

NORIA RESEARCH MXCA MANIFESTO

In the past 20 years, and in parallel to rising homicide rates in the region, we have witnessed an explosion in writing on violence in Mexico & Central America.

Yet, a large proportion of this academic, journalistic and 'expert' work, as well as national and regional security policies, are characterized by the distance – both physical and analytical – that they maintain from the local realities that affect the region.

Because of this distance, as well as a strong normative stance on 'criminal violence', one can observe a lack of understanding around the local dynamics of security, governance and (dis)order.

In this text we present the methodological and political manifesto under which Noria MXCA conducts all its projects.



A Call for **Local Understanding of Violence** in Mexico & Central America

Our Work & focus

This piece does not pretend to be exhaustive, or to provide answers. Rather, it is the first collective paper in a long-term project that brings together 32 women and men, academics, journalists and photographers, working from and on six countries. Therefore, each of the themes that are briefly introduced in this text will be treated further in future projects and initiatives, and will be complemented by an open-access bibliography.

Our program will address this situation by producing knowledge based on independent, original, and field-based research. In order to disseminate this knowledge to the broadest audience, our program gathers researchers, journalists, cartographers and photographers who run launch long-term research projects on:

1. Dynamics of violence, political order and criminal organizations;
2. Migration, forced displacement and disappearances;
3. Public security policies, drug policies and governance.

Our Research Manifesto

“*If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough.*”

This famous quote by photographer Robert Capa could apply just as well to the way in which violence in Mexico and Central America is currently analyzed.

Over the past fifteen years, homicide rates in the region have increased dramatically and reached shocking levels. As violence, in its many forms, has grown, so has the body of analytical work trying to account for it, both in academic and journalistic idioms. Although we do acknowledge the value of such works, many of them stem from distant perspectives, both physically and analytically. This prevents from adequately explaining the phenomena they aim to understand. In this respect, they are often plagued with the same flaws as national and regional security policies.

This distance, compounded by postures about so-called “criminal violence” or “armed conflict”, has hindered analytical understanding and influenced popular representations of the dynamics of local security, governance, and (dis)order in Mexico and Central America. As a consequence, increasingly general, self-reinforcing narratives are adopted, in which violence is presented as an ahistorical, asocial phenomenon belonging to a dark world, existing on the margins of healthy, functional society.

The political premise is familiar: the state shall maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. However, that doesn't reflect the social reality in the region– and in most parts of the world. It doesn't now, and maybe it never did. As a matter of fact, **the historical processes of state building and democracy in the region unfolded over decades of public and private violence, legitimate or illegitimate, including countless concrete**, and well-documented examples of torture, illegal detentions, executions, disappearances, and forced displacements in order to consolidate power.



“Self-reinforcing narratives present violence as an ahistorical, asocial phenomenon belonging to a dark world, existing on the margins of healthy, functional society.”

n that long process, which is still ongoing, the state never claimed, in practice, such a monopoly on legitimate violence. It has always shared it with and/ or actively delegated it to legitimate or illegitimate private actors, who participate in building social order alongside public authorities. Then, to understand the social dynamics of violence that affect the region, we need to distance ourselves from the classic theory of state. If we mean to grasp and describe what happens in reality, we need to observe it as it is, not as we would like it to be in theory.

Moreover, most of the analyses assume that homicide rates – amongst other quantitative measurements – are the only way to understand the causes and patterns of violence. Here the premise is as follows: what can't be measured can't be analyzed. Although, in some cases, the data are supplemented with a discussion acknowledging the – well-documented – limitations of such measures, in the end the evidence that is produced reflects a narrow notion of violence usually involving three distinctive elements:

1. a clearly identified perpetrator;
2. a straightforward motive (territorial control, “drug route” conflicts, payment collection, illegal resource extraction, revenge and discipline, amongst others) and,
3. a victim whose role oscillates between victimization and criminalization.

Besides, the three elements are almost always based on what the official source says about the event, without any attempt of discussion or criticism whatsoever. Now, when the crime is attributed to a “war” between cartels or gangs, victim and perpetrator are almost impossible to differentiate. They both fall into the category of “violent people” who kill or die for no other reason than their lifestyle, the pursuit of a perfectly rational criminal project, and their belonging to the “world of crime”, be it el narco or las maras.

These analyses fail to address the structural factors that fuel violent practices. They place a moral distance between the readers and the victims or the perpetrators of such violence, and they invisibilize all the social dynamics they cannot, or do not wish to “measure.”

Similarly, when it comes to field research, we are concerned by the growing number of journalistic pieces that seem to be brandished as trophies for their authors. In those cases, “fieldwork” becomes an extractive tool, choosing its protagonists and themes based only on their dangerousness, so as to then offer the most graphic, sensationalist descriptions possible. This grants them notoriety through the voyeuristic indulgence in the exaltation and exoticization of violence.

Our Objective

We aim at describing and analyzing dynamics of violence in all their complexity, departing from overarching narratives. The conclusions of such stories revolve around the most basic manifestation of violence, namely homicide, fostering knee-jerk reactions that are of little interest from the point of view of research. Noria’s Mexico and Central America program seeks to break away from those paradigms through the production and dissemination of knowledge acquired from original and independent research. **We aim to design, support and conduct studies relying on work in the field and in the archive, while respecting high standards of rigor and ethics.**

The idea is to step back from the “interpretative feast” (festín interpretativo) of violence – to quote Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis – however seductive it might be. Therefore, we believe that the detailed analysis of local context must be the starting point of this collective effort. That doesn’t mean denying or ignoring the magnitude of the crises, or forgetting to articulate local, national, and international scales of analysis, but rather appreciating more fully their multiple components.