

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE IN MEXICO, AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

Violence and youth are key issues in contemporary society, whether youths are the victim of violence as in the case of the student teachers in Mexico, or the perpetrators of violence, as in the case of Western adepts to the ISIS jihadist cause. This paper analyses the results of a recent online exploratory survey by the author of youth perceptions of violence in Mexico in comparison with national statistics generalised across the adult age group. The outcome is discussed in relation to the ongoing investigation into the disappearance of the rural student teachers in Guerrero, Mexico and Wilkinson's and Pickett's global analysis of the relation between social and economic inequality and the increase in violent crime. Finally these issues are related to Mexican family values and morality in order to gauge the possible challenges involved in addressing the factors involved in the issues raised.

Keywords: Youth, violence, respect, inequality, patriarchy

Introduction

Violence and youth are two themes whose interrelation is currently a cause of rising concern, either in relation to the globally reported phenomenon of western jihadist volunteers or the disappearance of 43 students in southern Mexico. In both cases youths have become both victims and perpetrators of violence, for children and youths are a large percentage of refugees in the Middle East, girls are victims of rape and abduction, yet the jihadist cause is attracting young people in the Middle East and from Europe to their cause, including "jihadist brides" from western countries. Similarly, in Mexico, there is concern both for those youths which are victims of violent crime at the hands of drug cartels at the same time those youths are joining such groups, or adopting violence in their daily lives and also as a preferred form of protest. What are youth perceptions of this climate of violence?

The following article discusses the results of a study initiated in Campeche in the Yucatan Peninsula in the South east of Mexico, concerning youth perceptions of violence. The questions that the research project sought to answer concerned the nature of youth experience of violence in Mexico; how widespread is the experience of violence; which forms of violence are predominant; who are the perpetrators; who are the victims; what is the impact in their lives; what is their experience of the response by state authorities. These and other questions were posed in the form of exploratory research by the author into youth perceptions and experience of violence in Mexico with the objective of identifying the contours of youth experience. The results are discussed in relation to events in Iguala and issues of social and economic inequality.

The national and local context

Contestants were mainly from Campeche, Yucatan and from Mexico City. The last population census in 2010 registered a national population of 112,336,538, with 8,851,080 in Mexico City, (known as Federal District), Yucatan, 1,995,577 and Campeche 822,441.

All three entities are amongst the federal entities with the lowest reported homicide rates in 2013. Out of a total of 32 federal entities, Yucatan maintained the lowest rate of 2 homicides per 100,000 residents, Campeche was in 6th lowest position with 8 and Mexico City (Distrito Federal) was in 14th position with 12, whilst the highest was Guerrero with 63 and Chihuahua which had 182 in 2010, in 2013 registered 59. (INEGI, 2014)

Although the number of homicides in the South-East and in Mexico City are low and remain stable since 2007, crime statistics are not. Campeche is in 17th lowest position with 23,710 victims over the age of 18 per 100,000 residents, Yucatan in third with 18,438, and Mexico City in 29th position with 33,068. (INEGI (ENVIPE) 2014, 2014)

Statistics regarding perceptions of security give a majority in Campeche regarding their locality as secure (64.5 secure, 35.2 insecure); as well as in Yucatan (71.6 and 28.2), but in Mexico City the majority regards the City as insecure (48.2 and 51.5). (INEGI (ENVIPE) 2014, 2014)

Nevertheless the first two set of statistics refer to reported violence and all three sets of statistics refer to an age group of 18 and above, information about which age group are most likely to be the victims of crime are not included, or the perception of security per age group.

The 26 of September of six student teachers were, on the orders of the mayor, shot by in Iguala in the southern state of Guerrero, police and 43 of their fellow students were handed over by police a criminal gang according to the statement the 22 of October of the Chief Federal Prosecutor. The investigation continues whilst national protests grow.

Methodology

The research design is a mixed method in a case study approach, (Robson, 3er edición 2011) using national statistics on levels of violence as background reference to an online questionnaire to elicit information from young people on their perceptions of violence and current media and academic discussion of the ongoing events in Iguala.

Using Google Drive an exploratory questionnaire consisting of 10 questions was posted in the Web for a period of 10 days and publicised via the authors Facebook account amongst her colleagues and her current and past students in the states of Campeche and Merida in the south-east of Mexico and Mexico City.

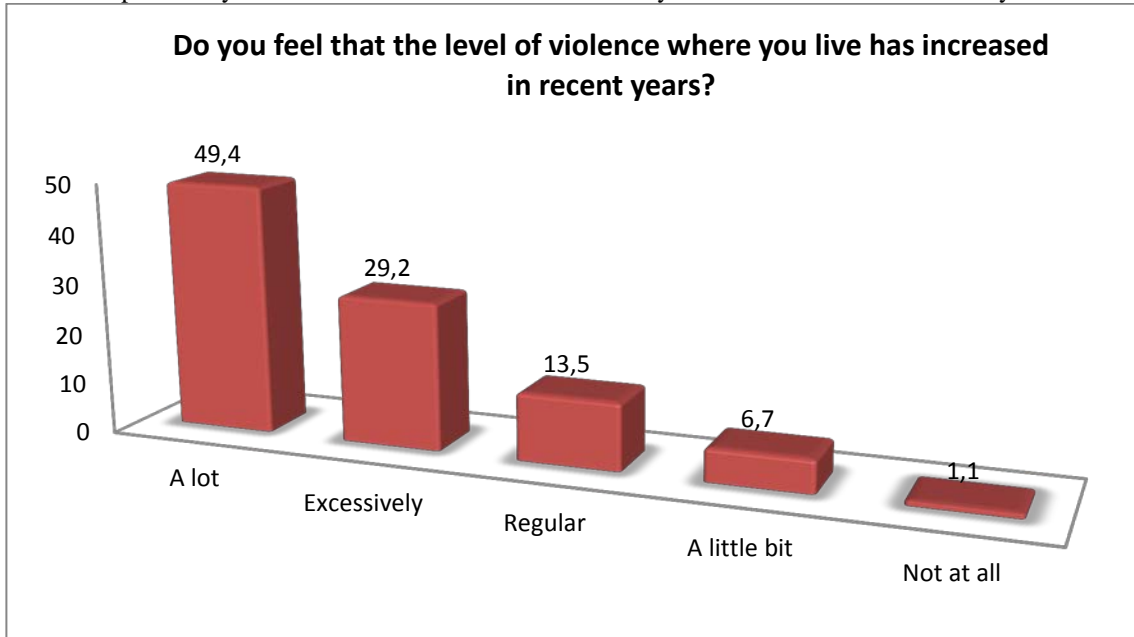
Data from the online results were exported and processed using SPSS and frequency tables and graphics were generated and analysed.

Results

All 10 questions were answered by the 89 contestants generating zero lost values.

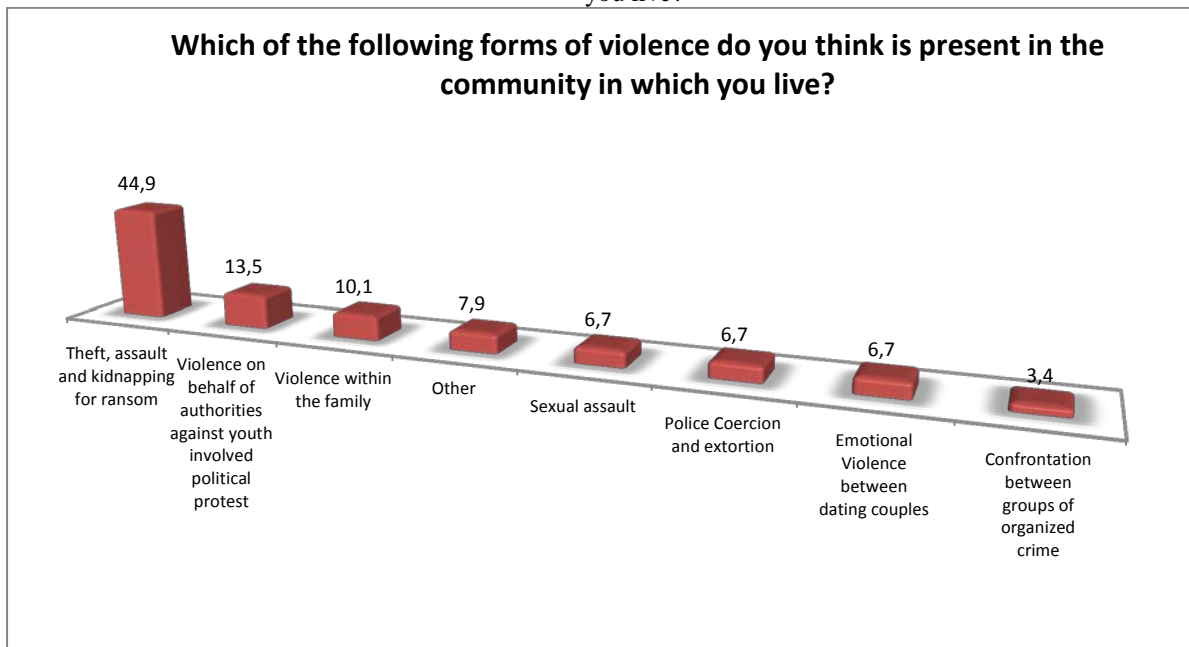
The response to the question “Do you feel that there has been an increase in violence where you live in recent years?” the answers indicated that 69 of the 89 respondents answered a lot or excessively with only one respondent answering “none” and 18 “a little” or “Regular” indicating that 77.5% of the contestants feel that violence is increasing in recent years

Graph 1: Do you feel that the level of violence where you live has increased in recent years?



To the question “Which of the following forms of violence do you believe are most present in the community in which you live? The contestants were asked to choose between seven types of violence or specify “other” and the replies were varied. A total of 40 chose the option “Theft, assault or kidnapping”, a total of 16 chose violence in the family or between couples. Amongst contestants which chose the option other, one wrote “Violence in all senses”. In accordance with national statistics the experience of conflict between organized crime is not prevalent in these areas.

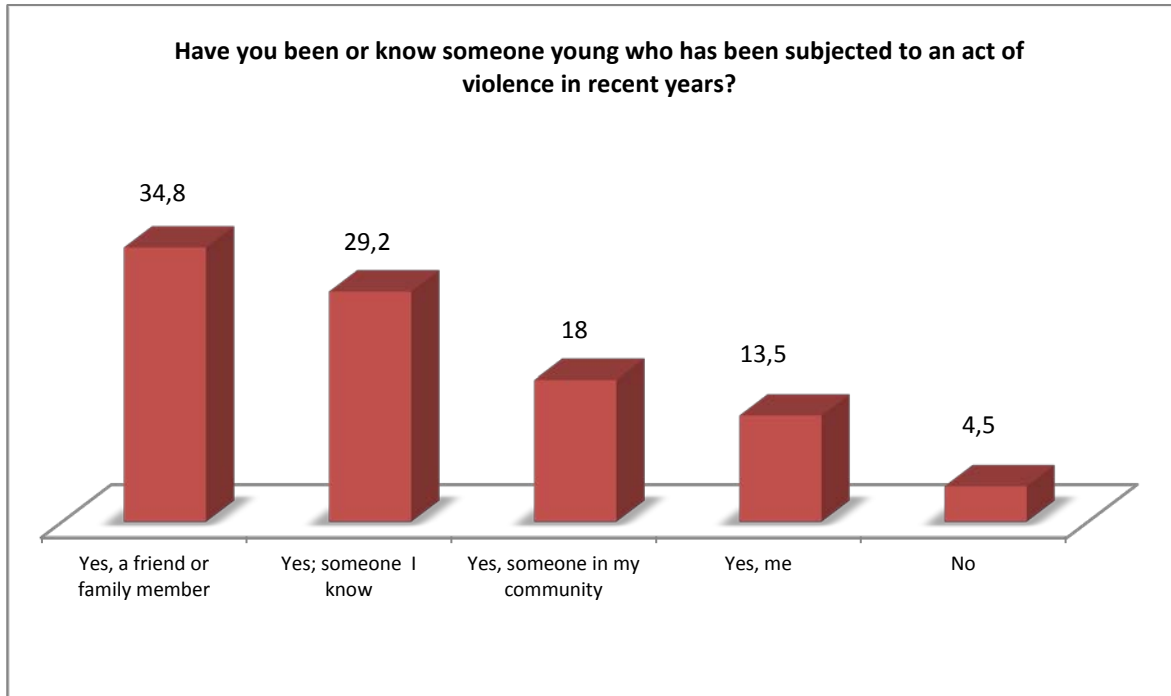
Graph 2: “Which of the following forms of violence do you believe are most present in the community in which you live?”



In order to determine how close their experience or perception of these forms of violence has been, the following question asked “have you been or do you know a young person who has been the subject of an act of violence in recent years?” The results indicated that twelve had been the victim of violence, in thirty cases the victim had been a friend or

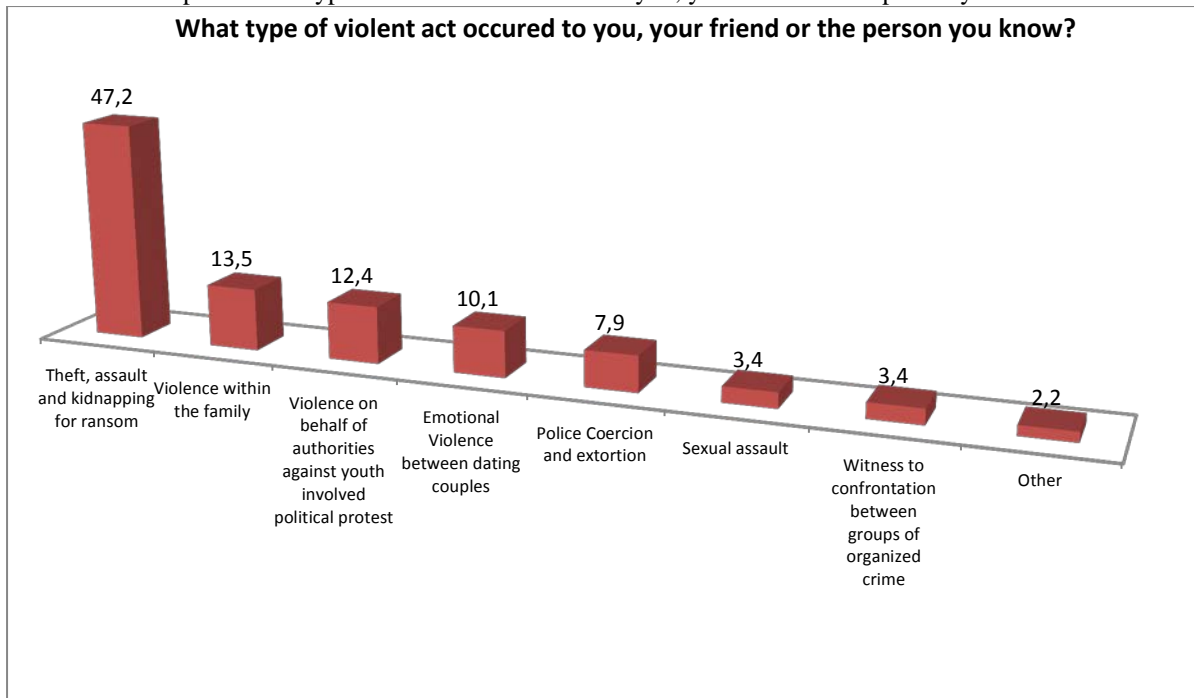
family member; in twenty six cases the victim was someone they knew and in 16 cases someone in the community and in only four cases did the contestant not personally know of anyone. This means that 76.4% of the contestants had a direct experience of the impact of crime, or 95.5% had a personal or close experience of the impact of crime.

Graph 3: Have you been or know someone young who has been subjected to an act of violence?



The next question asked which type of crime that person suffered, using the same seven types of crime in the question about the form of crime prevalent in their community and the results were similar although not the same.

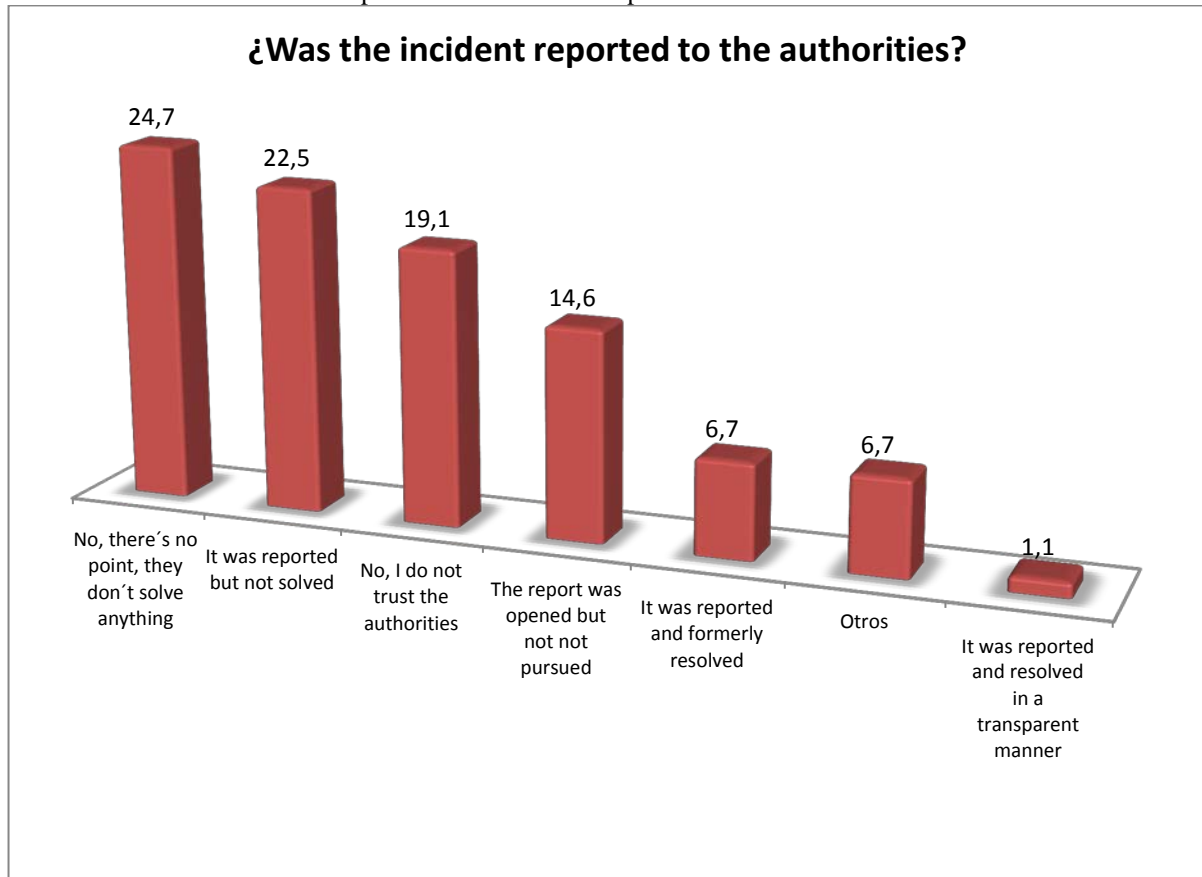
Graph 4. What type of violent act occurred to you, your friend or the person you know?



The above results show that more contestants have experienced violence within the family and amongst couples and also police coercion than those that consider these crimes are prevalent in their community (see graph 2).

In response to the question as to whether the crime was denounced to the authority’s 19.1% replied “no, I do not trust the authorities” and 24.7 % replied “no, there’s no point, they do not resolve it”., implying that 43.8% are not reported. Only 2.2.% reported transparent investigation into the crime.

Graph 5. Was the incident reported to the authorities?



Asked directly about transparency and whether the authorities are realizing a good job in reducing or eradicating violence, the results were the same in both questions: 56.2% said there was no transparency or no good work and 30.3 % little transparency or little good work, giving 86.5% perceiving little or no transparency or good work in reducing violence and only 1.1% reporting excellent transparency or a good job..

Table 1: Do you consider that there was sufficient transparency on behalf of the government institutions involved in the investigation of the crime?

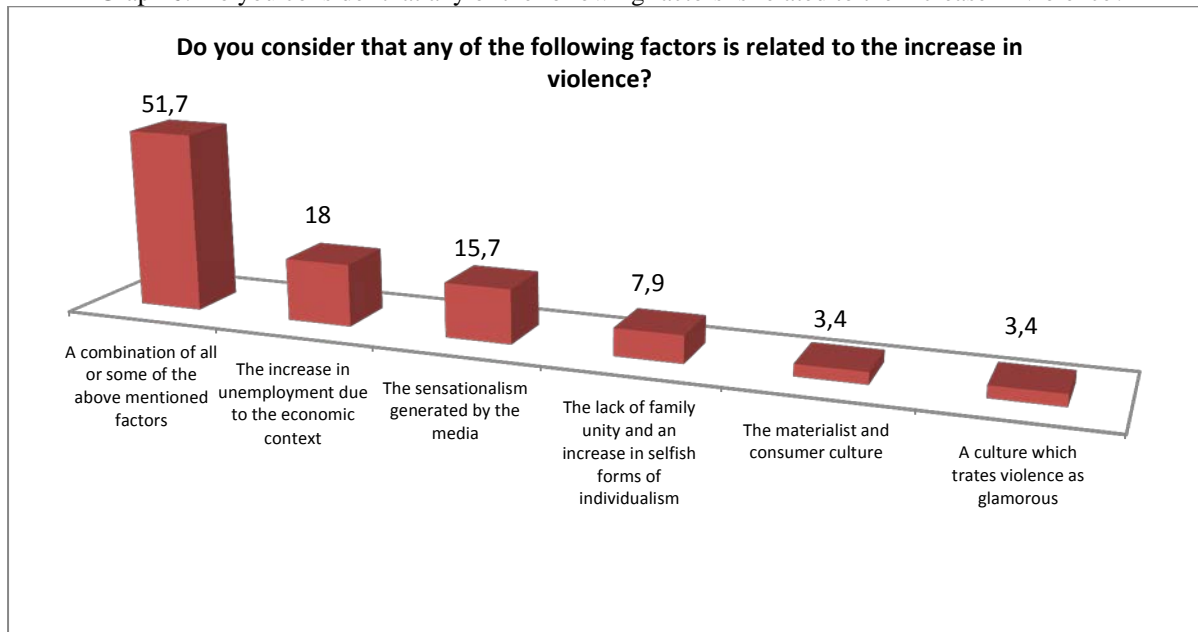
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative
Válidos	None	58	65.2	65.2	65.2
	A little	17	19.1	19.1	84.3
	Regular	10	11.2	11.2	95.5
	A lot	3	3.4	3.4	98.9
	100%	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
	Total	89	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Do you consider that the competent authorities are realizing a good job in reducing/eradicating violence?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative
valid	Not at all	50	56.2	56.2	56.2
	Little	28	31.5	31.5	87.6
	Good	10	11.2	11.2	98.9
	Excellent	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
	Total	89	100.0	100.0	

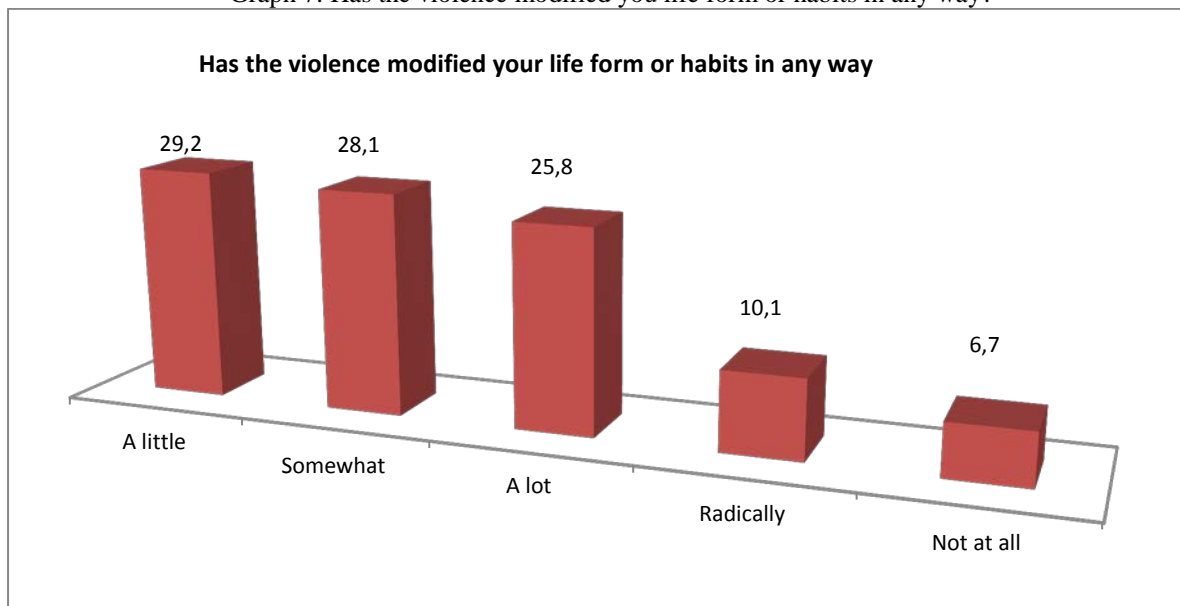
Asked about the factors which are related to the increase in violence, with reference to a list of six factors 50.6% answered that it was a combination of all six factors, 18% that it was a result of the increase in unemployment and 14.6% the lack of an adequate education.

Graph 6: Do you consider that any of the following factors is related to the increase in violence?



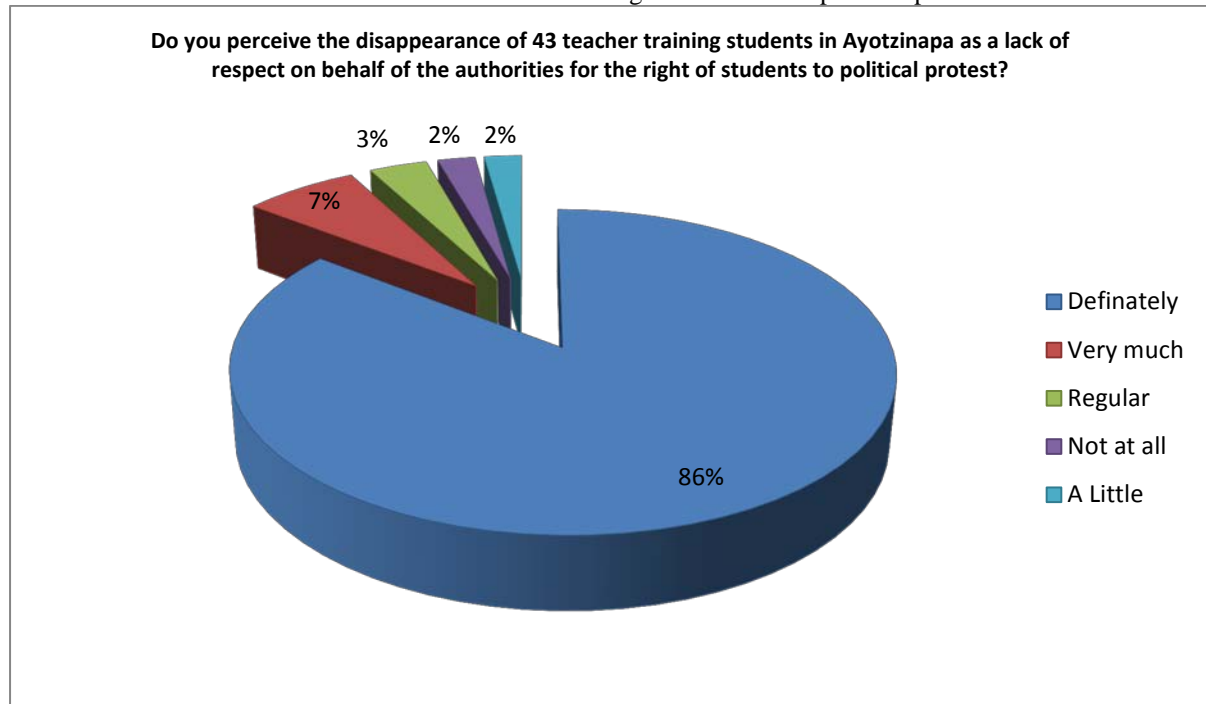
In response to a question about whether violence has in any way modified their life or life habits those who answered regular, a lot, or definitely totalled 64%.

Graph 7: Has the violence modified you life form or habits in any way?



Finally, in response to the question as to whether they consider the disappearance of 43 student teachers in Ayotzinapa as due to a lack of respect by the authorities regarding the rights of youth to engage in political protest, 84% answered definitely.

Graph 8: Do you perceive the disappearance of 43 teacher training students in Ayotzinapa as a lack of respect on behalf of the authorities for the right of students to political protest?



In resume, the results showed strong tendencies in the perceptions of violence amongst contestants. The type of violence identified is in accordance with government figures that in the three federal entities of Campeche, Yucatan and Mexico City the type of crime which is prevalent is not homicide but rather theft, assault and kidnapping for ransom, indicating a principal factor is economic.. Nevertheless, the contestants are 77.5% of the opinion that violence has increased, a perception which is no doubt related to the fact that 95% of the youths that replied to the questionnaire had had a personal or close experience of the impact of crime, with 13.5% being direct victims of crime. The results of the survey also contradicted government statistics concerning the security of their locality, only 4.5% had no experience of crime, directly or indirectly.

Alarmingly 43.8% say the crime was not reported either because there was no point or because they did not trust the authorities. These results were reflected in the questions about transparency with 86.5% reporting little or no transparency and their view that there was little or no good work by authorities in reducing violence. 64% confirmed that violence had modified their life to a medium extent, a lot, or in a definite sense. 84% considered recent events in Iguala as a lack of respect for the political rights of youths. Finally unemployment and inadequate education were considered as causal factors whilst 50% considered the causes were a combination of factors.

Discussion of results

The recent murder the 26 of September of six student teachers and the disappearance of 43 more in Iguala in the southern state of Guerrero, has been met with increasing indignation both nationally and internationally. Ongoing reporting and analysis of the political and social implications of this event have centred on the question of the apparent impunity of authorities involved in the abuse of power. Whilst it is clear that the question of

impunity is closely related to the question of justice, or rather the indignation regarding the injustice of the legal system in Mexico and a social and political class which believes themselves to be above the law, this discussion does not address the question as to why such excessive violence is perpetrated in the first place. Questions have resurfaced concerning the extent to which crime is endemic in different levels of government and law enforcement. (Bailey & Garzón, 2014) and the debate concerning the historical exercise of power in the country through the structure of patrimony. (Fábregas Puig, 2014), but little or nothing has been said or written concerning the pathological level of violence involved in this crime, not to mention the associated crimes that are emerging as different pits (9 by the 24th October 2014) with human remains are uncovered in the vicinity only to be disregarded as the solution to the case in question. (Camacho Servín, 2014)

There is another aspect to this event and it concerns the age of the victims, they were all youths from a local teaching college and reports have suggested that the mayor ordered them to be rounded up and taken away, believing on the basis of previous personal experience, that they intended to demonstrate and interrupt the presentation of his wife's annual report as the head of the municipal family development programme. (El animal político, 2014) The implication would appear to be that the mayor's reaction was along the lines of "how dare they think of interrupting his wife's public address?" and that they should be dealt with in a way that others in the future would know their place.

The pathological level and nature of the violence perpetrated appears to be related to issues of those in the political and criminal class of protecting one's public profile above all else, and treating the life of others as something which has less value the lower down in the social hierarchy they find themselves. In vertical patriarchal, patrimonial societies, youth finds themselves far from the upper echelons of that structure, and particularly poor rural youth.

A total of 84% of the contestants of the online survey indicated that without doubt there is a lack of respect for youth rights to political protest. Furthermore the level of youth experience of crime contradicts national statistics as 86.5% had a direct or indirect experience of crime in their locality. Does this indicate that youth are more aware of violence or more likely to be the victims of violence?

Youth opportunities in modern consumer societies

Europe is commemorating this year the beginning of the 1st World War, a period in which Mexico was living its own upheavals from the Mexican Revolution which began in 1910. The result of the 1st World War was the Second World War and Europe and the United States had learnt that the defeated nations had to be helped to rebuild their economy and self-respect if a long lasting peace was to be achieved, at in the case of Japan, far less foresight was shown in terms of the outcome of the end of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Hobsbawm wrote in "Extremes. The short twentieth century 1914-1991", (HOBSBAWM, 1994) this led to the golden years of post war economic development in Europe and Japan based on the Taylor production models developed in the United States of America. The social welfare model of economic development and full employment saw a reduction to spending in food to 13% of household incomes with the result that the majority of working households could consume the new products in production such as fridges, televisions and washing machines and cars which would change daily life.

Post war prosperity and Keynesian economics saw not only the advent of the consumer society, but also the Social and Cultural Revolution which was to result from the new social youth strata, a group characterized by its new found economic and social independence. The generational abyss opened up as for the first time young people's technological aptitudes means that they know more than their parents and youth culture

became participant in the internationalisation of culture through music. Nevertheless, the consolidation of the identity of youth as a social group was their commercial targeting of as a consumer group due to their acquisitive power during the post war years of full employment. Nevertheless Hobsbawm also sees in the triumph of individualism the rupture of the social fabric and the rise in levels of public insecurity.

Furthermore, youth as a group would become object not only of consumer market policy but also of government social and economic policy. In the Age Of Discontinuity Peter Drucker argues that knowledge workers were produced before knowledge jobs were created as a result of extended schooling, initially the result of the extended life of the average worker due to the introduction of technology into the workplace. Nevertheless, extended schooling soon became an economic tool to massage unemployment figures by delaying youth entry into the market place and Drucker describes how job profiles which previously required high school graduates transformed into profiles for college graduates. (Drucker, 1992)

From the 1990's youth higher education became promoted as a prerequisite to success in the knowledge economy whilst higher education provision was seen as an area of niche opportunity for private established U.S. universities to expand as a global franchise, (Russell L. , 2011) whilst the WTO classified education as a "commercially competitive activity" (Bottery, 2000) However, even before the financial market crash in 2008 this model of mass insertion of highly educated youths in highly paid knowledge jobs was already being questioned. (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, Halsey, & Eds, 2006) In Mexico research showed that insertion into the labour market continued to depend on social networks rather than skills. (Russell, 2014)

In short, youths were being encouraged to spend ever longer periods in education before entering the labour market, to invest ever higher amounts to achieve the credentials for well-paid work, yet the reality very often did not correspond to the rhetoric of public policy, indeed Brown and Lauder's research shows that by the beginning of the new millennium graduate job opportunities had become more competitive and growing inequality in returns. By 2010 the newly emergent phenomena were the "NEET" generation. Those that drop out of the either option are called NEETs (not in employment, education or training) in English speaking countries, or NINI's (neither study nor work- *ni estudian ni trabajan*) in Mexico. (Russell L. D., 2014)

Wilkinson and Pickett argue that "it is poor young men from disadvantage neighbourhoods who are most likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violence" (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010 p132) and this had to do with the question of social status. They quote James Gilligan, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist as claiming that he has "yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated ... and that did not represent the attempt to ... undo this "loss of face". And whilst women use clothes and makeup to "enhance their sexual attraction" men compete for status, so that increased inequality ups the stakes in the competition for status, so that as inequality increases so does violent crime. They cite statistics from the United Nations *Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems* to support their claim.

The situation is exacerbated in more hierarchical societies:

Shame and humiliation become more sensitive issues in more hierarchical societies: status becomes more important, status competition increases and more people are deprived of access to markers of status and social success- (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010 p141)

The roots of social inequality

The question of inequality in Mexico has its roots not only in economic policy but in a culture based on maintaining social hierarchy. Writing in 1993 Mexico's Nobel renowned writer Octavio Paz explained:

The slowness of the process of modernization is explained to a large extent by the double tradition in our country. Mesoamerica and Spain: two civilizations which did not profess idolatry for change. Remember what we said about the persistence of the image of the Aztec “tlatoani” in the popular sensibility. The Mexican family is profoundly traditional and in it is a figure which corresponds to the figure of the “tlatoani” and the president: that of the father, of the patriarch. Thanks to the Mexican family, Mexico continues to be Mexico: at the same time, the family and its morality have been the obstacles of change. They have been the source of nepotism and patrimony. (Paz & García, 2008 p60)

Nevertheless, Mexican family values continue to be held up without distinction or analysis as that which holds Mexican society together and that which consequently requires reaffirming in order to overcome the violence. This is a message which the Catholic Church strongly advocates, but also other civil groups. Yet in many ways Mexican family values remain important to maintain the fabric of society, they continue to be not only provide emotional support but also are the basis for the establishment of the horizontal networks on the basis of which most Mexicans try to navigate and survive the vertical state structure (Adler 1994). These family values are also entwined, as Paz points out, with elements of the mythical basis of Mexican culture. As a result, analysing and teasing out the positive and negative aspect of Mexican family values remains a complex and delicate matter. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the online survey only seven of the correspondents considered this as a principal factor contributing to the violence, perhaps reflecting a change of perception amongst this age group.

Conclusion

Wilkinson’s and Pickett’s explanation that the relation between levels of social and economic inequality and levels of violence is due to increased competition for status, particularly amongst young males, concurs with the findings of the exploratory research into youth perceptions of violence in various aspects: that youth perception and experience of crime is higher than national statistics based on averages across the adult age group; that crime related to both economic and emotional factors is high; the prevalence of the view that the crime perpetrated in the Iguala reflects a lack of respect towards youth rights; and finally it concurs with the fact that the perpetrators of the crime in Iguala were political figures competing for public status and the victims were poor rural youths.

The fact that social inequality feeds economic inequality and that social inequality is imbibed in traditional Mexican family values indicates the level of the challenges this problem involves. It also potentially accounts for the fact that most discussions have centred around the question of the impunity which surrounds the perpetrators of the crime whilst little discussion is directed at the heinous nature of the crime itself given the age group at which it is directed. It is to be hoped that the attention this crime continues to attract will generate more discussion and analysis and also the possibility that the present article will help shape the focus that discussion will take.

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