



## INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

### A FORCE FOR CHANGE: NUEVO LEÓN BOLSTERS POLICE CAPACITY IN TOUGH TIMES, 2011–2015

#### SYNOPSIS

In 2010, the government, private businesses, and local universities in the northern Mexico state of Nuevo León forged an unusual alliance to design and implement sweeping law-enforcement reforms in a challenging context. At the time, powerful drug cartels were fighting increasingly bitter and bloody wars to control their turf—which intimidated an existing police service already hampered by low pay, weak morale, corruption, and disorganization. Public confidence in the state’s ability to maintain order had evaporated. During the next five years, the public–private partnership oversaw the creation of an entirely new police service that, in tandem with other reforms, significantly strengthened the state’s capacity to ensure public safety and helped rebuild public confidence.

*Patrick Signoret drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in March and April 2018 and on earlier research carried out by Ariana Markowitz and Alejandra Rangel Smith in October 2014. New York University’s Marron Institute helped support Alejandra Rangel Smith’s participation. Case published July 2018.*

#### INTRODUCTION

In August 2011, attackers set a fire that killed 52 people in a casino in Monterrey, the capital and main metropolitan area of the state of Nuevo León, Mexico. Police later reported that the arsonists were members of an organized-crime group and were punishing the casino owner for failing to pay an extortion demand. The death toll and the indiscriminate nature of the arson jolted Mexico, even though many people had become inured to murder and other violence related to the country’s drug wars.

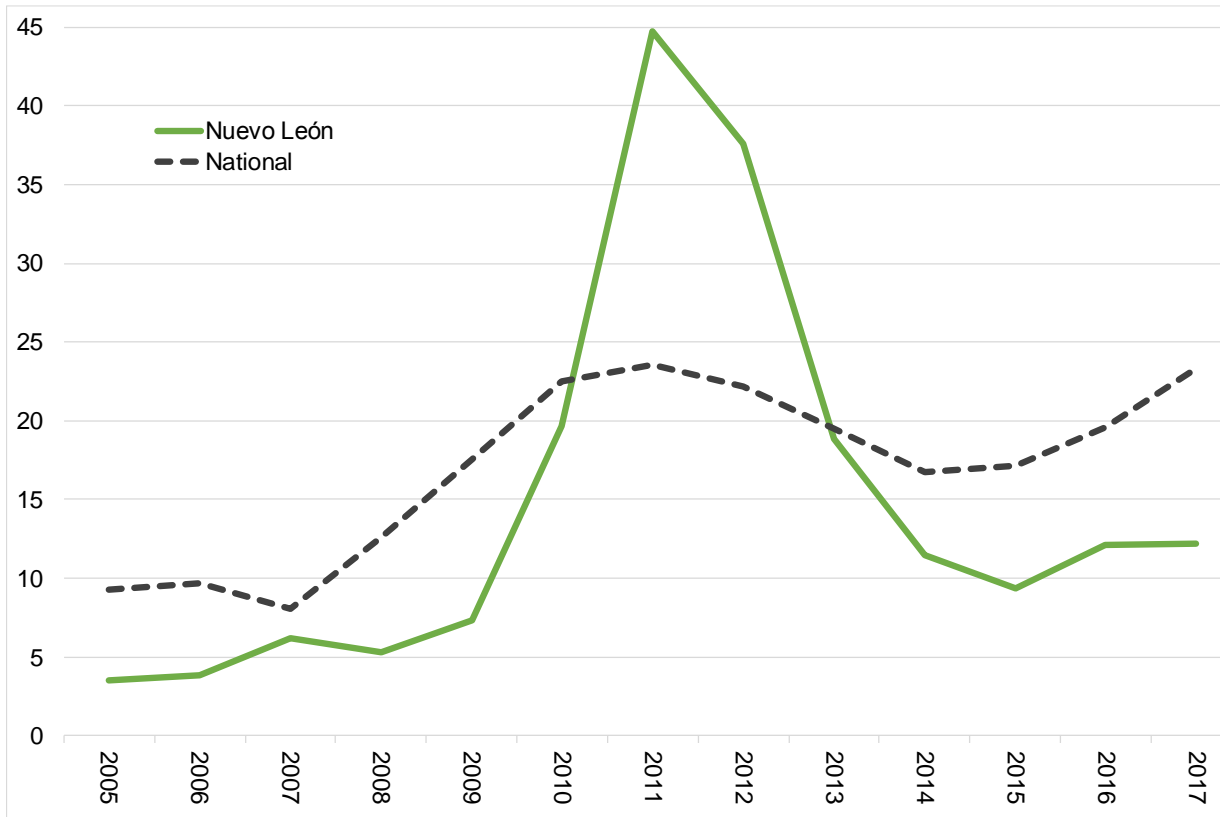
Five months later, an officer of Nuevo León’s Fuerza Civil (Civil Force), the state’s new police service, arrested a man whom it charged with masterminding the casino attack. The arrest helped raise the public profile of the Fuerza Civil, the product of an unusual public–private partnership

organized under Governor Rodrigo Medina, who took office in 2009 on a campaign promise to restore order and public safety.

In its first year, Medina’s administration had struggled to address the state’s wide-ranging public safety needs. Although the federal police and the army were mainly responsible for dealing with the cartels, the prevention of other types of crime—often but not always linked to cartel activities—was a daunting task for which the state police service was ill-equipped. According to Medina’s public safety minister at the time, just half of the 2,400 officers on the state police payroll reported for work, and many of those were suspected of colluding with the cartels. In addition, half of the state police patrol cars were missing, he said.

Initially, Medina’s team focused its efforts on removing police officers who failed new federal

**Figure 1:** Homicide rate per 100,000 population in Nuevo León and Mexico (national), 2000–2017



Sources: Mexico national statistics office (INEGI) for 2000–2016, state attorney general’s office for 2017

standards for ability and trustworthiness and on hiring new cadets, but the team’s recruitment efforts fell far short of needs. Meanwhile, violence continued to escalate (figure 1).

Monterrey, considered the industrial capital of Mexico, was known for having a powerful and active business community that had flourished earlier, when levels of crime and violence were low, and had often worked with the government to achieve common goals.<sup>1</sup> In mid 2010, an association of influential businesses known as the Group of 10, including Cemex, a multinational building-materials company, offered to help the state government address the security crisis. Medina accepted this proposal, and in September he agreed that Jorge Tello Peón, Cemex’s head of risk and strategic intelligence, would play a crucial

role in organizing what would become a public–private partnership called the Alliance for Security.

**THE CHALLENGE**

Tello Peón’s experience in business and government had prepared him well to take on the task of coordinating this joint effort to overhaul Nuevo León’s state police. Tello Peón’s career had involved creating and reforming national security institutions. He had led Mexico’s national intelligence agency from 1994 to 1999, then joined Cemex in 2001, taking a two-year leave of absence in 2008 to serve as national security adviser to Felipe Calderón, who was president from 2006 to 2012.

Significantly, Tello Peón had earned a reputation as an institution builder and a strategic

planner. He said his main strength was his ability “to bring together levels of government—the civil and military branches, the private and public sectors, or the American and Mexican governments.” He and his team confronted multiple challenges, all of which competed for immediate attention.

First, the existing police service was unable to recruit the honest, qualified officers required to bring order to the streets. Policing was a dangerous, low-paying occupation that encouraged corruption and discouraged applicants who had the right attitudes and skills. Dozens of police officers were being killed every year.<sup>2</sup> Even when the government advertised higher recruitment standards and raised police salaries—offering double what a similarly educated person could make in an entry-level state government job—qualified applicants sought work elsewhere. A

recruitment campaign launched in January 2010 seeking 500 new recruits drew just a handful of applicants.

Second, corruption was endemic, as some police officers sought additional income from bribes and other forms of graft and as others got coerced into working for drug cartels. “The police in Nuevo León were infiltrated and had strong ties to organized crime,” said Jesús Gallo, who later became the first permanent head of the new state police.

In one marginalized Monterrey neighborhood, community organizer Celina Fernández said the public viewed police officers and cartel members with equal suspicion. “Many people were disappeared, and no one ever knew whether it was the police or the Zetas [a powerful drug cartel] who did it. They [the perpetrators] were all referred to as *polizetas*,” she recalled. A

**Text box 1: Federal criminal justice reforms and vetting procedures**

In 2014, Maureen Meyer, with the Washington Office on Latin America, characterized the changes to police services underway in Mexico at the federal level.<sup>1</sup>

On court process, Meyer wrote: “Calderón-era police reform efforts . . . took place alongside profound changes to Mexico’s criminal justice system. In 2008, Mexico’s Congress passed a series of constitutional and legislative reforms with the support of broad sectors of Mexican civil society. The reforms aim to transform Mexico’s legal system to an adversarial judicial model in which the prosecution and defense present competing evidence and arguments in open court. This contrasts with Mexico’s current quasi-inquisitorial justice system in which most of the evidence is presented in written form to the judge and the proceedings take place largely outside of the public view. Once the new system is fully in place, it should function in a manner that is more efficient, effective, and transparent than the old system.

On vetting procedures, Meyer explained: “The confidence control exam consists of a four-part evaluation to determine if officers are fit for duty. The evaluation includes a polygraph test, a medical-toxicological examination, a psychological evaluation, and a background investigation. . . . These evaluations are meant to ensure that recruits for police forces have proper qualifications and a clean record in order to be part of the force. They are also meant to weed out corrupt officers and detect officers with substance abuse or psychological problems who need assistance. . . . Reasons for failing the exams included that the agents did not fulfill the age, physical, medical, or behavioral requirements; that they had unjustifiable assets; that they had problems with alcohol or illegal drugs; and, in some cases, that there were indications that the agents had links to organized crime.

<sup>1</sup> Maureen Meyer, “Mexico’s Police: Many Reforms, Little Progress,” Washington Office on Latin America, 2014.

2010 national statistics institute survey found that 71% of Nuevo León's residents had little or no confidence in their state police.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, within the police service, internal control and coordination with other parts of the law enforcement system had failed. In Mexico, public safety was the joint responsibility of federal, state, and municipal police services. Drug trafficking and fraud were federal offenses, but homicide, kidnapping, and theft fell under state jurisdiction. Municipal police shared some responsibilities with state police and also handled purely local matters such as traffic supervision and petty crimes. It was often unclear who was responsible for what, because many common crimes involved the illegal-drug trade. The division of authority between multiple services and multiple levels of government made rapid, clear communication difficult.

To complicate matters, Nuevo León's public-safety reform team also had to implement institutional changes required by federal laws passed in 2008–09, all of which required additional, costly training of police, prosecutors, lawyers, and judges.

Calderón's administration had instituted mandatory testing of state and municipal police officers—consisting of a medical evaluation, a toxicology exam, a polygraph test, physical and psychological appraisals, and a socioeconomic-background analysis. States that failed to comply faced the loss of federal funding. Separate legislation gave all police larger roles in investigating crimes—from securing crime scenes to interviewing witnesses (text box 1). Any reform of Nuevo León's state police service would have to meet these new requirements while maintaining patrols, traffic management, dispute resolution, and other basic public safety functions.

“Governor Medina compared our challenge to rebuilding a car while it was in motion,” Gallo recalled. “We couldn't stop, and the car had to end up like new.”

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

In October 2010, Tello Peón and other business leaders faced the tough task of forming a viable public–private partnership to address the multiple challenges that confronted Nuevo León. Three key elements were in place from the beginning. First, strong political will provided a solid foundation. “The government was willing to ask for and receive outside help,” Tello Peón said. And Medina declared his own commitment to do whatever was necessary: “If we're going to do this, we're going to do it for real. And it is going to cost us.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, the partners in the effort had a shared incentive to restore the rule of law in the state because success would benefit the government, the public, and businesses. Third, there was broad agreement on an initial strategy: to rebuild the state police by changing recruitment standards and practices, strengthening training, increasing salaries, and improving working conditions.

With strong support from Lorenzo Zambrano, the Cemex president who chaired the business group, and Medina, head of the state government, Tello Peón was able to open doors. He persuaded the heads of five of Monterrey's Group of 10 industrial conglomerates to contribute valuable talent to the partnership by making available high-level employees, including people who led their companies' human resources departments. Next, he organized a meeting of the state's security cabinet with representatives of the five businesses and officials of four top Monterrey universities that also had agreed to participate in the partnership. That gathering marked the first meeting of the Alliance for Security.

Tello Peón then enlisted two consultants who had worked at Cemex to lead the alliance's coordination committee, a team of full-time project managers who mediated between participants, coordinated logistics, set agendas, and documented commitments and progress. Representatives from each sector of the alliance—

business, academia, and government—sat on task groups to jointly design, implement, and evaluate efforts to revamp Nuevo León’s state police. The committees and task groups used business management tools to track performance and manage complex projects. For the next five years, 12 companies and six universities would participate in the project, with as many as 80 private-sector consultants participating at some times, according to Gustavo García, one of the coordination committee’s project managers. Corporate partners contributed management expertise, university partners focused on training and research, and the government dealt with strategy and had final authority and responsibility for decision making.

The alliance began with a single concrete objective: to boost police recruitment, a core task for which the expertise of the companies’ human resources systems could be potentially helpful. Business partners’ first efforts were sobering, however. On behalf of the government, the companies issued a massive call for recruits by

sending job postings to thousands of qualified people in their data banks. Although tens of thousands received information about the openings, according to Tello Peón, only a few hundred requested more information; only a handful satisfied the requirements regarding age, education, and fitness; and none enrolled in the police academy. Subsequent efforts increased recruitment to little more than a trickle by early 2011, and the numbers were far short of the 2,000 or so police officers the government had hoped to hire in each of the remaining five years of Medina’s term as governor.

Qualified candidates apparently wanted nothing to do with policing—at least in its current form. The experience pointed to the need to make the job of policing more attractive by improving benefits and reducing the risks to officers and their families. However, the necessity for even bigger changes became clear rapidly. So, business members of the alliance pooled their resources to pay for a local marketing firm, Tarín & Contreras,

### Text box 2: Defining the mandate

What exactly would the Fuerza Civil’s main function be? A police service in close contact with communities that carried out neighborhood patrols? A service that placed heavy emphasis on intelligence gathering and analysis? Or perhaps a high-capacity *reactive* force trained specifically for confronting well-armed organized-crime groups.

At the time, the federal police and the military were doing the bulk of the work in combatting armed criminal groups. The federal government’s formal stance, however, was that this was a temporary solution, that soldiers eventually would return to their barracks, and that state and local police would take over responsibility for public safety.

The head of the state police academy, Gerardo Palacios, who had researched the subject, urged the Alliance for Security to delegate common-crime policing and community policing to the municipal police and transform the state police into a quasi-military unit focused on cartel violence. Palacios envisioned the Fuerza Civil as “a ferocious tiger to unleash on any ferocious wolf that threatened the municipal police.” The idea gained momentum.

Immediately, the Alliance for Security had to negotiate with the federal government on how to adopt its model to Nuevo León’s reality. The federal model called for a third of the police force to consist of analysts and detectives. But to get officers on the streets and combatting armed criminal groups, the alliance had to argue that Nuevo León needed a higher proportion of operational police. Federal authorities acceded: the Fuerza Civil’s operational division would initially make up 90% rather than 67% of the total service.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Salazar, *Fuerza Civil: La Fuerza de Todos*, page 115.

to do an image makeover. It did not take long for Maricela Contreras, one of the company’s owners, and four members of her team to conclude that the public perception of Nuevo León’s state police was damaged beyond repair. The team found that even the word *police* had a pejorative connotation.

Contreras and the alliance’s recruitment committee agreed that Nuevo León needed not only more police officers with different uniforms but, more important, a complete separation from the “old” police. It wasn’t hard to convince Medina of the need for such a seismic shift. Rising levels of violence were imperiling the state and undermining political support, and he recognized the need for a bold departure from the status quo.

Contreras’s firm conceived several possible names for a new service, and the alliance settled on Fuerza Civil. The aim of the name was to convey a message of strength “for the people and by the people,” Contreras said. To visually convey that spirit, the team designed a black uniform with a

new logo that represented the 51 municipalities of Nuevo León. And the new service’s slogan would be “Everyone’s Force.”

Nuevo León embarked on a project that no other state in Mexico had carried out in recent history: creating a new police service from scratch while sidelining the existing state police. The idea was to give municipal police room to handle traffic control, traffic accidents, and minor crimes by making the state police a hard-hitting, quasi-military organization (text box 2).

### GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Public announcement of the new Fuerza Civil came in May 2011, but the preparatory steps began in the months before. The Alliance for Security’s sense of urgency grew as violence escalated in Nuevo León. Participants worked on multiple fronts to improve terms of service, image, recruitment, and training for the state police, adapting as the need for such a new institution

**Figure 2:** Homicide rate per 100,000 population for Monterrey and other large cities in the Americas, selected years

|                          | Population in millions | Homicide rate |           |           |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
|                          | 2010                   | 2005          | 2011      | 2016      |
| Toronto                  | 5.6                    | 2             | 1         | 2         |
| Chicago                  | 2.7                    | 16            | 16        | 28        |
| New York                 | 8.4                    | 7             | 6         | 4         |
| Los Angeles              | 3.8                    | 13            | 8         | 7         |
| Houston                  | 2.1                    | 16            | 9         | 13        |
| <b>Monterrey, Mexico</b> | <b>4.1</b>             | <b>3</b>      | <b>44</b> | <b>14</b> |
| Laguna, Mexico           | 1.2                    | 6             | 61        | 10        |
| Mexico City              | 8.9                    | 10            | 12        | 14        |
| Guadalajara, Mexico      | 4.5                    | 6             | 20        | 16        |
| Bogotá                   | 7.4                    | 25            | 22        | 16        |
| Rio de Janeiro           | 6.3                    | 40            | 22        | 21        |
| São Paulo                | 11.3                   | 25            | 9         | 8         |

*Note:* Homicide rate per 100,000 population.

*Sources:* Mexico national statistics office (INEGI), Igarapé Institute Homicide Monitor, Rio de Janeiro Security Ministry, City-Data.com. Mexican cities: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Defunciones por homicidios.” *Monterrey, Guadalajara, and Laguna* refer to metropolitan areas; *Mexico City* refers to what was previously the Federal District. US cities: City-Data.com, <http://www.city-data.com/crime/>. Toronto, Bogotá, and São Paulo: Igarapé Institute Homicide Monitor, <https://homicide.igarape.org.br/>. Rio de Janeiro: Rio de Janeiro Security Ministry, “Series Históricas Letalidade Violenta,” <http://www.ispdados.rj.gov.br/Arquivos/SeriesHistoricasLetalidadeViolenta.pdf>.

became clear. “We did things simultaneously—not in a timeline as we would have liked,” said Gerardo Palacios, who at the time was head of the Public Security Academy, the state police training facility. But as violence worsened, “we had no choice” (figure 2).

#### *Stopgap security measures*

Nuevo León desperately needed to reduce violence so it could give a rookie police service the space necessary for it to learn and to build public confidence. The state government called for federal assistance—an additional 2,000 soldiers—to help patrol the streets of Monterrey. Since the early days of Calderón’s presidency, the federal government had been sending extra federal police, army, and marine personnel to Nuevo León. Tello Peón built upon this assistance. While the alliance overhauled the state’s police service, the Operational Security Group—the state security cabinet, military and federal police commanders stationed in Nuevo León, and federal government representatives—managed joint forces. Tello Peón led the Group’s meetings.

The initial aim was to regain a measure of territorial control by establishing areas where security forces would clearly have the upper hand. In late 2010 and early 2011, no parts of Monterrey were safe. Criminal groups launched attacks against each other and against authorities all over the city, and they frequently blocked major avenues with commandeered vehicles in order to hinder police and military movements.

The Operational Coordination Group built sniper towers and small bunkers at strategic points the army identified. Tello Peón’s objective was to establish safe corridors “where people knew they could move about—where they could take walks. It was an emergency system of territorial control for the early stages of our efforts to win back the city.”

#### *Attracting candidates for the new service*

To entice police candidates who met federal standards, the alliance formed a recruitment and selection committee. The first job was to assess needs, employing a United Nations benchmark that called for three police officers per thousand residents. Adjusting for current staffing among various police services, the committee determined that the state would require 10,000 state police officers by 2015, meaning that it had to hire 2,000 yearly.

Next, the committee set standards for recruits based on a new federal model. Since 2008, President Calderón’s administration had worked to professionalize the federal police by establishing systems for screening, training, evaluating, and promoting personnel. The administration then required that state police services adopt similar standards so as to win accreditation, and in early 2011, it began to offer state governments millions of dollars per year in subsidies for their compliance.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to age and height requirements aimed at ensuring that officers were fit and could carry heavy gear, there were new educational standards: analyst jobs required at least a bachelor’s degree; aspiring detectives had to have at least a high school diploma; and those seeking patrol jobs—the operational positions—had to have at least a middle school education. All had to pass a battery of so-called confidence controls, or vetting procedures. To those requirements, Nuevo León added a new one: no former police officers (including those who had served in the old state police) would be admitted.

The recruitment and selection committee also focused on ways to make policing a more attractive occupation. A key initial move was to raise salaries and provide benefits such as pensions, health care, and life insurance for officers. Members of the old state police force had

earned a maximum of 10,000 pesos (US\$800) per month, and benefits had been few. The new standards paid recruits almost the same amount just for training at the police academy, and they received a bonus and a 50% raise upon graduation and becoming bottom-ranked police officers. The government also offered scholarships to support officers' children's education. The new salary and benefits package cost the state US\$47,000 a year per officer.<sup>6</sup>

The alliance also planned to create special gated communities where police officers and their families could live and would therefore be less vulnerable to retaliation from criminal groups. The first such neighborhood of 315 government-owned houses with subsidized rents opened in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Demand for such housing was high, so the alliance instituted a lottery to allocate space, with families receiving priority.

All of those efforts to attract police officers and improve their working conditions were costly and required financing from the state legislature. From 2010 to 2011, the budget assigned to the public safety ministry almost tripled to US\$245 million, and the ministry's share of the overall state budget doubled.

With the new terms of service gradually falling into place, partner businesses helped set up recruitment centers, run ads in Nuevo León and other Mexican states, and distribute recruitment materials across their stores and to those on their own lists of job applicants. The alliance established a logistics working group to manage new recruit information, conduct thousands of interviews, and bring in applicants from throughout Mexico. An alliance partner in the telecommunications sector set up a call center to field questions from people interested in joining the new police service. Before directing candidates to the public safety ministry and bringing them into Nuevo León from other states, the Alliance for Security stipulated procedures and required completed questionnaires so that it could verify whether candidates had their paperwork in order, had fulfilled minimum physical and educational requirements, and had

realistic chances of passing the full battery of confidence controls.

In the early stages of the creation of the new service, the alliance reached out to retired federal police and military people to serve as higher-ranking officers in posts that would eventually become open to promotions from within. All had to pass the new vetting procedures.

Meanwhile, Contreras and her team developed recruitment posters and flyers that introduced the new police institution to the public with the message, "We Need You." Prominent on all marketing material was the initial-salary offer of 14,585 pesos (US\$1,200) per month for patrol officers after graduating from the academy,<sup>8</sup>—a high wage considering that patrol officer recruits needed only a middle school education. (Analysts and detectives received higher wages.)

Eventually, marketing campaigns expanded to other states and included video ads portraying members of the new service as strong, committed, and honest. Contreras said the most-effective ads used ordinary-looking models rather than models who looked like they had just stepped out of a soap opera. "Police officers should be the very best citizens; they are our fathers, our sons, our friends, normal people, brave people who dare to act, to bring back peace; but they are neither immortal nor invincible," she said.

#### *Changing personnel practices*

To build a new police service in which pride in performance was a significant element required new management practices and new personnel rules. Alliance working groups developed a career ladder specifying how officers could move up the ranks conditional on good behavior, outstanding performance, and continuing training. The policy not only provided clarity and motivation for police officers but also clarified what leaders expected of them. Moving up the ranks became a requirement. Police officers had to apply for promotion every two years and had two chances to move up. Those who failed were dismissed.<sup>9</sup>



The alliance also introduced new routines. Uniquely among state and local police forces in Mexico, members of the Fuerza Civil would live in compounds—for their safety and for efficiency and to cultivate a military-style esprit de corps. At first, members of the service would have shifts of 45 days’ active duty and 5 days off. During the 45 days, they would eat, exercise, and even receive family visits in the first and main compound, called Police Camp 1. Room and board were provided at no cost—another perk in the benefits package.

While the new police service was taking shape, the government had to reform and redirect the existing one. Federal police vetting requirements, mandated in 2009, made it possible to remove officers who were dishonest or simply lacked the necessary skills. Nuevo León became one of Mexico’s first states to set up a center for carrying out the evaluations that such removals required,<sup>10</sup> and by 2012, it had tested all of its state police officers. Four out of five failed the evaluations and were dismissed.<sup>11</sup> The government paid full severance and helped retrain and find new work for those who passed the ethics tests but fell short of physical or educational requirements. Those who passed all the tests were assigned to a new police organization responsible for guarding prisons and state buildings.

Palacios said the staffing upheaval represented a significant step toward quashing corruption and that it underscored the necessity to create the new police service: “We needed to remove their uniforms, radios, and vehicles because they were using all of that against us. It’s better to have them in front of us—unmasked.”

### *Training the new police*

Long before the alliance decided to create the Fuerza Civil, Palacios had a vision for how the state police academy could improve capacity and professionalism by combining solid basic training with continuing education. Members of the police service would return regularly throughout their careers to recertify their skills, specialize, fulfill

requirements for promotion, and even obtain undergraduate and graduate university degrees toward becoming high-ranking commanders. Palacios’s goal was to create an educational institution that imbued in its trainees senses of pride and responsibility and that linked promotion to performance.

Palacios had worked closely with Jorge Zúñiga, a practicing psychologist and dean of the academy’s basic training and criminological investigation schools. Together the two studied university and police training models from Mexico and other countries. Palacios also studied materials from Mexico’s military academies, which he said provided “all of the whys” on specific issues such as job qualifications: “How many years you have to be there before becoming qualified to be, for example, sub-lieutenant; what you need to know; what the function of a sub-lieutenant is. . . . In Mexico there were no such answers for police.”

Using the military as a model, Palacios proposed that Nuevo León’s academy have a basic school for cadets, an officer school for the middle ranks, a higher-officer school for top brass, and an academic-leveling school that would offer members flexible high school–equivalent education, a requirement for promotion from the basic job level. The academy also would play an integral role in continuing staff development. All Fuerza Civil members would return to the school for a month at least once every two years to recertify some of their skills and learn new ones. A second part of the academy, the Division of Specialization, would host the continuing education courses that everyone had to take every year as a job requirement, test those seeking promotion, and offer university degrees related to security sciences.

Going a step further, Palacios wanted to transform the academy into a university that would be autonomous from government ministries. Autonomy would enable the university to decide what to teach and how. And even though the institution’s budget would remain public and

subject to audit, the institution would control its own spending, permitting greater flexibility to respond to perceived needs.

But reshaping the academy along those lines required legislative action. Palacios had written a draft bill he sent to the governor in December 2010—just as the Alliance for Security was swinging into action. The state congress passed the bill in a nearly unanimous vote, and the governor signed the law transforming the State Public Security Academy into the University of Security Sciences (Universidad de Ciencias de la Seguridad, or UCS) in April 2011—as the public announcement of the new Fuerza Civil was about to take place.

To make the changes realities, Palacios and his team had to deal with several urgent matters—some of them practical, such as how to accommodate a wave of new trainees, and others, intellectual, such as organizing the curriculum.

The UCS initially trained small classes of 100 to 150 cadets, including municipal police candidates and the few recruits who responded to the alliance’s early advertisements. As the alliance’s recruiting campaign went into high gear, however, the influx of students rapidly overwhelmed UCS’s infrastructure, which could house 500 cadets at a time. “From one month to the next, we had a thousand cadets to house,” recalled Palacios. The walls in dormitories came down in order to accommodate bunk beds, and activities began to take place on shifts. The government also made a painful decision to stop training municipal police—at least for the foreseeable future. But during the next few months, as the government began to disburse part of a planned US\$42-million investment to set up the UCS, the university was able to build up its infrastructure.<sup>12</sup>

At the time, the school’s curriculum did not conform with the new federal standards, and it had no written materials to use in the instruction of cadets. The alliance’s Monterrey university partners and the state education ministry helped develop new curricula, and the UCS developed its own

manuals on induction to police life, doctrine, techniques and tactics, and penitentiary security. Palacios said the UCS shifted some of its teaching practices in order to help cadets acquire the norms and values of the new police service in addition to undergoing core instruction in policing techniques.

To train a bigger and better police service, the UCS drew on outside help as it expanded its teaching staff from 13 instructors to more than 50. The federal police sent its own instructors to assist in preparing the first graduating classes. The military conducted one-month boot camps for physical and tactical training. And the United States, through a program in support of law enforcement in Mexico called the Mérida Initiative, helped train Nuevo León’s police instructors.

The training continued to change and improve. From mid 2011 to the end of 2012, the basic school had a three-month program. Although the training period met federal standards, Palacios considered the amount of time insufficient. So did Gallo, head of the Fuerza Civil from 2012 to 2015. The two told the governor that deploying police officers on the streets without more preparation than three months in basic school was putting the whole project at risk. Medina concurred, and the basic program was extended to six months.<sup>13</sup>

Other aspects of the program Palacios had envisioned soon came on line. The academic-leveling school opened in 2012, providing study space, materials, a subsidy, and assistance in sign-up for high school–equivalency exams. Because a high school diploma was a requirement for promotion, basic-level police officers who lacked a high school education were incentivized to obtain one.

The officer school, which trained the middle four ranks—from subofficer to inspector—opened in 2013. It offered a technical university degree in police command, whose requirements included six months of living at the UCS and an additional six months of field training. “That was when I considered that the UCS had truly become

a university,” recalled Zúñiga. The higher-officer school, aimed at training the top five ranks—from chief inspector to commissioner general—was slated to open at the same time the Medina administration ended—in September 2015.

The continuing education program also launched quickly. Its major focus was on preparation for criminal justice reforms, which were to come into effect in 2016. Officers had to learn how to take larger roles in criminal investigations by securing crime scenes, safeguarding evidence, and taking initial statements from witnesses and victims. Initially, individuals from each unit took turns going to the UCS for that training. When they returned, however, their new knowledge and updated practices often clashed with those of the individuals who had not yet received the training. Therefore, to build group stability and improve practices more effectively, the Fuerza Civil began sending whole units back to the UCS for continuing education at the same time.

#### *Deploying the new police service*

When the first class of 422 Fuerza Civil cadets graduated in September 2011, tensions in Nuevo León were running high. The casino fire a month earlier had generated community anger at the government’s inability to protect the public, and demands for Medina’s resignation grew, putting his flagship project at risk. Major private-sector partners, which had working relationships with the government and which were aware of the significant public-safety efforts under way, withheld criticism.<sup>14</sup> The federal government stepped in to provide support for the state, thereby boosting the number of federal police and soldiers there by 3,000—for a total of 6,500.

The new service’s early weeks were wobbly in other ways, too. Leadership problems bedeviled the early months. The first two commissioners general named to lead the police service, both of them former army generals, were unable to get along with civil society, the alliance, or their own

subordinates, and were replaced within weeks. In January 2012, Governor Medina named Gallo as commissioner general, and Gallo remained until the end of Medina’s administration in 2015. A career police officer who had served as federal police commander in Nuevo León in 2008, Gallo had returned to the state in early 2011 to head the security communications and intelligence center, known as C-5,<sup>15</sup> after its director was kidnapped and killed by a criminal group.

Gallo had his work cut out for him. At his command were nearly a thousand fresh faces, many of whom had had only three months’ training. And the rush to produce a new police service had failed to deal with certain important considerations. For example, Gallo discovered that none of the police officers had received permits to carry firearms. Moreover, he found that many members of the service—young men and women often far from home—had trouble adjusting to life in barracks and were undisciplined. And others simply quit because of the difficulty of spending 45 days on duty in the main—and at the time the only—police compound. Gallo quickly began obtaining weapon permits and sent continuous feedback to the UCS. Eventually, both the UCS and the Fuerza Civil set up programs with counselors to provide personal support.

The Fuerza Civil’s sole initial mission was to reclaim the streets from dangerous armed groups that operated openly and with impunity in Nuevo León. To deploy his police, Gallo made heavy use of the supporting military presence and of the strategic safe zones that had been designated around the city. Fuerza Civil patrols at first worked with military convoys—beginning to go out on their own only gradually. Gallo said he had to deviate somewhat from federal guidelines covering the operation of state-accredited police in order to deal with Nuevo León’s particular situation. For instance, he established squads of five officers rather than four per patrol vehicle. That gave each squad 360-degree vision to better guard against ambushes, he explained. Initially, the Fuerza Civil

patrolled with at least 15-person platoons of three vehicles.<sup>16</sup>

Gallo also reworked crime-fighting strategies to give the Fuerza Civil a more proactive role. Cartels and organized-crime groups used stolen vehicles to perpetrate nearly every crime, including homicide, kidnapping, house burglary, drug trafficking, and stealing other vehicles. “Whoever is involved in a kidnapping uses a stolen vehicle. Whoever is involved in an intentional murder uses a stolen vehicle. Whoever is stealing is using a stolen vehicle,” he said. Gallo, therefore, focused the Fuerza Civil’s initial efforts on vehicle theft: “Rather than attacking events, we attacked stolen vehicles. We started detaining people involved in other types of incidents who were using and driving stolen vehicles.” Taking that approach, the Fuerza Civil often found weapons.

Murder rates began to drop in 2012. As the security crisis abated and the Fuerza Civil grew in size, its mission gradually evolved. Despite the initial emphasis on developing a strong *reactive* force, ultimately both Nuevo León’s Alliance for Security and the federal government envisioned police services that could also gather and analyze intelligence, encourage the public to report problems, and investigate cases.

Planning deployments continued to require close and careful attention as force levels and mission definitions shifted. In 2013, the service’s multiple-vehicle convoys shrank to single-vehicle patrols. Those changes enabled Gallo to dispatch more-frequent patrols that covered larger areas. However, at any point in time, hundreds of his officers could be either in training at the UCS, on leave, or stationed in police camps (a second came on line in 2013) as analysts, intelligence officers, or administrative personnel. And he always made sure to keep two companies in reserve in case he was asked to boost security at, say, a soccer stadium or other venue or he needed backup in emergencies.<sup>17</sup>

*Improving intelligence, coordination, and communication*

Coordinating multiple law enforcement and security forces across three levels of government presented significant challenges for the government in Nuevo León. From the beginning of his term, Medina instituted weekly meetings that included his security cabinet, representatives from the attorney general’s office, military generals headquartered in the state, and representatives of federal government security agencies stationed there. “The governor was very closely involved,” recalled Gallo. “He would convene up to three meetings a week in order to follow progress and make sure we were working together.” Plus, Medina’s administration installed a statewide police radio communication system. And the municipal police chiefs and Gallo created a telephone network to distribute information more quickly and easily. “All of the police chiefs could know what was happening elsewhere, and we all supported each other,” he said.

Within the Fuerza Civil, Gallo and his successors used data from the C-5 center to guide their operations. C-5, a separate agency within the Public Safety Ministry, received all 911 emergency calls and anonymous crime tips and would then delegate action to the appropriate police or emergency service. C-5 also tracked all police vehicles in real time through GPS devices. Thus, Fuerza Civil commanders had at their disposal timely information on where various crimes had occurred, how long their agents had taken to arrive on scene, and where each vehicle had patrolled and at what speeds. In addition to enabling them to reallocate patrols and intelligence operations, the system improved efficiency by providing information that was both relevant and actionable.

*Ensuring lasting change*

As government authorities implemented Nuevo León’s police reforms, the Alliance for

Security continued working hard to support the efforts and push them forward. The coordination committee organized the alliance's efforts in annual stages, according to García, who worked on the committee. Each working group developed a set of broad objectives and then met weekly or monthly to share or monitor progress, concluding each year with a gathering to evaluate results and consider further changes in practice or approach. In 2012, the selection, marketing, and logistics committees merged into one and continued the robust effort to attract Fuerza Civil recruits. One committee developed a technological platform to help document and manage police recruits' admission procedures, cadets' training, and police officers' administrative, operational, and training histories. A crucial part of implementing a career path for the state's police service, the platform also linked to the national Plataforma Mexico—an effort to systematize and consolidate law enforcement–related data. Other committees developed and documented compensation and award plans for attracting and retaining police officers. Beginning in 2013, other committees helped the UCS prepare curricula for the officers school and cultivate the Fuerza Civil's values and sense of pride.

The Alliance for Security purposely kept a low profile and let the government be the visible leader and implementer of the efforts. One reason for that policy was personal safety: many of those involved were afraid of being pressured or victimized if it became known that they were collaborating with the government to replace the state police and combat crime. Another reason was to avoid criticisms that could have arisen from the government's reliance on outside help in carrying out one of its core responsibilities.

In December 2012, the state took a major step to ensure the stability and durability of the Fuerza Civil by passing a law naming it the official state police force and codifying its structure and norms.<sup>18</sup>

The alliance began gradually transferring responsibilities to the government, according to García. In 2013, the government took over recruitment, selection, logistics, compensation, and marketing—retaining Tarín & Contrera's services but taking over the contract. Later, the government took full control of the technological platform. Alliance meetings, initially held at universities, were moved to the Public Safety Ministry in 2013.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Nuevo León's efforts to provide an effective and trustworthy police service ran into a few unexpected stumbling blocks involving human rights, financing, and retention.

### *Human rights abuses*

The Fuerza Civil was unable to avoid a common shortcoming in the world of policing: the proclivity to use excessive force—especially in marginalized places such as prisons and poor neighborhoods. From 2012 to 2017, the state human rights commission issued 43 recommendations related to Fuerza Civil abuses, including arbitrary arrests, beatings, and torture.

Consuelo Bañuelos, director of a nongovernmental organization that dealt with gangs and inmates, said that many young people in the communities where she worked complained that Fuerza Civil officers often landed blows first and asked questions later. “And after a riot broke out in one prison and the Fuerza Civil was sent as backup, we received requests for medical help from families of prison inmates who complained of being brutally beaten by Fuerza Civil officers and having their bones broken,” she said.

In the poor Monterrey neighborhood where community organizer Fernández worked, relations with the Fuerza Civil were sometimes antagonistic and mistrustful, though there were periods of close collaboration. “Frankly, we prefer that they stay out,” she said.

The government characterized incidents of abuse as isolated, saying that violations were often reported by other Fuerza Civil officers and that the police responsible for the incidents were not just quietly fired but also arrested and imprisoned.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Financing and corruption*

The Fuerza Civil and other security measures were eating up a growing portion of the state budget. Moreover, federal transfers earmarked for public security were stagnating in real terms after 2010, and a major hurricane in 2010 ravaged Monterrey, which aggravated Nuevo León's financial problems and limited what the government could spend to rebuild the police service. From 2009 to 2014, the state's debt grew from less than US\$500 million to US\$2.5 billion, taking its share as a percentage of the government's disposable income from 65% to more than 100%.<sup>20</sup> During the same period, the Medina administration was clouded by accusations that it was either engaging in corruption or not doing enough to combat corruption. And taxpayers therefore wondered whether their money was being spent properly.<sup>21</sup>

Unease worsened in 2013, when the government, as one of several budgetary measures to bring deficits under control, won the state legislature's approval to increase the payroll tax—the state's main source of revenue—to 3% from 2%. Businesses were angry that they had not been consulted, and they were wary of financing a government accused of mispending funds.<sup>22</sup> That anger spilled over into the Alliance for Security, where work was suspended for months, according to García. Eventually, the government promised to earmark half the tax increase for public safety and to become more transparent with its alliance partners with regard to how it spent public security funds.

#### *Low retention*

The Fuerza Civil had a hard time keeping the people it hired. Some of the young officers, many

of whom were from out of state, could not accept the requirement to live in barracks with only short breaks to visit family. Others were hired away by other police services that knew that those young officers had received top-quality training. With help from alliance partners, the UCS and the Fuerza Civil worked to improve living conditions by offering counseling, by hosting extra activities to keep cadets and officers busy, and by making active shifts shorter and rest periods more frequent. Still, from 2011 to 2015, roughly 850 members of the Fuerza Civil resigned, and another 900 were fired for failing to show up for work or for other disciplinary reasons.<sup>23</sup>

Palacios and Gallo said quality was more important than quantity, however. They preferred to have a small and trustworthy force than to retain or readmit agents with discipline problems or who quit when times were tough. As cartel violence diminished, keeping the service comparatively small met needs adequately and moderated the impact on the state budget.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

By 2015, the Fuerza Civil had expanded to 4,000 members distributed across three police compounds. The members worked in less-intense shifts than they had in 2012, having two weeks on duty and one week off compared with 45 days on and 5 days off. The supply of police-family housing increased to 413 homes by 2015 from 315 in 2012. At the University of Security Sciences, the teaching staff grew to 52 professors and instructors—up from 13 in 2011. Many had graduate degrees, and some received extra training abroad.<sup>24</sup> By 2015, the basic school had trained almost 5,500 cadets, of whom 10% were women and of whom half were from out of state.<sup>25</sup> That year, the officer school produced its first class of 47 graduates, each of them with officer rank on the uniform and a university diploma in hand, according to Palacios.

As the Fuerza Civil expanded, public safety in Nuevo León improved markedly. From 2011 to

2015, the state’s homicide rate fell from 45 per 100,000 citizens to 9, and the percentage of residents who considered their city unsafe fell from 68%—or eighth worst among Mexico’s 31 states and the Federal District—to 55%, or seventh best. Notably, Nuevo León improved in that category as safety perceptions in many other states were worsening.

Police work became safer as well. From 2011 to 2015, only one Fuerza Civil officer was assassinated in the line of duty compared with dozens of state police officers in previous years.<sup>26</sup>

Although Nuevo León’s policing reforms surely contributed to the drop in violence, other circumstances contributed to the improvement in public safety. Hit by both rivals and the federal government, drug cartels splintered and adopted a lower profile. Violence fell nationwide—especially in northern Mexico. However, Nuevo León’s recovery was more durable than that in other parts of the country, with the homicide rate not only falling to 9 per 100,000 citizens by 2015 (half the national rate) but also remaining close to that level through 2017—even as murder rates shot back up in the rest of the country.

The Fuerza Civil could claim at least partial credit for other results as well. Reported thefts of vehicles and vehicle parts plunged 86%—from 21,000 in 2011 to 3,000 in 2015, for instance—and other reported robberies fell by half.<sup>27</sup>

Public trust in the police also improved. After 2011, accusations of state police corruption and collusion with drug cartels faded away. From 2011 to 2015, the share of Nuevo León residents considering their state police to be trustworthy increased sharply—both in absolute terms and in comparison with the federal police and with police services in other states, including states that experienced similar cartel dynamics. Perceptions of police effectiveness and level of corruption improved in much the same way (exhibit 1).

In the poor Monterrey neighborhood where residents used to consider the police and cartel members as one and the same, 2012 was a turning

point, Fernández, the community organizer, recalled. “The Fuerza Civil was sent into the neighborhood to replace all other police forces. It took two years, but neighbors finally stopped seeing *polizetas* and instead recognized the Fuerza Civil as a new police force.”

Although perceptions of public safety fell short of the levels of the early 2000s, improvements were tangible (Exhibit 1). Andrés Saldivar, a young professional who had lived in Monterrey since 2007, remembered seeing Monterrey’s nightlife slowly coming back. “I no longer had to check social media to know whether to avoid certain avenues or neighborhoods because of shootouts or blockades,” he said.

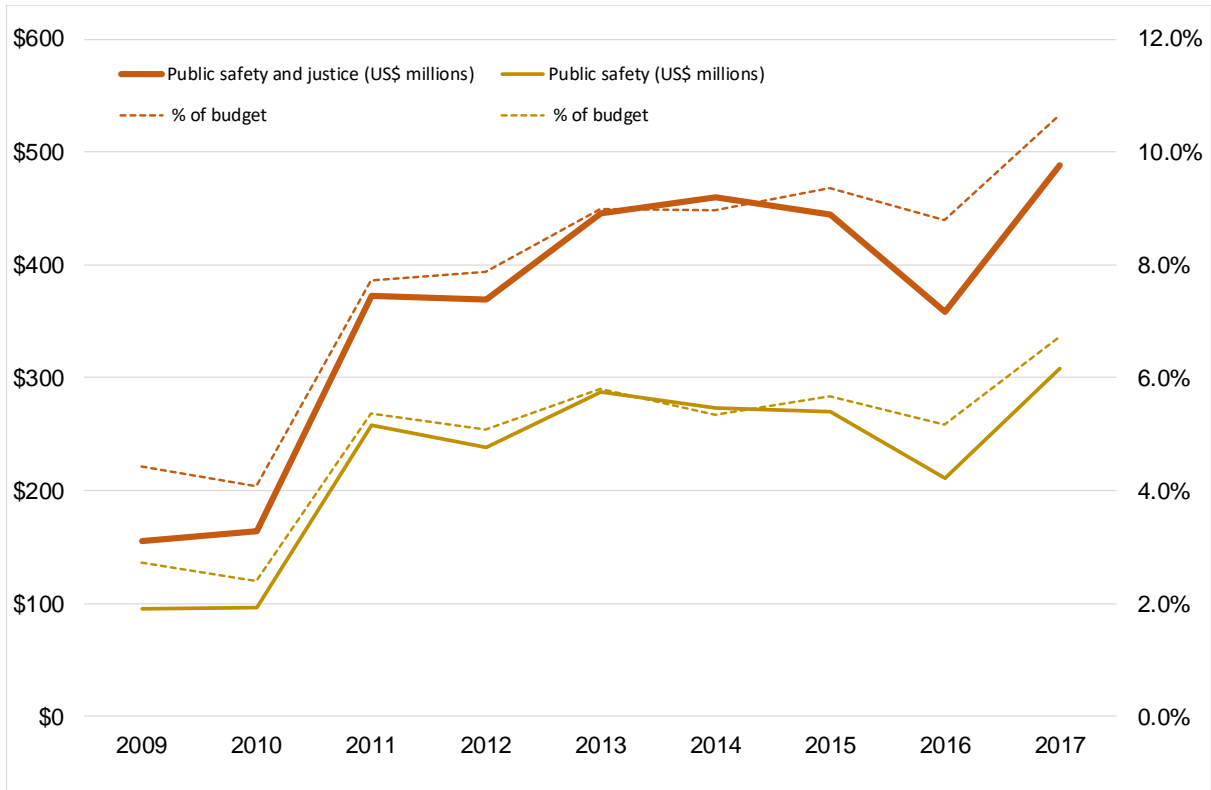
“There was an interesting indicator that life was returning to normal,” remarked Gallo. “We started to see traffic accidents at night. For three years or longer, we had seen no car crashes because people didn’t go out at night. The streets were empty, and the city was a desert. Later, we began to have a lot of accidents every weekend due to drunk driving and speeding, but that is a reflection that people were now going out with confidence.”

## REFLECTIONS

In Nuevo León’s 2015 state elections, an independent candidate, Jaime Rodríguez Calderón (no relation to former President Felipe Calderón), won the governorship of Nuevo León, running partly on a platform promising to address accusations of corruption against the Medina administration. Although the Alliance for Security’s business and academic partners worked with the incoming administration to keep the joint project running, they were unable to agree on the way to work together and share responsibility and information. The alliance was terminated.

Observers worried that the new government was neglecting the Fuerza Civil (Civil Force), was not doing enough to expand its size, and was depending too heavily on the military for public safety operations. However, although the Fuerza

**Figure 3:** Spending on public security and justice in Nuevo León, 2009–17 (in millions of 2015 US dollars and % of state budget)



Source: Budget allocated to public security ministry and attorney general’s office in budget laws passed by state congress in December of the preceding year

Civil did not grow, it did not shrink, either. After its budget was slashed in 2016, spending recovered strongly during the following two years (Figure 3), and efforts to transform it from a reactionary, heavy-hitting force to one closer to the citizenry were under way. Part of the service patrolled in white cars with pistols rather than black trucks with rifles. In response to requests from the public, GPS trackers enabled commanders to check that their patrol vehicles maintained reasonable speeds.

The reconstruction of Nuevo León’s state police resulted in several takeaways about how to remake a troubled police service.

- *Attracting candidate police officers required more than offers of material compensation.* It was crucial to be able to ensure their safety and to envision long-

term careers within the institution. In addition to increased pay and improved benefits such as life insurance, Nuevo León sharply toughened training standards and implemented uncommon practices such as live-in police compounds and protected family housing. Through a career service policy and the University of Security Sciences, the Fuerza Civil also provided members with opportunities to rise through the ranks and achieve professional long-term growth.

- *Public safety services are never cheap, but Nuevo León devised ways to limit costs.* The benefits and working conditions that attracted recruits to Nuevo León’s new police service were expensive: the state’s spending on law enforcement and criminal justice more than tripled in dollar terms

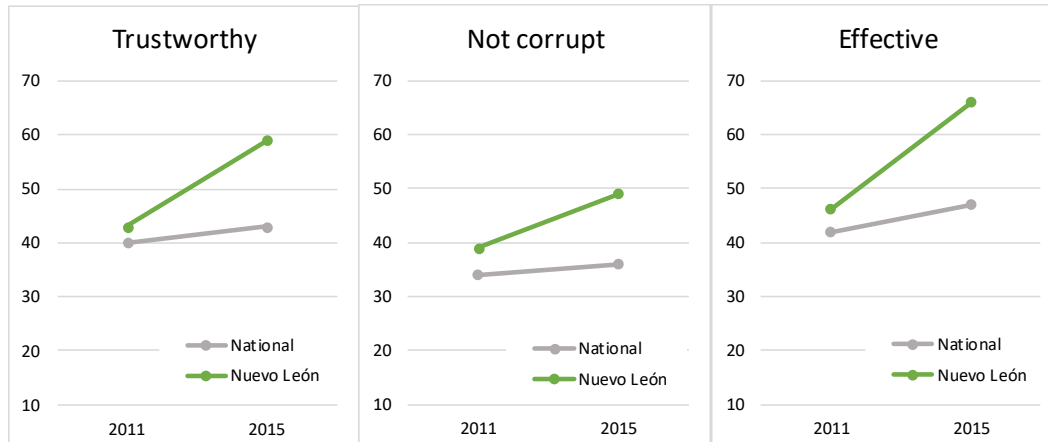


from 2010 to 2017 (adjusted for inflation), and the share of the total state budget allocated to those areas more than doubled, exceeding 10% by 2017. However, the state's police service reforms kept costs down in two ways. First, Nuevo León was able to keep a lid on personnel costs by not requiring high education levels from all recruits. The alliance determined that recruits with a middle school education were capable of learning the basics required for entry-level Fuerza Civil positions. Plus, the state was able to encourage—and provide—higher-level education through its University of Security Sciences. And second, because the decision makers perceived that it would be important to transform only parts of the state's security service to boost effectiveness, it aimed its investments accordingly. Nuevo León and its municipalities had 8,000 police officers in 2017, but only the Fuerza Civil's 4,000 lived in compounds and required quasi-military training and equipment. Municipal police, state prison guards, and building guards did not. Through 2017, this arrangement proved to be enough to prevent the type of cartel violence and intimidation that had peaked in 2011.

- *Supervision is crucial for preventing problems.* The University of Security Sciences and the Fuerza Civil were able to keep a close eye on their recruits and officers by having them live in one place. And by using GPS trackers, commanders could know the whereabouts of every one of their people on patrols. Because such information was provided by a separate entity—called C-5—and did not rely on self-reporting by Fuerza Civil officers, the results provided a firm basis for policy decisions and personnel actions.
- *Wholesale change is sometimes necessary.* Many police reform efforts in Mexico and elsewhere focused on replacing individuals deemed corrupt or ineffective with ones considered clean or capable, but sometimes the results showed that veteran colleagues or commanders could still corrupt fresh young recruits within the formal rules or informal practices that prevailed in existing institutions.<sup>28</sup> To break that pattern, Nuevo León created a new police service from scratch. After removing corrupt or poorly trained officers from the ranks of the old force, the reform team redirected those who remained toward activities separate from those of the Fuerza Civil, creating a tabula rasa.

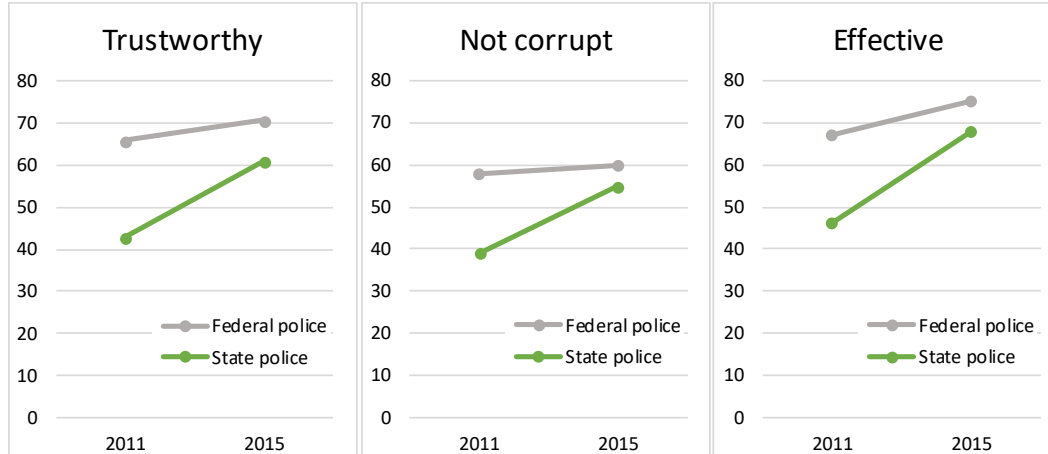
Exhibit 1

Part A3: Public perceptions of Fuerza Civil 2011-2015, Nuevo León resident attitudes toward state police compared to national average



Source: Mexico national statistics office (INEGI), victimization and public security perceptions survey (ENVIPE)

Part B: Public perceptions of state and federal police compared, Nuevo León:



Source: Mexico national statistics office (INEGI), victimization and public security perceptions survey (ENVIPE)

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- in the Monterrey metropolitan area, had a homicide rate below 4 per 100,000 population from at least as far back as 1990 until 2005, which was less than the US homicide rate during that period. See Fernando Escalante, “Homicidios 2008–2009: La muerte tiene permiso,” *Nexos*, January 1, 2011, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Homicide Trends in the United States,” <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbse&sid=31>.
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- <sup>6</sup> Salazar, *Fuerza Civil: La Fuerza de Todos*, page 71.
- <sup>7</sup> Salazar, *Fuerza Civil: La Fuerza de Todos*, page 74.
- <sup>8</sup> During the six months in training, cadets earned more than 9,000 pesos (US\$725) per month—in addition to being housed and fed—and received a graduation bonus of 10,000 pesos (US\$805). Source: Salazar, *Fuerza Civil: La Fuerza de Todos*, page 194.
- <sup>9</sup> Salazar, *Fuerza Civil: La Fuerza de Todos*, page 154.
- <sup>10</sup> In November 2010, Nuevo León was one of five states with a center accredited by the federal government, according to National Public Security System report cited in Aline Taxis Pliego, *Análisis Comparativo de los Centros de Control de Confianza y una Propuesta para su Mejor Funcionamiento*, January 2013, UNAM master’s thesis.
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- <sup>27</sup> State attorney general’s office, published by the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System, “Incidencia Delictiva de Fuero Común,” <http://secretariadoejecutivo.gob.mx/incidencia-delictiva/incidencia-delictiva-fuero-comun.php>.
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