

Anxiety, evasion and addiction: how Mexicans deal with endless violence

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Between anxiety, addiction and evasion, Mexicans have found coping mechanisms to deal with the violence plaguing their country and which peaked in 2017 to the highest level in two decades.

The year is not yet over, but the number of murders committed in November reached 23,101, according to a government registry of violent deaths, the highest count since the tally was launched in 1997, and topping the 22,409 killed in 2011 when the big drugs cartels started to fracture.

The statistics do not show how many of the deaths were linked to narco-trafficking, but experts believe the majority were attributable to the wave of drugs-related violence that has risen incessantly since 2006, when the government launched all-out war on Mexico's powerful cartels.

Collective violence

"Since the start of this absurd war on drugs, Mexico has entered into what the World Health Organization technically defines as 'collective violence,'" said Juan Ramon de la Fuente, a psychiatrist and former dean of the Autonomous National University of Mexico, or UNAM.

"It is a kind of epidemic when there are more than 10 homicides for every 100,000 people," he said.

WHO figures show that in 2015 Mexico was suffering 19 murders per 100,000 people, but De la Fuente, who participated in a multidisciplinary study of the impact of violence on society, puts that figure at at least 22 per 100,000.

The lack of security that has reigned over large tracts of Mexico for years has had a tangible emotional impact on the population, said De La Fuente, while life expectancy has dropped yearly among young people because of the number of youths being killed.

"We cannot separate the violence from the [mental health problems](#) which are on the rise across the country," said De La Fuente. "There is a feeling of helplessness which creates reactions that people express symptomatically, in terms of anxiety, a disturbance to sleep patterns, or the increased use of alcohol and other drugs."

According to government data, [drug](#) consumption has in fact increased by more than 40 percent since 2010.

"In Mexico there are no fewer than a million people who probably have suffered from some emotional or psychological impact derived from the drugs war since the army was sent on to the streets," said Rogelio Flores, a researcher into the societal effects of violence at UNAM's psychology department.

De la Fuente estimates that with the 200,000 people murdered, and tens of thousands missing since 2006, around 250,000 homes in Mexico have been affected by "a process of pain, depression, helplessness, frustration and fear, a gamut of very powerful and complicated emotions which is overlooked by the state from a medical and psychological point of view."

Scenes from Dante

In other cases, people display the phenomenon of "normalization" or "habituation" to the endless violence that is incorporated into daily life, from school children learning how to protect themselves during shootings to drugs lords being lionized in television shows or in the folk ballads known as "narco-corridas."

"It is worrying that we come to see death as an element of everyday life," said Flores. "There is a process of desensitization in large parts of society which is promoting and legitimizing violence, without considering its consequences."

The spectacular cruelty of the [drug cartels](#) has produced scenes of Dantesque horror, with [people](#) being beheaded, dismembered, skinned alive, tortured and hung from bridges—their bodies dumped, often by the dozen, in the streets for all to see.

Martin Barron, a criminologist at the National Institute for Criminal Science, said that in the past the cartels had "codes of respect" that included not killing a victim's wife or children.

But in 2009, with the rise of the Zetas—the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel, which was made up originally from government special police who defected to the drugs lords—all the rules started to disappear.

"The criminals now have no limitations preventing them inflicting whatever degrading acts they wish upon another human being," he said.

He underlined the lack of importance given to the origin of the Zetas, former elite commandos around whom swirl macabre legends, such as the story that one their late leaders used to eat the human flesh of his victims.

"We have to analyze these figures that come from a military

background, they start out there and then the cartels look for someone who would do be prepared to do something like this. This [violence](#) is not in the normal make-up of Mexicans, you have to go out looking for someone with psychotic tendencies," he said.

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