

Report reveals widespread torture of minors in Mexican prisons

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15 February 2017

In Mexico, 57 percent of adolescents in prison are tortured, according to a report released by the National Center for Human Rights (CNDH) late last month.

The CNDH, an independent agency, details the background and experiences of youth aged 14-18 who have been accused of committing a violent crime. It is based on interviews and surveys with 730 adolescents in 17 representative states throughout the country.

According to the Mexican Commission of National Security, there are currently over 13,000 adolescents behind bars, of which over one-fifth have been convicted of a violent crime, such as murder, robbery using violence and kidnapping.

The nationwide report documents the systematic abuse of imprisoned adolescents by local and federal police, as well as by sections of the Mexican Army and the Marines. Over half (57 percent) of all interviewed teens reported being tortured—often over the course of several days—after their arrest. Interviewees frequently reported being subjected to electric shocks, stabbed, tasered, drowned, asphyxiated and struck by the police.

One youth told interviewers: “I was undressed and tied up. They put water on me, they put bags on my face, they left me undressed and wet for five hours. They hit me in the ribs and tasered me. When they tortured me, I had to say what they wanted to hear or they would hit me more.”

While Mexican law prohibits using torture to extract confessions, previous investigations by the CNDH have found multiple cases of falsification of medical records that would confirm detainees had been subjected to torture.

Violations by the justice system documented by the study spread beyond torture and abuse at detention centers, including systematic violations of due process. The majority of adolescents reported not being informed of the charges against them (59 percent), not being informed of their rights (69 percent) and not being told

they had the right to an attorney (54 percent).

Overall, 16 percent of those interviewed reported being innocent, although this number was over twice as high in some regions (37 and 44 percent in Veracruz and Oaxaca, respectively). The report notes “a particularly high percentage [of alleged innocence] was found among those who, under conditions of poverty, marginalization and powerlessness, also suffered from discriminatory treatment by the justice system due to their ethnic or indigenous status.”

The report tells the story of Wilfrido, a 21-year-old indigenous youth who was charged with murder and was convicted because a seven-year-old relative of the victim cried in court at the sight of him. Despite Wilfrido’s explanation that the young boy had cried because he was frightened and did not speak Spanish, the existence of no other evidence against him and an alibi placing him elsewhere during the crime, the judge found this to be sufficient proof and he was sentenced to nine years in prison.

The study sheds light on the complicit role of the armed forces in the drug trade: about 20 percent of those interviewed said current or former members of the police or the army also took part in the criminal operations for which they were convicted.

Under conditions of violence and endemic poverty, vulnerable youth become entangled in the drug trade in an effort to provide for themselves and their families. The majority (64 percent) of those interviewed reported getting involved in crime to help their families financially. Prior to their arrest, adolescents reported working both in legal (e.g. farmer, daily worker, fisherman, dishwasher) and illegal (e.g. robbery, selling drugs, kidnapping) activities. However, those who worked in the illegal sector could earn up to 10 times as much.

Adolescents who are convicted of violent crimes are among the most vulnerable sections of the Mexican

working class. Interviewed teens were three times as likely to live in conditions of extreme poverty than the general population, and 40 percent noted they had been physically abused frequently prior to being incarcerated. Highlighting the predatory role of the drug trade, the majority of those interviewed joined organized crime when they were between 12 and 14 years old.

The CNDH report is a damning indictment of the existing conditions in Mexico more than a decade after the US-backed “war on drugs,” which has claimed over 80,000 lives since 2006. With the military and economic aid of the Bush and Obama administrations, this bloody war has not only led to countless deaths, but has militarized society to the degree that, as the report states, torture “constitutes ‘normal’ behavior that is to be expected from police.”

About half of all murders between 2008 and 2015 can be attributed to the “war on drugs,” according to the Mexican Statistics and Geography Institute (INEGI). Of these murders, 84 percent have never gone to trial.

Despite spending billions of dollars on security forces and military equipment, the drug war has been an abject failure. The US continues to have the highest levels of illegal drug use in the world, and the supply of illegal drugs to the US remains virtually unchanged.

Trump has sought to scapegoat immigrants for both the failure of this policy and for the conditions of poverty in the US that lead many to become addicted to drugs. “We have to keep the drugs out of our country,” he has stated. “We are getting the drugs, they’re getting the cash. We need strong borders. We cannot give amnesty.”

Workers and youth in Mexico and the US must reject this nationalist poison and fight to end capitalism, the social system that breeds the desperation and hopelessness that creates both the demand for and supply of drugs in order to serve the profit interests of corporations, banks and cartels.



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