REFASHIONING THE FEDERAL POLICE SERVICE:
MEXICO, 2006–2012

SYNOPSIS

During the mid 1990s, drug trafficking surged in Mexico. Because of a lack of training, poor equipment, and inadequate management practices, policing remained reactive rather than proactive, human-rights abuses were common, corruption was endemic, and the public’s trust in the country’s lead national-level public safety institution waned. Despite repeated efforts to introduce change, the challenges remained in 2006, when Felipe Calderón was elected president. Calderón placed combating organized crime and enacting police reform at the top of his policy agenda and appointed Genaro García Luna as secretary of public safety. García Luna and his reform team sought to transform the service—at the time called the Federal Preventive Police—into a larger and more professional, civilian-led organization capable of collecting and analyzing intelligence to investigate crime as well as to reduce the incidence of federal offenses such as drug trafficking. This case study shows how a determined leader and his team built organizational capacity, although their efforts made only a small difference in internal and external accountability during their time in office. It also points out some of the difficulties that impede institutional makeovers.

Editor's note: On Dec. 10, 2019, the U.S. attorney's office for the Southern District of New York announced the indictment and arrest of Genaro García Luna (DOJ bulletin) on charges of drug-trafficking conspiracy and making false statements. The case docket number is 19-CR-576. This case study will be updated after the indictment is adjudicated.

Benjamin R. Naimark-Rowse and Ariana Markowitz drafted this case study on the basis of interviews conducted in Mexico during November 2012, February 2013, and March 2014. Patrick Signoret and ISS staff expanded the case study in 2018. Also see the ISS case studies on Mexico City police reform and Nuevo León police services reform.

INTRODUCTION

When Felipe Calderón became Mexico’s new president in December 2006, improving public safety was a top priority. Drug-related violence had escalated. The Latin American Public Opinion Project found that in 2006, one in five Mexican citizens, or 20%, reported being a victim of a crime—up from about 17% two years earlier.¹ One of the country’s leading newspapers, Reforma, reported that the percentage of citizens who ranked insecurity as the country’s most important problem had more than doubled to 26% from 10% during roughly the same period.² Kidnapping was on the rise and began to affect wealthier citizens, who had typically hired their own private security when the government could not protect them³ (figure 1).
The country’s public safety services—federal, state, and municipal—were in a poor position to respond. Drug cartels and other criminal networks had infiltrated the ranks of those services in order to extend their own capacity and reduce their risk of getting caught. In some of the areas where cartels were most active, state and city governments had lost control.

The federal police services, which were primarily responsible for drug crimes, suffered from weak management and low capacity. Equipment was outdated and scarce, and officers often shared pistols or had to wait their turn for access to a vehicle to respond to a call for help.

Previous attempts to improve federal policing had produced some progress. From 1994 to 2000, President Ernesto Zedillo had unified the highway police, fiscal police, and migration police within a new institution, the Federal Preventive Police. He overhauled the separate police investigative service, and he tried to improve coordination both within government and across levels of government by creating the National Public Security System (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, or SNSP) and initiating a nationwide police communication network. He also assembled a council to provide oversight.

In 2000, Zedillo’s successor, Vicente Fox, extended reform to the Office of the Attorney General by replacing the Federal Investigative Police—charged with investigating federal offenses—with the Federal Investigation Agency (Agencia Federal de Investigación, or AFI), which was modeled after the US Federal Bureau of Investigation. The following year, Fox named an up-and-coming police officer, Genaro García Luna, as AFI director. During his five years as head of AFI (later called the Federal Ministerial...
Police), García Luna sought to improve training, introduce new processes and procedures, share intelligence and information, and create a system for vetting officers and holding them accountable for their performance. He also tried to engage citizens, acknowledging that “the state will never have a greater capacity than when it deploys the community” to help with crime detection.

Overhauling the investigative police proved an uphill battle, but it generated lessons that helped inform subsequent law enforcement reform. García Luna found it was difficult to secure better terms of service for his officers, and because AFI salaries remained uncompetitive, vulnerability to bribery persisted. In addition, García Luna recalled, when he tried to dismiss thousands of police officers suspected of illegal activity, the courts reversed his actions on the grounds that the officers were protected government employees who could be removed only for proven wrongdoing. “With little social prestige, inadequate training, and undignified wages and benefits that failed to match the risks and responsibilities of their duties, careers in Mexico’s police forces were a vocational choice for people lacking better opportunities,” García Luna later wrote in his 2011 book, The New Public Security Model for Mexico.

García Luna had a clear vision of how to transform the federal police; he brought hands-on experience; and he expressed a commitment to implement reform. In 2006, when Calderón needed a seasoned security official with those qualities, he knew where to turn for help.

THE CHALLENGE

As Calderón’s new secretary of public safety, 38-year-old García Luna’s job was to plan strategy; develop policy; harmonize the work of municipal, state, and national public safety programs; and support evaluation and learning. He also was head of the Federal Preventive Police, which was responsible for preventing and combating—but not investigating—organized crime, drug trafficking, and other federal offenses. His cabinet position was on the same level in the government hierarchy as the attorney general’s, whose office oversaw the AFI, which García Luna had previously led.

Despite his youth, García Luna brought considerable experience to the job. Previous to his AFI service, he had been with the Ministry of Interior’s Center for Investigation and National Security (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional, or CISEN), where he directed intelligence, counterterrorism, and counterintelligence efforts. In that capacity, he trained in Spain, Israel, France, Japan, the United States, and other countries and embraced new ways of thinking about police functions.

García Luna said he had a vision of what he wanted to accomplish. He said the traditional model of policing—catching criminals in the act—was insufficient to fight the gangs that had expanded in Mexico in the 1990s. He wanted law enforcement to be proactive. In The New Public Security Model for Mexico, he wrote, “A different type of criminal investigation was now required, one based on information analysis and processing, to identify the logistical and financial structures of organized crime, its ties to authorities, its modus operandi, and its recruiting mechanism, among other factors.”

One of the significant initial challenges involved clarification of the division of labor among Mexico’s profusion of law enforcement agencies. In compliance with the country’s 2002 constitution, the government had decentralized its public security functions by allocating responsibilities among more than 2,000 federal, state, and municipal police services that were spread across the country. The federal services were responsible for federal offenses—specifically, drug trafficking and crimes committed by civil servants. State and municipal police services handled state-level offenses, which made up about 90% of all reported crime nationwide, including robbery and assault.
Poor coordination among the various law enforcement services was a consequent challenge. Although earlier reforms had improved high-level policy coordination among federal agencies, on-the-ground coordination remained weak—especially at the state and local levels. “There was no communication between the different states,” said Margarita Gómez, who later served as director of international analysis at the federal police. “Someone who committed a crime in Tabasco could live in Veracruz because Veracruz had no idea that he was there.”

Moreover, the federal police services depended on unreliable state and municipal police information for intelligence about organized crime and other criminal activity. “When federal police officers called state officers to request information by fax, it took hours or days,” recalled Maribel Cervantes Guerrero, who served as federal police commissioner at the end of Calderón’s term.

Lack of immediate—and credible—intelligence confounded law enforcement. García Luna determined that the police needed better information systems in order to share data across levels of government. Indeed, police services at all levels were still lacking technical capacity and crucial infrastructure. Against the heavily armed and increasingly technologically savvy drug cartels, the police were woefully unprepared. According to Gómez, “We were facing a new type of organized crime that was more sophisticated, that had better technology and information—and its own intelligence system.”

Proactive reform also required empowering the police to investigate crimes together with the AFI, which at the time had sole responsibility for developing the evidence for prosecutions. Police were first at the scene of a suspected crime and could collect evidence while the trail was still fresh. “The whole question was whether we would have a police that was preventive—only preventive—or an investigative police,” said Alejandro Poiré Romero, who served as national security spokesman and interior minister under Calderón.

Addressing those multiple challenges required not only a more sophisticated Federal Preventive Police but also a larger one. With new responsibilities, the Federal Preventive Police would have to increase staffing, and including all services at all levels of government, in 2007 the total number of police per 100,000 people—a standard metric for international comparison—was 351 in Mexico compared with 390 for Colombia, 347 for Italy, 333 for Latin America and the Caribbean on average, and 300 for the United States. The Federal Preventive Police accounted for only about 5% of the total number of police personnel. (By comparison, in its neighbor, the United States, federal law enforcement officers numbered slightly more than 115,000 people and accounted for roughly 10% of total police.)

At the same time, the Federal Preventive Police lacked effective procedures for assessing officers’ trustworthiness and preparedness for their jobs. “There were no vetting processes to certify the honesty and moral character of law enforcement officers,” García Luna reflected, “and no systematic processes serving to guarantee that officer profiles suited job requirements.”

Finally, public support for the police was weak at all levels. Citizens viewed the police as corrupt, ineffective, and a waste of taxpayer money. And there was widespread concern about abuse of human rights by police at all levels of government. Less than one month before García Luna’s appointment, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission had reported that torture by police was a frequent problem. The public’s distrust was not likely to dissipate easily or quickly, but it set up a vicious cycle in which the citizenry viewed the police as corrupt and therefore not worth government investment. However, without investment, the police were unable to improve. It fell to those who were spearheading the reform to
persuade people that the results—when it came to improved public safety—would be worth the money spent and would reassure that police abuse of power would diminish.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

When he became secretary of public safety in 2006, García Luna was well aware of the difficulties he would face in designing and implementing strategies to improve the federal police service. His plan for police reform, called the New Model, had two pillars: (1) improving operational systems for gathering and storing information and intelligence and (2) creating a system that would professionalize and manage personnel. He planned to disband the Federal Preventive Police and create an entirely new institution with an expanded mandate under the Ministry of Public Safety, created in 2000, rather than under the Ministry of the Interior. But doing all of that would require changes to the constitution, meticulous planning, and a keen appreciation for complex personal and institutional relationships.

Learning from other countries’ experiences was a first step. In February 2007, two months into his tenure as secretary (minister) of public safety, García Luna hired José Antonio Polo as his chief of staff and director of international affairs. Polo brought high-level political experience to the job. He had served as a presidential adviser, speechwriter, director of political appointments, and chief of staff in the foreign ministry, where he had focused on security issues and relations with the United States. Polo’s first task was to direct a reorganized international affairs unit in the Ministry of Public Safety with a view to developing García Luna’s plans. The unit had four specific goals: identify the necessary technology, determine the best training methods and most-effective personnel practices used in other countries, cultivate international support, and open intelligence liaison offices abroad. Polo hired Gómez, a career intelligence officer, to fill a key position as director of international analysis.

While Polo gathered insight and helped frame options, García Luna began to acquire the authority to disband the Federal Preventive Police and to replace it with a new organization—to be called the Federal Police—that would have new authority to investigate crimes as well as respond to and prevent illegal activity. He also dealt with a more immediate problem: the shortage of basic equipment. During Calderón’s first year in office, the Ministry of Public Safety more than doubled its spending on equipment—from US$53 million to US$129 million.¹⁵

At the same time, García Luna’s team began to plan the reforms envisioned as part of each pillar. The first pillar included a new information system called Platform Mexico, which would support the new investigation and intelligence functions.¹⁶ Platform Mexico’s elements aimed to strengthen the capacity to gather, analyze, and use information for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of police operations and law enforcement. That meant creating specialized divisions to handle discrete parts of the intelligence and investigation process in order to build expertise and avoid incorrect or incomplete police actions that had frequently compromised the integrity of evidence in the past. One division would be solely responsible for maintaining databanks, for example, and another would handle investigations by securing crime scenes and collecting evidence in compliance with rules that would ensure admissibility of the information in court. A scientific division would monitor websites and collect digital evidence of crimes in order to prevent and respond to cybercrime. An analytic team drew on the information other divisions generated so it could build cases based on evidence rather than on investigators’ preconceptions. The analytic unit would try to uncover patterns in criminal activity and tactics and thereby facilitate the design of crime maps pinpointing the locations...
of events or behaviors. And the unit could cross-check information across databases. Last, another team, which oversaw operational planning, would match the officers and equipment deployed to the kinds of problems and vulnerabilities the data analysis had identified.

To act on that information and analysis, the new police service needed two other capacities as well. The first pillar created a unit to secure social rehabilitation centers, control riots, supervise transfers of inmates, and carry out seizures of weapons, drugs, and illegal money. Special operations units provided further assistance during natural disasters and sensitive activities like subduing prison riots and arresting dangerous criminals.

Whereas García Luna’s first pillar focused on infrastructure and investigative procedures, the second pillar centered on people. “We needed to send a message that we were not only changing the technology—that’s the easy part: buying technology—but changing human resources as well,” Gómez said. “We wanted to have better human capital.” Therefore, in 2007, the reform team began designing the Police Development System (Sistema de Desarrollo Policial, or SIDEPOL) to set forth protocols for recruitment, promotion, and exit, including specific policies for vetting, training, operations, professional development, and discipline. The team that worked on that part of the reform also focused on setting competitive wages and benefits and on establishing clear expectations for professional growth. García Luna hoped that SIDEPOL would promote job stability, improve police skills, be perceived as fair, and foster police camaraderie.17

To ensure that police officers could understand the new technology and carry out rigorous intelligence and investigative work, the federal police mandated that all new recruits in those divisions or units have university degrees, according to Cristina Chapela, a member of the team that designed the training protocol for the federal police during the Calderón years.

In 2007, while Polo and Gómez were reviewing training materials from abroad, the public safety ministry took two significant steps toward creating a new program to develop expertise. First, 300 midlevel officers underwent training by Mexican and foreign instructors, and they received promotions for completing the courses. Later that year, President Calderón reinaugurated the main federal-police-training institute in San Luis Potosí under the name Public Security Academy of Higher Education—wording that was intended to reinforce permanent changes in attitude, the vocation, skills, and leadership by the federal police.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

García Luna’s new, two-pillar model shaped the reform process. “That process wasn’t step by step, but many steps at the same time,” said Aydee de la Paz, an adviser to García Luna from 2008 to 2009. “The minister of public safety and the federal police needed to react immediately to outside pressures that confronted them at that time. There wasn’t time to say, ‘First we’re going to make the regulations.’”

From 2008 to 2012, total ministry spending increased 12-fold, driven in part by many simultaneous onetime investments and supported partly by external assistance. In 2006, the United States and Mexico formed a bilateral partnership called the Mérida Initiative to address organized crime. Scheduled to last until 2017, the partnership aimed to strengthen border security and counterterrorism, public security and law enforcement, and institution building and the rule of law. The initial emphasis was on improving equipment and information technology. (The partnership focused on institution building after 2011.) In 2007, the US contribution was slightly more than US$48 million—a number that shot up
to US$400 million in each of the next three years with initial investments in equipment and that then fell to US$139 million to US$281 million thereafter.\textsuperscript{18} Mexico’s government also invested heavily in in public security during this period.

\textit{Building the legal framework}

Organizational reforms required changes not only in administrative rules but also in laws, and even in the country’s constitution. A June 2008, constitutional amendment reshaped the criminal justice and public security systems.\textsuperscript{19} The new language established the presumption of innocence in the courts and introduced an adversarial process at trial that included oral arguments and simplified procedures as well as guaranteed legal representation by a public defender. The president then issued a decree that permitted the government to begin implementing the changes while a federal police law draft made its way through the legislature. Passed in 2009, the federal police law set forth some of the details of the new system. Among other rules and regulations, it described procedures for vetting and for taking police disciplinary measures. Further, it stipulated court-approved surveillance and the conduct of clandestine operations for preventive purposes.

The measures were controversial, though, and they encountered strong political headwinds. Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora, who oversaw the Federal Investigative Police—a separate institution in the civil law system at the time—offered a different vision for the country’s public safety strategy and was skeptical of expanding the role of the preventive police to include investigation.\textsuperscript{20} The opposition parties—the Democratic Revolutionary Party and the Institutional Revolutionary Party—also voiced objections. The former worried that giving the police greater power might lead to more human-rights abuses, and the latter did not want centralization of so much power in one agency. García Luna labored hard to build support, advocating for the draft law personally to the attorney general, the cabinet, and Congress. Calderón threw his weight behind the proposals and helped steer them through the approval process, and he persuaded skeptics in his National Action Party to help win legislative support of new budget outlays for financing the reforms.

A subsequent effort to reduce institutional fragmentation within the country’s police system failed, however. The Calderón administration tried to create state-level single police commands that would consolidate some of the municipal services. García Luna argued that such a consolidation step would generate economies of scale and make it easier to implement SIDEPOL and Platform Mexico. And although the proposal earned support from the National Governors Conference and two prominent civil society organizations—Mexico United Against Crime and Mexico SOS—mayors were reluctant to cede control of their police services. The ruling National Action Party enjoyed strong support in municipalities and thus did not want to diminish mayors’ power further. Congress ultimately blocked the proposal.

\textit{Improving operational systems for information and intelligence}

Platform Mexico was part of a Calderón campaign promise to improve data management in support of stronger public safety. Initially called the Unified System of Criminal Information, the program drew upon the 1995 Law for the Coordination of the National Public Security System, which allowed all law enforcement agencies (i.e., the police, district attorneys and the Office of the Attorney General, and centers for prevention and social rehabilitation) to communicate with each other. By early 2007, the system the 1995 law had established was hopelessly outdated, and García Luna and his team began reconstructing the network to make communication faster and more comprehensive.

“What we were trying to do was to create a platform—a much broader concept—not a system, and this platform would be for the
country; so we called it Platform Mexico,” remembered Gustavo Deffis, one of the IT experts who worked on the project.

The creation of Platform Mexico meant that for the first time, the secretary of public safety would have up-to-date information about the incidence of crime throughout the country as well as pertinent institutional information, including biometric data for police officers, an inventory of weapons and other hardware, and a centralized database of detainees and criminals.

Constructing the platform demanded both strong project management skills and deep understandings of (1) the kinds of data the police needed, (2) how police services currently used information, and (3) how they could reasonably improve the current practices. Francisco Niembro, a private-sector systems engineer who became undersecretary for information technology, said, “We are full of specialists and theorists, but we have very few people capable of implementing the ideas and making them a reality.”

In consultation with outside experts and commercial providers, Niembro’s team redesigned and updated the existing telecommunications network with an encrypted, broadband, fiber-optic system that could support the planned Web-based information system. Next, the team created two centers to store and process information. The primary one was housed at the Ministry of Public Safety in Mexico City, and the second, a backup, was more than a thousand miles away in the northeastern state of Sonora. The backup center would enable Platform Mexico to be back online within 15 minutes in the event of any kind of disruption in Mexico City, which was in an earthquake zone adjacent to a slumbering volcano. In addition to the central connection node at headquarters, the team installed 77 other nodes, including at least one in each of the 31 Mexican states. The team then built a network to connect all of the nodes and enable them to communicate with each other.

At a central control center, Platform Mexico would also be able to connect to a crisis information management system focused on natural disasters and to other civilian agencies as well as counterparts in neighboring countries in order to create a common operational picture in the event of a national or regional emergency. (One report called this site “one of the most sophisticated command and control centers for emergency response in the world.”)

Meanwhile, Niembro led the design and development of applications for adding, analyzing, and exploiting information while also creating tools for continuous updating. About half of the tools were custom designed, and half were commercial off-the-shelf.

At the same time, Niembro’s staff began to compile and integrate existing data from around the country—the core information that would initially fuel Platform Mexico. The team explained to other people the system’s use and trained them in the ways Platform Mexico could facilitate emergency response and make information management easier and more reliable. Niembro hired 300 technology experts and deployed them throughout the country to tutor state and local police, whose information technology skills were usually very limited. To streamline data entry, Niembro’s office also designed a uniform police report for officers to fill out when an incident occurred, so that all of the information entered into the system would be in a standardized format.

The effort to launch the new platform was far from seamless, however. Winning acceptance of the new system proved more difficult than anticipated. The designers thought local police services would appreciate the availability of better and faster data, and they conditioned state and municipal police services’ eligibility for federal subsidies on meeting benchmarks with respect to the services’ participation in Platform Mexico. According to Enrique Francisco Galindo Ceballos, then deputy executive secretary of the National
Public Security System, the process “worked like this: I give you money, and you achieve goals. If you need more funding, achieve more goals.”

Having played no role in the design and creation of the countrywide system, the state and local police had no sense of ownership and cooperated reluctantly, passing off spotty and often incomplete information to the federal police for intelligence analysis. In addition, because access to the information collected was on a need-to-know basis, state and municipal police could not view everything they and their colleagues uploaded. Deffis paraphrased the complaint: “It doesn’t help if I’m giving you my information but I don’t see the information from other states. Why continue sending mine?”

But the thing most lacking was training for police personnel: better understanding of the use of information and the risks of the use of the information, Deffis said. To respond to this problem, the reform team launched an internal marketing campaign. With García Luna’s support, Niembro developed a plan to visit all state governors in order to share information about the project, its reach, and its importance.

The effectiveness of police services also depended heavily on the willingness of citizens to report crimes. The ministry helped set up an observatory—a council of nongovernmental organizations—to help monitor police performance and propose ideas and established a way for members of the public to call for police help without exposing themselves to risk. That way was through National Citizen Service Centers (CNAC). CNAC was a network of call centers intended to be a “response to the culture in Mexico of not reporting crime,” maintained Eduardo Andaluz, adviser to the commissioner. “If someone is assaulted, he doesn’t report the crime because he thinks the prosecutor’s office is colluding with organized crime. Why would I report a crime if nothing is going to happen? They’re not going to help me; they’re going to persecute me.” García Luna hoped that CNAC would make it easier for citizens to provide intelligence information and tips. It included a call center to receive complaints via a toll-free telephone number, and special advisers were on call to direct reports of crime to the appropriate divisions within the police. Although advertising campaigns promoted citizen service centers across the country, take-up was limited, and in 2017, a 911 call system replaced CNAC’s functions.

Integrating training and human resources

A major aim of the reform program was to change the culture of policing. Polo and his colleagues sought to build a new esprit de corps. “You had every type of person” in the police service, said Rafael Avilez, a career police officer who entered the service in 1973 and rose through the ranks to design police policies and procedures and direct the police academy in Mexico City. “Army officers, naval officers, National Guard members, police from three levels of government. . . . It’s a puzzle that you have to try to put together.”

Creating a new, positive identity meant deploying new kinds of incentives and using new language to alter norms so that all police officers regardless of background and education would feel they were working together in a cohesive, professional organization. The Police Development System—SIDEPOL—was supposed to achieve that goal.

Designing and implementing SIDEPOL was at least as difficult as launching Platform Mexico. By reforming personnel procedures, SIDEPOL upset existing habits and relationships. “They were literally constructing an institution and setting a standard at the same time,” said Poiré; “and fighting crime as well.”

Polo and Gómez took the first steps during the planning phase while the legal changes that would put the reform program in place were still in progress. Gómez knew that if she and her colleagues didn’t get SIDEPOL’s design right, they would be unable to attract the university-educated
recruits who would be essential to making the system work. Gómez divided the process into three components. The first entailed creating new profiles for the type of police officers needed and the skills the officers should have. “We needed to give them good opportunities,” she recalled. To remain competitive in the job market, the opportunities extended beyond the workplace to include a life insurance fund and a fund to assist officers in purchasing homes. The second component aimed to map all existing police functions and the competencies that the system wanted to establish in the new police service. Finally, the third component consisted of devising a Master Plan for Professional Development as a road map for what officers would be expected to learn.

In developing the new personnel systems, Polo and Gómez consulted with more than 750 police officers. They asked each division commander to recommend 20 or 30 officers from each of the 13 ranks, invited the selected officers to Polo’s office in groups, and requested suggestions and feedback. The meetings sometimes uncovered skepticism about whether merit and fairness would prevail in a system wherein promotions and other rewards commonly went to friends and relatives of commanders. Such comments underscored the need for not only an improved system but also one that would be viewed as equitable.

To harmonize existing procedures with the new laws and—with best practices—García Luna wanted manuals or handbooks that could serve as references for training, professionalization, evaluation, and promotion. In their full form, such manuals would also have to include relevant legal frameworks, general rules, specific procedures, and glossaries of terms. He insisted that the manuals be not only clear and simple but also easy to use. García Luna “wanted manuals that could be used for distance learning and folded up so that officers could carry them in their pockets,” said Ricardo Márquez Blas, whom García Luna hired in August 2010 to focus on this task and to direct SIDEPOL.

When he came on board, Márquez Blas, who had more than 20 years’ experience in working on public safety issues, got to work immediately, tackling the task of turning into standard operating procedures the learning his predecessors had accumulated. He formed two teams of staffers to help develop each manual. One team had to be expert in a manual’s content, and the other had to be able to organize and write the manual. “There had to be a combination of writing ability and technical understanding because the manuals had to be very didactic,” he recalled. Márquez Blas then engaged experts, including a board composed mostly of academicians, to provide advice and assistance.

By October 2011, Márquez Blas had overseen the creation of more than two dozen manuals, and the time came to see how well they were working. With respect to manuals that concerned police conduct, Márquez Blas said, his office became able to evaluate how much officers had learned, though not how the new materials had affected actual practice. “We did a baseline survey before training and a post-training survey,” he said. “Seventy percent of the officers scored higher after the training.”

Improving recruitment and screening

Building up the federal police rapidly was a priority. That meant attracting university graduates for the new service, and García Luna himself traveled to universities to recruit directly.

Initial calls attracted 23,000 applicants. All recruits had to pass a battery of tests to evaluate their skills, knowledge, physical condition, and trustworthiness. The Ministry of Public Safety ultimately hired 9,000 officers, half of whom had at least a bachelor’s degree. But the process was less efficient than planners expected. Márquez Blas noted that during 2009, more than half of the recruits who applied to the federal police dropped
out during the lengthy evaluation process. Further, the 9,000 new recruits arrived before the new police academy was prepared for them, and as a result, the ministry had to sign agreements with two dozen Mexican universities for assistance in providing the initial three months of classroom training mandated for the new recruits. A second three months of training took place in the field with a mentor in the police division to whom each recruit was assigned after graduation. Subsequent recruits received their training at the new academy in San Luis Potosí.

Márquez Blas recalled: “It’s like any other job market. If you leave gaps or make people wait, then the probability increases that they will give up. Follow-up was critical.” To bolster communication with recruits, Márquez Blas enabled online preregistration and created a system of follow-up phone calls to verify preregistration information, schedule appointment reminders, and make sure that recruits were aware of the next steps in the process.

Ensuring timeliness was partly a matter of smoothing the links between offices handling different stages of recruitment and vetting. Márquez Blas wanted to make certain that the confidence testing center received advance notice of the number of recruits to expect and when and that the police academy knew approximately how many new students to expect and when.

After the initial hiring surge, Márquez Blas also targeted recruitment more narrowly. He said: “In the past, we basically said anyone should join. Now we go straight to the source. If we need biologists, we go to recruit in the faculty of biology, for example.”

Under the new system, all new police recruits had to pass tests before beginning to work, and experienced officers had to pass tests at least every two years in order to keep their jobs. “There was a lot of corruption in the police and elsewhere, so we needed a comprehensive system that could reduce the possibility of being corrupt,” said Gómez. The tests were intended to boost security and to increase levels of trust, competence, discipline, and knowledge of and commitment to police doctrine. Such vetting, called confidence control testing, consisted of polygraph, medical, psychological, and drug tests, as well as criminal background checks that included examinations of socioeconomic status relative to income. For the last, an examiner went to the officer or recruit’s home to see where the officer or recruit lived and talk with family and neighbors. The purpose of the process was to evaluate an individual’s suitability not only for police work but also for specific positions within the service at regular intervals throughout the person’s career. The idea came from intelligence agency CISEN, where García Luna, Commissioner Cervantes, and Márquez Blas had all worked previously. CISEN “was the only government agency that required confidence testing to join, not even the Marines or the Army,” said Márquez Blas. “We understood its value as a way to ensure the trustworthiness of agency staff.”

Experts from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the American Association of Police Polygraphists visited Mexico to communicate best practices and conduct training.

The speed with which the federal police grew—from 12,907 officers in 2006 to 35,460 in 2010—burdened the Federal Confidence Testing Center, which opened in 2007. By 2009, the center was administering about 5,000 tests per month compared with 500 per month in 2007. Without adequate staff, the director had to prioritize new recruits and senior officers and to test midlevel officers only when time permitted. Said Márquez Blas, “It was an issue not just of numerical growth but also of institutional growth—not just having more capacity but organizing that capacity better.”

In 2009, the Calderón administration released aggregate data from late-2008 police confidence test results showing that 61.6% of tested federal, state, and municipal officers were unsuitable for service. Rather than fire those officers, police officials flagged the results for further
substantiation. Within two years, 3,200 of those officers were let go. Some of the firings were based on failed confidence tests; others resulted from infractions such as frequent absenteeism and misuse of uniforms.

The early testing process did not evaluate officers’ ability to perform their specific functions, such as using a weapon, conducting an arrest, and patrolling an area. Nor did it include on-the-job performance evaluation. Márquez Blas recalled that SIDEPOL did not start developing systems for that purpose until late 2011.

To improve transparency and create more checks and balances, SIDEPOL leaders oversaw the creation of the Police Development Council, which helped give all divisions of the police had a voice. Formed in 2009, the council worked with both SIDEPOL and the internal affairs division, the “police of the police,” which was under the police commissioner. Marco Tulio López, who devised the legal framework for the council and briefly served as its director in 2010, said the council’s goal was to observe and supervise police performance.

**Strengthening the new academy**

Once accepted for employment, new recruits had to undergo training, but the program itself took time to develop. The initial training program had flopped. In 2009, before Márquez Blas took over SIDEPOL, the chiefs of a number of police divisions had refused to hire some of the academy graduates because the graduates lacked certain skills the divisions required. About 150 newly trained personnel remained without jobs. “This was one of my fears,” Márquez Blaz recalled. “That future graduates would be returned to me.”

Márquez Blaz responded by gradually tailoring recruitment and training to the specific needs of each division. “Before, there was one training protocol for all officers regardless of what their specific jobs would be,” he recalled. In revamping the training, Márquez Blas said, he asked division chiefs which skills they needed in their new recruits: “What do you need them for? fieldwork? office work? Do you need officers who spend more time in firing practice?”

To further systematize the process, Márquez Blas hired Martha García, who in early 2012 became director of training and expertise development. Recognizing the need to expand officer preparation in order to match peer countries’ standards, García extended the training of new recruits from six months to one year and divided the curriculum into three parts. All recruits began with courses in ethics, doctrine, tactics, rule of law, human rights, and discipline. They then specialized in investigation, intelligence, or firearms depending on the division to which they would be assigned. The divisions themselves then oversaw a third phase, which sometimes involved working with a mentor on a field assignment. Instructors were no longer limited to being academy teachers, and some were officers with reputations for excellence in certain areas. “There is no more trustworthy police officer than one who knows how to do the job well,” maintained Márquez Blas.

Soon the federal police began to make promotions contingent upon the completion of courses as well as other criteria. That step was unpopular with some veteran police officers, who were accustomed to advancing in the organization through connections and personal relationships with their superiors. They balked at having to travel to the academy at San Luis Potosí, in the center of the country, but senior officials did not back down.

**Charting a career path**

Improved training for recruits was insufficient to instill the kind of change García Luna envisioned. Creating a new esprit de corps was also a matter of getting incentives right.

Partly for that purpose, Márquez Blas oversaw the development of career paths for police officers. “To create a sustainable police service, you need to create the possibility for promotion so
that officers see opportunities for growth independent of changes in government,” he said.

There were 13 hierarchical positions within the police service that were parts of four scales in order from top to bottom: sheriff, inspector, officer, and policeman. The first three scales accounted for 30% of personnel, and the remaining 70% were policemen. Taking cues from the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation and the New York and Los Angeles police departments, a team within SIDEPOL determined specific requirements for each of the 13 positions with respect to education and professional prerequisites, training programs attended, and ages for retirement. Márquez Blas ensured that the information would be clear, comprehensive, and public, so that every person at every rank knew exactly what was required in order to earn a promotion.

Márquez Blas also contracted an outside firm to design and administer exams for promotions. And to maintain process integrity and avoid any suspicion from police officers, the firm delivered sealed exams to SIDEPOL on testing day. According to Márquez Blas, “Almost 99% of the police responded very favorably,” because the key complaint from federal and state police had been that promotions went only to friends of high-ranking officers.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

García Luna experienced significant setbacks in mid 2008, when gunmen murdered the federal chief of police, Edgar Eusebio Millán Gómez, outside his apartment building in Mexico City in May. The killing of Millán Gómez was the highest-profile assassination of four that occurred in little more than a week in Mexico City, which had rarely seen that type of violence. Reporting on the incident, the *Washington Post* quoted Mexican sociologist and expert in drugs Luis Astorga as saying, “It indicates terrible things, a level of weakness in our institutions—they can’t even protect themselves.”

A month later, at a checkpoint, heavily armed men wearing federal police uniforms stopped a sedan carrying Fernando Martí, the 14-year-old son of one of Mexico’s most successful businessmen. The gunmen tortured and killed the car’s driver and choked the bodyguard, leaving him for dead. They kidnapped the child and later killed him despite receiving millions of dollars in ransom from his parents. Martí’s bodyguard recovered from his injuries and identified the attackers, and his testimony led the police to arrest a number of their own.

The kidnapping and the murders marked a tipping point for Mexican society, already exasperated by the government’s continued inability to end police abuse, corruption, and drug-related violence. Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans took to the streets to demand that the government take decisive action against public insecurity—specifically, when it came to kidnapping and murder. Civil society organizations demanded a national conversation about public security issues, and Martí’s father argued that if government officials were not up to the task, they should resign.

In August 2008, two months after his son’s kidnapping and murder, Alejandro Martí and María Elena Morera, a protest leader and then president of Mexico United Against Crime, a civil society organization that advocated crime prevention and assisted victims, joined representatives of the legislative and judicial branches, state governments, and other civil society and business groups to sign the 75-point National Agreement on Security, Justice, and Legality. The agreement stated that impunity, corruption, and lack of coordination between law enforcement authorities had produced an atmosphere of insecurity and violence, and it demanded an immediate and forceful government
response. Politicians, potential recruits, and the general public had seen public security officials promise big change and fail to deliver.

The agreement focused on specific measures to combat kidnapping and stipulated stronger management of police services, improved coordination and information sharing between law enforcement organizations, reduced corruption, and an end to impunity of and corruption perpetrated by law enforcement officials.28

The president pushed the process through quickly. The agreement contained antikidnapping measures that civil society had suggested and additional points that the president had included without consulting civil society groups. In doing that, the administration deftly sidestepped a potential challenge to its reform program. Director of the federal police’s international analysis Margarita Gómez said that by securing the signatures of such a wide range of government and nongovernment actors, “the national agreement gave us the opportunity to help implement at the state and municipal levels. It put a lot more pressure on the responsible parties to produce results.”29

The quest for internal accountability remained a tough fight, however. The end of Calderón’s term saw two high-profile cases involving the federal police. In June 2012, federal police officers engaged in a shoot-out with one another at the Mexico City airport. During the operation, one group of federal police was attempting to break up a drug ring that another group of federal police operated. Two months later, federal police officers assaulted a US embassy convoy in the town of Tres Marías south of Mexico City, leaving 152 bullet holes in US diplomatic vehicles. The Office of the Attorney General issued arrest warrants for 14 federal police officers, charging them with attempted murder and property damage. The incidents drew attention to the slow rollout of certification requirements and the delay in strengthening internal accountability systems further.

ASSESSING RESULTS

The changes García Luna and his team introduced coincided with a major shift in national strategy to combat drug cartels. That strategy, which used military and federal police to target cartel leaders, triggered struggles for leadership within organized-crime syndicates and contributed to a multiyear surge in violence, some observers argued. The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) reported that the national homicide rate increased by 160% from 2006, when President Calderón took office, to 2011, the second-to-last year of his administration.29 (The rate dropped in 2012 and continued doing so until it surged again in 2016–17. In the year after the Calderón administration ended, the number of homicides in the border city of Juárez, previously named the world’s most dangerous city, fell by more than half from a high point two years earlier.30)

The direct impact of the federal police reforms on public safety were difficult to assess within that context not only because strategy itself affected this broad outcome but also because many other things did too, such as trafficking in guns from the neighboring United States and changes in the prices of contraband.

More telling evidence of improved performance came from public opinion surveys. The national statistical agency captured the trend in public perceptions of integrity and effectiveness over time (figure 2). The agency also revealed differences in public perceptions of the trustworthiness of the federal police compared with other law enforcement officials, although that news was still not as positive as hoped. In 2014, 52.6% of those surveyed said the federal police were corrupt (just two percentage points lower than the previous year and four percentage points lower than in 2012), whereas 77.3% said the traffic police were corrupt, 66.3% said the same of the municipal police, 61.9% said the same of the state police, and 61.6% said the same of the judicial police.31 By 2017, perception of the
trustworthiness of the federal police had edged up to 57%. At that time, 64% of those surveyed said the federal police were highly effective or somewhat effective, and only 53% said the same of the state police.32 (Even if performance had improved greatly, it might have been unrealistic to expect a more rapid shift in perceptions of the federal police, because in some parts of the country, soldiers were still maintaining order in the streets when Calderón left office and because most people had far more contact with the municipal police and the state police.)

By the time Calderón’s presidential term ended, the bones of Platform Mexico and SIDEPOL were substantially in place, even if the reform programs themselves were only just beginning to take effect.33

By 2012, 25% of federal police officers held college degrees, and the average monthly salary had risen to US$900 since 2007, and later increased further to try to compete with white-collar jobs.34 Despite the more-stringent educational qualifications, recruitment had increased. The numbers of federal police had more than doubled since 2006, though the ranks were unbalanced. “Right now, [the hierarchical pyramid] looks like a snake that ate a rabbit, which is to say that it’s narrow at the top and bottom, with a bulge in the middle,” said Avilez, who directed the police academy in Mexico City. The attrition rate among recruits was also high.35

García Luna’s team reported that all federal police officers had taken confidence control tests at least once. And even though the tests were
required, some civil society leaders argued that the measure did not go far enough. Morera of Mexico United Against Crime said, “These advances don’t guarantee us anything as long as we’re without accountability.” The removal of more than 3,000 officers early in the process was only one step in the right direction. “I do recognize that [García Luna] has made an enormous effort. Never before has there been such an effort in Mexico. But the lack of internal and external controls can create conditions that destabilize the police,” she added.

The development of standard operating procedures helped inform police academy training, but as the end of Calderón’s term approached, there was still a long way to go to embed such procedures firmly throughout the institution. Juan Salgado, a professor at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics who participated in the development of the procedures, said, “No operational or chain-of-command endeavors were undertaken to make them real in police practice.”

When Calderón left office, Platform Mexico was a state-of-the-art information system that included databases and mechanisms for improved coordination between policing services at all three levels of government. But staying state-of-the-art in a fast-moving technological world was difficult. “When we designed our network, we didn’t imagine that mobile technology was going to advance at the pace that it has,” Deffis said in 2018. “The network that we have right now is for broadband, for broad flows of information at high speeds. It’s not compatible with mobile technology.”

REFLECTIONS

Skepticism by politicians, potential recruits, existing police officers, and the general public about the bold reform he sought to accomplish surprised Genaro García Luna, who served as secretary of public safety, and his deputies. Keeping the effort alive in the face of strong political crosscurrents was difficult. “There was a bit of a tug-of-war in terms of where most of the investment was going to be made to increase state capacity against crime,” said Alejandro Poiré Romero, spokesman for the security council and interior minister under President Felipe Calderón. “The big challenge for successful models is to institutionalize them,” García Luna recalled. “There have been important efforts in many countries, including Mexico, [that] were cut short due to politics.”

Other players in the reform effort credited García Luna with laying the groundwork for successful internal reform. Alejandro Hope, a security analyst and columnist with major Mexican newspaper El Universal, said: “He’s really good at working the corridors of power, obtaining budgets, and projecting a vision. He had already done this at AFI before he arrived at the federal police.” Poiré agreed: “Without a doubt there was clarity about where we were going and what we were doing. If you hadn’t had a leader with the kind of motivation that Genaro had, there’s no way they would have achieved even a third of what they did.”

In assessing police reforms during the Calderón administration, Ernesto López Portillo, founding executive director of the Institute for Security and Democracy, a Mexican nongovernmental organization, described a lack of accountability: “I don’t have any doubt that the federal police have more operational capacities. I have no doubt that the federal police intervene in critical areas to reduce violence and to control crises. But is the federal police a healthy institution? I don’t know. Does the federal police systematically commit abuses? I don’t know.”

Hope echoed that ambiguity. “Is [the federal police] better than anything that preceded it? Probably. Is it better than most state and municipal police forces? Yes. Is it the shining example of what a modern police should be in Mexico? Certainly not.”
EPILOGUE

On December 1, 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto assumed the presidency of Mexico. Making good on a campaign promise, he eliminated the Ministry of Public Safety, created the National Commission for Security in its stead, and moved the new commission and the federal police into the Ministry of the Interior. He also proposed creating a new federal police service—a gendarmerie. He kept most of the SIDEPOL and Platform Mexico reforms intact, however, and sought to strengthen the integration of municipal, state, and federal police.

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