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**Master's Thesis**

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**Indigenous Autonomy as a Pathway to Human Security  
in Mexico: A Comparative Study of Oaxaca, Chiapas,  
and Michoacán**

Master's Thesis

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Study programme: Security Studies

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Year of the defence: 2024

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 30. 4. 2024

Anna Caltová

## References

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## **Abstract**

This thesis studies the impact of autonomy in the form of alternative forms of local governance on human security in Mexico, with a prime focus on the concept of personal security. The research is motivated by the increasing attempts of communities to establish autonomy in response to an insecure environment troubled by high levels of criminality and government paralysis due to corruption. This study uses a comparative case study approach employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, on the cases of three Mexican states: Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Michoacán de Ocampo. The analysis of primary and secondary sources, and examination of crime data at a municipal level, suggest that regions with autonomy tend to reach better personal security than non-autonomous regions. Further research is needed to conclusively determine the impact of autonomous governance on other aspects of human security.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato diplomová práce studuje dopad autonomie v podobě alternativních forem lokální vlády na bezpečnost obyvatel v Mexiku, především skrze koncept osobní fyzické bezpečnosti. Výzkum je motivován rostoucím počtem pokusů komunit o zavedení autonomie v reakci na nepříznivou bezpečnostní situaci způsobenou vysokou mírou kriminality a paralyzující úrovní korupce. Tato studie využívá porovnávací případovou studii s využitím jak kvantitativních, tak kvalitativních metod a je aplikována na tři mexické státy: Oaxaca, Chiapas a Michoacán de Ocampo. Analýza primárních a sekundárních zdrojů včetně kvantitativních dat o kriminalitě na úrovni obcí naznačuje, že regiony s autonomií mají tendenci dosahovat lepší osobní bezpečnosti než neautonomní oblasti. K definitivnímu určení dopadu autonomní správy na jiné aspekty lidské bezpečnosti je třeba dalšího výzkumu.

## **Keywords**

Human Security, Mexico, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacán, Indigenous Autonomy, Self-governance, criminality

## **Klíčová slova**

Lidská bezpečnost, Mexiko, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacán, autonomie původních obyvatel, samospráva, kriminalita

## **Title**

Indigenous Autonomy as a Pathway to Human Security in Mexico: A Comparative Study of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Michoacán

## **Název práce**

Autonomie původních obyvatel jako cesta k lidské bezpečnosti v Mexiku: Srovnávací studie Oaxacy, Chiapasu a Michoacánu.

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## Introduction

In 1994 United Nations Human Development Report marked a new turn in approach to security. From the state as a referent object of security, attention has been shifted to each and every individual as a part of the concept of human security. Although there is relative peace and an absence of state insecurity caused by international conflict, Mexico is not usually regarded as a safe country. The reason is a low level of human security. Despite various efforts over several decades, Mexican people are still threatened by high levels of violence mainly due to extensive networks of organized crime groups. The government, which is regarded as the ultimate provider of security, cannot guarantee protection to its inhabitants as it is unable to respond to the rising complexity of threats, partly because of the spread of corruption among its personnel. Left unguarded, the citizens started to protect themselves by forming vigilante armed groups. One such group emerged in Mexico's state Michoacán, in the village of Cherán Keri in 2011 to protect itself from increased violence generated by a criminal organization seeking to exploit the surrounding forest on which the locals' livelihoods depend. After they successfully banished the adversaries, the villagers decided to push out all the corrupt officials who left them exposed to criminals. To do so, the village decided to use the constitutional right of "usos y costumbres" (indigenous habits and customs) and transition from a system of governance through political parties, used everywhere else in the state, to a system of governance through local indigenous traditions. The struggle for human security was effectively transformed into self-governance and indigenous autonomy. The security situation improved and Cherán received praise for its efforts. Other communities in Mexico and beyond noticed Cherán's success and decided to pursue a similar path to security, thus creating a new wave of indigenous autonomy. However, it is still unsure how lasting was Cherán's success and whether it is replicable in other contexts. The number of autonomous communities is rising, and an increasing number of countries have passed laws on governance through customary systems similar to those applied in Cherán, but the consequences of establishing customary governance remain under-researched (Bobonis, 2021)

Besides Cherán there are other autonomous municipalities in Mexico governed through customary systems. Notably, since the early 1990s indigenous autonomy became prominent in Chiapas after the rise of the Zapatista movement and in the culturally diverse Oaxaca, but

numerous smaller autonomous communities exist throughout Mexico. In fact, indigenous autonomy is a relevant issue in many other Latin American countries as well. This autonomy is motivated by cultural representation and preservation of traditions, but also by the poor security situation in the region and the lack of basic services. In some instances, the security situation appears to be the strongest motivation. Indigenous autonomy therefore becomes a reaction to the government's inability to provide basic public services including protection and the rule of law. Given the increasing attempts to achieve autonomy, often motivated by security, a question arises whether autonomously governed municipalities are able to achieve better results in terms of human security than non-autonomous municipalities. Finding an answer to this question is the aim of this research, which seeks to enrich the current knowledge by opening new discussions about the provision of human security, where the state is failing to do so. Moreover, it could benefit indigenous communities who look for ways to increase their security and turn to the path of autonomy as well as the relevant governments who must decide how to respond to the demands for autonomy.

Research question:

Are autonomous municipalities governed through customary systems achieving better results in human security than non-autonomous municipalities?

## 1. Literature review

A relatively frequent topic of study regarding security in Mexico and the involvement of local civilian initiatives is the topic of vigilantism, through which some autonomous municipalities attempt to influence the security situation, especially in the state of Michoacán (for example Del Rio 2023; Hernández Navarro, Ryan, 2020; Ochoa, Tomas, 2016). Del Rio (2023), in his empirical study, evaluates the impact of self-defence groups on crime trends in Michoacán, using quantitative data on homicides, kidnappings, and extortions. His findings contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the presence of self-defence groups, indigenous self-determination, and fluctuations in levels of violence within a shorter timeframe. Hernández Navarro and Ryan (2020) comprehensively examined vigilantism in Mexico. They mapped the phenomena of vigilantism throughout Mexico since the Zapatista uprising, providing larger context from the whole nation as well as detailed information on the self-defence groups present in Michoacán and the security risks associated with vigilantism. Ochoa and his colleagues (2016) paid the most attention to the state of Michoacán as well by studying its democratic and security landscape in relation to the various vigilante groups.

Although vigilantism is in many instances closely related to the topic of self-determination and autonomous governance, they are still two very distinct phenomena. Unfortunately, the role of different forms of governance on security is less attractive to researchers than the role of self-defence groups whose influence on security is more direct and obvious. Gasparello (2018) offers an insight into the relationship between autonomous governance and security in her study centred on the political transformation of Cherán, perhaps the most famous autonomous municipality in Mexico. However, her analysis is more concerned with the violence which preceded the autonomy, than what came after it. Similarly, Danspeckgruber (2000) looks into the relationship between self-governance and security, but his approach is also different from mine. His concern is insecurity which can arise from communities which desire autonomy, but are denied it, thus turning to violence. Danspeckgruber therefore, just like Gasparello analyses security before establishment of autonomy, not after, which is the goal of my research. Magaloni et al. (2019) on the other hand explored the outcomes of autonomy in the form of traditional governance structures in indigenous communities in Oaxaca. Through qualitative analysis, they demonstrated the effectiveness of traditional

governance in providing public goods, contrasting it with political party systems. This study provides interesting findings, pointing to the successes of autonomous governance in terms of basic services provision, however, security in the sense of absence of physical violence is not included in the study. Although distant geographically, close in terms of research questions were Hoffmann et al., who researched a similar phenomenon occurring in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Local actors in this area are rising to tackle poor security situation through traditional forms of governance, which has been receiving praise from international organisations as an alternative path to improved security situation. However, the paper found local forms of governance are no more successful in dealing with insecurity due to the complexity of the threats. The authors claim that local governance initiatives in Congo are not able to resolve the large national issues at hand (Hoffmann, 2018). The topic of autonomous communities or municipalities governed through customary law in Mexico is not omitted from the research, but the studied aspect is usually whether this form of government respects democratic principles (Benton, 2012) and whether women are included in the decision-making process (Pedro Luna, 2018; Danielson, 2013).

In Mexico, studies on customary governance and autonomy tend to limit themselves to officially recognized autonomous municipalities, therefore limiting themselves mostly to the state of Oaxaca and in recent years to the municipalities of Cherán and Ayutla de los Libres in Michoacán and Guerrero respectively. Trasberg (2021) denounces this approach as the phenomena of customary governance is widely spread in central and southern Mexico even if it is not officially recognized. He himself decided to analyze the submunicipal community structures present in the states of Puebla and Tlaxcala and their ability to provide public goods and generate collective action. To my best knowledge, the phenomena of indigenous autonomy practised through customary self-governance in relation to human and especially personal security still lacks comprehensive research.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Latin America is a region almost completely spared from international wars. State's existence is not threatened by its neighbours or major international actors, yet we can hardly claim it is a completely peaceful and safe region. If the state is facing insecurity, the people can hardly feel secure, but even if the state is secure, it does not make its inhabitants feel the same way. To even recognize this insecurity, we have to use the lens of human security.

Citizens do not seek autonomy to protect the state, they do so to protect themselves, their families and communities. For this reason, this work builds on the theoretical framework of human security. Through human security, we can analyse the underlying causes of insecurity present in the Mexican population and identify relevant influences on the security situation and roles of relevant parties such as the state, criminal groups, and citizens themselves. It can also allow us to explore potential paths to improve the security situation and limit the vulnerability of civilians.

Although the concept of human security in some form and shape existed for many decades, for example in the form of the two concepts “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” used in the rhetoric of founding of the United Nations organisation in the 1940s, the UN’s Human Development Report (HDR) from 1994 made the first attempt to give it proper form and practical definition, bringing the term international academic recognition. Human security reorients the centre of interest from the nation-state to every single human and broadens the spectrum of threats we should account for. Wars and physical violence are no longer seen as the only threat. No one is secure in an active warzone, but insecurity can be also caused by lack of food, criminality, social unrest, state repression, unemployment, diseases or environmental degradation and natural disasters (UNDP, 1994). The United Nations Commission on Human Security (2003) proposed the following definition of human security: *“to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment”*. Since the Commission shies from proposing a more detailed definition due to regional differences in what is regarded as vital to human life, I have to resort back to the 1994 HDR to reach a framework which allows to study the concept of human security.

According to the aforementioned threats, the human development report compartmentalized human security into seven categories. Firstly, there is economic security. A person is economically secure if they have ensured access to basic income through productive work, or at least from public social programmes. Another category is food security, under which a person has to be able to access food both physically and economically. Health security is ensured primarily by accessibility of health care, but also by creating safe environments, preventing the spread of diseases or affordable family planning to prevent mortality at birth. Not only human health depends on the environment, whole human existence requires a stable environment, undisrupted ecosystems and clean water. Another category is therefore

environmental security. Community security means the protection of various groups of peoples and their traditions. Political security requires society and political systems to ensure basic human rights for all. Finally, personal security is primarily concerned with the absence of physical violence. A threat to personal security can pose war, criminals, competing groups of peoples, dangerous individuals, but also one's own government or even one to himself through self-harm or drug use. Protection of property is also mentioned under this category, as thefts, especially in poor areas, can bring significant hardships to one's livelihood. Moreover, threats to property can take the form of burglary, which directly threatens the physical safety of the victim. All the categories are intertwined, influencing each other, and together forming the complex reality of human security (UNDP, 1994). While this complexity is beneficial for representing reality, it is not ideal for academic analysis (Gasper, 2015). Only a very detailed single case study could attempt to analyze all of the above aspects of human security, but such work would by default have to limit itself to a mere description as drawing larger conclusions would be nearly impossible. To avoid this downfall, this research will be primarily concerned with personal security. The 1994 Human Development Report regards personal security as probably the most vital part of human security since if our physical well-being or even mere existence is threatened, other aspects of human security are necessarily de-prioritized.

### **3. Methodology**

Since the aim of the study is to assess the security outcomes of establishing autonomous municipalities on the basis of indigenous rights in Mexico, a quantitative quasi-experimental approach comparing data before and after the treatment, in this case, the establishment of autonomous municipalities in Mexico, could at first appear as a most suitable option. However, this approach is problematic for several reasons. The availability of trustworthy data, the practical reality of the security situation in various Mexican states, and the variability of statuses of autonomous municipalities and their functioning.

Considering the data, if we want to study municipalities, we need data at the municipal level. There is only one entity which has the potential capacity to collect data about security-threatening crimes in a nation of 127 million people, a government institution. In Mexico, this institution would be SNSP, the National Public Security System (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública). Fortunately, such data are being collected and made public on the

institution's website (SNSP, 2024). They are even available at the municipal level and the delicts are recorded on a monthly basis. However, this practice does not go far back into the past. Even if we take into account the dataset collected through an old methodology, we reach information which dates back only to the year 2011, which would not give us information on the state of affairs before the establishment of the vast majority of autonomous municipalities. Moreover, if we open this dataset, in some cases we find it half-empty, which leaves us with the latest dataset starting in the year 2015. A systematic before and after study is therefore not a suitable option.

Another issue is the diverse security situation and the position of autonomous municipalities in different Mexican states. Some states are more threatened by criminality and clashes of criminal groups than others and a study needs to take into account this diverse environment. Moreover, indigenous autonomous municipalities exist in several Mexican states, but some are fully recognized and cooperate with the government, while others are in opposition to the government. Those municipalities which are not fully coordinated with the government also tend to have their own security forces in the form of vigilante groups. In fact, there are many instances where autonomy became a second step after vigilantism, sometimes after armed clashes with the state's security forces, which adds another aspect which needs to be addressed when assessing a security situation in these autonomous municipalities.

Due to all the aforementioned aspects and issues of this phenomenon, a comparative case study employing both quantitative and qualitative methods was chosen. The phenomena will be studied on three cases, on the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Michoacán de Ocampo. Each case will be introduced by an examination of the political environment in which the autonomous municipalities emerged and how were they established and the security situation in the state. A descriptive analysis of quantitative data on criminality will follow, to uncover certain patterns, which will aid in guiding the qualitative analysis of secondary literature, reports, and online news, with the goal to assess the autonomous municipalities' ability to provide security to their inhabitants.

More specifically, in the quantitative analysis, three aspects will be looked at. The average rate of criminality in each of the two types of municipalities, yearly trends to identify possible unexpected patterns and finally geographical distribution of criminality, to again, identify certain patterns and locate municipalities with very high violence, which can



significantly influence the outcomes of the statistical analysis. Since the size in terms of inhabitants differs between the autonomous and non-autonomous municipalities, all calculations and results are adjusted to value per 100 000 inhabitants which is the metric most commonly used in similar scenarios. Rather than choosing a single year to assess the rates of criminality an average from all the available years in the dataset was created. Since the analysis is of states where deadly attacks of criminal groups occur and these attacks tend to be very sporadic, an analysis of one single year might create a distorted perception of the actual security situation and performance of the municipalities. When creating graphs, to limit the influence of extreme cases, average municipalities of the two types are compared to each other instead of using the simple metric of the number of crimes per capita in each municipality type. In other words, an average autonomous municipality is calculated first as well as a non-autonomous municipality. These average municipalities are then compared to each other. Heat maps, which depict average data over the observed period. Where applicable, a t-test is performed to ensure the statistical significance of the results. Alongside the overall crime rate, the number of homicides is analysed separately. There are three reasons to do so. Firstly, homicide is the most serious crime which deserves the most attention. Secondly, it is frequently used to measure violence and can be compared to other analyses from secondary sources, unlike the overall crime rate which is operationalized very differently in each study and report, thus making any comparison virtually impossible. Finally, homicide reporting is less likely to suffer from underreporting than other crimes.

Finally, the three cases will be compared to identify larger patterns across different environments and the influence of governments' approaches. Although the ability to generalise from any case study is highly limited, hopefully, this approach will generate insights which can guide future studies of the phenomena of indigenous autonomy.

### **3.1 Case selection**

The three cases were selected to encompass a wide spectrum of situations under which autonomy occurs and operates. Chiapas became world famous in the early 1990s with its Zapatista movement and subsequent civil war. One of the outcomes of this war was the establishment of autonomous self-governing villages, which are to this day regarded as illegal and operate in nearly complete isolation from their surroundings and the government. Oaxaca stands at the exact opposite of this spectrum. Its municipalities were not born from

war but from peace. They were not a product of revolt against the state and its political system, they received encouragement from it. Oaxaca's indigenous autonomous municipalities are fully legal and proud part of the highly indigenous state. Just like in Chiapas, these municipalities started to emerge in the 1990s and at this point are well established (González, 2023). The third case, Michoacán, however, represents yet another situation, it is the face of the current revival of indigenous autonomy. Michoacán is a state deeply troubled by drug cartel criminality and in 2011 a group of locals in the municipality of Cherán decided to act following the inability of the state's security forces to protect them. This home defence force later decided to form an autonomous government to resolve the troubling corruption in the political party system they were governed by. After some reluctance, they were able to achieve legal autonomous status and became a sensation motivating similar movements across Latin America. More villages in Michoacán tried to replicate their actions, but only with limited success. The case of Michoacán offers insights into the last wave of autonomy currently emerging in Mexico (Gasparello, 2018).

### 3.2 Data

A lot has already been said about the data used in this study, due to the way they essentially dictated the chosen methodology. I will therefore only in short repeat the main information and continue with discussing their potential drawbacks. Any data on criminality are faced with a myriad of potential issues. Underreporting, misinterpretation, manipulation and misclassification are common problems, but they are even more prominent in the environment of autonomous municipalities. The risk of the unreliability of the results caused by the data is not as high in the case of Oaxaca, but the reliability of available data on the isolated Zapatista villages is much more questionable, as these communities are unlikely to cooperate with the government's institutions. Perhaps they could be more open to non-governmental organisations, but they still might underreport and misinterpret the situation to appear more successful. Moreover, the scope of the necessary data makes the national statistical body NSNP to be the only source available. While we can not simply rely on the findings from quantitative analysis, I still deem this part of this study to be of high importance, as it can give us the larger picture as well as point us in the direction of aspects that need to be studied more closely. This more detailed insight will be sourced from peer-reviewed literature, reports, books and online local news.

In addition, data on the size of the population in the state and each municipality from the 2020 population census (INEGI, 2021), which is the census by date closest to each observed year in the criminality dataset, and a territorial demarcation dataset from INEGI were used to perform the quantitative analysis (Opendatasoft, 2023).

### 3.3 Conceptualization and operationalization

So far I have depended on a common understanding of the word autonomous when referring to municipalities. This has to be specified, as all Mexican municipalities are deemed to be to be autonomous. They are autonomous in the sense that every three years they elect political representatives in the system of political parties, who then decide how the municipality should operate and move forward, using state funds and local taxes. This study is, however, interested in municipalities that took this autonomy one step forward, substituted the political party system with traditional forms of governance and in some cases even isolated themselves from the state and federal government. Traditional forms of governance effectively mean indigenous traditions, but I try to avoid referring to the studied entities as indigenous municipalities. The reason is that there are around 13 million indigenous people in Mexico and many of them live in municipalities which could, in essence, be referred to as indigenous since there is only a small number of non-indigenous inhabitants, if any. Yet, if these municipalities are being governed through the system of political parties and have no extraordinary autonomy, they are not the subject of this study. Another term we could use to describe the subject of interest is self-governance. Danspeckgruber (2000) defines this term as a specific form of governance which maximizes autonomy and decentralization to allow communities a certain degree of self-determination and freedom while at the same time maintaining the cohesion of the larger governing body and its territory. Although the Zapatista movement was at least at some point during its existence seeking to break free from the Mexican government and establish its own territory, currently the autonomous areas still exist within the state's borders and are politically regarded as a part of the state. Furthermore, the Zapatistas are trying to influence the state's politics in their favour and to gain recognition, they are not at the moment actively pursuing separatist goals. We can therefore conceptualize the term autonomous municipality as a municipality, which exercises self-governance in its area through traditional forms of governance instead of participating in the system of political parties, but which still respects

the existence of a higher governing body and does not seek to remove itself from its influence, rather cooperate with it.

Before I operationalize the term autonomous municipality, I first have to clear out possible confusion caused by translations of the administrative terms. The federal country of the United Mexican States is divided into states, which are divided into municipalities. Municipalities usually encompass several towns and villages otherwise known as localities. Mexican municipalities (municipios) therefore refer to a local form of district or county. These municipalities can greatly differ in size and are oftentimes named after the largest locality within its borders, which can consist of a vast majority of the municipality's inhabitants. Due to this reality, some sources can refer to localities as municipalities. However, the terms should not be interchanged carelessly. Our conceptualization of autonomous municipalities needs to reflect this administrative division, which is problematic since the available dataset on crimes is only at the level of municipalities. In the case of Oaxaca, the municipalities are territorially very small and are officially regarded as autonomous as a whole. However, in Michoacán, only some localities inside much larger municipalities are autonomous and the Zapatista autonomous villages rarely respect the state's administrative division at all. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, as autonomous municipalities are regarded those municipalities where at least the vast majority of inhabitants are governed through indigenous traditional forms of governance.

There are many possible definitions of security, largely dependent on the context in which we intend to use this term. This work builds on the larger framework of human security, as described in the previous chapter. Yet, there are still many approaches to security within this broad concept, in fact too many for the scope of this study. The holistic all-encompassing nature of human security is beneficial for interpreting the complexity of human lives, but at the same time, it makes any attempt to study it very difficult (Gasper, 2015). This study does not intend to strictly concentrate on one single aspect of human security, especially since all the aspects are closely interlinked, but for practical purposes, most attention will be given to one aspect, specifically the concept of personal security. Personal security was defined by the 1994 HDR as one of the seven components of human security. Personal security is concerned with violence towards individuals perpetrated by the state on its own people, by other states in the form of war, by other groups, individuals or gangs, but also violence caused by self, such as suicide or drug use. It also addresses violence perpetrated towards

women, such as rape and domestic violence, and violence towards children. Crimes against property are also mentioned. Personal security is regarded by the report as perhaps the most important component due to the immense importance of physical security in people's lives (UNDP, 1994), which is also why it was chosen to be the core of this study.

Unfortunately, various authors use varying methods to assess criminality rates, for example, Del Rio (2023) uses data on criminality to analyze cartel-related criminality in Michoacán, to do so he analyses only three crime categories, intentional homicides with a firearm, extortion, and kidnapping. James and Smith (2017) are interested in general criminality rates related to the energy sources boom in the USA and chose to include homicide, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft. Troy et al. (2012) include in their study of a relationship between crime and tree canopy robbery, burglary, theft, and shooting crimes. In some instances, we can see only intentional homicides used as a metric for crime rates (Macrotrends, 2024). For the purposes of my research, I chose to operationalize personal security as a number of intentional crimes from the following areas: personal freedom, life and bodily integrity, sexual security, family, society and property, which are all included in the dataset from SNSP. I deem this approach to be most reflective of the concept of personal security of the population in general and I do not seek to relate the crimes to one specific aspect as the aforementioned authors. However, several crime categories were excluded from the dataset for conceptual or technical reasons. Femicide has been excluded due to duplication of the data with the category of homicide. Electoral crimes and other crimes of common jurisdiction were excluded to respect the difference in the two types of municipalities which are being studied, because the two types of municipalities are defined by differing electoral, executive and judicial systems, thus making this category incomparable. Perhaps controversially, abortion was also removed from the data. Besides the reasoning that abortion is not a threat to others or the self, a strong incentive to do so is the fact that abortion was legalised in Mexico in September of 2023 (the used dataset includes the year 2023). Incest was also excluded from the study as it is not a relevant marker of personal security.

#### **4. Indigenous autonomy in Mexico**

Until the end of the 21st century, multiculturalism was regarded as a source of danger for the cohesion of the state not only in Mexico but in most parts of Latin America. Officials

tried to silence any multicultural voices and sought to build one united nation held together by the singular Mexican identity (Munoz, 2004). But the country is vast, with history formed by many ethnicities fighting each other and living in peace side by side. Many languages are being spoken in the country. In some remote villages, one might have trouble finding a Spanish speaker, which is the de facto official language, as there are 62 recognised indigenous languages plus numerous local variations of Spanish (Terborg, 2006). Although the country succeeded in creating its own Mexican identity, indigenous voices could not be silenced forever. In the early 1980s, Latin America saw a shift in its approach towards multiculturalism. An era of the politics of recognition swept through the region with a series of constitutional reforms in a number of countries, but for each of them, this change meant something else. In some countries, it made a big difference in the lives of indigenous people, in others it was no more than words on a piece of paper. In Mexico, the changes brought by the new approach to the indigenous issue varied state by state. A reform to the national constitution was passed in 1992, but each state approached these changes in its own right according to its local context, the position of its local indigenous movements and in line with the current state-level politics. Autonomy was supposed to be installed after the San Andrés Agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture resulting from the peace talks between the government and the militant Zapatista movement and agreed to in 1994, but the agreement was never implemented in its true form. The Zapatista movement from Chiapas was however an incentive for other indigenous movements to demand the recognition of their culture and a tangible threat for those who would otherwise stand in their way. Some states still lack behind the federal laws on indigenous rights from 1992, but others went far ahead and created a comprehensive legal framework ensuring the recognition of indigenous cultures and their right to self-governance. A pioneer in this area is the state of Oaxaca, which is still considered the only state in Mexico with fully multicultural institutions (Munoz, 2004).

The time period from the 1980s to late 1990s could be defined by a rise in multiculturalism challenging the rule of a singular political party, and by communities seeking to sustain their traditions and improve living conditions by gaining autonomy. With the new century, a different dynamic started to take place in the indigenous battle for autonomy. After the Zapatista uprising, the federal government under president Zedillo and later Fox decided to reform the security policy of the country in response to rising organised crime. After Vicente Fox, Felipe Calderón took office as the new president in 2006. His term started

with calling a war on organized crime. Unfortunately, the result of these approaches was a striking rise in homicide rates and human rights violations, especially after 2006. Yet, the same approach persisted through the Peña Nieto administration between 2006 and 2018. In addition, the federal government passed a series of laws supporting the extraction of natural resources which negatively impacted communities inhabiting resource-rich areas, by destroying the surrounding nature and by land dispossessions (Mora, 2023).

A spike in violence caused by organized crime and the government's attempts to eradicate it created a new wave of indigenous autonomy motivated primarily by the hope of creating a safe environment free from violence in which the communities could live and grow. This renewed interest in legally recognized autonomy was enabled by a legal change at the federal level. In 2011 the government ruled that international resolutions on human rights agreed to by Mexico, including the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation from 1989, have to be respected (Gaussens, 2019). However, this legal reform would not simply allow any community to leave the political party system and become autonomous. The state of Michoacán is a prime example of the changing dynamic in indigenous autonomy and it should be no surprise that the new law was immediately seen as an opportunity by one of its communities located in the municipality of Cherán. It started a legal battle and successfully forced the state to recognize its indigenous rights building on the right to autonomy, thus becoming a beacon for other communities, who since then started their own legal battles (Mora, 2023).

The Mexican constitution and the practice of autonomous indigenous governance builds on the concept of the “usos y costumbres”, which was first used in the aforementioned convention by the International Labour Organisation (Gaussens, 2019). This term is widely used to describe the system by which autonomous municipalities and localities, which are the concern of this research, are being governed in contrast to the generally used system of political parties. In practice, there is no one singular form of usos y costumbres, rather each autonomous locality has its own form of indigenous governance formed by a variable combination of local customs and the state law. Indigenous governance consists of elections, jurisdiction and execution of power, but in official federal and state legislative, the concept of usos y costumbres tends to be reduced to a system of elections. Furthermore although governance through usos y costumbres is almost exclusively being related to indigenous communities, in the reality of Mexico some rural communities are maintaining many local

customs and prefer governance according to these customs even if the indigenous identity represented by its language and a feeling of belonging were sidetracked with the reality of rural life taking over the importance of the locals. Therefore, the question of autonomous governance by local customs does not strictly have to be an indigenous issue. Local customary governance has a source in colonial, perhaps even pre-colonial times, and through the coexistence with the republican regime it evolved into its current forms (Gaussens, 2019). Customary governance can for example take the form of local assemblies, elder councils, communal labour, or civic groups, and this occurs widely in central and southern Mexico, whether officially recognized by the state government, like in Oaxaca, or not. Under the communal labour, inhabitants of the locality are expected to perform short-term unpaid tasks in the community's organisation, referred to as *tequio* or *faena*, and take on unpaid public roles, for example in local policing, administration committees or organising public services and events, these positions are known as *cargos*. Individuals are chosen to fulfill *cargos* by communal assemblies, which also decide on any important matters. These regular meetings therefore appoint leaders and decide everyday issues. Further meetings are held by village elders, who do not have formal power, but can influence the decisions taken in the village due to their authority among their neighbours. Elder councils are formed by those who participated in some of the important *cargos* and over the years have build respectable reputation (Trasberg, 2021).

Whether governed through the regular political party system or traditional customs, Mexican municipalities have responsibilities in several areas, namely urban planning and development, management of water and sewage utilities, maintenance of roads, transportation systems, street lighting, markets and parks and, most importantly for this study, ensuring public safety. To carry out these duties, municipalities receive financial support from the state government as well as collect taxes from their inhabitants. Together with the state, municipalities are also responsible for education and social programmes. If it is agreed upon by both sides, some of the responsibilities can be delegated from the municipality to the state. Mexico is organized in a two-tier system, meaning that there are no other organisational entities between the municipalities and the state, above which there is only the federal government (OECD, 2016).



## 5. Oaxaca

One of those states which surpassed the federal developments was Oaxaca. By the 1970s movements fighting for reforms in support of workers, students, traders, land redistribution, and liberalisation of local politics, started to form in cities and in rural areas as a result of a series of economic crises. In the 1980s the movements were joined by large numbers of teachers demanding better work and life conditions (Munoz, 2004). At that time the country was still being governed by the political party Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which held unilateral power over the federal and the state governments since 1929. PRI relied on corporatism and election fraud to maintain its hegemony. Only the rising civil movements of the 70s and 80s started to chip off from its legitimacy. In Oaxaca the falling legitimacy of PRI was coupled with several government crises and early 1980s local governments of indigenous villages started to organize against PRI's political control and demanded more rights for the indigenous control. With the dropping legitimacy, PRI could no longer hold unquestioned power. Eventually, in most areas, the rural movements effectively transformed into indigenous movements. The Oaxacan indigenous battle for more recognition was further fueled by the Zapatista uprising in neighbouring Chiapas. The Zapatistas received large support from their indigenous neighbours, both material and non-material, while the Oaxacan governor feared violent conflicts spreading to his state (Magaloni, 2019).

When confronted by the rise of indigenous identity, Oaxaca could have gone down one of two paths. Either it could have confronted and repress the opposing movements or fulfill their demands. Thankfully, it chose the latter. And since most decision-making power is in the hands of the governor in Oaxaca, an important role in this decision was played by two PRI governors, Heladio Ramírez (1986 - 1992) and his successor Diódoro Carrasco (1992 - 1998). Already when nominated to run for office, Ramírez highlighted the important role indigenous communities play in Oaxaca's identity. Under his leadership, Oaxaca passed a series of constitutional reforms targeted at greater recognition of indigenous cultures and their jurisdictional and organisational systems. These reforms were even passed two years before the federal constitutional reforms in 1992. In the final year of his term, Ramírez started another series of laws targeted at indigenous self-governance. A new electoral law from 1992 vaguely described the indigenous "usos y costumbres". In 1995 and 1997 new reforms fully and functionally implemented indigenous traditions into the electoral laws

(Munoz, 2004). Thanks to Carrasco's decision to follow in the direction started by Ramírez, "usos y costumbres" become an integrated part of the state's electoral system, which is now used by more than 70 per cent of Oaxaca's municipalities, which are recognized as the territory of the indigenous community. Oaxacan institutions are effectively multicultural, a result incomparable to any other Mexican state (Ibarra Eliessetch, 2021).

The role of high political representatives is generally regarded as a vital part of the Oaxacan indigenous success. Munoz (2004) regards the governor's decision to be primarily influenced by Ramírez's childhood, his indigenous advisers and in the case of Carrasco by his desire to follow in his predecessor's footsteps with whom he had a close relationship, although it is very likely, that the armed struggle in neighbouring Chiapas was an additional motivator during Carrasco's term. Other authors are more pragmatic, claiming that the politicians were motivated by the public demand and used the indigenous issue to gain an advantage during elections (González, 2023). Since the majority of municipalities are now governed by various forms of "usos y costumbres", we can clearly see the demand for indigenous recognition in Oaxaca and the significance of multiculturalism in this state. Either way, the influence that indigenous people had on the state's politics was possibly one of the main differences between the indigenous success in Oaxaca and the failure in Chiapas (Munoz, 2004).

## **5.1 Quantitative findings**

Since the autonomous municipalities in Oaxaca are legally recognized, the operationalization has been straightforward. The autonomy status of municipalities has been classified following the official website of the Oaxacan government which made public a full list of autonomous municipalities in the state (Ieepco, 2022).

More issues arise in the data on criminality. Although the dataset is officially available from the year 2015, there are only 35 municipalities out of the 570 Oaxacan municipalities included for the years 2015 and 2016. During the analysis, another underrepresentation became evident in the data. The average crime rate for each of the two municipality types was significantly lower in 2017 than in other years. For instance, the crime rate for non-autonomous municipalities was calculated to be 190 in the year 2017, while in the following years, the number exceeded 600. For autonomous municipalities, this difference is even

more pronounced with the crime rate of 38 in 2017 and nearly 400 in the subsequent years. Due to these differences, I presume that similarly to the years 2015 and 2016, the dataset for the year 2017 includes significant gaps, although they are not apparent at first since all municipalities are included. Perhaps some values are filled in with 0 even in cases where it might have been more appropriate to mark them as missing values. Therefore, the years 2015, 2016 and 2017 have been excluded from the analysis in the case of Oaxaca.

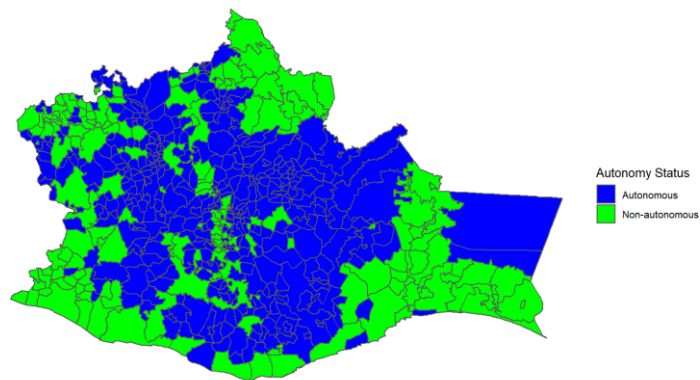


Figure 1. Geographical location of autonomous and non-autonomous municipalities in Oaxaca.

On average, autonomous municipalities in Oaxaca have a crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants of 366.99 while non-autonomous have a crime rate of 686.74. Welch's t-test confirmed that the two mean values are statistically significantly different, which is not surprising due to the size of the difference between the two values.

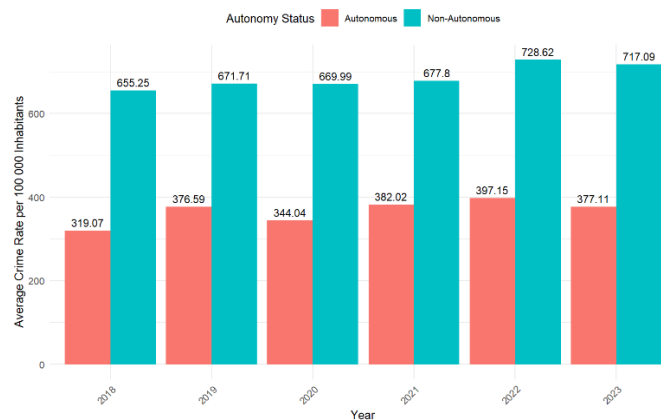


Figure 2. Average yearly crime rate per municipality type in Oaxaca. Adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants.

Reflecting the overall averages, we can see that all years separately show very similar patterns with the average crime rate being almost twice as high in non-autonomous municipalities as in autonomous. In terms of trends, we can identify a slight upward trend for both municipality types with a slight decrease in the last year.

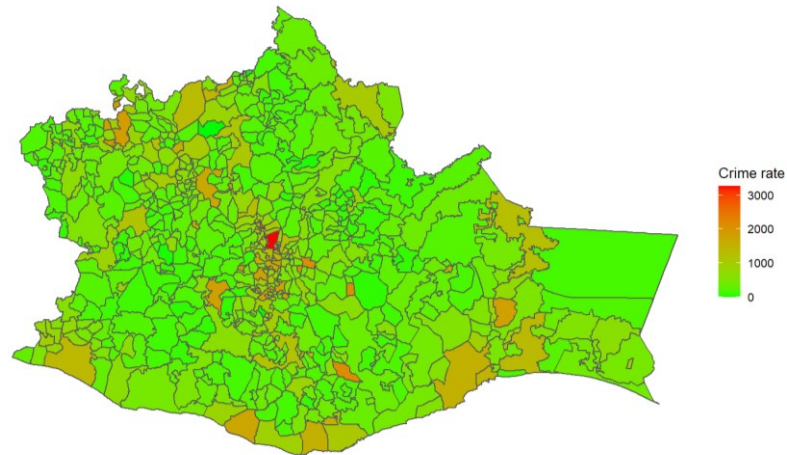


Figure 3. Heat map of Oaxaca displaying an average crime rate between 2018 and 2023 per 100,000 inhabitants.

When we compare the heat map to the map showing where autonomous and non-autonomous municipalities are located, we can easily identify the clusters of non-autonomous municipalities in the north, along the coastline, coming up to the border with Veracruz, and in the centre where the state's capital is located. The capital Oaxaca de Juárez, which is not autonomous, is also the municipality where most crimes per capita occur. The only autonomous municipality with a very high crime rate is the municipality of San Pedro Mixtepec Distrito 26 in the southern part of the state.

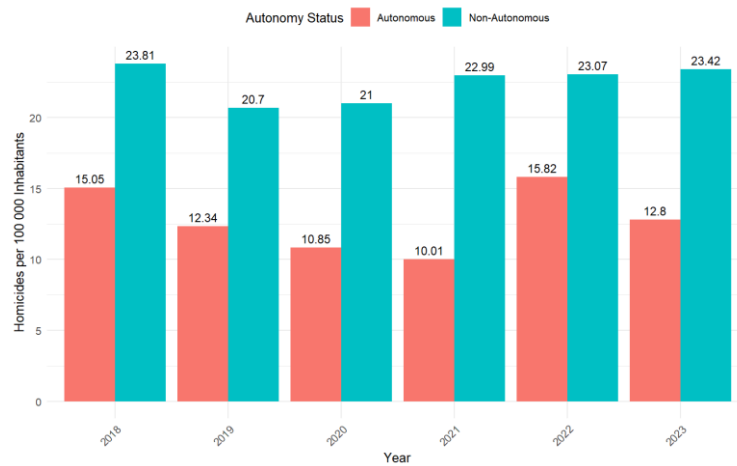


Figure 4. Average yearly homicide rate per municipality type in Oaxaca. Adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants.

If we isolate homicides from the rest of the delicts, the average value stays nearly double for non-autonomous municipalities when compared to autonomous. The homicide rate for autonomous municipalities is 12.81 and 22.50 for non-autonomous municipalities. We can however see differences in the trends by year, more volatility, and a different geographical distribution of the crimes. There was a sudden increase in homicides among autonomous municipalities in 2022, which is not as visible in non-autonomous municipalities. However, the very next year the homicide rate in autonomous municipalities returned to a downturn trend, while the number of homicides in non-autonomous municipalities kept increasing.

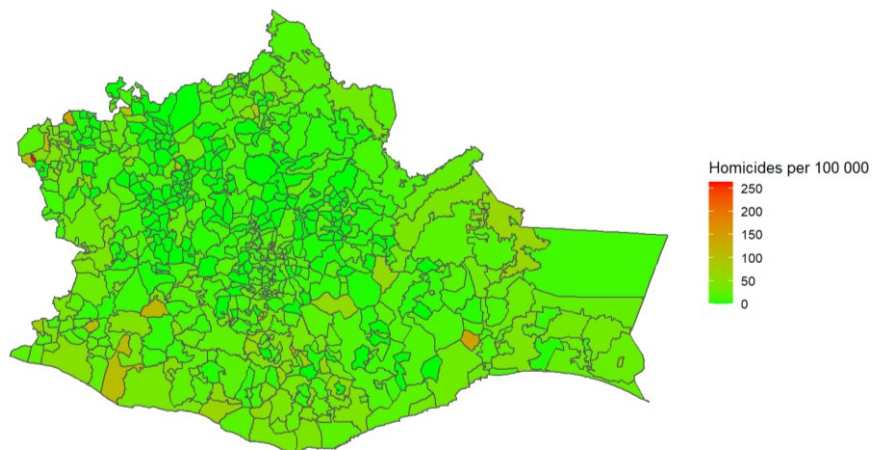


Figure 5. Heat map of Oaxaca displaying an average homicide rate between 2018 and 2023 per 100,000 inhabitants.

The heat map on the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants, shows a similar ring of increased criminality along the borders of the state, but it is much less prominent than in the map depicting the overall crime rate. The scale is also strongly influenced by one very small non-autonomous municipality, San Andrés Tepetlapa in the North-West of the state. With just 381 inhabitants the municipality saw 4 murders in 2018, thus having the highest homicide rate per capita in the state. San Andrés Tepetlapa has a homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants of 262, while the second highest rate is in the municipality of Santa María Mixtequilla with a rate of 142. An interesting difference between the two heat maps depicting the overall crime rate and homicide rate is the capital and surrounding area. Although the crime rate in this region is visibly the highest out of the whole state, the homicide rate is very low here. As in the crime rate heat map, one of the autonomous municipalities is among the most violent. In this case, it is a different municipality than in the statistic for crime rate. Santiago Amoltepec is among the municipalities with a high homicide rate.

The data also reveals another possibly important difference between the two types of municipalities. In terms of inhabitants, non-autonomous municipalities are on average nearly five times bigger than autonomous municipalities. Given the already very small municipality size in comparison to other Mexican states, this difference might signal, that autonomous municipalities are formed by smaller and closer communities than non-autonomous municipalities. This might have played a role when municipalities were deciding their form of governance, and it may also significantly influence the subsequent prevalence of crime.

## **5.2 Qualitative findings**

The security situation in Oaxaca is influenced by several forms of conflict. Firstly, there are political conflicts linked to worker unions' demands and demands for the release of social movement's political prisoners (Orozco Lopez, 2021). In 2006 the police opened fire at a non-violent teachers union strike. In reaction to these actions an indigenous movement the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples (APPO) called on demonstrations and demanded the resignation of the state's governor. APPO was an advocate of the autonomous governance system and after these demonstrations, it experienced brutal repressive actions from paramilitary groups as well as directly from the state police and military. Oaxaca has been the most successful in creating legal provisions for indigenous rights of all Mexican states,

but it has not been able to eradicate violence directed towards indigenous communities (Mora, 2023).

Secondly, there are territorial conflicts, notably surrounding mining and wind projects in the Isthmus region and agrarian disputes in the Sierra Sur region (López Vences, 2021). Conflicts over natural resources and territories were exacerbated by a series of judicial reforms including the Mining Law, the Hydrocarbons Law, and the Natural Waters Law which affected indigenous lands more than non-indigenous. Most of the over 300 mining concessions were issued for indigenous regions, generating a number of land concessions and triggering indigenous movements who tried to stop this development for over 25 years (Rivera, 2018). The state government plays an important role in resource extraction activities, usually siding with the exploitative company rather than the impacted communities. An example can be the events in the autonomous municipality of San José del Progreso. In 1999 communal lands were privatized as a consequence of resolving territorial disputes with neighbouring communities. Approximately ten years later an international mining company was granted mining concessions in the area by the state and the municipal authority. However, locals claim that they were not consulted and the obligatory process of obtaining agreement from the communal assembly was left out and instead, only the private owners were consulted. The company claimed the opposite and started the extraction activities. The mining led to environmental degradation, water scarcity and contamination, division of the community, and a feeling of insecurity due to the presence of private security forces of the mine. When the community members, mostly women as men had to continue working, demonstrated against further extraction activities, state and federal police arrived to remove them. 1 500 police officers, dogs and even helicopters were used in the operation to remove 100 protestors after a three-month-long blockade of the mine's entrance. An obvious signal of where the state stands and how much power a community can exercise against mining companies (Altamirano-jimenez, 2021).

As expected, another major source of conflicts in Oaxaca is organized crime. The war on crime security strategy initiated in 2006 had a negative impact on this state as well. In reaction to the rise in violence and land dispossessions resulting from extractivist policies, in which organized crime is involved, communities started to create self-defence groups more than ever before. Indigenous autonomy and vigilantism went hand in hand intending to protect vulnerable communities. A well-known example of this development is the

unfortunate events in the village of San Juan Copala in the municipality of Santiago Juxtlahuaca. After several violent events, the village decided to declare itself autonomous and form a self-defence group. Yet, the violence kept rising and four years later after a massacre in which 30 people were killed, supporters of the autonomy had to flee to other parts of Mexico. There were too many adversaries influencing the security situation making it too complex for an isolated community to win. The complexity of threats to local communities persists to this day. International companies, organized crime and the government are all participating in natural resource extraction with little to no regard to those most influenced by these activities, thus creating socio-political conflicts on all levels (Mora, 2023).

Currently, we can see another phenomenon contributing to the insecurity, where criminal groups from neighbouring states took refuge in certain Oaxacan regions, where they continue their illicit activities and as a result create zones of increased violence. These zones include coastal regions taken over by criminal groups from Guerrero, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region controlled by criminal groups from Guerrero and Veracruz, and the Papaloapan region, which criminal groups from Veracruz have been infiltrating. These areas are particularly risky for those running for office in elections. Candidates regularly experience threats and in some instances, the criminal groups do not shy away from killing the unfavourable candidates (López Vences, 2021). Violence is not limited to candidates, as illustrated by the 2022 murder of Crispín Hernández Vásquez, shortly before he could take the role of mayor to which he has been elected. Hernández was elected through *usos y costumbres* in the indigenous municipality of San Pedro Mixtepec Distrito 26, in the region of Sierra Sur (Cruz, 2022). The aggressor is still unknown. Because the municipality lies in one of the regions with an increased presence of organized crime groups, we could speculate that this murder was an attempt to influence local politics, but it could be a result of animosity within the community or even a personal matter. This municipality is also the only autonomous municipality which is among those with a high criminality rate as identified through the quantitative analysis in the previous chapter. The fact is, however, that elections in Oaxaca are very competitive and often influenced by high levels of violence. In the 2017-2018 local elections the situation was so dire, that elections had to be postponed due to security concerns in three municipalities, San Dionisio del Mar, San Juan Ihualtepec, and San Francisco Ixhuatán. Here the primary concern was the security of voters rather than the



candidates (López Vences, 2021). One of the three municipalities, San Dionisio del Mar, which is struggling with pressure from wind companies to build megaprojects, had to wait five years to elect communal authorities (Codigo DH, 2023).

These are only a few of the many cases of violence related to elections and political representation in Oaxaca. This type of violence is regularly studied by a consultancy firm Etellekt, which recorded the most politics-related homicides in the 2018 presidential and local elections in Oaxaca and Guerrero with 24 murders in each state (Matías, 2018). Recently, Etellekt published another analysis, showing that between the years 2000 and 2022, five states, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Puebla, Veracruz y Guerrero, account for 61% of murders of mayors in Mexico (Martínez, 2022). Electoral violence is not only imposed by masked actors attempting to instal favourable officials. Public protests and strikes are common and often involve actions such as blocking roads, detaining officials, and seizing public offices. This civil unrest sometimes escalates into physical violence, causing harm to individuals and damage to property. During Gabino Cué Monteagudo's administration (2010-2016) the situation became so dire that in six districts over 20% of polling stations could not be set up (López Vences, 2021). Although election-related violence is rarely an issue in municipalities governed through *usos y costumbres*, these municipalities are not excluded from the statistics on politically motivated homicides. Elected officials can still be murdered and divisions inside the community can lead to violence targeting elected officials and their relatives. Such events contributed also to the increased homicide rate in the municipality of Santiago Amoltepec which is among the most violent municipalities while being administered through a customary system (Pellegrini, 2023).

Another major issue in Oaxaca regarding human security is violence against women. In 2023 Oaxaca ranked seventh in the number of femicides, far ahead of the significantly more violent Michoacán (Statista, 2024). Women in Oaxaca also face gender-based political violence and lack of political representation. The political power of women appears to be even worse under the system of *usos y costumbres*. In 2018 only 10,17 % of municipal presidents were women of which 6,66 % in political party systems and 3,50 % in customary systems (Pedro Luna, 2018). This statistic is even more dire when we take into account that the vast majority of municipalities in Oaxaca use the customary system. In some municipalities, this exclusion is evident even in the active voting right since the right to vote can be denied to women as they do not possess land. This practice is being respected as a

part of local customs (Danielson, 2013). Although women very actively participate in community services, their activities are seldom recognized in the form of political power. This discrepancy is caused by the traditional views on gender and their roles in society (Vázquez García, 2011). Women get assigned to cargos (functions) which are viewed as less important and thus are unable to reach higher positions which are given based on the performance in cargos. Due to the same systematic feature, the customary systems also tend to exclude immigrants and sometimes non-Catholics from political participation (Danielson, 2013).

An increase in femicides in 2023 was unexpected from the trends in previous years, as the number of femicides in 2022 was lower than in the previous year. However, in 2022 there was an overall increase of homicides in the state compared to 2021 and a large proportion of the increase can be attributed to the autonomous municipalities. Although the homicide rate still remained lower than in non-autonomous municipalities, there might have been some pressure in 2022, which the autonomous municipalities were not able to resist in the short term according to the quantitative analysis of criminality in the previous chapter. As the increase was not as striking when both municipality types were accounted for, there is no explanation in the literature and news reports to be found. Drawing from the data, there was no particular area where some kind of large-scale attack would occur, instead, there was a relatively small increase in the number of homicides in several very small municipalities. These municipalities are also dispersed throughout Oaxaca, each being from a different region. Therefore, the sudden increase in homicides per capita recorded in 2022 in autonomous municipalities appears to be only a coincidence, where a couple of homicides took place in very small communities, thus distorting the statistic, instead of being a result of a single event or pressure source whose effects would be limited to autonomous municipalities.

When it comes to the provision of public goods as a marker of human security, Magaloni (2019) found the municipalities governed through customary systems to be more successful than municipalities with political parties. The change in the system of governance to *usos y costumbres*, did not change the amount of finances available to a municipality, yet customary governance was able to provide better basic services to their inhabitants. An important difference was also in the distribution among various groups within the municipality. Customary municipalities distributed resources more equally and the poorest households

received the most support. In municipalities governed by public parties, supporters of the governing party tended to receive better services. The authors assign this difference to the ability of customary systems to generate more awareness in the municipality, greater civic engagement, cooperation through community services and better accountability of the municipal president. Additionally, political party systems are more prone to corruption, which influences public goods provision directly, but also by eroding voters' engagement (Magaloni, 2019). Although the study did not include the provision of security through the police, we could expect similarities as police forces would also be influenced by government corruption, accountability or civic engagement. Furthermore, when surveying the local population, Magaloni asked for an opinion towards the form of governance. From customary systems, 91 % of respondents preferred this alternative to the political party system, while the residents in municipalities governed by political parties 55 % of respondents believe that public goods are negatively influenced by partisanship and 65,5 % believe that political parties divide the community and induce conflicts (Magaloni, 2019).

### **5.3 Case Summary**

Oaxaca is a unique state in Mexico due to its relatively successful integration of indigenous autonomy into its political and social structures. This has been attributed to the actions of local movements, which fought for indigenous rights and to a relatively supportive position of highly positioned politicians, who played a crucial role in implementing constitutional reforms that recognized and respected indigenous cultures and systems. As a result, Oaxaca's institutions effectively exist in a dual, multicultural system, with "usos y costumbres" becoming an integrated part of the state's electoral system, now used by over 70% of Oaxaca's municipalities.

The security situation in the state is mainly influenced by political conflicts, territorial disputes, organized crime, and violence against women. The political conflicts are often linked to worker unions and social movements, while territorial disputes revolve around the extraction of natural resources and wind projects. Organized crime has escalated violence and land dispossession, leading to the formation of self-defense groups. The region also experiences election-related violence, with threats to candidates and voters, and a high number of politics-related homicides. Despite these challenges, municipalities governed

through customary systems appear to be more successful in providing human security than municipalities governed by the system of political parties.

In Oaxaca, autonomous municipalities have a significantly lower crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants than non-autonomous municipalities, with an average of 366 compared to 687. This difference is statistically significant, with a similar pattern observed in homicide rates. Autonomous municipalities also have better results in public goods provision. However, the data also reveals that non-autonomous municipalities are on average nearly five times larger in terms of population, suggesting that autonomous municipalities are formed by smaller, closer communities. This difference in community size and structure may significantly influence the prevalence of crime. There is also a negative result seen among autonomous municipalities. Although women participate in the life of the communities, their work is not adequately represented by political power and they seldom reach higher political positions. Although the situation is not ideal in non-autonomous municipalities, women in their local politics reach better representation.

## **6. Chiapas**

The indigenous struggle in Chiapas started with the First Indigenous Congress in 1974. Over a thousand representatives of various indigenous peoples gathered in this public forum to condemn structural injustice regarding mainly land distribution and labour conditions. Motivated by the discussion in the gathering, indigenous movements started to emerge and in the 1980s they confronted the political representation of the state and large landowners demanding improved conditions and land redistribution. Politicians and landowners responded with harsh repression. Clashes between the indigenous peasants and the elites soon grew into open violent conflict. In Chiapas, the deteriorating legitimacy of the governing PRI did not result in the accommodation of alternative ideas and protest movements, only in repression and sporadic formal changes to the law, which did not have any real effect (Zaga Szenker, 2015).

In contrast to the case of Oaxaca, recognition of indigenous rights following the federal constitutional reforms in 1992 was minimal and even avoided the term indigenous. For most of the 1990s, legislative reforms only formally declared the protection of local cultures and languages. Nothing has really changed even after the rise of the Zapatista movement, the

violence resulting from its clash with the government, not even after the San Andrés Accords in 1994. Only in the last year of the 20th century did Chiapas pass more significant legislation for the indigenous movement. New constitutional reforms also brought the right to elect local governments through *usos y costumbres*. However, the real effect of this change was minuscule since it did not apply to the municipal level and local leaders do not have political administrative jurisdiction (Orozco Lopez, 2021). In Oaxaca, one municipality can often consist of a singular town and a similar approach would effectively mean governance through *usos y costumbres* on the municipal level. However, municipalities in Chiapas are comparably much larger and the distinction between locality and municipality becomes more important. One municipality can consist of several indigenous towns seeking autonomy as well as many non-indigenous towns preferring the political party system. To resolve this issue and allow for indigenous autonomy with meaningful administrative powers the territorial administration of the state would have to be changed, which the state strictly refused (Munoz, 2005). The 1999 reforms recognized the right of indigenous autonomy, but they did not give it any tangible meaning. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 1990s, the Zapatistas began creating numerous autonomous municipalities, which persist to this day despite repeated attempts by the government to destroy them through military action. Further, indigenous communities decided to govern themselves through customary systems in the aftermath of the Zapatista conflict (Orozco Lopez, 2021).

Although the indigenous Zapatista movement undoubtedly reached a great deal of mental and physical mobilization of the indigenous people in Chiapas and beyond and even resonated in the international discussions, it was never able to challenge the PRI rule through formal structures like their counterparts in Oaxaca. Chiapas consisted of 118 municipalities, 31 of which were considered indigenous, therefore the electoral power of indigenous people was not as strong as in Oaxaca. Furthermore, the indigenous movement was never completely united with some communities disagreeing with the conduct of the Zapatistas, and none of the indigenous communities were able to influence the high-positioned politicians who preferred connections with the state's landowning elites. Indigenous autonomy was also opposed by the federal president Ernesto Zedillo, who feared the cohesion of the country and the protection of the southern border with Guatemala. Chiapas governors between 1994 and 2000 owed their position to Zedillo and would follow his lead in the indigenous question (Munoz, 2005).

From the late 1990s, not much has changed for the legalisation of the indigenous autonomy, but in the last decade this issue rose again and those hoping for more political action received new signals that things might finally change. In 2011 Cherán a municipality in Michoacán became determined to reach officially recognized status of autonomous municipality with the right to govern through *usos y costumbres*. The legal fight of its people led to a breakthrough in the matter of indigenous autonomy for the whole of Mexico as the federal constitution was reformed again and related matters are now being resolved through the Supreme Court of Justice (Ayvar, 2023). Following the example set by Cherán a municipality in Chiapas decided to take advantage of the recent change of will among Mexican courts and applied for autonomy. The municipality was Oxchuc and its citizens decided to opt for the system of *usos y costumbres* after two decades of internal conflict caused by disagreements in the political party system, which resulted in physical violence, hoping that different systems would make the municipality functional. The transition was not an easy task, but the municipality consisting of 130 communities finally succeeded and became autonomous in 2019, despite not being one of the *de facto* autonomous municipalities which would previously use the customary system of governance. In 2018 another two municipalities, Sitalá and Chilón, received an agreement from the court to start internal discussions about transitioning to the customary governance system. However, the discussions were interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the process was delayed. Oxchuc is as of today still the only legally recognized autonomous municipality in Chiapas (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2023).

## **6.1 Quantitative findings**

The case of Chiapas is more troublesome to operationalize than the previous case of Oaxaca. There are municipalities *de facto* under the administrative and political control of the Zapatistas, which are generally considered autonomous and tend to be the centre of debate around indigenous autonomy even beyond the state of Chiapas, but their existence is not recognized by the state and therefore is illegal. There is also a single officially recognized autonomous municipality since 2019, but in practice, the municipality has never been able to elect government through the customary system due to internal conflicts. To perform the analysis, I will consider the Zapatista municipalities as the main autonomous actors, while the official autonomous municipality of Oxchuc will be treated separately.

Since the Zapatista-governed municipalities originated from military struggle and are still illegal, their exact location is openly disclosed for security reasons and their borders do not reflect the official political map of Chiapas as the indigenous communities exist across the municipal borders. The Zapatista-controlled areas are also still changing. Therefore, there is no official list of autonomous municipalities governed by indigenous traditions, as it is the case in Oaxaca. Thus the municipalities had to be assessed individually and those with a strong presence of Zapatistas autonomous towns were treated as autonomous<sup>1</sup>. Although this autonomy does not occur at the municipal level, it is still likely to have a strong impact on the criminality occurring in a given municipality.

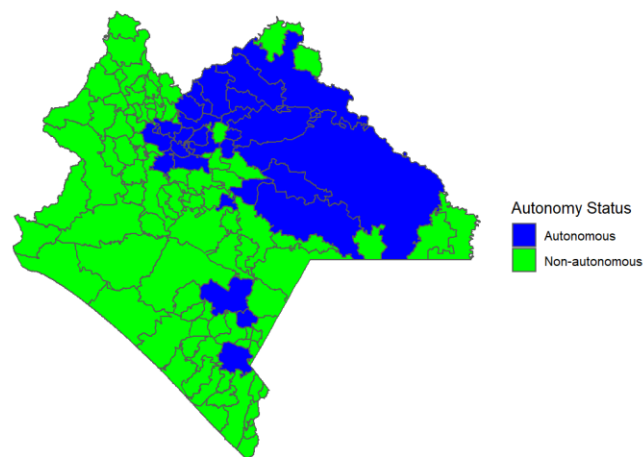


Figure 6. Location and geographic distribution of Zapatista autonomous municipalities in Chiapas.

In Chiapas, the average autonomous municipality reached a crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants of 74.02, while non-autonomous municipalities scored 202.07. Therefore, in the case of Chiapas, there is also a strong difference between the two municipality types.

<sup>1</sup> The autonomy status of municipalities was determined primarily, although not exclusively, through the following sources: PEÑA GUEVARA, MARILÚ. 2006. *LOS MUNICIPIOS AUTÓNOMOS REBELDES ZAPATISTAS*. Mexico City. Dissertation. Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Iztapalapa.; MORALES, Yessica. 2022. *Gobierno en Chiapas no existe, no mira, no oye y no habla: Red AJMAQ* [online]. Available at: <https://www.chiapasparalelo.com/noticias/chiapas/2022/09/gobierno-en-chiapas-no-existe-no-mira-no-oye-y-no-habla-red-ajmaq/>; REBRIL, Anna. 2020. *Zapatistas: Lessons in community self-organisation in Mexico* [online]. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/zapatistas-lecciones-de-auto-organizaci%C3%B3n-comunitaria-en/>; ZAPATEANDO. 2014. *Autogobierno y autonomía de las comunidades zapatistas* [online]. Available at: <https://zapateando.wordpress.com/2014/01/02/autogobierno-y-autonomia-de-las-comunidades-zapatistas/>; BECERRIL, Andres. 2019. *EZLN toma más territorios en Chiapas; 'rompimos el cerco', asegura* [online]. Available at: <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/ezln-toma-mas-territorios-en-chiapas-rompimos-el-cerco-asegura/1331082>

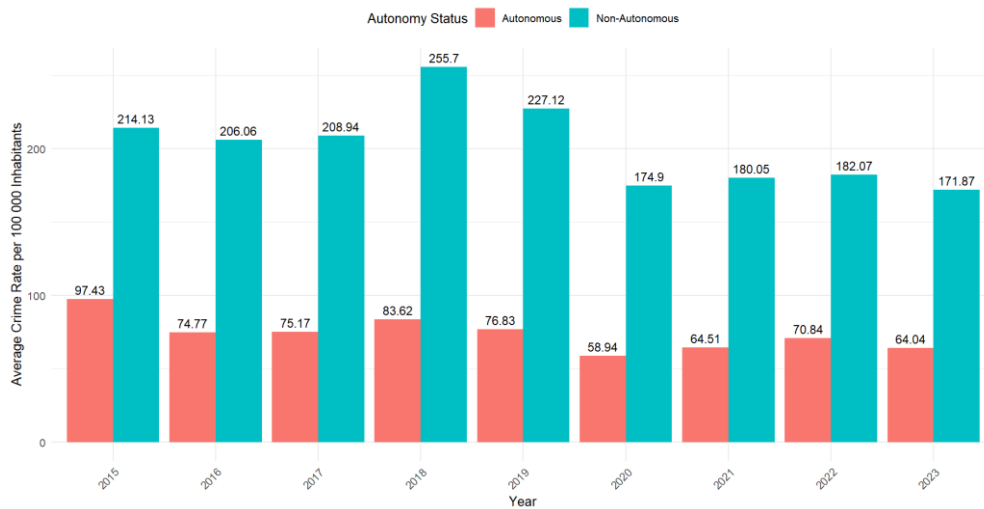


Figure 7. Average yearly crime rate per municipality type in Chiapas. Adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants.

In terms of yearly trends, we can see a general downturn trend, which has been interrupted by a steep increase in 2018. This interruption was not as prominent in the autonomous municipalities, instead, there was only a slight increase from 2016 to 2018, but since then the value has been decreasing. Presumably, there has been some event that influenced the security situation in some or all of the non-autonomous municipalities to cause the sudden increase. Overall, the number of crimes has been decreasing for both municipality types in recent years.

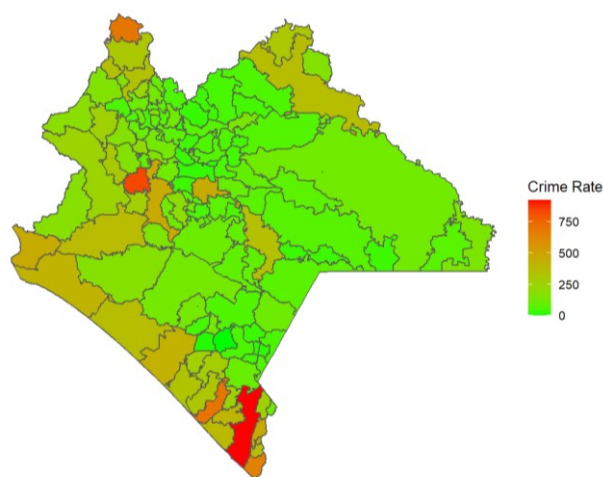


Figure 8. Heat map of Chiapas displaying an average crime rate between 2015 and 2023 per 100,000 inhabitants.



In terms of the geographical distribution of criminality, we can identify certain patterns. Most violence occurs in the southern municipalities of Tapachula, Suchiate and Huixtla, in the capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez located in the west-centre of the state, and in Reforma in the north. All of these municipalities are non-autonomous and likely have a strong influence on the average crime rate. There is also a general increase of violence along the coast, from there coming up along the main road to the capital city, in the centre of the state, and in the north. If we compare the heat map with the location of autonomous municipalities, we can see that no autonomous municipalities are located in these areas of higher criminality.

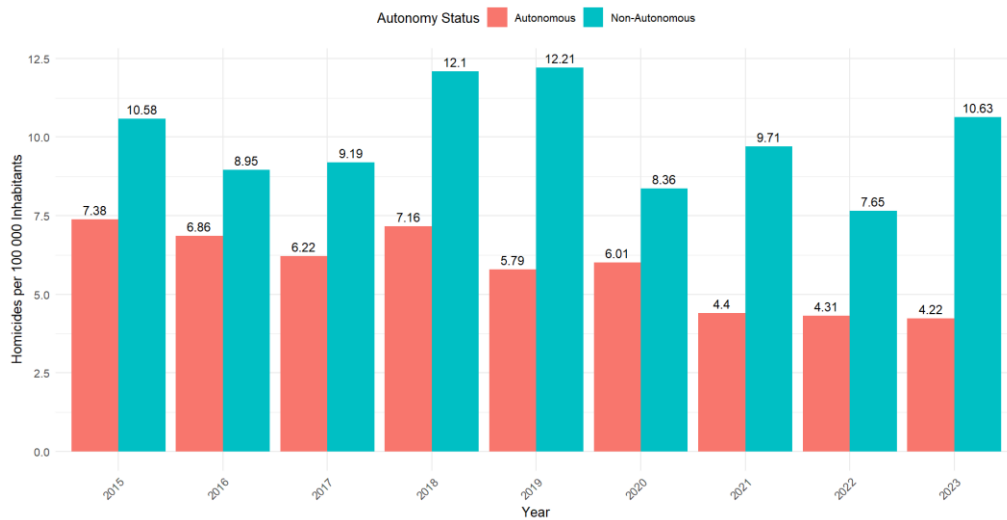


Figure 9. Average yearly homicide rate per municipality type in Chiapas. Adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants.

After isolating homicides from the dataset, the average value for autonomous municipalities results in 5.82, while for non-autonomous municipalities the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants is 9.94. Therefore, we can again see a significant difference. There is more volatility present in yearly trends for homicides among non-autonomous municipalities than in the overall crime rate, while the autonomous municipalities show very similar trend in the number of homicides as for the crime rate. Although the amount of overall criminality in Chiapas appears to be continuously declining, the same trend in homicide rate is visible only for the autonomous municipalities. Among the non-autonomous municipalities, there is apparent an upsurge of homicides in the last year as well as large increase in the years 2018 and 2019, similar to the increase in crime rate. In the beginning of the observed timeframe the difference between autonomous and non-autonomous municipalities was already apparent, but the gap has gradually increased, except for the year 2020 when the value for

non-autonomous municipalities dropped only to increase again in the upcoming years.

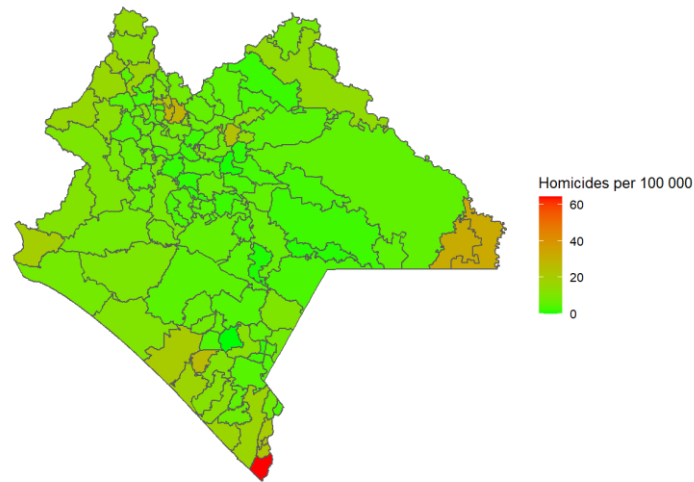


Figure 10. Heat map of Chiapas displaying an average homicide rate between 2015 and 2023 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Interestingly, the homicide rate does not follow the same geographical trend as the crime rate. The most violent was the municipality of Suchiate at the very south of the state. Although it was also one of the municipalities with the highest crime rate, the other municipalities from this list do not appear to be plagued by similar levels of homicides by far. The central region, including the capital, where crime rate is high appears to be relatively peaceful when homicides are assessed separately from other types of crimes. The coastal region has elevated levels of homicides, similar to the crime rate, but other areas are suddenly more pronounced. Most notably, the eastern tip of the state, specifically the municipalities Marqués de Comillas and Benemérito de las Américas. There are also three municipalities in the centre of the state with high homicide rates, which do not appear in the crime rate heat map. These are the municipalities of Pantelhó, Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacán and Rincón Chamula San Pedro. All these municipalities are geographically very close to the autonomous municipalities. Although they are close, the factors which influence high homicide rates do not appear to negatively influence the Zapatista region.

While the results from this analysis seem conclusive and strongly in favour of the autonomous municipalities, we have to be more cautious here, than in the case of Oaxaca or even Michoacán. First of all, the classification of municipalities as autonomous or not is far

from being straightforward, as autonomous communities in many instances do not territorially respect the borders of municipalities and within some municipalities, we can find areas governed through political party system as well as numerous illegally autonomous villages. The second issue is the animosity between indigenous communities and the government. These communities can be much more reluctant to report crimes than municipalities governed through the political party system recognized by the government. However, underreporting can be present in non-autonomous municipalities as well.

It would be reasonable to expect the region under Zapatista influence to be negatively affected by conflicts between communities who support and oppose the Zapatistas and by clashes with the state forces. The reality of last several years shows a different pattern. Most criminality and violence occur along the coastline, by the Guatemalan border and in municipalities with large urban centres, while the Zapatista region appears to be significantly more peaceful.

For the analysis of Oxchuc, the Zapatista municipalities were removed, and the municipality was compared only to the non-autonomous municipalities under the control of the state and political parties.

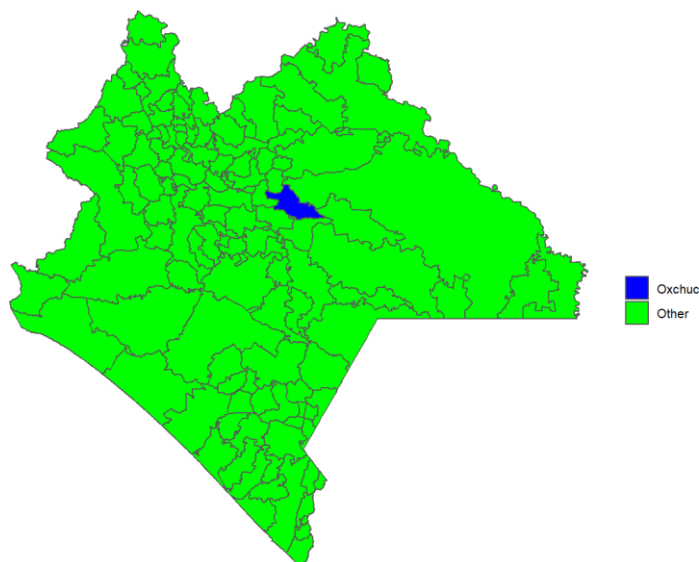


Figure 11. Location of the autonomous municipality of Oxchuc.

The average crime rate in non-autonomous municipalities is 203.32 while in Oxchuc the crime rate reaches only 86.37, which is a striking difference.



Figure 12. Average yearly crime rate per municipality type, adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants. The autonomous value represents the municipality of Oxchuc.

The crime rate bar plot shows a major increase of delicts presumably caused by the revolt which led to seizing control over the municipal government by the local population. Since then the criminality rate gradually decreased to levels much lower than before the revolt.



Figure 13. Average yearly homicide rate per municipality type, adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants. The autonomous value represents the municipality of Oxchuc.

Regarding the homicide rate, the non-autonomous municipalities excluding the Zapatista region reach the value of 10.01, while for Oxchuc the homicide rate per 100 000 inhabitants is 3.03. Interestingly, the trend in homicides is almost opposite to the trend in overall criminality. There was no significant increase in homicides in the year of the uprising in

2016 and the trend is upward unlike for the crime rate. Since banishing political parties, the number of homicides kept increasing, except for the year 2020 when no homicide occurred. This data signals persistence of major conflicts in the community.

## **6.2 Qualitative findings**

The twelve-day-long civil war of Chiapas ended with the signing of the 1994 San Andrés Agreement, but that was not the end of all violence. Promises mainly on the side of the state were not fulfilled and open conflict was transformed into a low-intensity war against the Zapatista centres (Zaga Szenker, 2015). For years the state existed in a state of constant instability, confrontation and violence caused by clashes between Zapatistas and their opponents, either in the form of state security forces, many paramilitary groups, other conflicting communities or criminal gangs (Munoz, 2005). The state government was accused of cooperating with some of the paramilitary forces (Sprague, 2022), as well as with organized crime groups. Cooperation with criminals became notorious, especially during the presidencies of Calderón and Peña Nieto when the state government of Chiapas and few other states were plagued by massive corruption and public resource theft (Felbab-Brown, 2019). Moreover, as many communities denounced capitalism and started to concentrate on protecting natural resources and community land, regional tensions increased. Land restorations and political rights for indigenous communities generated violent opposition from those who intended to profit from the community lands. There are more than private interests against the protection of natural resources. The communities have also experienced strong pushback from the state which cooperates with international companies and seeks to benefit from several megaprojects disregarding the indigenous territories and the negative influences on locals' livelihoods (Sprague, 2022). Against all odds, the security situation of Chiapas is not as bad when compared to the rest of Mexico. According to the peace index of the Institute for Economics and Peace, Chiapas was the third most peaceful state in Mexico in 2023 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

Unfortunately, in recent years the number of crimes started to gradually rise again and the beginning of 2024 was particularly violent. The increase in violence is attributed to conflicts between the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG). The Sinaloa Cartel previously dominated over the region, but in 2021 it started facing competition from the CJNG for control over smuggling routes. The organized crime affects the security situation

in Chiapas in three main ways, drug and migrant smuggling, secondary criminal economies, and political influence. Chiapas is a major transit point for migrant smuggling routes through Mexico, leading to increased conflict among crime groups for control and higher criminality and homicide rates along the coast and Guatemalan border which indicates the quantitative analysis of delicts. These groups profit from smuggling, kidnappings, and extortion of migrants. Drug trafficking and migrant smuggling are the biggest fuel to conflicts in Chiapas, but extortion, kidnapping, and land disputes also pose security threats. Criminal groups impose protection taxes on local businesses, influencing economic sectors like transport and agriculture. Extortion has led to significant impacts, for example around 30% of coffee growers already abandoned their crops. Moreover, violence in Chiapas has a political dimension, with crime groups seeking to influence local politics. Before elections, these groups fight for votes and territorial control, which also opens access to public funds. The state has witnessed political violence, including numerous assassinations and threats against candidates (Manjarrés, 2024). The rise of threats related to land and general terror from many diverse sources since the beginning of the war on drugs in 2006 caused a shift in the meaning behind indigenous autonomy in Chiapas. In the beginning, autonomy sought recognition and protection of culture and indigenous rights, now the primary concern is defence from violence and protection of traditional life connected to land (Mora, 2023).

The Zapatistas themselves claim that the institutions they established after the uprising led to improvements in the socioeconomic situation of the locals. Zaga Szenker's (2015) study came to a conclusion which supports this claim. Even though the local population suffered the negative effects of violent conflict, their socio-economic situation has improved in the long term even more than the situation of those outside of the conflict. It seems that the most influential were the new councils and laws and schools together with health centres, which are scarce in the rural regions. They were able to do so even without accepting any finances from the government, instead relying on their own resources and donations from NGOs, foreign governments and private supporters (Zaga Szenker, 2015). In the financial sense, the Zapatista municipalities are truly autonomous from the state, unlike the recognized autonomous municipalities of Oaxaca, Michoacán, and the municipality of Oxchuc in Chiapas.

Indigenous autonomy in Chiapas was an improvement also for the position of women. The Revolutionary Law on Women together with several demands in the 1994 negotiations

sought to empower indigenous women, for example by stating that women have the right to education and community participation, but also the right to family planning including access to contraceptives (Zaga Szenker, 2015). Despite arguments against recognizing indigenous normative systems, in many indigenous communities women play a crucial role. They are involved in the decision-making and discussions about conflicts and their resolution. Although the situation is not ideal, most issues women in these communities face are family-related, like child support, parental rights, separation, and sometimes domestic violence, which is not limited by the boundaries of indigenous communities (WERNGREEN, 2008).

As discussed in the introduction, the municipality of Oxchuc is the only officially recognized autonomous municipality in Chiapas, therefore it deserves to be discussed in greater detail, even though it reached autonomy only in 2019. In the 1990s there were many supporters of the Zapatistas in the municipality, but the local government was able to repress them and prevent any rise of opposition to its power. Ultimately, it was not indigenous identity or rights to land, but rather political conflicts, that led to the municipality's autonomy. Political conflicts were always present in the municipality, but in the years 2015 to 2018, the conflicts significantly intensified. In 2016 the conflicts transformed into the uprising, forcing the municipal mayor to resign. The opponents of the government formed a self-proclaimed autonomous assembly based on the indigenous customs system (Sovilla, 2024). The state government initially recognised the autonomous municipal government but revoked its ruling after the former mayor María Gloria Sánchez filed a complaint. The office was returned to Sánchez, while her opponents prepared for the 2018 elections and for the legal establishment of the customary system. The municipality was increasingly polarized. The conflicts culminated in a brutal attack at the former self-proclaimed assembly, which resulted in the death of four of its members. Sánchez was identified as the mind behind this attack. After these events, the way for supporters of the customary system opened.

The case of Oxchuc represents another phenomenon regarding indigenous autonomy and human rights. Before the violent attack, Sánchez received strong support from feminists across Mexico. Indigenous rights got into conflict with women's rights (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2023). Similar events occurred in a neighbouring municipality of Chenalhó, where however the political party system represented by Rosa Pérez Pérez persisted (Ejecentral, 2016). In reaction to feminist concerns, it was decided that women should have both the right

to elect and to be elected. A requirement was also put in place, that the municipal council should be formed from 50 per cent women. However, in practice, women would be always in pairs with their husbands, thus making it more of a formality than a real representation (Cal y Mayor, 2019). Although the elections establishing the new customary government were peaceful, only four months later, conflicts erupted again. On December 15, 2022, a General Community Assembly of the Tseltal people of Oxchuc, Chiapas, with over eleven thousand participants, was disrupted by a violent confrontation between supporters of two leading candidates (Cal y Mayor, 2022).

Each of the members of the municipal council represented the local communities which had sent them to the office and in accordance with the previous political system, they were expected to secure the most amount of funds and benefits for their community. Furthermore, those who voted for the autonomy expected additional benefits. Another problematic aspect of the new system was the practice of voting by show of hands. Some unsuccessful candidates questioned the results and since no record of the vote existed, the concerns could not be answered (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2023). The conflict, involving gunfire, casualties, and widespread violence, prevented the appointment of their municipal authorities via their Normative Indigenous System. The conflict continued and escalated in the following months, with daily gunfire, road blockades, and property destruction. Meanwhile, Hugo López Sántiz seized the municipal building, declaring himself the "traditional municipal president of Oxchuc", sparking further disputes as opponents attempted to evict him (Cal y Mayor, 2022). Recently the situation has improved and the indigenous communities of Oxchuc requested new elections through the customary system (López, 2024).

Additionally, from the quantitative analysis, we can see that there are several municipalities located in the region bordering Zapatista municipalities which have high levels of homicides. A closer look can provide us with valuable insights into the security issues the region is facing which do not seem to affect the Zapatista municipalities. One of these municipalities is Pantelhó, which is surrounded by autonomous Zapatista municipalities. In Pantelhó a new self-defence force, reportedly led by José Herrera, has displaced the civilian militia, "El Machete", accused of the disappearance of 31 people and violence. El Machete had taken control of Pantelhó in 2021 to combat organized crime. Since then the municipality has become a playground for armed groups fighting for control over the municipal government while claiming protection of civilians from criminals. Clashes between these groups led to



many injuries and deaths among the armed militias as well as civilian bystanders (Rocha, 2023). In 2024, Pantelhó's residents, responding to continuous violence and instability, chose not to participate in elections, demanding a Municipal Council elected by local customs instead. Pantelhó represents nationwide phenomena where self-defence groups emerge against organized crime but end up manipulated by criminals and potentially become a new violent political actor (Máriscal, 2024).

Another municipality plagued by a high number of homicides is the Pueblo Nuevo Solistahuacán. The municipality has been troubled by violence for a considerable amount of time now. The cause of the violence is clashes between two armed groups as well as numerous murders of individuals or small groups by unidentified aggressors (Leyva García, 2023). High-profile incidents include the sentencing of a former president for aggravated homicide, the murder of a local businessman and political candidate, and the recent murder of two young men on a street in the town centre (Morales, 2022; Infobae, 2022; El Heraldo, 2024). The inability of the municipal government and the high costs of accessing justice are adding to the frustrations of the local population (Leyva García, 2023). The increase of violence is visible in the larger region bordering Tabasco where an increase in homicides caused an alarm (El Heraldo, 2024). Judging by my analysis of homicide rates, the situation is especially poor also in the neighbouring municipality of Rincón Chamula San Pedro, which has recently experienced several murders resulting from clashes between criminal groups (Morales, 2021) and a violent conflict due to political differences which led to gunfire injuring several people (Coello, 2021).

Another area with a high number of homicides which neighbours the Zapatista region are the municipalities of Benemérito de las Américas and Marqués de Comillas between the Zapatista municipalities and the border with Guatemala. The situation in Benemérito de las Américas is tense due to increased violence related to organized crime groups smuggling drugs and people across the border and extorting the local population, leading to business closures and families abandoning their homes. Government efforts to reduce violence have been ineffective, reacting only with hard measures after an occurrence of violence and concentrating on stopping drug trafficking rather than on the protection of civilians (Moreno, 2023). President Obrador recently dismissed the violence, which is increasingly being noticed by newsletters, citing state-level statistics that regard Chiapas as peaceful. However, the president's narrative contrasts with the high violence rates at the municipality level

identified in my analysis of homicide occurrence (Campos Montes, 2023). The situation in the neighbouring municipality of Marqués de Comillas is virtually the same. As in Benemérito, there has been an increase in violence due to clashes between local criminal groups (Infobae, 2022).

Based on the analysed data on criminality, there was an apparent spike in violence in 2018 and 2019 among the non-autonomous municipalities, but the assessment of secondary sources and news reports did not reveal any probable cause for this development. From a closer look into the quantitative data, it appears that the cause may lie in the situation in the neighbouring municipalities of Tapachula and Huixtla and the state capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez. All of these municipalities saw a major increase in the number of crimes during the 2018-2019 period. For instance, the crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants for Tapachula was 1605 in 2018 which made it the municipality with the highest crime rate, but in 2023 this number was down to 475. In the same year, the municipality with the highest crime rate was Reforma with a rate of 859. Why the state capital saw a similar increase of criminality in 2018 and 2019 as Tapachula and Huixtla remains unclear, but these two municipalities have struggled with a major influx of immigrants, which may have impacted their security situation (Semple, 2018; El Economista, 2018). An increase in the homicide rate apparent since 2021 mainly among non-autonomous municipalities could be attributed to the confrontation between two major criminal groups which since 2021 battle over control of trafficking routes.

### **6.3 Case Summary**

Autonomy in Chiapas originated from a violent conflict and to this day remains largely illegal, which means greater isolation of the autonomous regions from the outer world, financial independence from the state, and clashes with the armed forces. Both crime rates and homicide rates are significantly different between the two categories of municipalities, with the autonomous municipalities being visibly less violent. Autonomous municipalities are located in a region that remains relatively peaceful, while criminality in virtually all non-autonomous regions is elevated. The insecurity levels in non-autonomous municipalities are also strongly influenced by extremely violent situations in several municipalities, mainly along the Guatemalan border and the coastline. These regions are troubled by an increase in criminal activities, especially since 2021 when the Sinaloa Cartel began to be threatened by

the presence of Jalisco Cartel New Generation leading to struggles for control and exploitation of the local population. High criminality is also present in large urban centres and along main highways, however, there is not a high number of homicides present in these areas compared to other regions. Increased criminality is also along the border with Tabasco, which has been related to clashes between armed criminal groups. There are several factors which have a major effect on negative security outcomes in Chiapas, organized crime, conflicts between and inside of communities, corruption, exploitation of natural resources and political violence. It may appear that due to the organisational structure of autonomous municipalities, violence and especially homicides related to elections and governing are not a significant issue in autonomous municipalities. However, this appears to be true only in the Zapatista autonomous municipalities, while in the legally autonomous municipality, Oxchuc political conflicts caused violence and paralysis of the local government. Internal unity may be a strong factor in the success of Zapatista municipalities. Those living under the autonomous Zapatista rule appear to live in a safer environment than those living in state-controlled regions and those living in the legally autonomous municipality of Oxchuc, which has been established only recently. Besides personal security, other aspects of human security, such as community, health or environmental security seem to be better in the Zapatista region. Regarding political security, the situation also appears to be better in the Zapatista region due to the involvement of women. There is not enough available data to comment on other sectors of human security. However, the collected information might be influenced by the inaccessibility of the Zapatista municipalities, meaning the situation may differ in reality and between individual municipalities.

## **7. Michoacán de Ocampo**

Michoacán has been significantly influenced by the war on organized crime. Instead of eradicating criminality, the campaign increased violence and broadened the interests of cartels. Extortion, human trafficking, kidnapping and natural resources extraction were added to the drug and arms trafficking. All these activities had an immense negative influence on the local population and not only that the state was not able to help the victims, but the state itself victimized the population even further (Fuentes Díaz, 2015). Up until this point the indigenous movement in Michoacán did not reach as much traction as in other states, small communities would practice some forms of customary governance under the

larger administrative structures, but there was no strong demand for officially recognized autonomy. Only in the worsening security situation and after several arrests of government officials due to ties with criminal organizations did these demands start occurring with increasing intensity.

The main example of indigenous autonomy in Michoacán is the community in Cherán. Issues arose when criminal organizations started to exploit forests in the area and the local authorities were unwilling to respond and stop the illegal activities. The municipality experienced a major rise in violence and a political crisis so deep that the community was convinced that political parties are the main driver of community marginalization. Abandoned by the officials, the locals decided to organize themselves according to local customs, ousting the political parties, and creating a communal security force. Parallel to the physical action the community sought legal recognition of the alternative governance in the form of *usos y costumbres*. After a year, in 2012, the municipality succeeded and became officially recognized as autonomous based on the system of *usos y costumbres* (Gasparello, 2018).

In 2015, another indigenous community from the Purepecha region decided to end injustice by self-governance. However, this community chose a bit different approach. The Pichátaro community consists of 36% of the population of the municipality Tingambato, yet it was receiving only 6% of the funds allocated to the municipality (Aragón Andrade, 2023). The community decided to take the municipal government to court and won with the court ordering to the municipality to allocate an appropriate proportion of funds directly to the community. Subsequently, the Pichátaro community became the first Mexican sub-municipal self-governing entity with financial autonomy. So far, indigenous autonomy depended on the municipal government which has the right and responsibility to allocate finances. The case of Pichátaro opened a new possibility for fully-fledged indigenous autonomy without the need to control the whole municipality. Since then at least 30 other Mexican communities have set out to follow Pichátaro's example and eight already succeeded, all of which are located in Michoacán (Cabrera Silva, 2021). One of those successes was the community of Arantepacua in the Nahuatzen municipality for which the triggering event for the decision to change the form of governance was an incursion of the state's armed forces which led to the death of 4 persons and several arrests (Aragón Andrade, 2023). The other autonomous communities with budgetary freedom are San Felipe de los

Herrerros, Nahuatzen, Comachuén, Sevina, Santa Cruz Tanaco and Cherán-Atzicurín (Cabrera Silva, 2021).

## 7.1 Quantitative findings

The case of Michoacán is not much easier to operationalize in terms of autonomy than the case of Chiapas. Michoacán was selected for the study to represent the most recent developments that kick-started a new wave of indigenous emancipation and self-governance in Mexico and beyond, not necessarily for its similarity to the other cases regarding the number of autonomous municipalities and suitability for quantitative analysis.

As of today, there is only one autonomous entity at the municipal level and several autonomous localities of small size in Michoacán (González, 2023). Unfortunately, the available data on criminality reaches only the municipal level, therefore we have to exclude the other autonomous communities from the quantitative study, since these self-governing towns form only a small part of their respective municipalities in terms of inhabitants (for example Santa María Ostula has 2 444 of the total 24 676 inhabitants (INEGI, 2021)). Moreover, the autonomy of some of these towns is only very recent. Therefore, only the municipality of Cherán has been operationalized as autonomous for the quantitative part of the research.

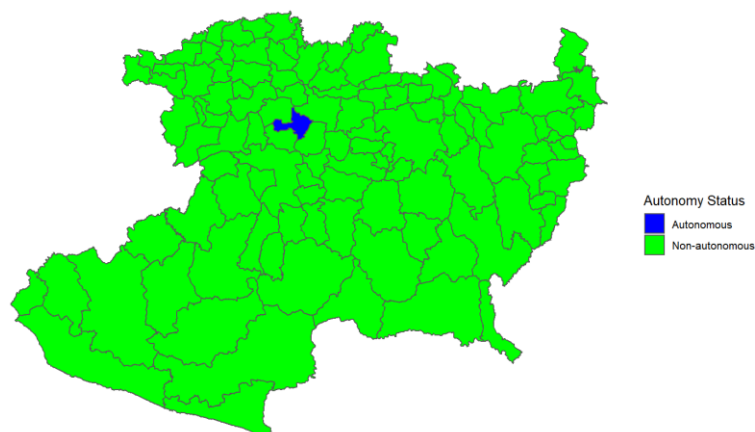


Figure 14. Geographical location of the autonomous municipality Cherán in Michoacán.

The average crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants was 170.56 in the autonomous municipality of Cherán and 436.82 in the non-autonomous municipalities. The difference is striking even

though when looking at the findings, we must keep in mind that the average autonomous municipality equals to the single municipality of Cherán.

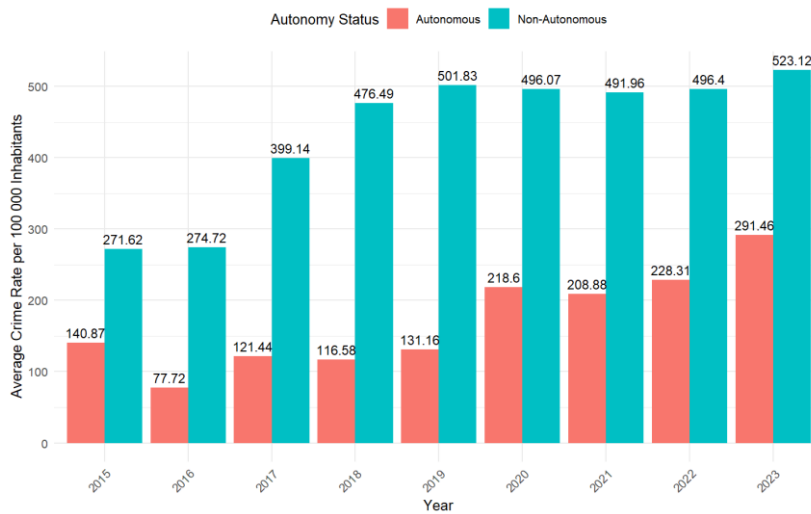


Figure 15. Average yearly crime rate per municipality type in Michoacán. Adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants.

Bar plot reveals a significant increase in crime rate over the past nine years for both types of municipalities. The value nearly doubled from the year 2015 to 2023. The non-autonomous municipalities experienced a sharp increase in criminality during the years 2017 to 2019, while the autonomous municipality initially resisted this trend, but later gradually increased as well while the crime rate in non-autonomous municipalities plateaued between 2019 and 2022, thus decreasing the difference from the average non-autonomous municipality. There was however an initial decrease of 45 % between the years 2015 and 2016.

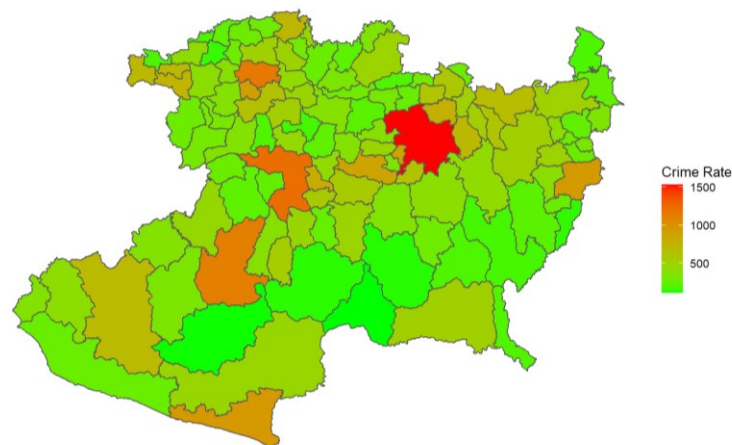


Figure 16. Heat map of Michoacán displaying an average crime rate between 2015 and 2023 per 100,000 inhabitants.

From the heat map, we can see that there are several municipalities with very high crime rates spread throughout the country. The highest number of crimes per capita was recorded in the state’s capital, the city of Morelia.

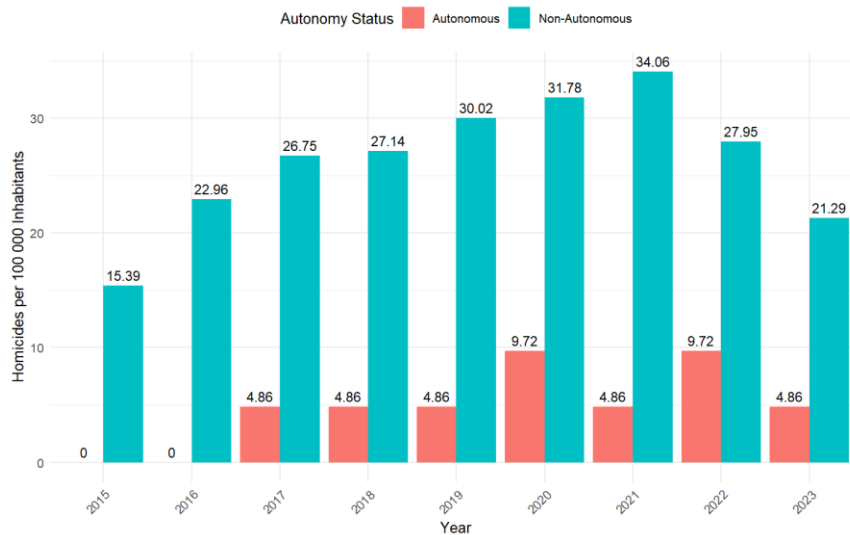


Figure 17. Average yearly homicide rate per municipality type in Michoacán. Adjusted to 100,000 inhabitants.

The crime rate in non-autonomous municipalities is two and a half times bigger than the crime rate of the autonomous Cherán, but the homicide rate difference is even more substantial. With an average of 26.37, non-autonomous municipalities have more than five times higher homicide rate than the municipality of Cherán with the rate of 4.86 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Yet, there is a positive trend, the homicide rate of non-autonomous municipalities significantly lowered in the past two years. In the autonomous municipality of Cherán the rate increased in 2020 and 2022. These increases may appear large as they are double of the years prior and after, but we must keep in mind that the rate is still relatively low and in real numbers represents the difference between two homicides in the years 2020 and 2022 and one homicide in the remaining years, except for 2015 and 2016, when no homicide occurred in the municipality.

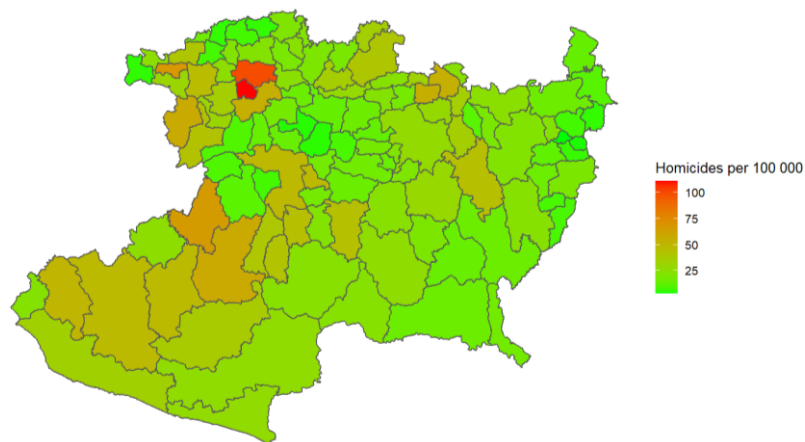


Figure 18. Heat map of Michoacán displaying an average homicide rate between 2015 and 2023 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Similarly to the cases of Oaxaca and Chiapas, although the crime rate in the capital city is very high or even the highest of all the municipalities, in terms of homicides, the capital is not among the most violent municipalities. In Michoacán, two municipalities have strikingly more homicides per capita than the rest of the country. These municipalities are Jacona and Zamora. The city of Zamora had, in fact, the second-highest number of homicides per capita in 2022 in all of Latin America and the Caribbean, just after another Mexican city, Colima (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). Municipalities neighbouring Cherán, where eight autonomous communities are located, have relatively low homicide rates as well, however just beyond this area, the rate increases.

Cherán is half the size of an average non-autonomous municipality in Michoacán, in terms of population size. The differences between autonomous and non-autonomous municipalities in the case of Michoacán appear to be immense, but we have to keep in mind, that we are in reality comparing only one municipality to the rest of the state. Possibly we could single out a different municipality from the category non-autonomous and reach similar findings. Yet, when comparing the two heat maps, there are not many such municipalities, where both crime and homicide rates would be as low as in Cherán.

## 7.2 Qualitative findings

Despite being one of the Mexican states most affected by violence, Michoacán experienced significant improvements in peacefulness in 2022 when compared to the



previous years, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace report. However, these improvements are not state-wide as the town of Zamora possesses the highest homicide rate of all Mexican cities, which is the result of cartel struggle for control of methamphetamine and heroin production and their distribution abroad through Mexico's second largest port Lázaro Cárdenas. Drug trade is not the only source of cartel-related conflicts. Michoacán is a major producer of avocados and limes and cartels seek control over these industries to extort the producers, mostly influencing the western part of the state. Since 2015 the organized crime rate has risen by 64 per cent. To battle the threat posed by organized crime, several communities resorted to organising self-defence groups (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

Autonomy in Mexico has always been connected to self-defence. In Michoacán, self-defence became more important than indigenous autonomy, but autonomy emerged as a complementary tool to achieve security (Mora, 2023). Del Rio found the presence of vigilante groups in Michoacán beneficial for lowering violence in regions where the state's abilities to destroy organized crime are limited. Although there is an initial increase of violence when self-defence groups emerge, a large proportion of homicides are thought to be suffered by criminals. However, violence is likely to increase after self-defence groups leave, because a power vacuum emerges and a criminal group takes advantage. Self-defence therefore has an important role in deterrence (Del Rio, 2023). Institutionalization of self-defence in the form of indigenous autonomy could make this difference permanent and it is likely an important factor in the development we saw in the case of Cherán.

So far the ability to transition from vigilantism has been limited to groups that are able to identify on the basis of ethnicity. It is something we can see in Michoacán in the Purepecha region, while in the region of Tierra Caliente this phenomenon has not emerged partly because mobilization was through the common rural life experience (Fuentes Díaz, 2015). Also, the interests of criminal groups as well as the state were too strong and some of the communities, such as the community of San Miguel Aquila, were not able to persist and its population was scattered into the surrounding area or detained (Cendejas, 2015).

The cooperation between the state and criminal groups was not limited to the case of San Miguel Aquila. Michoacán is one of the Mexican states, which are notorious for immense levels of corruption among its officials. Public resources are being stolen with almost no

hesitation, public budgets fall into great deficits and cooperation with organized crime is evident (Felbab-Brown, 2019). The obedience of politicians is ensured not only by bribery but also by open violence. At the beginning of the year 2024, two candidates for the role of mayor from two different parties in the town of Maravatio in the north of the state were murdered. Both killings are presumed to be linked to the struggle of cartels for political control (Stevenson, 2024). Local politicians often became targets of criminal groups as they sought control of the municipalities (Sánchez, 2024). In such an environment, one cannot be surprised that many politicians choose to cooperate with criminals. By leaving the system of political parties, autonomous towns and municipalities are likely to limit the violence the communities face during elections, a widespread issue in Michoacán.

Another issue is corruption among policemen. Wolfesberger (2017) found widespread human rights violations by municipal police in the form of extortion or dispossession of belongings. Policemen impose fines for real or fabricated minor misdemeanors, although they have no right to do so. If payment is refused, the person is taken into custody to wait for trial, while their belongings are taken never to be returned. Just like the local politicians and businessmen, the police have close ties with organized crime. There are also numerous reports about serious criminalization and victimization from the side of the federal police, which has been active in municipalities after the start of the war on crime under president Calderón. For locals, the armed forces and especially police forces are as big of a threat as the criminal groups. Citizens can file complaints to the state's human rights commission or the Public Prosecutor's Office, but their success depends on their financial abilities and have to face frequent unwillingness from the institutions to resolve the issues (Wolfesberger, 2017). When communities are given the right to establish their own communal police, this criminalization and victimization is inevitably limited as these policemen have stronger moral accountability to the community which can also remove them from the position at any time. Presumably, it is also easier for the locals to complain directly to their local leaders who have the power to resolve the issues, than filing a complaint to institutions residing in the state's capital or in Mexico City.

In Michoacán, indigenous identity is not a guarantee of security, more likely it increases one's vulnerability to threats. The state's marginalization of indigenous communities, combined with their inherent vulnerabilities, can easily result in their downfall. However, strengthening traditional structures with a shared vision of communal living and well-being

can improve social cohesion and responsiveness. The success of Cherán shows how a community can take back control when conditions are right (Cendejas, 2015). The community often faced conflicts with loggers who threatened their safety with violence and extortion. Cherán saw a major increase in criminal activity since 2009 with 16 residents being killed and 6 gone missing (Gasparello, 2021). Criminal violence led to widespread fear which caused community paralysis and high social fragmentation when neighbours were avoiding each other. Locals also had to endure constant humiliation from the criminals as there was no way to resist. The insecurity particularly affected children and young people, who dealt with violence and limited public space access. It even greatly impacted public health, contributing to nervous, circulatory, and digestive diseases (Gasparello, 2018). The final straw came when the loggers diverted the community's vital water source, making daily life unbearable. Despite pleas for governmental intervention, the community had to resort to creating community guard, which was led by the women of the community. Despite great losses, they managed to restrict access to the region and expelled the official authorities, naming political parties as sources of division (Cendejas, 2015).

The community guard replaced local police, due to accusations of cooperation with criminal groups and lacking motivation to resolve investigations. A change occurred also in the justice department. Serious crimes are transferred to the Public Ministry Agency in Zamora, while the local Mediation Council handles minor offenses. Nonserious offenses are dealt with penalties like short-term detainment, community work, or fines. Communal security has brought a decline in major crimes since 2013, and community activities have re-emerged. Life has returned to the streets with communal festivals, children playing and people walking the streets after dark, all of which was unimaginable prior to the community's activization. Works have also started on restoring the decimated forests. The system relies on communal vigilance, participation, and coordination. Even families who were linked to crime prior to the establishment of autonomy are welcomed to participate in community activities, although under some form of oversight, as the community emphasizes reconciliation over punishment. Such approach is preferred also because of the size of the community which is very interconnected through family bonds (Gasparello, 2021). The findings from the quantitative analysis of criminality show significantly lower crime and homicide rates for Cherán than for the rest of the country and the locals seem to have the same perception of the situation, claiming that after the change in governance, the criminality in the town

plummeted and that the community is finally able to grow and build instead of being constantly preoccupied with violence (Lopez, 2020). Trust and community solidarity networks were strengthened. However, gender equality and women's rights are still violated due to deep-rooted gender oppression. Despite women's increased participation, patriarchal norms persist limiting women to traditional roles. (Gasparello, 2018) However, other authors conclude that Improvements have been seen in the political representation of women in Cherán and in other autonomous communities in Michoacán. Under the political party system, no woman has been elected to high political positions in these localities, which has changed with the new system. Yet, female participation in politics has not been institutionalized, so there is no guarantee that the same development will occur in other autonomous communities (Aragón Andrade, 2023).

Santa María Ostula is another important case of autonomy in Michoacán, although not yet officially recognized. Ostula is the only autonomous town located on the coast near a major port used for illegal trafficking and routes to the port lead near the community. There are also several colliding interests from the mining, development or tourism sectors which create a security risk for the community (Aranda, 2013). Although the struggle is ongoing, there has been some success in the fight with organized crime groups. The community is now reforestating the surrounding areas where valuable tree species were brought close to extinction by the cartels (NMás, 2020). Its story began in 2009 when the community decided to resolve ancestral land dispossessions by establishing autonomy. The community received support from indigenous movements and was able to recover most of the lost land, but it had to face immediate violent backlash from those who were unhappy with the land recuperations. Subsequently, the community created a communal police force as part of the autonomous institutions (Mora, 2023). Between 2009 and 2015 when the conflict ended, 40 rights activists were murdered or disappeared. The community repeatedly asked for help from the government and filed complaints to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. No help came, on the contrary, during a peaceful protest in 2015 a ten year old child was accidentally killed by the Mexican military, for which no one has been held responsible. Yet the same year the criminal groups left the area due to the community's resistance, a result rare in Mexico. Since the situation normalized, the community has been able to return the practice of local customs and reform and strengthen its institutions including the community assembly which gradually made the political party system irrelevant. The

community is also supporting fellow indigenous communities which are trying to reach similar goals (Brennan, 2019).

As for some of the small autonomous communities of the Purepecha region the municipality of Cherán is also located, there have been some more trouble on the way to autonomy. Most troubled was perhaps the community of Nahuatzen 3 years after transition the community was still divided. Some see autonomy as a great benefit, new jobs, developments and increased security through the new police, but a large portion of the population disagrees and would prefer the return of the political party system. Conflicts between the two sides even led to physical violence especially after one of the mayors after a change to an autonomous regime was murdered (Lopez, 2020). The polarization has become so severe that officials are contemplating whether to change the organisational structure of the town back to the political party system. Similar difficulties were experienced also in the communities of Comachuén and Sevina, where polarisation led to a governance crisis and violence, although not as severe as in the case of Nahuatzen. On the other hand, the political transitions of the towns Arantepacua, and San Felipe de los Herreros, and Pichátaro were peaceful, although some management-related issues were present as well (Aragón Andrade, 2023).

### **7.3 Case Summary**

Michoacán has been deeply affected by organized crime, leading to increased violence and a broadening of cartel interests, which have a greater impact on the local population. Despite recent improvements in peacefulness in Michoacán the state still struggles with violence, particularly in certain areas, due to cartel control over drug and agricultural industries. Corruption among officials and police also deepens the issue. To combat this, numerous communities have formed self-defence groups, which have proven effective in reducing violence in the longer term, but they often create a power vacuum once they disband. Some communities have been able to maintain order, either after clashes with criminal groups or after major internal issues, by establishing autonomy and a customary system of governance. Among these municipalities were Cherán and Pichátaro. Cherán became officially recognized as autonomous in 2012, while Pichátaro became the first Mexican sub-municipal self-governing entity with financial autonomy in 2015. Since then, several other communities in Michoacán have followed their example. Although the state

government did not initially support their autonomy, new federal laws enabled the communities to reach autonomy after a legal battle. Unlike in the 1990s Chiapas, there was no open confrontation with the state.

The autonomous municipality of Cherán has significantly lower crime and homicide rates compared to non-autonomous municipalities. The municipality also shows improvements in social cohesion, environmental protection and incorporation of women into local political life, as do other autonomous communities in the state. The customary system in Michoacán also largely limits increases in homicide rates during elections, which is a major issue in the area. However, for some communities, such as Nahuatzen the transition to autonomy has been challenging and led to division and violence, signalling that autonomy is not an automatic solution to all security concerns.

## **8. Comparison of Oaxaca Chiapas and Michoacán**

Each of the three cases provides unique insights into the effects of indigenous autonomy in different political environments on personal security within the respective regions in Mexico. Oaxaca presents a distinct case where the integration of indigenous autonomy into the state's political and social structures has resulted in a dual, multicultural system. Autonomous municipalities show lower crime rates and better public goods provision, although with some issues regarding gender representation. However, it's important to note that there have been some challenges, particularly in relation to gender representation. Furthermore, not all autonomous municipalities show low levels of criminality and homicide rates, which indicates that the positive results are not universal. Yet, there are only two such municipalities that noticeably deviate from the autonomous success story, while the crime and homicide rates are generally significantly higher in most non-autonomous municipalities.

Chiapas, on the other hand, has autonomous regions that originated from violent conflict and remain largely illegal, resulting in isolation and clashes with armed forces. However, these areas are notably less violent than non-autonomous regions, at least in past nine years. The Zapatista autonomous municipalities show significantly better results in terms of personal security, however, these municipalities are mostly located in remote areas where there is less pressure from organized crime. The autonomous Zapatista communities seem to offer better

personal, community, health, and environmental security than state-controlled regions or the recently established autonomous municipality of Oxchuc. Unlike in the case of Oaxaca, females have an important role in the life of the community and participate in their governance. This difference is likely to be the result of particular indigenous cultures which differ among the states, but also inside of the states, given the immense diversity of indigenous communities in southern Mexico.

In Michoacán, the rise of autonomous communities has been a recent response to increased violence and control by organized crime. Autonomous communities like Cherán and Pichátaro have experienced significant reductions in crime and homicide rates, improved social cohesion, and better environmental protection. However, the transition to autonomy has not been smooth for all communities, with some experiencing division and violence. Particularly those communities which experienced internal divisions prior to the establishment of the customary system were likely to experience conflicts during and shortly after the transition. This has also been the case for the municipality of Oxchuc in Chiapas. Because these communities changed the system of governance only recently, it is not yet clear how these internal divisions will influence the personal security of their inhabitants in the long term. The case of Michoacán also shows the importance of a strong shared identity in the community for the successful establishment of autonomy. While all three regions have unique circumstances, the presence of autonomous municipalities generally corresponds with lower crime rates and improved personal security in all three cases, despite certain challenges.

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have set out to find out whether indigenous autonomy can be a tool how to improve human security in a state plagued by organized crime and corruption. What motivated this work were the increasing attempts of small communities to establish autonomy from the Mexican government in recent years. When presented with the phenomena of indigenous autonomy, which is closely linked to the Zapatista uprising and their autonomy, the first concept that might come to one's mind is community security and with it the rights of the indigenous cultures. However, based on consulting relevant literature and observing recent developments, I argue that personal security rather than indigenous representation is currently at the forefront of motivators for indigenous self-governance in

Mexico. Therefore, the primary concern of my research was the physical personal security. That being said, both personal and community security together with many others are aspects of the larger concept of human security, aspects which can not and should not be completely isolated from one another. Therefore, I have attempted to shed light on other aspects of human security in autonomous communities as well, but the concept of human security is too broad and the available data is too scarce. Moreover, while conducting the research, one aspect of human security came to the forefront as highly important, that is the issue of security and political rights of women. These issues are perhaps the only relatively well-researched aspect of human security in regard to indigenous autonomy in Mexico. It is also the argument most frequently used against the establishment of autonomy. Moreover, it is part of the physical security given the occurrence of femicides and gender-based political violence in Mexico. For these reasons, I decided to dedicate a small portion of the research to this aspect of human security above others.

After analysing various primary and secondary sources, and examining crime data at the municipal level collected by an institution of the Mexican government, I've concluded that regions with autonomy tend to have better personal security compared to non-autonomous regions. This result may be caused by the different forms of local government, but it might also be significantly influenced by other factors such as the size of the autonomous communities or their often secluded and rural position or by the combination of many factors. Nonetheless, despite the limitations of available data, the results show that communities governed by autonomous systems provide more secure environments for their inhabitants. The research also shows positive developments in other areas of human security across the three cases, but to provide conclusive results, more research needs to be performed in these areas. As for the controversial aspect of customary governance, the inclusion of women, I have found the political rights of women to be dependent on the local specificities. In some instances, women's political rights suffer under the customary system, but there are also many instances of improved position of women. Given these results, there is no reason regarding human security, to prevent legalisation of indigenous autonomy through the system of *usos y costumbres*, however this alternative political system should not be taken as a simple way to achieve security, as under unfavourable conditions it can lead to more violence caused by divisions in a given community. The system of indigenous autonomy



could also benefit from a general framework and guidance, which could prevent conflicts in the transition period and ensure basic political rights for women and minorities.

## Summary

V této diplomové práci jsem se snažila zjistit, zda může být domorodá autonomie nástrojem ke zlepšení lidské bezpečnosti ve státě sužovaném organizovaným zločinem a korupcí. To, co mě k tomuto výzkumu motivovalo, byly rostoucí pokusy malých komunit o zřízení autonomie od mexické vlády v posledních letech. Když jsme konfrontováni s fenoménem domorodé autonomie, který je úzce spojený s povstáním Zapatistů a jejich autonomií, první koncept, který nám může přijít na mysl, je bezpečnost komunity a s ní práva domorodých kultur. Avšak na základě konzultace relevantní literatury a sledování nedávných vývoje tvrdím, že osobní bezpečnost namísto domorodé reprezentace je v současnosti prvotní motivací pro domorodou samosprávu v Mexiku. Proto byla hlavním zájmem mého výzkumu fyzická osobní bezpečnost. Nicméně jak osobní, tak komunitní bezpečnost spolu s mnoha dalšími jsou aspekty širšího konceptu lidské bezpečnosti, aspekty, které nelze a neměly by být zcela izolovány jedna od druhé. Proto jsem se snažila osvětlit i jiné aspekty lidské bezpečnosti v autonomních komunitách, ale koncept lidské bezpečnosti je příliš široký a dostupných dat je málo. Při provádění výzkumu se jeden aspekt lidské bezpečnosti ukázal jako velmi důležitý, a to otázka bezpečnosti a politických práv žen. Tato problematika je snad jediným relativně dobře prozkoumaným aspektem lidské bezpečnosti v souvislosti s domorodou autonomií v Mexiku. Je to také argument nejčastěji používaný proti zřízení autonomie. Navíc je součástí fyzické bezpečnosti vzhledem k výskytu a genderově motivovaných vražd a politického násilí v Mexiku. Z těchto důvodů jsem se rozhodla věnovat malou část práce tomuto aspektu lidské bezpečnosti.

Po analýze různých primárních a sekundárních zdrojů a prozkoumání dat o trestné činnosti na úrovni obcí shromážděných institucí mexické vlády jsem dospěla k závěru, že oblasti s autonomií mají tendenci mít lepší osobní bezpečnost ve srovnání s neautonomními oblastmi. Tento výsledek může být způsoben různými formami místní správy, ale může být také významně ovlivněn jinými faktory, jako je velikost autonomních komunit nebo jejich často izolovaná poloha, nebo kombinací mnoha faktorů. Přesto, navzdory omezením dostupných dat, výsledky ukazují, že komunity spravované autonomními systémy poskytují bezpečnější prostředí pro své obyvatele. Výzkum také ukazuje pozitivní vývoj v jiných oblastech lidské

bezpečnosti ve všech třech státech, ale pro poskytnutí definitivních závěrů je nutné provést další výzkum. Pokud jde o kontroverzní aspekt autonomie, začlenění žen, zjistila jsem, že politická práva žen závisejí na místních specifikách. V některých případech jsou politická práva žen v autonomním systému omezena, ale existuje také mnoho případů kde se postavení žen po získání autonomie zlepšilo. Vzhledem k těmto výsledkům není důvod týkající se lidské bezpečnosti, který by bránil legalizaci domorodé autonomie prostřednictvím systému usos y costumbres. Nicméně tento alternativní politický systém by neměl být brán jako jednoduchý způsob, jak dosáhnout bezpečnosti, protože za nepříznivých podmínek může vést k většímu násilí způsobenému rozdělením dané komunity. Systém domorodé autonomie by také mohl těžit z obecného rámce a vedení, které by mohlo předcházet konfliktům v přechodném období a zajistit základní politická práva pro ženy a menšiny.

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