

Narco-capitalism and the ‘ni-nis’

An increasingly important factor in Mexico and the rest of the region is the growth of ‘narco-capitalism’; the domination of large areas of Mexico and especially of the border by violent drug cartels. These vie for control of the smuggling routes that link the Central American production areas with the profitable markets for drugs in the USA. Ironically the USA provides weapons for both sides: for the Mexican government forces through military aid and for the gangs through easy purchases in the southern states of the USA. In fact, drug cartels have been intertwined with elements of the government, the police and the army for many years. The recent increase in violence appears to be a result of the attempts of President Calderón since 2006 to meet US demands by cracking down on the cartels. The cartels have diversified into abduction of migrants for purposes of extortion, as well as forcing them to be drug couriers. Migrants who resist are often tortured or murdered. This situation, combined with the US recession and the anti-immigration laws in Arizona and other states, has made it hard for Mexicans to migrate to the USA (Covarrubias et al., 2011; Tetreault, 2011).

The implementation of the free trade provisions of NAFTA after 1994 had already led to the decline of rural employment opportunities in many regions, such as the state of Zacatecas (García Zamora, 2009; García Zamora and Contreras Díaz, 2012).

Emigration to the USA became a safety-valve, providing a perspective for young Mexicans who could not find work in agriculture at home. Now this option has been all but closed off by the violence at the border. According to Mexican social scientists, a generation of ‘ni-nis’ (ni escuela, ni trabajo – neither school nor work) has emerged: young people with no prospect of education or long-term employment. Many of them choose the lucrative – but often short – life of the drug-cartel soldier as preferable to a longer life of poverty. By providing a ready source of recruits for the gangs, the presence of the ‘ni-nis’ helps perpetuate a vicious circle of dependence, poverty, violence and underdevelopment.

Note: in addition to the sources cited, Box 6.1 is based on research by Malena Arias and Stephen Castles in the State of Zacatecas and on analyses by Mexican colleagues.