‘The Social Contract Is Broken’: Inequality Becomes Deadly in Mexico

nytimes.com /2017/09/30/world/americas/mexico-inequality-violence-security.html

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30/09/2017

MONTERREY, Mexico — Viewed from above, greater Monterrey, with its corporate headquarters and golf resorts, appears as one city stretching between the mountains that surround it.

Closer up, though, it becomes clear that invisible walls enclose Monterrey’s wealthy core, creating a dividing line between its four million residents. For the people within those invisible walls, government is responsive and crime low. Those outside face rising murder rates, corruption and, activists say, police brutality.

Sergio Salas exists in both sides. He commutes between the education ministry in an affluent area downtown, where he works on special education programs, and his home in the working class suburb of Juárez.

Mr. Salas always assumed he was safe at his home, with the butterfly preserve he built in the backyard. Then, last year, criminals arrived at his house, tied him up and robbed him. Shaken, he returned only after installing a fence and hiring a part-time guard.

His beloved town, he said, has changed amid a rash of such crimes. Families put up walls, decamp for more prosperous areas or simply endure. The very notion of community has vanished.

As Mexico descends into its most violent year on record and the state proves incapable of responding, those with resources are taking matters into their own hands. Landowners, businesses and the rich are buying security by means legal and not.

Any social compact is built in part on the agreement that security is a public good, shared and maintained by all. As Mexico's rich effectively withdraw, the implicit arrangements that hold society together are breaking down.

Though the effects are subtle, they are everywhere. The rise of vigilantism, criminal impunity, police corruption and state weakness can all be traced in part to this growing security inequality.

In Juárez, neighbors would once come together against common challenges like crime or a corrupt police officer, but now, Mr. Salas said, "there is a culture of not participating, of not caring, of silence."

"The social contract is broken," he said.

Security as a Private Good

As the war on drugs fractured large cartels in recent years, smaller and more predatory groups rose in their place. Extortions and kidnappings spiked, targeting not just businesses and the rich but also middle-class workers.

In response, those who could afford it enlisted private security to do what the state could not.

Between 2013 and 2015, the number of private security companies nearly tripled, according to government statistics. Industry analysts believe the real number, including unregistered firms, may be several times higher.

The shift may be worsening Mexico's notoriously ineffective justice system, which secures convictions for only a tiny fraction of crimes. Armed guards can prevent a murder but they cannot investigate one, much less roll up a local cartel.

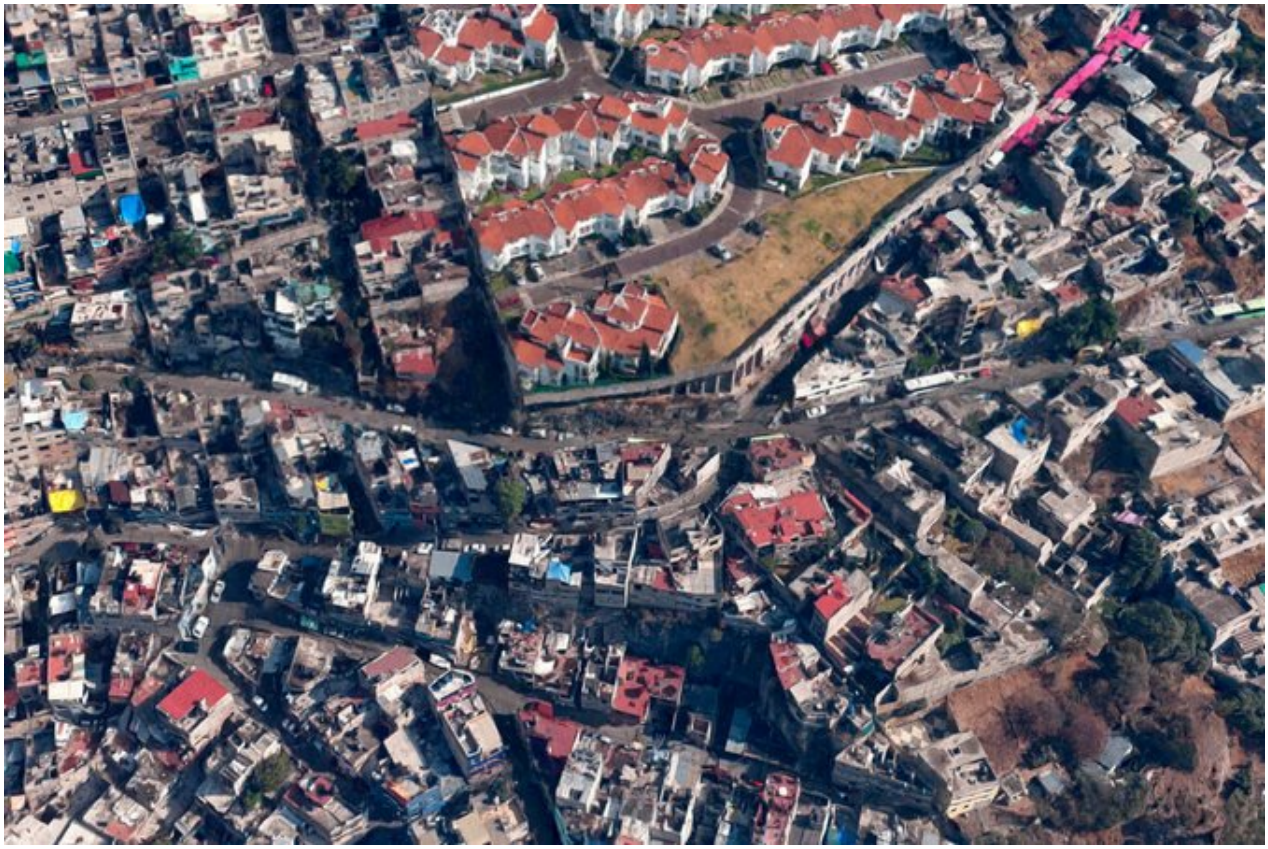
Remaining police resources tilt toward the connected. One study estimated that 70 percent of Mexico City's police work to protect private interests, such as guarding banks.

As powerful classes grow less reliant on the state for security, political pressure for addressing crime or reforming police has declined, even as the murder rate rises.

In moneyed enclaves across Mexico, where guards patrol boutique shops and hip restaurants, the violence rarely comes up in conversation, as if it were happening in another country.

Meanwhile, ordinary citizens are left unprotected. Gangs and organized crime have flowed into poor neighborhoods.

The divide is starkly visible in places like Santa Fe, an affluent neighborhood on Mexico City's western edge, where glass high-rises and shopping malls overlook slums that sprawl out from their shadows.



In Mexico City, the affluent neighborhood of Santa Fe overlooks slums. Google

On a recent afternoon in one such slum, Andres Ruiz, a sometimes-employed musician, leaned against a wall as he waited for the bus that, though frequently targeted by robbers, was his only way into town.

He squinted across the street at a stone cliff that rises, like a castle battlement, some 20 feet above the shanties. The fresh white walls of a gated neighborhood, built right up to the ledge, seemed to gaze back down at him.

“Security is only for them, for the high people,” he said, using a word that also means elite. Gang members, who openly patrol the streets, crawled past on a motorbike. “We are relegated, forgotten.”

Living outside those walls, Mr. Ruiz said, “is like being in a slaughterhouse.”

Marilena Hernandez, who sells quesadillas and tacos down the street, said it might be for the best that police ignore the robberies that come “at any hour.”

“It can be counterproductive to call them,” she said. The police, for her, were just another form of private security that she could not afford. “If you have money to give the officers, maybe they’ll be more eager to help you, but otherwise they won’t.”

Might Makes Right

As the state recedes, inequality and violence, once largely distinct phenomena here, are feeding into one another. That cycle can be seen especially in the rise of vigilante militias. Those groups are “the extreme of the phenomenon of private security,” Edna Treviño, the director of México Evalúa, a public policy think tank, said in her office in Mexico City.

They began as a grass-roots solution to the violence. Local communities, fed up with police, organized self-defense groups to replace them. But this only accelerated Mexico’s breakdown, with the proliferation of untrained gunmen who often acted with impunity.

Many militias were bought off by cartels. Others were tempted into drug trafficking, kidnapping or extortion. They

are now considered a major driver of the disintegration they were once meant to solve.

Those groups may be a manifestation of inequality, according to recent research by Brian J. Phillips, a political scientist at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics in Mexico City.

In a study of 2,500 towns, Mr. Phillips found that vigilantes did not necessarily arise in the areas with higher crime or a weaker state presence, as one might expect.

Rather, the wider a town's gap between rich and poor, the greater the odds that vigilante militias would form. Conversely, a town with more equality, even if it is poor, rarely produces such groups.

When looking at individual cases, it becomes clear how inequality, more so even than violence, drives the vigilantism tearing apart the rural countryside.

For the rural rich, who are often landowners, hired guns can guard a business or farm that local institutions are too weak to protect. Then, in a microcosm of national trends, the militia effectively replaces the police, but rarely protects those who cannot afford to pay them.

This often prompts the poor, seeing that only militias provide security, to form their own volunteer forces, or to turn to lynchings, a form of vigilantism that requires few resources.

Or the poor may arm first out of perceived necessity. For every percentage point increase in inequality, the murder rate rises 1.5 points, studies find.

Mark Ungar, a Brooklyn College professor who studies security issues, said that might-makes-right vigilantism has shifted the "gravity of power" in rural areas toward those with the most money.

That can mean cartels. But sometimes the deepest pockets belong to agricultural and resource extraction firms, which have been accused of deploying armed groups against environmental activists and indigenous communities.

"Private security has become a central part of criminality itself," Mr. Ungar said.

Social and Political Order Fray

"There is something particular to security," said Rita Abrahamsen, a political scientist who studies security's effects on society. "It's different from something like health care. If you don't have security, then that cohesion cannot be maintained."

This fraying can be felt across Mexico. Polls show rising distrust in institutions and dissatisfaction with the state of democracy.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a left-wing populist known for challenging the legitimacy of elections, leads polls for next year's presidential vote. Though he has emphasized economic inequality rather than security issues, his supporters include many poor and working class people who feel left behind.

Inequality "is one of the great issues in this country," Jorge Tello, a former director of the national intelligence service, said over coffee at a private club in Monterrey. Nearby, a well-dressed family sang happy birthday.

When violence first rose citywide, Monterrey's powerful corporate leaders pushed for, and often directly financed, root-and-branch reforms intended to protect everyone.

But when crime fell in wealthy areas, so did pressure for continuing the reforms. Though rich citizens had spent benevolently, they had deepened a political culture in which institutions and officials serve the moneyed. Areas like Juárez fell into neglect.

"That's why I think López Obrador has a huge chance to become the next president, because a big part of the

population doesn’t have access to a restaurant like this,” he said.

As Mexicans withdraw from the social compact, Mr. Tello warned, problems like crime and corruption entrench.

“When you talk about these issues in Mexico, it’s said that there’s such a lack of governance,” he said. “But it’s the lack of citizenship as well.”

‘We Are a Society That Won’t Mobilize’

“Mexican society has always been unequal,” Ms. Treviño, the director of México Evalúa, said.

Now even security, the bedrock of social order, was becoming a matter of every Mexican for himself or herself, altering how citizens see their obligations to society itself.

“We are a society that won’t mobilize very much, won’t act against deadly violence,” she said.

As the sense of collective good recedes, neglect is becoming the new norm.

“In some slums of the city, there is no presence of the state,” she said. “There is nothing, literally nothing. Young people have to take care of each other in the street.”

Mr. Salas, the Juárez robbery victim, expressed optimism that the social contract could be repaired if communities unlearned their new habits.

“It is a cultural thing that was put together little by little, so you have to dismantle it and then put it back together piece by piece,” he said. “I bet on that. That’s the reason I’m not moving.”

But Ms. Treviño, after watching years of work on poverty and governance unravel, worries that society might not come back together again.

“It’s very serious,” she said.

“As I say this, it’s making me emotional,” she added, tears of frustration rising in her eyes. “It’s overwhelming.”