Mapping Criminal Organizations in Guanajuato
Methodology

Disclaimer

- These datasets are not the "truth", rather an approximation of it based on publicly available information, fieldwork, and interviews with local actors. There are likely some errors/inaccuracies. If there are any inaccuracies that you are aware of, please inform --.

Purpose of document

The purpose of this document is to be transparent about (i) methodology, (ii) definitions, (iii) measurement, and (iv) important coding decisions.

Datasets

Mapping Criminal Organizations (MCO) in Guanajuato is composed of three separate datasets:

- Criminal Organization (CO) Group Histories.
    - Background information on all COs that have operated in Guanajuato between January 2000 and December 2021.
- CO Geographic presence and strength of presence.
    - Municipality-year panel dataset of all COs in Guanajuato, 2000-2021.
- CO Relations.
    - Tracks the relationships (rival, ally, neutral) between all COs operating in Guanajuato between January 2000 and December 2021.

Methodology

MCO Guanajuato is based on extensive qualitative research. The datasets were created using the following protocol:

- I first relied on MCO's state panel dataset to identify all large groups present in the state between 2007 and 2015 (Signoret et al. 2020).[1] I also used the cartel genealogies document from the Mapping Criminal Organizations in Mexico project[2] to create an initial list of COs operating in Guanajuato.
    - I then conducted extensive qualitative research to expand the list of COs and include smaller COs that do not get covered in national reports.
    - The result was a list of the population of COs operating in the state of Guanajuato between 2000 and 2021.
- Each CO was then researched in depth through systematic online searches, with each piece of information being processed into a long-form document summarizing the information per month, per year, per CO.

[1] Signoret, Patrick; Marco Alcocer; Cecilia Farfan-Mendez; Fernanda Sobrino, 2021, "Mapping Criminal Organizations in Mexico: State Panel 2007-2015", https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/N0KGCZ, Harvard Dataverse, V1.
[2] www.mexicocrimemaps.org

    - This research included searching each CO by year and municipality. Every article with information was opened, read, and processed into a document that summarized the information and organized it by CO, month and year.
    - Sources and information included news articles, investigative journalistic articles, books, academic articles, Mexican government reports, US government reports, and expert reports, among others.
    - When information was missing for a CO-municipality pair, additional searches were conducted to assure all information available was collected.
    - This document was used to understand which municipalities each CO was operating in each year and what that presence looked like. This informed the measurement used for CO presence and CO strength of presence.
- The document was then complemented by fieldwork undertaken in the state of Guanajuato between June and September of 2021 and included interviews with current and former municipal and state government officials, local academics and journalists, local civil society groups, and local security analysts.[3]
- In all, in addition to the 60 sources in Signoret et al (2021), this process added dozens of state and municipal government official reports, articles from at least 138 unique international, national, regional, and local news outlets and blogs dedicated to reporting news on organized crime, and Greyson (2010).[4] Overall, over 1,000 unique pieces of evidence were processed.
- This document fed:
    - A spreadsheet in which the presence and strength of presence of each CO was tracked by municipality by year.
    - A document identifying the different relations between COs across time.
    - A document summarizing the information about each CO.

Definitions and measurement: Presence and strength of presence

- "Presence"
    - I define presence as a criminal organization having continuous (permanent or semi-permanent) operations in a given municipality. This can include having safehouses, members, illicit activities, etc. in a municipality for a period of time that is not transient.
        - This excludes intermittent presence, such as attacks against police officers/rival criminals by a criminal organization in a municipality where it does not have established operations. Just to give some examples, CJNG attacked a police station in Villagran in December 2019, killing police officers. However, they only entered the municipality to conduct the attack.
    - After intensive research, three "levels" or "strength" of "presence" were decided on:
        - (1) Cell presence, (2) weak presence, (3) and strong presence.
        - This is due to the particular history and dynamics of criminal organizations in Guanajuato and the type and quality of information available. Each level of presence is described below.

[3] Fieldwork was conducted as part of a larger project which was approved by the University of California, San Diego IRB Project #210532S.

[4] Grayson, George W. La Familia drug cartel: Implications for US-Mexican security. Strategic Studies Institute, 2010

- Cell presence
    - I classify the presence of criminal groups that are not "cartels" as cell presence. This includes:
        - Important, yet highly localized delinquency groups, like those that exist in Leon that specialize in car theft, drug dealing, transport theft, oil theft, extortion, credit card fraud, etc. This does not include local neighborhood gangs. These are powerful yet localized criminal organizations, which include:
            - Los Durango, Los Pelones, and the cells that operated in Leon prior to them uniting and forming Cartel Union Leon
        - Remnants or fragments of larger drug cartels that remain active once the large group ceases to exist. These are also localized cells that are not part of some large organization but are nevertheless powerful. This is the case in Guanajuato with the Familia Michoacana, Caballeros Templarios, and Zetas. Once these large organizations disbanded, some small local cells that had operated under the umbrella of these larger organization continued operating in Guanajuato independently, oftentimes under the name of the defunct larger organization.
        - Cells sent by the Sinaloa Cartel to fight CJNG starting in late 2020. Although these cells belong to a "cartel", and a powerful one at that, CDS' presence in Guanajuato during this time period has not been to establish any criminal activity. CDS only deployed a small group of soldiers from one of its armed militias (Gente Nueva Salazar) to the state with the sole purpose of fighting CJNG.
- Weak presence
    - Strong and weak presence are reserved for "cartels" operating in a territory.
    - Weak presence measures a criminal organization having active operations in a given municipality (not only intermittent presence) but when this criminal group is not strongly established in the municipality—it is not a stronghold for that criminal organization.
- Strong presence
    - When a criminal organization has established its operations in a given municipality, and the municipality serves as a stronghold for that criminal organization.
- Cell versus weak versus strong presence
    - This categorical measure is trying to measure an underlying latent level of presence that, at least theoretically, is likely continuous. My current understanding of how strong of a presence a group has in a given municipality is intricately linked to (1) number of members, safehouses, drug selling points, weapons, etc. it has permanently or semi-permanently in that municipality—its infrastructure, (2) how well established/settled it is in certain neighborhoods and communities—its social base, (3) how many illicit activities it has, how widespread they are, and how much profit it is making in a municipality to fund its presence—its economic base, and (4) how well it has built its networks with police officers, police captains, politicians, bureaucrats—its state protection.
    - In practical terms, it is sometimes difficult to establish whether an organization has weak or strong presence. In these cases, I code conservatively as weak presence.

    - Two or more criminal organizations can have strong presence in the same municipality at the same time. Two or more criminal organizations can have presence in the same municipality and not be rivals.
    - Familia Michoacana, Caballeros Templarios and Zetas, while still coherent groups, are always classified as having weak presence since they did not operate out of Guanajuato—their home states and strongholds were in other states. While it appears as though some of these groups came to have "strong" presence in certain municipalities in Guanajuato, like CT in some municipalities in the south of the state, there is not enough information to identify these specific cases and time periods. It also seems as though, in these instances, their "strong" presence was transitory and short-lived, lasting only a year or two in most cases. Moreover, it seems clear that their presence was never as well-established or as strong as CSRL and CJNG have had in many municipalities for years.
    - BLO, CDS, CNP are always classified as having weak presence since neither BLO or CDS had established operations in the state, and CNP operates out of its strongholds in Jalisco.
    - BLO and CDS presence in Guanajuato is somewhat tricky to classify because neither established illicit operations in the state aside from white collar activities like money laundering and investing in the tourist sector, and in the case of CDS, supplying wholesale drugs to local criminal organizations. That is, these groups were only in Guanajuato to live in, vacation in, or invest money, and were not interested in establishing their presence like every other group has. This differs fundamentally from every other group in the state.
- Measuring presence of each group individually versus relative to each other:
    - Some MCO projects and other existing datasets measure the presence of criminal groups in a confined territory *relative to* other groups in that territory. That is, whether each group is the dominant group, whether one is the incumbent and the other the challenger, or whether it is a stalemate.
    - In contrast, here I attempt to map each criminal organization in each municipality on its own. In other words, I measure each group's presence independently of the presence and level of presence of other groups in the same territory. I do this for two reasons:
        - First, measuring presence relative to other groups forces us to measure **two** things at once: presence AND relations between criminal groups. I choose to measure these separately.
        - Second, not all groups are rivals and fighting each other over territory. For example, Cartel Union Leon and Los Durango, and Los Pelones and FEGS and CSRL have all, at some point, shared the same territory without fighting each other after forging alliances or at least being neutral with each other. Therefore, coding their presence relative to the others—one as dominant, or incumbent, or competitor—forces a measurement that captures some dynamic that may not be there.
        - Third, it creates a measurement equivalency problem. Say two groups are not well established in a territory but are actively fighting each other. Say in the neighboring municipality both criminal groups are well established and fighting

each other. Measuring both as competitive would create a measurement where both municipalities have the same value. By measuring presence independently, one can see where two well established groups are fighting each other and where two weakly established groups are fighting each other.

Leon cells

- Some of the local delinquency groups that came to form Cartel Union Leon had operated in the city of Leon for decades and continue to do so until the present. However, in 2014 they banded together to form Union Leon. Therefore, I measure their collective presence as "cell presence" prior to 2014, and from 2014 onward as strong presence.

Imputing data

- When it is clear, given the context and other background information, that a criminal organization was present in a municipality during a specific year, but there is no direct evidence of that group being there, I impute the values given the values of the preceding and succeeding years, coding conservatively.

Time Interval: Yearly Observations and Timing of Evidence

- Because I code year-municipality presence, I do not capture monthly changes. Due to the illicit nature of the topic, it is often impossible to identify specific dates for a group entering/exiting a municipality.
- In some cases, all we know is that something happened in a specific year without information on day or month. For example, it has been well documented that CSRL was formed in 2014. However, there does not exist any public information about when in 2014 they formed. When this is the case, I code the year given as the start off their presence. In the case of CSRL, I code them as having presence starting in 2014.
- There are specific instances where we do have important month-level changes well documented, which requires a decision about how to code. The general rule adopted is that if a group had presence for 4 months or more during a year, then we code them as having presence that year. If they operated in a municipality less than 4 months, we do not code them as being present that year. The three important examples include:
    - La Familia Michoacana was severely weakened in January 2011 when most of its leaders left and formally announce the formation of Caballeros Templarios in March 2011. In this case, I code LFM presence as cell presence in Guanajuato starting in 2011.
    - In February 2015 La Tuta, the last remaining leader of the CT, is arrested and the organization fragments. I code CT presence as cell presence starting in 2015.
    - On March 4, 2015, Z-42, the last remaining leader of the Zetas, is arrested and the organization fragments (there were already internal conflicts given the death of El Lazca in Oct. 2012 and the arrest of Z-40 in July 2013). I code Zeta presence in Guanajuato as cell presence starting in 2015.
- There are also instances of groups entering new territories that do not coincide with calendar years. Some examples include:
    - Cartel Nueva Plaza was first detected in Leon in July 2020. I code their presence as starting in 2020.

    - Cells of CDS were first detected in August 2020. I code their presence as starting in 2020.
- There are instances where we have information that presence level changes during a calendar year. In these instances, I code the level of presence as that which was active during most of the calendar year. To illustrate:
    - One example: There is evidence that CSRL was well established in Silao before 2019 and even as 2019 began, however, CJNG had pushed them out by the end of the year. I do not have concrete evidence about when this transition happened during the year, but it seems to have happened mid to late 2019. In this case I code CSRL as having weak presence during 2019 and no presence starting in 2020.
    - Another example is Salamanca, where there is evidence that CSRL had strong presence up to August 2020, when El Marro, leader of CSRL was arrested, but was only operating in the outskirts of the city by early 2021, with CJNG taking over most of the municipality. In this case I code CSRL having strong presence in 2020 and weak presence in 2021.
- There are instances where evidence of presence in a municipality comes from early in the year, January or February, in which case I sometimes use this as evidence of presence in the previous year, especially when corroborated by other evidence. In other words, if there is evidence that a group was in a municipality in early or mid-2018, then evidence that they were present in that same municipality in January or February of 2019, I use the datapoints from early 2019 to fill in 2018.

Unit of Analysis: Municipality

- An important question is whether municipalities are an appropriate unit of analysis to measure CO presence. Ideally, finer-grained observations could be measured. However, collecting this information is not feasible as this information is rarely reported. City or town-level measurement would be the next best, but Mexican news reports and government reports most often report the municipality where an event happened, not the town within the municipality. This also proves challenging, as municipalities without large cities include various small towns and news, expert, and government reports most often identify municipalities, not cities or towns, when reporting CO activities and presence.
- Aside from information constraints, COs themselves structure their organizations through local bosses ("jefes de plaza") who are assigned to certain territories. COs themselves most often base these territories or "plazas" on municipal borders. In other words, they assign bosses to municipalities or groups of municipalities. If COs themselves are organizing their presence and activities using municipal jurisdictions, then it seems appropriate to map their presence at this level.
    - To see one example specifically in Guanajuato, see this report by Perez (2020).[5]

Types of evidence

- Narcomantas (messages left in public by COs) are only used to measure presence if they are corroborated by other evidence of presence. Sometimes narcomantas are left in places where a criminal group does not have operations but is close to where they do. It appears that they are

[5] https://guanajuato.lasillarota.com/estados/ana-fabiola-y-la-chepa-las-jefas-de-plaza-del-cjng-en-guanajuato/425091

sometimes used as signaling, so it's unclear whether they are cheap talk, that is, they're not really there but want their rival CO to think they are.

- Attacks on police stations/drug rehab centers are only used to measure presence if they are corroborated by other evidence. Sometimes criminal groups enter an enemy's territory and attack places/people either as a hit or to "calentar la plaza" (increase law enforcement efforts in that territory).
- Primary evidence (most frequent)
    - Arrests
    - Seizures of assets such as weapons, ammunition, safe houses, drugs, etc.
    - Police, police commands, bureaucrats, or politicians colluding with criminal group.
    - Confrontations, attacks, murders by criminal organizations.
- Secondary evidence
    - Analysis/reports/investigations by other experts in news, government, and private organization outlets.