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To cite this article: Juan Del Rio (2023) Do Vigilante Groups Reduce Cartel-Related Violence? An Empirical Assessment of Crime Trends in Michoacán, Mexico, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46:7, 1216-1240, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2020.1816683](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1816683)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1816683>



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Do Vigilante Groups Reduce Cartel-Related Violence? An Empirical Assessment of Crime Trends in Michoacán, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

When the Knights Templar cartel targeted the people of Michoacán, vigilantes formed for protection. This study uses a paired sample t-test to investigate the effect that the emergence and subsequent removal of the vigilantes and their confrontational approach against the Knights Templar had on cartel-related crimes. Initially, homicides increased in vigilante areas, while kidnappings and extortions decreased. After vigilantes were removed, homicides and kidnappings increased, while extortions decreased. Government removal of vigilantes allowed for a power vacuum to ensue, allowing violence to increase. Therefore, violence initially increases with vigilante presence, then decreases, while increasing again once the group is removed.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 20 May 2020


Accepted 15 August 2020

In 2019, the Mexican state of Michoacán reached record homicide levels—the month of September alone saw the state record 220 homicides.¹ This is an increase of 28.7% in homicides compared to September of 2018. In 2019, Michoacán had experienced several high-profile violent episodes; for example, in February, 8 individuals were killed after a shoot-out between the Los Viagras cartel and government security forces in the municipality of Buenavista;² three months later, 10 people were killed near the town of Uruapan after a clash between the Cártel

Jalisco de Nueva Generación (CJNG) and Los Viagras;³ and in June another 9 people were killed in the municipality of Aguililla after another confrontation between the CJNG and Los Viagras.⁴ These three municipalities where the aforementioned incidents took place all share the common characteristic that they were once occupied by *autodefensas* (vigilantes) earlier in the decade.

Vigilantes first emerged in the “tierra caliente” region of Michoacán in February of 2013.⁵ Their emergence is attributed to the state’s lack of success in protecting the local population from the Knights Templar (KT) cartel. Much of the frustration that led to the birth of the vigilantes derived from the KT cartel’s widespread practice of extortion,

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 Supplemental data for this article is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1816683>.

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which served as a major incentive for change and improving point for the vigilantes.⁶ Numerous businesses closed or left Michoacán, as those who failed to meet extortion payments faced retaliatory acts including arson, kidnapping, and execution.⁷ While extortion made life under the KT cartel very challenging, frequent violent occurrences including kidnappings, rapes, disappearances, and murders also contributed to the growing discontent with the drug traffickers and a wave of support for the vigilantes.⁸ In May of 2014, the Mexican government created a “Rural Defense Force” in order to legitimize the self-defense militias.⁹ However, after just two years, in April of 2016, Mexican authorities disarticulated the Rural Defense Forces,¹⁰ which no longer allowed the vigilantes to operate with impunity.

The vigilante phenomenon is not new and is not limited to Michoacán as it has been documented and studied throughout different regions and countries, such as South Africa,¹¹ Nigeria,¹² Tanzania,¹³ Ghana,¹⁴ Kenya,¹⁵ India,¹⁶ Indonesia,¹⁷ Palestine,¹⁸ Latin America¹⁹ and more recently cyber vigilantism on the web.²⁰ A number of studies have examined vigilantism in different contexts, however, no study has analyzed the empirical effects of vigilante emergence and removal in an area with a drug cartel presence over a long period of time. However, one study presented by Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub in 2016 titled “Vigilante mobilization and local order: Evidence from Mexico” examined the effects of vigilantism on crime in the Michoacán context (will be referred to as ‘Osorio study’ for remainder of study).²¹ In this study, researchers conducted a one-year post analysis after the vigilantes emerged in Michoacán, this study however, has several shortcomings which are further discussed in the next section.

In an effort to build upon previous vigilante research, this study empirically examines whether the emergence of vigilantes, in the absence of a functional government, had a positive or negative impact on a region subject to victimization by an organized crime group. Consequently, an assessment of this case study allows policymakers to make educated predictions on the outcome of vigilante uprisings to confront organized crime groups in other areas of Mexico—as is currently the situation in Michoacán and Guerrero—and elsewhere more globally.

Vigilantism

Cartel-related violence in Mexico has been extensively studied throughout different regions of Mexico as it relates to the apprehension or killing of cartel leaders. What it is unclear is the impact of a vigilante uprising on cartel-related violence and the cartel organization. The situation in Michoacán presents a unique opportunity to examine cartel-related violence alongside the presence of vigilantes who partnered with Mexican security forces to incapacitate an organized crime group. This is a timely topic to be considered as several municipalities within Michoacán have recently seen the reappearance of vigilantes.²²

Vigilantism dates back to medieval times, with the frankpledge system being one of the earliest concepts that influences modern vigilante movements.²³ The frankpledge was an arrangement of law enforcement and policing in which members of the community were collectively responsible for the conduct of their peers. A frankpledge group was in charge of ensuring that any criminal within the group was led to court or the

community itself was fined.²⁴ Over time, this system was replaced by government officials that maintained order and carried out justice. Contemporary societies agree with John Locke's concept of the Social Contract in which the government's role is to protect the natural rights of its citizens, thus, allowing citizens to no longer seek protection from vigilantes. However, in the absence of protection from the government, as in the case of Michoacán, vigilante movements have emerged to replace the government's role of protecting its citizens.

Vigilante Literature

There are many lines of research related to the themes associated to vigilantism. First, the emergence of vigilantism has been frequently explained by the combination of a frail government and high levels of crime.²⁵ In Africa, for example, the combination of the perceptions of a failing state police and rising crime generated a situation where an abundance of non-state policing groups have emerged.²⁶ Vigilantism is associated with a perception that there is a serious and authentic problem with deviance.²⁷ In New York City, police precincts that exhibited the highest crime rates also experienced vigilante activity.²⁸ In Kenya, the increased frequency of vigilante groups is linked with the struggle for political control and more importantly, the growth of criminal activities, especially extortion.²⁹ In Ghana, the following factors were found to be related to a growth in vigilantism: an under-resourced police force, a frail police-civilian relationship, a rising crime rate, a slow and clogged court system, an increased public worry about crime, and a breakdown in traditional methods to resolve disputes.³⁰ In a post-apartheid South Africa, the poverty and lawlessness that has been created by apartheid not being addressed in the twenty years after the democratic transition has been linked to the emergence of vigilantes as one of the scarce choices for security.³¹ Similar to Africa, researchers have indicated that vigilante activity in the United States is a product of the anxiety produced by the nature and recurrence of criminal behavior and lack of trust in traditional institutions.³²

Another line of research within the vigilante literature investigates the relationship between public support and vigilantism. Vigilantism draws support from regions with the highest risk of victimization.³³ In a U.S. setting, in high-crime neighborhoods, men are somewhat more supportive than women of vigilante groups, while low-income individuals are also marginally more supportive than high-income individuals.³⁴ In Ghana, public support for vigilantism has been essentially linked to people's views toward the honesty of the police; individuals who felt that the police were not dependable were more probable to support vigilantism than individuals who felt the police to be dependable.³⁵ Within Mexico, citizens are more likely to communicate support for vigilantism if they do not have faith in local government institutions.³⁶ Similarly, in an inquiry on vigilantism in 18 Latin American countries, it was found that the strongest predictors of support for violent vigilantism are signs of institutional illegitimacy, personal victimization, and punitive mindsets.³⁷ In regards to who participates in vigilantism, Abrahams has noted that with some infrequent exceptions, vigilante activity is generally undertaken by men.³⁸

A third line of research has examined the use of violence by vigilantes and their effect on crime. Vigilante groups have regularly been responsible for grave human rights violations, and their actions can lead to retaliatory escalations of violence.³⁹ In the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa, it was found that the vigilante system was based on retributive justice, in which vigilantes operated in the public sphere expending the use and the threat of violence for warnings and retribution.⁴⁰ A case study on the *Mapogo* vigilante group in a northern province of South Africa revealed differing results for the observed crimes. The overall violent crime increased during the period of analysis, specifically, rape, incident assault, common assault and grievous bodily harm, while murder and attempted murder decreased. Additionally, property crime incidents increased, while overall robbery decreased over time.⁴¹ Correspondingly, an ethnographic study linked the expansion of rights provided by South Africa to a justification on rising assaults on suspected criminals by the Mapago vigilante group.⁴² In Tanzania, the presence of vigilantes and their actions has been linked to a successful reduction in crime in some of the areas they operate.⁴³

Moreover, in the realm of religious differences, in Lombok, Indonesia, violence by Muslim vigilante groups has been linked to spiritual expansion of Hindus, and tension in interisland relations.⁴⁴ Further research on Indonesia has demonstrated that the modus operandi for some vigilante groups is not necessarily the use of violence, instead it is the display in the ability to commit acts of violence in ascertaining themselves as spokespersons of local society.⁴⁵ Others have inquired about the relationship of the state and vigilante groups. Bowden has noted the idea of “state vigilantism” with the phenomenon of vigilante death squads, which are often made up of government personnel, such as off-duty police officers,⁴⁶ leaving Abrahams to question if this government violence is being disguised as a grass-roots crime control initiative.⁴⁷ In sum, it is unclear whether vigilantism can decrease crime based on the few available studies that have analyzed crime rates. What is further unclear is whether vigilantism can reduce cartel-related crime, the subject of the current study.

With regard to Michoacán, research suggests that the emergence of vigilantes in the region is a result of the widespread extortion, kidnapping, and other violent crimes perpetrated by the KT drug cartel on the local population.⁴⁸ Similarly, vigilantes in Michoacán are found in relatively poor areas of the state where state and federal authorities have a minimal presence, and where local authorities are frail and/or vulnerable to influence from organized crime groups.⁴⁹ These groups are fundamentally a pronouncement of the state’s failure to protect the local population from the KT.⁵⁰ Likewise, the *autodefensas*, or vigilantes, in Michoacán emerged because of the absence of the state in certain regions, particularly in ungoverned spaces, due to the inability of the state to provide adequate security.⁵¹

The weaknesses of government institutions and a lack of democracy created suitable conditions for organized crime to flourish.⁵² For example, the weakness of democratic institutions in Apatzingán, Michoacán has generated a series of perverse incentives for criminals to enter local political life, while the lack of legitimacy, inadequate financial resources, and the short terms in office of municipal councils has prevented the local government from fulfilling their obligations to their citizens and society as a whole,⁵³ thus allowing organized crime groups, such as the KT drug cartel to prey on the

inhabitants of Michoacán. Similarly, local economic inequality created a fitting situation for vigilante organizations in Michoacán, as inequality creates a demand for vigilantism because poorer citizens feel relatively deprived of security compared with wealthier neighbors who have advantages regarding private and public security.⁵⁴ The motives outlined above for the emergence and presence of vigilantes in Michoacán are similar to the reason's vigilantes emerged in some areas of Africa.⁵⁵

The vigilante movement in Michoacán originated in February 2013 in the western municipalities of Tepalcatepec and Buenavista and quickly diffused into other regions of the state.⁵⁶ At the height of the movement, vigilantes were occupying 28 of Michoacán's 113 municipalities.⁵⁷ Conversely, with the use of ethnographic interviews on members of the self-defense forces and political and social leaders of the communities, Fuentes-Díaz found that the vigilantes were present in 24 municipalities, while possibly present in 5 other municipalities.⁵⁸

While there have been several studies and reports documenting the growth and adequate conditions for the vigilantes to flourish, there are few studies focusing on the impact vigilantes have had on crime. To date, the Osorio study is the only quantitative study assessing the effect that vigilante mobilization had on local levels of crime within Michoacán. Using cross-sectional data, the authors contend that the emergence of *auto-defensas* reduced the levels of many different kinds of crimes including cattle rustling, property crime, land disposessions, larceny incidents, robberies, extortions, kidnappings, murders, and fraud, by analyzing the effect that the presence of vigilantes in 2013 had on crime the subsequent year, 2014.⁵⁹ While the Osorio study makes an important contribution to the literature and employs a sophisticated statistical analysis, the study has several shortcomings, as a result, the validity of this study's results come into question. First, due to the fact that the study was presented in 2016, there is no evaluation of the long-term effects of vigilante presence on crime in the region. Second, this study was presented the same year that the vigilantes were removed by the government, therefore there is no analysis to assess the impact of vigilante removal. Third, the study does not include a clear comparison of crime levels between areas with vigilante groups and areas without. Similarly, while vigilante presence has been mapped out,⁶⁰ none of the aforementioned studies have discussed how crime levels have been affected in those specific municipalities that exhibited the presence of vigilantes, in comparison to municipalities without their presence.

In sum, the vigilante literature has gathered mixed findings as to their effect on crime, and in some cases, vigilante groups have been shown to escalate violence. Theoretically, homicides may escalate initially if vigilantes are trying to rid an area of an organized crime group. The following section will discuss how the tactics used by the vigilantes in Michoacán, in cooperation with Mexican security forces, may lead to an increase in violence at first.

Factors Related to Rises in Violence

When vigilantes formed in Michoacán, they cooperated with government forces to take on the KT drug cartel and debilitate the organization. Althaus and Dudley explain:

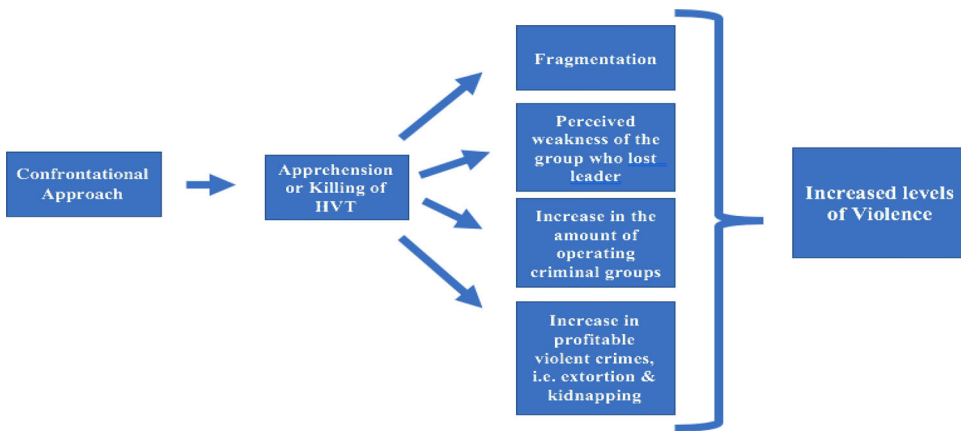


Figure 1. Sequence of possible outcomes related to confrontational enforcement practices.

Federal troops, police and militias entered towns together, manned checkpoints and consulted with one another about strategy. Drawing from the sudden trove of intelligence coming from the vigilante groups and locals who supported them, the federal forces arrested hundreds of suspected Knights Templar and corralled several important leaders. The culmination of this alliance came on March 9, when federal troops killed Nazario Moreno, the leader of the Knights Templar. Several weeks later, they killed one of Moreno's successors.⁶¹

Together, the vigilantes and government forces took a confrontational approach by increasing enforcement in the region to capture or kill KT cartel members. A significant amount of studies on the removal of kingpins/High Value Targets (HVTs) indicate that an increase in law enforcement strategies related to removing these leaders is linked to an increase in violence (See Figure 1).⁶² For example, Espinosa and Rubin have argued that military interventions to combat drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) resulted in an increase in the average homicide rate in Mexico.⁶³ Similarly, the arrest or killing of kingpins, bosses and leaders has resulted in the fragmentation of cartels, thus, increasing violence as divided organizations fight against each other for drug trafficking routes and control over other illegal activities.⁶⁴

A confrontational approach with increased enforcement is related to an increase in violence for several reasons. First, confrontational strategies lead to the capture or assassination of leaders, who are usually designated as HVTs resulting in the fragmentation of a group. Consequently, fragmentation leads to violence as factions engage in competition. One study by Phillips, and another by Atuesta and Ponce demonstrate that if law enforcement disassembles a criminal group's leadership through apprehension or assassination, breakups are sparked from within the organizations.⁶⁵ This breakup, therefore, escalates violence amongst criminal groups as splintered groups engage in fierce succession conflicts.⁶⁶ This has become routine in Mexico amid the many DTOs as violence increases following the capture of important leaders.⁶⁷

A second reason a confrontational approach is related to an increase in violence is due to the perceived weakness of the group whose leader was captured or assassinated, thus triggering an attack by another group to contest control over trafficking routes and territories.⁶⁸ Researchers have asserted that confrontational law enforcement in a specified area disturbs the status quo of organized crime, and this volatility triggers a

significant rise in not only intra-cartel violence but inter-cartel violence as well.⁶⁹ For example, after Mexican security forces were deployed to confront DTOs via organized arrests or assassinations of cartel leaders, violence increased,⁷⁰ whilst criminal groups waged war against each other to fill the power vacuums that followed.⁷¹

Third, Atuesta and Ponce point out that the implementation of confrontational enforcement strategies increases the amount of operating criminal groups, and therefore influences the intensity of violence among criminal groups.⁷² This is a result of other groups moving in, in an attempt to gain control over a region who may no longer be under control of a DTO. Similarly, increased law enforcement approaches to capture or kill high level cartel members is associated with increased violence—though the timing of this increase is up to debate. One group of researchers found that the apprehension of leaders is associated with cartel-related violence and homicides within the six months a HVT is apprehended.⁷³ Similarly, another researcher observed that leadership removal is associated with an initial decrease in violence, although an increase does occur in the long run as either fragmentation occurs or new groups emerge to fill market demands.⁷⁴

Confrontational law enforcement approaches such as those implemented by the *vigilantes* in cooperation with military forces are also linked to an increase in other profitable illicit activities. As law enforcement strategies like the HVT approach have disrupted drug trafficking networks, many DTOs have diversified their criminal portfolio.⁷⁵ For example, when the leader of a DTO is captured or killed, the chain of command is ruined, leaving local criminal cells to realize it may be too expensive to continue to be involved in the long-distance drug trade, which requires the managing of a large criminal network. Consequently, as outlined by Calderón, Robles, Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni these local criminal cells may begin to commit other criminal activities, including extortion and kidnappings in order to continue the flow of incoming revenue.⁷⁶

Related, it may also be the case that groups become profit-starved,⁷⁷ which may be due to an absence in trafficking connections which would inhibit the group from continuing a highly profitable drug trafficking operation.⁷⁸ For example, the weakening of the Arellano Felix Organization (AFO) by way of kingpin arrests was linked with increased amounts of extortions and kidnappings in Tijuana.⁷⁹ A case study of the AFO revealed that the removal of high-ranking AFO leaders with important business connections could escalate the group's tendency for kidnapping by observing the link that the removal of leaders with business connections in the organization had with the increased rate of kidnappings.⁸⁰

Researchers agree that when government forces directly confront DTOs by capturing or killing their HVTs, the result will be an increase in violence, mainly homicides.⁸¹ The increase in violence may be a result of a power vacuum, leading to fragmentation within the group whose leader was apprehended.⁸² Similarly, studies by Rasmussen and Benson; Moeller and Hesse; Calderón et al.; and Atuesta and Ponce indicate that an increase in violence may also be a result of rival groups perceiving that the group who lost a high-ranking leader may become weaker, thus triggering an attack from rivals to dispute territory.⁸³ Researchers have also found that the elimination of HVTs may disrupt a group's trafficking network, thus, escalating violent crimes, like kidnapping and extortion, in order to make up for the loss in trafficking revenue.⁸⁴ Overall, these

studies demonstrate the general outcome when government forces directly confront DTOs. None of these studies has assessed the outcome of a confrontational strategy undertaken by a vigilante group in cooperation with government security forces against a DTO. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to evaluate if vigilante presence reduced cartel-related crime. More specifically, the study evaluates vigilantism that employed an HVT strike approach against a drug cartel and its effect on crime.

Methods

Data

This study analyzes data drawn from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (National Institute of Statistics and Geography), an autonomous Mexican governmental organization known in short as INEGI. INEGI is Mexico's national statistical agency and operates independently of any law enforcement agency providing data on deaths by homicides and other violent crimes.⁸⁵ INEGI provides mortality data by reporting the amount of individual homicide victims identified by medical examiners at the state, municipal, and federal level.⁸⁶ Data on reported crimes are available monthly at the municipal and state level for the period under study, 1st January 2011–31st December 2017. As Mexico is a federal republic, municipalities are similar to counties in the United States.

This study analyzes whether vigilantism has an impact on cartel-related violence by observing crime within the region vigilantes were present. The following variables of interest were separately analyzed (1) intentional homicides with a firearm (will be referred to as 'homicides' for remainder of study), (2) extortion, and (3) kidnapping. Intentional homicides with a firearm serve as the best proxy to measure cartel-related homicides since organized crime related homicides typically involve the use of high-caliber or automatic firearms,⁸⁷ thus including homicides without firearms would capture many non-cartel related homicides.

Municipal crime data from Michoacán was aggregated from INEGI into two groups; municipalities with vigilantes ($n = 24$), the experimental group, and municipalities without vigilantes ($n = 89$), comparison group 1, which was informed by the Fuentes-Díaz study.⁸⁸ The state of Nuevo León was used as the second comparison group because it is the closest in size to Michoacán, exhibits the presence of organized crime groups, and vigilante groups are not present during the time of analysis. ArcGIS software was used to depict municipalities that exhibited vigilante presence versus municipalities that did not within Michoacán (Figure 2) and to display the state of Michoacán and Nuevo León within Mexico (Figure 3). Analyzing data on two comparison groups, as opposed to the area of interest only, permits for generalizable deductions on the settings that may increase violence and reduce extortions and kidnappings.

Analysis

It is important to note the limitations of the dataset employed for this analysis. INEGI crime data is only available from January 2011–December 2017, consequently putting a restraint on the type of statistical analysis that could be conducted to assess intervention

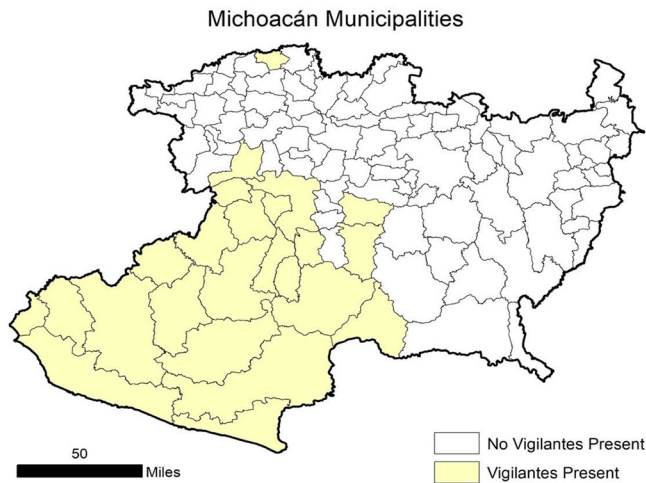


Figure 2. Michoacán municipalities with and without vigilante presence. *Source:* Fuentes-Díaz (2015).



Figure 3. Subdivision of Mexico by State.

effects on crime incidents. An Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) model to assess the time series would have been optimal, however, with the limited data available there was not enough pre-intervention periods to conduct an ARIMA analysis. Nevertheless, the analyses maintained a robust statistical test to identify causal relationships. A paired sample t-test was created to analyze pre-intervention cartel-related crime trends in the INEGI data and identify intervention and removed treatment effects.

Paired sample t-tests were used to examine differences between municipalities with vigilantes, and the two comparison groups (Michoacán municipalities without vigilante presence, and the state of Nuevo Leon). Homicides, extortion, and kidnapping were separately analyzed for every month within the study period. A supplementary analysis was also conducted where the crime rate was used instead to control for population

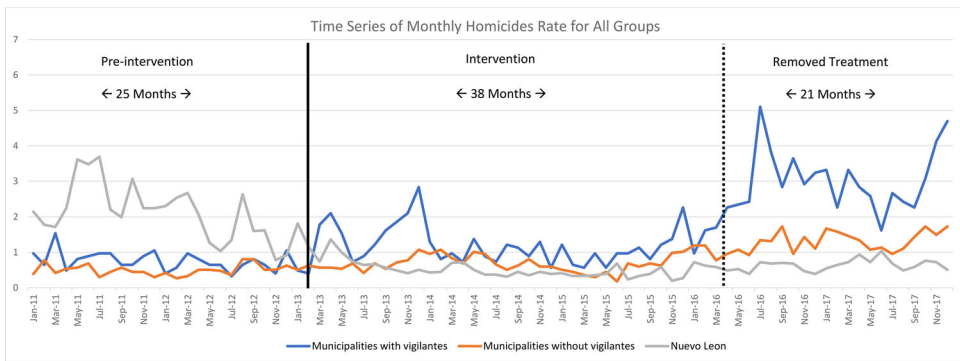


Figure 4. Monthly Homicides, Kidnappings (K&R), and Extortions in municipalities without vigilantes (2011–2017). *Source:* INEGI.

differences between the three groups under analysis. The crime rate was calculated by dividing the number of reported crimes by the total population of each group, then multiplying the result by 100,000.

In order to conduct a paired sample t-test, the data being analyzed should be of a normal distribution. A frequency distribution was generated for the INEGI data being analyzed, revealing that the data is non-parametric. A paired sample t-test was still used given the robustness of the statistical analysis. However, a supplementary analysis was conducted using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which is the equivalent of the paired sample t-test for non-parametric data. Results for the Wilcoxon signed-rank test are displayed in [supplementary Table 1](#). All significant findings of the paired sample t-test were also significant in the analysis using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

There are three periods of interest (1) pre-intervention (January 2011 - January 2013; 25 months), (2) intervention (February 2013–March 2016; 38 months), and (3) removed treatment (April 2016–December 2017; 21 months)–see [Figure 4](#). However, a paired t-test requires the same amount of observations for a pre- and post-analysis, thus, in order to meet the assumptions of the paired t-test, five periods were created. The 25-month pre-intervention period is referred to as pre, while the 38-month intervention period is divided into three separate measures. To analyze the intervention period against the pre-intervention period, the first 25 months of the intervention period (post 1) are analyzed against the pre-intervention period. Then, in order to analyze the intervention period against the 21-month removed treatment period (i.e. vigilantes no longer present), the first 21 months of the intervention period (post 2) are analyzed against the removed treatment, while also analyzing the last 21 months of the intervention period (post 3) against the removed treatment.

Descriptive Analysis

Evaluation begins with a descriptive analysis of the time series data by constructing a figure that depicts the frequency of crime incidents over the 84-month period (see [Figure 4](#)). The vertical solid line represents the first known presence of vigilantes in February 2013, while the vertical dotted line represents the disarticulation of vigilantes/rural defense forces in April 2016. A visual examination of [Figure 4](#) shows that the

Table 1. Results of T-test analysis and mean number of offenses reported in INEGI.

Region & Crimes N of Months	Pre 25	Post 1 25	t Test	Post 2 21	Removed Treatment 21	t Test	Post 3 21	Removed Treatment 21	t Test
Vigil ntes Present									
Homicides	9.36	15.24	-4.231***	15.95	37.52	-7.634***	13.42	37.52	-10.043***
Kidn ppings	1.80	2.36	-1.119	2.67	1.38	2.773	.90	1.38	-1.943
Extortion	5.36	4.80	.525	5.67	.38	6.589***	1.29	.38	3.650***
No Vigil ntes Present									
Homicides	16.76	23.40	-3.619***	23.43	43.95	-7.506***	22.00	43.95	-8.385***
Kidn ppings	9.64	8.04	1.130	9.29	.95	7.278***	1.43	.95	2.225
Extortion	17.20	12.60	1.847	14.38	1.14	9.384***	2.33	1.14	1.971
Nuevo Leon									
Homicides	108.64	29.76	10.124***	31.57	32.71	-.296	21.38	32.71	-5.077***
Kidn ppings	4.72	3.28	2.345	3.67	2.81	2.574	1.86	2.81	-3.127***
Extortion	10.68	29.44	-9.178***	27.86	54.52	-8.662***	41.29	54.52	-4.214***

Note: Pre = January 2011–January 2013; Post 1 = February 2013–February 2015; Post 2 = February 2013–October 2014; Post 3 = July 2014–March 2016; Removed Treatment = April 2016–December 2017.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (Two-tailed test).

Table 2. Percent change in reported offenses by INEGI.

	Municipalities with Vigilantes	Municipalities without Vigilantes	Nuevo Leon
Homicides			
Pre–Post 1	+63%	+40%	–73%
Post 2 – RT	+135%	+88%	+4%
Post 3–RT	+180%	+100%	+53%
Kidnappings			
Pre–Post 1	+31%	–17%	–31%
Post 2–RT	–48%	–90%	–23%
Post 3–RT	+53%	–34%	+51%
Extortion			
Pre–Post 1	–10%	–27%	+176%
Post 2–RT	–93%	–92%	+96%
Post 3–RT	–71%	–51%	+32%

Note: Bold denotes a significant percentage increase/decrease.

trends in crime did not remain stable over time. A comparison of the period before and after the vigilantes were present, reveals an increase in homicides, no effect on kidnappings, and a decrease in extortions. After the removal of the vigilantes/rural defense forces, homicides continued to increase, while kidnappings and extortions decreased. Further empirical corroboration is necessary before accepting these findings as statistically significant because Figure 4 only depicts crime incidents in municipalities with the presence of vigilantes, and not areas without vigilantes. To investigate this matter, a more sophisticated intervention analysis is undertaken with two comparison groups for contrast that is discussed below.

Results

Monthly averages and t-test scores for homicides, kidnappings, and extortion in municipalities with vigilantes, municipalities without vigilantes, and Nuevo Leon for all five time periods are displayed in Table 1. Percentage change for the comparison of the three periods for each group is displayed in Table 2. Municipalities with vigilantes

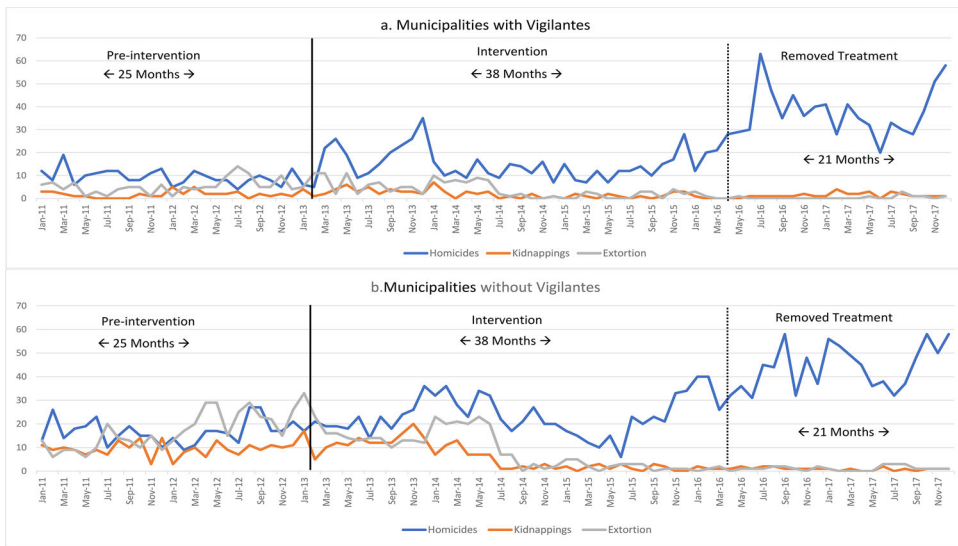


Figure 5. Monthly Homicides, Kidnappings, and Extortions (2011–2017). *Source:* INEGI. (a) municipalities with vigilantes ($n = 24$), (b) municipalities without vigilantes ($n = 89$).

(experimental group), experienced a significant increase in the monthly average of homicides by 63% when comparing the periods of time before and after vigilante presence began (pre/post 1) ($t = -4.231$, $p > .005$), while exhibiting a nonsignificant 31% increase in the monthly average of kidnappings and a 10% decrease in extortions.

There was a significant increase in the monthly average of homicides by 135% when comparing the period of vigilante presence and the period when they were removed (post 2/RT) ($t = -7.634$, $p > .005$), while there was a non-significant 48% decrease in the monthly average of kidnappings and a significant 93% decrease in the monthly average of extortions ($t = 6.589$, $p > .005$). There was a significant 180% increase in the monthly average of homicides when comparing the last 21-month period of vigilante presence to the period they were removed (post 3/RT) ($t = -10.043$, $p > .005$), while there was a nonsignificant 53% increase in the monthly average of kidnappings and a significant 71% decrease in extortions ($t = 3.650$, $p > .005$).

Within Michoacán, municipalities without vigilantes (comparison group 1), experienced a significant increase in the monthly average of homicides by 40% when comparing the periods of time before and after vigilantes began (pre/post 1) ($t = -3.619$, $p > .005$), while exhibiting a non-significant 17% decrease in the monthly average of kidnappings and a 27% decrease in extortions. There was a significant increase in the monthly average of homicides by 88% when comparing the period of vigilante presence and the period when they were removed (post 2/RT) ($t = -7.506$, $p > .005$), and a significant 90% reduction in the average amount of kidnappings ($t = 7.278$, $p > .005$) and 92% decline in extortions ($t = 9.384$, $p > .005$). There was a significant 100% increase in the monthly average of homicides when comparing the last 21-month period of vigilante presence to the period they were removed (post 3/RT) ($t = -8.385$, $p > .005$). While there was a non-significant decrease of 34% in the average number of kidnappings and a 51% drop in extortions (Figure 5).

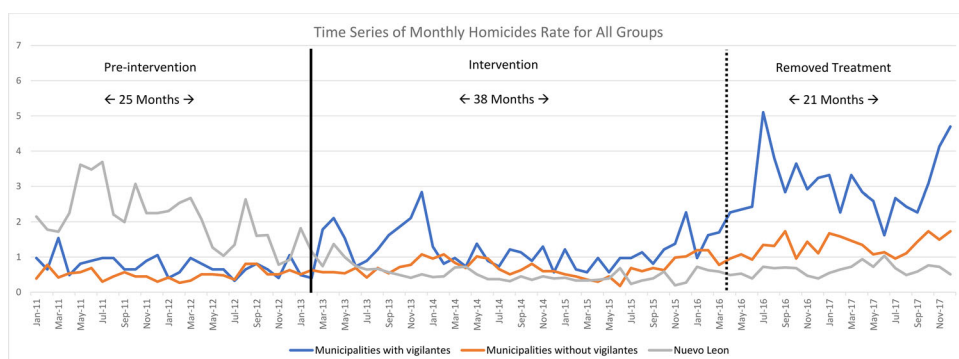


Figure 6. Monthly Homicides in municipalities with vigilantes ($n = 24$), municipalities without vigilantes ($n = 89$), and Nuevo Leon (2011–2017). *Source:* INEGI.

Nuevo Leon (comparison group 2), experienced a significant decrease in the monthly average of homicides by 73% when comparing the periods of time before and after vigilantes began ($t = 10.124$ $p > .005$), and a non-significant 31% decrease in the average number of kidnappings, while exhibiting a significant 176% increase in number of extortions ($t = -9.178$ $p > .005$). There was a non-significant 4% increase in the average number of homicides when comparing the period of vigilante presence and the period when they were removed (post 2/RT), a non-significant 23% decrease in kidnappings, and a significant 96% increase in extortions ($t = -8.662$ $p > .005$). There was a significant 53% increase in the average number of homicides ($t = -5.077$ $p > .005$), a 51% significant increase in kidnappings ($t = -3.127$ $p > .005$), and a 32% significant increase in extortions ($t = -4.214$ $p > .005$) when comparing the last 21-month period of vigilante presence to the period they were removed (post 3/RT). [Supplementary Table 2](#) presents the results of the t-test using the crime rate per capita. All significant t-test results were identical for [Table 1](#) and [Supplementary Table 2](#), except for the mean comparison of kidnappings between the last 21-months of the period vigilantes were present and the period when they were removed (post 3/RT) for comparison group 2, although still statistically significant ($t = 2.988$, $p > .005$).

Discussion

Results suggest that the collaboration of vigilantes with Mexican security forces, their confrontational approach and increased enforcement against the KT cartel is associated with elevated levels of violence as previously observed.⁸⁹ In correspondence with the Espinosa and Rubin study linking military interventions in combating DTOs to an increase in the average homicide rate throughout Mexico,⁹⁰ the average amount of monthly homicides significantly increased between the periods of time before and after vigilantes were present in both the vigilante and non-vigilante areas of Michoacán, while the comparison state of Nuevo Leon experienced opposite trends with a significant decrease in homicides.

The current study provides some support for the hypothesis that *vigilante actions increases the rate of violence when confronting a drug cartel*. However, the non-vigilante area of Michoacán also saw an increase in homicides during the same time, although it

was smaller as a percentage. While other factors may certainly affect levels of violence, the prospect that vigilante presence in a specific area and surrounding region can contribute to a significant, long-term increase in homicides is worth considering (Figure 6).

In light of the Osorio study indicating that vigilante presence reduced homicides, kidnappings, and extortion from 2013 to 2014,⁹¹ this study finds the opposite with regard to homicides. Specifically, in municipalities with vigilante presence, initially, homicides significantly increased during the period in which vigilantes were present and continued to dramatically increase in period after their removal. More specifically, the first 12-months of vigilante presence saw the highest amount of homicides recorded during the intervention. This suggests that the initial increase in homicides during the intervention period was likely a result of vigilantes and government forces directly confronting the KT cartel, in which both sides exhibited loss of life. Additionally, the substantial increase in homicides in the vigilante area during the removal period compared to homicide levels of the two comparison groups, suggests that the presence of the vigilantes served as a deterrent to cartel-related homicides while the group was present. The apprehension of the KT cartel leader, La Tuta, and the group's subsequent demise ensued a power vacuum. However, it seems that with the removal of this HVT, this power vacuum took longer to develop than other power vacuums have in the past. Traditionally, when security forces have removed HVTs from a DTO, this has been followed up by power vacuums within the group who lost its HVT, or other DTOs stepping in to contest the monopoly established by the debilitated group. In the case of the Michoacán vigilante area, it seems the power vacuum began once the rural defense forces were removed, not when the HVT was removed from the DTO, as seen in previous observations.

It is worth considering that the power vacuum which ensued after the removal of the vigilantes is connected to at least one of the four possible outcomes related to the apprehension or killing of an HVT. In this case, it appears that both fragmentation and an increase in the number of operating criminal groups as explained by Phillips; Atuesta and Ponce are applicable in Michoacán once the KT cartel was debilitated and the rural defense forces were disallowed.⁹² Since the weakening of the KT and removal of the rural defense forces, violence has increased as the Viagras cartel have continued to operate and have been contesting the state of Michoacán with the CJNG.⁹³ The Viagras were once the paramilitary wing of the KT cartel before they broke apart and joined the vigilantes in the fight against the KT cartel, to later split into their own DTO once the rural defense forces were suppressed.⁹⁴ This is a direct example of the fragmentation that takes place after the removal of an HVT as outlined by Phillips.⁹⁵

In addition to fragmentation, this also serves as an example of the presence of an increased amount of operating criminal groups after confrontational enforcement approaches have been implemented, in which the intensity of violence is increased as many groups are contesting the territory in dispute.⁹⁶ The exponential increase in homicides that was initiated when the vigilantes were disallowed has continued as the Viagras and CJNG wage war against each other in an effort to take control over the region.⁹⁷ Similarly, there are currently four competing criminal groups operating in Michoacán's avocado producing region; CJNG, the Nueva Familia Michoacána, the Tepalcatepec Cartel and the Zicuirán Cartel.⁹⁸ This situation draws direct parallels with

the observations made by Atuesta and Ponce regarding the increased amount of criminal groups present subsequent to the implementation of confrontational law enforcement practices such as HVT strikes.⁹⁹ It is worth considering, that the current number of criminal groups operating within Michoacán is a result of no one group being able to obtain control over Michoacán as the KT cartel once did.

The perceived weakness of the group whose leader was apprehended, and subsequently attacked by a rival group as outlined by Rasmussen and Benson; Moeller and Hesse; Calderón et al.; and Atuesta and Ponce does not seem to be an applicable outcome in this observation.¹⁰⁰ When the KT cartel's leader; Nazario Moreno, was killed, homicides initially rose insignificantly and then proceeded to fluctuate with a downward trend for the next year and a half. Similarly, when the successive leader; La Tuta, was captured, homicides began to significantly increase nearly a year later. These trends suggest that there was not an immediate attack by another DTO immediately after the removal of these leaders to move in on the territory previously controlled by the KT cartel.

The increase in profitable crimes, such as kidnapping and extortion by a DTO after its leader has been removed does not seem to apply in this case either. The findings presented here demonstrate a reduction in kidnappings from the period before vigilantes were present through the period in which vigilantes were removed within both areas of Michoacán, which challenges the assertion made by Calderón and colleagues indicating that criminal organizations may diversify their criminal portfolio after a leader is removed to make up for lost trafficking profits.¹⁰¹ However, these findings are consistent with the observations made in the Osorio study as kidnappings saw a reduction with the introduction of vigilante presence.¹⁰² Although, it is important to note that only the non-vigilante area experienced a significant decrease in kidnappings over the study period. This suggests that the KT was weakened to the point that it may have not had the chance to engage in other criminal activities.

The observed trends regarding extortions also contradict the contention made by Calderón and colleagues,¹⁰³ as there was a decrease in extortions throughout the period the leaders of the KT were eliminated. It is worth contemplating that the presence of vigilantes is associated with a long-term decrease in extortions in the region they operate in and surrounding areas. Findings regarding extortion in both areas of Michoacán are consistent with the Osorio study, as there was a long-term decrease during the observed period.¹⁰⁴ While both the vigilante and non-vigilante area of Michoacán experienced a long-term decrease in extortions, Nuevo Leon exhibited opposite trends as extortions significantly increased in the state over time. These mixed findings regarding homicides, kidnapping and extortion suggest that the effects of the presence and removal of vigilantes are long term and different than previously observed by the Osorio study, in both vigilante areas and non-vigilante areas of Michoacán.

It is important to approach the declining trends of extortion with caution. It may be the case that extortions significantly decreased during the period in which vigilantes were removed (removed treatment) because of a lack in reporting of this crime. For example, in an interview conducted by Kyrt with Los Viagras leader, Nicolás Sierra Santana, Santana explains that at the time of the interview there was an increase of extortions in the region.¹⁰⁵ This claim is contradictory to the trends in the INEGI data

used for this study. Additionally, in the same interview it is revealed that the vigilantes contained members that were previously allied with the KT cartel among their ranks.¹⁰⁶ This is further corroborated in a report from Perez Caballero in which he indicates that when the Viagras joined the vigilantes in the fight against their old organization (KT) they formed a special unit within the legitimized rural defense forces named “G-250” and were tasked with capturing the KT’s leader at the time, La Tuta.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, one study recently highlighted how individual drug traffickers deliberately switched between Mexican organized crime organizations and how these individuals take their “tactics, techniques and procedures with them.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, allowing for the possibility that members of the Viagras engaged in extortion while citizens did not report the crimes in fear of retaliation from the Viagras at the time they were cooperating with the vigilantes.

One particular example of interest, that was recently brought to light, explained how a hitman nicknamed “El Grillo” began his career with La Familia Michoacana cartel (LFM) and when a portion of LFM split to the KT cartel, Grillo split with them.¹⁰⁹ More importantly, when the KT cartel became debilitated and lost territory to vigilantes, Grillo switched over to the vigilantes to provide intelligence on the KT cartel, then subsequently joined the rural defense forces, and was lastly linked with the self-defense forces of Apatzingan before his death.¹¹⁰ It is plausible that initially, the extortion rate did not significantly decrease, while kidnappings marginally increased during the intervention period in vigilante areas as a result of groups within the vigilantes such as the Viagras continuing to engage in extortion and kidnapping. Given the possibility that members of the Viagras could have carried over their tactics, techniques and procedures with them from their time under the KT cartel’s ranks.

With the observed trends in mind, it appears that in states experiencing armed conflicts, who are struggling to maintain low levels of violence, and/or have an absent functional government in certain regions, can see the emergence of vigilantes as a positive solution to decrease long term violence and crime. While homicides initially increased within Michoacán, it is likely a result of the direct confrontation by the vigilantes in cooperation with Mexican security forces against the KT cartel, making it probable that the homicide victims during this time were cartel-related, as well as members of the vigilante groups and security forces. Similarly, it is likely that homicides also increased in the non-vigilante area as a result of vigilantes forcing the KT cartel members to be displaced in the non-vigilante areas where the KT cartel was likely confronted by Mexican security forces.

After the first 12-months of vigilante presence, extortions and kidnappings decreased to levels not seen during the pre-intervention period and continued to remain low throughout the period in which vigilantes were removed. Similarly, homicides also decreased after the first 12-months of vigilante presence and did not dramatically increase again until the vigilantes were removed. Altogether this suggests that while they were present, vigilantes may have served as a deterrent to other criminal organizations from moving in to fill the vacuum left by the KT cartel.

Limitations

INEGI data has previously been considered the most consistent, complete, and reliable source of information regarding crime in Mexico.¹¹¹ However, it is important to note

that this dataset has several shortcomings. There is the possibility that the dark figure of crime within the areas analyzed is being left out, considering that only 25% of crimes are reported, and 2% are punished in Mexico.¹¹² Motives for citizens in not reporting crimes may be attributed to the time-consuming processes of reporting a crime and prevalent mistrust that citizens have toward authorities.¹¹³ This limitation allows for the potential of the three observed crimes to have gone unreported. However, it is important to note that compared to other violent crimes, homicide has a comparatively high rate of reporting, partly because it is a difficult crime to hide.¹¹⁴

When discussing the INEGI data set, it is important to discuss the data compiled by Mexico's National Public Security System, simply known as SNSP. The SNSP is a secondary reference of data on homicides within Mexico and has two sources of data, first it organizes and reports on the amount of intentional homicides that are identified and investigated by law enforcement and secondly, it records the number of actual victims of homicides and other crimes.¹¹⁵ While SNSP data was not used in this study, it is worth noting that even with the differences in data collection by INEGI and the SNSP, the crime trends identified by both datasets are closely correlated, for example, Calderón, Heinle, Rodriguez Ferreira and Shirk point out that in the years that the data sets overlap, they produce a Pearson's coefficient of .949.¹¹⁶

Another limitation of the data used in this study is that homicide incidents in this study were disaggregated into "intentional" homicides "with a firearm," allowing for the possibility that not all intentional homicides with a gun were committed in relation to the vigilantes and/or organized crime groups within the state. Therefore, there is no certainty that all of the homicides analyzed were in relation to the vigilantes or cartel-related. However, given the lack of availability of data on cartel-related homicides, the use of intentional homicides with a firearm as a proxy for cartel-related homicides is the most accurate data available at this time because it eliminates homicides classified as "negligent," "unknown" and those committed with a "cold weapon" since cartel violence is likely to involve a firearm.¹¹⁷ While this study employed data from INEGI, it is recommended that the Mexican government and independent sources try to gather and disseminate data on cartel-related homicides in order to better analyze organized crime related violence. Additionally, data through the INEGI dataset should continue to be released in order to continue longitudinal analysis of crime trends.

Conclusion

Vigilantes in Michoacán are once again operating in Coahuayan, Ostula, La Ruana, and Tepalcatepec,¹¹⁸ in some cases to defend against the CJNG. Similarly, the neighboring state of Guerrero has also exhibited the rebirth of vigilantes.¹¹⁹ As seen in this study, the reemergence of vigilantes in these municipalities may lead to an increase in violence as these groups confront and contest their territory against the CJNG, Viagras, or any other organized crime group. While it is in the governments best interest to contain the vigilantes in order to prevent violence between them and organized crime groups, their diffusion throughout the state might be inevitable as it was in 2013. In the event that vigilante presence spreads once again, either in Michoacán, another region of Mexico, or in a state exhibiting the vigilante phenomenon for the first time, governments need to create a legal framework to cautiously establish the vigilantes as

a legitimate entity. In allowing vigilantes to operate through community self-governance, authorities and the vigilantes themselves should be cautious in allowing former members of criminal organizations or militant groups to infiltrate the vigilante groups. Specifically, with respect to Michoacán, the state and municipal law enforcement agencies need to cooperate with vigilantes and should not solicit any elite groups who branched out of an organized crime group in the pursuit of capturing high-level members of the CJNG or any other organized crime group. Likewise, with regard to states experiencing armed conflicts, those who allow for the emergence of legally recognized vigilante groups to operate in partnership with government security forces should be attentive to the possibility of infiltration into the vigilante groups by former members of illegal armed groups.

While the cooperation of the authorities and vigilante groups was associated with the demise of the KT cartel, it is not plausible that this will be the case with the CJNG as the group is present in at least 22 states.¹²⁰ However, in the event that vigilantes and government forces are successful in eradicating the CJNG and other criminal groups from the state, the government should not disarticulate the vigilante forces as they did in 2016 as this may lead to another power vacuum inviting more crime groups attempting to fill the void left by vigilantes and any organized crime groups.

Future research should investigate other regions to observe if these findings are limited to Michoacán or shared by other areas exhibiting the presence of vigilantes and organized crime groups. A replication study should investigate Michoacán's neighboring state: Guerrero, as the state has also witnessed the emergence of vigilantes at around the same period of time Michoacán did. Forthcoming examination on the topic should investigate any displacement and/or diffusion effects as a result of vigilante presence throughout the region.

This study was the first to assess the long-term outcomes of vigilante actions, diffusion, and removal in an area where an organized crime group exhibited territorial control over the region. Now that vigilantes have reemerged in Michoacán, and are currently present in other regions of Mexico, this study offers potential predictions on the outcomes in the regions in which vigilantes will directly confront organized crime groups. More importantly, this study offers insight into the conceivable outcomes if another power vacuum ensues after a vigilante group working with government forces debilitates an organized crime group.

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Acknowledgements

The author extends his gratitude to the peer reviewers, the editorial staff, Dr. Stephen Pires, Dr. Rob Guerette, and Dr. Tim Goddard for their assistance on this project. Any errors or omissions are my own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).