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# A record 29,000 Mexicans were murdered last year - can soldiers stop the bloodshed?

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# A record 29,000 Mexicans were murdered last year - can soldiers stop the bloodshed?

## **Abstract**

Exactly 234,966 people have died in Mexico's 11-year drug war. Now the government wants to deploy soldiers to criminal hot spots, a move many fear will just increase violence and weaken the police.

## **Disciplines**

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## A record 29,000 Mexicans were murdered last year – can soldiers stop the bloodshed?

February 22, 2018 10.40pm AEDT

Murder rates in Mexico have spiked since the military was first sent in to fight organized crime in 2006. Henry Romero/Reuters

## A record 29,000 Mexicans were murdered last year – can soldiers stop the bloodshed?

February 22, 2018 10.40pm AEDT

Mexico's war on drugs has left 234,966 people dead in the last 11 years. In 2017 alone, the country saw some 29,000 murders, the highest annual tally since such record-keeping began in 1997.

For years, incensed Mexicans have demanded that President Enrique Peña Nieto – now in the final stretch of his six-year term – take action. Recently, lawmakers from his Revolutionary Institutional Party proposed a controversial solution: Put Mexico's military on the streets to fight crime.

Despite protests and warnings from human rights advocates, who say the law will actually escalate violence, on Dec. 15, 2017, the Mexican Senate approved the Internal Security Law.

Just before Christmas, Peña Nieto signed the legislation into law. In response, activists poured red paint in fountains across Mexico City to symbolize the bloodshed it would usher in.

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**Cencos**  
@cencos

Hoy las fuentes de la #CDMX se pintaron de rojo, la seguridad no debe ser responsabilidad de las fuerzas armadas. La #LeyDeSeguridadInterior NO es la respuesta y únicamente perpetuará la violencia. Exigimos se busque la paz, continuar con esta guerra, sólo generará más sangre.

8:32 AM - Dec 2, 2017

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### A military history of massacres

I've been studying the violence in my home country for decades. While something must be done to stem the bloodshed, history shows that militarizing law enforcement will hurt rather than help.

Mexico's military has actually been fighting crime informally for over a decade. In 2006, former President Felipe Calderón sent 6,500 soldiers to battle cartels in the state of Michoacán. And they never really stopped.

The consequences have been grave. Between 2012 and 2016, Mexico's attorney general launched 505 investigations into alleged human rights abuses – including torture and forced disappearances – committed by the military.

In 2014, soldiers shot 22 unarmed citizens in the town of Tlatlaya. Later that year, the army was allegedly involved in the unsolved kidnapping of 43 students from a teachers college in southern Mexico.



Mexico's army was allegedly involved in the disappearance of 43 students in 2014. The case remains unsolved. Jose Cabezas/Reuters

Much of the military's extrajudicial violence is undocumented and investigations move slowly, so crimes by the armed forces have been difficult to prosecute. In 11 years, only 16 soldiers have been convicted of human rights abuses in civilian courts.

Supporters of the Internal Security Law, including Secretary of Defense Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos, say the new law will right this wrong. By providing a legal framework for the armed forces to take on law enforcement duties, it ensures stricter regulation and more oversight.

Security experts, on the other hand, call the Internal Security Law dangerous, saying it delays much-needed police reforms and violates the Mexican Constitution, which prohibits using the military for Mexico's public security.

### **The authoritarian connection**

The idea of "internal security" has a dark genealogy in Mexican law. It first appeared just after the country's independence from Spain, in 1822. According to the short-lived Emperor Agustín de Iturbide, his government had the right to protect "the internal order and the external security" of the fledgling nation.

In practice, that meant persecuting those who had opposed Iturbide's dissolution of Congress and

proclamation of himself as Mexico's new emperor.

Authoritarian regimes have since invoked "internal security" – which made its way into the country's 1917 constitution – to fight all sorts of rebels, from revolutionaries to student liberals to indigenous discontents.

The new Internal Security Law continues this tradition, giving the president the right to order federal authorities, including the army and the navy, to intervene when other federal and local forces cannot handle certain "threats to internal security."

Built-in safeguards are supposed to prevent the government from abusing this power. Within 72 hours of such a threat emerging, the president must publish a "designation of protection" that details the specific place and limited time frame of military occupation.

In practice, though, these requirements are optional. In cases of "grave danger," the law says, the president can take "immediate action."

The new law contains other concerning contradictions. One article states that peaceful protests do not constitute a threat to Mexico's internal security. This should avoid a repeat of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, in which soldiers in Mexico City gunned down hundreds of student demonstrators.

But another article of the law may undermine that provision by deeming "controlling, repelling or neutralizing acts of resistance" to be a legitimate use of military force.

### **The most challenged law**

Mexican human rights advocates aren't the only ones alarmed by the new law. In December, both the United Nations and Amnesty International asked the president to veto it.

Instead, Peña Nieto approved the law but declared that it would not be enforced until the Supreme Court can review its constitutionality.



Marines standing guard in Mexico City after a July 2017 shootout between gang members and the Mexican army. Carlos Jasso/Reuters

The Supreme Court has now received thousands of legal challenges to the Internal Security Law. Suits alleging that the law encroaches on Mexicans' basic rights were filed by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, 188 congressmen and 43 senators. More than 12,000 citizens have also submitted individual complaints on similar grounds. On Feb. 12, the hugely popular governor of

Chihuahua, Javier Corral, traveled to Mexico City to personally file a claim in the name of the people of his state.

No date has yet been set for the 11 Supreme Court justices to hear arguments.

### **The problem with the police**

Another consequence of the Internal Security Law, in my analysis, is that it will further weaken Mexico's already troubled police force.

According to a December 2017 government report, Mexico has just 0.8 police officers per 1,000 inhabitants – less than half what the U.N. – recommends.

The report also notes that just 1 in 4 officers has received sufficient training. And out of 39 police academies, only 6 satisfy the minimum conditions – for example, dormitories, medical services or training infrastructure – to be considered fully functional.

Mexico's police are also widely perceived as corrupt and ineffective. In part, that's due to their low salaries. Currently, officers in poor states like Chiapas and Tabasco earn about half the federally recommended minimum monthly salary of 9,993 pesos, or US\$500.

To supplement their poverty wages, as Mexicans well know, many police officers have traditionally turned to petty bribery. More recently, some police have gotten involved in more lucrative criminal activity, working with the same drug cartels they're supposed to be fighting.



Distrust of the police is a common trope in Mexican pop culture.

Successive Mexican governments have used the shortcomings in the police force to justify sending in soldiers and marines, claiming it's a provisional measure to get crime under control while the police are professionalized. The new law has turned this temporary solution into national policy.

### **A spectacular failure**

The military is not exempt from corruption.

The brutal Zetas cartel, infamous for beheadings and indiscriminate slaughter, was originally formed by deserters of the Mexican army's elite special forces.

The claim that the military can keep Mexicans safe was recently put to its first test. In January President Peña Nieto had to cancel a trip to the city of Reynosa, in Tamaulipas state, where criminal groups have been violently clashing. The army said it could not guarantee his safety there.

If the military cannot even protect the president, Mexicans ask, what hope do the people have?

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