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# THE COPRODUCTION OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN MEXICO

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## Introduction

During some of the most violent years of the so-called “War on Drugs” in Mexico between 2008 and 2012, a major public debate surrounded the role of the government and civil society in the coproduction of public safety. Although President Felipe Calderón defined the problem of public safety primarily as a problem of institutions, he called on citizens to get involved in the creation and implementation of strategies for the production of safety (Calderón 2009, 18). This approach to the issue of public safety not only became a programmatic aspect of the Calderón administration, but also shaped public discourse and eventually policy through a series of government actions. In 2008, Calderón summoned the National Public Safety Council, which included a number of prominent citizen advisors, to analyze public safety issues and create strategies to tackle surging violence. In 2009, Calderón called for unprecedented public dialogues with citizens, including academics, community leaders, and residents from all over the country. Starting with the Salvárcar massacre, a January 2010 shootout at a party in Ciudad Juárez in which 15 people were killed, the Mexican government sought to finance various programs for the recovery of public spaces and social development through citizen-led initiatives such as Todos Somos Juárez, or “We are all Juárez” (Presidency of the Republic 2012). By then, the government already had promoted programs like hotlines for citizens to anonymously communicate useful information and intelligence to law enforcement. In short, in the face of soaring crime rates the government asked citizens to help ensure public safety.

In spite of such efforts, most public policy analyses of recent crime trends in Mexico have so far failed to frame government-citizen cooperation in the production of public safety as an issue of the coproduction of public goods. This is puzzling, given that many of Calderón’s efforts went to the heart of the issue of the coproduction of a public good—public safety—based on a partnership between government and citizens. This failure is largely due to a gap in the Mexican literature on the coproduction of public goods. This paper examines Mexico’s efforts to engage citizens in the coproduction of public safety. Moreover, it analyzes the obstacles that citizens encounter in Mexico in trying to collaborate on the production of public safety in the context of organized crime.

## The Coproduction Theoretical Debate and Organized Crime

To begin this analysis, it is useful to present the two sides of the theoretical debate on the public safety aspects of the coproduction of public goods. First, government efforts to get citizens to collaborate in the production of public safety are tantamount to acknowledging its inability to resolve an issue as fundamental to a government's basic obligations as public safety. In other words, by inviting citizens to coproduce public safety, the government declares itself ineffectual. What's more, if efforts to secure public safety nosedive after citizens become involved, the government can exonerate itself by making citizens co-responsible for failure.

On the other hand, some argue that the production of public goods, including public safety, is a joint responsibility of government *and* citizens. In a democratic context, they argue, citizens are obligated to get involved in the decision-making process and the implementation of efforts geared to the production of public goods, including public safety (Levine 1984, 178). It not only enhances the quality of public goods but in the end improves the quality of democracy.

Considering the decline of public safety in Mexico, these opposing views add nuance to the debate on the Mexican government's efforts to involve citizens in the coproduction of public safety and also show the limits of involving citizens in coproducing public safety in the face of organized crime—that is, the presence of powerful criminal organizations. The nature of crime in Mexico, it will be argued, may have exceeded the capacity of the citizenry to coproduce public safety, particularly in light of politico-historical and material constraints on civil society's ability to mobilize independently of the government. In a context as complex as Mexico in the 21st century, it is important to analyze the definition of coproduction of public safety vis-à-vis the limits of the mechanisms to coproduce it and the risks to citizens who want to help. Thus, this paper asks: Can citizens successfully engage in co-productive activities in public safety in the context of organized crime?

To be sure, it is not a matter of rejecting the possibility of the coproduction of public safety by emphasizing its limitations, since it may have its advantages; nor is it a matter of embracing it uncritically by arguing that citizens have a civic duty to help, for it may involve serious risks under certain conditions. Rather, any co-productive activity in public safety calls for discerning

the true value of public safety coproduction and the conditions under which it can be successful (Brudney and England 1983).

### **The Case of Mexico**

The case of Mexico requires discerning the value of the coproduction of public safety because the debate has to consider the fact that Mexico's civil society has atrophied over time. The authoritarian political culture of the 20th century, by definition, implied that citizens were demobilized politically and could not develop an effective capacity for autonomous organization. After nearly 70 years of corporatism, Mexico's society failed to develop the cultural, structural, and institutional conditions to integrate citizens in the production of public goods. The government was largely responsible for public goods, and citizens came to expect the government to resolve most problems and provide most of those goods. Such is the case with public safety; citizens never cooperated in generating their own public safety.

At another level, it is important to examine the concept of coproduction of public goods in terms of the goals of any co-productive activity. There are "soft" public goods—education, health, and civil protection, in which citizens may volunteer; and there are "hard" public goods—public safety, firefighting, supplying drinking water and drainage, in which citizens can only marginally be of assistance (Whitaker 1980; Sharp 1981). In the case of hard public goods, the responsibility of each actor participating in the coproduction process should be realistically assessed because citizens can only marginally participate by either providing input or volunteering for specific activities and under certain conditions. In the provision of hard public goods, citizens can hardly be permanent, active actors in the decision-making process, although sometimes their input can be combined with that of public servants to produce balanced public policies. These observations are relevant in Mexico's case because public safety is a hard public good, and its coproduction would have to occur in a context of extremely violent organized crime, in which citizens are limited in how they can participate.

Moreover, any co-productive activity lies somewhere along the spectrums of active-passive participation, individual-collective mobilization, positive-negative collaboration, and activism-compliance (Brudney and England 1983). These spectrums are crucial to understanding the range of citizens' roles in the coproduction of public safety. Citizens' ability to intervene

effectively along these spectrums depends on the structural and material conditions under which a government-citizen partnership takes place. As we will see in Mexico's case, this is a major problem because these spectrums are hardly applicable, given that most Mexicans have come to expect the government to provide all public goods. Conversely, the Mexican government does not always want citizens to get involved, a stance somewhat more in line with its traditionally authoritarian character.

These political and historical conditions, along with the character of organized crime, make Mexico's case particularly suitable to test some of the limitations of the coproduction of public safety. This study focuses on analyzing factors that impede or limit Mexican citizens' effectiveness in the coproduction of public safety. It also explores some of the negative consequences of engaging citizens in coproducing public safety in an unequal society.

### **The Neoliberal Context and the Coproduction of Public Safety in Mexico**

The coproduction of public safety also must be examined through the nature of the neoliberal state. Academic work going back to political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and economic thinkers like Adam Smith assigned governments a basic obligation: ensuring public order (Vincent 1997). Although the Keynesian-influenced state expanded that obligation during the 20th century, it was curtailed toward the end of the century—what we know as the neoliberal turn. This contraction of the 20th century Keynesian state since the 1980s has again emphasized the fact that a government's ultimate responsibility is to control its space and territory, and that its authority should primarily be focused on the provision of public order (Beck 1997, 46).

Mexico is no exception. With the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the country's government relinquished its role as the central planner and manager of the national economy. Unfortunately, by divesting itself from its economic responsibilities, Mexico's government lost its ability to negotiate with other actors and decree a social order through economic rewards and punishments, a state of affairs made possible by its control of national wealth. What remained in the hands of the government was, effectively, its role as a regulator state and provider of public safety, which were managed with debatable results. Thus, Mexico's government can fairly be held against this basic obligation of the modern neoliberal state—the provision of the central public good of safety—and judged for its performance in that regard. This in turn allows us to

observe how the country's government relates to the coproduction of public safety, whether it engages Mexican citizens in coproductive public safety activities, and how coproduction is accomplished. The neoliberal turn, therefore, allows us to test whether governments can provide the conditions for citizens to participate in its coproduction, particularly in contexts of organized crime.

### **Mexico's Political Culture and the Coproduction of Public Safety**

In the case of Mexico, the government's success and failure was largely measured on its ability to generate economic development due to the rapid expansion of the state's role in the mid-20th century. The government became the engine of growth and the general manager of the national economy. This access to national wealth allowed the government to negotiate with numerous social, economic, political, and even criminal actors on the basis of its ability to bestow economic rewards and proffer financial punishments. This allowed the government to manage criminal activity and keep it to a minimum. Unfortunately, this *political* management of crime and delinquency precluded the need to develop autonomous law enforcement institutions or to engage citizens in the coproduction of public safety. For several decades, Mexico's government did not establish a professional public safety system that also included appropriate channels for citizens to participate. Not only did the country's government not see the need to involve the citizens in the coproduction of public safety but, given its authoritarian character, citizens' mobilization was viewed as a potentially direct challenge to the state's control of society. Mexico's government preferred to reduce its citizens' ability to organize and act outside state-sanctioned channels. Consequently, Mexican citizens failed to develop a culture of collaboration in the production of public goods and over time came to view the resolution of public problems as a government matter.

The development of political mobilization along channels strictly sanctioned by the government backfired when the government called on citizens to help. The coproduction of public goods presupposes an active, participatory, and capable civil society—citizens prepared to exercise their rights separately from and before the government, capable of influencing governmental policies and strategies, and adept to hold the government accountable in the case of failure. It also requires that the government be willing to establish institutional channels for citizens to participate. However, Mexico's government appears to view citizen involvement as largely

undesirable—though that stance is more so held by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) administrations than the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) administrations. Thus, when the country’s government appeals to the coproduction of public safety, it is often seen as a way to distract attention from the issue, disguise its inability to provide it, or co-opt the most critical voices. Citizen participation is seen as a venue to reduce political pressure in a volatile environment that has the potential to erupt into public protest. Thus, when the government encourages citizen involvement, it is not out of a genuine understanding of the value of citizen participation in the decision-making process or to allow citizens to supervise and modify public safety policies, but rather a maneuver to protect itself from criticism and ultimately accusations of failure.

Another example of how the political culture of Mexico clashes with the coproduction of public safety is in information sharing. Coproduction requires citizens to have full access to accurate and timely information, including public accounts, decision-making processes, and internal investigations. This means that the coproduction of public safety requires accountability. Mexico’s government does not customarily adhere to any of these requirements. On the contrary, the government prefers to withhold information, share it only partially, or outright deny it for fear of being held accountable. The Peña administration (2012–2018) appears particularly sensitive to criticism and prefers to control the flow of information.

### **Mexico, Public Goods and Coproduction of Public Safety**

Academically, there is no consensus on the definition of the coproduction of public safety, though there are important debates about its meaning. However, the common denominator of all definitions is that the coproduction of public goods requires citizen action in collaboration with government agencies to increase the quantity and quality of all public goods in their community (Parks et al. 1981), including public safety—a “hard” public good. These activities take different forms.

Collectively, the coproduction of public safety involves citizen participation in public councils, as well as neighborhood consultations, street patrols, and collective reports of suspicious activity. Other examples of citizen involvement in the coproduction of public safety could include installing security alarms, locks, and bars; hiring security guards for residential areas; and



improving public lighting. The most pernicious forms of citizen action include lynchings and other kinds of citizen aggressions and punishment, which have occurred all over Mexico. Individual participation includes hiring body guards, not traveling at night, avoiding areas considered dangerous, keeping a watchful eye, locking cars and homes, etc. Although these and many other activities take place in many cities in Mexico, citizens rarely think of them as part of the coproduction of safety—a positive view. Instead, they perceive them as activities to make up for the government’s incompetence—a negative view. The government is perceived as incapable of ensuring public safety and citizens believe they have to take the production of safety into their own hands.

The way Mexican citizens view the production of public safety implies there is no clear tradition of government-citizen cooperation in the coproduction of public safety. Additionally, well-established channels for combining citizen input with governmental public policy and clear mechanisms for receiving and assimilating such feedback do not exist. Both the culture and the methods for coproduction are absent in Mexico.

### **Democratic Normalcy and the Coproduction of Public Safety**

In democratic contexts, where governments accept the principle of accountability and encourage civil society’s active participation in governmental decision-making on public goods, citizens can participate in the coproduction of public safety through various actions, most designed to prevent criminal activity. As already mentioned, citizens collectively can participate as volunteers in self-defense groups, hire neighborhood security guards, install safety devices such as street cameras, and recruit others to participate in patrols and neighborhood watch programs, etc. Individually, citizens can take steps like using guard dogs and installing locks, bars, lights, sensors, and cameras. These actions work best in combatting petty property crime or even serious but largely random crime. These actions are sometimes done in coordination with law enforcement agencies, which may integrate citizens into their local councils and even hold public meetings where citizens can both give input and hold officials accountable.

None of these actions is likely to work against the kind of organized crime that prevails in Mexico today. In fact, Mexico’s problem is that much of the violent criminal activity is related to heavily armed, well-organized criminal gangs, against which citizens can do very little or

nothing. Most of the literature on the topic of public safety coproduction partnerships between the government and citizens deals with general crime, but not with *organized* crime. Organized crime presents a special challenge and deserves separate analysis, given that it is not run-of-the-mill neighborhood crime nor is it opportunistic or random.

Considering the nature of organized violence, citizens' real impact on public safety is limited. Tactics of organized crime groups include attacks with high caliber weapons, road blocks with heavy vehicles, well-coordinated violent attacks, and swift and deadly retaliation on individuals who complain to the police or provide information. Moreover, citizens cannot truly affect the structural conditions that lead to organized crime, even when they take individual or collective action to reduce their vulnerability. Citizens may only be able to protect themselves to some extent—passive participation in our spectrum above. In other words, the greatest impact citizens can have under conditions of organized crime is improving their feeling of control over their closed environment. They may feel safer, but they will remain powerless against the gruesome violence seen in Mexico.

To reiterate, although the situation in Mexico over the past decade has included unorganized or petty and opportunistic crime, the main challenge to public safety is *organized crime*, and citizens lack the skills and preparation to face organized criminals. They cannot truly effect change in the structural factors leading to organized crime such as international drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other highly-coordinated criminal networks. Organized crime also has a much greater capacity for intimidation and retaliation vis-à-vis neighbors who wish to organize themselves for coproduction of safety. In short, the crime conditions in Mexico over the past decade have not been conducive to citizens achieving a true impact on reducing crime.

### **Protection as a Necessary Condition for the Coproduction of Public Safety**

When calling for citizen participation in the coproduction of public safety, it is essential for a government to provide a modicum of protection for those who wish to participate. Such protection includes ensuring that citizens who help are not subject to retaliation for reporting information on criminals to the authorities. This is particularly true in regard to organized crime. If the government cannot ensure the safety of informers, whistle-blowers, accusers, reporters, etc., citizens cannot participate without assuming great risk. Their own lives are in danger if they

do and are found out. Cases of citizens who have been threatened or killed for collaborating with authorities in Mexico are common. Consequently, citizens will opt for very passive forms of participation—self-protection measures that do not involve helping the government.

In addition, local police forces in Mexico are not only too weak to protect collaborators but are often corrupt and untrustworthy. Organized criminal groups' successes in penetrating police forces in fact impede citizens from engaging in the coproduction of public safety. Citizens who report crimes cannot be sure that government agents are not complicit with criminal gangs. There is ample evidence that corrupt cops have turned in citizens who bring forth proof of criminal activity. The issue of retaliation by criminals in Mexico, which includes everything from threats and intimidation to murdering collaborators and their families, is important because there is extensive circumstantial evidence that the government is unable to protect its own honest agents (Madrigal 2013) or citizens who simply want to collaborate by doing something as simple as reporting a criminal act (*El Diario de Juárez* 2014). Based on this, it is possible to assert with a high degree of confidence that one of the main reasons over 90 percent of all crimes in Mexico go unreported is a lack of trust in the government being able to investigate and prosecute crimes, but more specifically the fear of criminal retaliation against citizens collaborating in the production of safety.

Mexico's government understands the need to protect citizens that collaborate in the production of public safety. This is evident in the creation of a witness protection program, although this is only a recent development (LXI Legislature 2011). This program, however, focuses on protecting organized criminals who decide to cooperate with the authorities. It is not made for protecting citizens who wish to collaborate with the government in the coproduction of public safety (Animal Político 2012). For those, the risk is entirely borne by the citizen.

Thus, the government cannot provide a minimum level of protection to those who collaborate in the coproduction of safety, especially vis-à-vis organized crime. Given that the government is incapable of guaranteeing the safety of citizens who wish to participate in the coproduction of safety—whether by denouncing crimes, testifying as a witness on trial, or simply informing authorities—the safe-conduct necessary for coproduction is largely nonexistent, which in turn discourages citizen participation.

### Limits of Coproduction: Militarization and Unprepared Citizens

Aside from the financial burden of protecting oneself by investing in personal, family, and neighborhood security, an important element limiting citizens is that they are not prepared, trained, or legally authorized to fight crime—much less organized crime. Citizens do not have the expertise to detect organized criminal activities or to carry out investigations, nor do they possess the equipment to face organized criminals. When citizens have taken it upon themselves to enforce the law, the question has turned to the role of paramilitary groups (*grupos de autodefensa*), such as heavily armed vigilantes that operate in Michoacán, Guerrero, and a handful of other states. But the paramilitary groups' presence is more a sign of a breakdown of the law enforcement system, leading to ensuing debates on whether we are confronted with a failed state and not a downside to the coproduction of public safety.

This does not completely preclude the possibility that citizens can contribute to resolving specific crimes by criminal groups or help in the prevention of certain crimes through collective measures. By definition, coproduction of public safety involves a broad set of activities, and some may be useful vis-à-vis organized crime. However, none of these individual or collective efforts can change the social and economic structural forces that produce the kind of organized crime and delinquency that Mexico is going through, nor can these actions replace those of the government. Worse yet, when citizens take the law into their own hands and punish criminals extra-judicially, they may no longer be aiding the government in the coproduction of public safety—they may be adding to the chaos.

The increasingly militarized nature of organized crime exposes the limits of citizen participation, since citizens are clearly not prepared to face this kind of crime. Citizens' firepower is inadequate against organized crime. Moreover, by militarizing its own strategy against organized crime, the government has created a situation of extreme risk to citizens in which the role they can play is unclear. Citizens may end up caught in the crossfire between two highly militarized forces and unable to truly contribute on their own to the resolution of a public safety crisis of this nature.

### **Negative Externalities of Coproduction: Direct and Indirect Costs**

The coproduction of public safety comes at a cost. First, one cost is borne by the citizens themselves in the form of the financial burden each person faces in procuring his own safety in the face of government failure—locks, alarms, fences, etc., all cost. Second, fighting organized crime is an expensive burden on public funds—funds which are then not invested in other more productive public spending, resulting in reduced public benefits overall. Let us explore each separately.

Citizens who must invest in their own personal and family safety can no longer invest as much in their own material welfare, including education, health, retirement savings, material improvements to their property, etc. Any additional time invested in patrolling or other safety-related activities is also an opportunity cost—this time could be spent at leisure with family, friends, etc. Thus the government's inability to provide public safety becomes an additional cost borne by the citizens who have less money and time to invest in their own welfare because they must procure their own safety.

Secondly, the government is forced to invest larger percentages of its budget in public safety due to higher levels of violence and insecurity caused by organized criminal activity. Such expense is not productive because it does not contribute to capacity-building within society. Every dollar not invested in education, health, infrastructure, and other productive social welfare capacities means that citizens benefit less in the long-term, as said social benefits are deferred. This is an indirect cost, and often citizens must pay for public goods the government cannot produce because it is investing more on public safety.

### **Negative Externalities of Coproduction: General Distrust**

Another negative externality of the coproduction of public safety in the Mexican context is the erosion of social trust when citizens are turned loose on each other. In some ways, the coproduction of public safety pits some citizens as watchmen over others. This in turn distorts the way fellow citizens view each other in a social network. A vigilante mentality is suspicious of other fellow citizens. The *other* is a suspect at all times. This often can create conflict among citizens as those who take their role in coproduction very seriously keep a constant, suspicious eye on their neighbors. This in turn feeds a general environment of distrust. Citizens formerly on

the same side of an issue enter into conflict as some take it upon themselves to watch others. This cannot be ignored because as citizens begin to look at each other suspiciously, an environment of distrust is created and destroys social capital in the name of fighting crime.

The negative externalities of the coproduction of public safety go even deeper, as they imply a total shift in perspective in the relationships among citizens themselves. Although the coproduction of public goods has been relatively well studied, the coproduction of public safety and its impact on general trust has been less studied; we do not yet know what effect it may have on neighbor-to-neighbor relations. There are analyses that show that the government's cooperation with citizens in co-productive activities helps reduce crime in general, although not everywhere or for all kinds of crime, but there are no analyses on what it does to trust levels among residents of participating neighborhoods. And there are no studies on whether it can help in combatting organized crime or if it simply further rips the fabric of society. The case of Mexico is ideal to put this hypothesis to the test.

#### **Negative Externalities of Coproduction: Exclusion**

Another negative externality is the at times steep material cost of coproduction, which means not all citizens can invest the same amount of resources. If the government invites citizens to become co-producers of public safety, those with financial resources, either individually or collectively, can invest more time, effort, and money to establish their own safety and secure their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, citizens who do not have the financial resources or time to invest the required energy or effort are virtually excluded from the possibility of coproducing public safety in their environment and consequently are left more unprotected by comparison. The same can be said of organizational capacity. Many middle and upper class citizens have the intellectual knowledge and organizational capacity to engage in co-productive activities. However, the poor often do not possess such resources to come together and bind against crime. And organized crime is often more present in neighborhoods where poor citizens live, leaving them even more vulnerable to retaliation and further reducing the incentive to organize against it.

This is evident in cities where middle class communities have invested resources to close streets and parks and hire entrance guards. This phenomenon, however, has led to the "privatization" of public spaces and created conflicts among neighbors, especially among those who are not willing

to pitch in to pay for the physical maintenance of those streets and parks or the guards. Nevertheless, many municipalities have granted the necessary authorizations for middle and upper class communities to enclose public spaces due to political pressure. The poorer communities in these cities, however, are poorly organized and have been left exposed to crime. In a certain sense, the overall effect has been segregation by class, leaving the poorer citizens much more vulnerable (Mella 2009).

Furthermore, as is the case in some cities with high levels of violence where citizens with greater resources have closed off streets and parks and formed private communities protected by security guards at the entrances, the privatization of public spaces has excluded poorer citizens from such areas. In one case in Ciudad Juárez, poorer neighbors lost access to a park that ended up enclosed by fences surrounding a neighborhood of wealthier citizens.

Thus, the relationship between income and coproduction of public safety creates a serious problem concerning the fairness of the outcome; people with higher incomes can increase their safety, while people with lower incomes are left out in the cold and become more vulnerable to crime. Crime also is often displaced to urban neighborhoods that cannot afford the costs of coproduction (Percy 1987, 87). Though closed communities represent a type of activity for coproducing safety, they end up leading to social exclusion (Enríquez Acosta 2006). In many cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, insecurity has all-too-easily shifted to the most vulnerable population, with an unequal effect on the poor. In conclusion, coproduction of public safety transfers vulnerability to the poor and creates conditions of exclusion, leaving the most at-risk citizens at a clear disadvantage.

### **Limits of Coproduction: Reducing Crime or Reducing Fear?**

There is an additional false promise behind the idea of the coproduction of public safety in spite of its virtues under certain conditions. Citizens may participate, but they do not have the ability to reduce the lack of public safety per se, especially in contexts of organized crime. Very often, the only real affect their actions can have is to diminish the feeling of insecurity, that they can fall victim to crime at any moment. This does not necessarily imply a reduction in crime, but rather a feeling of increased control over their environment (Percy 1987). This is particularly true in contexts of organized crime.

Worse yet, in the case of Mexico, this feeling is occasionally achieved through the government's deliberate actions to omit or conceal statistical information about crime and delinquency, as well as agreements between the media and the government to prevent the publication of statistics on violent events. The most dangerous Mexican states have implemented this type of silencing strategy, in part to reduce political costs. The Peña administration (2012–2018) also employs cooptation as a silencing strategy very effectively, a natural extension of the political philosophy and culture underlying the PRI administrations. For example, the most recent figures show that crime has increased during the Peña administration, while media coverage of crime has actually decreased (Castillo García 2014).

### **Coproduction Through Citizen-led Projects as Red Herring**

Mexico's government has insisted that citizens participate in the “recovery” of public spaces in response to an increase in crime in recent years. Behind this call is the broken window theory (Kelling and Wilson 1982).<sup>1</sup> *Todos Somos Juárez*, an effort Felipe Calderón's administration started in 2010 in Ciudad Juárez, and similar programs in other cities call on citizens to take back parks, schools, streets, etc. from criminals. Significant efforts and resources have been invested to create a feeling of community, giving citizens a sense of control over public spaces and reducing their feeling of vulnerability. To a certain degree, these efforts generate collective trust and work well when the government and society cooperate and work together to manage the necessary resources. These programs have been an excellent mechanism for institutionalizing the coproduction of public safety.

However, such efforts have limits. First of all, they do not appear to work against organized crime, though they may affect unorganized criminal activity and help prevent general delinquency, which are often encouraged in contexts of high levels of violence and impunity. The structural conditions behind the general problem of public safety that stems from organized criminal activity, however, remain.

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<sup>1</sup> The Broken Window Theory, originally proposed by Kelling and Wilson, contends that dilapidated buildings and urban infrastructure—with broken windows, etc.—signal to the community that it is permissible to treat property poorly, that no one cares, and that it is acceptable to engage in destructive behavior in that location. This in turn creates more destruction of property and eventually a cycle of decay that ends in chaos and eventually criminal activity. To prevent that kind of signaling, it is important to maintain and repair every part of a building—or any infrastructure that falls in disrepair.



This approach also presupposes that the kind of violence seen in Mexico recently has a “cultural” or civic component to it and that these efforts go to the “cultural roots” of the problem. The Mexican government has in fact promoted efforts to get to the cultural roots of violence. In other words, the government directs our attention to the conditions of public spaces and the population’s public habits as root causes of violence and crime. To address this, cultural events and programs such as concerts, theater, etc. are organized based on the idea that high culture can help prevent and maybe even resolve the issue of public safety and crime. The result is that violence and crime are redefined as a cultural problem, which diverts attention from the structural causes of crime and ultimately from the government’s own ineffectiveness. Indeed, portraying the problem of violence and organized crime as being connected to civic culture is useful to the government. It depressurizes the public safety problem by making citizens co-responsible for it and convinces residents that they are in complete control of the causes of said violence. This is doubtful.

Moreover, this approach depoliticizes the problem of violence and crime. It allows the political class to tame public protest and redirect citizens’ focus to activities that are not truly aimed at the root causes of criminal activity, particularly organized crime. In many ways, this allows the political authorities to avoid paying the price of not fulfilling their minimum obligation—providing public safety as an essential public good.

In conclusion, by redefining the problem of violence and crime as a problem of culture, especially high culture, the government depressurizes a political problem and transfers the responsibility for its failure to provide adequate public safety onto the citizens. In turn, the government increases its legitimacy by claiming that safety is everyone’s responsibility and convincing citizens that their safety is in their own hands. The government thus conceals its direct responsibility and disguises its failures. If citizens are co-responsible for safety, they are consequently producers of insecurity if they fail to cooperate with the measures implemented by the government.

### **Coproduction of Public Safety as Political Desertion**

Even if we assume that the coproduction of public safety is desirable for strengthening a democratic society, co-productive activities offer the government a way to both demobilize

citizens politically and disguise its failures in providing public safety. But even more problematically, it forces citizens to redefine the problem as a non-political issue. In other words, when the government calls on citizens to coproduce public safety, it sets up a red herring to draw attention away from its fundamental obligation to produce the basic structural conditions for a calm, peaceful society. That in turn sends citizens the message that public safety is not a political problem but a soft public good they can help produce. Such is not the case, particularly in conditions of organized crime.

When the government makes citizens responsible for the coproduction of safety, it is safeguarding itself from being held accountable for its (in)capacity to produce safety as well as the potential political recrimination from citizens. However, public safety, like any other public good, is eminently a political issue. Therefore, citizens should use political channels to demand improved public safety.

### **(Re)Politicizing the Coproduction of Public Safety**

What is the appropriate role of citizens in the coproduction of safety, especially in a context of violent organized crime? The citizens' first obligation is to exercise their political rights by demanding that the government fulfill its minimal obligation—to bring organized crime under control. The natural channel for this expression is politics. Authoritarian regimes, however, prefer to depoliticize questions of public policy, and Mexico is no exception. Moreover, authoritarian regimes have lower levels of tolerance for political criticism, and Mexico today appears to maintain a neo-authoritarianism resistance to criticism.

This view implies that citizens who agree to coproduce public safety through so-called “cultural” approaches may be abandoning politics as a venue to demand that the government fulfill its basic obligation—the production of public safety. But civil society cannot allow its efforts in the coproduction of public safety—however desirable—to disguise the government's inability to produce it, hide its own failures, displace its responsibility onto citizens, or depoliticize the demand for public safety. The citizens' role is to contribute, assist, and cooperate in the creation of public safety, not exonerate the government from its fundamental responsibility of being responsible for its own failure.

Citizens can contribute with input, such as information and ideas for decision-making processes, but they also must demand that the government create formal, acceptable mechanisms for citizen intervention. Without this, citizens are not fundamentally responsible for the coproduction of public safety. That eminently remains the responsibility of the government. If the government fails to fulfill its minimum obligations, especially in a liberal system that delegates economic welfare and social development to the market, it can be argued that it is a failed state.

### **Extreme Violence and Crime and the Emergence of Militias/Vigilantes in Mexico**

Perhaps the most important manifestation of the continuous exhortations to coproduce public safety is the emergence of self-defense groups, or “vigilantes.” These militias are groups of people who take the law into their own hands to fight criminals and protect their property and communities, often outside the scope of law enforcement and always in the name of public safety. These groups form for various reasons. Primarily, they believe the government has failed in providing public safety, forcing them to now take action. They are often heavily armed. They patrol streets and often engage in shootouts with organized criminal groups. They arrest, detain, and sometimes punish criminals.

The problem with self-defense groups is those citizens must independently determine who is a threat and what actions must be taken to ensure their protection. This situation can quickly result in a series of arbitrary decisions, as citizens justify taking the law in their own hands and bringing about “justice” through lynchings or “seizing” entire towns and detaining citizens, etc. (See, for example, Rodríguez Guillén’s analysis, 2012). The target of these actions, however, is continually moving, which is often counterproductive as leaders lose control of the groups, resulting in even greater injustice and impunity rather than the desired environment of order and peace.

The case of Michoacán is even more complex. Self-defense groups there reached a level of organization beyond spontaneous movements in cities and towns where citizens expressed frustration. Although there is evidence that militias have formed in various parts of the country due to the government’s inability to guarantee public safety, the situation in Michoacán has become a paradigmatic case because it not only shows the government’s incapacity to provide

safety, but also gives the government the opportunity to create a strategy for managing these groups.

The emergence of militias is one of the most serious problems related to the issue of coproducing safety. When citizens organize into paramilitary bodies, they appear to compete with the government instead of helping in the production of public safety. They also test the government's ability to manage these groups and prevent them from becoming a parallel law enforcement system. This is exactly what happened with the militias in the state of Michoacán. Their emergence placed the government in a quandary. The Mexican government, while unable to demobilize them, made it clear they were not a substitute for law enforcement agencies. It also acknowledged their usefulness and saw them as a response to frustration with organized crime. Finally, the government deputized them, though doing so led to other problems. The militias do not have the capacity to bring anyone to a legitimate legal procedure or to guarantee due process and human rights. Their actions are generally outside the constitution and their punishments are extra-judicial. Furthermore, the government did not have full control over them, even when the groups already had been deputized as a *rural police force*. This shows that militias can become a force with a life of their own, parallel to and often usurping a government's functions. In extreme cases, as it happened in Michoacán, they can become predatory groups that victimize innocent citizens instead of fighting crime and helping bring about justice. It is also possible that militias do not reinforce or strengthen government law enforcement institutions; rather, they may substitute and replace them with actors who end up abusing the human and constitutional rights of citizens who become a target for their actions.

Sometimes, they turn into organized criminals themselves. Self-defense groups in the state of Michoacán—militias—were quickly corrupted and infiltrated by organized crime. The Mexican government was unable to disband them. No studies explore why the government failed to effectively control the militias and decided to deputize them as rural police, but there is evidence that the militias engaged in organized crime themselves as they had to finance their own operations independently of government budgets.

In summary, the Mexican government's decision to legalize militias as rural police was a way to practically wash its hands of the public safety issue and co-opt citizens to produce their own safety instead of facing its own failures. Allowing citizens to participate in government-

sanctioned militias means formalizing forces that may begin as self-defense groups but have the potential to become actors unprepared to protect human rights—although considering the latest reports of torture in Mexico, the official police agencies themselves may engage in widespread human rights violations (Amnesty International 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The coproduction of public goods is a legitimate and even necessary mechanism to produce public safety in a democratic society. When civil society and government collaborate to create an environment of social peace and calm, the bond between them grows. Nevertheless, public safety is and will continue to be a fundamental obligation and responsibility of the state. Citizens can contribute to the production of safety through a series of individual and collective measures, but they cannot be held responsible for the safety of their environment or society, especially under conditions of organized crime.

Furthermore, the coproduction of safety requires certain minimum conditions—that the government be open to citizen input and be accountable to civil society. It also requires activities to be coordinated with total citizen participation and for an open flow of information between the government and the public, in addition to specific guarantees of protection toward citizens collaborating with the government in coproduction efforts. This is particularly true in the case of organized crime. Mexico does not meet these requirements, however.

Additionally, coproduction involves significant negative externalities that distort equal access and protection for the entire population. It depletes private funds, constituting an additional tax that can end up excluding the poorest citizens by segregating the underprivileged from the well-off. It also may end up privatizing public spaces, and in extreme cases it may result in the creation of militias that add to the criminal chaos. The coproduction of public safety adds little to state capacity and gives way to complicated situations with militias, which may carry out lynchings, wage vendettas, or extort resources from their communities to finance their operations. All of these were evident in Michoacán.

The coproduction of safety deserves more theoretical exploration and substantial examination of how it works in practice. This paper is the beginning of a debate that is necessary and urgent in Mexico, despite the government's insistence on engaging civil society in the coproduction of

public safety. It is therefore intended to establish a framework for a public debate on how a government-citizen partnership can work toward the coproduction of public safety, and to begin a clear-eyed analysis of its benefits and drawbacks.

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