The Making of a Sicario Class: Youth Mobilisation into the Mexican Drug War
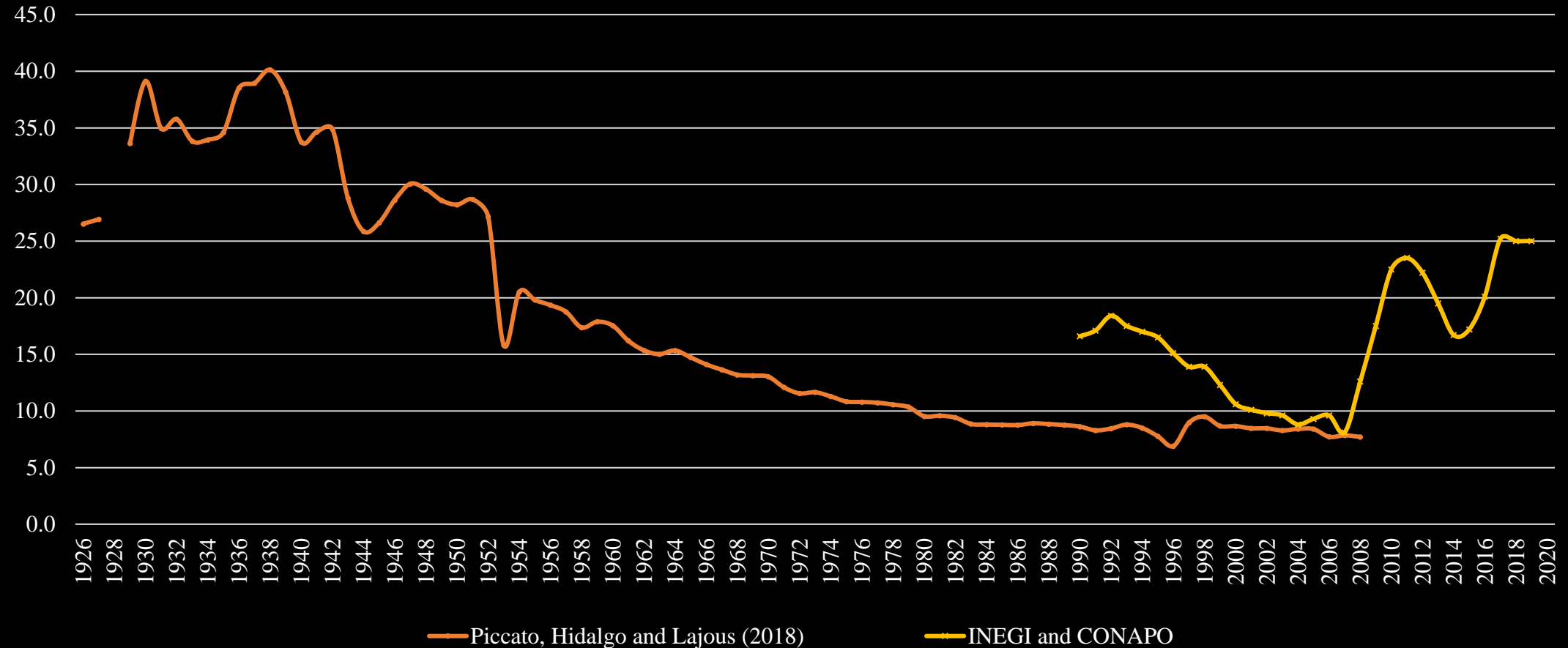
Dr. Raul Zepeda Gil

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Katz Center for Mexican Studies
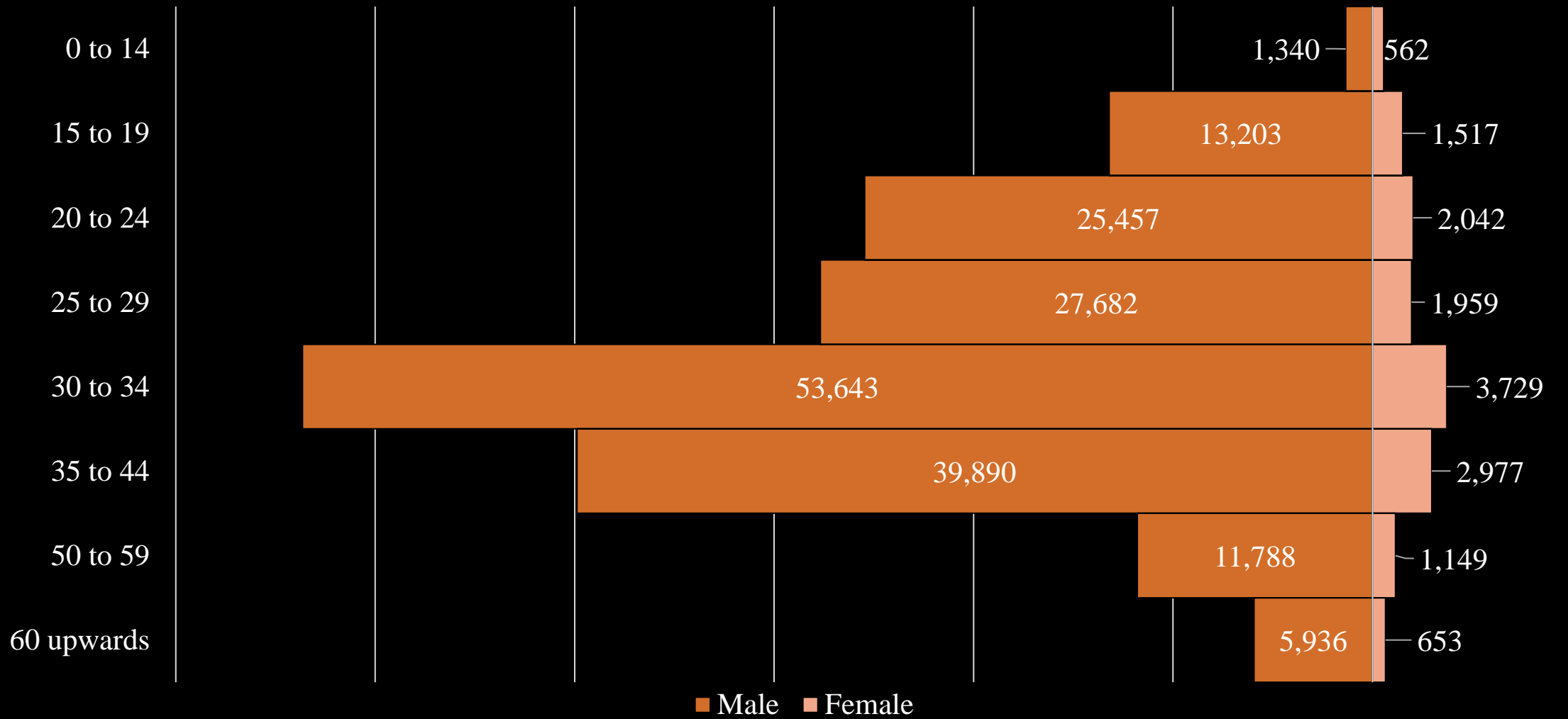
Homicide rates per 100, 000 inhabitants in Mexico during the 20th Century

Piccato, Hidalgo and Lajous (2018) ⸺⸺ INEGI and CONAPO

Homicides by age bracket in Mexico by age and gender from 2006 to 2018

Age bracket	Male	Female
0 to 14	1,340	562
15 to 19	13,203	1,517
20 to 24	25,457	2,042
25 to 29	27,682	1,959
30 to 34	53,643	3,729
35 to 44	39,890	2,977
50 to 59	11,788	1,149
60 upwards	5,936	653

■ Male ■ Female

Source: INEGI Deaths statistics.

Victims of homicides: comparison of general homicides, males killed with guns and youth (minors of 29) killed with guns

Source: INEGI homicide statistics.

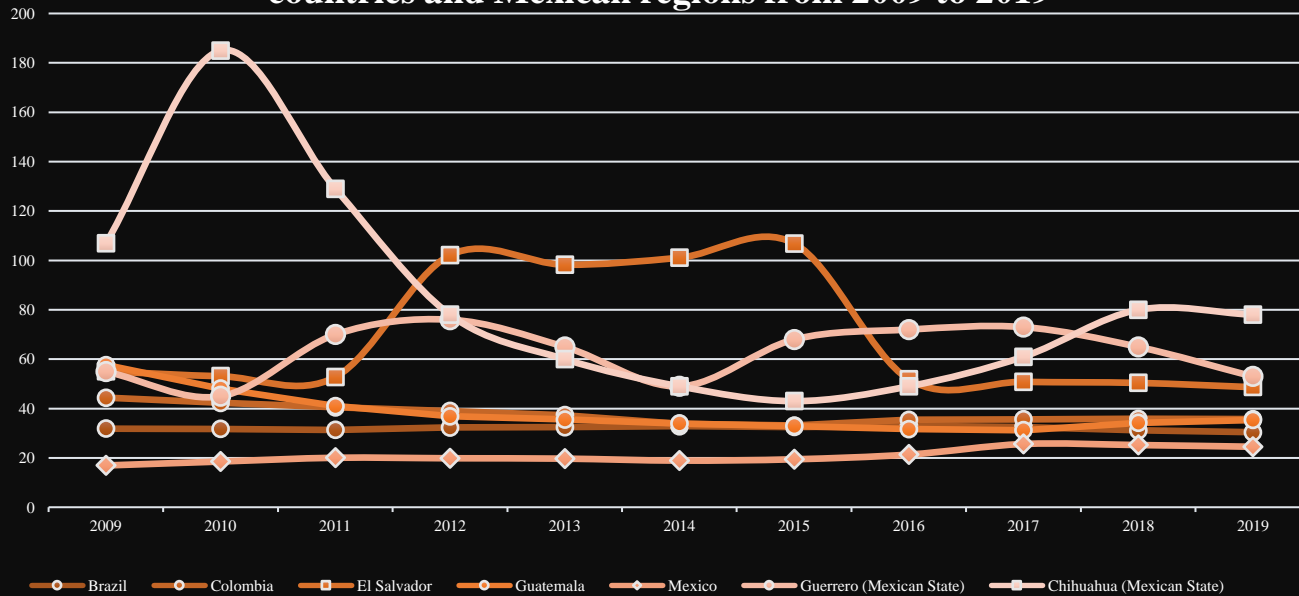# Most of homicide victims and homicide inmates are young marginalised men

- Previous literature (De Hoyos, 2016; Gómez & Merino, 2012) assumed the profile matched with NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth as primary source of recruitment by criminal organisations.

- Others have identified low schooling (Ingram, 2014), Unemployment (Rivera, 2016), Poverty (Azaola, 2018; Chávez, 2020), Peers (Chomcynski & Guy, 2021) and Masculinities (García Reyes, 2018).

- Previous studies about sicarios in Mexico are based on the ecological characteristics of the place where homicide victims died.

- However, previous assumptions on their identity are based on the homicide victims' profiles, and not homicide inmates, which is more accurate.

- Most youth crime in Mexico literature is not linked to the conditions of the Mexican Drug War. A war is not possible with a large human scale mobilisation.

- As Densley postulates, gangs cannot grow ad infinitum. They have a finite number of openings to take up the large pool of supply of youthful workforce.

- **there has not been research that links those individual stories to wider-scale conflict dynamics**

Theoretical framework

How did the Mexican Drug Cartels mobilise enough recruits to counter the Mexican Army and other Drug Trafficking Organisations?
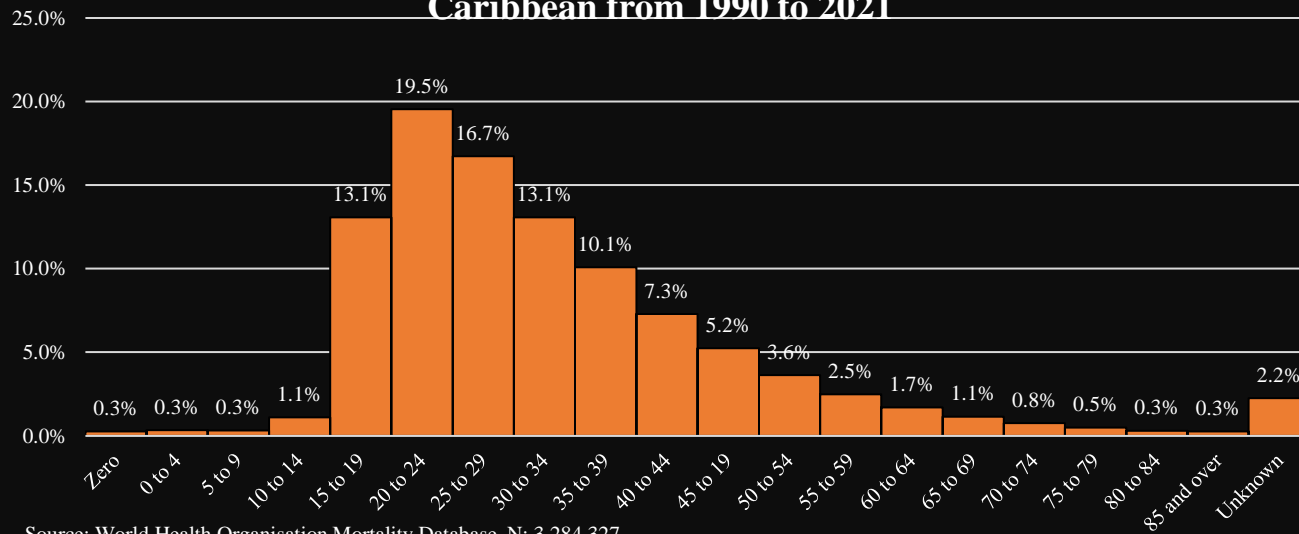
- Political economy of war
- Criminal violence as an occupational choice
- Analytical Marxism (class formation)
- Interdisciplinary: criminology, conflict studies, occupational sociology, political economy.
- Life course sociology and criminology
- Mixed methods national case: linking the rise of violence to mobilisation processes. Not only profiles.

Homicide rates per 100, 000 inhabitants in selected Latin American countries and Mexican regions from 2009 to 2019

Legend: Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Guerrero (Mexican State), Chihuahua (Mexican State)

Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network. Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 (GBD 2019) Results. Seattle, United States: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), 2021. And the National Mexican Institute of Statistics (INEGI).

Homicides (percentages) by age group in Latin America and the Caribbean from 1990 to 2021

Values: Zero 0.3%, 0 to 4 0.3%, 5 to 9 0.3%, 10 to 14 1.1%, 15 to 19 13.1%, 20 to 24 19.5%, 25 to 29 16.7%, 30 to 34 13.1%, 35 to 39 10.1%, 40 to 44 7.3%, 45 to 19 5.2%, 50 to 54 3.6%, 55 to 59 2.5%, 60 to 64 1.7%, 65 to 69 1.1%, 70 to 74 0.8%, 75 to 79 0.5%, 80 to 84 0.3%, 85 and over 0.3%, Unknown 2.2%

Source: World Health Organisation Mortality Database. N: 3,284,327

This research is situated in the discussion about Latin America

I am not disputing

- The origin of the war. That has consensus: it was the deployment of the Army in the region (Flores & Zarkin, 2021; Espinosa & Rubin, 2015) Snyder & Duran Martínez, 2009)
- The role of growth (Bergman, 2008), democratization (Yashar, 2018; Trejo & Ley, 2020), or interjections (Lessing, 2017).

I am disputing

- Scholars denying inequalities have a role on the conflict (Bergman, 2018, Vilalta et., al, 2023; Neumeyer, 2005)
- That labour markets role in this is not studied in the region.
- That NEET youth is the one to blame (De Hoyos, 2016)

The research roadmap

Conceptualising violent crime in extorsion contexts as work

Locating the Mexican Drug War as a labour market process (political economy approach)

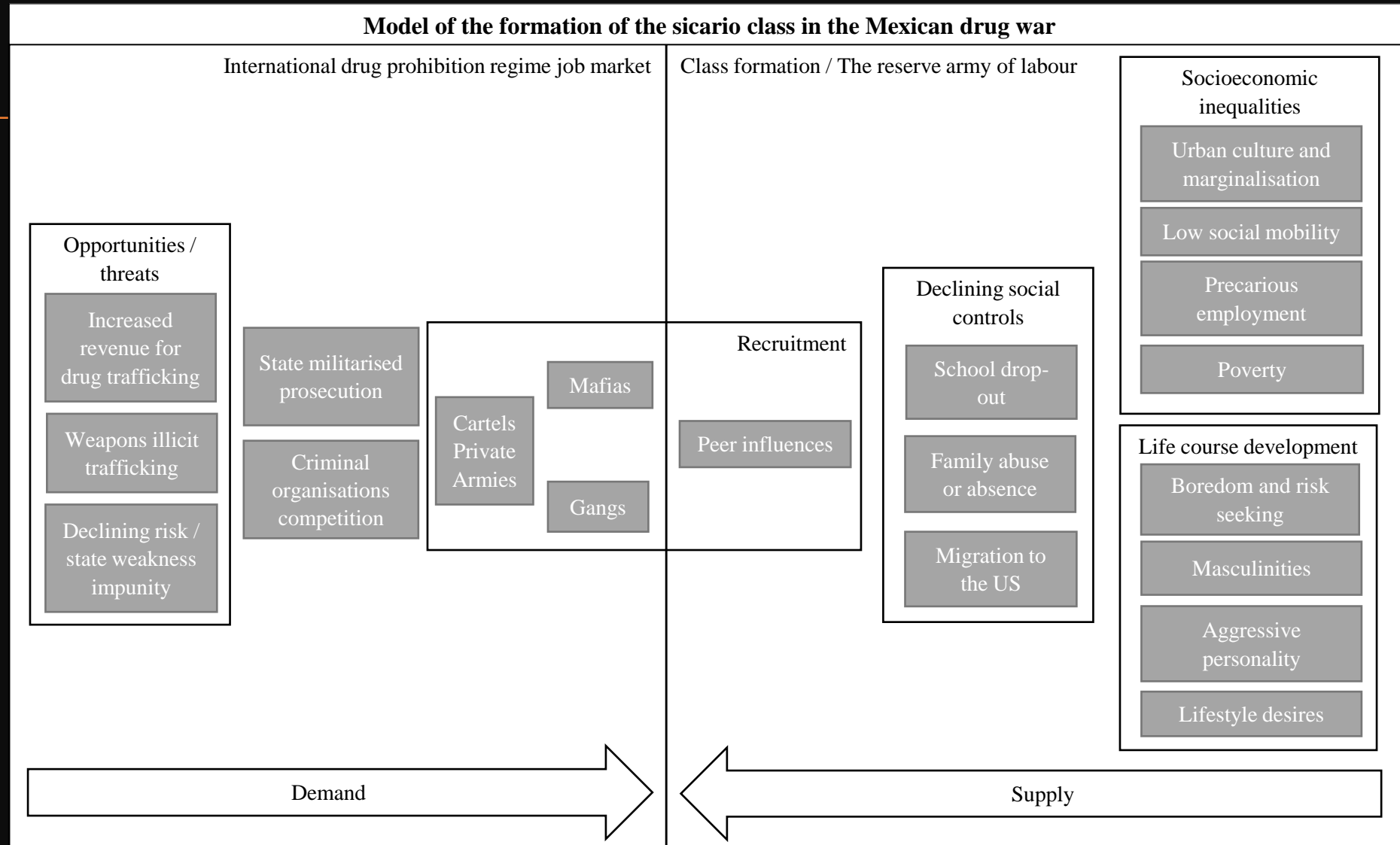Mixed methods design: exploratory quantitative analysis of ENIGH, ENPOL and ENSAJUP.

Focus groups and interviews with youth based on an occupational choice framework.

The political economy of the Mexican Drug War mobilisation process

- the recruitment process is part of the political economy of the drug war, parallel to the development of the other violent markets: drug prohibition, extortion, and arms smuggling.

- the drug war military interjections are part of the widescale global war on drugs prohibition regime, fostered by the United States government in Latin America

- military operations are the motivation behind the demand of criminal organisations for violence labour, and the socioeconomic marginalisation of young men in the region as the supply side. In other words, this as a labour-matching process.

Criminal organisations demanded violence workers to retaliate against the Mexican Army since 2006

Model of the formation of the sicario class in the Mexican drug war

International drug prohibition regime job market

Class formation / The reserve army of labour

Socioeconomic inequalities
- Urban culture and marginalisation
- Low social mobility
- Precarious employment
- Poverty

Opportunities / threats
- Increased revenue for drug trafficking
- Weapons illicit trafficking
- Declining risk / state weakness impunity

State militarised prosecution

Criminal organisations competition

Cartels Private Armies
- Mafias
- Gangs

Recruitment
- Peer influences

Declining social controls
- School drop-out
- Family abuse or absence
- Migration to the US

Life course development
- Boredom and risk seeking
- Masculinities
- Aggressive personality
- Lifestyle desires

Demand

Supply

The profile of the labour market of Mexican Sicarios is more complex than NEET, Unemployment, or Low Schooling

- Instead of a fixed profile, we must look recruitment into criminal organisations as a labour transition into adulthood.
- Using data from ENPOL and ENSAJUP (Minors in Prison) reveals that socioeconomic marginalisation is combined with
  - life experiences of family abandonment,
  - becoming a father,
  - early transition from precarious work,
  - and decision making under the influence of peers and drugs.
- Most begin their criminal careers by committing robbery or other crimes since the early teens (15 years).

- They drop-out from school in secondary to begin working in manual informal labour or as farmers. Their "idle" period is brief if it happens. Most have employment and working in several places.
- Poverty is a transitional phase in their lives. Essentially, they are looking into criminal activities as a **social mobility gamble**.

Percentages and number of people victims of homicide and homicide perpetrators by youth classifications from different sources (2006-2018)

| Age groups defined / Source	Homicide Inmates, Inmate Survey (ENPOL 2007-2016)	A juvenile sentenced for homicide according to the administrative census in state youth detention centres (2018) *	Homicide victims with a firearm on the street (2007-2018)
Total	34, 405	371 (17%)	112, 798
Children (10 to 17)	137 (0.4%)		4, 935 (4.38%)
UN Youth definition (15 to 24)	12, 799 (37.2%)	-	31, 884 (28.27%)
Mexican Law Youth (12 to 29)	18, 370 (53.39%)	-	47, 507 (42.12%)

*Totals are presented but may not be equal to the exact number of adolescents because the administrative census reports the number of crimes and not persons, but most inmates committed only one crime.

# Percentages of homicide inmates by age group in between 2016 and 2021
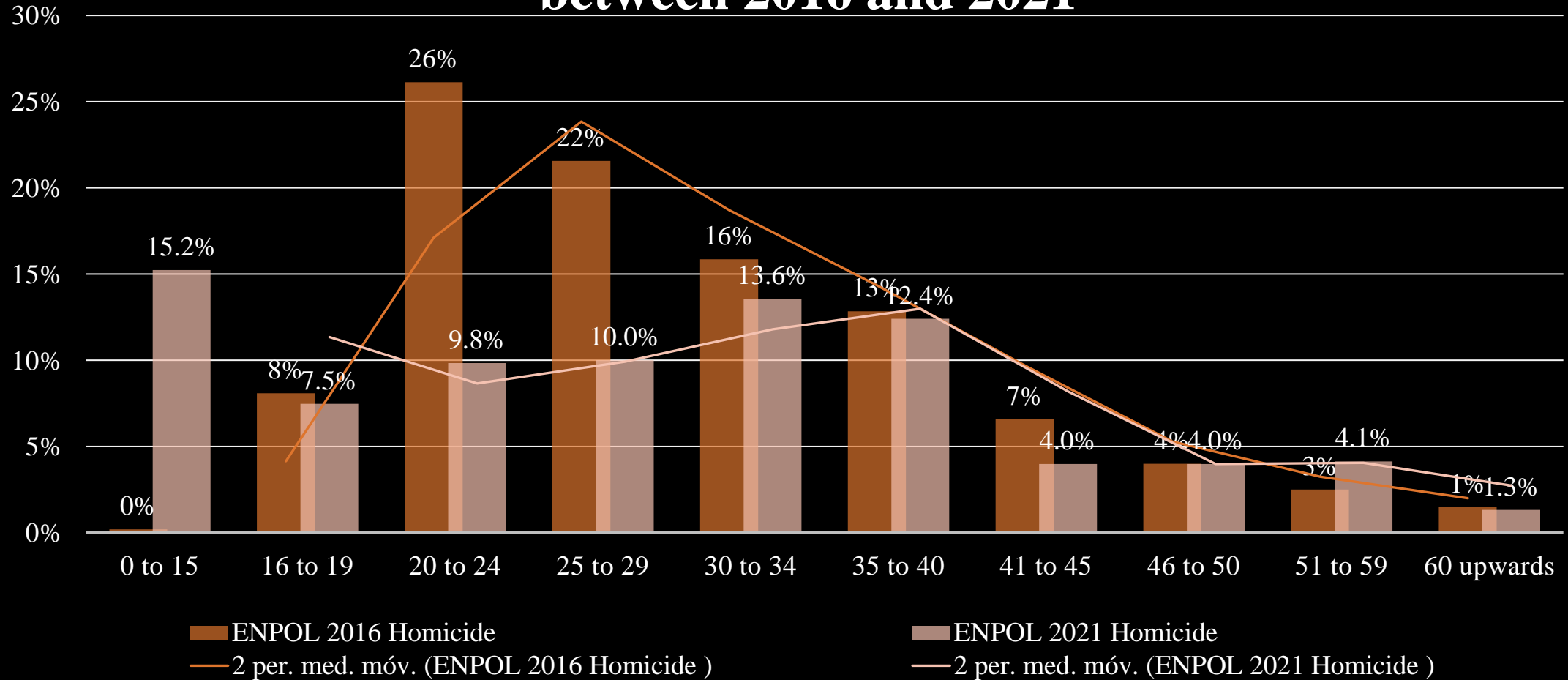
Sources: ENPOL 2016 and 2021 by INEGI. N for ENPOL 2016: 47, 167. N for ENPOL 2021: 42,248

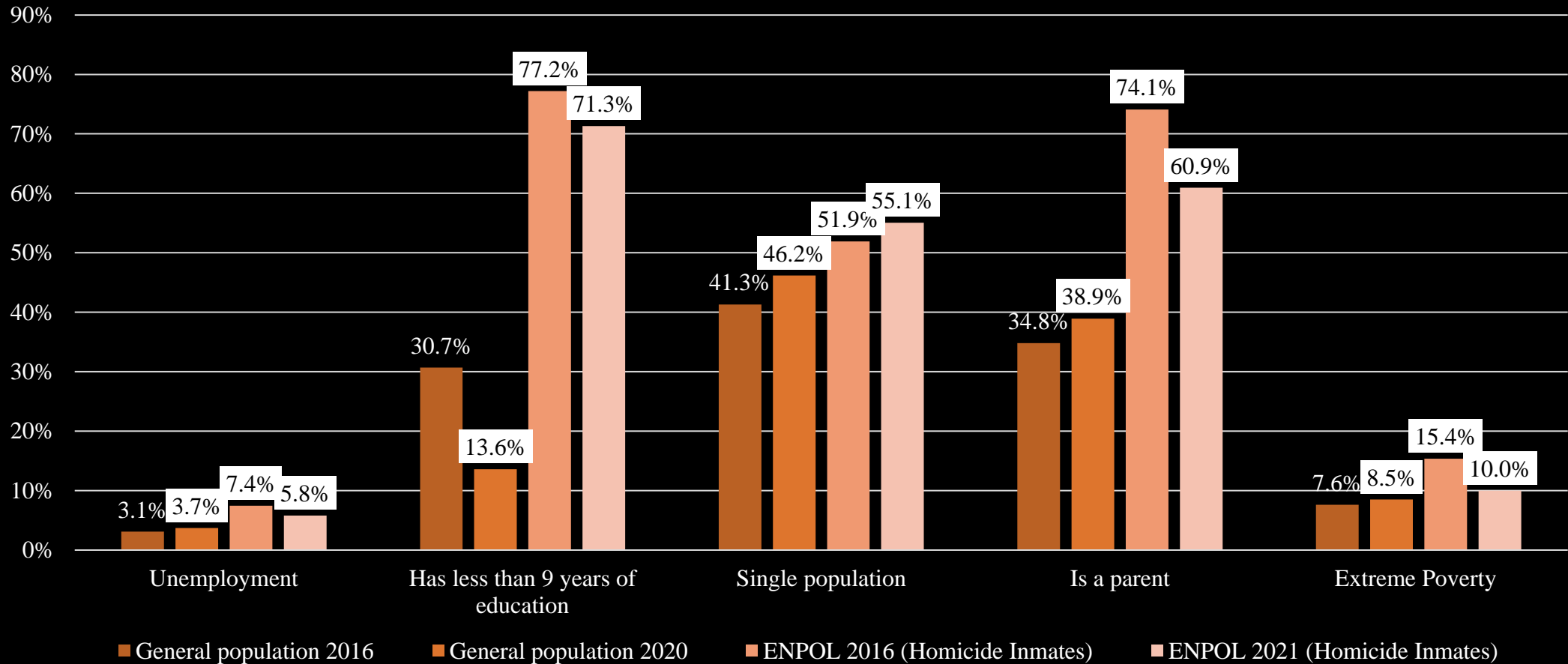**Percentages of schooling rates for male homicide victims and homicide inmates**
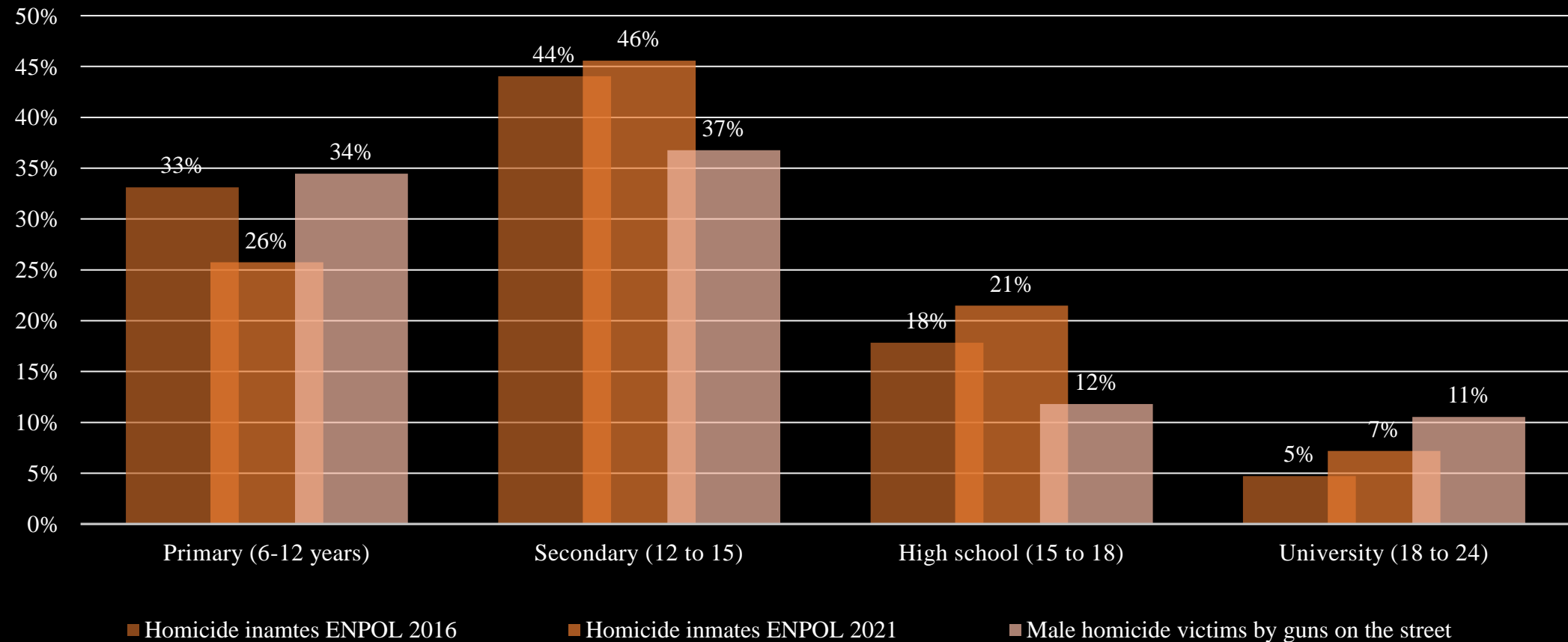
Source: INEGI Mortality, and ENPOL 2016 and 2021.

Percentages per occupational class (EGP adapted for Latin America) for homicide victims and homicide inmates in Mexico.
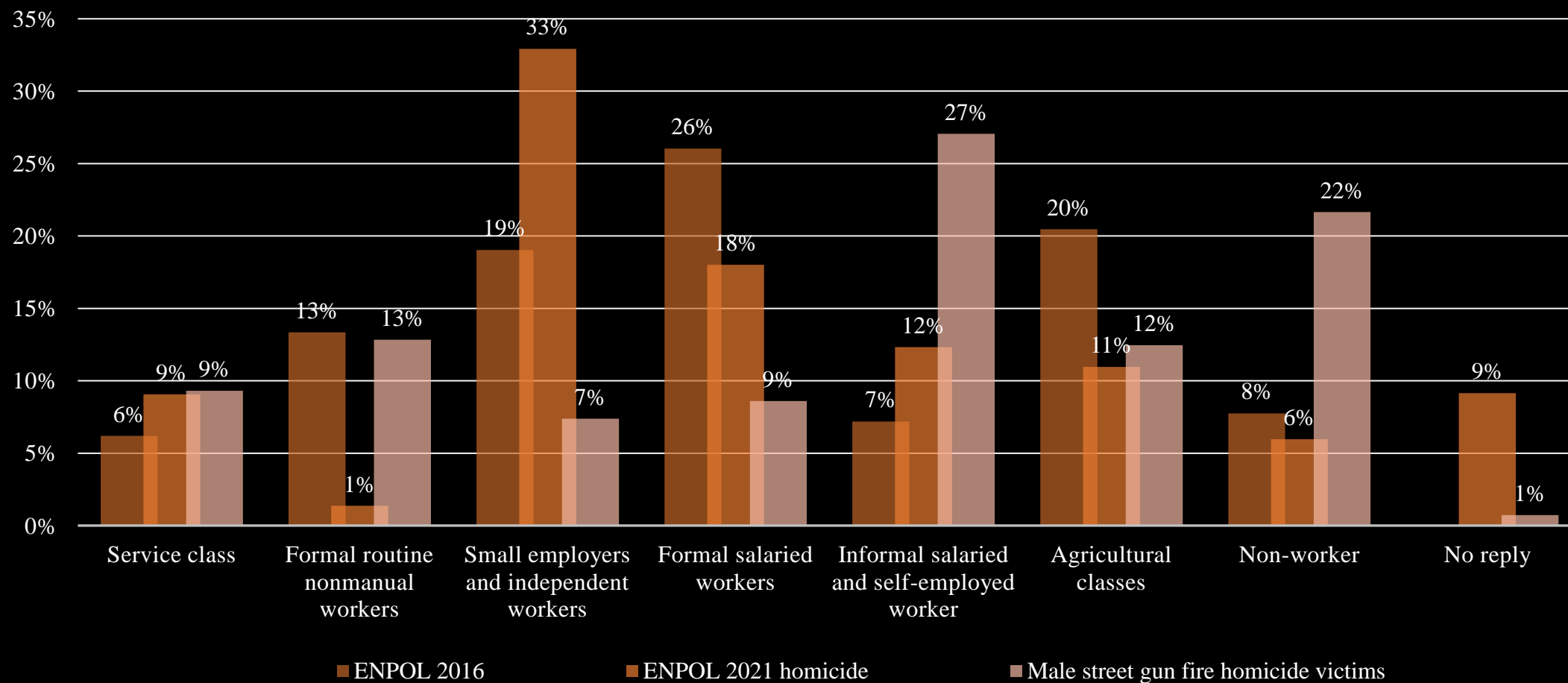
Source: INEGI Mortality, and ENPOL 2016 and 2021.

Primary sociodemographic data of the Mexican Population compared with Homicide Inmates

	Unemployment	Has less than 9 years of education	Single population	Is a parent	Extreme Poverty
General population 2016	3.1%	30.7%	41.3%	34.8%	7.6%
General population 2020	3.7%	13.6%	46.2%	38.9%	8.5%
ENPOL 2016 (Homicide Inmates)	7.4%	77.2%	51.9%	74.1%	15.4%
ENPOL 2021 (Homicide Inmates)	5.8%	71.3%	55.1%	60.9%	10.0%

Sources: Censuses INEGI, ENADID, ENPOL.

Frequencies of variables of interest regarding the inmate homicide population

Theories of violence	Variables in theories	The inmate was or had…	ENSAJUP 2017	ENPOL 2016 (all homicide inmates)	ENPOL 2016 (homicide inmates captured after the War Onset in 2006)	ENPOL 2021 (all homicide inmates)	ENPOL 2021 (homicide inmates charged after the War Onset in 2006)
		Total (percentages related to the total)	950	35,826	23, 010	35, 615	29, 411
Life course development	Transition to adulthood	under 29 years old when detained	---	56.07%	53.22%	57.95%	52.23%
		male	95.82%	95.49%	95.08%	94.78%	94.82%
		a parent	19.85%	73.45%	72.78%	61.13%	61.31%
		single	19.85%	53.67%	53.03%	54.81%	54.74%
	Parental influence	parents with criminal records	23.33%	4.89%	5.12%	4.74%	5.10%
		been abused by parents	58.16%	48.23%	47.62%	19.97%	19.05%
		left school because of bullying	3.14%	16.88%	17.78%	19.27%	19.22%
	Criminal career	been in prison before	35.92%	19.24%	19.69%	13.31%	13.31%
		detained with an adult	79.02%	---	---	---	---
		previous experience working in police or military forces	1.93%	9.55%	9.36%	9.85%	9.65%
Socioeconomic and environmental factors	Schooling and inequality	not enough income to eat	91.47%	15.64%	14.44%	90.34%	90.72%
		income lower than the higher income bracket	---	---	---	80.07%	79.49%
		left school because of the need to work	21.67%	60.47%	60.56%	54.69%	54.77%
		left school to support family members	0.57%	4.07%	4.85	0.58%	0.52%
		less than nine years of schooling	63.29%	78.74%	78	66.69%	66.82%
	Regional and social inequality	living in a female head household	53.26%	16.39%	17.03%	13.92%	13.3%
		born in a southern state	9.52%	23.23%	22.5%	19.5%	19.76%
		born in a northern border state	34.26%	26.40%	28.56%	25.8%	25.5%
	Employment	was unemployed and not in school	19.84%	7.51%	7.68%	5.03%	5.27%
		had an employment	96.14%	92.66%	92.47%	93.99%	93.64%
		a farmer or a manual worker	73.6%	59.47	58.95%	71.54%	70.77%
Criminal justice and discrimination	Labelling and racial discrimination	an indigenous language speaker	3.26%	10.35%	9.54%	5.62%	5.75%
		darker skin colour than the average population in Mexico	---	---	---	57.98%	57.17%
	Criminal justice corruption	a lawyer present when he was presented to the prosecutor	91.06%	16.8%	17.86%	19.16%	19.77%
		tortured by police or prosecutors while detained	50.87%	49.14%	44.65%	40.64%	39.70%
		received threats to declare himself guilty	80.41%	63.49%	62.84%	50.88%	50.27%
Drug consumption		regular alcohol consumption	---	---	---	82.36%	82.58%
		regular drug consumption (except alcohol)	---	---	---	59.41%	59.36%

Which was the decision-making process of these young men to participate in organised crime?

- Although there is evidence of forced recruitment, after conducting interviews and focus groups with young men in Mexico, I could not find widespread evidence of forced recruitment.

- Most young men see killing and selling drugs as a work option. Most decide to not do it, but the ones deciding had a very intricate process of decision making.

- I conducted 18 interviews with homicide inmates. 8 focus groups with secondary and high school students in a rural town with criminal organisations presence.

- I triangulated with the findings of several researchers (Azaola, Chávez, García Reyes, Reguillo).

Schoolboys are well connected to the world of crime… and their current lives as unsatisfactory

Geography of nothingness
- *In the town, there is nothing. No employment. No cinemas. There are more places to visit in Mexico City.*

Families
- *The main difficulty (of attending university) is economic because some things are expensive, the fees, and the supplementary learning materials that I might need.*

Alternative Futures
- *Here you get paid very little. Here you earn like 2, 500 pesos each 15 days. People in the United States earn that money in a day.*
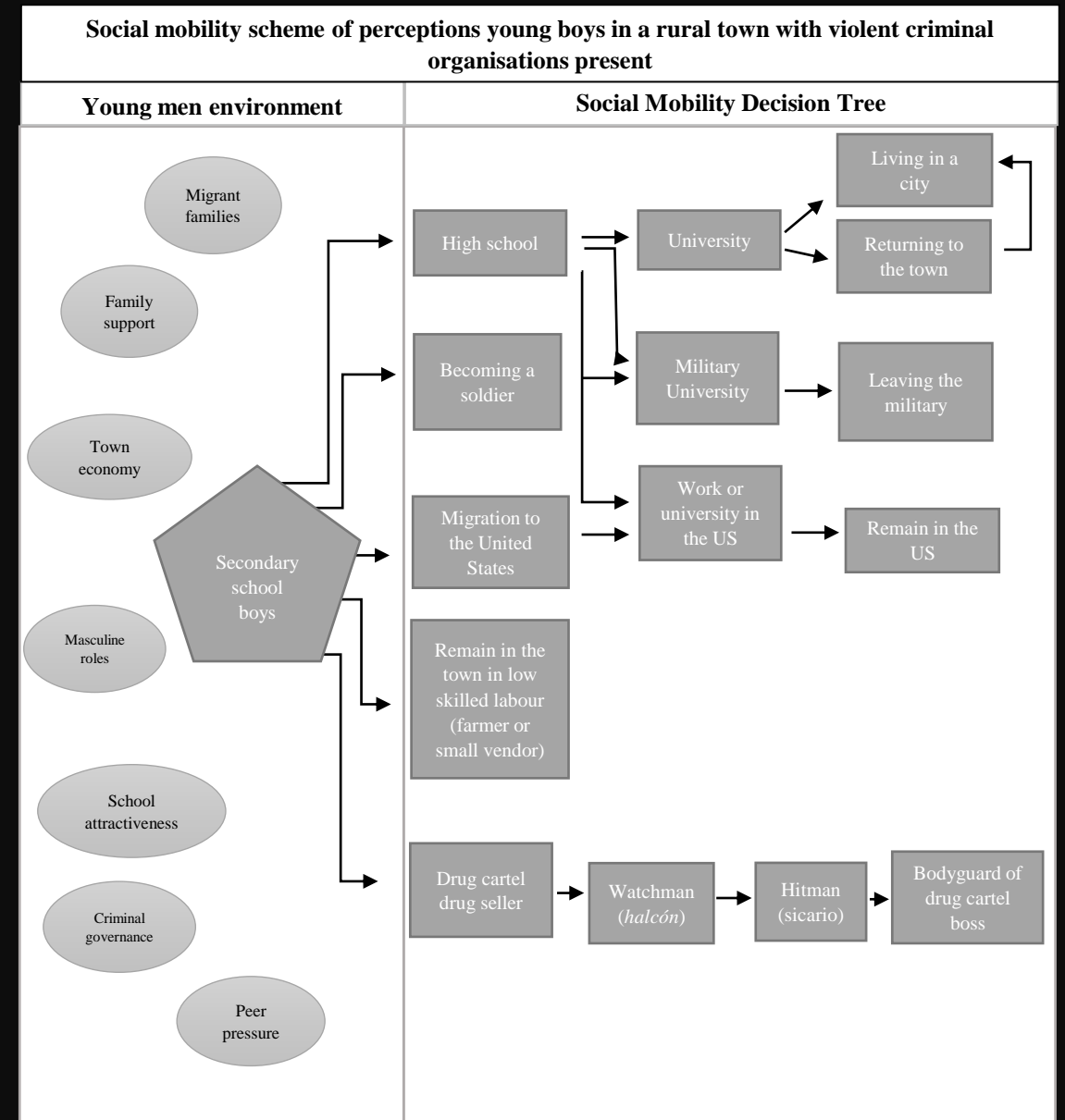
Peers and masculinities
- *(The soldier) he looks cool (mamón). Strong, I want to take a picture of them with their uniform, of their guns too.*

Recruitment
- *My friend is a sicario in the mafia. He receives a lot of money every two weeks (quincena). He wanted me there, but I refused.*

Schoolboys are actively thinking on their occupational prospects, and their local conditions are dominant in their perspectives

- The masculine morality of breadwinning is central in their narratives and justification of their social mobility choices.
- parental support is decisive in their decisions
- school's allure is weak when juxtaposed with the challenges faced by the boys. For example, their views of the schooling as tedious and the curriculum as incomprehensible
- soldiering is a moral enterprise that can be deemed a feasible choice for social mobility.
- their views of drug cartel labour have not been informed by any depictions of narco life in popular culture
- high salaries, luxury, becoming a breadwinner, parties, alcohol, and drugs are some benefits of a job in the cartel. However, in close candour conversations among peers, they convey that they know the actual cost: arduous labour, detachment from their families, performing killings, few days of rest, constant risks, and mounting debts with the cartel bosses.
- they have conjured a picture of the cartel labour work structure in their minds. They describe it with the words jale or chambear, meaning work in Mexican vernacular Spanish. They are fully aware of how that world operates.

Social mobility scheme of perceptions young boys in a rural town with violent criminal organisations present

| Young men environment | Social Mobility Decision Tree |

Sicario labour is hard and dangerous, and life circumstances leading to it were messy

Life was hard

- *I was desperate because we had nothing to eat. My dad was drinking and consuming drugs all the time. My family convinced me to work as a construction worker (albañil). I had to sustain my family. I earned like 1 200 pesos a week (10 GBP).*

It was easy to me

- *He pulled me to work (jalar), and I started to smoke (marijuana). And, I began to ask him for favours. After, I began to smuggle weapons for the cartel. I liked what I used to do because it looked like the movies. We were partners in crime and supported each other in case of any danger.*

War was even harder

- *I had no rest days. I worked every day. I used to sell drugs all night. I could not even buy clothes. If I needed something, there was just one phone number I could call. But mostly, I could only passively respond to calls never had an idea which number they called me from. I lived in a security house and was so stressed that I got facial paralysis.*

Now I want to be good

- *My parents told me that when I get released, I shall not go back to the bad ones; if I ended up in (adult) prison, I would not have their support again. I have to go out to pay for the lawyers my parents hired. I want to take theright path (quiero ir por la derecha). I want to go to school again.*

Sicarios are living extreme working conditions, and they were allured by criminal organisations even with knowing those risks

- They know they have to make social mobility choices with those broader constraints. Sicario labour is one of those pathways. Regardless, as seen in this chapter and highlighted in several studies of youth social mobility, the boys who got into organised crime have lived lives in contingent, fluid, and chaotic episodes.
- his predicament of contingency is also partly circumscribed by attempts by criminal organisations to lure these boys into their ranks. These organisations knowingly exploited the boys' emotional immaturity. They entice them with alcohol, money, and drugs to thwart their decision-making. These boys know cartel labour is dangerous, arduous, and morally reprehensible.
- They suffer isolation, extensively long working days, weeks and months, torture, and abuse. In parallel, some enjoyed violent labour, including performing the same torture treatments they had received.
- They travel to several states fighting against other cartels or the army. In other words, while the Mexican drug war on the northern border is part of everyday life, for the southern Mexico boys, drug cartels and gangs have reached them through a more formalised conscription process. They have been drafted into their regions to fight the war in other parts of the country.
- Some of the sicario boys declared to me that they were sometimes targets of murder by requests of Santa Muerte

The formation of a Sicario working class

- Their choices were embroiled in hubris, limitations, risks, and survival.

- These social mobility gambles are risk-taking choices to attain social mobility.

- Later, the ones who made this decision will acquire the usual occupational traits attached to their labour: prestige, killing skills, rewards, higher salaries, and benefits.

- The regular days at work in the cartel sicarios described gave us a broad picture of precarious labour.

- Themes relevant: discrimination against darker skin tones boys, history of parental participation in the police or the Mexican military, and addiction to drugs and alcohol.

- Migration has been discussed widely in Mexico to explain the rise of vigilantes, but not for sicarios

- former sicarios could imagine themselves as police or military officers after prison because they know they have valuable skills.

In summary

The main findings indicate that the drug war activated a new labour market for young, marginalised men with low schooling rates, a history of family abuse, and work precarity.

Criminal organisations took advantage of them as a labour supply by offering them high salaries. They later trapped them into exploitative violent labour with threats and drug addiction-related debt.

These young boys were allured by their peers already in drug cartels because of the low prospects of achieving occupational upward social mobility in their communities. Therefore, their decisions were a risky social mobility gamble.

Policies

until the pressure on drug cartels to militarise remains, they will continue seeking young men to fill their ranks: end the global war on drugs

demobilising these young men requires an ambitious long-term social policy to tackle stubbornly low social mobility	A precarious labour market is a key structural feature of youth precarious lives
	Increase schooling is imperative
	first employment youth programmes to the years when school-drop out happens (Jovenes Construyendo el Futuro **IS NOT DOING THIS**)
	reviewing with teachers why some students are uninterested and bored at school as part of a broader initiative to make schools attractive
	curtail the problem regarding the lack of parental oversight by amplifying childcare access and reducing working hours
	A particular focus on absent and abusive fathers is fundamental within these policies
	increasing university level access,
	attending youth leaving prison with an employment program

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Contact

raul.zepeda@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Oxford Department of International Development
3 Mansfield Rd, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
01865 281800
www.qeh.ox.ac.uk