them.

Drawing on my research findings, there is at least one cult that needs further exploration. The cult of the holy death widely spread in the Zeta's cartel (and potentially smaller cells splintered from this cartel), is linked to human sacrifices, practices of torture and mutilation. Regardless of their alleged Satanic nature, these practices on their own are alarming and further research needs to be undertaken to find out how widespread a phenomenon it is in the northern states of Mexico. What appears fundamental in this dimension of violence linked to drug trafficking, is the fact that victims' bodies are disappeared. In light of the growing number of disappearances in Mexico, this finding should not be underestimated.

Considering that there is so little information about this topic, and how delicate this subject is, I suggest that further research is undertaken by interdisciplinary teams in coordination with local authorities. The psychological toll for researchers is potentially high, so it is highly recommended to divide the workload and have peer support. Furthermore, in order to provide a more comprehensive study of this subject, I would recommend a team of at least five researchers specialised in different disciplines such as cultural studies,

anthropology, sociology, psychology and criminology. Local authorities can assist researchers with relevant information regarding cases linked to satanic rituals and disappearances.

## **6. Conclusions**

This paper has provided a qualitative analysis of the narratives of thirty-three former narcos regarding their jobs in drug trafficking. It showed how violence linked to drug trafficking is multifaceted and serve different purposes. Through this analysis, this paper demonstrates that drug trafficking-related violence cannot be tackled with one single strategy. More significantly, this paper shows that the continuation of the militarised public security will perpetuate the first two dimensions of drug trafficking-related violence. Hence, in response to the recent debates regarding the creation of the National Guard and the rather blurry strategy of López-Obrador to tackle violence, this paper provided alternative strategies, based on the perpetrators' perspectives, to minimise violence in the long run.

In the light of drug trafficking-related violence as a business and violence as the ground rules of working in drug trafficking, the first strategy suggested is to legalise drugs in Mexico starting with cannabis and opium. If drugs remain illegal, drug cartels will keep operating and recruiting more children and young men in the North of Mexico. If drugs remain illegal, drug cartels will continue exercising practices of torture, kidnapping and murder as a business and as the ground rules of working in this illegal business. It is clear that legalising cannabis would not solve the violence alone, but it would assist in decreasing it and could aid the Mexican economy, especially in the rural areas. As said before, legalising marijuana and opium will benefit the peasants who had no other alternative than working in the illegal business in order to survive, as well as generating thousands of jobs in the country. Legalisation of drugs in Mexico, however, should be considered as part of a wider strategy to minimise violence which includes tailored social programmes to help children and young men living in the most dangerous poor neighbourhoods.

The third dimension of drug trafficking-related violence addressed in this paper suggests that there are more complex causes of violence in Mexico. This is a key finding in the former narcos' narratives of their experiences of violence in drug trafficking. Beyond the monetary incentives, and the easy access to drugs, participants found practices of torture and murder exciting and empowering. These feelings are linked to their early experiences of domestic violence, and their everyday violent encounters as part of street gangs. Participants explained that in the context of poor neighbourhoods, children are extremely vulnerable to all types of violence. Most of them suffered some type of abuse from their parents and close relatives. This, in turn, led them to do drugs, to evade their reality and be 'happy' for a moment, and to join street gangs in search for support. This is the way in which participants become desensitized to violence. In particular, as explained earlier, gang fights proved the best training for young men to become more violent. Gang warfare is as lethal

and cruel as drug trafficking-related violence, children and young men have to fight for their lives on a regular basis and this is the way they earn their peer's respect. In this context, it is not surprising that participants normalised and even enjoyed practices of violence. However, some questions emerge from these narratives: where were the local authorities when these men were fighting in the streets every weekend? Where was the local institution Integral Family Development (DIF) when participants suffered domestic violence?

Drawing on participants' narratives, it seems fundamental that in order to prevent more individuals joining the ranks of organised crime, more attention should be given to life conditions and safety in the poorest neighbourhoods of the North of Mexico. To this end, it is suggested that local authorities investigate what are the main issues that inhabitants of these neighbourhoods must cope with daily, and then design social programmes tailored to their needs. In particular, local authorities should pay more attention to helping children and young men who suffer from drug addictions. Hopefully, as the government has acknowledged addictions as a health issue, there are more rehabilitation centres that offer professional help. Participants highlighted that their low self-esteem drew on both their condition of being poor and being drug addicts. Therefore, rehabilitation centres should also provide psychological help in order to help individuals to value their own lives. This is of paramount importance as being a young poor man suffering from drug addictions puts individuals at higher risk of joining drug cartels.

Finally, this paper brought to the fore the ritualistic practices linked to the Zetas cartel. Unlike other cultural elements of the so called narco-culture, the cult to the holy death [santa muerte] poses a threat as it implies gruesome practices of torture and murder. Participants explained that most members of the cartel were invited, or sometimes forced, to join this cult. Members must engage in human and animal sacrifices in exchange for protection. The pact with the holy death is as simple as it is macabre, members offer this saint the life and suffering of their victims and, in return, the saint will protect members and guarantee a dignified death. In the context of the prevalence of disappearances in Mexico, especially in the North, this cult should be further investigated. To date, there is little research on the role that the holy death played or still plays in the murder and disappearance of thousands of people. Therefore, I suggest that an interdisciplinary team is created to investigate the particularities of this cult in partnership with local authorities.

The current administration of López-Obrador still has an opportunity to address the issue of violence in a different way as promised during his campaign. The creation of the National Guard will not tackle the roots of violence and it will certainly not prevent more individuals joining drug cartels. As confirmed by participants, and as it has been explicitly acknowledged in the National Development Plan, violence only incites more violence. This paper has offered an analysis of the perpetrators' perspective which has been systematically ignored by decision makers to date. If the government continues to ignore this perspective, and the voices of expert academics against the militarisation of the public security, it runs the risk of reproducing the same mistakes they vehemently criticised for twelve years.

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