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Impact of Organized Crime on Murder of Law Enforcement Personnel at the U.S.-Mexican Border



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Sara Schatz
The Ohio State University
Columbus
OH
USA

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Preface

In the international narcotics trade, assassinations associated with the transport of drugs have emerged as a concern for scholars of the rule of law and state stability (Richani 2010; Rueter 2009; Van Dijk 2007; Marat 2006). In general, violence in global drug markets varies. High levels of drug-related homicides were seen in the US crack market in the 1980s and in Russia and Central Europe since the collapse of communism (Hignett 2010; Reuter 2009; Fryer et al. 2005). In the Latin American dynamic, however, the proximity to the enormous US drug-market, combined with political, judicial, and criminal justice institutions affected by drug-related corruption, has led to extreme surges in drug-related homicides, threats to the stability of governments, and international aid plans to restabilize the state in several instances. In Colombia in the 1990s, the rise of drug-related assassinations, including the killing of government officials (judges, politicians, mayors), was one significant element in the launching of Plan Colombia, an international, multi-institutional security plan to reestablish state capacity (Bibes 2001). In Mexico and Central America, homicide levels since 2006 have reached epidemic proportions, including over 55,000 organized-crime-related homicides in Mexico alone (Molzhan et al. 2013:5, 22). This, combined with regional drug-related threats to local governing stability, has led to several U.S. funded security plans for the region (Plan Mérida, Mérida II, Central American Regional Security Initiative) (Seelke and Finklea 2013, US Department of State 2013).

The case of drug-related assassination in Mexico is of particular interest to the question of the rule of law and state stability because it demonstrates two elements. First, the national, state, and local government has become increasingly recognized as a party to the current “multidimensional, multiparty and multi-location armed conflict among criminal groups being waged in Mexico” (Kan 2012). Second, a close look at these killings of government officials shows it is law enforcement, particularly local law enforcement, who are the main targets of a pattern of systematic assassinations across Mexican states and municipalities (Molzahn et al. 2013:31).

This book analyzes the assassination of law-enforcement, more specifically, the targeted killings of police chiefs and top commanders in the Mexican drug war

(2006–2012). It does so in the context of international and national institutional “gaps” in the rule of law that contribute to these murders.¹ At the municipal level, documentation of the rise of the assassination of Mexican mayors has demonstrated its negative impact on the local rule of law (Ríos 2011b).² The literature also acknowledges that Mexican law enforcement has been increasingly the target of violence in urban cities (Sabet 2012:57; Murataya et al. 2011:89; García 2011; Olson et al. 2010:15; Sullivan and Elkus 2008:7). Nevertheless, little has been written on the dispersion of organized crime violence against municipal law enforcement outside of the major urban centers, despite recognition of the acute vulnerability of local, rural police chiefs (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011:45). Thus, this book provides a first case study of the assassination of municipal law enforcement (police chiefs, top-level police commanders) who have been killed in relatively large numbers and at a greater rate than military personnel in Mexico’s drug war (Molzahn et al. 2013: *Excelsior* 9/11/11).

A road map to this book begins with the empirical fact that over 2,500 law-enforcement officers have been killed in Mexico since 2006. By legal code, organized crimes are a *federal* offense, prosecuted by federal forces (Pásara 2009:220). As such, it would be expected that the officer death toll in the Mexican drug-war would be worse for prosecuting federal forces (the federal preventative police and the military). Yet, official US and Mexican government figures and academic figures on the law-enforcement death toll in Mexico show a different picture. Academic data on the national ratio of police to military deaths across all Mexican

¹ It is beyond the scope of this book to analyze in-depth the relationship between the degree of lethality used by the state and the frequency of its punitive actions against criminal groups in order to assess the overall level of damage caused by the state’s use of lethal force on criminal groups across the nation. Osorio (2011) measured the total number of government enforcement actions against organized crime, nation-wide. According to his analysis, the government used violence against DTOs (drug-trafficking organizations) only in 3.26 percent of the events, whereas the remaining 96.74 percent corresponded to non-violent enforcement. Nevertheless, he argues that increasing levels of non-violent government enforcement have a similar disruptive effect among DTOs than the one generated by violent state actions. This suggests that even a small proportion of lethal state action can trigger substantial spirals of violence among DTOs. This point speaks to the repression-dissent literature which indicates that in some circumstances challengers increase levels of contestation as a response to previous state repression. It partially helps explain some of the retaliation killings of Northern Tier police chiefs and commanders analyzed in this book (Gamson 1975; Lichback 1987; Gurr 1970).

² The impact of assassination on the local rule of law has not been well studied. In part, this is because the level of analysis in the literature on civil conflict is national, not sub-national in orientation. For example, in the literature on civil wars, Buhaug and Rod (2006) and Buhaug, Gates and Lujala (2009) have found that geographic factors such as location, terrain, and natural resources interact with rebel fighting capacity. Together, these factors play a crucial role in determining the duration of a conflict. Conflicts last substantially longer when located in rural areas, at considerable distance from main government strongholds and/or along remote international borders.

states show overwhelmingly that it is the Mexican *police*, not (federal) military officers who have suffered lethal attacks in the drug-war (Shirk 2010:5).³

Official Mexican government data in 2010 reveal the death toll for municipal police officers was higher than that of state and federal police forces (municipal police forces: (n = 915 persons killed or 0.57 % of the entire force killed, state police forces: (n = 698 or 0.32 % of the entire force, military and federal police forces: (n = 463, 0.15 %) (US Senate 2011b; García 2011:246; Gustavo and García 2010).⁴ By November 2012, academic sources reported a total of 2,539 police officers and 204 military personnel were victims of organized-crime-style violence with the ratio of police to military deaths growing from 12 to 1 (2008–2011) to 16 to 1 in 2012 (Molzahn et al. 2013:31).

Official Mexican government data in early 2012 state that 83 % of the total municipal police killed were assassinated with the remaining 17 % killed in confrontations with organized crime elements (n = 1,381) (*Excelsior* 1/3/12). Such death toll figures do suggest that the municipal police in Mexico represent the “front line” or “the foot troops in the drug-war conflict” (Sullivan and Elkus 2008:7).

As such, this book focuses on the topic of organized crime and the rule of law in contemporary Mexico by examining the assassination of local law enforcement in the drug-war conflict. It is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 presents a backdrop to the assassination of local law enforcement in Mexico (2006–2012). It is argued that spill-over arms, many from the US (U.S. Senate 2011a, b; Dube, Dube and García-Ponce 2012; McDougal et al. 2013) helped change the tactical balance of power between organized crime elements and the municipal police, opening a space for the successful use of “law-enforcement assassination”.

In Chap. 2, a case study is presented of a system of assassinations for the purpose of rigorously undermining the rule of law at the municipal level in Chihuahua. The argument advanced is that law-enforcement assassinations are employed by

³ Shirk (2010) TBI NarcroBarometro (mid-2008–2010) reports that of the total law enforcement killed (n = 1,620), there were 123 military dead and 1,497 police killed.

⁴ To calculate the death toll by force level, this brief relied on Sabet’s (2012:11) 2009 academic figures on the total numbers of Mexican law enforcement personnel by force level. Also used were official Mexican government statistics on law-enforcement (2006–July 2010) which report a total of 2,076 officers assassinated (US Senate 2011b; García: 2011:246; Gustavo and García 2010). The breakdown of officers assassinated by level of force was: 915 municipal police, 698 state police, and 463 federal agents killed by Mexican organized crime groups. By January 2012, official Mexican government statistics on law enforcement deaths report a total of 2,997 agents killed (*Excelsior* 1/3/12). In early 2013, official reports stated there were 399 federal police killed in Mexico’s drug-war (2007–2012) which have occurred largely in Michoacán (n = 78), Chihuahua (n = 55) and the Federal District (n = 45) with less than 20 federal police officers killed per state in the remaining states (*Excelsior* 2/26/13). The nation-wide study of state and federal officers assassinated is an area for future research, expanding on the concept of law-enforcement assassination in Mexico’s drug war.

“organized crime elements”⁵ to try and achieve several types of criminal goals. The multiple motivations for such assassinations include retaliation for federal, state and/or local prosecution, to try and neutralize police chiefs and/or to place corrupt police chiefs at the municipal level. In addition, organized crime elements seek, in certain strategic towns lying along key drug trafficking routes, to achieve intermittent local governance and/or to reduce local governmental capacity in order to obtain greater freedom for movement of goods. Thus, law-enforcement assassinations are importantly ‘instrumental’ murders, involving prior planning (Batton 2002:846) and committed as a means to an end or as a way of accomplishing several criminal goals.

In Chap. 3, a wider look is presented at a series of law-enforcement assassinations across a range of 11 Northern Mexican states. It is argued that the tactical advantage of organized crime elements gives them relatively easy physical access to law-enforcement targets. It is thus one prime element facilitating the use of assassination as a strategy (White 2008). U.S. and Mexican legal, political, and judicial institutions have not been able to adequately restrict opportunity for law-enforcement assassinations. The inability to reduce access to weapons and officials, to increase security for police personnel, to reduce corruption, and punish offenders sets the stage for the assassination of local law enforcement. Yet, it is the goals of organized crime elements (to clear drug-smuggling routes and to try and gain more pliant governance at the municipal level) that ultimately motivate such killings.

In sum, acquiring enhanced weaponry increased the power of organized crime elements (their tactical means). This combines with their planning capacities to achieve clearer routes to smuggle drugs (their operational means). Together, these elements (tactical and operational means) gave rise to the use of law-enforcement assassination as a more “efficient” strategy for action against law-enforcement agents.

⁵ This book uses the term “organized crime elements” interchangeably with “fragmented cartels”, and “drug-trafficking organizations” (DTOs). The terms “hired guns”, “hitmen” and “assassins,” and/or “enforcer gangs” (a group of assassins) are also used interchangeably. The general trend in organized crime toward the fragmentation of large cartels (Garzón 2008:172) has also occurred in Mexico (and Chihuahua state). Ultimately, as Molzahn, Ríos and Shirk (2011:6) argue, the many terms used to describe organized crime [(DTOs, organized crime groups, cartels, transnational criminal organizations (TCOs)], etc., are inadequate because they suggest a degree of cohesiveness and hierarchy that “probably does not exist, at least not consistently, in the illicit drug trade”. They also tend to “dehumanize the individuals involved and also distract us from the fact that the “enemy” comprises members of all segments and strata of society, from Mexican farmers, truck drivers, and auto-body mechanics to U.S. bankers, college students, and corrupt government officials” (Molzahn, Ríos and Shirk 2012:6). Hence, this book uses the more generic term “organized crime elements”.

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Chapter 1

Backdrop to the Assassination of Local Law Enforcement

1.1 Introduction

Assassinations of government officials are not just an act against the person in the government but against that state's political institutions (Iqbal and Zorn 2006: 491). The assassination of law-enforcement reflects well-organized, strategic hits on specific targets. This means law-enforcement agents serving in a legal capacity within a legitimate government institution. As assassinations, such murders also involve the use of deception or treachery in their execution (White 2007, 2008).

Some scholars have argued that law-enforcement killings are the product of a criminal insurgency, or an internal war by criminal insurgents which challenges the state because it seeks to sever its regulatory arms (Sullivan and Elkus 2008: 6; Clinton 2010). Others have suggested that the killing of law-enforcement in Mexico is somewhat random. It is the outcome of unpredictable dangers implicit to an officer in the line of duty or the product of the general disorder, havoc and the overall rise in homicide rates in the nation since 2006 (Olea 2011).¹

This book suggests that access to superior weaponry increased the power of organized crime elements in Mexico. Enhanced tactical means, greater access to high-powered weapons and therefore the capacity to kill more people augments the *sheer tactical power* of Mexican organized crime assassins even if their cohesiveness has diminished over time (Garzón 2008: 172; Molzahn et al. 2012: 6). Sophistication, complexity and intensity in operational means (planning, training, intelligence, mobility and communications) are now hall-mark features of organized crime elements in Mexico's drug-war (Turbeville 2010: 123). Tactical superiority over municipal police

¹ To give one example, the PAN Mayor of San Pedro, Nuevo León declared the murder of his municipal police chief Héctor Ayala Moreno "part of the risks of public functions" (La Jornada 2006).

has combined with inadequate institutional protection (bullet-proof vehicles, greater security detail) for local officers. This facilitates the use of assassination to carry out the operative aims of fragmented cartels (dominance over drug control routes) (Sullivan and Elkus 2011: 22; White 2008: 5).

Specifically, “law-enforcement” assassinations are conceptualized herein as targeted hits on precise members of the local executive branch who are operationally the ones watching and/or enforcing laws in drug-transit zones.² The concrete focus is on municipal police chiefs and top commanders of the municipal preventative police including municipal transit police.³ These police are typically organized under the authority of a *Secretaría* (Secretariat) or Department of Public Security (*Dirección*). The police chief and the top-level command staff are the key actors within municipal police, often the ones most subject to the “choice between a very large sum of money and death” by organized crime (Sabet 2007: 9).

The argument presented in this book is that law-enforcement assassinations are targeted and patterned over a series of municipalities across a range of Mexican states. Were such killings random or casual, one would expect a diverse set of crime circumstances such as a knifing in one municipality or a shooting in different locale. Yet, as is argued in Chap. 3, rise in the armed power of organized crime elements offers new tactical opportunities which have resulted in a “signature style” of law-enforcement assassinations. Across eleven Northern Mexican states and municipalities, one sees a similar, consistent pattern of organized crime assassins using surprise, deception, and high-powered assault weapons (AK-47s, AR-15s) firing multiple rounds of ammunition on largely off-duty police chiefs and

² The use of the term “law-enforcement assassination” is confined more narrowly to municipal police chiefs and top-level commanders in order to achieve rigor across a series of similar cases. Chapter 2 briefly discusses other rule of law personnel assassinated in a specific municipality in the context of the death of a local police chief or top-commander. This does not, however, exclude the potential use of the term “law-enforcement assassination” to refer to a larger conceptual universe of law-enforcement members of the executive branch including federal police, state police, the military, specialized members of the attorney general’s office and the prison system. Excelsior (2011a) lists, for example, in its registry of 174 government officials killed (2006–2011) the following other law-enforcement officers assassinated: the director of the Anti-Kidnapping Unit of the Federal District PDJDF, a director of the Criminal Investigations Unit of the PDJDF and an Inspector of the Federal Police.

³ The primary job of the municipal preventative police is to conduct patrols, maintain public order, prevent crime and administrative violations, and be the first responders to crime. The transit police, responsible for sanctioning traffic violations and responding to accidents, are technically considered part of the preventive police. However, in some cases they are organized as a separate police force. At the municipal level, formal control of the police falls under the jurisdiction of the mayor, except when the president is in the area at which point he is the new commander of that force (Mexican Constitution Article 115; Esparza 2012: 18–19). “Police chiefs” are referred to in Mexican Spanish as, variably, “Comandante”, “Jefe Policiaco”, “Director de la Policía” and “Director de Seguridad Pública”. Also included in this brief are top municipal Mexican police commanders including: “Comandante de Operativos de la Policía Municipal”, “Comandante de Unidad”, “Sub-director of Seguridad Pública”, “Jefes de Distrito” and “Jefes de Delegaciones”.

commanders caught off-guard. Chapter 3 shows these law-enforcement assassinations occur along three distinctive North-bound drug-transit highways which traverse multiple “Northern Tier” municipalities (See Sect. 1.4.1). It shows a similarity of assassination weapons and method of attack across distinctive types and levels of organized crime organizations.

Law-enforcement assassinations are also *systematic* because they advance several goals held by organized crime elements. As is next argued in Chap. 2, these criminal goals go beyond *just* retaliation for federal, state or local prosecution. Criminal goals also include the neutralization and/or placement of corrupt police chiefs, limited intermittent local governance and/or to reduce local governmental capacity in order to obtain greater freedom for movement of goods.

In this chapter, the analysis presents a backdrop to the assassination of local law enforcement in Mexico’s drug-war. Section 1.2 explains how spill-over arms helped change the tactical balance of power between organized crime elements and the municipal police, opening a space for the successful use of law-enforcement assassination. Section 1.3 suggests that there can be multiple motives (beyond just retaliation) for the repetitive use of targeted assassinations against municipal officers. As such, it is important to concentrate on the goals and tactical advantages that allow this lethal strategy to be “successful”. Section 1.4 (Appendix) explains the methodological reasoning behind the selection of the “Northern Tier” states used in this brief.

1.2 Law Enforcement Assassination in the Mexican “Drug-War” Context

1.2.1 *Institutional Limitations, Impunity and Law-Enforcement Assassination*

Legal scholars define “impunity” as the institutional failure and/or inability of the state to act with due diligence to adequately prevent, and the failure to adequately investigate, homicide crimes including assassination (Orentlicher 2005: 6). Failures at several institutional levels (legal, judicial, political) can create a structure of impunity that can contribute to political killings. The legal system is unable to function as a sufficient system of restraint for political assassination where authorities are not able to sufficiently punish murderers (Zepeda Lecuona 2004; Schatz 2011b). When law enforcement is compromised (either in terms of capacity—case overload, inadequate equipment/salaries, lacking in political will and/or suffering from internal corruption), some politicians will even intermittently use law enforcement for political ends (Schatz 2011a: 186–187).

Political killings due to multi-level institutional failures are not new in Mexico. This is evidenced by the systematic political assassination of over six hundred leftist PRD members (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, 1988–2005) (Schatz 2011a), the “disappearance”/political killing of guerrilla leaders of the 1970s (CNDH 2001),

and the assassination of many oppositional leaders and even PRI politicians in the 1990s (Zepeda Lecuona 2004; Velasco Piña 2005). Organized crime elements can benefit from multi-level failures of Mexican and U.S. institutions to restrict opportunity for assassination. A compromised criminal justice system offers access to “buy” (bribe) or use “lead” (bullets) vis-à-vis police chiefs, police and other law enforcement officers (Sabet 2010; Pimentel 2000). The post-2006 assassination of police chiefs and commanders can thus be understood as one piece of a larger puzzle of systematic assassination in Mexico.

1.2.2 Spill-Over Arms Supplies and Their Impact

In the drug-war related literature on Mexico, scholars have noted that law enforcement is outmatched. Turbeville (2010: 123) argues that the national number and brutality of assassinations exceed the threats with which traditional law enforcement have been trained and equipped to deal with. Mexican organized crime elements now possess sophisticated planning; training; intelligence and counter-intelligence preparation; mobility; communications; type of weaponry; levels of intensity; and “sheer audacity”.

In part, one reason that Mexican law-enforcement is outmatched is related to the fact that a significant portion of Mexican organized crime’s weaponry emerges from the US side of the border (McDougal et al. 2013; U.S. Senate 2011a, b). It is well-known that spill-over arms supply can promote damaging forms of violence which may hold serious consequences for the stability of Latin American states (Seekle 2013, Dube et al. 2013; Leslie 2010; Godnick et al. 2002). High-powered weapons inherited from long civil wars have been identified as contributing to gang violence in Central America, influencing the previously conflict-ridden nations of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua (Seelke 2013) and even the formerly peaceful nations of Costa Rica and Panama (Godnick et al. 2002). Jamaica also suffers from a high homicide rate (52 per 100,000) (UNODC 2011 in Ríos 2011a) while most crime guns seized in the nation over the past decade have been traced back to Florida (Leslie 2010).

Scholars have analyzed the impact of a spill-over arms supply on Northern Mexican border homicide rates. Dube, Dube and García-Ponce (2012: 23) found that after the expiration of the 2004 U.S. assault weapons ban, Mexican municipalities neighboring the Texas, Arizona and New Mexico border ports “saw total homicides rise by 60 % as compared to *municipios* 100 miles away, implying an additional 239 homicides in each of the 2 years after 2004”. The location of a municipality on the U.S.-Mexico border was also found to generate an increase of 116.3 % in the expected number of violence among criminal groups (Osorio 2011: 26). Municipalities which lie along Northern Mexican drug-smuggling routes (Sinaloa, Durango, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí) (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 32–34) have also borne significantly higher rates of turf-war related homicides (Dell 2011).

1.2.3 A Change in the Tactical Balance of Power

Changes in the nexus of organized crime and politics due to President Felipe Calderón’s declaration of a “war on drugs” in December 2006 also explain why local law-enforcement in Mexico’s drug-war found themselves increasingly out-matched (Turbeville 2010: 125). In the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. demand for illicit drugs grew producing a significant increase in demand from Mexico (Astorga and Shirk 2009: 5). Vertical control over the political and law enforcement systems by the PRI was dominant, however, in Mexico, especially in Western Mexico where opium, poppy and marijuana were grown (Sabet 2010).

At the municipal level, the PRI-appointed chief of police would tolerate the drug trade in his/her informal local jurisdiction or territory (*plaza*) in exchange for pay-offs from organized crime. Under PRI control of the traditional *plaza*, the drug trafficker or smuggler actually bought his or her “license” to operate from “the local police chief, military commander, mayor or the individual who had been given authority in that area by the PRI (Pimentel 2000: 42)”. By the late 1990s, however, a trend toward greater trafficker autonomy from political control began as the political system pluralized and decentralized but did not institutionalize (Pimentel 2000: 40–41; Astorga 2012: 156). This decentralizing trend continued under the first non-PRI president Vicente Fox (2000–06, PAN), further eroding the traditional *plaza* system.

Simultaneously, as Mexican cartels gained greater political autonomy from PRI control, they also gained in relative strength as Colombian cartels diminished in power due to concerted domestic and international law enforcement actions (UNODC 2010 in Ríos 2011b: 10). PAN president Calderón took office in 2006 as cartels began to diversify, adding retail drug sales, kidnapping and extortion along with drug-smuggling (Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2011: 9). However, as Ríos (2011a: 11) notes, it was increased enforcement in Mexico under Calderón which weakened the cartels and the traditional *plaza* system of corruption (bribes).

For several decades, Mexican organized crime organizations conducted their illegal activities without causing substantial violence, and only in the recent years have drug related homicides experienced a dramatic increase (Ríos 2011b: 9). Nevertheless, drug-related assassination was certainly not unknown before 2006, although precise estimates are difficult to ascertain. For example, journalist Quiñones (2009: 1) claims about 1,000 intra-gang drug-related killings annually before 2006. Rarely were government officials the target. Campbell (2005: 327) notes, however, that in Ciudad Juárez before 2006, local newspapers (*El Diario* and *Norte*) were reporting stories about bloody drug killings almost daily.

What is clearer is that the end of the U.S. Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 2004 greatly facilitated the illicit trafficking of arms from the U.S. to Mexico (Dube et al. 2013; McDougal et al. 2013). This allowed Mexican criminal organizations to substantially increase their firepower because they could easily purchase high-caliber

weapons as found in the much-criticized “Operation Fast and Furious”.⁴ Quiñones (2009: 2) argues that Mexican criminal organizations went from assault rifles and large caliber pistols to:

platoon-sized units employing night vision goggles, electronic intercept collection, encrypted communications, fairly sophisticated information operations, sea-going submersibles, helicopters and modern transport aviation, automatic weapons, RPG’s, Anti-Tank 66 mm rockets, mines and booby traps, heavy machine guns, 50 [caliber] sniper rifles, massive use of military hand grenades, and the most modern models of 40 mm grenade machine guns.

Calderón’s “war on drugs” (2006–07) thus began in this context of increasingly well-armed criminal elements with a vertical rise in cocaine seizures by the Mexican Army. This was followed by a new strategy of “juridical” (unconditional) rather than “territorial” (conditional) governmental “crackdowns” on cartels (Lessing 2011). Such crackdowns increased competition between the cartels while also fragmenting cartel leadership (Astorga and Shirk 2010; Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 39). Fueled by the larger US demand for drugs (Reuter 2009: 122), these prosecutorial changes therefore combined with the easy access to international (often US) arms (Goodman 2011: 5). This led now fragmenting cartels to procure an even higher level of armament to fight each other over *plazas* and territories (cartel turf wars) (Dell 2011: 21).

⁴ By 2007, media reports began to criticize the flow of firearms from the United State to Mexico (Department of Justice [DOJ] Inspector General 2012: 48). One news story reported US law enforcement as saying they had never seen anything like the flood of guns surging into Mexico. This article (Roig-Franzia 2007) quoted a Phoenix Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives [ATF] agent as blaming the circumstances on the ease of buying of high-powered weapons since the U.S. assault weapons was not renewed in 2004. This same quoted agent, along with four other ATF agents would later be reassigned within ATF and the Justice Department after a Congressional inquiry into “Operation Fast and Furious”. Operation Fast and Furious was meant as a short-term federal operation which purposely allowed licensed firearms dealers to sell weapons to illegal straw buyers, hoping to ultimately track the guns to Mexican drug cartel leaders and arrest them. The DOJ Inspector General’s Review of Operation Fast and Furious and Related Matters reports that by the end of 2009, the ATF, by using informants and not prosecuting straw buyers, had “identified 19 suspected straw purchasers who had bought approximately 690 firearms over the previous 4 months—primarily AK-47 style rifles—for over \$350,000, much of it cash. Four of the buyers—Patino, Steward, Moore, and Chambers—were responsible for over 70 % of the purchases” (DOJ Inspector General 2012: 132–133). The ATF also learned that many of these illegally purchased weapons made their way into Mexico. It is beyond the scope of this brief to analyze each and all incidents of the estimated 195 recovered weapons in Mexico and the type of weapon(s) recovered reported in the 512 page DOJ (2012) report relating to Operation Fast and Furious. The DOJ (2012) report does not always mention the specific type of US weapon recovered in Mexico. Nevertheless, two examples of such recoveries were selected for illustrative purposes here where the specific type of weapon was reported in Mexico. One recovery occurred in Mexicali, Mexico (December 2009) where 50 % of the 48 recovered firearms (46 of which were AK-47s) were purchased by Operation Fast and Furious subjects (DOJ Inspector General 2012: 119). In another incident in (Caborca 2007), Mexican authorities recovered during a raid in the city an AK-47 pistol and an AK-47 rifle purchased by an Operation Fast and Furious straw-buyer on March 30 and June 26, 2007 (DOJ Inspector General 2012: 57).

Government crackdowns also led organized crime elements to engage in limited attacks or confrontations with the Mexican military which have resulted in soldier deaths (Goodman and Marizco 2010: 8). As Osorio (2011: 26–27) notes, “readily obtainable weapons and the substantial financial resources extracted from illicit markets allow DTOs (drug-trafficking organizations) to rapidly enhance their fire power to fight against other criminal organizations or to resist government authorities”. Thus, the increasing availability of sophisticated weaponry altered the relative balance between rival criminal groups. Importantly, it also enhanced its tactical power vis-à-vis government authorities, especially the military, federal and state police.

The increasing sophisticated weaponry of organized crime elements *also* strongly shifted the relative balance of power between them and the local police. A strategy of unconditional governmental crackdowns and the rise in armed power of cartels together altered the dynamics of interaction at the municipal level. By 2008, ample access to high-powered armament including military-style assault rifles, especially AK-47 semi-automatic rifles and AR-15 semi-automatic rifle clones clearly gave fragmented cartels an extremely large tactical advantage over local police in Mexico (Olson et al. 2010: 15–17). Municipal police equipment offers inadequate protection and the body armor local police use is “often useless, defective, or not enough to protect them from the high-caliber guns that the cartels have” (Murataya et al. 2011: 89). Sabet (2012: 57), for example, notes: “Lacking bullet proof vests, being armed only with revolvers, and driving weak-engine Nissan Tsurus, the police were highly vulnerable to attack”.

Furthermore, prior to 2008, a majority of Mexican municipal police did not carry any type of assault rifles because they were previously only authorized for the military (Sabet 2012: 219). High quality and high caliber weapons and ammunition smuggled in from the US by Mexican drug trafficking organizations have left the local police vastly outgunned (Williams 2012). Sullivan and Elkus (2008: 7) note that “cartel gunmen outmatch the tactical capabilities of most local Mexican police” and theorize that this advantage allows them to conduct “a war of attrition against mid-to-low level law enforcement officers...”. In fact, cartel tactics vis-à-vis local law enforcement have included the specific targeting of police chiefs and police, the use of police beheadings, police death lists and the killing of off-duty or in-transit officers.

1.2.4 The Power of the Gun

The issue of specialized military training as a previous tactical advantage for Mexican hit-men has been raised by Turbeville (2010: 133). He argues that there was a transition in Mexico by mid-2003 from the “gangsterism of the traditional narco hit men” to *sicarios* who employ “paramilitary terrorism with guerrilla tactics”. Turbeville (2010: 134) specifically cites a 40 min armed clash in Nuevo Laredo between about 20 specialized “Black Commando” Sinaloa cartel hit men

and Federal Investigative Agency officers (AFI) law enforcement forces patrolling the city on July 31, 2003 as a key historical moment of this transition.⁵

According to Turbeville (2010: 135), “Amidst the varying reports and interpretations of the incident, there was an area of common agreement. This was that the paramilitaries possessed weaponry, confidence, and willingness to engage opposition including federal forces with heavy firepower”.

Many scholarly and government accounts of the recruitment and training of Mexican hit-men, however, do not provide clear evidence that a majority of *sicarios* come from a police or military background with previous paramilitary training. Ríos (2010) argues that organized crime elements largely rely on poor, uneducated Mexican youth,⁶ young adults and even Central American migrants (Farrell 2012: 29) with *no* previous formal education, qualification or special tactical training as recruits. At least at the lower levels,⁷ the Federal Secretariat of Public Safety in Mexico reports that most Mexican hit man typically start as informants (level one) within drug trafficking organizations with monthly wages of approximately US\$232 and \$505 (2009). Being an informant means reporting on any movement in the delimited area and the potential hit man can move up to recruiter (level two) only after the members of the group agree he/she has been loyal to the organization (El Universal 2009a). The actual “tactical” training of hit men then begins with assisting in some kidnappings of enemies and debtors of the organization who will be executed. Those who show most aptitude will be raised into the *sicario* role with a salary increase to US\$754 weekly (Guevera 2013: 140).

Typically, this “on the job” training process from initial recruit to lower-level hit man takes only 3 months (El Universal 2009b).⁸ A captured *La Familia* cartel activist

⁵ The original fire fight did not start out as a conflict between the government and organized crime elements. Instead, the *Zetas* and pursuing Black Command gunmen who worked not for *Zetas* but the rival Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman Cartel were pursuing the *Zetas*, but did not catch them. Instead, they ran into patrolling AFI officers and engaged them in a 40 min firefight with automatic small arms fire and launcher-fired grenades (Turbeville 2010). By 2009, such tactics had spread to hits on the municipal police where a similar attack occurred made up of a specialized commando of 38 *sicarios* who made good on prior death threats to the police chief. The commando stormed the municipal building in rural town of Bahuichivo (Urique, Chihuahua), kidnapping and then assassinating police chief Leopoldo Pérez Quiñónes, a senior municipal official and a citizen in April 2009 (XEPL 2009; Turbeville 2010: 136).

⁶ This mirrors a general trend in the ever younger recruitment of Mexican citizens into organized crime groups. The previous average was 20–35 years old but the post-2008 period began to see the recruitment of youth as young as 12–15 years old (SSP 2010: 12).

⁷ Ríos (2010) presents evidence of different “levels” of hit-men when she asks Alfredo Quijano, the editor of *El Norte*, a local newspaper from Juárez, Mexico how much does a hit man cost? According to Quijano: ‘It depends on the type of hit man. The good ones are expensive, but you can always find someone who would do the work for \$150–\$210’. Ríos (2010) says that for \$210, “an inexpert gang member can get a low profile target killed; for \$21,000, an expert can kill the chief of police in Mexico City, or at least that is what the hit man who killed Mr. Robles Liceaga, the chief of police in Mexico City until 2002, said he was paid”.

⁸ Mexican hit men are fairly disposable, lasting only about 3 years before being executed either by rivals or their own organization (El Universal 1/5/09).

further described the basic training of the organization’s potential hit men. According to Grayson and Logan (2012: 98), “He explained that potential hit-men are taken to mountainous zones and are directed to pursue, shoot and cook fifteen victims. This exercise tests whether recruits can conquer their fear and overcome the sight of their quarries’ blood’.” Thus, in the cases of lower-level Mexican *sicarios* or Central American migrants, there is little evidence of significant previous military training that might contribute to an immediate tactical or paramilitary advantage over local police.⁹

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the background and training of selected Mexican hit-men may, in certain cases or in special operations, contribute to a tactical advantage over municipal police. *Zeta* scholars note that the original *Zeta* members were trained killers with military backgrounds and specialized US military training (Yeh 2012: 240) who then turned into hit men for the Gulf cartel (Grayson and Logan 2012: 29; Farrell 2012: 30). Some *Zetas* still contract themselves for hire as enforcers (Kan 2012: 50). Organized crime elements also greatly value trained soldiers from Mexico and Guatemala as *sicarios* and have actively recruited Mexican soldiers (Fiegal 2009), Mexican police (Molloy and Bowden 2011) and ex-Guatemalan special forces soldiers (Kaibeles) (Kan 2012: 50; Stratfor 2013). Several US prosecutions of “contracts for hire” also reveal that US soldiers are being recruited by Mexican organized crime elements to assassinate US based targets because of their skilled military tactical training (Kolb 2013).¹⁰ Also to expand the geographical mobility of hit men, *Zetas* began to recruit Mexican–American teens living on the border giving them advanced military-like training prior to their ascendance to *sicarios* for murders on US soil (Grayson and Logan 2012: 198; Cárdenas 2013: 232; CBS News 2012).

⁹ Most of the literature, however, reaches an agreement on the point that hired guns in Mexico kill mainly for the money. Payment for the Mexican cartel hit man is typically in the form of a salary and benefits for assassination [benefits can include drugs, access to women, electronics, restaurant food in jail] (Lusk et al. 2013: 11). Mexican hit-men will also sometimes be able to supplement their incomes with kidnappings to increase their personal earnings (Grayson and Logan 2012: 55). Some Mexican hit men, however, also hope, beyond the money to achieve professional mobility and perhaps “climb the criminal ladder and eventually become cartel leaders themselves (Kan 2012: 50)”. Some do successfully climb this ladder, taking the next step above the hit-men which is the *plaza* boss or even the next step to an intermediary leadership position (lieutenant) who is head of a cell. Grayson and Logan (2012: 29) says that lieutenants carry out commands issued by their superiors. They oversee the work of the second-tier of the organization or local cell sergeants who are responsible for about six or more cells (whose 5–7 members often do not know each other). The sergeants also control their own hit-men and are loath to share their names with other sergeants who may try to recruit them (Grayson and Logan 2012).

¹⁰ Several recently prosecuted “murder for hire” schemes include former Army private Michael Apodaca, 22, who was recruited and paid \$5,000 by the Juárez Cartel to shoot and kill José Daniel González-Galeana, a cartel member who had been outed as an informant for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in El Paso. Kevin Corley, 29, a former active-duty Army first lieutenant from Fort Carson in Colorado, pleaded guilty in federal court in Laredo, Texas, to conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire for the *Los Zetas* cartel after being arrested in a sting operation. He had pledged, together with former Army Sgt. Samuel Walker who was also prosecuted, to put together a four man kill team to raid a Texas ranch, steal 20 kg of cocaine and kill four people (Business Insider 2012).

Rather, it is the argument in this brief that a very close read of the evidence shows that armaments remain *the* central piece of the tactical advantage of Mexican hitmen over municipal police. It is the “power of the gun” even in the hands of recently trained hit men which is a sufficient cause for law-enforcement assassination. *Sicarios* were armed with automatic weapons reserved for the military of *the AK-47 or AR-15 type* even in the 40 min July 31, 2003 firefight in the city of Nuevo Laredo cited by Turbeville (2010: 134–135) as a key moment of transition to the paramilitarization of Mexican hit men [emphasis added]. In the 2009 assassination of the Bahuichivo, Chihuahua police chief and municipal officer (Turbeville 2010: 136), multiple commando assassins discharged into their bodies “dozens of shots from assault rifles (Al Instante 2009)”. The US Department of Justice (DOJ) (2012: 1) reported that “AK-47 style rifles and FN Herstal 5.7 caliber pistols made up the majority of 2,000 US weapons purchased by investigated straw-buyers for transport to Mexican DTOs (2009–2011)”. As Sullivan and Elkus (2008: 11) note, the possession of AK-47s, sniper scopes, grenade launchers, and/or “cop-killer” penetrative ammunition...“gives even the lowliest cartel gunman a tactical advantage over his police counterpart”.¹¹

1.3 A Multiplicity of Motives for Law-Enforcement Assassination

Given the more than 2,500 law enforcement officers killed in the Mexican drug-war conflict, an in-depth case study of the targeting of *all* federal forces (army, navy or federal police), all state-level and all municipal level police and all members of the criminal justice systems (prison directors, guards, prosecutors in the attorney general’s office) is beyond the scope of this book. Nor, while interesting topics in their

¹¹ In other words, organized crime elements try to recruit hit men with previous specialized training when they can but cannot rely exclusively only on hit men with extensive previous tactical training to run the majority of their *sicario* cells (Stratfor 2013; El Universal 2009). As such, Mexican organized crime elements often must “make do” with their on-the-job training of hitmen. The recruitment of non-professionals and even their subsequent sophisticated military-like, tactical training can have mixed results in terms of precision, collateral damage and publicity for the organized crime group. Nevertheless, the outcome is almost always lethal for one or more victims. One example is Laredo US teen Rosalio Reta with no previous tactical training who was recruited at age 13 then trained by the *Zetas* in Mexico where he claims to have received military-like tactical training in counter-surveillance, intelligence gathering, explosives and handling different types of weapons (CBS News 2012). Reta turned out to be a very “professional” assassin in one US-based hit, according to Laredo police, executing a precise pattern of shots through the car window with a steady hand killing a Mexican crime lord living in Laredo, Texas. Yet, Reta subsequently botched another hit, this time in Mexico where he killed innocents and missed the target. Realizing he would die for the mistake, Reta agreed to prosecution and to cooperate as a witness for the Laredo police in exchange for their extracting him from Mexico. He was sentenced to 70 years in a US prison for two contracted *Zeta* hits but is suspected of having killed several others in his career as a *Zeta* assassin (CBS News 2012).

own right, does this study analyze large-scale quantitative data of killings between rival DTOS (see: Dell 2011), or quantitative amalgamated data on the daily sum of violent events against municipal government officials by DTOs (see: Osorio 2011).

Instead, the analysis presented here examines specific, targeted assassinations of law enforcement personnel at the municipal level. Targeted hits of police at the local level by organized crime elements in the drug-war conflict have often been selective and deliberate. For example, a full 8 % of the fifty police officers killed in early 2008 in state of Chihuahua had their name on a “narco-list” (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2008).

Often the question asked by the public upon hearing of the assassination of a Mexican police officer is: Was s/he killed because of “opposition to”, or “complicity with”, organized crime (Sabet 2012: 12)?

Nevertheless, in any series of assassination events in a nation over time, there could be a multiplicity of motives for the killings. A repeated pattern of assassinations is strongly suggestive of a *system* of assassination. While individual actions may matter in one specific case, in analyzing a series of assassinations, one must take at face value the possibility that there may be honest officials, corrupt officials or both killed.

To be sure, “complicity” explains why some corrupt police officials are killed by Mexican cartels because they failed to deliver on promises or betrayed their bribers (Ríos 2011b). Similarly, “opposition” explains why retaliation for government prosecution is so often a salient motive in police killings. There are multiple accounts, for example, directly linking police deaths to retaliation for federal prosecution. For example, in June 2008, Edgar Millan Gómez, acting director of the federal preventive police, was assassinated in his own home by a man wielding two 9 mm pistols 1 week after holding a press conference in Culiacán (Sinaloa) to announce the arrests of 12 hit men working for the Sinaloa Cartel (US Senate 2011b).¹²

Yet, as Reuter (2009) argues, the killing of Mexican law enforcement and elected public officials by drug cartels is not *just* about retaliation for intensified enforcement. There are also often innocent parties who are killed to send a signal to honest public officials. The killing of innocents is frequently accompanied by decapitation or torture (suffused with menace) and a written “message” with the head or body to local public and law enforcement officials. These can serve as signals to honest officials who seek to remain “neutral” that they have to choose between competing drug gangs offering bribes and, if they fail to choose, they will suffer a similar fate (Reuter 2009: 280; Ríos 2011b).

Furthermore, honest police officials can also be assassinated by corrupt police officials whose earnings might suffer as a result of the prosecutorial actions of honest officials and honest police. Finally, both honest and/or corrupt officials may be assassinated by organized crime elements randomly simply to keep others in line (Ríos 2011b), to persuade other officials to accept payment and/or to replace one set of officials with another.

¹² That same day, Roberto Velasco, one of the directors of the federal organized crime unit, was also shot and killed in Mexico City (US Senate 2011b).

Such a diversity of victims suggests the need for a focus on the structural elements of an assassination campaign. The questions asked in this analysis about the killing of top Mexican municipal law enforcement by organized crime elements are: “What goals are achieved by assassinating local police chiefs and top-level commanders?”, and, “What are their tactical advantages that allow this lethal strategy to be “successful”?”

1.3.1 A Systemic Pattern of Assassinations

The argument advanced herein is that there is a systemic pattern of assassinations by organized crime elements for the purpose of rigorously undermining the rule of law.¹³ A “rule of five” sources was collected for each assassination event discussed in this study (see Appendix, Chap. 2).

In Chap. 2, it is shown how law enforcement assassination is often used to try and achieve several types of outcomes at the municipal level or a multiplicity of motives, not just retaliation. These multiple motives do include retaliation for federal, state and/or local prosecution *but also* the attempt to try and neutralize police chiefs, to achieve intermittent local governance and/or to place corrupt police chiefs at the municipal level. Also, the goal can be to reduce local governmental capacity to obtain greater freedom for movement of goods.

Chapter 2 is a case study of the murder of small town police chiefs and top-level commanders in Chihuahua (2006–2012). This in-depth approach allows for a detailed analysis of the repetitive use of law-enforcement assassinations at the municipal level. The Mexican Army’s presence, as is argued, has been relatively weak in Northern Tier rural areas, especially in rural Chihuahua and rural Sonora because it does not possess the resources to win a protracted fight with the Sinaloa cartel (Danelo 2011). It can be plausibly assumed that at least one key reason why the military has a lesser ratio of lethal casualties than the municipal police (Molzahn et al. 2013: 31) is because its personnel were less likely to be consistently placed *over time* in municipalities located directly on drug-transit routes than local police.

Furthermore, federal law enforcement was also thinly stretched (US Senate 2011a: 17) and not always able to remain in troubled municipalities as a police presence in the 2006–2012 period. After 2008, municipal security was frequently compromised in multiple Northern Tier municipalities. In this context, fragmented cartels came to use killings of municipal law enforcement to “seek to [further] weaken the structures of governance and the rule of law to secure maneuver room for their own strategy” (Sullivan and Elkus 2008: 6). Such a lethal strategy by organized crime elements does not necessarily result in the subsequent, prolonged deployment of federal forces in a given municipality. As such, it does not necessarily

¹³ By “system”, the author is referring to the organized, lethal strategies of assassins as they relate to, and are influenced by, the larger, complex, dynamic set of inter-related institutions (international and domestic criminal justice systems, legal systems, political system) that surround these actors.

generate a counterproductive outcome for criminal organizations. The killing of municipal police chiefs and commanders has thus become one strategic method for weakening the local rule of law in the current post-2006 Mexican drug war dynamic.

This book does not claim, however, that bullets are the *only* strategy being employed by organized crime elements toward local law enforcement. While it is extremely difficult to determine the amount of organized crime infiltration and the responses of police to organized crime incentives (Sabet 2012: 109), the use of “*plata*” or bribes of local police chiefs and commanders may still be a widely used strategy in certain municipalities in Northern Tier Mexico. Along major portions of the drug-smuggling corridor of Baja California Sur Highway 1, for example, (from Guerrero Negros to Los Cabos), clear evidence was found of bribery and/or the placement of local corrupt police chiefs as strategies which better facilitate criminal goals than assassination (Zeta 2009).

Nor does the argument presented herein *solely* imply a linear or single benefit at the municipal level from the use of law enforcement assassination by organized crime elements. Chapter 2 illustrates multiple instances where a local police chief may be assassinated and a strategic town may be “emptied” of its rule of law institutions (El Universal 2010; Ríos 2011b: 18; Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 33) to allow for greater freedom of movement of goods but then “re-taken” later by federal forces. This back-and-forth pattern of municipal control can vary within a single municipality and state and is clearly not uniform across the nation (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 47; Molzahn et al. 2012: 10, 17). There are a variety of motivations over time for violence in the drug trade (Reuter 2009: 279) with municipal manifestations of organized crime presence (Hobbs 1998).

Rather, law-enforcement assassination has become more efficient strategy for action. Largely, this is because the tactical advantage of organized crime elements facilitates their physical access to law enforcement targets. Access to the target (an element of opportunity propagated by the lack of institutional protection of officials) is one prime motivator for the use of assassination (White 2008: 5). Thus, multiple institutional deficits and impunity within the legal, criminal and political systems facilitate the choice of assassination as *one* “successful” strategy of action.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the weapons and methods of attack employed in such assassinations across the range of Northern Tier states. The tactical advantage of organized crime elements is manifest: (1) in convoy style armed vehicular assaults and, (2) in targeted, strategic hits with high-powered assault rifles on police chiefs and top-level commanders outside of their vehicles. The “signature style” of these law-enforcement assassinations involves surprise, deception and the use of such assault weapons as AK-47s and AR-15s firing multiple rounds of ammunition on top municipal officers caught off-guard. The rise in the armed power of organized crime elements thus offers new tactical opportunities for the use of “*plomo*” over “*plata*” toward municipal police chiefs and commanders.

A mapping of the towns and cities along the drug-trafficking routes where the assassination of municipal police chiefs and commanders took place is located in Chap. 3. This mapping shows that law-enforcement assassinations have not just been confined to major cities. They have also spread to small towns which lie

along three specific North-bound highways. This is a smaller, but not identical, reflection of the larger geographical dispersion of organized crime related violence to municipalities near and along drug-smuggling routes and highways (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 45; Osorio 2011: 26).¹⁴

In sum, by concentrating on a series of Northern Tier states, it is shown how police chiefs and top-level local commanders are being assassinated by a variety of organized crime organizations along three distinctive North-bound highways that traverse multiple Northern states and municipalities. This suggests a certain similarity of assassination strategy across distinctive types and levels of organized crime organizations (see Appendix). In other words, the assassinations of Northern Tier police chiefs and commanders appear to be largely ‘instrumental’ murders (Batton 2002: 846).

1.4 Northern Tier Mexican States and Mexico-US Ports of Entry

1.4.1 *The Selection of Northern Tier States*

By sampling the six states that lie directly on the U.S.-Mexican border along with a second tier of those five Northern states that lie deeper into Mexico, this book assembles what the author believes to be the first such attempt at systematically recording municipal police chief and top-level commander assassinations in Mexico. An in-depth analysis of 101 top municipal police officers is conducted in Chaps. 2 and 3. As such, it stands as a precondition for a full, future, account of the law-enforcement assassinations of Mexican police chiefs and commanders throughout the nation.

“Northern Tier” states include Baja California Norte, Baja California Sur, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, San Luis Potosí, Durango and Zacatecas. This overlaps with Danelo’s (2011) classification of “Northern Mexico” in terms of geo-political sub-regions. It includes the six northern states directly bordering the United States, as well as portions of other states deeper in Mexico’s heartland: Baja California, the Sierra Madres, and the Rio Grande Basin.

¹⁴ Guerrero-Gutiérrez’s (2011: 45) mapping of the municipal spread of organized-crime related deaths (2007–2011) shows that the homicide has never been solely concentrated in the immediate border states (Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas). Nor has it spread from the southern states to the northern states of Mexico or even from the second tier Northern states (Sinaloa, Durango, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí) to the immediate border states. Instead, such drug-related homicides follow drug-routes that cross state boundaries. This often follows after the fragmentation of cartels in a city (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 46–50). Guerrero-Gutiérrez’s (2011: 45) mapping therefore suggests a relationship between cartel fragmentation in urban areas and dispersion to municipalities near and along drug-smuggling routes and highways. After 2011, there has been a process of its further dispersion both within a municipality and to new municipalities. As afore noted, Osorio (2011: 25) seeks to explain drug-related homicides of all types of government agents when confrontations between law-enforcement and DTOs occur. He argues that government agents are more likely targets in specific drug-reception areas, spots of international wholesale distribution, local retail markets and marijuana producing zones after confrontations between law-enforcement and DTOs.

Baja California is the rugged peninsula south of the U.S. state of California and includes Baja California Norte and Baja California Sur. The Sierra Madres include the deserts, mountains, steppes and coasts of Sonora and Chihuahua. The Rio Grande Basin covers the eastern mountains, plains and tropics of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, as well as portions of eastern Chihuahua and Durango. Also included are those states lying deeper into Mexico including Sinaloa, Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí (Map 1.1). Certain states bordering on the southern edge of Sinaloa (Nayarit, Aguascalientes, Jalisco, Veracruz) were not included.

Sample choices are made because they speak to key elements of an issue (Weber and Pickering 2011: 3). In this study, all of the states selected in the Northern Tier are traversed by drug trafficking routes pertaining to at least one of the major cartels (Sinaloa, Zetas, Golfo) (see Maps 1.1, 2.1, 2.2 in Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 31–37). They are often also traversed by multiple smaller cartels (Tijuana, Juárez), regional cartels (Pacífico Sur) smuggling multiple types of drugs (cocaine, marijuana, heroin, methamphetamine) (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 31–37). Multiple municipalities within these Northern Tier states are also subject to the criminal activities of local organizations formed from disbanded cells from large cartels. Their activities consist primarily of drug distribution and dealing within their own and/or contiguous municipalities as well as kidnapping, car theft and extortion. One example is La Nueva Federación para Vivir Mejor, located in the Monterrey, Nuevo Leon area (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 115). Thus, by covering rural and urban areas of the Northern Tier states, the analysis captures the geography of the killing of law enforcement in drug producing (marijuana), drug trafficking and drug distributing towns and cities.



Map 1 Northern tier Mexican States Source Map/Still. Britannica Online

Weber and Pickering (2011: 3), in their study of border deaths at the global frontier, note the methodological importance of utilizing a “core sampling” method for undertaking a complex analysis within a field that is very broad. According to the authors:

“Dauvergne argues that, when confronted by the breadth of potentially distinct” topics, the key challenge is to avoid superficiality, while still being able to speak to the broader issues. Her ‘countermeasure’ is to: “adapt the ice scientist’s methodology of core sampling. To understand the layers, the scientist extracts a narrow sample that contains a trace of each element under examination. This is the antidote to breadth. Core sampling...means drilling into each topic under consideration to extract a sample that in key ways reveals something about the whole. Some sampling choices are easier than others, but they are all choices” (2008: 3).

The sampling choices made in this book avoid selection bias on the dependent variable because there is sufficient additional case selection (variation between states within the larger Northern Tier). The states of Tamaulipas and Baja California Sur, for example, register fewer reports of drug-related killings against local authorities than Nuevo León and Chihuahua but also suffer from the presence of criminal organizations. The inclusion of states such as Sinaloa, Coahuila and Zacatecas also capture states which may not have experienced a lot of law-enforcement assassination in the 2006–2011 period but which were then subject to multiple assassinations of municipal police chiefs and commanders (2011–2012). The inclusion of such cases within a larger Northern Tier set of states thus does consider the variable of varying levels of drug-related assassination against law enforcement across different states.

1.4.2 US Ports of Entry: Urban or Rural?

This brief principally analyzes the assassination of police chiefs and high-level local commanders in cities and towns located on and near the U.S.-Mexican border and in towns and cities located along strategic Northern Tier drug-smuggling corridors. Traditionally, the DEA (2011) and some scholars (Dell 2011) argue that the routes that drug traffickers take from Mexico to the US have as their end-goal to cross into the US in primarily *urban* based ports of entry. This is based on the idea that traffickers, upon reaching the U.S.-Mexican border, seek to smuggle their product through legitimate commerce at key urban US ports of entry such as Tijuana/San Diego; Ciudad Juárez/El Paso; Nuevo Laredo/Laredo; Matamoros/Brownsville. Dell (2011) notes that “while drugs may also enter the United States between terrestrial border crossings, the large amount of legitimate commerce between Mexico and the United States offers ample opportunities for drug trackers to smuggle large quantities of drugs through border crossings and ports (U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency 2011)”. Dell (2011) identifies nineteen US points of entry which encompass multiple medium and large Mexican and US cities that lie directly on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Other scholars, however, especially experts on illegal migrants (including Mexican drug traffickers), have noted that the use of outlying *rural* ports of US entry has increased significantly since 2004. This “displacement” of illegal migrants more

toward rural US ports of entry is explained as the result of the militarization of the U.S. border with Mexico, expansion of border patrol (Reaves 2012), new security measures following the 9/11 attacks and the emergence of the Homeland Security department which concentrated and intensified illegal migrant apprehensions by the Border Patrol particularly near *urban* border cities (Dunn 2009: 2, 51, 59, 61, 229; Andreas 2009: 94, 98). This had the effect of thereby displacing illegal migrants seeking to escape detection into crossing into the US to outlying, isolated rural areas along the border and in increasing migrant deaths (Massey and Pren 2012).¹⁵ Some of these rural ports of entry are located in US federal parks or in Native American tribal jurisdictions where US Border Patrol agents have more limited authority (H.R. Bill 1505 2012), particularly in the state of Arizona. Some of the smallest rural border ports of Mexico-US entry include Sonoyta [Sonora]/Lukeville [Arizona], Sásabe [Arizona]/El Sásabe [Sonora] and Palomas [Chihuahua]/Columbus [New Mexico].

This brief finds that 8 % of the assassinated municipal police chiefs and high-level commanders were killed in six traditional ports of urban entry into the US that lie directly on the U.S.-Mexican border. This includes the large and medium-sized urban cities of Tijuana/San Diego; San Luis Colorado/San Luis; Nogales/Nogales; Ciudad Juárez/El Paso; Piedras Negras/Eagle Pass; Nuevo Laredo/Laredo traditionally identified in the South-West Border Regions High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas Counties (DEA 2011). At the same time, this brief found 3 % of the Northern Tier police chief assassinations and high-level commanders took place in the small city ports of Mexico-US entry (Tecate/Tecate; Agua Prieta/Douglas). In addition, 3 % more police chiefs were assassinated in small Mexican towns which lie along the northbound routes to the rural Sonoyta/Lukeville and Sásabe/El Sásabe border crossings.¹⁶ This suggests then that the post-2004 US border law-enforcement build-up *has* also affected drug-trafficking routes and thus the etiology of police chief assassinations in so far as smaller towns on or near the border became more significant ports of entry into the US in the post-2008 drug-war.

¹⁵ Increased migrant (illegal and drug-trafficker) deaths have been reported in multiple desert areas between town crossings, especially on federal lands in the states of Arizona and New Mexico. Using Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner death statistics, Humane Borders (2013) presents detailed maps of rural Arizona federal lands where multiple migrant deaths have occurred. [Humaneborders.org](http://www.humaneborders.org). Sasabe poster; Douglas poster; Nogales poster; Lukeville poster; <http://www.humaneborders.org/warning-posters>. Arizona and New Mexico are the US states where police response/patrol numbers experienced a very large increase after 2008 in relationship to total federal officer personnel (Reaves 2012: 11).

¹⁶ For example, the Tubutama/Saric municipality police chief Julian Adrian Paz Robles was a resident of the rural Mexican port of entry town Sásabe (La Policiaca 2011). Intra-cartel turf-wars [Sinaloa versus Beltrán Leyva] over that same critical twenty-seven miles of drug-smuggling border crossing which includes Sásabe/Arizona Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge were “ground zero” (Moore 2011) in the violence that later engulfed and killed the chief. The previously quiet small town of Caborca, Sonora lies along rural highway 2 to the rural Mexico-US port of entry Sonoyta (Sonora)/Lukeville (Arizona). Caborca, Sonora was transformed from a relatively quiet place in terms of the drug trade (New York Times 1988) to a significant staging point for smugglers going north (Arizona Republic 2008) before the assassination of its deputy police chief Francisco Javier Gutiérrez Moreno (Excelsior 2011b).

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Chapter 2

Rub Outs in the Territory: Killing Police Chiefs and Top-Level Commanders in Chihuahua

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines in detail the assassination of municipal police chiefs and top-level municipal commanders in the state of Chihuahua (2006–2012). The argument advanced in this chapter is that these murders are the result of the interaction between impunity in the political, legal and law enforcement systems and the goals and weapons of the criminal organizations. This thesis is presented in three sections.

Section 2.2 describes how the elements of opportunity and motivation for the killings of police chiefs were abundantly present in Northern Tier Mexico, especially in the post-2008 period. They consisted of insufficient protection of officials which facilitated opportunity for assassination. In addition, lack of municipal capacity to implement police reforms slowed institutional efforts to improve local security during this period.

Section 2.3 presents an analysis of the system of law-enforcement assassinations of local police chiefs by organized crime elements in the state of Chihuahua. Selective, often sequential, hits by cartels of chiefs and commanders in multiple towns along key drug-trafficking corridors has proven an effective strategy that serves several criminal goals. The goals achieved by organized crime include: (1) retaliation for federal, state and local prosecution, (2) the attempt to neutralize police chiefs, (3) to achieve intermittent local governance and/or to place corrupt police chiefs, and, (4) to reduce local governmental capacity in order to obtain greater freedom for movement of goods.¹

¹ These four goals are presented as “ideal types” and should be understood as such. In the empirical exposition that follows, there is some overlap between ideal types, i.e. the attempt to achieve intermittent local governance may also involve the attempt to place police chiefs favorable to organized crime elements. However, the attempt to achieve intermittent local governance does not always include the assassination of the police chief or top-level commanders and therefore it is kept as a separate category in the analysis.

Section 2.4 presents a mapping and a discussion of the specific gains from law-enforcement assassination and their negative impact on the local rule of law. A geographical mapping of the assassinations of local police chiefs and top-commanders in Chihuahua also reveals that they are not random but follow a northbound pattern along drug-smuggling routes. Organized crime elements did take total temporary political control in some small towns near the U.S.-Mexican border and near the cross-roads of major drug-smuggling highways. In those instances, the concerted assassination campaigns in several of these towns can be understood as limited “governance” through organized crime (Sheptycki 2003; Sullivan and Elkus 2008).

2.2 Opportunity, Motivation and Law-Enforcement Assassination

2.2.1 Targeted, Strategic Hits

The strategic use of deception as one such “signature” element of a deliberate law-enforcement assassination (White 2008: 5) was evident in Chihuahua. Hit men, in small-town Allende (pop. 4,185 [2010]) were very effective in using treachery to assassinate the police chief. Assassins, playing on a still-existing sense of public duty, got the police chief’s family members to open their home door by knocking while politely asking for the chief by name. At that point, they then violently forced their way into the home, ambushed, shot the police chief in his own shower and then fled (Notimex 2011). The targeting of the Rosales municipal police chief (pop. 5,570 [2010]) was no accident. The chief was ambushed in a surprise attack by an armed commando just as he arrived at home after finishing his shift. The detonations from the high-caliber weapons used to assassinate the police chief were so powerful that they broke the windows of a store a block away (Tres Códigos 2012). In small town Balleza (pop. 2,087 [2010]), the police chief suffered and survived so many targeted assassination attempts (at his home, on the highway) that he earned the nickname “El Gato [The Cat]” for allegedly possessing nine lives (La Policiaca 2011g).²

² In Balleza, there were a series of assassination attempts on the police chiefs and top-commanders. The first (March 22, 2010) was unsuccessful because top-police commander Leoncio Loya Chavira who was ambushed in his vehicle along with the ex-mayor, Miguel Ángel Sandoval Prieto (2001–2004), survived the wounds from the armed attack on his vehicle. The attack came 1 h before the Army conducted an anti-organized crime operation on the nearby highway (XEPL 2010). The second set of assassination attempts happened to police chief Armando Sánchez [*El Gato*] in 2011. Sánchez would later flee the municipality with two municipal police officers after the State Attorney General’s Office issued a warrant for his arrest (for collusion with organized crime) in early 2012 (Al Contacto 2012) and was detained a year later (Nota Roja 2013). The subsequent police chief Federico Villas Brito resigned just after coming under investigation by the Federal PGR and the State Attorney General’s Office because of an anonymous tip linking the chief to armed groups and executions in the municipality (Nota Roja 2013). The assassination attempts on police chief Sánchez were preceded by a series of assassinations of the ex-mayor (2004–2007) who was assassinated along with the wife of another mayor at a funeral

Such planned hits on police chiefs do not look like the random result of the general disorder, havoc and the overall rise in homicide rates in the nation since 2006 (Olea 2011). Rather, strategic assassinations, designed to eliminate a target, are generally well-planned, complex events involving cooperation among several actors. They are often conducted in the context of intra-group and inter-group warfare in which killing leaders is seen as a useful war strategy (Palmer-Fernández 2000; David 2002).

2.2.2 Gaps in the Data

The killing of local law enforcement, especially small-town police chiefs and commanders is thus a serious, on-going issue which deserves historical treatment in its own right (WSJ 2010). Yet, many journalistic accounts are very urban-based and focused on high-profile figures such as standing governors (Michoacán) and gubernatorial candidates (Tamaulipas). Such assassinations and assassination attempts on high-ranking politicians are important and elicit a lot of press attention. Nevertheless, assassinations are actually often higher in rural municipalities. Criminal insurgency studies, also often urban-focused, have also neglected small-town contexts (LaPlanate 2011).

Yet, many Mexican small-towns have increasingly become sites of extortion, kidnappings or forced migration, places where fragmented DTOs order citizens to abandon their towns (AP 2010). This was true in the state of Chihuahua where a large number of rural municipalities that lie along its drug-smuggling highways registered very high rates of drug-related assassinations according to government data [SNSP-PGR 2011 (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública-Procuraduría General de la República)] (Appendix).³

Unfortunately, however, the only existing large-scale government data set on assassinations at the municipal level (SNSP-PGR 2011) provides only partial insight into the problem of the killing of police chiefs and other law enforcement officials. The analysis of official municipal-level assassination data *does* tell us that cartel-related assassination is very wide-spread. 92 % of the municipalities in the state of Chihuahua recorded assassination events in 2011 (SNSP-PGR 2011, Appendix).

Nevertheless, the government evidence fails to specify whether the victim was a drug-cartel member, government official (or type of public official—police,

Footnote (Continued)

for an assassinated man (La Policiaca 2011b). The ex-mayor's own husband, a PRI candidate for mayor, had been attacked and killed in 2004 and she then substituted for him and won the mayorship by a majority vote. Later, in Balleza in January 2010, the son of the new mayor was killed by gunmen. At that funeral, the nephew of the municipal police commander was also executed. In sum, in Balleza, the series of assassination attempts on the top-level commanders and police chiefs were accompanied by a string of killings of other local officials and their family members.

³ The Chihuahua municipalities documented in the official SNSP-PGR (2011) data were Ascensión, Camargo, Cuauhtémoc, Guadalupe y Calvo, Guazapares, Hidalgo, Jiménez, Madera, Ojinaga) (n = 2,132 assassinations, 2006–2010).

mayor, other) or a by-stander. This leaves a gaping hole in the data set. Moreover, the oft-repeated Calderón government claim that 90 % of Mexico's assassinations consisted of inter or intra-cartel turf wars (The Guardian 2010) falls short. It does little to explain how the specific killing of local police chiefs and other law enforcement personnel benefits organized crime elements. Nor, according to Milenio (2013a) did the first 70 days of PRI President Enrique Peña Nieto's term in office register a drop in drug-related homicides ($n = 2,097$) with ten police officer victims in January 2013 alone. By April 2013, La Jornada (2013) reported that municipal and state police continued to be killed at the same rate as in previous years under Mexican president Calderón.

A 2011 *Excelsior* (2011b) study reported that 174 public officials and politicians were assassinated across Mexico since 2006. 48 % of those killed were police chiefs in 23 states and 66 municipalities (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 45). The state-by-state breakdown of *Excelsior's* (2011b) data shows 80 public security officers were assassinated.⁴ These law enforcement officers were directly involved in upholding the rule of law (police chiefs, State Secretaries of Public Security and Special Groups operations directors, Federal police). 24 mayors were assassinated.

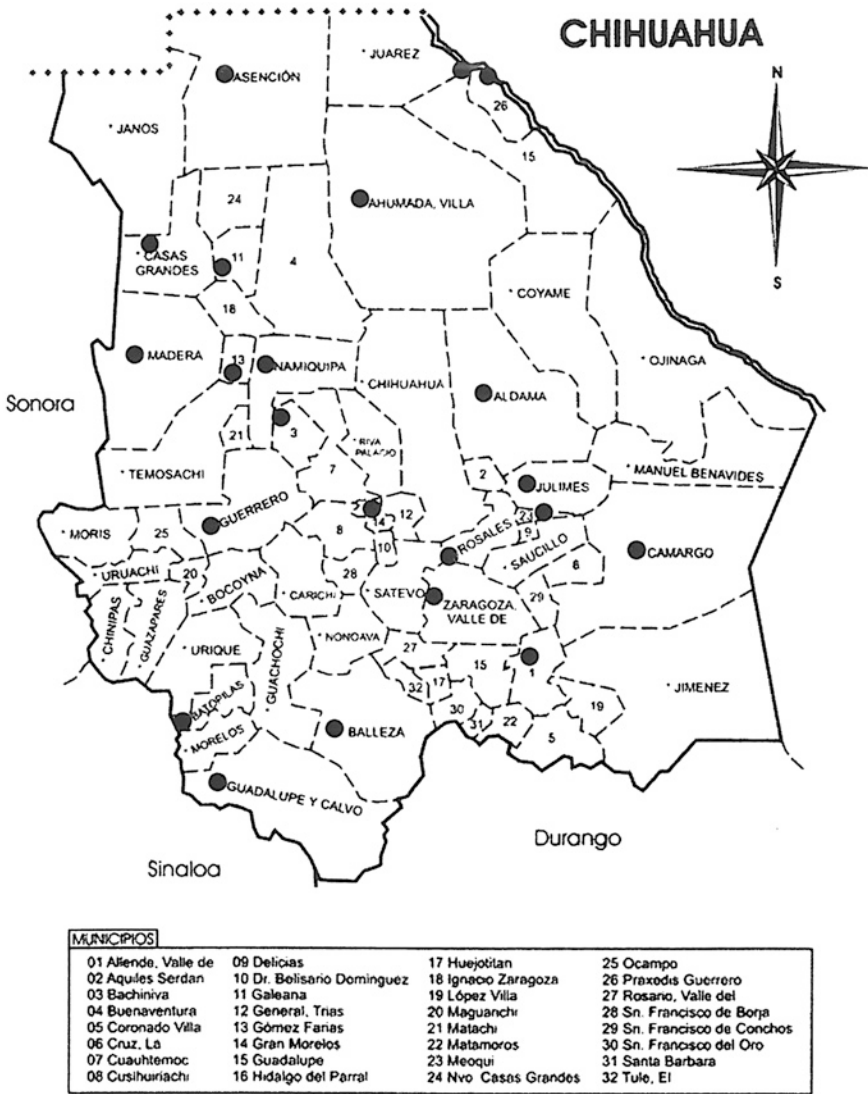
2.2.3 Methods

The author, to create an accurate data set of small town police chiefs and top-level commanders in Chihuahua, conducted an exhaustive search for such law-enforcement assassinations in all 65 of Chihuahua's municipalities (2006–2012) (Lexis/Nexis Academic, Mexican regional and crime press, see Appendix). A representative sociological data set of those municipalities *where the assassination of municipal police chiefs and top commanders actually occurred* was constructed. This data set provides a corrective to the official government assassination data where no description on the occupation of the victim is provided.⁵

Scholars have found that as long as a serious attempt is made (a weapon is fired), it is chance which often defines whether an assassination fails or succeeds and that both lead to an increase in conflict (Jones and Benjamin 2009: 25). Failed assassination attempts were often followed up upon with successful assassinations

⁴ According to *Excelsior's* study (2011b), the police chiefs killed in these states and municipalities include: Aguascalientes ($n = 7$), Baja California Norte ($n = 1$), Baja California Sur ($n = 1$), Campeche ($n = 1$), Coahuila ($n = 1$), Colima ($n = 1$), Durango ($n = 8$), Guanajuato ($n = 6$), Hidalgo ($n = 3$), Jalisco ($n = 2$), Michoacán ($n = 3$), Morelos ($n = 2$), Mexico State ($n = 4$), Puebla ($n = 3$), San Luiz Potosí ($n = 1$), Sinaloa ($n = 4$), Tabasco ($n = 4$), Quintana Roo ($n = 1$) and Veracruz ($n = 14$).

⁵ If the municipality is not included in Table 2.1, the author did *not* find documented the assassination(s) of the police chief(s) or top-level police commanders.



Map 2.1 Municipal map of Chihuahua with law-enforcement assassinations

in the Mexican drug-war dynamic. Thus, this book discusses both assassination and assassination attempts in tracing out a system of law-enforcement assassinations of municipal police chiefs and top-level commanders.

Map 2.1—Municipal Map of Chihuahua shows the political boundaries of Chihuahua’s municipalities (Source: Ponce 2013). The municipal seats where assassinations of top-level municipal police officials occurred are indicated.

2.2.4 *Simultaneousness and Opportunity*

A “system” of law-enforcement assassinations by drug-trafficking cartels is traced out in this chapter based on the assumption of “simultaneousness”. By simultaneousness, it is shown that although motives or gains may overlap, three elements are always present in each assassination event. These include: (1) the murder victims got involved in the enforcement of the rule of law before they were murdered, (2) the murders often had a “positive” effect for drug-trafficking cartels in the respective towns such as the closing of local police stations or the end of corresponding law-enforcement actions, and (3) the murders happened along drug-trafficking routes. Thus, the assassinations of local police chiefs and top commanders all share these three characteristics of simultaneousness.

Assassination behavior is centrally framed by both opportunity and motivation. Opportunity is a key element in the assassination of a government official because the act depends upon the assassin(s) ability to locate the target and to gain sufficient access to that person. Any “regime that hopes to protect their most politically important persons from motivated assassins must either conceal location, block access, or both” (White 2008: 5).

The key elements of opportunity to assassinate law enforcement in the Mexican drug-war have included: (a) insufficient protection of officials and (b) lack of municipal capacity. First, the protection of local law enforcement has been a problem in Mexico. As noted in the preface, the majority of the law enforcement officers killed by 2010 were municipal police ($n = 915$) and state police ($n = 698$) who were operating in various municipalities at the time of their death (García 2011: 260). International and domestic newspapers also continue to print the entire names of assassinated police chiefs and police officers; thereby providing organized crime elements potential access to the whereabouts of their family members.

In the face of these law-enforcement killings, as well as a total death toll of roughly 34,000 organized-crime related killings by 2010, President Calderón admitted that the Mexican government had been unable to combat narco violence successfully “with brute force alone” (García 2011: 261). He also noted that “the municipal police are the most vulnerable, the easiest to track down, the ones most co-opted, the ones most subjected to intimidation and of course vengeance by criminals who act with impunity” (Casey 2010).

Continued lack of financial and political capacity also hinders institutional efforts to improve and strengthen local police, especially in municipalities already heavily hit by organized crime. Federal legislation promoted by Calderón was passed in 2008 to establish a “unitary” police force to strengthen municipal police by advances in salary, recruitment, professionalization, crime data base sharing and confidence controls (Sabet 2010: 259–261; Moloeznik 2013). By mid-2011, however, 78 % of Mexico’s municipalities had not yet implemented the new unitary police system. By mid-2012, the majority of municipalities in the state of Tamaulipas had not yet incorporated into the new unitary police model (La Jornada

2011c; Horacero 2012).⁶ By early 2013, in San Luis Potosí, the state's 58 municipalities had just signed the institutional agreement with the federal government to implement the unitary police force in the state (Milenio 2013b). Moreover, skeptics of the unitary police system fear that the policy may "simply concentrate problems of corruption and inefficiency under one roof, providing a one-stop-shop for traffickers to further compromise police integrity at the state level" (Shirk 2012: 14).

2.2.5 Chihuahua and the Northern Mexican Tier (2008–2012): Cop-Killing Without Punishment?

Mexico largely relies on federal forces such as the army, navy, federal police and the federal office of the attorney general [PGR] to fight criminal organizations, drug trafficking and organized crime. Local police are nevertheless in charge of minor crimes, transit regulation and public security in Mexico (Sabet 2009: 3). "Even though a municipal officer is not responsible for, nor authorized to, pursue and investigate drug trafficking, she nonetheless might be asked to look the other way, provide security for a shipment, provide weapons, information, and uniforms, or actively engage in transport and sale" (Sabet 2007: 5).

Drug-trafficking organizations have a primary interest in moving their product quickly and unimpeded, either by rival cartels and/or by local, state or federal officials who may attempt to prosecute them. This means, in Northern Mexico, movement along drug-smuggling routes up to U.S. Inter-State 10 which parallels the US-Mexican border (Stratfor 2010; Sullivan and Elkus 2008: 3; Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 32). Corrupt municipal police can be valuable allies "for organized crime who need information on who is passing through the municipality military or federal police they control so they can protect local criminal operations and anticipate attacks by their rivals and by federal authorities" (Dell 2011: 7).

Research has repeatedly shown that honest Mexican policemen who refuse to participate in corruption are at high risk from assassination (from corrupt higher-ups, from fellow corrupt officers and from narcos outside the police) (García 2011: 260). Furthermore, the extensive narco-penetration of society (Díaz Cayeros et al. 2011) makes it extremely difficult and impractical for honest police to quit or hide from the Narcos (Sabet 2010). As assassination behavior is also importantly framed by motivation (White 2008: 4), one motive for killing honest, zealous prosecutors and police chiefs is to remove knowledgeable and effective opponents who might capture traffickers. Such assassinations can also serve as a deterrent on other prosecutors, police chiefs and police (Reuter 2009).

⁶ According to the Executive National Secretary of the National Public Security System, multiple Northern Tier municipalities simply lacked the local institutional capacity to implement the plan. In fact, many mayors "had gone to their respective governors and said: I have no financial, political or security capacity to have a police force, Governor, please take charge and give us police services" (Zacatecas Hoy 2011).

Existing data on fifty police killed in the state of Chihuahua during the first 6 months of 2008 strongly suggests that organized crime elements began to heavily target local police in small towns along strategic drug-trafficking routes. By mid-2008, 58 % of the assassinated police officers were killed *outside* of Ciudad Juárez with only 5 federal officials killed (2 Army, 2 federal police, 1 AFI official) (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2008b). This means that the majority of law enforcement victims killed in early 2008 in Chihuahua was *municipal police officers* located outside of urban Ciudad Juárez followed by state-level rule of law personnel (members of the state attorney general's office (24 %). State security forces (8 %) constituted the remaining assassinated officers. By mid-2008, the targeting of federal forces (army, navy, federal police, AFI, Marines) was clearly less than the assault by organized crime elements on municipal police in Chihuahua.

In the face of these police killings, such was the concern with the Northern Tier security situation that by early 2008 Stratfor (2008) intelligence analysts asserted that the Mexican government had (deliberately) lost control of Northern Mexico to the drug-smuggling organizations.⁷ Nevertheless, the Calderón government did begin a surge in the deployment of military and federal troops in Chihuahua in early 2008, suggesting a concern for local security in the region. Map 2.2 displays available figures on the troop deployment of the Mexican Army in the state of Chihuahua and other border states (2008–2012).

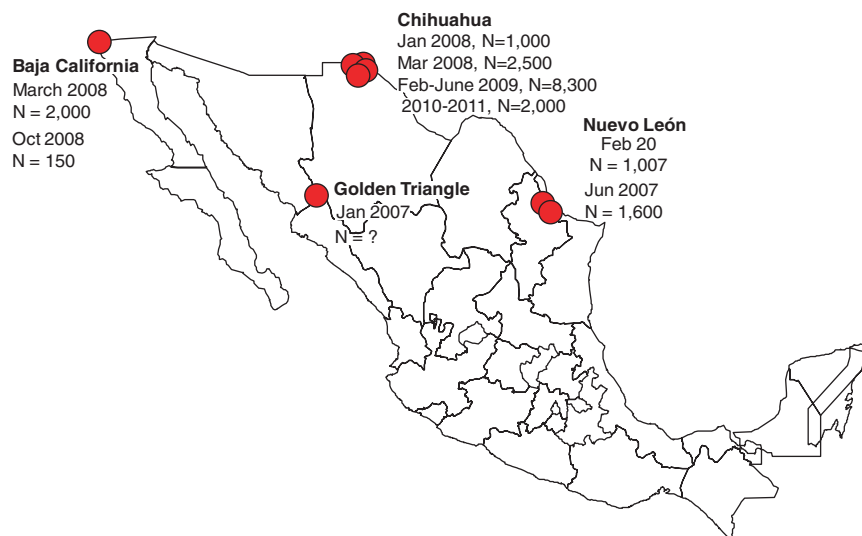
One problem, however, has been the heavily Ciudad Juárez-based urban focus of the deployments in Chihuahua. Almost exclusively, federal deployments concentrated on the urban city of Ciudad Juárez (Operación Chihuahua, 2008–2009) (Astorga and Shirk 2010). An additional 2,000 federal troops were deployed in Chihuahua with control transferred to the Federal Preventative Police in 2010–2011. This deployment also continued to show a largely urban concentration of military forces in and around urban Ciudad Juárez (El Universal 2010a; Sedena 2010, 2011).⁸ By early 2013, except in the Chihuahua municipalities of Delicias and Ciudad Juárez, the state of Chihuahua was not on the list of 13 states receiving new Army deployments (Proceso 2012d; Reforma 2013) proceso.

The Army *had been* intermittently sent to different small cities and towns within Chihuahua to temporarily ensure public safety, make arrests and to confiscate illegal

⁷ Stratfor analysts contended that (then) confinement of the war to the north's sparsely populated desert regions did not threaten the survival of the Mexican regime (in the southern heartland). This and the fact that the industry's \$35–\$40 billion revenue in sales (largely to US consumers) was simply too beneficial to the Mexican economy led Calderón to sacrifice the Northern Tier to organized crime-related violence, according to analysts (Friedman 2010).

⁸ According to the Mexican Military (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional—SEDENA) and the US Department of Justice (2010), the Mexican military was temporarily deployed in drug interdictions and arrests of drug-traffickers in the following 8 municipalities in Chihuahua outside of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City (March 2008–August 2011): Ascensión; Villa Ahumada, Nuevo Casas Grandes, Guadalupe y Calvo, Batopilas, Janos, Parral, Delicias. According to Milenio (2012), there were 149 military operations in the state of Chihuahua between 2008 and 2010 (159 in Guerrero, 93 in Nuevo León, 92 in Coahuila, 72 in Sinaloa, 60 in Michoacán, 57 in Tamaulipas, 37 in Durango, 25 in Sonora, and 18 in Veracruz).

Military and Federal Police Deployments in Border States



Map 2.2 Military and federal police deployments in Border States. *Sources* Astorga and Shirk (2010), El Universal (2010a), SEDENA (2010, 2011)

weapons (New York Times 2009). Ultimately, however, responsibility for maintaining order is returned to local police in small cities and towns. The Mexican military also largely adopted a “hands off” strategy in rural Chihuahua and rural Sonora under Calderón because it did not possess the resources to win a protracted fight with the Sinaloa cartel (Danelo 2011).⁹ The relative absence of a sustained federal presence in small-towns where local officials are assassinated reduces the costs of using bullets as one strategic maneuver by organized crime elements (Lessing 2011: 18).

Sabet (2011) argued that many small towns in Northern border states by 2011 had already become the “strongholds” of Mexican organized crime with those local

⁹ In small towns in Northern Sonora, a virtual state of siege between rival cartels (Sinaloa versus Beltrán Leyva) also led to the rise of de-populated “ghost towns” without police, schools, or businesses (LA Times 2010; Arizona Daily Star 2011). Cerro Prieto Sonora (pop. 500 in 2010, down from 1,750 in 2000) is located near the Altar-Sásabe highway 64 close to the U.S. border in Arizona. The last Army checkpoint is miles away, the town’s last policeman was murdered in mid-June 2011. The police station, schools and all local businesses closed then (NPR 2011). Just north up highway 64 in the small town of Saric, Sonora two mayors, a police chief and 10 police officers had all fled, leaving the town without police. No mail carriers, produce or soda distributors or even ambulances entered the town which was patrolled at night, according to residents, by 20–30 organized crime elements in 20–30 vehicles. With respect to cartel economic activities in the Sonoran village of Gila, cartel toll-takers monitor highway 64 toward the border and make sure each immigrant-loaded van has paid the \$100 passage fee (LA Times 2010: 2).

police officers who remained there are often charged with unclear authorities. In many instances, the remaining outgunned, and outmanned, municipal police officers in Northern Mexico were taken by surprise in ambushes by cartel gunmen while on-duty. The Army, in Ciudad Mier (Tamaulipas), for example, said it was stretched too thin to police the town for an extended period after feuding cartels emptied it of many of its residents, the schools, banks, pharmacies, stores and doctors (Osorno 2011). In a surprise raid on the town a few months after the Army's retreat, the six last remaining local police were simply grabbed from the police station by heavily armed Gulf Cartel operatives in 15 SUVs, beaten, bloodied and disappeared. The ambush was aimed at securing the key trafficking area (the *Frontera Chica*) in the corridor immediately between Tamaulipas and the US border. Order was later restored and some 4,800 residents returned with the construction of a 500 man Army base in the town. Nevertheless, the Army's presence was only temporary with local police ultimately required to regain control. Major gunfights continued between cartels and the military just outside the town (2012–2013) despite the restoration of calm within the town itself by early 2013 (Valley Central 2011; Red Noticias 2013).

2.3 Goals of Organized Crime Elements

2.3.1 A “Bird’s Eye” View of Law-Enforcement Assassination

In this section, the analysis introduces Table 2.1—Hits and Attempted Hits on Small-Town Police Chiefs and Top Commanders in Chihuahua. The aim of Table 2.1 is to summarize in tabular form a systematic view of the assassination of police chiefs and top commanders in Chihuahua's sixty-three non-metropolitan municipalities (see Methodological Considerations and Appendix). Table 2.1 also presents information on assassination attempts, instances where the entire municipal police force resigned and other rule of law officials assassinated in the municipality. This “bird’s-eye” view of the assassination of local police chiefs and top commanders precedes a more detailed discussion of the specific goals of organized crime elements for employing assassination in the municipalities.

The analysis will now demonstrate how retaliation is but *one* criminal goal pursued by organized crime elements in strategic towns. Table 2.1 shows that in 23 municipalities in Chihuahua (36.5 %) police chiefs or top-commanders were either assassinated (n = 25 persons), kidnapped, still missing (n = 1 persons) or victims of attempted assassination [threatened with death, resigned or fled after ambush] (n = 11 persons). Other specific gains associated with these law-enforcement assassinations include the removal of new and/or neutral police chiefs and commanders, intermittent local government and a broader attack on rule of law personnel for greater freedom for movement of goods. Thus, this section identifies at least four motives for municipal-level law-enforcement assassinations in Chihuahua.

Table 2.1 Hits and attempted hits on small-town police chiefs and top commanders in Chihuahua

Police chiefs/commanders	Assassinated	AA	AA/flees	Entire police force resigns	Other rule of law officials assassinated
<i>Municipality</i>					
Praxedis G. Guerrero	Y (1st)	Y (3rd)	Y (2nd)	Y	Councilman
Nuevo Casas Grandes	Y(1st2nd)	Y			Agent State Attorney General's Office (AA)
Ascensión	Y (1st)		Y (2nd)	Y/Y	Police Chief's Bodyguards killed in attack on PC
Ahumada	Y(1st2nd)			Y	2 Municipal Police
Guadalupe D.B.	Y(1st2nd)			Y	Mayor, 1 Mun.Pol, 2 Councilmen, 3 City Worker
Meoqui	Y(1st2nd)			Y	Ex-Councilman, State Police Commander
Guerrero	Y				Councilman (disappears)
Rosales	Y;Y;Y	Y			
Galeana	Y				Federal Police Invest. Officer; Mayor (DT/Flees)
Aldama	Y				3 police officers
Allende	Y				
Guadalupe y Calvo	Y(1st2nd)			Y	Mayor/Prison Director; 2 Municipal Police
Valle de Zaragoza	Y				Mayor's assistant
Julimes	Y				
Madera	Y				
Gómez-Farías	Y				Public Works, Health Sector functionaries
Batopilas	Y				
Urique	Y				Senior Municipal Official
Gran Morelos		Y	Y	Y	Mayor (AA/Flees)
Camargo		Y			5 Mun. Police, Ex-Mun. Officer, PC Bodyguard
Balleza		Y;Y			Mayor/Mayor's Son; Nephew of PC
Namiquipa			Missing		Mayor/Town Treasurer
Bachimiva			Resigns	Y	City Treasurer Assaulted; 5 Rural Army Killed

Key AA Assassination Attempt; *PC* Police Chief; *Mun* Municipal; *Pol* police. Sources in bibliography

2.3.2 *Retaliation for Prosecution*

The execution of the police chief can be linked to revenge for prosecution of organized crime in the municipalities of Ascensión, Ciudad Camargo, Villa Ahumada and Namiquipa.¹⁰

Ascensión lies along highway 2, a key drug transit route for all types of drugs trafficked. It is located in a region of Chihuahua claimed to be contested between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels (Stratfor 2011).

Ascensión's mayor in September 2010 fired 14 municipal police officers after an angry town mob took justice into their own hands, causing the death of two teenagers who were part of an on-going and unprosecuted local kidnapping ring associated with organized crime elements (El Paso Times 2010c). Subsequently, the new Ascensión police chief Manuel Martínez expanded his new police force by twenty-six officers, began to conduct bi-weekly "trust control" exams on police and caused a seventy percent drop in crime with no kidnappings or homicides. By mid-May 2011, Martínez and his two bodyguards were found dead with signs of torture. They had been abducted minutes after leaving a security meeting with the State Secretary of Public Security (La Policiaca 2011c). The entire 26 man police force resigned in early August 2011 after two more municipal cops were killed by organized crime. Mexican soldiers, state and federal police began to patrol the small rural town and the State Attorney General promised to find the killers (BBC 2011). Thus, in Ascensión, the targeted hit on the police chief appears to be an effort to stymie the capacity of local law enforcement to more effectively prosecute organized crime.

A similar attempt to employ law-enforcement assassination to thwart the more effective prosecution of organized crime was evident in the municipal seat of

¹⁰ In Namiquipa, Guerrero, Galeana and Guadalupe y Calvo, retaliation for federal prosecution was a central motive in a series of law-enforcement assassinations. Namiquipa, a remote village, became a disputed drug trafficking route between the Sinaloa and Juárez cartels (Ríos 2011b: 21). In Namiquipa, the kidnapped police chief had been missing since 2008, the year the town treasurer was assassinated (7/25/08) (Reuters 2009). The mayor was assassinated on his way to work the following year (7/15/09) (Ríos 2011b: 21) in what Shirk in (Justice in Mexico July 2009: 3) writes was clear retaliation for federal (the Army's) prosecution of organized crime elements. "In a ...targeting of a public official, gunmen assassinated Hector Meixueiro, the mayor of a ranching town in Chihuahua in clear retaliation for last month's [Army] arrest of 25 men suspected of belonging to a cell responsible for carrying out kidnappings, extortion, and killings in the area. Meixueiro was shot dead as he drove to work on the morning of July 14 in his home town of Namiquipa. The killing corresponded with "narco-banners" hung in nearby Ciudad Juárez calling out Meixueiro and the state attorney general for the arrest of 25 cartel members in June. Last year, gunmen killed the Namiquipa treasurer and kidnapped its police chief, who is still missing. Also killed in retaliation for the arrests was local Mormon leader and anti-crime activist Benjamin Le Barón, who was kidnapped from his home in a rural Chihuahua community [Galeana] along with his brother-in-law....According to military authorities, the killings were perpetrated by a cell of either the Juárez or Sinaloa cartel responsible for carrying out kidnappings, extortions, and killings in the surrounding areas" (Justice in Mexico July 2009: 3). In Galeana, the Army detained a Juárez cartel lieutenant and leader of a group of hit-men

Ciudad Camargo. Ciudad Camargo lies along an Eastern Chihuahua drug smuggling route (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011). Analysts place the municipal seat and municipality largely within the Juárez cartel sphere of influence (Stratfor 2011).

Three municipal police officers in the small city were murdered on the job, the town's homicide rose by 400 % in a single year and cases of the extortion of local ranchers were on the rise (BBC 2009b). By September 2009, in response to the crime wave, the Camargo mayor purged his police department of thirty municipal officers suspected of corruption; doubled the number of patrol cars in the streets and arrested some 20 suspects accused of a series of armed robberies of local homes and businesses (BBC 2009b). The assassinations followed. The head of the State Police unit based in Camargo survived an assassination attempt but lost a leg as a result of the attack (BBC 2009b). The Camargo police chief's bodyguard and his 13 year old daughter were less fortunate and were gunned down in their car by hit-men wielding AK-47s later that same month after a failed assassination attempt on the chief. It was not until 2 years later (early 2012) that the Unitary Police began to initiate operations in Camargo in response to continued localized violence in the town (Radiza 2012). Multiple state unitary police agents subsequently died in confrontations with organized crime elements in Camargo in 2012 (Redacción 2012).

The town of Villa Ahumada is roughly 80 miles south of Ciudad Juárez and is bisected by the Pan-Am Highway 45 headed north to Texas, making it geographically desirable for drug trafficking (Justice in Mexico News Report February 2009a). Journalist sources place it within the sphere of the Juárez cartel (New York Times 2011b) while scholars contend it is in dispute between the Juárez cartel and the Sinaloa cartel (Dávila 2010: 163–164). Still others note that the small town is a strategic point and is often used as a safe house for drug storage (Puente Libre 2011).

The reasons behind the single-event massacre of the police chief, two police officers and several civilians in the municipal seat of Ahumada municipality (Villa Ahumada, pop. 9,000 [2010]) were complex. The Army had swooped

(Footnote 10 continued)

who operate in the Juárez valley and are housed in Guadalupe Distrito Bravo for the assassination of the high-level Federal Police intelligence agent José Alfredo Silly Peña (Marines). Silly Peña, along with 20 Federal Police elements, was in charge of the investigation of the kidnapping, extortion and murder of Galeana anti-crime activist Le Baron. Silly Peña was ambushed while leaving a hotel along with 2 other Federal police agents who are still disappeared (Noticias PV 2009). In November 2008, Galeana's police chief was assassinated just after receiving threatening calls from alleged organized crime elements that "the mayor was next" (El Paso Times 2011). The mayor subsequently fled to the US and went into hiding for 6 months. In Guerrero, the police chief was assassinated on a town street just after finishing a course on Public Safety when intercepted by an armed vehicle whose occupants shot at the chief multiple times (Xep1 2008 and Xep1 2009a). In the municipality of Julimes, police commander Villicaya Checo was kidnapped just outside the courtroom by an armed commando, tortured and left in a ditch by the side of a local highway (La Policiaca 2012c). He had just given legal testimony regarding municipal support for a recent police operation (Código Delicias 2012a).

down at the funeral for 19 year old Villa Ahumada gangster (killed in intercartel violence) and arrested dozens of individuals 2 days before the killings. The massacre occurred on May 17, 2008 when suspected cartel gunmen strafed a used car with multiple bullets before pumping more than 75 rounds into two men in a truck (Observador Chihuahua 2008; New York Times 2008). Hours later, the gunmen caught up with and assassinated the police chief and two municipal officers who were sitting in their patrol car at a gas station. Eyewitnesses identified the gunman as carrying multiple assault rifles and wearing masks and official forensic analysts found over 50 bullet-casing at the crime scene (Redacción 2008).

The subsequent resignation of the town's remaining twenty police officers immediately deteriorated local security conditions (Justice in Mexico News Report February 2009a). "Many say the town will never be able to afford the cost of a more professional force that could stop future attacks. 'One feels very disillusioned with the government,' said one town resident. 'There is no one who seems to be able to do anything'" (New York Times 2008: 3). Jesús Blanco Cano, the subsequent police chief of Villa Ahumada was also assassinated 3 months later (2008). He was shot to death on his first day on the job. He had been beaten, blindfolded and his hands were tied behind his back. 12 bullet casings were found at the scene. Reporters contended the assassination was in response to a recent government offensive action against drug cartels (AP 2008). Thus one gain for organized crime elements from the retaliatory killings of police chiefs, top commanders and other direct rule of law enforcement personnel is reduced local prosecution.

2.3.3 Other Assassinated Police Chiefs and Commanders: The New, "Neutral" or Otherwise Unsuitable to Organized Crime

Another positive gain for organized crime elements in assassinating police chiefs is the removal of new individuals who do not conform to criminal goals. A series of sequential attacks on police chiefs, commanders and state law enforcement officials in Nuevo Casas Grandes, at very least, caused temporary damage to the local government, in so far as new personnel had to be sequentially replaced. The first assassination of the police chief in Meoqui illustrates how DTOs will send a message that even turning a blind eye (by claiming neutrality toward criminal gangs) is unacceptable.

Nuevo Casas Grandes (seat of the municipality) is located on Chihuahua Highway 10 on-route to Ciudad Juárez. The 2008 fire-bombing of the police chief's home and his assassination while fighting the fire by presumed hit-men was preceded by several death threats to the chief, according to the mayor. These came after the chief decided to testify before a federal court regarding

a women who ran a local safe-house for narcotics in the town (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2008a). According to the mayor, although it is not the task of the municipality to combat narco-trafficking, the municipality had suffered from multiple car robberies and “we attend to crimes that do not pertain to us [by jurisdiction] but they are cases we encounter in the street” (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2008a).

This “revenge for prosecution” law-enforcement killing was immediately followed by an assassination attempt four months later however, when the subsequent Nuevo Casas Grandes police chief and his sub-director were ambushed in their vehicle on their way home and nearly died when armed men opened fire on them (La Jornada 2008). They were rushed to a U.S. hospital in El Paso for treatment. U.S. hospital officials placed the medical facility on a two-week security lock-down and later sought to charge the Mexican government for related costs in a similar incident (KFox 14 News 2008).

Another assassination attempt on law enforcement in Nuevo Casas Grandes took place in late 2009 when an armed commando attacked the installations of the AEI [Agencia Estatal de Investigaciones] of the State Attorney General’s Office located in the town (El Universal 2009b) by throwing a grenade inside the building and firing upon it. Finally, subsequent Nuevo Casas Grandes transit police director and ex-police chief of the municipality Jose Luis Padilla Arías’s house was shot up in late 2012 by presumed organized crime elements but the director received no protection and was not re-located (NotiMex 2012). The State Attorney General’s office stated that the director’s subsequent kidnapping and execution was organized crime related, as an armed commando of multiple vehicles stormed police headquarters grabbed Padilla Arias in front of his fellow officers. As these police officers were forced onto the ground by heavily armed gunmen, they stated that they were therefore unable to act to protect the director (Proceso 2012c; El Universal 2012). Padilla Arias was reported to have asked his kidnappers: “Why are you abducting me?” to which they allegedly responded with a vulgar remark in front of the station’s security cameras (La Policiaca 2012d).

In the municipal seat of Meoqui (located along Highway 45D, south-east of Chihuahua City), the assassination of the new police chief Hermila García Quiñones was clearly a targeted execution aimed at eliminating a “neutral” official (pop. 22,574 [2010]). Gunmen simply shot up her SUV while she was on her way to work a month after taking the job (UPI 2010). García Quiñones was the first of two assassinated female police chiefs. A new cohort of women police chiefs took on the job as part of an experiment to remain neutral in the face of drug-cartels and to have police departments do more social work and regain people’s trust.¹¹

¹¹ García Quiñones was part of the first wave of female officers in Chihuahua along with Guadalupe Distrito Bravos police chief Erika Gándara (disappeared 12/28/10), Praxedis G. Guerrero police chief Marisol Valles García (fled to US after death threats, 3/1/11), Veronica Ríos Ontiveros (El Vegel, Balleza municipality) and Olga Herrera Castillo (Villa Luz, Balleza municipality). As of 2012, there were no reports of the assassination of either Veronica Ríos Ontiveros or Olga Herrera Castillo.

Quiñones was a former lawyer with the State Attorney General's Office with limited policing experience when she took over but nobody else wanted the job. She refused to carry a gun or travel with bodyguards (El Paso Times 2010). The Meoqui mayor insisted that she had no enemies and had not received any death threats but the Meoqui municipal secretary told reporters (evasively) that nobody wanted the job because “things here are very hot” [in relationship to organized crime] (Ciudad Capital 2011). According to Stratfor analyst Burton (in Otis 2011: 2), Quiñones:

may not have done anything to trigger her death ... Cartels are constantly battling for control of border routes to ship crystal meth, marijuana and cocaine to the United States, and bring guns, cars and cash back. In the shifting territory, someone may simply have decided that a highly educated lawyer would get in the way. The nature of the cartel business is such that you are going to play by their rules or you don't play. You quit, resign or get killed.

Subsequent acting Meoqui police chief José Guadalupe Álvarez Roelo was also assassinated. The acting chief was killed as he got into his car after shopping at a local supermarket (La Policiaca 2012e; Tiempo Digital 2012). This targeted hit marked the tenth law enforcement killing in the municipality within two years (Código Delicias 2012b).

In Aldama (pop. 18,642 [2010]), there was also a sequential elimination of municipal police personnel. The 2008 assassination of the police chief Sostenes Gómez Arzate was attributed officially to organized crime elements (El Universal 2008). This assassination was followed by the execution of a former senior police official 3 years later (2011) (National Association of Former Border Patrol Officers (M3 Report) 2011). In 2012, multiple telephone death threats against the entire police force culminated in the assassination of three agents, including the police chief's son—also a municipal policeman (La Policiaca 2012a).¹²

2.3.4 Intermittent Local Governance

There were also some serious instances where selected law-enforcement assassination attempts went beyond retaliation and the attempt to eliminate new, neutral or other local police chiefs and top commanders unsuitable to organized crime elements. In Gran Morelos and Jicamorchi, fragmented cartels were also able (briefly) to take-over the town's entire political structure and, in Gran Morelos, to temporarily “place” a police chief in office.

¹² In Aldama, the police chief's son was attacked and pulled out of his vehicle on the highway by an armed commando, then tortured, executed with his hands bound and dumped. The assassins left his wallet, cell phone and personal papers in his patrol vehicle untouched (La Policiaca 2010a). In Batopilas and Gomez-Farías, police chiefs were ambushed on highways (Al Contacto 2011; Xepi 2009b).

The hamlet and seat of Gran Morelos municipality (San Nicolás de Carretas, pop. 725 [2010]) is located along Highway 16D, south-west of Chihuahua city. It is a town where La Línea (the Juárez cartel enforcer wing) has been allegedly active (El Economista 2011). Fragmented cartels finally managed to seriously wound the PRI mayor (Ricardo Solís Manríquez) and eventually caused him to flee the town for the US to ask for asylum (La Jornada 2011b) after two assassination attempts and a series of death threats. Two weeks later, gunmen simply stormed Gran Morelos, shot up the town, and ordered all officials to leave. Municipal facilities were closed, the police chief and other town officials including the interim mayor rapidly left, leaving the town in the hands of cartel gunmen (MexicoRojo 2011b).

Having gained (temporary) political control over Gran Morelos, organized crime elements apparently installed a new police chief in line with their goals. Nevertheless, this new police chief along with a Gran Morelos police officer and the police chief of the neighboring municipality of Dr. Belisario Domínguez were subsequently detained by the Army for alleged ties to DTOs. This detention occurred while the chiefs were accompanying Raul Hernandez Ortega (“El Bolas”), a leader of La Línea gang in southern Chihuahua at a local dance hall (El Diario Mexico 2011). After the arrest of the allegedly corrupt Gran Morelos police chief, the previous mayor who fled to the U.S.—mayor Ricardo Solís Manríquez—returned the next day under heavy Army protection (La Red Noticias 2011). The Gran Morelos mayor then replaced the entire twelve-man police force.

Organized crime elements then reverted back to the pattern of assassinating or attempting to assassinate new police chiefs presumably not to the liking of their criminal organizations. After a month on the job, the next Gran Morelos police chief barely survived an armed ambush on his vehicle. His escort and secretary, both traveling in a nearby vehicle, perished in the assassination attempt on the chief (Al Día Sonora 2011). [For a similar story in the village of Jicamorchi, see Footnote.¹³]

¹³ Armed cartel men also stormed the town, closed the streets, burned and/or looted eight houses including the doctor’s and beat up a teacher in the village of Jicamorchi (pop. 374 [2010]), in the hills in Uruachi municipality. This action caused 110 families to flee to nearby mountains and the town was left, temporarily, in the hands of cartel men (Código Delicias 2011a, b). By September 2011, the remaining town’s people had begun to arm themselves to confront cartel assassins that returned to surround the community. The PAN mayor Aldo Alejandro Campos said that the council only had 10 policemen but there were more than 60 armed men who fired at the police and then took refuge in forest outside of town (La Jornada 2011d). He also noted that the presence of soldiers and police investigators had not put the situation under control (Fox News Latino 2011) and stated: “These criminal groups have besieged us. If federal and state governments do not respond, people are willing to take some action on their own, because here there are left-over weapons. I do not want to do what is illegal, but if we have no other choice, we will”. A month later, the medical clinic and the schools remained closed and many families still refused to return. Some Jicamorachi residents also filed a complaint for property damage with legal authorities in Cuauhtémoc but omitted their names out of fear (Código Delicias 2011a). La Jornada (2011d) reported evidence of the emergence of rival DTOs (Juárez versus Sinaloa) in the town.

2.3.5 A Broader Attack on Rule of Law Personnel for Greater Freedom for Movement of Goods

The Juárez Valley of Chihuahua is a stretch of border fifty miles east of Ciudad Juárez which lies along a major drug-smuggling highway. A broader attack on the rule of law by organized crime elements is evident in certain strategic towns located along the Juárez Valley. Organized crime elements there have sought, and been able, to minimize interference with their operations by simply emptying the towns (AP 2010). In the small border town of El Porvenir, located near Fort Hancock, Texas along US Highway 10, cartels were very clear about this process leaving notes which said, “You have just a few hours to get out” (AP 2010). The local police all fled.

Assassinations by organized crime elements in such border towns targeted a broad spectrum of town officials who got involved in the enforcement of the rule of law before they were murdered. Guadalupe, for example, is the municipal seat of Guadalupe Distrito Bravos, located just east of Ciudad Juárez. The town is a significant drug-trafficking transport and storage site, according to Mexico’s Organized Crime Unit of the National Attorney General’s Office—SIEDO (PGR 2012).

A series of killings of local officials had the effect of virtually crippling the local rule of law. The murders began in 2009 with the assassination of Guadalupe’s police chief (1/20/09) and the (temporary) mass resignation of the entire municipal police force. This was followed by the surprise killing of two female council members (2/09) who had allegedly denounced the activities of organized crime (El Mexicano 2010). The first councilwoman was assassinated at her business and the second, 2 days later, in her auto by hired guns, according to official forensics. A municipal policeman was subsequently murdered (6/09) (El Mexicano 2010).

The arrival of 2,000 federal troops by early 2010 to combat the drug gangs in nearby Ciudad Juárez caused a surge in violence in Guadalupe. Houses and shops were destroyed by arson, and threats by organized crime elements forced out residents by March. Guadalupe’s law enforcement was affected, meanwhile, as its police force was further reduced from 40 to 4 officers by the June 19, 2010 assassination of PRI Mayor Manuel Lara Rodríguez. DTOs subsequently threatened to kill residents who might refuse to emigrate from the town (La Jornada 2011a).

Fragmented cartels also subsequently “disappeared” the next Guadalupe Distrito Bravos police chief (a women) (12/23/10) with the family reporting that her body was later found (Brewer 2012). Her uncle (the new mayor) had appointed her and warned her to keep a low profile but she appeared in the press posing with a semiautomatic rifle, talking openly about the importance of her new job. “I am the only police in this town, the authority”, she told reporters (New York Times 2011a: 3). The next government victims executed were three city workers sweeping the city plaza (2/22/11); one of whom was the nephew of the murdered mayor. There were reportedly no police, no fire department, and no social services left in the town by early 2011. The local municipal population had been reduced by 40 %

(from 2005 to 2010) (Tiempo Digital 2011; Ríos 2011b: 16). By 2012, there were *simply no municipal police left* in Guadalupe Distrito Bravo. Soldiers and federal police intermittently provided security at random checkpoints on the highways that connect the town and other farming towns with Ciudad Juárez (AP 2011b).

A similar pattern of the weakening of the local rule of law occurred in nearby Praxedis G. Guerrero (pop. 2,128 [2010]), a border municipality that lies further east of Ciudad Juárez. The assassinations began, as in Guadalupe Distrito Bravo, with the murder of the police chief. Three days after assuming the post in 2009, the new police chief in the municipal seat was decapitated. Grabbed by heavily armed men along with seven police officers and several civilians, the chief's severed head was then dumped in an ice box in front of the police station. It was accompanied by a threatening message aimed at a rival criminal gang (Latin American Herald Tribune 2009). The subsequent Praxedis G. Guerrero police chief, criminology student Marisol García Valles age 20, fled to the US after 5 months on the job (El Pueblo Chihuahua 2011b). García Valles stated that she had received repeated death threats from organized crime elements for attempting to remain neutral in the face of competing cartels (El Paso Times 2011).

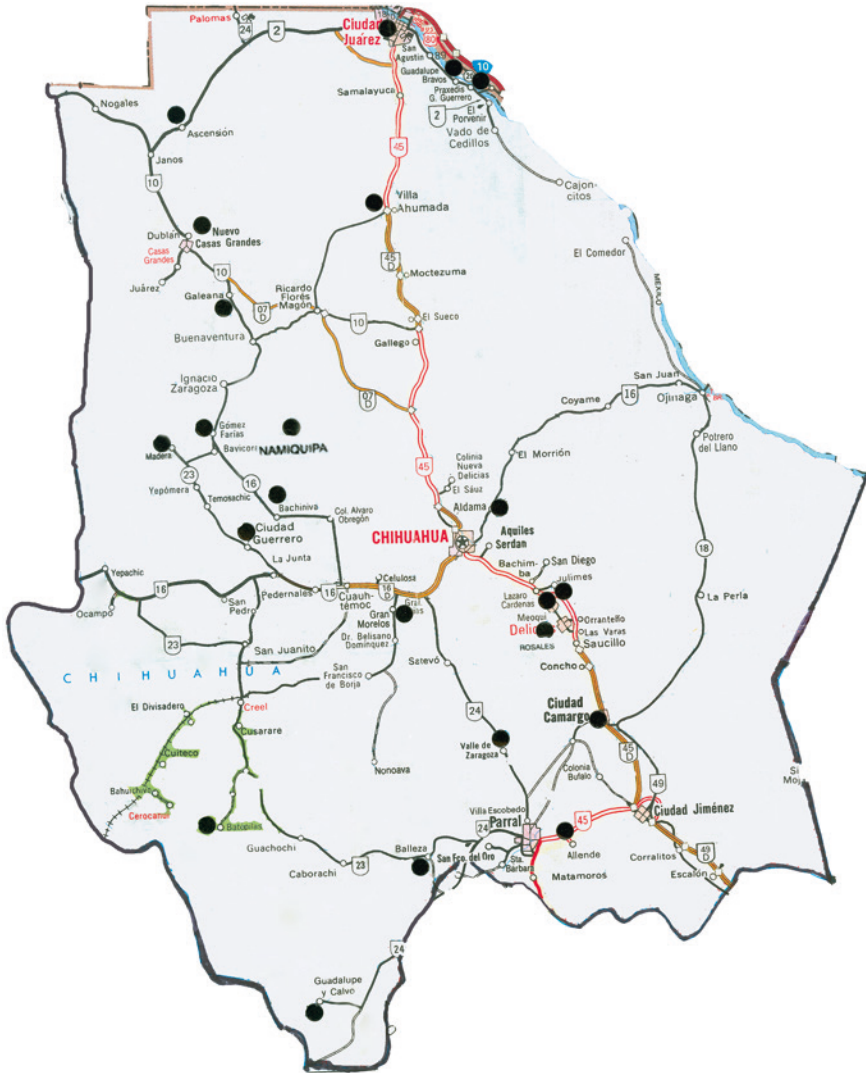
The attempted assassination of the third Praxedis police chief occurred on June 21, 2011 when armed men stormed the house of Rosario Rosales at dawn, seriously wounding her, her husband and their son (Excelsior 2011a; El Pueblo Chihuahua 2011c). The last agent of the State Attorney General's Office had left the municipalities of Praxedis G. Guerrero and Guadalupe Distrito Bravos without access to judicial institutions by 2011 (El Pueblo Chihuahua 2011a). Official census figures by mid-2010 listed 61 % of the 3,616 homes in Praxedis G. Guerrero as uninhabited (AP 2011a). Local capacity to uphold even a semblance of the rule of law was significantly diminished with the elimination of judicial institutions and repeated assassinations, death threats and attempted assassinations on police chiefs. By mid-2012, the town of Praxedis G. Guerrero had no armed police and was being served by six unarmed civilians (Proceso 2012b).

Organized crime elements in these selected towns were clearly attempting to gain territorial (and possible political) control over specific Mexican border communities by hollowing out the rule of law in these towns. This broader attack on the rule of law combined with the attempt to empty small towns of its residents is a phenomenon that could be understood as a specific criminal insurgency in some selected strategic communities that lie along key drug trafficking corridors (Sullivan and Elkus 2008: 2–6).

2.4 Law-Enforcement Assassinations in Strategic Towns

2.4.1 Highway Routes Where Assassinations Occur

The analysis will now present a detailed map of the towns along the highway routes where the assassinations of municipal police chiefs and top-commanders in Chihuahua occurred. Map 2.3—Highway Routes and the Assassinations of Police



Map 2.3 Highways routes and assassinations of police chiefs and top-commanders in Chihuahua

Chiefs and Top-Commanders in Chihuahua—is focused on the state of Chihuahua alone. The map delineates the state’s boundaries from the neighboring states of Sonora (to the west), Coahuila (to the east), Durango and Sinaloa (to the south and south-west) and shows the state’s major and minor state highways.

Map 2.3 illustrates that local police chiefs and top commanders are indeed being assassinated in strategic towns and cities that lie along the major Chihuahua

state highways. These highways represent drug-smuggling routes which cross in and out of separate territories (*plaza* designations) contested by fragmented cartels.

Map 2.3 presents a close highway mapping of the pattern of law-enforcement assassinations in Chihuahua. It strongly suggests that at each of the nodules of the main South-North Chihuahua highways from Durango to Ciudad Juárez (49, 45, 45D), police chiefs and top commanders have been victims of assassination or assassination attempts (45-Allende, 45D-Ciudad Camargo, 45D-Rosales, 45D-Meoqui, 45D-Julimes, 16-45-Aldama, 45D/45-Villa Ahumada). A similar pattern is evident along each of the lesser Chihuahua highways which run South to North from Sinaloa (24-Guadalupe y Calvo, 23-Batopilas/Bahuichivo, Balleza, 23/24, Valle de Zaragoza, 24) and (16D-Gran Morelos, 16-Bachíniva, 16-Guerrero, 23-Madera, 16-Gomez Farías, 15/10 Namiquipa, 10-Galeana, 10-Nuevo Casas Grandes and 2-Ascensión) and which run northward to and around Ciudad Juárez (2-Guadalupe Distrito Bravos, Praxedis G. Guerrero).

Similarly, the (relative) absence of law-enforcement assassination in towns along Federal Highway 45 linking Chihuahua City to Ciudad Juárez can be attributed to the frequent, routine inspections and anti-assault patrolling of federal police. This is a component of Operation Conjunto Chihuahua (PGR-Tercer Informe 2009: 30, 37; PGR-Cuarto Informe 2010: 22, 34; PGR-Quinto Informe 2011: 26).

Map 2.3 presents a pattern of killings which strongly suggests that law-enforcement assassinations are dosed out in selected towns; a practice paralleled in political assassinations related to electoral-political disputes (Rojas-Alba 1994: 31). While not every small city and town that borders these highways is subject to law-enforcement assassination, those located at highway cross-roads and along the US-Mexican border are more vulnerable to it as drug trafficking route structures and the territories (*plazas*) shift in the face of intermittent government crackdowns (Dell 2011). The specific gains derived from assassinating the police chiefs and top-level commanders in each of these towns is idiosyncratic, and depends upon the calculus of organized crime elements within each community, as now discussed below.

2.4.2 Influencing the Selection of Police Chiefs/Mass Police Resignations

The killings of top level municipal police officials in Chihuahua suggests that while retaliation for prosecution remains a very salient motive for law-enforcement assassination (White 2008: 4; Ríos 2011b: 21; Dell 2011), other pay-offs include neutralizing police personnel, intermittent local governance and greater freedom for movement of goods.

The relative “success” of the assassination of police chiefs and commanders will likely to continue to motivate some organized crime elements to use “bullets” in certain towns along strategic drug-trafficking routes in Chihuahua. There existed seven municipalities (10 % of the state) where there were, simply, no police chiefs left by late 2012. In Ascensión, Galeana, Guadalupe Distrito Bravos,

Praxedis G. Guerrero, Meoqui, Bocoyna and Namiquipa, the municipal population was being attended to by intermittent brigades of the Unitary Police, and, in Guadalupe Distrito Bravo, by social workers (El Herald de Chihuahua 2011). The total elimination of 10 % of Chihuahua's municipal police chiefs who do not conform to organized criminal goals represents one gain from the use of law-enforcement assassination by organized crime elements.

Another gain from repeated assassination and assassination attempts is the potential capacity to influence and/or sustain the choice of police chiefs. In Gran Morelos, Aldama and Meoqui, there was significant turn-over in top law enforcement personnel due to assassinations (Excelsior 2011c; El Universal 2008; UPI 2010).

More subtly, the assassination of "neutral" police chiefs can have an indirect damaging effect. The repeated, targeted assassination of police chiefs dissuaded new applicants from taking the job and/or, at best, required the government to repeatedly search and hire new applicants for the post in Meoqui, Praxedis G. Guerrero, Guadalupe Distrito Bravo and Rosales. In Rosales, a total of three police chiefs and commanders were assassinated and one police chief survived an assassination attempt over the course of a single year alone (2012).

The murders also had a "positive" effect for organized crime elements in the municipalities of Ascensión and Ciudad Camargo where police chiefs who had effectively reduced crime (by 70 % in Ascensión) were assassinated, thereby ending (if only temporarily) corresponding law enforcement (La Policiaca 2011d). In Guadalupe y Calvo, the first assassination attempt on the police chief had a "positive" effect for drug-trafficking cartels in the municipality in reducing rule of law personnel. Just after a meeting with President Calderon, the Guadalupe y Calvo mayor and his bodyguard were killed and the chief gravely wounded in a vehicular ambush attack on the highway (El Economista 2010). Ríos (2011a: 21) understands this assassination/assassination attempt as a "signal" to the federal government that prosecution of organized crime in the municipality would not be tolerated. The assassination of the next Guadalupe y Calvo police chief was combined with the installation of 200 "narco-blockades" by cartel operatives in the municipality who threatened authorities (Noticias de Chihuahua 2012). This led to the resignation of the next mayor, the entire police force and the subsequent police chief (El Sol de Parral 2012; La Parada 2012; La Jornada 2012b).

Indeed, in a total of eight municipalities in Chihuahua (13 %), the entire police force resigned en masse at least once following the assassination or assassination attempt on the police chief (Table 2.1).

2.4.3 Broader Attacks on Rule of Law Enforcement for the Movement of Goods

In municipalities located on strategic drug-trafficking corridors on the U.S.-Mexican border, the assassinations of a series of law-enforcement officials involved in the enforcement of the rule of law before their murder reduced local governmental

capacity and facilitated the ability to move goods without interference. After the assassination of the police chief, the next targeted hit in the municipality of Guadalupe Distrito Bravo was on the municipal council tax collector; an assassination followed up 4 days later with the murder of the municipal council health officer (in charge of drug crimes) (El Mexicano 2010). These town officials were killed over a year before the PRI mayor and then the next chief (the last remaining police officer) were assassinated.

This town lies precisely along the most direct port of entry into the US drug market (Dell 2011; Ríos 2011b: 13) and most of the towns where police chiefs and top commanders were assassinated are located along Chihuahua's strategic drug-smuggling corridors (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 39). The "emptying" of towns near Ciudad Juárez, instances of municipalities where the entire police forces quit en masse and/or where all local government officials leave the town in the hands of cartel gunmen represent concerted efforts by organized crime elements to gain control over specific communities (Sullivan and Elkus 2008).

Nevertheless, while these instances of the municipal breakdown of the rule of law are severe, they are also often intermittent. Federal forces have (re-)intervened to (re-)establish order in the town, or around the highways associated with certain "hot spots" (Gran Morelos, Guadalupe Distrito Bravo). The continued capacity of federal forces to reassume (if only temporarily) government control over such contested municipalities suggests that the broader contention that assassination is a criminal insurgency strategy aimed at severing the regulatory arm of the state (Sullivan and Elkus 2008: 7) must be nuanced and contextualized within a given municipality and specific time period.

Finally, in five of the six municipalities where mayors were assassinated in Chihuahua, the police chief was also assassinated and in the sixth (Balleza), the chief survived multiple assassination attempts. In Chihuahua then, where mayors are assassinated, a closer look suggests that the police chiefs was nearly always also assassinated. As Grayson and Logan note, Mexican cartels are eager to act with impunity and will seek the "failure of the rule of law", especially in those areas along key routes for the smuggling of drugs (Proceso 2012a).

2.4.4 Law-Enforcement Assassinations, Reducing Police Presence and Halting of the Rule of Law in Other Northern Tier States

The killing of police chiefs, top-level commanders and other law enforcement can directly halt, even if only temporarily, the on-going enforcement of the rule of law. In the state of Durango, there was also a similar initial pattern as in Chihuahua of a string of fifty assassinations in 2008 of law enforcement personnel (police chiefs, municipal police, state police, federal drug-crime investigators (AFI), and investigators from the state attorney general's office) (El Siglo de Durango 2009).

This halting of the on-going enforcement of the rule of law also helps explain why it is possible to begin to generalize a pattern of municipal police chief and top-level commander killings to municipalities outside the state of Chihuahua. There were also instances of small-towns in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas where the municipal police chief was also assassinated, and/or police stations violently attacked and then the entire local police force quit, leaving the towns at least temporarily without any police (General Terán, Los Ramones and Los Aldama [Nuevo León]) (Houston Chronicle 2011; El Universal 2010b).

In Hidalgo (Tamaulipas), other intimidation tactics that preceded the elimination of key rule of law enforcement personnel at the municipal level included throwing grenades at the police station (2010). This violent act calcified one policeman and led to a mass resignation of the local police force and virtually no public security in the municipality for over a year until the arrival of the Army (El Norte 2011). The March 2010 attack on the Hidalgo police station was followed by the assassination of the police chief (2010) and then the mayor (2010) by suspected organized crime elements (Milenio 2010b, c, d).

2.4.5 Law-Enforcement Assassinations, Attacks on Police Stations in Strategic Small-Towns and Message Sending in Other Northern Tier States

Small town police chiefs and commanders in other Northern Tier states were also among those assassinated in strategic towns which lie along the Sinaloa, Gulf and Zeta cartel drug-smuggling corridors (for example, Poanas [Durango] (Highway 45) (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 32–33). In Tamaulipas and Nuevo León, a series of assassinations of small-town police chiefs and top-level commanders also took place in strategic towns (Ciudad Mante, Linares, General Terán, Sabinas Hidalgo) located along Highway 85. This highway is a strategic *Zeta* drug trafficking route which runs north from Tamaulipas through the state of Nuevo León to the border city of Nuevo Laredo (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 33; Stratfor 2012).

In General Terán (Nuevo León), the police station was deserted with the windows broken, door ajar and with the walls perforated with bullet holes and punctured by grenade attacks on January 28, 2011. The police chief and a fellow police officer had been abducted from the station the day before and their bodies were found mutilated by the highway along with a “narco-message” from the Gulf Cartel stating it was “cleaning the area of *Zetas*” (Periodismo de Investigación 2011). The municipal palace had also been attacked, the mayor was nowhere to be found, all schools and most businesses were closed.

In the state of San Luis Potosí, the surge in organized crime related violence did not begin until 2010 (La Policiaca 2012c). Subsequently, there were four successive attacks on police stations within a one week period (Tamasopo, Ébano, Tamuín, San Vicente). Grenades were thrown at the Tamasopo and Ébano stations and in Tamuín,

390 high caliber bullets were shot with 262 impacting the exterior of the building (MexicoRojo 2011a). Although there were no law enforcement casualties reported, several semi-nude, decapitated mutilated bodies were dumped at two police stations (Ébano, Tamuín) as a message to local law enforcement (La Policiaca 2011a).

2.4.6 The Removal of New, Neutral and/or Police Chiefs and Commanders Unsuitable to Organized Crime/Broader Attacks on Rule of Law Enforcement for the Movement of Goods in Other Northern Tier States

Also generalizable outside the state of Chihuahua are cases of the strategic elimination of “new” police chiefs and commanders and their “replacement” (sometimes temporarily) with those linked as informants of drug-cartels. In Sabinas Hidalgo, Tamaulipas (an alleged *Zeta* safe house), following the assassination of the police chief, the subsequent police chief and eight officers were detained as alleged *Zeta* informants tied to the murder of two federal police (El Porvenir 2006; The Monitor 2011). In Saltillo (Coahuila), a police commander who had passed department confidence tests was assassinated along with his 11 year old son while driving through a neighborhood in the state capital. He was later found to be on the *Zeta* payroll according to a SIEDO investigation (Proceso 2012).

A similarity is illustrated by the emptying (Ríos 2011a: 18) and then “re-taking” by federal forces of the border town of Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas located at the US border in the contested *Zeta* vs. Gulf “*Frontera Chica*” drug corridor (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 33). This represents a parallel to the emptying of strategic towns in Chihuahua near Ciudad Juárez to allow for greater freedom of movement of goods.

2.5 Conclusion

The second chapter of this book presented a short historical introduction of how “opportunity” was present for the assassination of police chiefs and commanders in Northern Tier Mexico in terms of discontinuous law enforcement. It was argued that intermittent Army/federal police presence combined with insufficient protection of officials provided opportunity for law-enforcement assassination to occur. Efforts to reduce this “opportunity” through institutional reforms to improve local policing conditions (the creation of a unitary police) while a potentially positive step, were slowed by lack of municipal implementation capacity (La Jornada 2011c; En Línea Directa 2013). By mid-2012, a few “success” stories of a significant drop in crime were being reported in certain municipalities as the result of such police reforms (Guadalupe, Nuevo

León) (Reuters 2012). After 5 years without a single local policeman in Villa Ahumada, Chihuahua (the town saw intermittent policing by federal and state forces, 2008–2012), the subsequent police chief claimed optimistically that “the worst is over” and noted that his new department was about to receive high-caliber arms (Milenio 2013c).

Yet, in other Northern Tier municipalities (San Francisco de Conchos, Guadalupe Distrito Bravo, Guadalupe y Calvo, Jiménez, Guachochi [Chihuahua], Ciudad Victoria, [Tamaulipas]), entire police forces continued to resign after organized crime elements threatened to kill them leaving their local populations at least temporarily without public security personnel (Proceso 2012, In Sight Crime 2012; La Policiaca 2011f; Excelsior 2013). The state of Chihuahua, by early 2013, was one of the slowest in the nation to implement the new certification measures required to move toward the unitary police system with only 25 % of the police force tested under the new “confidence tests”, according to SNSP (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública) (Norte Digital 2013).

This chapter also addressed the issue of motivation for law-enforcement assassination. This was done by tracing out a detailed systematic of the assassination of small-town police chiefs and top-level commanders in Chihuahua to study the diverse strategic motives of organized crime elements who employ assassination as a tactic. It was found that selective, often sequential, hits by cartels on chiefs and top local commanders in towns along key drug-trafficking corridors serve *not only* as retaliation for federal, state and local prosecution but also exploit several other strategic goals. Such “pay-offs” from the assassination of police chiefs and commanders can also include, depending upon the town, the attempt to neutralize police chiefs, to seed corrupt police chiefs, to achieve intermittent local governance, and/or to ensure greater freedom for movement of goods.

The geographical mapping of the assassination of top level municipal police officials in this chapter also revealed a related aspect of motivation. The particular geography of such murders is not random but follows a pattern along drug-smuggling routes. Police chiefs and commanders have been victims of assassination or assassination attempts at each of the nodules of the main South-North Chihuahua highways from Durango to Ciudad Juárez and along each of the lesser Chihuahua highways which run South to North from Sinaloa.

The mapping of the assassination of police chiefs and top-commanders also demonstrates how each town which lies along a drug-smuggling route possesses a unique set of conditions for the particular strategic goals of organized crime elements. In the strategic U.S.-Mexican border town of Praxedis G. Guerrero, a series of three police chiefs were assassinated, fled death threats or suffered assassination attempts because they refused to take sides between competing cartels. In Valle de Zaragoza, a town along Chihuahua Highway 24 and its tributaries known as drug-trafficking routes used by organized crime elements according to the State of Chihuahua’s Prosecutor’s Office, two of three consecutive police chiefs were under criminal investigation (El Diario Digital 2012). The only police chief *not* under criminal investigation was assassinated one month after taking the job (La

Jornada 2012a).¹⁴ In the town of Villa Ahumada (Chihuahua) (a safe house for drug storage located along strategic highway 45), the series of assassinations of the police chiefs (5/31/08 and 8/22/08) occurred within the context of likely retaliation for federal prosecution (Puente Libre 2011).

Thus, while all of these towns share the common characteristic of being located along a key drug-smuggling corridor, the concrete motives for assassinating the police chief or top-commander varied by town.

This is why municipal police chiefs and top-level commanders were not killed in every town along these trafficking routes. As aforementioned in the introduction, along major portions of the drug-smuggling corridor of Highway 1 along the Baja California Sur Peninsula (Guerrero Negro to Los Cabos), there was evidence of bribery and/or the placement of local corrupt police chiefs (Zeta Reportaje 2009). Federal prosecutors also charged multiple police chiefs and police as working for the organized crime (often specified as the *Zetas*) in multiple municipalities in Tamaulipas (San Fernando, Jiménez, Sota la Marina, Valle Hermoso) (Observador Global 2011; Proceso 2010; El Universal 2009a; La Policiaca 2011e).

The calculus to use bullets over bribes in a strategic town depends upon the specific circumstances of organized crime elements within that town. Intermittent federal control and lack of rigorous prosecution of police assassins are key institutional elements which increase target access to police personnel. A calculus to use lethal force is, however, very importantly facilitated by the rise in the armed power of organized crime over local police.

Goodman and Marizo (2010: 163) note that while the flow of firearms and ammunition to organized crime groups in Mexico does not on its own “cause violence, it can contribute to a group’s decision to attack a rival [and can] increase the lethality of such an attack... [or] pose a serious challenge to the government’s ability to curb such extreme violence”. The opportunity of assassins to get close to targets to commit law-enforcement assassination, their calculation of the relative pay-off of a specific assassination in a given town and the access to weaponry are all factors influenced by a complex, inter-related system of institutional processes. Thus, a specific lethal attack on a given police chief or commander in a particular town is not random. It is shaped both by the unique strategic circumstances of that town for criminal goals (operational considerations) as well as the opportunities that facilitate the choice of lethal force (tactical considerations). The next chapter, while closely focusing on the

¹⁴ The Chihuahua State Attorney General’s Office reported the incidence of significant organized crime related drug-trafficking and homicides along the Rosales-Satévo spur which feeds into Highway 24 (Valle de Zaragoza to Chihuahua) near Satévo (El Diario Digital 2012). In Valle de Zaragoza, police chief Carlos Rodolfo Güereque Hernández was the second of three consecutive chiefs in 2012 and the only one assassinated. The first chief, Carlos Miguel Vega Cazares, was tried and convicted for 8 years and 6 months for the abuse of authority and homicide of a civilian (El Monitor de Parral 2013). After the assassination of Güereque Hernández, the next Valle de Zaragoza police chief—Jorge Arturo Morales (took office 5/25/12)—fell under investigation by the PGR and State Attorney General’s Office. This is because the police chief accepted as a police officer an individual who had been detained and investigated for rape, marijuana trafficking and illegal border crossing on three different occasions by U.S. Marshalls (Nota Roja 2013).

tactical advantage of organized crime elements, also addresses the larger dynamic institutional processes in which such lethal calculations are embedded.

Methodological Considerations

The definition used by this author and the Office of the Mexican presidency in defining an assassination or execution as allegedly caused by organized crime, includes meeting at least two of six specific criteria resulting from official investigations into the activities of individuals presumed to be involved in organized crime. As Molzahn et al. (2012: 5) note, “among the relevant characteristics used to identify such homicides are signs of torture, the caliber of the arms used, and other particular characteristics of the modus operandi of Mexican criminal groups, such as wrapping the body with sheets or leaving written messages with the body. The six government criteria for classifying organized crime homicides include:

1. The victim was killed by high caliber firearms.
2. The victim presents signs of torture or severe lesions.
3. The victim was killed where the body was found, or the body was located in a vehicle.
4. The body was wrapped with sheets (*cobijas*), taped, or gagged.
5. The homicide occurred within a penitentiary and involved criminal organizations”.

Special circumstances (criteria 6) also include: victim was abducted prior to assassination (*levantón*), ambushed or chased, an alleged member of a criminal organization, or found with a narco-message (*narcomensaje*) on or near the body. In addition to meeting at least two of these six criterion for an organized-crime related homicide, this book also adds the criteria that the victim was a municipal police chief or top-level commander.

In places with small populations, it is preferable to average murder rates over a number of years since an unusual homicide rate drawn from a single year could “leave a false impression of the general level of violence in a community” (Roth et al. 2011: 177). Since the execution rate rose annually in all of Chihuahua’s 65 municipalities from December 2006 to December 2010, the execution rate per 100,000 inhabitants was calculated taking into account the number of reported executions *and* the population size of the towns during the 4 year period (12/06–12/10) that the SNSP-PGR (2011) data was collected. The formula used was: [municipal population * 4 years/100,000 = A]; number of executions in the municipality/A = average municipal execution rate per 100,000].

The official INEGI Mexican census is taken every 5 years but there was a significant drop in the population in multiple Northern Chihuahua municipalities after the drug-war began in late 2006. While introducing potential inflation in the execution rate, the 2010 INEGI municipal population figures nevertheless represent a more accurate measure of the actual rural and semi-rural population in Chihuahua in the period analyzed herein. Therefore, the author utilized the 2010 municipal population figures in this study.

Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), INEGI and Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) define a “metropolitan” area as a city with over

1 million residents (e.g., Ciudad Juárez) (SEDESOL 2004). Outside of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua is the Mexican state with the third lowest population density (13.7 per square mile) in the nation. There are only six municipalities with populations over 50,000, excluding the capital city (Chihuahua). Hinderink and Titus (2002) simply define the entire state of Chihuahua outside of Ciudad Juárez as containing small and medium-sized communities. Following Hinderink and Titus (2002), this chapter analyzes both municipalities with less than 2,500 residents and small and medium-sized communities with populations of 2,500–50,000 (together, representing 88 % of the state of Chihuahua). Standing police chiefs and top-commanders were also assassinated in Chihuahua City (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2012) and Ciudad Juárez (El Paso Times 2011) or survived assassination attempts (El Paso Times 2011b—Ciudad Juárez).

This book employs the “rule of five”. This means that for every assassination event, the author compiled a minimum of five different English and/or Spanish-speaking news stories documenting the same assassination before the murder was included in the analysis. This “rule of five” ensures the reliability of the news account by verifying the details of the assassination by multiple different sources. In the English-speaking newspapers, the following sources were used—*Associated Press*, *BBC*, *Arizona Daily Star*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Latin American Herald Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal*, *El Paso Times*, *Reuter*, *UPI* and *National Public Radio*, among others. To further avoid possible bias, exaggeration or mis-reporting, the author also heavily relied on multiple Spanish-speaking Chihuahua regional newspapers, including: (*XEPL*, *El Ágora*, *Tiempo Digital*, *Chihuahua al Instante*, *Código Delicias*, *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, *La Crónica de Chihuahua*, *Noticias de Chihuahua*, *El Pueblo Chihuahua*, *El Sol de Parral*, *Observador Chihuahua*, *El Diario de Juárez*), Mexican national newspapers and news magazines used included (*La Jornada*, *El Universal*, *Excelsior*, *Milenio*, *Proceso*, *El Economista*), and crime-focused newspapers (*La Policiaca*, *MexicoRojo*), among others. For other Northern Tier states, multiple regional Mexican and US border-state newspapers were also utilized to obtain accounts on small towns and cities not covered by national newspapers. Among others, such Spanish language regional news sources include *Zeta Reportaje* (Baja California), *El Siglo de Durango*, *El Sol de Durango* (Durango), *Al Día Sonora*, *El Imparcial*, *Cajeme Hoy*, *Noroeste* (Sonora), *El Siglo de Torreón* (Coahuila), *El Sol de Tijuana* (Baja California Norte), *Hoy Tamaulipas*, *El Mañana de Tamaulipas* (Nuevo León, Tamaulipas), *Zacatecas Hoy* (Zacatecas) among others.

Appendix

The Office of the Mexican Presidency released new drug-related homicide data in 2010 on all of Mexico’s municipalities (SNSP-PGR data base 2011). These official statistics on organized-crime related homicides from December 2006 to December 2010 were compiled by the PGR for the National Public Security System (SNSP) under Mexican President Felipe Calderón. The data is

Table 2.2 Executions in Chihuahua, by municipality (Dec. 2006–Dec. 2010)

Town	Pop.	Total	Per 100,000
Huejotitán	1,049	1	–
Manuel Benavides	1,601	n/d	–
Coyame del Sotol	1,681	n/d	–
El Tule	1,869	n/d	–
Maguarichi	1,921	56	800
Rosario	2,235	n/d	–
Coronado	2,284	4	44
S.F. de Borja	2,290	0	0
Dr. B. Domínguez	2,911	6	54
S.F. de Conchos	2,983	1	9
Matachí	3,104	1	8
Gran Morelos	3,209	14	116
Satevó	3,662	14	100
Santa Isabel	3,937	12	80
La Cruz	3,982	4	80
López	4,025	10	62
Matamoros	4,499	40	235
S.F. del Oro	4,753	7	37
Prax. G. Guerrero	4,799	71	374
Julimes	4,953	5	26
Zaragoza	5,105	12	60
Morris	5,312	26	130
Cusihuirachi	5,414	25	500
Galeana	5,892	9	39
Bachíniva	6,011	14	58
Temósachic	6,211	16	67
Guadalupe DB	6,458	135	540
Ig. Zaragoza	6,934	4	15
Ocampo	7,546	16	53
Riva Palacio	8,012	39	121
Uruachi	8,200	27	84
Morelos	8,343	14	42
Allende	8,409	14	42
Chínipas	8,441	10	30
Gómez Farías	8,624	7	20
Carichí	8,795	13	37
Guazapares	8,998	13	37
Santa Bárbara	10,427	9	22
Casas Grandes	10,587	22	55
Aquiles Serdán	10,688	17	40
Janos	10,953	25	58

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Town	Pop.	Total	Per 100,000
Ahumada	11,457	8	20
Batopilas	14,362	15	26
Rosales	16,785	26	43
Balleza	17,672	27	38
Urique	20,386	38	47
Aldama	22,302	18	20
Buenaventura	22,378	14	15
Namiquipa	22,880	22	24
Ascensión	23,975	92	95
Ojinaga	26,304	51	48
Bocoyna	28,766	41	35
Madera	29,611	65	59
Saucillo	32,325	31	16
Guerrero	39,626	39	24
Jiménez	41,265	79	48
Meoqui	43,833	76	45
Camargo	48,748	110	229
Guachochi	49,689	30	15
Guad. y Calvo	53,499	111	53
N. Casas Grandes	59,337	120	52
Hid.del Parral	107,061	187	44
Delicias	137,935	122	22
Cuauhtémoc	154,639	97	16
Chihuahua	819,543	1,348	41
Juárez	1,332,131	6,150	116

Listed in ascending order by 2010 municipal population size. *Sources* INEGI (2010), SNSP-PGR data base (2011). See also: Methodological Considerations. **Bold** Indicates an Assassination of a Police Chief or Top-Level Commander in the Municipality

sub-categorized into four categories (total “drug-related homicides”, “aggressive homicides”, “confrontational homicides” and “executions”). Ríos and Shirk (2011: 6) contend that the SNSP methodology closely correlates with INEGI [*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*] and the newspaper *Reforma*’s drug-related homicide data bases. The SNSP-PGR executions data (2011) does not detail whether the victim of an execution was a state official, a drug-cartel member or a by-stander.

An examination of the execution rate in urban versus rural municipalities in Chihuahua shows that urban areas are, in fact, not significantly more violent than rural areas. The data in Table 2.2 “Executions in Chihuahua, By Municipality (2006–2010)” show that 46 % of Chihuahua’s municipalities (pop. less than 50,000) had execution rates worse than more urban Chihuahua City (41.22 per 100,000, pop. 819,543). Even more to the point, 14.5 % of Chihuahua’s municipalities (pop. less

than 50,000) register execution rates worse than metropolitan Ciudad Juárez (116 per 100,000, pop. 1,332,131). Yet, Ciudad Juárez was the city frequently named by the press as the most violent city in the world (El Paso Times 2010a; BBC 2009a). In many of the smaller Chihuahua's municipalities (pop. less than 4,000), the execution rates in the 2006–2010 period far exceed the United Nation's definition of an epidemic rate of homicides (10 per 100,000), e.g. (Maguarichi, 800 per 100,000; Gran Morelos, 116 per 100,000 Satevó, 100 per 100,000; Santa Isabel and La Cruz, 80 per 100,000, Dr. Belisario Domínguez, 54 per 100,000; Coronado 44 per 100,000).

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Chapter 3

Weapons and Methods of Attack as a Tactical Advantage

3.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes the weapons and methods of attack of assassins on municipal police chiefs and top-commanders across all other Northern Tier states. The tactical superiority of organized crime elements is manifest in the similarity of weaponry employed in law-enforcement assassinations (mainly AK-47s, AR-15s). It is also illustrated by the two signature attack “styles”: convoy style armed vehicular assaults and strategic hits on officers in or near their homes largely engaged in off-duty, everyday social activities. Operationally, such assassinations occur in strategic towns along three distinctive North-bound drug-transit highways across a range of municipalities in the multiple states of Baja California Norte, Baja California Sur, Sonora, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Durango, Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. The enhanced weaponry of organized crime elements along with surprise attacks, often involving deception, intersects with the relatively poor equipment (lack of bullet-proof vehicles) and uneven security for officers characteristic of multiple Mexican municipal police departments (Sabet 2012: 55, 121). Taken together, the tactical superiority of organized crime elements combined with their efforts to clear routes to smuggle drugs (operational means) facilitate the use of law-enforcement assassination as a strategy for action against law-enforcement agents.

This chapter is organized into five sections. Section 3.2 contextualizes the problem of the assassination of top municipal police authorities within the extreme “weaponization” of organized crime elements in a society with a tradition of relatively restrictive weapon ownership. Sections 3.3 and 3.4 illustrate the “signature style” of these assassinations. This involves a detailed discussion of the vehicular ambush assaults on police chiefs and top-level commanders (Sect. 3.3) as well as the strategic assassinations of officers engaged in everyday social activities including ambush assassinations, torture and beheadings (Sect. 3.4). Section 3.5 maps out the strategic towns and cities that lie along the Western, Central and Eastern

Northern Tier drug-trafficking routes which have been subject to such murders. This mapping shows how these law-enforcement assassinations took place across multiple “Northern Tier” municipalities characterized by distinctive types and levels of organized crime organizations.

Finally, Sect. 3.6 analyzes “gaps” in the rule of law within the legal, political and judicial systems which set the stage for these law-enforcement assassinations. The “package” of institutional deficits that facilitate such assassinations includes a bi-national failure to reduce organized crime elements’ easy access to weapons, weak prosecution of police assassins, uneven security for local police and differential municipal access to federal resources.

3.2 Considerations Regarding Weaponry

3.2.1 *Extreme Weaponization*

The Mexican problem of the assassination of local police chiefs and top-commanders can first be understood in the terms of the extreme “weaponization” of organized crime elements in a society with a tradition of comparatively limited weapon ownership (Cook et al. 2009: 271). In Mexico, the possession of high-caliber guns is essentially prohibited for citizens and the single legally authorized retail outlet for firearms is operated by the Ministry of National Defense [Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional-SEDENA] (Dube et al. 2013). Articles 9 and 10 of the Mexican Federal Law of Firearms also only allow certain citizens the possession and carrying of pistols of only calibers 0.380 (9 mm) or less, and revolvers of calibers 0.38 special or less.

In the U.S., the Federal Assault Weapons Ban expired in 2004. After its expiration, analysts began to document a large upsurge of assault weapons and lethal violence into Mexico, especially along the U.S.-Mexican border (U.S. Senate 2011a, b; Dube et al. 2013). Fernández Menéndez and Salazar (2009) argue that killing in Mexico has become inexpensive because of this uncontrollable flow of illegal arms. Merlos (2009) estimated that in 2008 alone, 200,000 high power arms which include grenades, hand guns, Tommy guns, bazookas and three million cartridges entered Mexico illegally from the U.S.¹ Only 10 % of these arms were

¹ “Straw-buyers” or individuals who buy guns on behalf of others in the US are a factor in the flow of illegal arms to Mexico. While Goodman and Marizco (2010: 189) cite as typical straw buyers the girlfriends of drug dealers, drug purchasers and U.S. citizens previously unconnected to Mexican DTOs seeking to make money, US border law enforcement has also been implicated. In the town of Columbus, New Mexico which lies just across the border from Puerto Palomas (Chihuahua), the mayor and police chief were indicted by the US Federal Attorney General’s Office for allegedly conspiring to purchase firearms for illegal export to Mexico. In this federal indictment, about 200 firearms AK-47-type pistols, weapons resembling shortened AK-47 rifles and American Tactical 9 mm caliber pistols, all firearms favored by Mexican drug cartels were allegedly purchased from Chaparral Guns in Chaparral, N.M., owned and operated by defendant Ian Garland. Law enforcement officers actually seized 40 AK-47-type pistols, 1,580 rounds of 7.62 ammunition and 30 high-capacity magazines from the defendants before they crossed the U.S.-Mexico border into Mexico (ICE News Release 2011).

estimated to be out of commission. The United States Office of the Inspector General within the Department of Justice reported an increase of 20 % of US long guns recovered and traced in Mexico from 2004 to 2009 (US Senate 2011a). McDougal et al. (2013: 2) found that the volume of firearms crossing the U.S.-Mexican border was higher than previously calculated—253,000 firearms were purchased every year to be trafficked during the 2010–2012 period. They note that this number is much higher than number of arms trafficked in 1997–1999, during the federal Assault Weapons Ban (AWB) (88,000 firearms) (McDougal et al. 2013: 2).

Ríos (2010) specifically points toward the ease of obtaining assault rifles now in Mexico, noting that in particular: “Whomever, wherever can obtain an AK47”. Goodman and Marizco (2010: 186) report that:

“According to analysis presented by an ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives] Agent in August 2010, the top two firearms recovered in Mexico that had been purchased in the United States in the past 3 years were, in order, AK-47 type semi-automatic rifles (7.62 × 39 mm caliber) and AR-15 semi-automatic rifle clones (0.223 caliber). Many of the AK-47s and AR-15s were then converted to fire as select-fire machine guns”.

Captured Mexican hit-men also refer to their easy access to US-purchased guns and grenades. One assassin who killed multiple police officers in Tamaulipas was found with a large arsenal of AK-47s and grenades. He explained that they were sent to him from Brownsville, Texas (El Universal 2009b). Arrested *Zeta* boss, *El Mamito*, told Mexican Federal Police interrogators that US citizens sell the organization arms (Milenio 2011c). He noted that due to increased Mexican pressure on crime groups, it became, by 2011, “a little harder for us to bring in weapons, but at any rate, they’re available. [The arms] came over the [El Paso-Júarez] bridge before”, he said, “now they come across the river” (CNN Mexico 2011). A Sinaloa cartel hit-man involved with the Mexican Federal Attorney General’s Witness Protection program claimed that he regularly picked-up numerous AK-47s purchased in Arizona for the cartel (ContraLínea 2012).

3.2.2 A Relative Lack of High-Powered Weapons at the Municipal Level

This rise in fire-power possessed by organized crime elements, however, has not been matched by Mexican municipal police departments at least not until late 2012, and only in selected municipalities. By law, Mexican police officers do possess legal access to assault rifles, flash-bang grenades and bulletproof vests. Nevertheless, the literature on the Mexican police strongly suggests that few municipal police officers had regular access to high-powered assault rifles due to lack of past public investment. Sabet (2012: 55) contends, for example, that “most vehicles and guns trade owners and ‘work’ multiple shifts” across Mexico’s municipal police departments.

Sabet (2012: 121) also notes that better equipment, particularly assault rifles and bullet proof vests as well as better officer protection are among the most challenging

elements of a strategy to confront the threat of organized crime. In 2008, only 150 of the nation's 2,458 municipalities received additional federal funding for the purchase of more equipment (Sabet 2012: 194). In that budget, more assault rifles and bullet-proof vests constituted only 0.8 and 14.8 % of that total budget, respectively (SSP 2009 in Sabet 2012). A slight improvement in local officer access to high-power assault weapons began to emerge in certain municipalities but was still not systematic across Mexico's municipal police departments by early 2013. Cities such as Hermosillo, Sonora (2008) and Tijuana, Baja California Norte (2009) made an early effort to improve local police weaponry using newly available federal funds after a local crisis of a series of police assassinations (Sabet 2010: 27, 2012: 57; Washington Post 2012). In 2010, the municipal police in Ciudad Juárez were reportedly the first in the nation to obtain automatic long arms (assault rifles, Model G 36 kV, 0.223 caliber) (El Diario de Juárez 2010). [The weapons were given to the municipality by SEDENA.] Nevertheless, in the *relative* balance of tactical power, organized crime elements possessed an extremely large tactical advantage over local police in Mexico (2006–2011) (Sullivan and Elkus 2008: 5).²

Under a new federally-subsidized municipal security program begun in August 2012 (SUBSEMUN 2012), several municipalities were classified as “high-intensity” crime-ridden municipalities. Most are located in several Northern Tier states (Sonora, Sinaloa, Chihuahua). These municipalities can now qualify to receive short arms and semi-automatic long assault rifles from SEDENA under a complex formula.

By late 2012, however, the distribution of long arms varied even within the Northern Tier municipalities that qualified for the SUBSEMUN funds. In Agua Prieta (Sonora), for example, where two police chiefs were gunned down by organized crime elements armed with multiple AR-15s, *matapolicias* and AK-47s (2/26/07; 3/11/10), the police department subsequently received a single Remington caliber 302 rifle (Mas Medio 2013). Moreover, the 2012 SUBSEMUN funds do provide new opportunities for the purchase of trucks, medium-sized sedans and tactical group vehicles. Yet, none of these vehicles are bullet-proof (SUBSEMUN 2012). Thus even relative, recent improvements in the tactical capacity of selected municipalities must be contextualized against the backdrop of lack of past public investment in police arms in a society where the drug-related killing of government officials was not wide-spread (Ríos 2011a: 9).

The analysis in this chapter now proceeds to document how the superior weaponry of organized crime outmatched and often overwhelmed many Northern Tier police chiefs and commanders leaving them little or no opportunity for self-defense (2006–2012). Section 3.3 describes the armed ambush vehicular assaults on both

² The Mexican National Attorney General's Office (PGR) reported that from December 1, 2005 to January 22, 2009, it confiscated 31,512 weapons from organized criminal groups including 17,118 assault weapons. Confiscated material included anti-tank weapons, RPG rocket launchers, grenade launchers, and 0.50 caliber assault rifles. One of the largest busts occurred in November 2008 in the border city of Reynosa and included 314 assault weapons, 126 short range guns, 287 grenades, and over half a million rounds of ammunition (El Universal 2009a)

on and off-duty chiefs who did not have access to adequate bullet-proof vehicles. Section 3.4 next characterizes the strategic attacks on generally off-duty chiefs and top-level commanders walking to and from their vehicles, homes and on city streets.

3.3 Armed Vehicular Assaults

3.3.1 Data Description

In the next two sections, a detailed narrative of the first “signature style” of the Northern Tier law-enforcement assassinations is introduced with the presentation of Table 3.1—Mexican Police Chiefs and Top-Commanders Assassinated in Northern Tier States (2006–2012). The goal of Table 3.1 is to summarize into a single table the available data organized by state on the assassination of 74 top municipal police officials in Northern Tier Mexico (2006–2012). Table 3.1 presents data on the type of weapon used, estimated number of bullets fired and type of attack (vehicular, abduction, residential) and whether or not the victim was driving or located within a bullet-proof vehicle at the time of his or her attack. [See footnote 4 for more data description].³

The analysis of the law-enforcement assassination of multiple top-level municipal police officers reveals two main types or categories of killings (vehicular ambushes and strategic hits on officers engaged in everyday social activities including abduction assassinations). These two types of law-enforcement assassinations are principally based on differences in the way the crime was carried out, i.e. whether the victim was driving inside his or her own vehicle or whether the victim was outside a vehicle, often engaged in such everyday activities as leaving the house for work, walking down the street or even eating, sleeping or bathing inside their own homes. In both types of law-enforcement assassination, organized crime elements almost uniformly ambushed the victim from inside one or more of their own vehicles except in the cases of home penetration which were always accompanied by a subsequent vehicular escape.

Of the two types of assassinations, vehicular (47 %) ambushes made up the majority of cases. These were followed by strategic hits on officers engaged in

³ As in Chap. 2, this chapter utilizes the “rule of five” or a minimum of five English and/or Spanish speaking news stories documenting the same assassination event (see Chap. 2, Methodological Considerations). For each assassination, the author compiled a data set on the following sources: (1) official forensic reports on the number of spent bullet casings, (2) official forensic reports on the type and number of weapons fired based on ballistics reports; (3) available reports from eyewitnesses or other types of testimony on the number, type and bullet-proofing of vehicles involved in the event (DTO and law-enforcement); (4) circumstances of the crime (location, number of victims, name of victims, whether killed or wounded); and (5) evidence of narco-messages, torture, decapitation, binding of hands of the victim’s body. Legal testimony on the identity, arrest and/or prosecution of the assassins is included as available. The “rule of five” sources ensures adequate verification of a single event across multiple sources, thereby highly increasing the reliability of the data.

Table 3.1 municipal police chiefs assassinated in northern tier states, 2006–2012

State and Municipality	Weapon Used	Est. # shots	Bullet-proof vehicle (Victim) ^a	Vehicular attack/ abduction and vehicles used by organized crime	Residential/public street and crime details
<i>Baja California Norte</i>					
Tecate, 12/5/07	AK-47, .223 cart.	45			Home Sleeping in Bedroom
Tijuana, 1/4/08	AK-47s			Abducted from home	Body found tortured in canyon
Tijuana, 1/14/08	AK-47	50+	No	Single Auto Ambush	
Tijuana, 1/15/08	AK-47, 0.38	200			Shot Him Up Inside his home
Tijuana, 1/20/08				Multiple Auto Ambush	
Pl. Rosarito, 9/27/08	AK-47AR-15 mat	45		Multiple Auto Ambush	
Pl. Rosarito, 3/28/11		Multiple	No	Multiple Auto Ambush	
Tijuana, 4/12/12	.45	4		Nissan Titan	
<i>Baja California Sur</i>					
La Paz, 1/5/07	0.38	13		Tsuru	
Los Cabos, 10/25/11				Abducted	Body found w message
San. Anita 3/26/12 AA	AK-47	20	No	Truck	
<i>Sonora</i>					
Agua Prieta, 2/26/07	AR-15matapolicia	40+	No	Jeeps: Cherokee/Liberty	
Agua Prieta, 3/11/10	AK-47	3+		Dodge Mini-Van	In line of duty on street
P. Peñasco, 6/20/10 AA	AK-47	6+	No	Jeep Cherokee	
Huatabambo, 9/25/10	AK-47	5+	No	Ford Lobo, Maxima, Pathfin	
Nogales, 9/12/11				Abducted	Beaten, Left in Mine

(continued)

Table 3.1 (continued)

State and Municipality	Weapon Used	Est. # shots	Bullet-proof vehicle (Victim) ^a	Vehicular attack/abduction and vehicles used by organized crime	Residential/public street and crime details
Empalme, 1/14/11	AK-47	2	No		Outside home just as he left
Caborca, 5/16/11 AA	.9 pistols	2	No	Stopped for speeding	3 others open fire on him
Tubutama, 5/30/11	AK-47	91	No	Surburban	
Sn.Luis Colorado, 5/8/12	AK-47	38	No	Truck/Grand Marquis	
<i>Coahuila</i>					
Piedras Negras, 4/26/09	AK-47, AR-15	40	No	Chevrolet Minerva	
Ramos Arizpe, 8/31/09	0.38 super., 223 cart	12+	Destroyed		Shot out in line of duty
Torreón, 3/14/11	.223 cart	10			Home: penetrated his patio
Torreón, 6/24/11 AA	Assault, grenades		No	Stolen State Vehicle	
Castaños, 11/14/11	AK-47	4		Abducted	Shot/Left Burned in Vehicle
Saltillo, 12/5/11	Assault rifles	80	No	Honda Odyssey SUV	
Saltillo, 2/15/12	AK-15, .223 cart	17			Outside home just as he left
Torreón, 3/12/12	AK-47	6-19	No	Ford	
<i>Nuevo León</i>					
San Ped. García 2/13/06		8+		Single Auto ambush	
Sabin. Hidalgo 2/13/06		2-4		Chevrolet Suburban	Shot outside municipal palace
Linares, 9/12/06	AK-47/AR-15 mat.	20	No	Truck, Altima	
San Nicolás, 11/14/06	AK-47	10	No		Outside home at bus-stop

(continued)

Table 3.1 (continued)

State and Municipality	Weapon Used	Est. # shots	Bullet-proof vehicle (Victim) ^a	Vehicular attack/abduction and vehicles used by organized crime	Residential/public street and crime details
Santa Catarina, 11/23/06	.9 pistol	10+			Inside a convenience store
Santa Catarina, 5/21/07	AK-47/AR-15	15+	No	Nissan Platina	Home eating lunch
San Ped. García, 11/4/09				Abducted	Head left in lap in vehicle
Aguasleguas, 3/27/10				Abducted	Body left in ditch on highway
Los Aldama, 4/12/10				Abducted	Body quartered, left on highway
Gn. Teran, 1/26/11				Abducted	In line of duty
Apodaca, 5/7/11				Abducted	Body left mutilated in taxi
Guadalupe, 6/13/11		20+		Abducted	Police headquarters penetrated
Santa Catarina, 6/26/11	Assault rifles	5+		Auto ambush	Body left near own vehicle
San Nicolás, 7/7/11					
<i>Tamaulipas</i>					
Nuevo Laredo, 3/6/06	Assault rifles		No	SUVs	
Hidalgo, 7/5/10				Auto Ambush	
San Fernando, 9/8/10				Abducted	Body found in field
Nuevo Laredo, 2/3/11					Shot on street leaving restaurant
Ciudad Mante, 3/20/11	Assault rifles	20+	No	Multiple Auto Ambush	
C. Victoria, 6/3/12 AA	Car bomb				Blew up car in front of his home

(continued)

Table 3.1 (continued)

State and Municipality	Weapon Used	Est. # shots	Bullet-proof vehicle (Victim) ^a	Vehicular attack/abduction and vehicles used by organized crime	Residential/public street and crime details
<i>Durango</i>					
Durango, 1/27/09	.40 cart., .9 mili	6+		Abducted	Body left near highway
Villa Union, 2/2/09				Abducted	Body found in a well
Villa Union, 1/18/10				Abducted	Body left in plaza w message
Comonfort, 3/5/11	High-caliber	50+	No	Multiple Auto Ambush	
Villa Union, 1/19/11				Abducted	Decap. left in plaza w message
Canatlán, 1/21/11	High-caliber				Just outside home
Lerdo, 11/6/11					Killed walking down street
El Salto, 3/30/12	AK-47	24+			Killed walking down street
Ocampo, 3/31/12					Burst Inside His home
El Salto, 5/28/12	AK-47	24+	No	Multiple Auto Ambush	While walking down street
<i>Sinaloa</i>					
Culicán, 2/26/10				Abducted	Body left on highway
Mazatlan, 4/25/10	AK-47, AR-15,	9	No	Multiple Auto Ambush	
Culicán, 5/1/10	AK-47, 0.38, 0.9	13		Multiple Auto Ambush	
Mazatlan, 4/25/11	AK-47	71	No	Multiple Auto Ambush	
Angostura, 7/12/11	AK-47	8		Abducted at home by 12	Body left by highway

(continued)

Table 3.1 (continued)

State and Municipality	Weapon Used	Est. # shots	Bullet-proof vehicle (Victim) ^a	Vehicular attack/abduction and vehicles used by organized crime	Residential/public street and crime details
Culicán, 2/23/12	AK-47; pistol	Mult			Killed in parking lot
Ahomé, 3/26/12	0.38 super	4			Killed at clothing store
Culicán, 6/9/12	0.9 milimetre cart.	Mult	No	Cherokee truck	Ambushed and shot near his car
Choix, 6/29/12	AK-47	20+		Black truck	Ambushed leaving restaurant
Culicán, 9/12/12	AK-47, pistols	10+		Multiple Auto Ambush	
<i>Zacatecas</i>					
Jerez, 5/16/11 AA	High-caliber			Multiple Auto Ambush	
Valparaíso, 10/9/11	High-caliber, Gren	Multiple	Burned	Multiple Auto Ambush	
Juan Aldama, 3/2/12	High-caliber	Multiple		Abducted	Body left by highway
San Cristobal, 3/1/12					
Chalchilnahtes 5/17/12	High-caliber	40+		Multiple Auto Ambush	
<i>San Luis Potosí</i>					
Tamazunchale, 7/28/12				Auto Ambush	Head left on car roof top

^aA blank indicates no data
mat refers to *Matapolicia* or cop-killers guns
cart refers to cartridges, *Gren.* refers to grenade
(n = 74 police chiefs and top-commanders assassinated)

everyday social activities (30 %), including abduction assassinations (23 %). Abduction assassinations were also characterized by much more extensive bodily mutilation, torture and beheading of the officers. Many also involved public display of the dead body with a “narco-message”; the latter often considered a “special circumstance” of organized crime assassinations (Molzahn et al. 2012: 5)

3.3.2 Vehicular Attacks

With respect to vehicular attacks, Table 3.1 also provides available data on the number of organized crime vehicles involved in the ambush (single, multiple) and the type of vehicle used by organized crime elements. The argument advanced in this section is that vehicular ambush attacks on police chiefs and top-commanders are characterized by the repetitive use of assault rifles against “easy” targets, often caught by surprise, in non-bullet proof vehicles.

To begin, the data in Table 3.1 first reveal a pattern of armed assaults by heavily armed organized crime assailants attacking Northern Tier police chiefs and top-level commanders driving in non-bullet proof vehicles, e.g., in Sonora (5/8/12, 5/30/11, 9/25/10, 6/20/10, 2/26/07), Coahuila (3/12/12, 12/15/11, 6/24/11, 4/26/09), Nuevo León (7/7/11, 5/21/07, 9/12/06, 2/13/06), Durango (5/28/12, 3/5/11), Tamaulipas, (3/20/11, 7/5/10, 3/06/06), Sinaloa (9/12/12, 6/29/12, 6/9/12, 4/25/11, 5/1/10, 4/25/10), Baja California Norte (4/12/12, 3/28/11, 9/27/08, 1/20/08, 1/14/08), Baja California Sur (3/26/12, 1/5/07), Zacatecas (5/17/12, 10/9/11, 5/16/11), San Luís Potosí (7/28/12) (47 %, n = 35).

One “typical” example of such an armed vehicular assault took place in San Luís Colorado, Sonora. Police chief Luis Freddy Rodríguez Soqui was killed in his car (a non-bullet-proof Dodge Charger) when two vehicles fanned out beside him and then the assailants shot at him thirty times as he was leaving the neighborhood where he lived (Redacción 2012a). Rodríguez Soqui tried to repel the attack with his 0.9 caliber pistol, wounding one of his attackers before succumbing to his injuries.

Similarly, the police chief of San Pedro, Nuevo León, Héctor Ayala Moreno died in his Dodge Durango when Sinaloa cartel hit-men drove up beside him and rained a “hail of bullets” on the front window of his non-bullet proof SUV (El Porvenir 2006a). One of eight bullets caught him in the throat, causing him to lose control of his vehicle and to crash into several parked cars. Authorities attribute his assassination to *La Burra*, a Sinaloa hit-man also charged with killing nine other persons allegedly in revenge for the arrest of two cartel traffickers (Milenio 2009b, 2010).⁴

⁴ Ironically, of the ten cartel victims, the police chief was the only law enforcement officer who did not actually participate in the original state operation. Among the other nine persons executed included a penal judge, a lawyer, the wife of a policeman, three bodyguards of narcotraffickers (Milenio 2010c). Three years earlier, the municipality of San Pedro municipality (a suburb of Monterrey, Nuevo León) had been considered the “model municipality of the nation” for its affluence, safety and low levels of crime

3.3.3 Convoy-Style Ambush Attacks

As a generalization over a series of armed, vehicular assaults, it can be said that organized crime elements utilized “convoy” like tactics. These include the attempt to close escape routes, intercept and cut off the victim by fanning out in multiple vehicles around the victim’s car, assassinating the target and then successfully driving away after the hit. For example, the Playas de Rosarito (Baja California Norte) police chief was intercepted, cut off and trapped at a city street corner by two vehicles while returning home with his wife and children on his day off. Eyewitness testified to the authorities that they recognized one of the two assassins who opened fire on the chief with 0.9 caliber pistols killing him inside his GMC wagon instantly. The recognized assassin was identified as an ex-state and municipal police officer (*El Fantasma*—The Phantom) now associated as a hit-man for the Sinaloa cartel (El Sol de Tijuana 2011).

Another example of a “convoy” attack occurred in the assassination of Huatabampo, Sonora police chief Trinidad Guadalupe Montiel Jiménez (9/25/10). Montiel Jiménez was sitting in the driver’s seat of his Ford Lobo along with a transit police officer a few meters from an elementary school. Organized crime elements in three vehicles (all new with polarized windows) drove up and around the police chief and opened fire on his car with AK-47s, immediately killing him (El Imparcial 2010b). The transit officer opened his passenger door and tried to flee but was shot on the sidewalk just as the young children were leaving the school. The Army subsequently detained the Huatabampo *plaza* boss from the criminal gang *Los Salazar* for the murder (Cajame 2012).

In San Cristobal, Fresnillo, Zacatecas (3/1/12), several suspected *Zetas* pulled up next to a police commander who was stopped at a red light in his non-bullet proof Nissan Tsuru on his day off, and opened fire on him, killing him in a second. These organized crime gun-men made sure they respected the traffic laws because after the hit, they then waited for the light to turn green before driving (at the speed limit) toward the bus station, according to eyewitnesses (Notimex 2012a).

In multiple other instances (Table 3.1), hit men utilized convoy-like tactics to ambush police chiefs in non-bullet proof vehicles by surrounding and cutting off their escape routes on city streets, urban and rural highways (Tijuana, Playas de Rosarito [Baja California Norte], Santa Anita, La Paz [Baja California Sur], Tubutama, Puerto Peñasco, Agua Prieta [Sonora], Torreón, Saltillo, Piedras Negras [Coahuila], San Nicolás, Santa Catarina, Linares, Sabinas Hidalgo [Nuevo León], Ciudad Mante, Hidalgo, Nuevo Laredo [Tamaulipas], Culicán, Choix, Mazatlán [Sinaloa], Pueblo Nuevo, Comonfort [Durango], Jerez, Valparaíso, Chalchilunahates [Zacatecas], and Tamazunchale [San Luis Potosí]. Turbiville (2010: 133) suggests that such convoy tactics may derive in part from the fact that many drug cartel hit-men are deserted Mexican soldiers with previous military-training.



Photo 3.1 Police vehicle, post-assassination, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (Source NYT 2009)

3.3.4 Lack of Vehicular Protection Means Certain Death

The lack of vehicular protection made the majority of police chiefs and top-level commanders “easy” targets. Top police officials are totally unprotected from armed convoy vehicular assaults because they do not have access to such necessary bullet-proof protection as non-penetrating glass, armored door, roof, floor, panels and pillars (Murtaya et al. 2011). Three examples illustrate this equipment deficit.

Durango police chief Narciso Ochoa Ibañez was intercepted in his non-bullet proof Ford pick-up truck by multiple vehicles and then shot with an “infinite” number of bullets. His body was completely destroyed (El Siglo de Durango 2011). A police commander of Saltillo, Coahuila perished instantly in his non-bullet proof Honda Odessa SUV when twelve men ambushed his vehicle and fired eight shots from assault rifles (Proceso 2011b). Adalberto Padilla Molina, the police chief of the U.S.-Mexican border city of Nogales, Sonora was driving to work in a non-bullet proof Dodge Caravan along with his bodyguard. Three men working for organized crime opened fire on the chief with AK-47s killing him instantly (El Universal 2010).

The range of vehicles (official and non-official) driven by police chiefs at the time of their attack was wide but it made little difference to the ultimate lethal outcome. Police chiefs and commanders across Mexican Northern Tier States drove Jeeps (Cherokee/Liberty), Mini-Vans (Dodge), pick-up trucks, mid-sized (Grand Marquis) and compact cars (Ford Lobo, Ford Maxima, Ford Pathfinders, Nissan Titan) and SUVs (Honda Odyssey), among others. The shattered front windows of the official municipal police vehicle (a Ford truck shown in Photo 3.1) reveal how easily bullets can penetrate non-bullet proof glass. In this attack, three police officers died immediately from the assassination in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.



Photo 3.2 Vehicle of police chief assassinated in Ciudad Mante, Tamaulipas (*Source Milenio 2010a*)

The lack of bullet-proof glass can render any vehicle vulnerable to high-powered rifles even in cases where a single shot was fired. Photo 3.2 shows the vehicle of Ciudad Mante (Tamaulipas) police chief Jorge Montemayor who was killed in his truck with a single shot by suspected organized crime elements. The chief was subsequently videotaped dead in his truck shortly after his murder by local citizens because prosecutors from the State Attorney General's office failed to promptly remove the body from the vehicle (Milenio 2010a).

3.3.5 *On and Off-Duty Victims*

Police chiefs and top commanders were engaged in a variety of everyday activities both on-duty and off-duty and were generally caught by surprise in these pre-planned vehicular ambushes. On-duty attacks occurred while chiefs were: patrolling the streets (Agua Prieta, Sonora, 2/26/07, Agua Prieta, Sonora 3/11/10; Piedras Negras, Coahuila, 4/26/09; Tijuana, Baja California Norte, 1/14/08 Ciudad Mante, Tamaulipas, 3/20/11), on the highway (Chalchihuites, Zacatecas, 5/17/12; Valparaíso, Zacatecas, 10/9/11, Comonfort, Durango, 3/6/11, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, 3/6/06), in a commercial center (Culicán, Sinaloa, 7/12/11); and driving to work, often very near home (Tubutama, Sonora, 5/30/11; Piedras Negras, Coahuila, 4/26/09; Empalme, Sonora, 3/1/11; San Luis Colorado, Sonora, 5/18/12).

Off-duty attacks also occurred in a variety of places within the city while police chiefs and top-commanders were engaged in such everyday activities as: returning home after work (La Paz, Baja California Sur, 1/5/07, Nogales, Sonora, 3/25/10), on a family day off (Playa Rosarito, Baja California Norte, 9/27/08), picking up children near an elementary school (Ramos Arizpe, Coahuila, 8/31/09) and driving with one's son in the neighborhood (Saltillo, Coahuila, 12/5/11). Empalme

Sonora deputy police chief Miguel Acosta García was driving to work after leaving his wife and children at the home of his mother-in-law. Chief Acosta García was ambushed by three armed assailants, presumed hit-men armed with an AK-47 and was killed immediately inside his non-bullet proof Tahoe SUV by two shots to his thorax (La Policiaca 2011i; Milenio 2011a).

3.3.6 Little or No Opportunity for Self-Defense

Organized crime elements also employed good intelligence in planning these assaults as there is evidence of clear identification, surveillance, selection and timing of the target. The rapidity, along with the near total lack of any type of vehicular protection, set up the chiefs and commanders for a lethal attack and contributed to the surprise element of these ambushes.

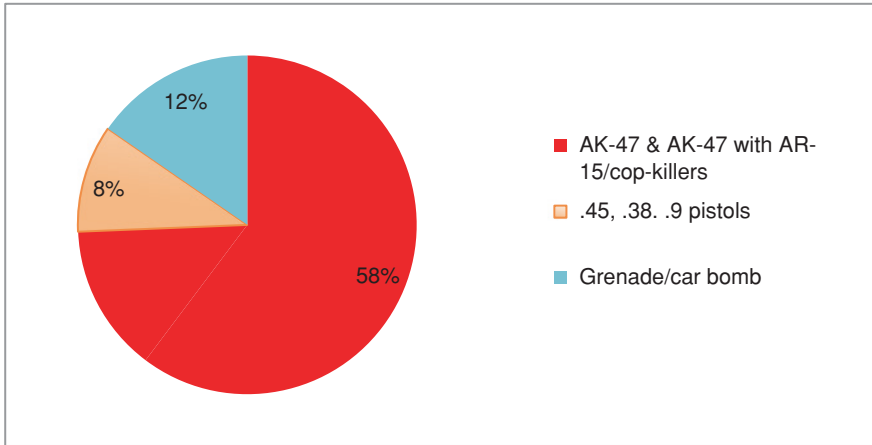
For example, San Pedro Garza (Nuevo León) police chief Héctor Ayala Moreno did not appear to see his “revenge” attack coming. The State Ministerial Police had captured, prosecuted and jailed two high-level Sinaloa cartel operatives in the municipality a few months earlier (Milenio 2009b). Chief Ayala Moreno was caught by surprise, intercepted by Sinaloa cartel hit-men while driving on-duty in the city in his Dodge Durango. The chief died when bullets penetrated the non-bullet-proof windshield, hitting him in the neck (El Porvenir 2006a). According to the State Attorney General’s Office (Milenio 2010c), the chief was killed by the Sinaloa cartel’s in revenge for the state-level prosecutorial efforts.

A retired Army General in Nuevo Laredo (Tamaulipas) had become the police chief of Nuevo Laredo a month earlier. He was intercepted on a city street and executed in his vehicle just after leaving police headquarters with all his bodyguards present (New York Times 2012). According to the Trans-Border Institute: “Farfán Carriola and his staff had just barely left police headquarters when they suddenly came across an armed vehicle that was blocking the corner where the streets “Venezuela” and “Plutarco Elías Calles” meet. The unit, which was armed with machine guns, immediately began firing at the F-150 Ford Lobo that carried Farfán Carriola and his staff” (Justice in Mexico 2011). SEDENA claimed *Zeta* operative Francisco Medina Mejía was responsible for the execution (Milenio 2012b).

3.3.7 Types of High-Powered Weaponry Utilized

Graph 3.1 presents the data on the bullet casings count from Table 3.1 as identified by official forensics at the crime scene.

The data in Graph 3.1 show how assassins used massive high-grade fire-power weapons in which AK-47s played a dominant role, followed by AR-15s, and 0.38 super *matapolicias* (cop-killers). The AK-47 was listed in a full 58 % of the



Graph 3.1 Found at murder sites of assassinated Mexican Northern Tier Police Chiefs and Commanders (2006–2012)

weapons identified by the authorities as utilized in the assassination of municipal police chiefs and top-commanders. This figure includes 47 % of the weapons identified as AK-47s alone. An additional 11 % of these crimes involved multiple gun use in which AK-47s were utilized along with AR-15s and *matapolicias*. Pistols (0.45, 0.38 and 0.9) made up an addition 8 % of the weapons found at the murder sites across all Northern Tier states. The use of grenades and car bombs (12 %) was, however, almost always restricted to the state of Tamaulipas. Thus, in the assassination of Northern Tier municipal top police officials, high-powered assault rifles, particularly AK-47s, was clearly the weapon of choice by organized crime hit-men.⁵

The most common type of ammunition found after the assassination of Northern Tier local police chiefs and top commanders were 0.223 cartridges and the 0.38 Super cartridges. The latter is often used with semi-automatic pistols and is considered to exceed the power threshold factor considered to be a “major” caliber (Boatman 2005: 16).

Even when not caught by surprise, the superior weaponry and force of organized crime simply overwhelmed the majority of police chiefs and commanders. This, in effect, left them with little or no opportunity for self-defense. The Agua

⁵ In the assassination of the Tububama (Sonora) police chief, organized crime elements were forced to abandon one of their vehicles while fleeing the crime scene because it ran into another car. The authorities were thus able to search the vehicle. They found a large stash of weapons in a special compartment which included: a long arm (caliber 0.9 loaded) supplied with a cartridge magazine; an M16 (caliber 5.56) long arm with a grenade launcher; an M203 40 mm grenade launcher; two AK-47s (caliber 7.62, 39 mm), a 9 mm pistol with a charger supplied with 15 rounds of ammunition of the same caliber; two super 38 caliber pistols and a 0.45 caliber pistol with a charger mm with eight rounds of ammunition; three grenades, magazines and about 800 rounds of ammunition of different calibers (Policia de Sonora 2011)

Prieta Sonora police chief's bodyguard did see the vehicular attack coming and actually managed initially to lethally wound an assailant. Nevertheless, the bodyguard, police chief Ramón Tacho Verdugo and the chief's son soon after all perished in the attack because assailants fired approximately 103 bullets from AR-15, AK-47s and 0.45 assault rifles into their non-bullet-proof vehicle. This rendered survival impossible (2/27/07) (Milenio 2007).⁶

3.3.8 Effective Attack Method

A successful assassination not only depends upon identification, surveillance, selection, timing, transport, approach and safe exiting (Turbiville 2010: 125). It also depends importantly on the specific details of the firing of the weapons. Two distinctive methods of effective attack have been outlined in the literature on combat and military training. These include the "spray and pray" method and precise targeted hits.

In the "spray and pray" method, the assassin will "spew bullets everywhere", shooting at the windshield, all over the driver's door and even the back door (Rosi 2011). Little effort is made to line up each shot or burst of shots. It is a method characterized as prevalent amongst those without benefit of proper training (Southworth 2004: 2). In contrast, the "precise targeted hit" method involves the very concise firing of a circle of bullets either around the lock of the driver's door or through the window lined up with the target's head (Bowden and Molloy 2011). Sullivan (2010) contends that the effective attack method of Mexican cartels differs from the usual "spray and pray" method of criminals because of the use of complex, small-unit tactics while armed with military infantry weapons. The use of substantial firepower by hit-men is thought to result in greater collateral damage (the killing a number of persons beyond the target such as bodyguards, drivers, colleagues, family members and unfortunate bystanders) (Turbiville 2010: 125, 127).

3.3.9 Selective Targeted Hits and the Repeated Firing of Assault Rifles

A close look at the vehicular assassination of Northern Tier municipal police chiefs and commanders suggests fairly precise, selective targeting accompanied by large numbers of firings but without high numbers of collateral killings.

Table 3.1 examines the total number and type of bullet casings remaining at the crime scene, as identified by official forensics. The data in Table 3.1 show that the

⁶ Then PRI governor of Sonora Eduardo Bours, himself under investigation for close political ties to organized crime (Proceso 2008 [PGR/SON/HM-UMAN-LL/338/2007]) also claimed police chief Tacho Verdugo was under investigation for ties to organized crime (Milenio 2007)



Photo 3.3 Vehicle after police chief assassination in Mazatlán, Sinaloa (Source Norosete 2011; Redacción)

estimated number of bullet casings found after the vehicle ambush ranged from 2 to 81 bullets ($n = 23$ cases). The average was 27 bullets per assassination event. In 14 % of the murders, a total of 71, 80, 50 and forty plus shots were fired.

This abundance of ammunition explains why press descriptions of such armed vehicular attacks used metaphors such as “killed a hail of bullets” or “it was raining bullets”. As such, the quantity of shots fired could look like the use of the “spray and pray” method. Nevertheless, in multiple instances, precise target assassinations resulted in relatively few collateral casualties even where large rounds of ammunition were fired. This speaks to the selective, targeted nature of the hit that these assassinations represent.

The attack on Mazatlán police chief Rolando Ochoa Torres, for example, is instructive in this regard. Photo 3.3 shows the police chief’s non-bullet-proof pick-up truck after the multiple armed convoy attack of 10–12 organized crime elements in 3 vehicles intercepted him in a residential neighborhood (La Policiaca 2011g). A full 71 rounds of ammunition from AK-47s were pumped into his driver’s door, killing him instantly (Noroeste 2011a). The vehicle’s driver door and side panel is completely penetrated by bullets. Yet the chief (the driver) was the only one killed in the ambush. The officer sitting next to him was only mildly wounded in the leg and abdomen and the third officer sitting at the passenger door

Photo 3.4 Vehicle After Police Chief Assassination in Huatabampo, Sonora (Source Alfonso Campos-Rubio, *Policiaco de Sonora* 2010)



not was wounded at all, despite the abundance of bullets fired at the driver's side of the vehicle (4/25/11).⁷

A very similar method was carried out in Culicán (Sinaloa) whereby the police chief (the driver) was immediately assassinated by multiple shots from an AK-47. Yet, his fellow officer (a passenger) was able to exit the vehicle and fire upon organized crime elements before being shot down (Nota Roja 2012).

The assassination of Huatabampo (Sonora) police chief Trinidad Guadalupe Montiel Jiménez further illustrates the selective nature of these targeted hits which do not necessary result in great collateral damage. Photo 3.4 shows how assassins precisely lined up the bullets with the chief's neck and head killing instantly. Montiel Jiménez's fellow police officer even escaped the vehicle from the passenger door. Then the decision was made by organized crime elements to subsequently kill him on the street (Policiaco de Sonora 2010).

Furthermore, in a majority of cases, police chiefs and top-commanders were driving alone and thus there was no collateral damage in 58 % of such assassinations. Comonfort (Durango 3/6/11) police chief Narciso Ochoa Ibañez, for example, was killed alone when organized crime elements shot up his non-bullet-proof official municipal pick-up truck near a highway (La Jornada 2011c).

This fairly selective, relatively precise targeting of hits on police chiefs and top commanders, often driving their vehicles alone suggests some planning and target intelligence. As such, these armed vehicular ambush assaults can be classified as one type of "signature assassination" which Turbiville (2010: 127) defines as

⁷ Indeed, the third officer opened her door and fled uninjured into the street. There was no subsequent attempt to assassinate this officer who fled the vehicle. The assassin (a hired gun of an organized crime cell in Mazatlán) was detained in his vehicle and arrested the same day by the military's Elite Force (Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales: G.A.F.E.). In this case, the hit-man did *not* waste all of his ammunition in the assassination. G.A.F.E. found an additional 548 bullets in his vehicle along with four AK-47s, two 0.9 caliber pistols and 16 magazines (Río Doce 2011).

narco-attack forms carried out with “frequency and with a now-familiar sameness inside Mexico... reflect[ing] all too typical violent engagements”. The specific features of the signature vehicular assassinations on Northern Tier police chiefs and top commanders include convoy-style tactics, surprise, ambush attacks often by multiple vehicles on selected targets. The repetitive use of assault rifles, quite possibly converted to fire as select-fire machine guns (Goodman and Marizco 2010: 186) against “easy” targets in non-bullet proof vehicles raises the question of whether, and how, survival is ever possible?

3.3.10 Who Survives Armed Vehicular Attacks? T6+ Levels of Bullet-Proofing

A T6–T8 range of bullet-proofing of a vehicle is required to survive the intensity of the massive firepower characteristic of the Northern Tier vehicular armed attacks on municipal police chiefs and commanders. As a rule, vehicle armoring protection levels range from T1 to T8, according to one bullet-proofing manufacturer (TAC 2012a, b). A T4 bullet-proof level can protect an individual in a vehicle against a handgun or pistol. A T5–T6 level protects the individual from high-power rifles, a T7 from armor-piercing rifles and T8 provides extra armor-piercing rifle protection (TAC 2012a, b).⁸

A vehicle with bullet-proof protection at a level below T5 simply cannot survive the sustained fire-power used in the ambushes documented in this brief. Manuel de Jesús Cicero Salazar, the police chief of Ramos Arizpe (Coahuila), was one of the few local chiefs found to be driving an official bullet-proof vehicle at the time of his murder. Chief Cicero Salazar and his bodyguards engaged in a vehicular chase onto the local highway against a group of fleeing hired-guns who had just assassinated a drug-lord (alias “El Gato”) at a local horse-race (Redacción 2009b). During the highway chase, organized crime elements opened fire on the chief. The windshield of the chief’s T4 level bullet-proof protected vehicle shattered after 15 min of sustained attack by hired-guns with AK-47s and semi-automatic pistols during which dozens of shots were fired (0.223 cartridges, 0.38 Super cartridges). The chief and his bodyguards retreated from their bullet-penetrated official vehicle to the side of the highway and radioed for back-up from police headquarters. However, they were told by the radio operator that no officers were willing to come: “They say that they don’t come because they don’t have equipment, señor”. The chief allegedly responded: “They have no balls; they have

⁸ See: <http://tps.com.mx/es/niveles-de-proteccion/> for one illustrative list from a commercial vehicle armoring company detailing the types of weapons, ammunition-velocity and mass that correspond to each level of ballistic protection levels (T4, T6, T7, T8) and http://tps.com.mx/wp-content/uploads/TPS10_TablaDeNiveles.pdf. In Mexico, T5 level ballistic protection protects against military assault weapons (e.g., the G3, 308 FAL, caliber 7.62 × 51 mm, the Ar-15 and M16 caliber 5.56 × 45 mm and fragmentation grenades)



Photo 3.5 Vehicle After Failed Vehicular Assassination Attempt, Michoacán (Source EFE 2010)

destroyed my bullet-proofing, we need help” before perishing along with his four bodyguards (Redacción 2009b).

In contrast, high-ranking Michoacán State Security Secretary Minerva Bautista was able to survive a 2,700 round convoy attack on her T5+ level bullet-proof SUV Jeep Cherokee (Los Angeles Times 2010). Photo 3.5 shows how this high level of bullet-proofing of the State Security Secretary’s vehicle saved her life. Her driver and body guard were only lightly wounded despite the 45 min long fire-power attack by AK-47s, AR-15s, Barrett anti-tank and grenades. The vehicle is now held on display as a “trophy” model of bullet-proofing at the Monterrey company where it was manufactured (Portautomotriz 2010).

3.3.11 Prohibitive Costs

The cost to ensure a bullet-proof a vehicle in Mexico is an estimated US\$19,230–76,920 depending upon the T protection level (Portautomotriz 2010). A T8 level bullet-proof vehicle costs an estimated \$64,810–\$86,390 in the US (TAC 2012a, b).⁹ How can such costs be understood within the pre-existing framework of municipal police vehicle allotments?

The efforts of the police chief of Jeréz, Zacatecas Lt. Colonel Joaquin Esquivel Guzmán are instructive in this regard. Chief Esquivel Guzmán complained to the Zacatecas governor that the Jeréz municipal police only possessed five patrol vehicles (all non bullet-proof) for a city of 52,594 inhabitants. Only one of the patrol vehicles was actually in working condition. Esquivel Guzmán requested

⁹ For one US bullet proofing estimate, see: <http://www.texasarmoring.com/blog>. The cost of a T6 level of bullet-proof protection new Mercedes Benz was \$250,000 in September 2011

ten additional vehicles in November 2011 from the mayor. He also argued that he would require at least 200 officers (60 more) to “offer a good service” given the rise in organized crime related homicides, gang-related activity and robberies in the municipality (Zacatecas Nota Informe 2011). In May 2012, the chief survived a nine vehicle ambush attack on the police station (Proceso 2012c). By July, only 2 more vehicles were allotted but none of them were bullet-proof (Imagen Zacatecas 2012).

3.4 Targeted Strategic Hits of Officers Engaged in Everyday Social Activities

3.4.1 Hunted Down by Armed Commandos

A series of Northern Tier police chiefs and commanders were also targeted in or near their homes when engaged in off-duty, everyday social activities. Table 3.1 reveals this second “signature” pattern of the assassination of Northern Tier top municipal police officials. The data show a series of strategic hits with high-powered assault rifles on local chiefs and top-commanders *outside* of their vehicles ($n = 22, 30\%$). There is also evidence of considerable surveillance, selection and timing in these law-enforcement assassinations.

Often, officers were “hunted down” by armed commandos who sprayed them with bullets in or near their own homes. This included assassination as they stepped out of their front doors to go to work, waited for the bus near their homes and as they sat in their front patios just after work (Culicán, Sinaloa 6/9/12, Canatlán, Durango 1/21/11 Saltillo, Coahuila 2/15/12 Empalme, Sonora 1/14/11 San Nicolás, Nuevo León 11/14/06 Torreón, Coahuila 3/14/11). The personal homes of police chiefs and commanders were also penetrated by armed men who forced their way into the officer’s bedrooms and assassinated them while they were sleeping (Tecate, Baja California Norte, 12/5/07), in their living rooms (Ocampo, Durango, 3/31/12; Poanas, Durango, 1/8/10 Tijuana, Baja California 1/15/08), while eating lunch in the dining room (García, Nuevo León, 11/4/09) and, as noted in Chap. 1, even while bathing in their own showers (Allende, Chihuahua, 11/22/11). Thus, some of these assassinations involved forced entry into homes.

Municipal chiefs and top-commanders were also killed while engaged in off-duty social activities in public places. Assassinations occurred to officers walking down city streets (Lerdo, Durango 11/6/11 El Salto, Durango 3/30/12, Pueblo Nuevo, Durango 5/28/12 Agua Prieta, Sonora 3/11/10), leaving restaurants (Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas 2/3/11 Choix, Sinaloa 6/29/12), in parking lots after a doctor’s appointment (Culicán, Sinaloa 2/23/12), in a clothing store (Ahomé, Sinaloa 3/26/12) and a drinking coffee inside a convenience store (Santa Catarina, Nuevo León, 11/23/06). Officers were also murdered outside the municipal palace (Sabinas Hidalgo, Nuevo León 2/13/06), in the parking lot of police headquarters (Santa Catarina, Nuevo León 6/26/11). Such assassinations demonstrate prior knowledge of a chief or commander’s on and off-duty routines, including medical appointments, restaurant usage and daily travel schedules.

3.4.2 *Extreme and Non-Extreme Personal Security*

In the face of such repeated lethal attacks on local top police officials engaged in everyday social activities, some chiefs advocate extreme personal security measures. For example, ex-Tijuana and current Ciudad Juárez police chief Julian Leyzoala (2011-present) has received multiple death threats from organized crime elements. He claims he stays alive only by sleeping, eating and locking himself up at headquarters at night and by never repeating external public routes (El Paso Times 2011a, b). Leyzoala, for example, counsels other police chiefs and ex-police chiefs to act with extreme vigilance and to not eat in public restaurants.

Investigative reports, however, also note that Leyzoala was protected by 20 bodyguards in six vehicles at an estimated cost of US\$50,000 in salaries alone when acting police chief of Tijuana (2008–2011) (Zeta Reportaje 2008).

Many top-level municipal police officials are, however, not able or willing to employ such extreme personal security measures. In the case of one ex-police chief, the official may not have felt that danger was immediate or that threats were credible. Former Chihuahua City (1995–1997) and Ciudad Juárez (2003) police chief José Refugio Plascencia was shot to death by three armed men in a Chihuahua City Applebee's restaurant (8/11/11). Ruvalcaba was eating alone in the restaurant even though he had received death threats and attacks from organized crime the week before (La Policiaca 2011h). Indeed, 6 days before his assassination, gunmen fired weapons and lobbed fire bombs at a family business in Delicias (El Paso Times 2011c).

Some military men serving in the post of municipal police chief also did not employ extreme self-protective security measures. Some were mowed down instantly by heavily armed cartel hit men as they engaged in everyday social activities. Jose Armando Vega Corderos, a Major in the Army turned police chief of El Salto (Durango) was executed as he walked down the street at lunch time. Presumed organized crime elements pulled up next to him in a vehicle, fired over 24 rounds of ammunition from AK-47s into his body in front of multiple eyewitnesses then fled (5/12) (El Mañana 2012). A retired Calvary Lieutenant serving as Torreón, Coahuila's police chief died instantly when gunmen entered the unprotected patio of his house, assassinated him and his female companion (Redacción 2011a).

The sub-director of Public Security of Linares (Nuevo León) claimed that police chief Enrique Barrera Nevares had received frequent death threats from suspected Gulf cartel members but “did not give them any importance” (La Jornada 2006). Police chief Barrera Nevares was attacked by hit-men with 15 shots (AK-47s, 0.9 mm pistols) just as stepped outside his house to go to work without any bodyguards or security elements (Es Mas 2006) (Photo 3.6).

His wife, María Teresa de Nevares said: “I had just said goodbye to him, it was about 8:50 am because he was on his way to work; they took him from me, they also took my life from me” (La Jornada 2006).

In other instances, municipal police chiefs and top-commanders were simply easily assassinated, struck down as they engaged in everyday activities. Trinidad

Photo 3.6 Police Chief Assassination in Linares, Nuevo León (Source Es Mas, 9/12/06)



Alberto Curiel Lugo, police chief of Los Mochis (Ahomé, Sinaloa) was caught by surprise walking down a commercial street. According to eyewitnesses, Curiel Logo saw two organized crime elements in a Grand AM descend upon him and tried to avoid the assassination by darting into a nearby clothing store to hide. Nevertheless, he was shot by the assassin with a 0.38 Super and fell before the store entrance in front of horrified store clerks (El Debate 2012a). One of the assassins in this case, “*El Ulises*”, an 18 year-old crystal addict tied to a local crime cell allegedly confessed to the crime and was prosecuted and sentenced for the homicide (El Debate 2012b).

As in the case of vehicular assaults, the targeting of top municipal police officials outside their vehicles was successful even when bodyguards were present. Police chief Hector Echevarria Islas was hit by 20+ bullets by an armed vehicular convoy while standing beside his bodyguards in Choix (Sinaloa 6/29/12). The chief had just stepped outside the restaurant where he, the mayor and a number of policemen and their wives were celebrating the “Day of the Police” (El Universal 2012b). No one else was killed except the chief despite the presence of dozens of guests, police and the mayor at the event.

3.4.3 Elements of Deception

The signature use of deception (White 2007, 2008) also characterized these law-enforcement assassinations. The use of treachery was raised in the execution of San Nicolás (Nuevo León) police chief Humberto Chávez Valero. The chief received a call on his cell phone at home 5 days after participating in the prosecution of suspected *Zeta* hit men (Proceso 2007). This call drew him out into a

garden just next to his house where he was instantly executed by hit-men sitting in waiting in several vehicles (El Porvenir 2006b). After the killing of chief Chávez Valero and 10 other municipal police in the larger Monterrey area in 2006–2007, the police chief of nearby San Pedro went on local television. He declared, “This is a hunt against the police; they are after us. We are going to have to go twice as protected and more alert” (Proceso 2007).

Deception was suspected in the assassination of Agua Prieta (Sonora) police chief José Matín Lopéz Contreras who was shot by armed suspects at an intersection (3/11/10). The hit-men had cut in front of him in their vehicle, an act which caused the chief to get out of his car and peacefully speak with the men, according to eyewitnesses. The suspects immediately executed chief Lopéz Contreras with an AK-47 configured with a silencer and fled (El Imparcial 2010a). The threat of possible collusion was raised by authorities in the assassination of Caborca (Sonora) deputy police chief Francisco Javier Gutiérrez Moreno. Gutiérrez Moreno was on his way to a restaurant to dine with his family (Excelsior 2011). Three local police officers detained the chief for a speeding violation. This required the chief to step down from his vehicle, and, at exactly the same moment, hit-men descended upon the victim, assassinated him and then fled. The three municipal officers were subsequently put under provisional arrest by state prosecutors for failing to aid the deputy chief Gutiérrez Moreno and for failing to shoot at the assassins during the attack whom they plainly identified (El Observador Arizona-Mexico 2011; Línea Directa 2011b).

The assassination of police chief Germain Pérez Quiroz (Santa Catarina, Nuevo León, 6/26/11) involved a combination of deception and forced entry. The chief was gunned down inside his own office at police headquarters by 15 armed men in 3 trucks wearing masks and what resembled police badges. The hit men entered the station and threatened police security until they told them the location of the chief. After killing chief Pérez Quiroz, gunmen took three policeman hostage and their whereabouts are unknown. A *Zeta* leader, head of the Monterrey *plaza* was later charged with the murder along with the masterminding of an attack on a casino in the city in which 52 persons lost their lives (Proceso 2012a).

3.4.4 Abduction Assassinations

Municipal police chiefs and top-commanders were also abducted before their murder (23 %, $n = 17$). In such cases, family or colleagues reported the officer as “missing” or “kidnapped by unknowns”. Later, the victim was found with signs of torture (hands bound, multiple gun shots wounds to their head, burned alive in their vehicles, beheaded and left with narco-messages) (Molzahn et al. 2012: 5).

Local police chiefs and top-commanders were abducted from their homes (Tijuana, Baja California Norte, 1/4/08 Angostura, Sinaloa, 7/12/11 Los Aldama, Nuevo León, 4/12/10), abducted returning and leaving home (Guadalupe, Nuevo León, 6/13/11; Los Cabos, Baja California Sur, 10/25/11); abducted on the way

to a restaurant (Juan Aldama, Zacatecas, 3/2/12); abducted from the police station (General Terán, Nuevo León, 1/26/11) and abducted from their autos (Castaños, Coahuila 11/14/11; Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila 11/22/11; Aguasleguas, Nuevo León 3/27/10), to name a few sites (see Table 3.1).

These abductions also involved the use of high-powered assault weapons in surprise attacks on off-guard officers. For example, a rapid, coordinated surprise abduction of the Los Cabos (Baja California Sur) police chief Martín Márquez Ruiz took place just as he left his home. Four armed hooded alleged organized crime elements surprised the chief, grabbing and shoving him into their vehicle although Márquez Ruiz always carried a loaded gun. They then executed the chief with a bullet to the head and threw his body away behind some buildings four blocks away (Zeta Reportaje 2011).

In Los Aldama (Nuevo León) presumed *Zeta* operatives grabbed the chief from his home as he was getting ready for bed. He was later found shot dead in a ditch. These abductions were often apparently unexpected. According to the Los Aldama mayor, “He [the police chief] was never involved in things, so we never thought this could happen.... We don’t have gangsters in these towns, we don’t have have people involved in drugs. So people are very afraid” (Houston Chronicle 2010).

3.4.5 *Bodies Left Lying Around/Torture*

The bodies of the abducted then assassinated police chiefs and top-commanders were found in various places (near the highway—Juan Aldama, Zacatecas, 3/2/12 Culiacán, Sinaloa, 2/26/10 Angostura, Sinaloa, 7/12/11 Durango, Durango, 1/27/09), in a well (Villa Union, Durango, 2/2/09) and in the local *plaza* with a narco-message (Poanas, Durango 1/18/10; Villa Union, Durango, 1/19/11).

Torture was also often associated with these abduction assassinations. A Tijuana (Baja California Norte) top-level police commander was abducted by a heavily armed commando along with another man from a home. Their bloodied bodies were later found in a canyon with signs of torture (El Sol de Tijuana 2008).

Kidnapping police chiefs and top-commanders, assassinating them and then leaving their bodies on public display represents a clear challenge to political authority (Grillo 2011). Such was the fate of Durango (Durango) police chief Marcelo de la Torre Macías. The chief was abducted, then shot in the head, back, shoulder and arm before being dumped face down by the side of the highway (El Siglo de Durango 2009a). Prosecutors for the State Attorney General claimed the case was organized crime related and initiated an investigation but declined to give details (El Siglo de Torreón 2009b).

Photo 3.7 shows the covered body of Anglostura (Sinaloa) chief Jesús Alfonso Ramírez Pérez. Ramírez Pérez’s body was found face down with signs of torture and with his hands and feet bound up by the shoulder on the local highway (Notimex 2011a). The chief had been abducted from his home by 12 heavily armed masked men dressed in black a few days earlier (Noroeste 2011b). Forensic



Photo 3.7 Abduction and assassination of Angostura (Sinaloa) Police Chief. *Source* *Línea Directa* (2011c)

officials considered him to have been murdered at the highway as they found 8 spent AK-47 cartridges there.

Other types of bodily mutilation were also associated with abduction assassinations. The police chief in Guadalupe, Nuevo León was abducted, quartered and left in a taxi near the police station (6/13/11). The charred bodies of the abducted Castaños (Coahuila) police chief, his brother and another victim were found in a vehicle near the highway 2 days after the chief was reported as missing (La Policiaca 2011k).

3.4.6 Beheadings

Mexico had no real history of beheadings before early 2006 (Bunker et al. 2010). Beheading are now considered the most dramatic means by which cartels accomplish their strategic and tactical objectives [to] “keep police and soldiers at bay, out-terrorize rival cartels, silence reporters and eyewitnesses, keep lawyers from prosecuting and prevent investigators from investigating” (Bunker et al. 2010: 150). Grayson (2011) maintains that beheadings and dismemberments are also used to punish those who oppose or betray them and as a sign to leaders to collaborate with them. Reuter (2009: 28) understands beheadings as clear signals to law enforcement that they had better subordinate to the superior power of organized crime by accepting bribes or resigning.

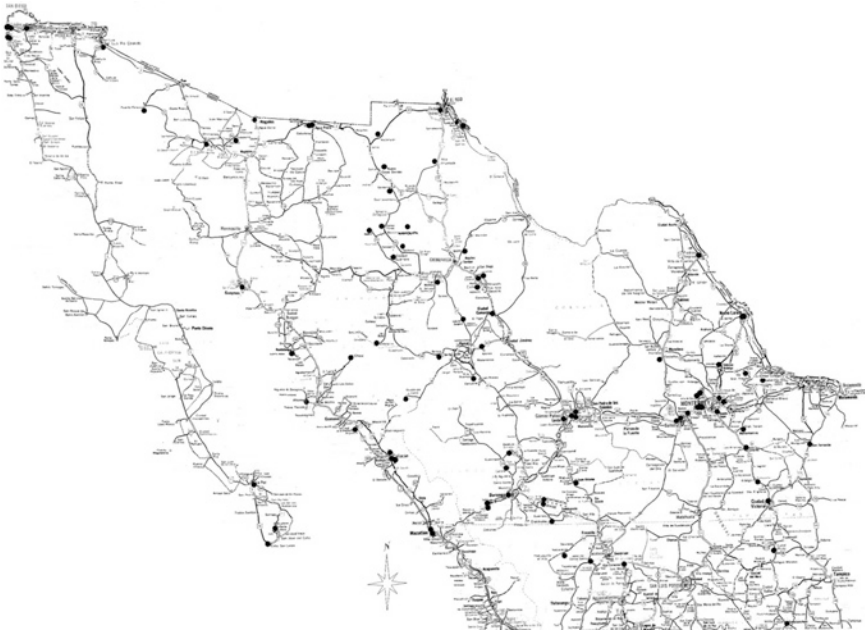
Narco messages were found alongside some abducted/assassinated Northern Tier municipal police chiefs and top-commanders. The decapitated head of the Villa Union (Durango) police chief was left in the plaza with the message: “This will happen to all the pigs and there are more to come” (Ésto va a pasarle a todos los policías marranos y faltan más) (Nota Roja 2011). Fourteen municipal police resigned within a week (La Policiaca 2011a).

Mass police resignations took place in the Praxedis G. Guerrero, Chihuahua police force after the decapitated head of the police chief was left in an ice box at the police station. The chief’s head was left with a narco-message from suspected “*La Línea*” members threatening rivals from the Sinaloa cartel (Bunker et al. 2010: 157; LaRed Noticias 2009). In General Terán (Nuevo León), officials declined to reveal the content of the narco-note left on the highway alongside the quartered and mutilated bodies of a top-commander and fellow police officers (El Imparcial 2011). The police corporation director immediately quit after the assassination (La Jornada 2011b).

The police chief in Agualeguas (Nuevo León) was found decapitated in his vehicle. His head was left in his lap next to his executed brother who sat on the passenger side. The letters of the Gulf Cartel (CDG) were found inscribed in blood on his driver’s door (Milenio 2010b). The head of the acting police chief of Tamazunchale (San Luis Potosí) Patricio Sandoval Pérez, was left in an ice box on his car roof and investigators found his body in the trunk (La Policiaca 2012). Chief Sandoval Pérez had been driving on the highway on his way to a police training course in the capital when intercepted, pulled violently out of the car, executed and then beheaded.

3.4.7 From Tactics to Routes

The analysis in previous Sects. 3.2 and 3.3 of this chapter have focused on the tactics, weapons and methods of attack in the assassinations of local police chiefs and top commanders. The geographical focus is on the Northern Tier states of Baja California Norte, Baja California Sur, Sonora, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Durango, Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. It has been argued that the tactical advantage of organized crime elements is manifest in two “signature” style assassination patterns: convoy style armed vehicular assaults and targeted, strategic hits on officers engaged in everyday social activities. While a systematic examination of top-level municipal police official assassinations in all states of Mexico is clearly outside the scope of this brief, a compressed view (2006, 2010–2011) from the state of Michoacán does reveal a similar pattern of *vehicular assassinations* (3/19/06, 4/28/06, 6/1/06, 6/9/06, 4/16/10, 7/30/10, 10/1/06, 1/7/11, 3/1/11, 3/10/11, 3/23/11), *strategic hits* (9/14/06, 1/28/10) and *abduction assassinations* (9/25/06, 10/3/06, 10/3/06) of police chiefs and top-level commanders (Cambio de Michoacán 2006; Nota Roja 2011; La Jornada 2011a; La Policiaca 2011b, 2011c; El Universal 2011a).



Map 3.1 Law enforcement assassination in northern tier states

In the next Sect. 3.4, the analysis now proceeds to map the Northern Tier towns and cities where such law-enforcement assassinations have occurred. This mapping is done in order to ascertain which drug-trafficking routes have been subject to such murders.

3.5 Three Northbound Routes (Western, Central, Eastern)

The assassinations of top-level municipal police officials are not random. They all take place along three distinctive North-bound drug-transit highways which traverse multiple Northern Tier municipalities. Map 3.1—Law-Enforcement Assassinations in Northern Tier States—reveals these three basic routes. These include a Western route (through Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California Sur to Baja California Norte), a Central route (through Zacatecas, Durango to Chihuahua) and an Eastern route (through San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas to Nuevo León or Coahuila).

First, along the most Western route, the assassinations can be traced from Mazatlán (Sinaloa) Northbound toward the U.S.-Mexican border along Highway 15/15D. This includes the cities and towns of Culicán, Anglosutra, Ahome, Choix (Sinaloa, 23), into Sonora—Huatabampo (176), Empalme, Tubutama (64), Caborca (2/37), Puerto Peñasco (37). The Western route ends directly along or very near

the U.S.-Mexican border—Nogales (Highway 15, Sonora), Agua Prieta (Highway 17, Sonora), San Luis Río Colorado (Highway 2, Sonora) Tecate (Highway 2, Baja California Norte) and Tijuana and Rosarito Beach (Highway 1 and 1D). In the southern tip of Baja California Sur, several law-enforcement assassinations were registered in Cabo San Lucas, Santa Anita and La Paz.¹⁰

The mapping of the assassination of local police chiefs and top commanders across Northern Tier Mexico also reveals a second, central route which encompasses the states of Zacatecas, Durango and Chihuahua. There are two recognizable sub-routes in the Central route, both of which can be traced near Fresnillo, Zacatecas. One runs into Highway 54 (Valparaíso, Jerez de García Salinas, San Cristobal, Zacatecas) and continues northward on Highway 54 (Fresnillo, Chalchihuites) into Durango (Villa de Union, El Salto, Canatlán, Coneto de Comonfort, Villa Ocampo [Durango]) and the city of Parral Chihuahua. The murders also run northward on Highway 49 (Juan Aldama, Durango) into Lerdo (Durango, Highway 49), Torreón (western Coahuila) and continue northward into Ciudad Camargo, Chihuahua [see Map 2.3, Chap. 2].

Third, the law-enforcement assassinations also follow a discernible Eastern route (San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, eastern Coahuila). This route can be charted northward on Highway 85 from Tamazunchale (San Luis Potosí), Ciudad Mante, Ciudad Victoria, Hidalgo (Tamaulipas) to Linares (Nuevo León), General Terán (cross roads of Highway 83 and 35) into Monterrey and its suburbs (Guadalupe, Santa Catarina, Apodoca, Villa de García, San Nicolás). The assassinations continued northward from the larger Monterrey/Saltito metropole (Ramos Arizpe, Saltillo) on Highway 85D (Sabinas Hidalgo) up to the U.S.-Mexican border at Nuevo Laredo (Nuevo León). Assassinations of chiefs and top-level local commanders also branched northbound on Highway 57 from Saltillo through the state of Coahuila (Castaños) to the U.S.-Mexican border city of Piedras Negras.¹¹

3.5.1 A Rural Dimension

These murders are taking place in strategic towns, often small-towns and cities that lie along major northbound state highways and their minor branches.

¹⁰ For further details alleging corruption and pay-offs to top law-enforcement by the Sinaloa Cartel along Baja California Sur Peninsula Highway 1 from Guerrero Negro to Los Cabos, see Chap. 1.

¹¹ The killing of the San Fernando police chief has been directly linked to retaliation for the investigation of the massacre of 72 Central American immigrants committed by the *Zetas* (Milenio 2011b). The forensic evidence was not sufficient to ascertain whether torture before death was a tactic employed in his assassination. The chief, along with the State Attorney prosecutor in charge of the investigation of the suspected *Zeta* migrant massacre were reported disappeared a day after their investigations began. Two weeks later their bodies were found in an advanced state of decomposition in a field thirty miles north-east of the city. The Mexican Secretariat of the Navy captured 1 and identified 11 other *Zeta* suspects in the murders (BBC 2010)

Map #5 also shows how the assassination of Northern Tier police chiefs and top commanders *not only* occurs in urban cities such as Mazatlán, Culicán, Monterrey, Torreón and Tijuana (Campbell 2009; Bunker and Sullivan 2011). They also took place outside major urban centers, importantly in places along the drug-trafficking routes that gain less press attention. Small towns located along these routes include Santa Anita [Baja California Sur], Villa Ocampo [Durango], Tubutama [Sonora], Coneto de Comonfort [Durango], Aguasleguas [Nuevo León], and Anglostura [Sinaloa] (pop. 1,000–5,000 [2010]). Larger towns were also affected along northbound drug-trafficking routes including Villa Union [Durango], Canatlán [Durango], General Terán [Nuevo León], Chalchihuites [Zacatecas], Castaños [Coahuila], Valparaíso [Zacatecas] and El Salto [Durango] (pop. less than 25,000 [2010]).

These law-enforcement assassinations occur across a series of states and municipalities which are characterized by distinctive types and levels of organized crime organizations. These municipalities are traversed by drug trafficking routes pertaining to at least one of the major cartels (Sinaloa, Zetas, Golfo, Beltrán Leyva), by multiple smaller cartels (Tijuana, Juárez), regional cartels (Pacífico Sur) smuggling multiple types of drugs (cocaine, marijuana, heroin, methamphetamine) (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 31–37; DEA 2012; Stratfor Stratfor 2012a, b). In addition, law-enforcement assassinations occurred in multiple municipalities within the Northern Tier which are also subject to the criminal actions of local organizations. Such organizations are often formed from disbanded cells from a larger cartel and consist primarily of drug distribution, dealing, kidnapping, car theft and extortion within their own and/or contiguous municipalities (Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 115). For example, this was the case of the killing of Mazatlán Sinaloa top police commander Andrés Rolando Ochoa Torres who was allegedly assassinated by hired guns (La Policiaca 2011g). Ochoa Torres' presumed assassins were members of a criminal cell also involved in car theft, extortion, illegal weapons possession and assaulting motorists on the highway in the municipality (El Sol de Mazatlán 2011). Similarly, the Durango Attorney General's Office blamed an organized criminal cell for the armed vehicular assassination on the highway just outside the small town of Coneto de Comonfort (Durango) of the police chief (La Policiaca 2011c).

Thus, the mapping of the geography of the killing of law enforcement combined with the data in Table 3.1 suggests a similarity of assassination weapons and method of attack across rural and urban municipalities along three main northbound drug-trafficking routes. This suggests a certain similarity of assassination strategy across distinctive types and levels of organized crime organizations.¹²

¹² In fact, this brief found evidence of some level of legal processing of these law-enforcement assassinations in 16.6 % of the cases (identification of criminal actors, provisional arrests, suspect in custody or sentencing). The organized crime groups identified included: *Zetas* (6.25 %), criminal cells/hired guns (5.2 %); the Sinaloa cartel (3.1 %) and the Gulf cartel (2.08 %)

3.6 Institutional Dimensions of Law-Enforcement Assassination

3.6.1 *Institutional Deficits, Impunity and Law-Enforcement Assassination*

Gaining more security at the local level is difficult for honest municipal police chiefs, commanders and officers because of the tremendous organized crime challenge, their limited authority and their dependence on the larger criminal justice system. As Sabet (2012: 121) notes:

To counter the threat of organized crime is perhaps the most challenging [enormous policy change]. Doing so requires removing infiltrated officers from the force, securing radio communications, protecting officers while they are on duty by giving them adequate equipment (e.g., bulletproof vests, assault rifles), revising operational procedures, and protecting officers who have been threatened (by permitting them to carry their weapons off duty, providing bodyguards, or even relocating them). While outside the jurisdiction of local police chiefs, countering the threat of reprisals also requires aggressive prosecutions of police killings”.

This brief suggests that “gaps” in the rule of law at several institutional levels (legal, judicial, political) create a structure of impunity that contributes to these law-enforcement assassinations. The legal system still cannot function as a sufficient system of restraint for drug-related killings. The Chihuahua court system, as one example, simply lacked the institutional capacity to match the 2,150 % rise in homicides since 2006 in the state despite the laudable introduction of oral trials in 2008 (Schatz 2011b; TBI 2010). In 2009, there were 584 successful homicide sentences in the state of Chihuahua. Only a portion of these prosecuted homicides were related to drug-related homicides despite a recorded 2,082 homicides that year (Schatz 2011b). By 2011, oral courts in Chihuahua issued a total of only 139 homicide sentences despite an estimated 1,348 cartel-related slayings in the state that year (Informe Chihuahua 2011: 49; TBI 2011).

Cases of police assassinations also fail to be adequately prosecuted (Sabet 2012: 219). Yáñez Romero (2009: 17) reports that only 2 % of the police officer killings by organized crime elements (2007–2008) were brought to trial by authorities, leaving 98 % of the cases without investigation and with no perpetrator in prison. A lack of judicial institutional capacity translates into continued opportunity to commit law-enforcement assassination without severe risk of prosecution (Castañeda 2012: 204).¹³ Lack of legal system capacity at the state and federal levels in Mexico thus continues to hinder the systematic, large-scale prosecution

¹³ At the federal level, by mid-2011, there were a total of only 79 successful, completed federal prosecutions for organized crime in Mexico (only one of which was found to include a drug-related assassination) (PGR Informe de Labores 2011: 79; Schatz 2011a, b: 7). The PGR reports that Federal Criminal Sentences for Organized Crime (SIEDO) for drug-related crimes were $n = 34$ (2007), $n = 132$ (2008), $n = 97$ (2009), $n = 114$ (2010), $n = 79$ (2011, 7/31) (Schatz 2011b; PGR Informe de Labores 2011: 79)

of organized-crime related assassins (Schatz 2011b; PGR Quinto Informe 2011). This is despite some recent advances in the oral trials homicide prosecution of hired guns (Excelsior 2012) including police assassins (Redacción 2013b; *Públic Es* 2011) in select municipalities in some states.

At the level of the local criminal justice system, municipal institutional reforms and improvements to the legal system are frequently advocated as a key containment solution to organized crime (Kugler et al. 2005; Kugler and Rosenthal 2000). However, as noted in Chapter 2 in the state of Chihuahua, limited municipal capacity led to significant delays with 78 % of the municipalities still not implementing Calderón's unitary police system in Mexico by mid-2012 (Horacero 2012; *Línea Directa* 2013). Incoming President Enrique Peña Nieto, in early 2013, announced yet a new plan to bring state police from each of Mexico's 31 states under a federal command (Stratfor 2013). Stratfor (2013) analysts, however, do not predict any significant changes in 2013 as a direct result of Peña Nieto's domestic security policies since they will take time to produce results.

Another "gap" in the rule of law refers to the U.S. judicial system which relies on a strategy of relatively weak prosecution in seeking to stop firearms trafficking to Mexico. There is an average 1 year sentence for straw purchasing versus an average of 10 year sentence for drug conspiracy charges (Goodman 2011: 9). This tepid prosecution continues despite findings by the Mexican federal attorney general's office that 80 % of the traced drug-trade related captured cartel arms in Mexico originate in the US (2010–2011) (PGR Quinto Informe 2011: 94). U.S. efforts to prevent arms trafficking (ATF's Project Gunrunner, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Operation Armas Cruzadas) have had some success such as the May 2008 seizure of 1,300 weapons from a gun store owner in Phoenix. Nevertheless, overall the flow of weapons has clearly exceeded interdiction efforts (Sabet 2009: 14–16) and large-scale, U.S. based efforts to stringently prosecute illegal arms buyers for Mexican cartels have not yet occurred.¹⁴

Efforts to strongly address such US institutional deficits from the Mexican side have not yet proven particularly fruitful either. One Department of Homeland Security official recollected a meeting with Mexican counterparts in the lead up to the Mérida Initiative where one of the chief Mexican negotiators argued that

¹⁴ In the US in 2009, in response to the General Accounting Office's (GAO) request for information on the prosecution of arms traffickers, various US agencies were unable to provide complete data on prosecutions of cases. According to the GAO: "Officials from the Department of Justice (DOJ's) Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys (EOUSA) stated their national database for tracking criminal cases does not have a category specific to Mexico arms trafficking cases. They said there is not a simple way to determine which cases involve arms trafficking to Mexico since cases may involve various defendants and charges, and no charges are specific to arms trafficking to Mexico" (U.S. GAO 2009: 43). In terms of total US prosecutions, the US Senate Caucus cites a January 2011 ATF report of 809 successful total prosecutions with 209 persons under court supervision for illegal arms trafficking to Mexico (US Senate 2011a: 9). Seekle and Finklea (2013: 39) from the Congressional Research Service report that between FY2005 and FY2010, ATF investigations in U.S. border states led to the seizure of over 8,700 guns and the indictment of 1,705 defendants, of whom 1,170 were convicted, in federal court

Mexico would far prefer that the U.S. provided no financial support but simply took action to address the flow of weapons into the country. The US was more prepared to offer money than to address potential gun control (Sabet 2009: 14). Mexican authorities... “unable to address the root of the problem...have instead joined the arms race (Sabet 2009: 16)”. In 2013, symbolic gestures by the Mexican ambassador to support renewed gun control legislation in the US following a mass shooting in a Connecticut elementary school in late 2012 were complemented by a 54,000 signature petition by Mexican citizens calling upon the US government to take further steps to combat weapons trafficking (Fox News Latino 2013).

In fact, the U.S. spent \$473.9 million in Mexico by August 2011 on international law enforcement to achieve the four goals of “disrupting criminal organizations, institutionalizing reforms to sustain a rule of law and respect for human rights, creating a 21st century border and building strong and resilient communities” (Seelke and Finklea 2011: 2). In 2012, the US spent a total of \$25.3 million on democracy, human rights and governance (Foreign Assistance 2012). Yet, there has not been a *single* provision or budgeted line item in *Plan Mérida* or *Mérida II* which addresses the need to fund greater local security efforts to insulate honest Mexican municipal policemen from narco-penetration (US-GAO 2010: 8–9).

At the level of domestic Mexican law enforcement, efforts to improve protection for local police are also very uneven as illustrated by the state of Chihuahua. In a novel pro-active approach, the city of Ciudad Juárez raised \$1.54 million (US) to house the entire police force (n = 2,250 officers) in hotels for at least a month with round the clock surveillance (February 2012). This occurred after the fragmented Juárez cartel threatened and then began to “kill one policeman per day” until the police chief resigned. Multiple Juárez police were subsequently assassinated as they went home from work, got into their cars to and from work and/or were ambushed at gas stations, kidnapped from autos and then burned alive (El Paso Times 2012). The cloistering of Juárez officers worked well to preserve police lives for 2 months until they were given the option to return home on March 29, 2012 (only 600 officers (27 %) choose to remain in the hotel) (La Policiaca 2012c). The next day, five officers were assassinated and two gravely wounded by an armed commando at a party in an officer’s home (El Universal 2012a; La Policiaca 2011d). Thus, the cloistering of police in hotels in Ciudad Juárez was briefly successful in reducing law-enforcement assassination until officers left the hotel. Subsequently, multiple Ciudad Juárez police officers were assassinated in 2012 and, in early 2013, the Sinaloa cartel “declared war” on the city’s police after the death of a cartel leader, executing a municipal officer (Redacción 2013b).

The problem of institutionalized corruption within law enforcement also remains very complex. Investigations by Mexico’s Organized Crime Unit of the Federal Attorney General’s Office (SIEDO) reveal that some police (federal, state and municipal) are protectors of identified drug-cartel assassins while others (federal organized crime investigators, police chiefs, mayors) are on identified cartel assassin “hit” lists (El Universal 2009b; Proceso 2010b; Reforma 2012; El Herald de Chihuahua 2008).

3.7 Police Corruption and Lack of Public Confidence

The assassination of Northern tier municipal police chiefs and top-level commanders can be understood more broadly as the result of a lack of “intelligence-based policing” (Dintino and Martens 1983) and the lack of information and communications technologies (ICT) (Sheptycki 2003). The continued persistence of institutionalized corruption within law enforcement facilitates law-enforcement assassinations by providing inside information on the personal movements, personal domiciles and employment-related movements of police chiefs and top-commanders. This is intelligence, often provided by police insiders, which refines the strategic targeting of officers by organized crime elements.

Impunity at all institutional levels of the police also remains a problem. Federal investigators found that one drug cartel (the *Zetas*) were able to penetrate and buy federal, state and municipal law-enforcement to secure impunity for their operations. Officers working for organized crime facilitated a number of tasks including the corruption of local prosecutors to free detained criminals (Proceso 2012b).¹⁵ In the state of Tamaulipas, the military took over twenty-two police departments because of institutionalized local corruption attributable to organized crime (Proceso 2011a). In three Tamaulipas municipalities, police chiefs were either detained for direct linkages with organized crime (Soto la Marina), for participation in organized-crime related kidnapping (Valle Hermoso), or for acting as “look-outs” (*halcones*) for cartels (Jiménez) (Proceso 2010b).

Future prosecutions will help reveal the number and geographical range of corrupt police chiefs and commanders who are assassinated because they failed to deliver on promises or betrayed their bribers. This was the case with the assassination of Saltillo, Coahuila police chief Emanuel Almaguer who paid the payroll and received support for expenses of the patrols of corrupt police working for the *Zetas* (Proceso 2012b).

At the political level, politicians continued to purge local police in multiple states in Mexico in 2011–2012 but potential DTO recruitment and severe citizen mistrust of local police complicated such policy initiatives. In the state of

¹⁵ In 2009, the United Nations estimated that 60 % of municipal governments and police forces had been infiltrated by drug cartels (Justice in Mexico News Report 2009: 2). Recent federal prosecutions continued to reveal large monthly pay-offs (US \$2,000–\$100,000) by organized crime elements to selected military, the Federal Attorney General’s Office, the federal police, the AFI personnel, judicial, state and municipal police in exchange assistance and impunity for their operations (Proceso 2012b; PGR/SIEDO/UEIDCS/041/2012). The federal attorney general’s office report on the *Zetas* also showed that public servants were paid by the cartel to: report all formal or anonymous denunciations of its members, share classified SIEDO information on its members, to remove charges against organized criminals, liberate stolen goods, vehicles and weapons secured in operations, to filter the federal transit police at selected federal highways to identify rival commandos or their cargos and to ensure free transit, to provide information of operations in the Federal District and other corporations, to escort shipments of drugs, weapons, armor and other goods to the cities of Miguel Aleman, Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa and to provide protection for illegal PEMEX oil extractions (Proceso 2012b)

Veracruz, for example, authorities dismissed all of the state's municipal police departments ($n = 1,737$ police officers) as part of Calderón's national effort to root out corrupt, abusive or incompetent police (Insight Crime 2011). Nevertheless, some analysts worried that such mass purges also provide more recruits for drug-cartels.¹⁶ Meanwhile, citizens continued to evaluate the municipal police as "very corrupt" (42–55 %). Only 25–27 % of Mexican citizens in 2011 rated the performance of the local police as "good" and 72 % stated that they mistrusted their municipal policemen (Cayeros et al. 2011: 4).

For their part, a unique survey of Ciudad Juárez [Chihuahua] police officers revealed their perception that the efficacy of the police is compromised by the criminal justice system. Only 2 % thought that municipal police had any ability to resolve the problem of homicide, despite the officer's acknowledgement by 52 % that homicide was the crime which most worried society (Justiciabárometro 2011: 41). Municipal police officers also acknowledged the problem of police corruption. On a scale of 0 (no corruption) to 4 (a lot), the majority (65 %) ranked the problem a "2" or higher. A full 44 % blamed the problem of police corruption, however, on high-ranking police officials alone (Justiciabárometro 2011: 37).

Massive financial enticements for corruption to specific Mexican law enforcement officials do persist. Pay-offs to organized crime informants continues even from within high-level federal prosecutorial institutions (Proceso 2012b; La Policiaca 2013). Arrests of SEIDO (the Federal Attorney General's organized crime investigation unit) officials who also had with ties to the Supreme Court and the Federal Attorney General's Office were made because such individuals allegedly provided protection to Sinaloa cartel boss "El Chapo" Guzmán (Reforma 2012).

3.7.1 Reducing Target Access

The transnational trafficking of drugs; particularly cocaine, can bring guns in its wake and render conflict even more lethal as in the Jamaican case (Agozino et al. 2009). In the Mexican case, the easy availability of automatic and semi-automatic weapons has amplified the severity and lethal consequences of the rapid weaponization of organized crime elements (Cook et al. 2009). The murder of multiple Northern Tier municipal police chiefs and top-level commanders was facilitated by their being tactically outmatched and often overwhelmed by the superior armed force of organized crime elements. The presence of such high-grade weaponry at the local levels in multiple Northern Tier states will pose a continued risk for assassination for local police.

¹⁶ As Samuel Gonzalez, Mexico's former Attorney General, told *Al Jazeera* in a report on Veracruz's mass police firings, "The great paradox is that we pay for the training of organized crime through the bad planning in the training of the police. Then, we get rid of the police, and they go to organized crime" (Insight Organized Crime 2011).

The almost uniform inability of police chiefs and top-level commanders to exercise any effective form of self-defense in the face of high-powered assault weapons renders them relatively “soft” targets. This reflects an aspect of impunity which is also manifest in terms of inadequate measures to reduce target access to local police officials and officers.

In fact, protective measures were so scant in the state of Chihuahua outside of Ciudad Juárez, to give one example, that the local police in Meoqui, Chihuahua (still without a police chief) were so threatened by organized crime elements that they simply locked themselves into police headquarters. They refused to leave in fear of new attacks and demanded better arms, uniforms, equipment and even gas for patrols (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2011). Despite the protest, a year later, a second Meoqui police top commander was executed outside his vehicle in a supermarket parking lot just after work by an armed commando (Tiempo 2012). In Namiquipa, Chihuahua, the lack of public protection of local government officials, including police, became so severe that three dozen municipal employees temporarily “took-over” the municipal palace. They demanded greater protection for their lives and greater medical security (El Heraldo de Chihuahua 2011).

In reality, the problem of reducing target access *is* often effectively dealt with at the highest levels of Mexican state law enforcement. Total bodyguard protection and access to adequate bullet proof vehicles was provided, for example, to six top-level state law enforcement officials in Baja California Norte in 2008. These officials included the State Attorney General, State Public Security Director, Tijuana Public Security Director, Director of the State Preventative Police, Tijuana Municipal Police Chief and Rosarito Director of Public Security. These top law enforcement officials were protected by an average of 18 bodyguards working 24-h a days, 365 days a year and officials had access to T6+ bullet-proof vehicles (Zeta Reportaje 2008). Their multiple body guards attended to all aspects of the lives (home, office, vehicles, work). The annual cost for these six officers was approximately (US\$2,007,466.16 [2008]).

It is not likely that such a level of budget expenditure will occur to decrease target access to municipal police chiefs, commanders or officers across Mexico’s municipalities. Instead, short-term strategies which may or may not reduce target access are being implemented on a city by city basis. In Guadalupe (Nuevo León), ex-military men turned police chiefs rely on religious leaders and moral training campaigns to dissuade individual police officers from getting involved with organized crime elements (Redacción 2012b). In Jalapa (Veracruz), the mayor used federal money to hire an Israeli security consultant to teach basic policing, self-defense and resolution of crises situations such as hostage taking (New York Times 2011).

Recent efforts to increase the assault rifle fire-power of the municipal Mexican police may, in fact, increase their number of opportunities for self-defense in fire-fights with organized crime elements. Nevertheless, a related issue is the fact that the receipt of high-powered assault rifles per se in a municipality is no panacea. In the aforementioned municipality of Guadalupe (Nuevo León), the receipt of 15 rifles from SEDENA designated for the police chief’s bodyguards may have protected chief Florencio Santos Hernandez from dying in a second assassination attempt.

Nevertheless, it did nothing to prevent the subsequent abduction, decapitation, and quartering of top-level Guadalupe municipal commander Juan Fidencio Salazar (Univision 2011).

3.7.2 Continued Assassination Risks for Municipal Police

The assassination of Northern Tier local police chiefs and commanders can be understood to represent a change in the relationship between organized crime elements, populations and territories along shifting drug-trafficking routes. A tactical advantage puts into question, at least at the municipal level, the idea of the traditional legitimacy of the state's monopoly of coercive force in order to assert their position. While it is true that transnational organized crime is a phenomenon too large in scale for the national state to handle (Williams and Savona 1995), organized crime is still manifest locally and so needs be governed locally (Hobbs 1998).

Skeptycki (2003) raised the issue that the increased presence of organized crime can actually provide an occasion for the re-articulation and re-establishment of state capacity in an era of globalization when "many signs point to the "hollowing out" of the nation-state and a diminution of its capacities" (Jessop 1993, 1994). Yet, according to Skeptycki (2003), the reassertion of state capacity in the context of bi-national (and international) drug-trafficking can present a "bewildering" proliferation of platforms of governance. In the Canadian context, "some governmental capacities have been transferred to a supranational level. Other expressions of states' capacities have been removed to restructured local or regional levels of governance within the national state. Then too there are aspects of governmental capacity in emerging horizontal networks of regional transnational governance connecting across states' boundaries" (Skeptycki 2003: 511).

In the Mexican context, efforts to re-assert state capacity are also occurring but face complex challenges which cross municipal, state, regional, national and international boundaries and are often riddled with contradictions. National governmental efforts to improve local policing conditions through the creation of a state-level unitary police and a restructuring of police governance are hailed by some as a potentially positive step (Reuters 2012). As noted in Sect. 3.1, new bullet-proof vests and helmets (Level 3A protection) are available to certain, qualifying "high-intensity" crime-ridden municipalities. This represents a relative increase in the level of bullet-proof gear available to local police officers (SUBSEMUN 2012).

3.7.3 Access to Bullet-Proof Vehicles

Nevertheless, given the repetitive, successful assassination of officers with high-powered assault weapons by hired guns (AK-47s, AR-15s), a broad-based,

effective strategy to the problem of target access in Mexico would need to include a significantly increased number of bullet-proof vehicles for municipal police. By 2011, the Mexican Association of Bullet-Proof Vehicles (AMBA) reported that the municipal, state and federal government did represent 30 % of the market-share for bullet-proof vehicles in the nation, a market that has grown by 146 % from 2006. In 2011, a total of 2,949 bullet-proof vehicles were sold with 885 being government vehicles (El Economista 2012). In 2012, overall sales were up by another 10 % from the previous year to 3,102 (AAP 2013).

Yet, official federal SEDENA military statistics (2006–2011) report that only 5.9 % (n = 1,105) of all military vehicles were bullet-proof (SEDENA 2012: 255). Statistics for federal police SSP show the total number of official vehicles as 668 (2008, 2010) but do not report the number or percentage of total vehicles that are bullet-proofed (SSP 2012: 192). Data on the percent share of Mexican municipal vehicles that are bullet-proof are simply lacking. In the data presented in this brief, only 1 % of the municipal police chiefs or top-level commanders drove in a bullet-proof vehicle (n = 1, Ramos Arizpe, Coahuila).

3.7.4 Uneven Institutional Outcomes in Efforts to Reduce Target Access Across Northern Tier Municipalities

New confidence tests for the police were implemented in 2011–2012 and are yielding some results in terms of attempting to reduce corruption and the purchase of informants within the police ranks. For example, in the state of Tamaulipas, 14 % (43 of 300 officers) failed the new confidence tests and then were resigned their posts (Notimex 2011b).

Yet, national implementation of increased municipal security including obtaining stronger weaponry has also been slowed by the continuing lack of municipal capacity. In fact, implementation of policies to strengthen local police and to reduce target access follows a distinctive tempo across different municipalities over different states. They often depend upon a given municipality's differential access to federal resources (La Jornada 2011d; El Mañana de Tamaulipas 2012).

The problems of the mayor of Chihuahua City [Chihuahua] municipality are illustrative of such complexities inherent in efforts to re-assert local governing capacities within a federal governing structure. The municipality of Chihuahua lost 24 municipal police to assassination under the 2 year administration of municipal president Marco Adán Quezada (2010–2012). Adán Quezada complained to the federal government that he had ordered and pre-paid SEDENA for 500 assault rifles in mid-2010 but had to wait 18 months for the assault rifles to arrive (El Universal 2012c). At that point, it was additionally stipulated that the weapons would not be released until an additional \$115,881 (US dollars) was paid by the municipality for an officer training course on how to use them. The mayor protested that during the 18 month wait, the municipality could have conducted the necessary weapons training. “Now” [he noted], “when we send the officers into

training, we're going to have to take them off patrol duty and this will affect public security" (El Universal 2012c).

More effectively, the entire Rosales, Chihuahua police department went on mass strike the day after the funeral of the fourth police chief assassinated in the municipality in one single year (2012). The police corporation also submitted a formal petition to the mayor and the state government claiming lack of support and proper administration for the police had led to repeated assassinations against police (La Policiaca 2012e). Two days later police were back on the job with a 25 % pay increase, life-insurance, two additional official vehicles and promise from the state government to deliver radio equipment and to accelerate the 9 month wait for the purchase of four additional long arms (La Policiaca 2012e).

Less effectively, the Nuevo León State Security of Public Security recognized that 18 of the state's 51 municipalities lacked any police at all because, despite signing the agreement to implement the Unitary Police, the state government did not have sufficient institutional capacity to do so. As such, many municipalities lacked resources for police, transit agents and civil services (La Jornada 2013). Manuel González Arizpe, the police chief of the rural municipality of Doctor González (Nuevo León) resigned his post for lack of sufficient resources to carry out his duties. Complaining about how the effects of the implementation of "confidence" tests (toxicological, physical, economic) had led to the firing of numerous officers, González Arizpe argued:

It is incredible that in Nuevo León there are 18 municipalities without a single patrol, be it from the Federation, the state or the municipalities, and this is how we are supposed to confront organized crime which is armed to the teeth.... I came to have 5 officers, armed only with Billy clubs and good faith. When 20 delinquents arrived at the town square, the only options we had were to apply evasive tactics to confront them. But, thank God, they did not advance, either because they just wanted to scare us or they were incompetent.... I went a month attending to every one of the 250 calls that citizens registered. It is not easy when they tell you armed men are disputing land claims; you do not know if it is an old lady with a 0.22, as occurred in one case, or if they are 10 types armed with AK-47s and you have to go armed only with your bravery and a Billy club.... I believe that police too have human rights and to send them into combat delinquency without arms is neither right nor is it humane.

3.8 Conclusion

The post-2006 assassination of Northern Tier police chiefs and top-level commanders is the result of the interaction between the impunity in the political, legal and law enforcement systems and the goals and weapons of the organized crime elements. Multi-level "gaps" in rule of law institutions set the stage for such murders to happen. These include gaps within the legal, political and judicial systems to restrict opportunity for the assassination of police officials by reducing access to weapons and officials, increasing security, reinforcing local police capacity, reducing corruption and punishing offenders.

Yet, it is the goals of organized crime elements—to clear drug-smuggling routes and to try and gain more pliant governance at the municipal level—that motivate the killings. The specific geography of these assassinations is not random but follows a pattern of drug-smuggling routes and the particular strategic goals of organized crime elements in that town. If bribery and/or the placement of local corrupt police chiefs facilitate criminal goals, as in multiple Tamaulipas municipalities, a strategy of payoffs to police chiefs is pursued (Proceso 2010b, 2011a). If, however, the local situation is characterized by increased federal, state and/or local prosecution in a given strategic town, the superior tactical power of organized crime elements may facilitate the use of law-enforcement assassination as a strategy of choice.

The interaction between impunity and the particular goals and geographic routes of organized crime elements also helps explain why certain municipalities in certain states (Northern Tier states, states aligned along key trafficking routes) are more adversely affected by the assassination of their police chief(s) and commanders. In the state of Chihuahua, small towns are particularly vulnerable to this crime as are Northern municipalities with strategic access points to the US Interstate 10 and small towns located at, or near, the crossroads of the major North-South state highways. The political assassination of politicians along highways was also a tactic employed by certain PRI hired guns in electoral-political disputes with the PRD during the 1988–2005 period (Schatz 2011a: 41).

Superior weaponry allows organized crime elements clear physical access to their targets. The continued primary risk factors for municipal police chiefs and top-commanders are their lack of adequate equipment, especially bullet-proof vehicles, and their constant vulnerability to surprise attacks by hit-men using high-powered assault weapons. A tactical advantage is therefore another element which renders such murders a “successful” strategy by organized crime elements. Specific town-by-town local gains by organized crime elements and systemic institutional failure to contain opportunity for assassination combine. Together, they create the perfect (lethal) storm facilitating the law-enforcement assassination of Northern Tier municipal police chiefs and top commanders.

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Chapter 4

Conclusion

Law-enforcement assassinations are targeted hits occurring over a series of municipalities across a range of Mexican states. They demonstrate a similar, consistent pattern by organized crime elements who employ surprise, deception, and high-powered assault weapons (AK-47s, AR-15s) killing off-guard police chiefs and commanders. The assassinations of top-level municipal officials are not random. They all take place along three distinctive North-bound drug-transit highways which traverse multiple Northern Tier municipalities. Their mapping shows a similarity of assassination weapons and method of attack across distinctive types and levels of organized crime organizations.

This variety of criminal motivations over time for assassination in the drug trade (Reuter 2009: 279) carries implications for the local rule of law and state stability. In Northern Tier Mexico, the impact of law-enforcement assassination on municipal stability and institutional structures varies. In extreme instances, organized crime elements have sought to “empty” a town of its rule of law institutions (Ríos 2011: 18; Guerrero-Gutiérrez 2011: 33) to allow for greater freedom of movement of goods. Such municipalities are often, but not always, also those classified as “high-intensity” crime-ridden municipalities and are located along the U.S. border towns or along strategic drug-trafficking routes (Subsemun 2012). That same town may then be “re-taken” later by federal forces. This represents a back-and-forth pattern of control over towns which can vary within a single municipality and state.

In other strategic towns that lie along drug-transporting routes, the goals of organized crime elements are more narrowly focused. Law-enforcement assassination may involve the specific removal of an unwanted top-police officer and/or the placement of a corrupt police chief or high-level commander without an effort to gain further control over the town’s political or legal institutions. While no less lethal for the individual officer, such selective assassination was not accompanied by a massive disruption to the town’s legal, political or criminal

justice institutions. Law-enforcement assassination as such a “neutralization” or “placement” strategy in multiple towns was thus not accompanied by an institutional meltdown.¹

This suggests that there can be degrees on a continuum of the effort to use law-enforcement assassination as a strategy to undermine the local rule of law. Depending upon the strategic importance of the town, neutralization and/or placement achievement through assassination may suffice. In other more strategic towns, a greater effort is made, at least temporarily, to reduce or eliminate the government personnel associated with rule of law institutions.

This book has also shown that law-enforcement assassination in Mexico’s drug-war particularly targets the rule of law personnel (local police chiefs, transit police commanders, municipal commanders) who are operationally the ones watching and/or enforcing laws in drug-transit zones and highways. The lesser killing of military forces (2008–2012) (Molzahn et al. 2013: 31) occurs because military and federal police forces are more intermittent along these routes, providing temporary “security umbrellas in towns that are under siege by gangs of armed men.... Army troops [do] not, however, substitute for police in conducting day-to-day law enforcement activities” (Moyano 2011: 15). Thus, municipal law enforcement clearly represented the “front line” of the Mexican drug-war (2006–2012).

Mexican law enforcement assassinations are a transnational problem, particularly in light of the dynamic of spill-over arms, especially from the U.S. Easy access to high-powered weaponry, especially after 2004, along with advanced planning, training, intelligence and counter-intelligence preparation, mobility, communications changed the tactical balance of power between organized crime elements and the local police. This, in turn, opened a new space for the successful use of law-enforcement assassination, especially given institutional limitations of the federal police and/or military to sustain a long-term presence in multiple small-towns. Spill-over arms from the U.S. along with Calderón’s strategy of “juridical” (unconditional) rather than “territorial” (conditional) governmental “crackdowns” on cartels (Lessing 2011: 18) thus reduced the relative costs of using “bullets” over “silver”.

Law-enforcement assassinations in Mexico are also a transnational problem because of their policy implications for state stability. This raises a certain paradox. On the one hand, spill-over arms are a manifestation of how global forces are having a great local impact on the police (Bowling 2009, 2012: 155).

¹ In other instances, there can be towns with no or few persons or civil society institutions (schools, businesses, day-care centers) left open without any reported law-enforcement assassination. The example of the town of El Alamillo (Madera municipality) Chihuahua is instructive in this regard. In 2009, El Alamillo was practically deserted, termed a “ghost town” since all of the houses and the local daycare center were burned and thirty persons were kidnapped by cartel gunmen (XEPL 2009). Two hundred families fled the town because of constant harassment by criminal gangs; allegedly by members of *La Línea* (the Juárez cartel enforcer wing). Local residents speculated that the municipal police of Madera and its zone were collusive with organized crime elements or might even form part of such criminal groups (La Policiaca 2009).

Transnational arms straw-buyers in Texas cities facilitate the killing of top police chiefs and commanders in small Chihuahua towns. At the same time, U.S. law enforcement officials also fear “reverse” spill-over violence and violent assaults by Mexican cartels against their own agents (Tucson 2010). The Texas Department of Public Security claims that since 2009 there have been 78 incidents in which shots were fired by Mexican cartels at 85 US law enforcement officers (Texas Department of Public Security 2013). Thus, there is an intimate weapons connection between illegal drug markets in a single Mexican *plaza* and in a major US city which is the transnational supply and distribution network that feeds them (Bowling 2009: 155).

On the other hand, policy-makers in Washington seek a transnational policy solution which aims to “fight organized crime and associated violence while furthering respect for human rights and the rule of law” without significant provisions for reducing the assassination risk for honest Mexican municipal police. By early 2013, Plan Mérida and Mérida II had delivered only 26 armored vehicles (May 2009) (US-GAO 2010: 8) with no budgetary plans for additional equipment procurement to Mexico.² This led some analysts to argue that it is impossible to combat transnational criminal enterprises by focusing so heavily on the U.S. side of the border, and that domestic programs must be accompanied by stronger efforts to build the capacity of Mexican law enforcement officials (Seelke and Finklea 2013: 33).

This book has also shown how Mexican federal officials began in 2008 to incrementally improve equipment and arms to municipal police including assault rifles and bullet proof vests (Sabet 2012; Subsemun 2012). Select police departments in some violent Northern Tier municipalities began to receive high-powered assault rifles by late 2012. Yet, the continued lack of access to adequate bullet-proof vehicles by all levels of Mexican law enforcement (Sedena 2012: 25; SSP 2012: 192) still renders better officer protection one of the most challenging aspects of the effort to counter the organized crime (Sabet 2012: 121). Furthermore, the growing volume and value of U.S. firearms sales to Mexico (2010–2012) combined with the relatively small number of arms seized at the border (McDougal et al. 2013: 5) does not necessarily bode well for reducing the target access of municipal police. Thus, law-enforcement assassination in Mexico presents a transnational problem without an adequate transnational solution.

In the Mexican context, efforts to re-assert state capacity in the context of bi-national (and international) drug-trafficking have also presented a “bewildering” proliferation of platforms of governance (Skeptycki 2003), often characterized by uneven municipal institutional outcomes. The federal government’s more

² The US President Budget Request (Executive Office 2012: 240) makes a formal commitment to supporting law enforcement along with counternarcotics, and demand reduction programs to “advance the goal of dismantling drug trafficking and other criminal organizations”. Nevertheless, funding support is for forensics laboratories and justice sector security, as well as prison reforms and prosecutorial capacity building. Investment in equipment is discussed as a priority of the Mexican government. In part, this is due to impunity concerns by US Senators about human rights violations by police and military forces (US Senate Bill 2012: 74).

assertive role in offering greater fiscal benefits to stabilize the security situation in municipalities has followed distinctive tempos across different municipalities over different states, often depending upon a given municipality's differential access to federal resources. Similarly, the federal initiative to restructure municipal level public security into a Unitary State Police force has been characterized simultaneously as a "success" and a "failure".³ Finally, federal efforts to increase the sheer number of military personnel per se as a public security strategy in the face of organized crime, such as in Ciudad Juárez, have not yielded uniformly positive results (Moloeznik 2013: 3). Thus, the re-articulation and reassertion of (centralized)⁴ state capacity in the context of international and national "gaps" in the application of the rule of law raise significant obstacles for achieving renewed governing stability in Mexico.

This book has also emphasized that these targeted, strategic killings are facilitated by rule of law deficiencies at several institutional levels (legal, judicial, political) which create a structure of impunity that contributes to these murders. Law-enforcement assassinations clearly do not occur within an institutional vacuum as their transnational dimensions suggest. Rather, the organized, lethal strategies of assassins relate to, and are influenced by, the larger, complex, dynamic set of inter-related institutions (international and domestic criminal justice systems, legal systems, political system) that surround these actors.

Comparative cases suggest that the failure of the criminal justice system to apprehend assassins is also a clear motivator for assassinations such as in Nigeria where they are relatively common (Raifu et al. 2009: 163). Scholars in the Nigerian case also point toward the importance of the need for better equipment and orientation of internal security agencies in protecting the lives of citizens (Raifu et al. 2009: 163). The dynamic of repeated assassinations has led some to deem the Nigerian situation "a culture of impunity of political killings

³ In the specific state of Chihuahua, to use one example, those that argue that the policy of implementing the Unitary Police model has been a success point to several developments. These include: (1) increased levels of coordination between municipal, state and federal police forces which has led to a drop in crime in certain municipalities; (2) the rationalization of joint police operations in Chihuahua into four new territorial zones and (3) the increase in agents and investigatory police associated with the new model (La Policiaca 2011; Redacción 2013a, b; El Universal 2013; XEPL 2013). Those more opposed to the model and/or those who point to its failings make several arguments. These include: (1) that it has been significantly delayed in implementation (to 2013); (2) that it takes away the community policing aspect of control from municipal police; and (3) that both the assassination and corruption of State Unitary Police agents continue to occur under the new model (Moloeznik 2013; El Diario de Chihuahua 2013; Norte Digital 2013; Milenio 2013).

⁴ Moloeznik (2013: 11–16) notes that the idea of the Unitary Police model represents an effort to re-assert centralized control. Similarly, one could argue that Peña Nieto's national Gendarmerie also represents the re-assertion of centralized control. The Gendarmerie would place roughly 10,000 federal forces largely drawn from the military under the control of the (federal) Interior Ministry. Its first funds are slated to commence in July 2013 (Seekle and Finklea 2013: 35; Informador 2013).

and assassinations [which] will continue because there is no judicial repercussion against previous killings...to deter or serve as a deterrent to other culprits” (Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), Port Harcourt, Patrick Naagbantón 2010).

Ríos (2010) had argued of the relationship between the justice system and Mexican hit-men that, “Killing in Mexico is... inexpensive because the possibility of being caught is very low”. Blanco (2012), however, notes that recent judicial reforms and the introduction of oral trials in Chihuahua and other Northern Mexican states have begun to show some positive impact. He found judicial reforms in Chihuahua were accompanied by a significant increase in the number of investigations started after the crime is reported and a decrease in solicitation of bribes by the transit police (2012: 25). More to the point, the first cases of a life sentence as well as some long-term sentences for police assassins are slowly beginning to emerge (Públic Es. 2011; Milenio 2012; Redacción 2013a). With the criminal justice system still in state of transition (Schatz 2011), one hopes that such stronger sentences for police assassinations can indeed begin to close the “black hole” of lack of prosecution for the murder of police (Sabet 2012: 219; Yáñez Romero 2009).

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