

# Feelings of insecurity regarding organized crime in Tamaulipas, Mexico

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## Abstract

**Objective.** To understand the meanings, feelings and practices associated with insecurity in a context with the presence of organized crime. **Materials and methods.** The study was conducted in a municipality of Tamaulipas, México, with high levels of violence. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of thirty indirect victims. Interview transcriptions underwent computer-assisted qualitative analysis using the MAXQDA program. **Results.** Threatening situations and perceived causes of insecurity in the local context were identified. Various psychosocial consequences of insecurity and coping strategies are also described. **Conclusions.** Although the strategies used attempt to reduce the impact of insecurity on mental health, a transformation of mobility in public space and social relations is observed. Citizens handle insecurity at the individual level, even when it is attributed to structural causes.

Keywords: safety; crime; crime victims; psychosocial impact; adaptation, psychological; Mexico

## Resumen

**Objetivo.** Comprender los significados, afectos y prácticas asociadas con la inseguridad en un contexto con presencia del crimen organizado. **Material y métodos.** El estudio se realizó en un municipio de Tamaulipas, México, con altos niveles de violencia. Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas semiestructuradas, con una muestra propositiva de treinta víctimas indirectas. Las transcripciones de las entrevistas fueron sometidas a un análisis cualitativo asistido por computadora mediante el programa MAXQDA. **Resultados.** Se identificaron las situaciones amenazantes y las causas percibidas de la inseguridad en el contexto local. También se describen diversas consecuencias psicosociales de la inseguridad y las estrategias empleadas para su afrontamiento. **Conclusiones.** Aunque las estrategias empleadas buscan disminuir el impacto de la inseguridad en la salud mental, se observa una transformación de la movilidad en el espacio público y las relaciones sociales. Los ciudadanos manejan la inseguridad a nivel individual, aún cuando le atribuyen causas estructurales.

Palabras clave: seguridad; crimen; víctimas de crimen; impacto psicosocial; adaptación psicológica; México

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The state of Tamaulipas, in México, has high levels of homicide, robbery, extortion, kidnapping,<sup>1</sup> missing persons<sup>2</sup> and internal migration due to insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Based on the criminal index of Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo (CIDAC), it is regarded as a severely impaired state<sup>4</sup> and two of its cities are among the most dangerous in the world.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, 86.9% of the population of Tamaulipas regarded living in their state as unsafe as a result of crime. This figure is higher than the national average and has remained stable since 2011.<sup>6</sup> These are reflections of a state of “deterioration or instability of public liberties, order and public peace”.<sup>7</sup>

Insecurity is a public health problem because it has an impact on various social determinants of health, such as governance, cultural values and social cohesion, and creates conditions of everyday stress and exposure to potential risks.<sup>8</sup> It promotes the formation of a lifestyle based on fear,<sup>9</sup> which implies the use of protective measures, the control of personal information and the restriction of everyday activities.<sup>10,11</sup> This style can reduce the quality of life,<sup>12</sup> limit healthy activities<sup>13,14</sup> and foster both the emergence of psychological symptomatology<sup>15</sup> and the loss of economic, social and cultural capital.<sup>16</sup> The situation can be exacerbated when the state responds exclusively through increased sentences and affects alleged culprits’ human rights.<sup>17</sup>

Due to its conceptual complexity, there are several approaches to the study of insecurity. Insecurity has several related dimensions: emotional, cognitive, practical<sup>18</sup> and political, since it also encompasses citizen demands for state protection.<sup>19</sup> It involves considering both external conditions<sup>20</sup> and the rate of crimes or socio-environmental elements, together with subjects’ interpretation of crime through the symbols they share with their reference groups within the framework of social relations.<sup>21-23</sup> It has even been pointed out that there are ideological aspects that influence its study, such as the degree of responsibility attributed to citizens regarding security, the construction of fear of crime as a dysfunctional emotion, and the failure to consider a variety of emotional responses to crime.<sup>24</sup>

This study used the concept of the feeling of insecurity, understood as “the weave of representations, speeches, emotions and actions”.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of Kessler’s proposal,<sup>19</sup> the feeling of insecurity caused by the organized crime involves understanding the interpretative framework whereby individuals identify the criminal acts associated with these groups, the causes of the situation of violence, the emotions created, the psychosocial consequences and the individual strategies implemented for their protection and the emotional handling of the situation.

The purpose of the study is to understand the feelings of insecurity elaborated by the citizens of a municipality in the state of Tamaulipas, which includes the situations associated with organized crime that they perceive as threatening, the perceived causes of their activity, the psychosocial consequences and the strategies for coping with it.

## Materials and methods

### Respondents

A multiple case study design was used with a view towards understanding the way insecurity is constructed in a local context with the presence of organized crime groups that engage in high levels of violence. Respondents were selected according to the following criteria: being over 18, having lived in the city for at least seven years (due to the fact that this coincided with the start of Felipe Calderón’s six-year term), and not having experienced any of the following incidents: abduction, rape, or the disappearance or homicide of a family member.

This last criterion was developed with the aim of understanding the way insecurity is constructed by indirect victims,<sup>25</sup> who comprise the majority of citizens, and to comply with the ethical goal of avoiding harming respondents by making them relive traumatic experiences associated with these types of incidents. Through the snowball technique, respondents were asked to facilitate contact with people they had known for many years, who had no direct or indirect links with organized crime, and had not been the victims of any criminal groups. They were also required to be people they trusted and with whom they had a friendship, given that in the current context, people do not usually discuss the issue with strangers for safety reasons.

### Exploration methods

The study was based on the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Ethical Principles of Psychologists. Informed consent was obtained from all the respondents, the confidentiality of the data was protected and their anonymity preserved for security reasons. The study was conducted during the period from February to July 2015 in a municipality in the center of Tamaulipas.

The study began with a checklist to determine whether respondents met the inclusion criteria, after which they were asked for their informed consent.

Once respondents had agreed to collaborate in the study, a brief survey was conducted to collect socio-demographic data.

After the questionnaire had been administered, a semi-structured interview was conducted lasting between 15 and 40 minutes, which were audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. An interview guide was used to explore the following topics: 1) incidents related to insecurity; 2) causes of insecurity; 3) emotions when faced with insecurity; 4) consequences of insecurity on their everyday lives; and 5) individual strategies for controlling insecurity. It should be noted that during the interviews, respondents' names were not mentioned in order to protect their identities, and after the analysis the interviews were erased from electronic records.

### Data analysis

Interview transcriptions underwent computer-assisted analysis with the MAXQDA program version 11. Using this program, codes and sub-codes were created according to the topics covered in the interview guide. Once the main codes had been identified through the construction of visual maps and the collection of code frequencies, a manual analysis was performed to identify the broadest categories with their respective sub-categories, in keeping with the notion that the feeling of insecurity is a structure that includes emotion, the interpretative framework that lends it meaning and practical strategies for its control.<sup>19,21</sup>

## Results

Thirty people participated in the study, the majority of whom were women (n=19) in the 18-29 age category. The age range was 18 to 59 years old. With regards to educational attainment, the majority held a college degree (n=25), were single (n=22) and had no children (n=19). The most common occupations were student (n=12), professional (n=7) and employee (n=8).

What follows is a presentation of the main categories and sub-categories identified in the study, related to the construction of insecurity among respondents at a symbolic, affective and practical level.

### Incidents related to insecurity (figure 1)

From the respondents' point of view, the situations that produced the greatest fear were abductions and shootouts:

I have heard that when it is very late at night or early in the morning, sometimes there are shootings, I do not know where but sometimes there are shootings and that worries me [case 15, woman, aged 37].

After this, they expressed concern about crimes such as assault, homicide and robbery, as well crimes reflecting the diversification of the criminal activities of organized crime in the locality, specifically extortion and fee collection:

Lots of premises are closed due to insecurity, you can't have your own business or you have to take your phone number off the adverts, those kinds of things [case 26, woman, aged 23].

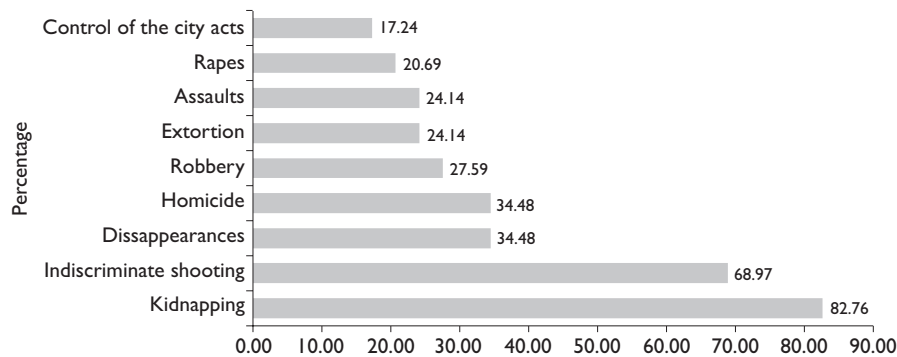
Another issue linked to the dynamic of organized crime that worries respondents is that of disappearances, which are associated with the settling of accounts or the search for information. To a lesser extent they refer to issues, not classified as crimes, which also constitute expressions of organized crime in the city: the existence of a paramilitary group known as *Halcones*, road closures and fake roadblocks.

Assaults were more often reported by men, whereas women were more likely report disappearances, rapes and acts to control the city such as the closure of streets and places, false checkpoints and the presence of *halcones*. Workers reported theft more often than students, who mentioned homicide. The group of people without children expressed greater concern about the crimes of homicide and extortion than those without children.

### Causes of insecurity (figure 2)

With respect to the causes of insecurity, respondents declared that the main cause was the "government", which they criticized for its lack of action or for "allowing organized crime to grow"; as well as a shortage of appropriate security strategies, including a lack of policy capacity or surveillance in the city and they even cited the prioritization of personal interests above those of the public good. Another cause they mentioned is the collusion between the government and organized crime:

They let them grow [...] I think that because they lent them money that didn't have to be reported, they were making a good income on the side, they used to make deals [...] so they started grabbing economic power, influence and



**FIGURE 1. ASSOCIATED SITUATIONS TO INSECURITY. PERCENTAGE OF CODE USE BY ALL THE SAMPLE (N=30). TAMAULIPAS, MEXICO, 2015**

experience of how everything is run and by the time they really tried, to bring them down, all hell was let loose [case 7, man, aged 22].

As for organized crime, also referred to as “drugs trafficking” by respondents, it was said that criminals act out of “greed” or because of their “pursuit of money”. However, they also perceive that the situation of insecurity is related to the “power struggle” between rival criminal organizations, and among federal forces. Among the respondents, there were some who mentioned causes such as “economic necessity”, “job insecurity”, and the “lack of education”, as well as “an easy way to get money”. They also mentioned other moral causes such as the lack of values and spirituality.

Among the group of men, greater importance was given to corruption as a cause of insecurity. Social causes were mentioned, such as the neglect of marginalized neighborhoods, family disintegration and the arrival of people from other places, which were not mentioned by the women’s group. A higher proportion of the group without children considered that insecurity is due to government failures in maintaining the law, and the design and implementation of public security strategies.

### Emotions associated with insecurity (figure 3)

Among the respondents, the main emotions referred to were “fear” or “dread” and they used words like “worry” or “unease” to refer to their emotional state in the face of the presence of organized crime in the locality:

Well maybe criminals make me more scared because of the fact that [...] they don’t have any kind of obligation

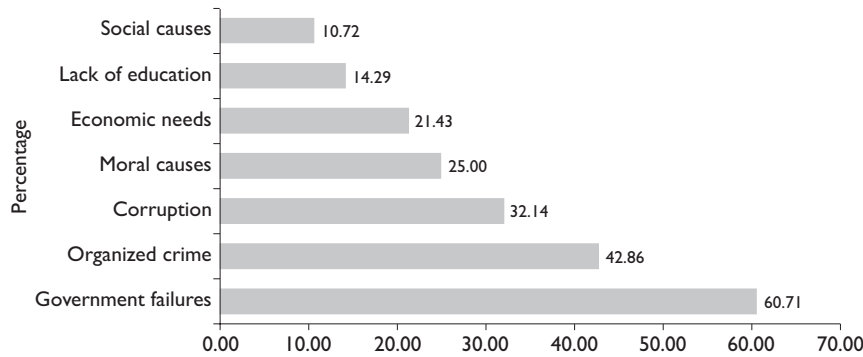
to the state or citizens and the fact that they are not going to be considerate or anything because they are colder and crueler [case 13, woman, aged 23].

However, some of the respondents declared that they felt “calm” at that moment, and to a lesser extent they said that they felt “indifference,” as though they had “resigned” themselves or “got used” to the local situation. Moreover, some respondents expressed emotions such as “anger” or “annoyance”, some felt “tension”, “helplessness”, or even perceived that they had a “limited” life or that it had “turned into a mess”. It should be noted that the expression of emotions such as “sadness” and “grief” was minimal.

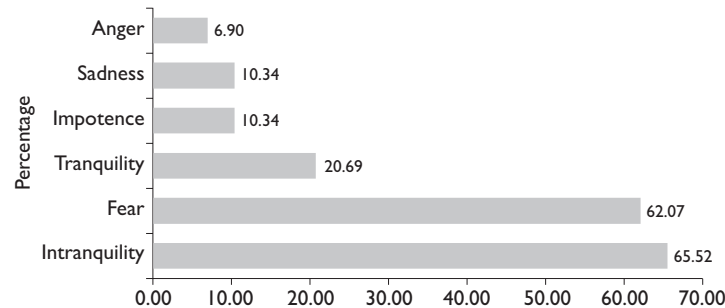
Women said that they were frightened more often than men, who were more likely to say that they felt uneasy, which is less intense than fear and encompasses a range of sensations such as worry, tension and vulnerability. People with children were more likely to report feeling fear than those who did not; in addition to feeling angry, unlike the other group. A larger proportion of workers said that they felt afraid compared with the group of students.

### Consequences of insecurity (figure 4)

The main consequence of insecurity for the respondents has been “not going out”; in other words, a restriction on their circulation or movement in public places, especially at night, which means having to stay at home, cut down their social life and suffer from restrictions in everyday life related to various areas such as self-care and going out with their family or friends:



**FIGURE 2. PERCEIVED CAUSES OF INSECURITY. PERCENTAGE OF CODE USE BY ALL THE SAMPLE (N=30). TAMAULIPAS, MEXICO, 2015**



**FIGURE 3. EMOTIONS LINKED TO INSECURITY. PERCENTAGE OF CODE USE BY ALL THE SAMPLE. TAMAULIPAS, MEXICO, 2015**

You think about going out like before when you went out at night or things like that so, you think about it a little bit, doing a certain activity that you used to do back then, yes, it does stop you a bit, it deprives you of lots of things in your everyday life because you think twice before doing them [case 25, woman, aged 26].

Another significant consequence involves the "suspicion" felt towards other people, which can be expressed at the relational level as exemplified by the codes of "not making friends with strangers", "not sharing personal details" or "only going out with friends you know". To describe the situation, they used terms such as "psychosis", "paranoia" and "not knowing if they are a thief or someone who could harm you".

Among other factors that have been restricted was "traveling on the highway". Another thing mentioned was the consequence of looking after family members. Above all there was a tendency to overprotect them,

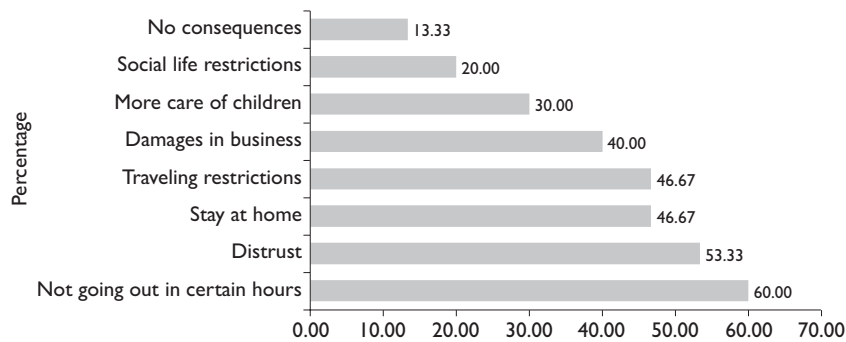
which stems from worrying about their children; and more often certain consequences in the work environment such as losing clients, money or the interruption of work activities. Respondents without children reported more consequences such as travel restrictions and harm to businesses or firms than those who were parents.

### Strategies for managing insecurity (figure 5)

The main strategies respondents used to protect themselves or avoid situations related to insecurity concerns was "being careful about arrival times", especially "avoiding going out late" or at night.

I try not to go out late, to get home early and well not to go out, not to go out after ten at night [case 4, woman, aged 53].





**FIGURE 4. PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF INSECURITY IN EVERY DAY LIFE. PERCENTAGE OF CODE USE IN ALL THE SAMPLE (N =30). TAMAULIPAS, MEXICO 2015**

As well as a reorganization of time in everyday life, reference was also made to a reduction in movement in the street, or in terms of trips as a way to protect oneself. Furthermore, the importance of avoiding certain places was mentioned, particularly bars, clubs or zones perceived as being high risk, such as the outskirts of the city.

Alternative forms of self-protection involved “not giving out personal information”, “distrusting strangers” and “getting to know the people who surround you”. They also mention the importance of using social networks and cell phones mainly so they can keep in touch with their families:

Well, here my only family is my sister... if she’s going out she tells me where she is so I know where she’s going to stay or if she’s going to stay at my house [case 27, woman, aged 24].

Compared with women, men reported greater use of the strategy of not getting in trouble or keeping a low profile in order not to attract attention. The group without children and the group of students declared that they were more likely to use the strategy of avoiding places, communicating via social networks and coping with violent situations, compared with the groups with children, and workers, who were more likely to use the strategy of not providing personal data.

Unlike the previous strategies, which are designed to protect respondents from possible incidents related to organized crime, the following strategies attempt to deal with the dissatisfaction caused by the local situation. The key strategy mentioned by the respondents was “trying to lead a normal life” or “getting on with their lives”, which involves trying to keep the peace

despite the presence of organized crime so as not to interrupt their everyday lives. This implies a process of normalizing a situation in which insecurity is present and not allowing it to completely take over their everyday lives:

In general, I try to do activities, umm, as normally as possible so as not to affect my emotional issues [case 29, man, aged 35].

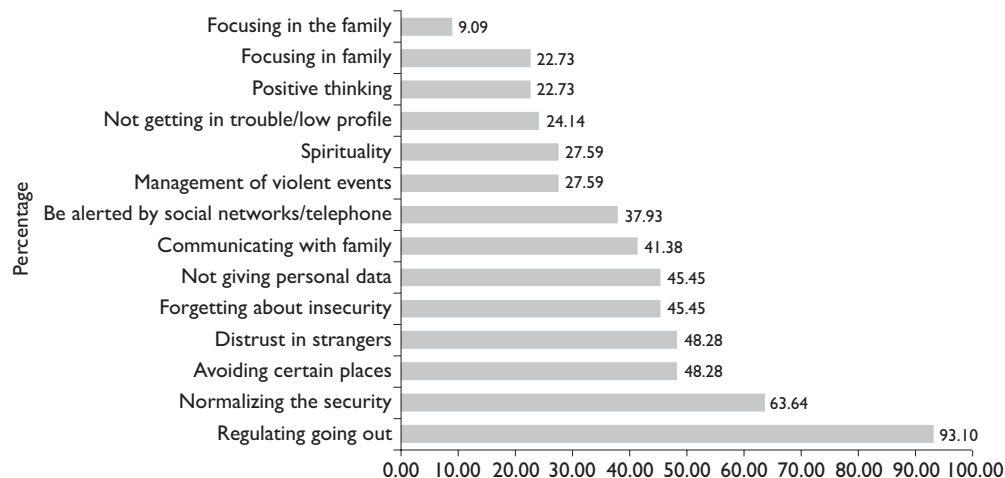
Other strategies involve avoidance (“not knowing what is happening in the city” or “keeping themselves isolated”, as well as “not thinking about insecurity”) or trying to maintain a positive perspective (“not seeing the downside”, “trying to think positively”, “not thinking about what could happen”). Furthermore, spiritual strategies are mentioned, such as “keeping their faith”, “entrusting themselves to God” or “praying”:

I try to trust God, that He will protect us and that we will be alright [case 20, man, aged 58].

The group of parents used the normalization strategy more often than the group without children, whereas men were more likely to report trying to think positively or changing their perception of the problem than the group of women.

## Discussion

The feeling of insecurity is linked to crimes such as abduction, robbery or homicide.<sup>6,26</sup> However, issues linked to the presence of organized crime, and not necessarily classified as crimes themselves, such as disappearances, shootouts, collection of fees, false roadblocks or the



**FIGURE 5. INSECURITY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES. PERCENTAGE OF CODE USE BY ALL THE SAMPLE (N=30). TAMAULIPAS, MÉXICO, 2015**

implementation of a surveillance system via “falcons”, are also associated with insecurity. This implies the need to address local aspects of the phenomenon of organized crime, instead of homogenizing incidents linked to insecurity across states. In the case of Tamaulipas, insecurity increases due to the diversification of criminal activities<sup>27</sup> and the process of Balkanization owing to the capture of key commanders and internal conflicts that have led to turf wars among rival organizations in various parts of the country.<sup>28</sup>

It could therefore be argued that the presence of organized crime groups, linked not only to drug trafficking, but also to violent crimes, transforms everyday experience in terms of movement in public places, impermanence and connection to other people. Security, which should be ensured by the state, must be obtained through everyday strategies to control insecurity, which results in the erosion of the social fabric and the loss of public places.<sup>11</sup> These conditions could play a key role in the consolidation of territorial control in the local community in the hands of organized crime.

The main emotion expressed by respondents is fear or dread, as has been found in previous studies.<sup>29</sup> However, other types of emotion were detected such as peace of mind, which is related to a process of resignation or becoming accustomed to insecurity, which may be an affective expression of the domestication of organized crime by communities in order to coexist with the presence of the phenomenon in question.<sup>22</sup>

With respect to the causes of insecurity, respondents gave reasons that are similar to those identified

by Kessler<sup>19</sup> in their accounts of insecurity, because they consider that insecurity is due to the complicity between the state and criminal groups,<sup>27,30,31</sup> and to a lesser extent, a social crisis characterized by unemployment, lack of job security and a shortage of educational opportunities,<sup>32,33</sup> as well as the moral degradation related to greed, the pursuit of easy money and the lack of values.<sup>34</sup>

The strategies used by citizens to control insecurity are mainly avoidance-based,<sup>19</sup> and a response to the principal emotion identified in the study, namely fear or dread. A significant portion of the study concerns the identification of specific strategies for coping with insecurity, such as the following: normalization, avoiding thinking about crime, thinking positively, spirituality and focusing their lives on work and family. This means people can forget about the issue in their everyday lives, and possibly reduce the anxiety it produces, as a process of mental health care or anesthesia against violence in social spaces. It should be noted that respondents do not mention suffering from any kind of disease or show signs of psychological disorders.

If it is important for citizens to find everyday strategies to cope with insecurity, it is also important for the state to recognize this discontent instead of permitting the normalization of cases of exceptional violence and failing to guarantee the security of its citizens.

Among the limitations of the current study, respondents were predominantly young females, meaning that it is necessary to perform studies on groups who have different levels of social vulnerability and, for that mat-

ter, are exposed to the phenomenon in a different way with a view to accessing the polyphony of discourses regarding insecurity.<sup>11,35</sup>

Many studies have focused on the effects of political conflict and the link between exposure to violence and psychological trauma.<sup>36</sup> Other lines of research have expanded this vision to focus on the constraints on health, feeling destroyed or depressed and experiencing trauma-related stress. These studies recognize the fact that increased feelings of human insecurity and chronic economic constraints pose a greater threat to health than direct exposure to violence.<sup>37</sup>

The presence of feelings of insecurity in the population due to the presence and actions of organized crime can produce mental health problems and certain constraints on physical functioning, and therefore impact public health. A study by Stafford<sup>38</sup> and colleagues found that walking at high speed and lung functions as well as subjective health measurements are associated with fear of crime. In this study, respondents reporting high levels of fear were 50% more likely to display symptoms of common mental disorders while over 90% were more likely to show symptoms of depression than those who reported low levels of fear.

In Australia, a study by Foster and colleagues<sup>39</sup> concluded that fear of crime constitutes a risk factor for poor mental health in a bidirectional way, in other words, the greater the psychological distress, the greater the fear of crime rather than vice versa. However, the connection between fear of crime and mental health seems to be more direct when one observes the constraints on physical and social activities, in other words, when people stop engaging in everyday activities in their local community, regardless, according to this study, of their level of involvement with the community. This suggests a direct relationship between emotional distress and fear of crime.

In Mexico, the relationship between fear of crime and the perceived risk of victimization in everyday routines was analyzed by Vilalta,<sup>40</sup> particularly going out at night, which was chosen from the ENVIPE 2011 survey. It was found that direct and indirect victimization has an independent impact on changes in our everyday routines, as well as the perception of the safety of a neighborhood and the perceived risk of victimization. However, the most valuable finding was that distrust of the local police was among the most important factors that distinguished between those who altered their routines from those who did not. Moreover, it was found that place and context affect the fear of crime, which in turn affects typical behaviors such as everyday routines. This study showed that the intensity of the war against organized crime in Mexico has affected large groups of people regardless of the actors involved.

These studies appear to suggest that it is important to strengthen political and social institutions and have an honest police force to which one can turn in conflict situations. Besides, having reliable non-corrupt institutions, in addition to combating crime, would be an ideal way to reduce the emotional exhaustion which the Mexican population in general and that of Tamaulipas in particular, suffer on a daily basis.

*Declaration of conflict of interests.* The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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