Mexico, before and after Calderon's drug war

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We all know that Mexico’s drug war has taken a horrific toll — an estimated 50,000 deaths since President Felipe Calderón launched the effort in late 2006. But how much did Calderón’s declaration change the crime rate? And now that president-elect Enrique Peña Nieto is set to take over in December, how much is likely to change?

Travelers might want to dip into “Drug Violence in Mexico,” a recent report by The Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. Though good statistics are often hard to come by in Mexico, authors Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Ríos and David A. Shirk have gathered a boatload of numbers, and they raise the idea that drug-related killings accelerated before Calderón declared war.

As the report notes, the Mexican government counted 12,903 drug-war killings (a.k.a. organized-crime homicides) in the first nine months of 2011, which brought the official total to 47,515 since Dec. 1, 2006.

If you add the 2,624 drug-related homicides reported by the Mexican daily Reforma from October through December 2011, that makes an estimated 50,139 drug-war deaths in five years and one month. (And there are all the killings of this year yet to be officially counted.)

Looking back, the TBI report suggests that drug-related violence may have begun to surge two years before Calderón took office.

To reach that conclusion, Ríos did some estimating, combining available crime figures with “a multiple imputation algorithm and Bayesian statistics” as part of her Ph.D. dissertation.

She found that in the calmer days between 2000 and 2004, drug-related killings were “probably limited to 3,000 to 4,000 cases annually” and that violence was in decline. But in about 2004, while Vicente Fox was still president, Ríos found, violence began to rapidly increase, especially in the states of Chihuahua and Michoacán.

In the state of Baja California (which includes Tijuana and the northern portion of the Baja peninsula), Ríos estimated between 284 and 350 drug-related killings per year from 2000-2006, compared with 250 officially tallied drug-war deaths in the first nine months of 2011.

In the state of Baja California Sur (which includes Los Cabos and the southern portion of the Baja peninsula), Ríos estimated fewer than 10 drug-related killings per year from 2000-2006. The official figure was 10 such killings for the first nine months of 2011.
As for Mexico’s president-elect, Peña Nieto, he does come with baggage. His party, PRI, was voted out of the presidency in 2000 after seven decades of uninterrupted rule, including allegations of deal-making with major drug traffickers in exchange for peace and payoffs. In a July interview with the L.A. Times, he disdained details, but said that “we will widen the fight on organized crime, fighting drug trafficking, but also put a special emphasis on the crimes that generate violence in society…. Sadly, what people today feel is fear, they feel frustration, they feel an absence of results.”