



Violence Against Women in Mexico

*A report on recent trends in femicide
in Baja California, Sinaloa and Veracruz*

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Last year, more women were killed in Mexico than ever before in the country's modern history. In 2016, Mexico's female homicide rate reached 4.5 per 100,000, nearly twice that of 2012. While in a global context, violence against women in Mexico does not reach the most extreme levels, it represents an intractable problem from both a social and a policy perspective.¹ Of particular interest are murders that can be classified as "femicides"—defined as the killing of a woman as a "hate crime."² Mexico has long been an international reference point for such cases, as the unsolved murder of hundreds of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez during the 1990s and 2000s galvanized a community of committed activists and led to an emblematic ruling against the Mexican government in the Interamerican Court of Human Rights.

Over the last decade, Mexico's staggering wave of drug war violence has rendered femicides nearly invisible. Uncounted in official statistics, addressed with half-hearted measures by authorities, these crimes have had an outsized social impact. Femicides terrify, denying women equal access to public space and opportunities, and further shredding a social fabric already torn by a decade-long drug war. The systemic impunity surrounding femicides erodes trust, both among citizens and in the government, and further undermines societal resilience.

The drug war has provided local governments a convenient explanation for femicides and for why policy interventions such as judicial trainings and media campaigns fail to reduce the number of murders. Most importantly, drug war violence has served to reinforce a culture of impunity surrounding these crimes by highlighting the inefficiency of the judicial system. As Sinaloan activist Natalia Reyes notes, only 8% of femicides are ever punished.

Neither has there been substantial political will to address the problem. The primary policy, the Gender Violence Alert Mechanism (AVGM), allows citizens to request a declaration of a "gender alert" for municipalities where violence is increasing, which obliges local officials to take measures to end the violence and increase awareness about femicides. In practice, the Alert

Jovana Sarahi Mendoza, 16, disappeared on October 3, 2017 on her way home from school in Navolato, Sinaloa. Her half-naked body was found 9 days later near an irrigation canal in a rural area, with her school uniform and notebook nearby. The degree of decomposition suggested that she had killed several days prior and her body showed traces of beatings. One of Jovana's close friends wrote on Facebook that she had sent an audio message on the day of her disappearance asking for help. While cases like hers are not particularly common—we documented only 12 victims under age 20—they tend to become flashpoints for mobilization, in part because of the victim's presence on social media. A similar case occurred in 2016, when 19-year-old Jesús Yesvelt Barreras Cruz disappeared from an internet café in El Fuerte. Her body was found in a clandestine grave in 2017. Neither case was resolved, and motives for the femicides remain unclear. —Kat Doering

process has been politicized and its substance hollowed out.

Since 2015, the Kroc School's Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego has documented over 1,200 potential femicides in three Mexican states.³ Baja California, Sinaloa and Veracruz represent distinct phenomena related to drug trafficking and organized crime, human smuggling, migration and politics. By collecting case-level data, this project is able to provide vital information about trends in violence, helping to disentangle femicides from the larger drug war.

In this preliminary report, we present the results from an analysis of over 500 cases from the past two years, a period in which gender-violence became a source of widespread mobilization in Mexico.⁴ These findings reflect broader trends: Mexico will likely end 2017 with the most murders ever in its modern history, and this tendency is visible in our data. The increase is not nationwide, however, and the patterns in femicide suggest that we should be wary of causal reductionism.

All data presented here is also available online as interactive and open-source maps and charts.

Summary

Our research has revealed five key trends in violence:

- First, we find that violence against women in Baja California and Veracruz is increasing, particularly during the latter part of 2017.
- Second, we find a countervailing pattern of violence in Sinaloa. A flat trend here indicates a consistent pattern of femicidal violence that has resisted policy efforts to address it.
- Third, sexual violence appears to be epidemic in Veracruz and is trending upward.
- Fourth, the Orizaba-Córdoba corridor in Veracruz experiences a disproportionate share of violence, and femicides there have increased over the past two years, despite the declaration of a gender violence alert a year ago.
- Fifth, we find that while the upward trend in Baja California is largely driven by criminal violence in Tijuana, a focus on that pattern by officials obscures the state's systemic problem of domestic and sexual violence, particularly in Mexicali.

Notes from Introduction

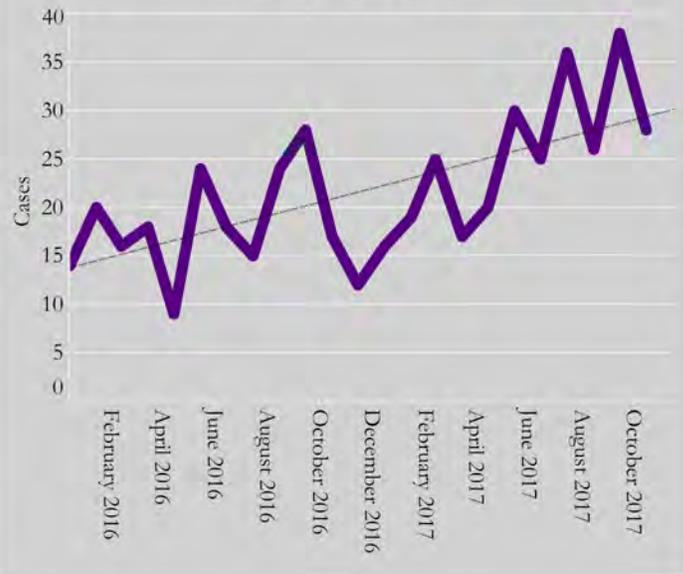
1. The World Health Organization calculated that in 2015 the global rate was 2.4 per 100,000. A rate of 4.5 per 100,000 would have ranked 43rd of 183 countries that year (Mexico's rate at the time was 3.9). By comparison, South Africa and Colombia register female homicide rates above 9 per 100,000 according to the WHO, while Jamaica and El Salvador both have rates above 15. Honduras, the extreme outlier, had a rate of 46.1 per 100,000. Source: <http://apps.who.int/violence-info/homicide/>

2. The term and definition were popularized by Diana Russell in the 1970s and subsequently translated into Spanish as *feminicidio*. Due to subsequent modifications to the latter term's meaning in Spanish, its reverse translation as "femicide" has come to signify murders of women where the state is complicit and impunity is present. See: http://www.dianarussell.com/origin_of_femicide.html

3. For information on our methodology, see the appendix.

4. Protests included hashtag movements and nationwide marches in September, 2017 (#niunamenos) and April, 2016 (#vivasnosqueremos).

Documented Femicides in Baja California, Sinaloa, and Veracruz, 2016-2017



On April 3, 2017, Jazmín Millán Elenes was shot to death in the La Mesa area of Tijuana. Millán Elenes was a known drug dealer who had been incarcerated four times for charges ranging from gun possession to bribery. Millán Elenes was known as "La Piñata" in the Sanchez-Taboada area of the city where she was involved in drug dealing. She was given this alias because she was in charge of distributing "the candies." It was reported that she had been previously threatened. Millán Elenes was shot in front of two minors, one was her son.

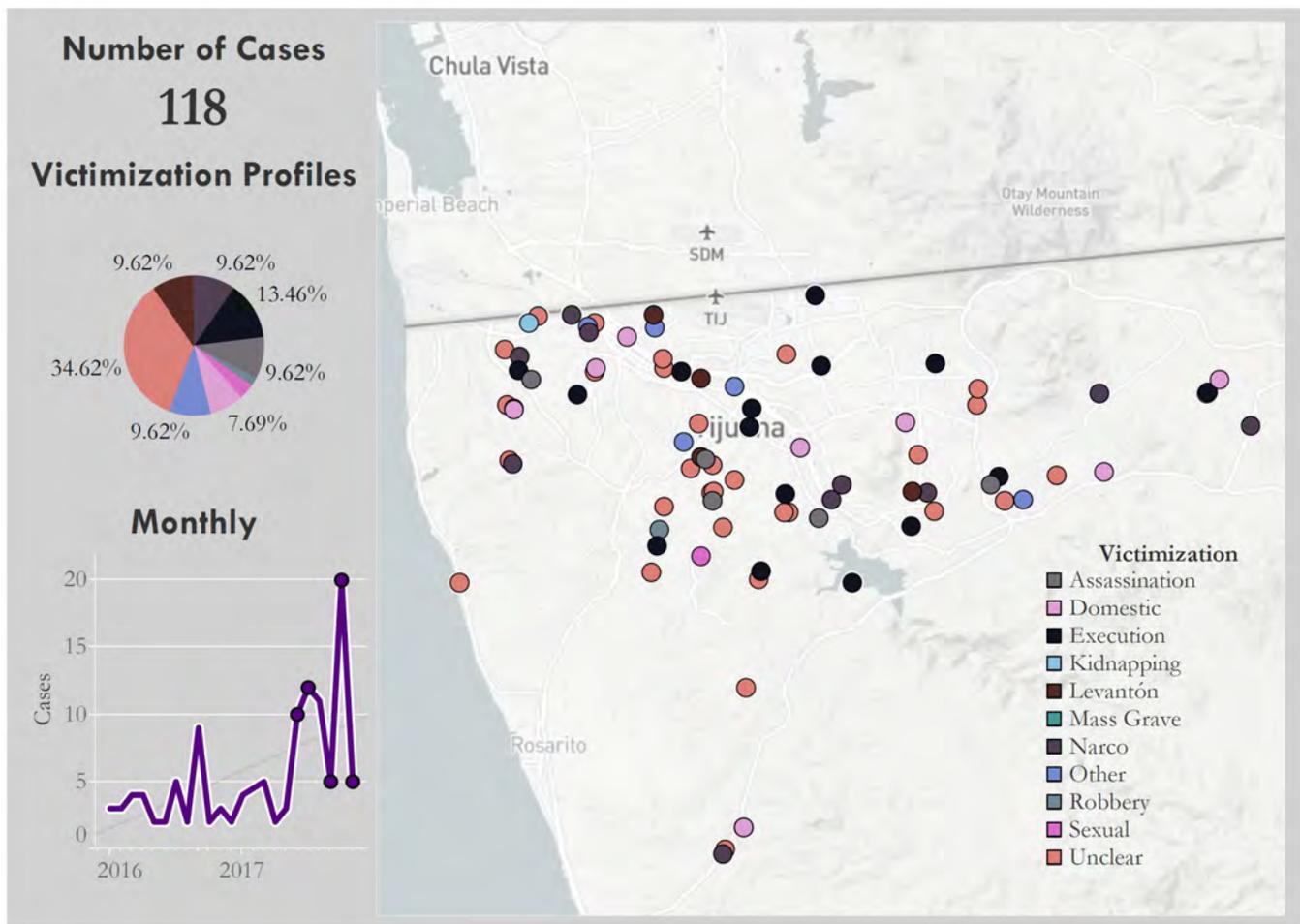
Millán Elenes' case, along with that of Alejandra Mancilla, another reported drug dealer murdered in the same area in June, 2017, highlight the extent to which violence in the southwestern neighborhoods of Tijuana is driven by organized crime. At the same time, this is not to say that all cases there involved those participating in drug dealing, since in many of these cases a victimization profile could not be determined and extortion or other predatory activities might have been at play. – Carolina Arellano

1. Increasing Violence

All states experience dramatic month-to-month fluctuation in femicides, however since the start of 2016, Baja California and Veracruz have trended rather sharply upward. The drivers of these increases are not always clear. As previously noted, homicides have generally trended upward in Mexico during 2017, something analysts have attributed to growing violence associated with drug dealing, as well as struggles within organized crime. Both Baja California and Veracruz registered their highest three month average from August to October of 2017.

In Baja California, nearly 80% of the cases during that period occurred in Tijuana, and of those nearly all the violence fit patterns associated with organized crime. Only 2 cases could be classified as domestic violence. While this superficially supports official claims that increases in violence against women are attributable to their participation in drug dealing, close examination of the cases does not provide evidence to support this conclusion.

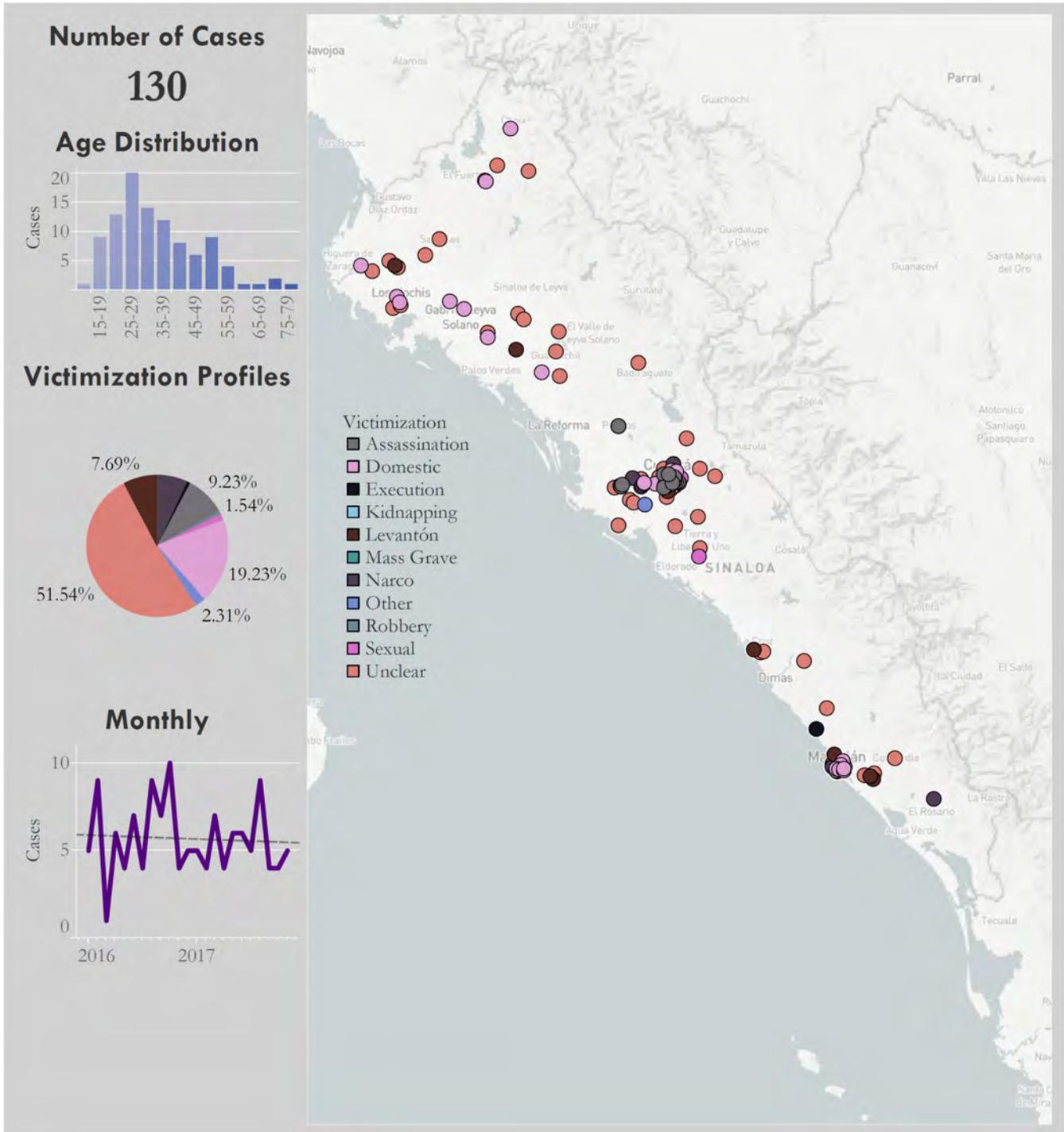
Femicides in Tijuana June-December 2017



On November 19th, 2016 Julieta Amalia was murdered by her husband in Culiacán, Sinaloa. At forty-four years old, she had been a victim of domestic abuse for a number of years. Her partner, Soltero, had a history of violence, and had previously served prison time. Family and friends of Julieta report that Soltero was kind to Julieta when sober, but when he drank or used drugs, he became abusive. He was extremely controlling and jealous, and allowed her to have only limited contact with her family. In the weeks before her death, friends say Julieta appeared thin, gaunt with scars on her face and her arms, and was frequently anxious, sad and distracted. Only a few days before her death, she confided in a friend that she was convinced Soltero was going to kill her. On November 19th, Julieta was in a home in the Renato Vega Amador neighborhood. Soltero had been drinking, and when Julieta refused his advances, he became violent and stabbed Julieta to death. Afterwards, he stabbed himself in the chest twice and attempted to convince the police that a stranger broke into the house and stabbed both of them, but was deemed guilty. Soltero currently awaits trial.

Julieta's story of domestic abuse is unfortunately quite common in Mexico. It demonstrates that for many women, the threat of femicide does not just come from strangers, but from their own family members. Like Julieta, women in such relationships may feel isolated and trapped. Ironically, Julieta resided in Culiacán, a large city where in theory she would have access to more resources. This contrasts with women who live in rural areas in Mexico, who may have more difficulty getting help. However, Julieta's case makes clear that access to resources does not always equate with usage of those resources. – Paige Hopkins

2. Sinaloa Static



The trend in femicides in Sinaloa has remained relatively flat, and the state did not experience the same August-October spike as in Baja California or Veracruz. Across two years, this flat trend persisted even as overall homicide levels rose in 2017. This stability is troubling. Because the violence appears unrelated to exogenous factors driving increases elsewhere (such as Baja California), femicidal violence in Sinaloa may be a more intractable problem than elsewhere. Despite the declaration of a gender alert in March, 2017, the patterns of violence have remained unchanged and because femicides in Sinaloa appear to be less concentrated in urban areas than in Baja California (where the overall rate of femicides is similar, though the trends diverge) addressing the problem may be more difficult still.

Gender Violence Alerts in Mexico

In 2007, Mexico passed the General Law on the Access of Women to a Life Free of Violence, a landmark piece of legislation regarding the human rights of women. The law broke new ground, institutionalizing a gender perspective in government responses to femicide.*

Since then, the situation for women in Mexico has worsened. And there have been considerable difficulties in implementing the law's principles.

The problem is pressing: seven women are killed every day and 92% of the cases go unpunished.

There are increasing levels of sexual violence, forced disappearances, family violence, street harassment, and femicides, and a total lack of protection for victims resulting from the new accusatorial oral trial justice system.

The primary policy tool to address the problem is the activation of the gender violence alert mechanism (AVGM), created by the 2007 law. The Alerts oblige states to take urgent action to eradicate femicides. The AVGM is designed to achieve two things: first, to increase the visibility of violence against women and girls, and second, to create political will to implement measures to reduce femicide. Since an AVGM was declared in Sinaloa this March, there has been some progress on revising legislation to incorporate a gender perspective and officials are in the process of reviewing budgets for the state women's institute. Authorities have also continued ongoing programs designed to provide training for authorities, educate the public, and reduce harassment. Nevertheless, many elements required by the Alert remain unaddressed. These include criminal and judicial steps to improve the investigation of femicides, provide sufficient attention to victims, ensure swift processing of perpetrators, and the implementation of exemplary punishments. Also pending is a full case review of all unsolved murders of women during the past 12 years.

Nevertheless, more than 6 years after the first petition for an alert, the process is marked by perpetual bureaucratization, politicization, and revictimization.

The AVGM demonstrates that the citizenry and civil society have the legal ability to demand that

María de Jesús Reyes Pérez was 70 years old when she was beaten to death with a baseball bat by her mentally ill son in Angostura, Sinaloa, who accused her of witchcraft. On August 7, 2016, her neighbors called the police and informed them of a man who was hitting two senior citizens. When authorities arrived, they found her bleeding and unconscious in her own home, while her husband had been hit only once. Paramedics transported her to the hospital in the nearby city of Guamuchil, however she died of her injuries shortly after. Police subsequently detained 48-year-old Evaristo Salazar Reyes for the crime. Unofficially, it became known that Evaristo was mentally ill and was taking controlled medication, and after spending the previous night drinking had accused his mother of witchcraft and attacked her.

The case is surprisingly similar to others, and highlights a number of issues. Between 2016 and 2017 there were eight other domestic violence cases where older victims were attacked by their male children. Like the Reyes Perez case, mental illness also appears to have played a role in many of these. However many of the perpetrators were also reported as experiencing feelings of disrespect from their mothers, suggesting that cultures of masculinity played an important role.

Unlike the case of Julieta Amalia, however, the Reyes Perez case occurred far from most official resources for women: Angostura is a rural town of only 5,000, and it is in places like this that much of the domestic violence in Sinaloa occurs. – Carolina Moreno

the federal government examine the situation of gender violence in any region of the country, and that process of monitoring and civil organization has contributed greatly to strengthening the cause of women's rights.

Amparo Natalia Reyes Andrade is a member of the Colectivo de Mujeres Activas Sinaloenses, A.C., one of the petitioners for the AVGM in Sinaloa, and a Social Counselor for the National Women's Institute.

*The 2007 law codified the term *feminicidio*, and it is preferred by activists. However its translation as femicide implies state complicity in the crimes, so "femicide" is used here. See note 2 in the introduction.

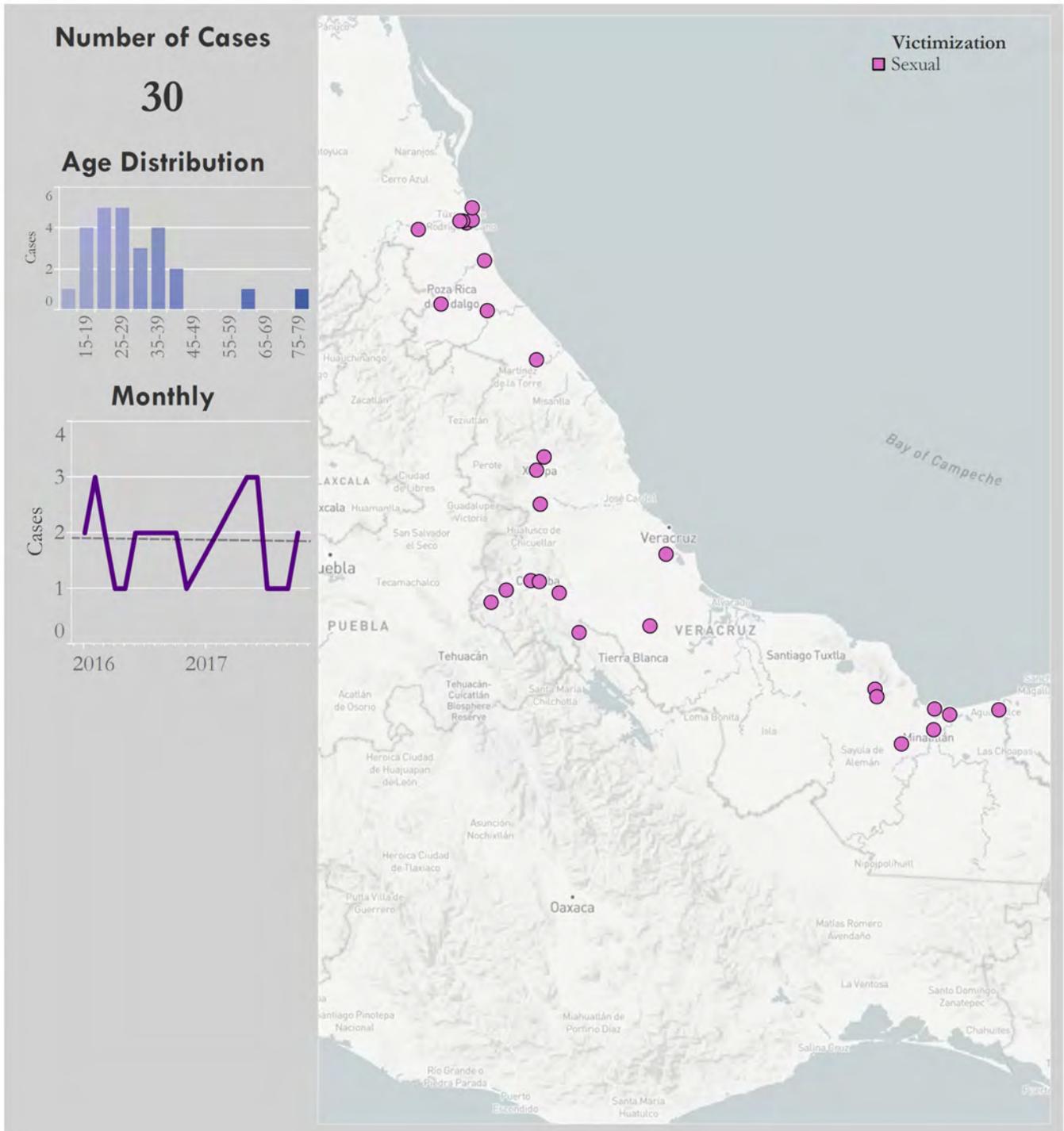
3. Sexual Violence in Veracruz

More than 12% of the cases documented in Veracruz included some element of sexual violence, whether sexual assault or mutilation. This percentage is strikingly higher than that found in Baja California or Sinaloa (4.1% and 1.3% respectively). That these crimes have been geographically distributed across the entire state suggests they are indicative of social patterns rather than the activity of any particular criminal cell or serial predator.

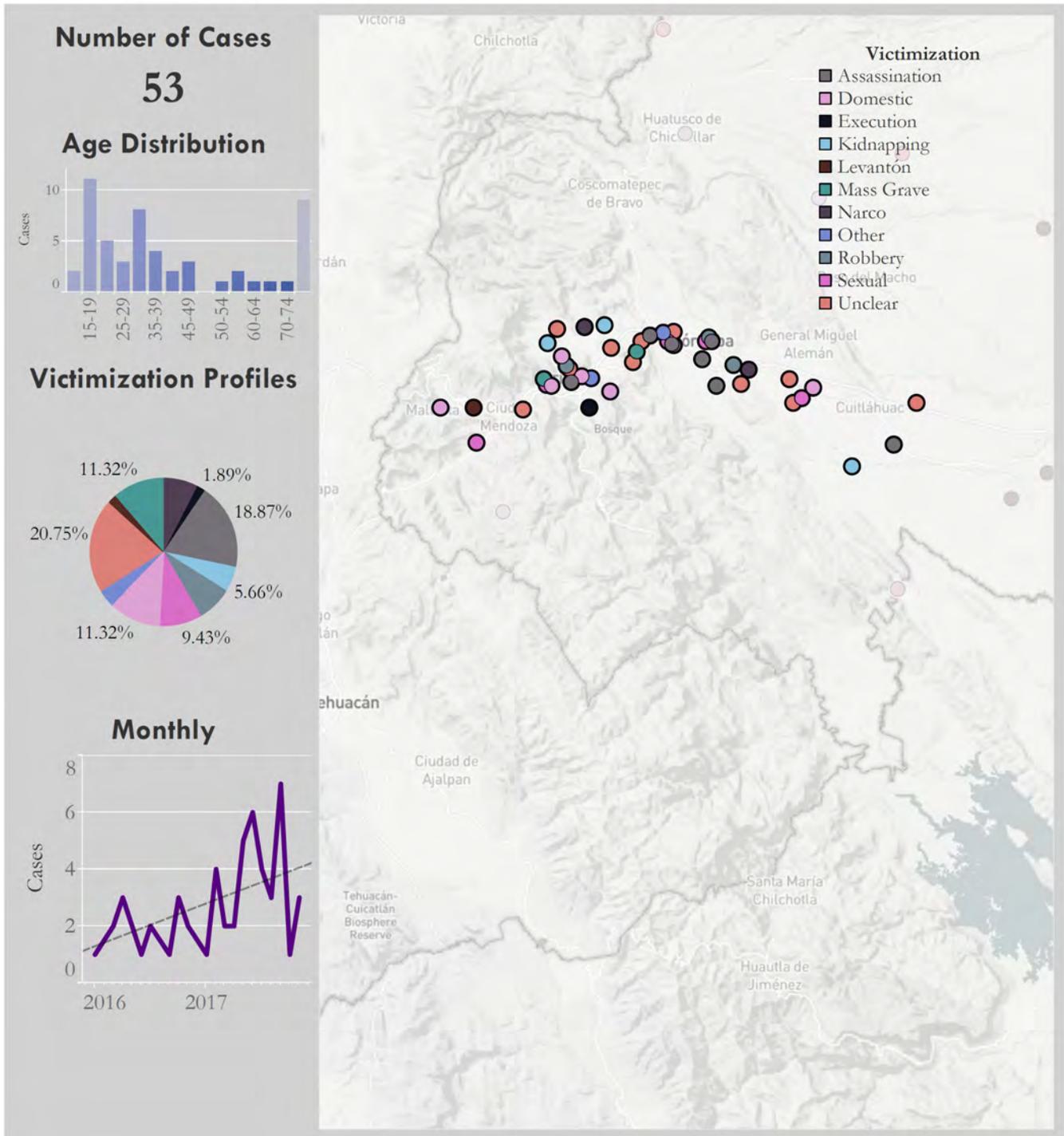
Erika Alejandra Guzman Torres was found February 22, 2016 in the municipal cemetery in the city of Tuxpan, Veracruz. Torres, 37, a waitress from Santiago de la Peña and a mother of two, had been hit in the head and face with a large rock. Initial reports suggested that she may have been raped, and her body was found half-naked. Little information is available about the case, as there was no follow-up reporting on the crime after February 23. Though police initially offered two possible motives for the femicide, either revenge or a crime of passion, the investigation was stalled and as Noreste observed “at the moment not only have no arrests been made, but no suspects have been identified.”

Gúzman Torres’ case represents a number of troubling patterns found in Veracruz femicides. Waitresses and others working at bars seem to be at high risk: during 2016 and 2017, at least 7 waitresses were murdered away from their place of work. It is possible that a lack of transit options contributes to the risks these women face, since those working in bars are required to travel alone sometimes at late hours when a bar closes. The possible rape, and the fact that the body was left half-naked, also follows the larger pattern of sexual violence in Veracruz: at least 10 cases involved a reported sexual assault (the actual number may be much higher) and 23 cases involved bodies left naked or partially undressed. – Julia Herold

Sexual Femicides in Veracruz, 2016-2017



4. The Orizaba-Córdoba Corridor



The most striking geographic tendency in Veracruz is the concentration of violence in the area around Orizaba and Córdoba, along the main highway connecting Mexico City to the port of Veracruz. Around 20% of all cases documented in the state occurred in this area and have trended upward, even since the declaration of a gender alert last year. As with trends in Tijuana, many of the cases in this area seem linked to organized crime—the area is strategically located—however upwards of 13% of the cases can be classified as domestic violence and victimization patterns do not suggest clear evidence that the violence is solely driven by drug cartel activity. Orizaba, for example, registered a number of high-profile domestic violence femicides.

Twenty-three year old Cinthya Leon Salome was beaten and strangled to death by her husband on April 12, 2016 in Orizaba, Veracruz. After a night out with her husband at different bars, the couple returned home and began to argue over what her husband believed were “hickeys” on his wife’s neck. Enraged by what he believed was his wife’s infidelity, Cinthya’s husband Carlos Jesús Texcahua Flores, strangled his wife in their bedroom. He later testified he went to sleep next to his wife’s lifeless body, and decided the next morning to turn himself in to authorities.

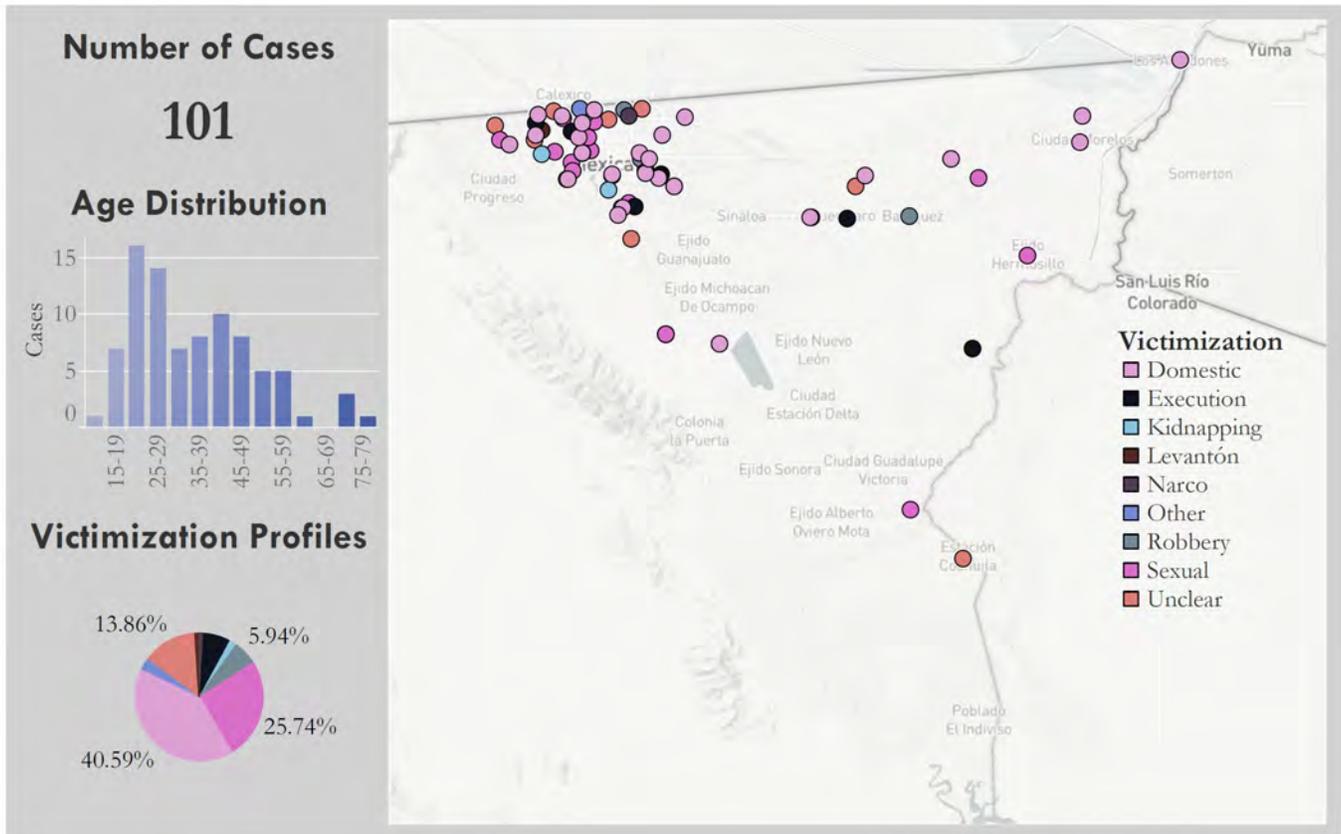
Domestic abuse is one of the clearer forms of femicide. These cases are the ones in which the motives are usually the most clear, and the killing is easily classifiable. Domestic abuse is common within Mexico, and are not limited to spousal abuse but also include sons abusing or killing their mother or grandmothers and fathers abusing their daughters. Although in this case, there was no indication whether or not this was the first incident of abuse in the home, often domestic violence killings occur after abuse has been present for some time. In our sampling, 17 women were killed by domestic violence in Veracruz alone.

The León Salome case also illustrates the difficulty in understanding regional clusters of femicide: hers was one of more than 50 cases documented in the Orizaba-Córdoba region, and one of four similar domestic violence cases in the city of Orizaba alone. At the same time, domestic violence only represented around 10% of the cases in the area, with patterns of violence associated with organized crime representing around 30% of cases. – Johanna Lara

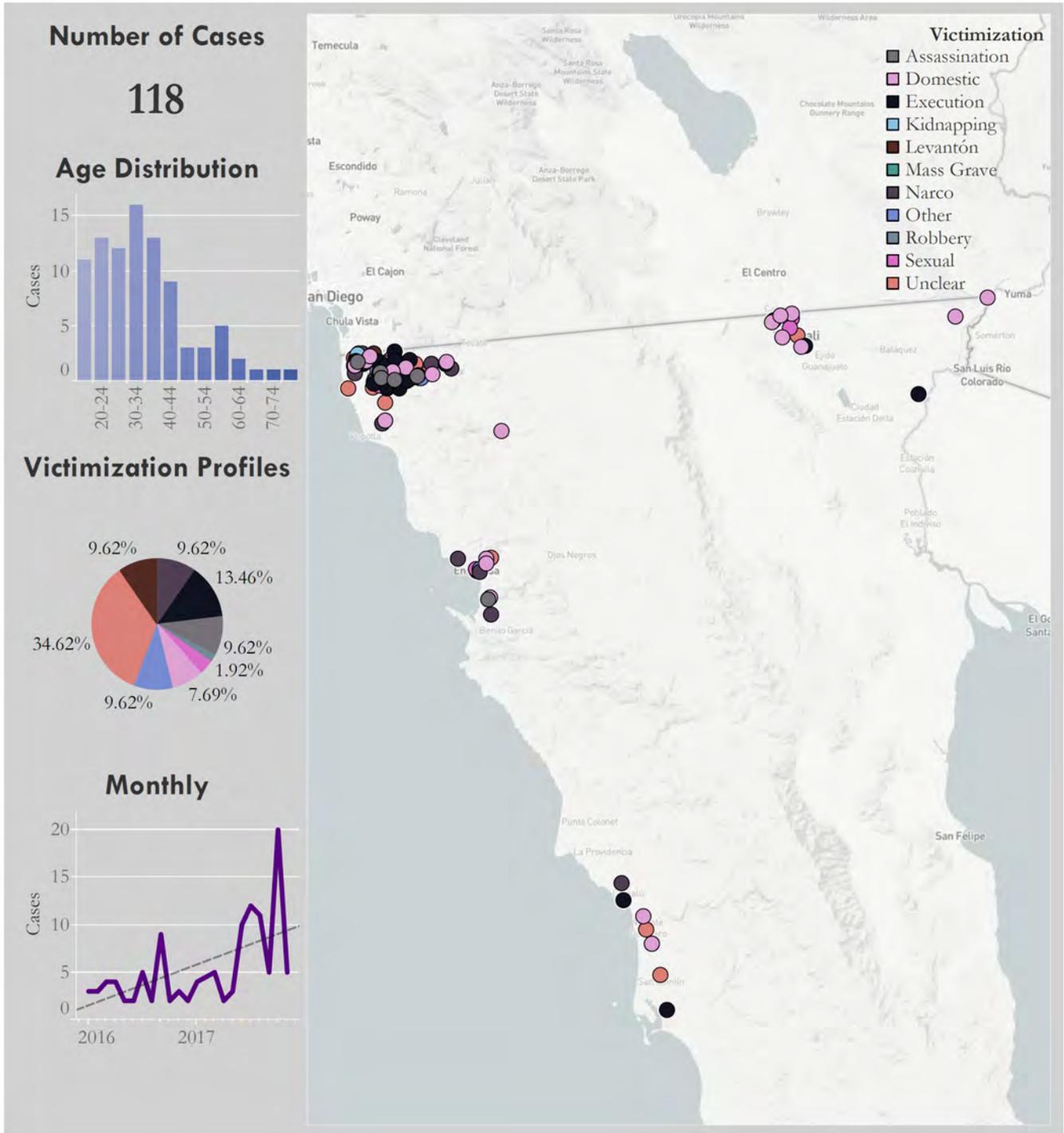
5. Domestic and Sexual Violence in Mexicali

While most femicides in Baja California are clustered in Tijuana, were most of the population resides, the area surrounding the state's capital of Mexicali has a long-running epidemic of domestic violence and sexual femicides. Since 2013 we have documented nearly as many domestic violence and sexual femicides in Mexicali as in Tijuana, a city more than twice its size. This is especially striking because Mexicali has otherwise low levels of femicides: domestic violence or sexual murders make up just under 70% of the cases we have documented there.

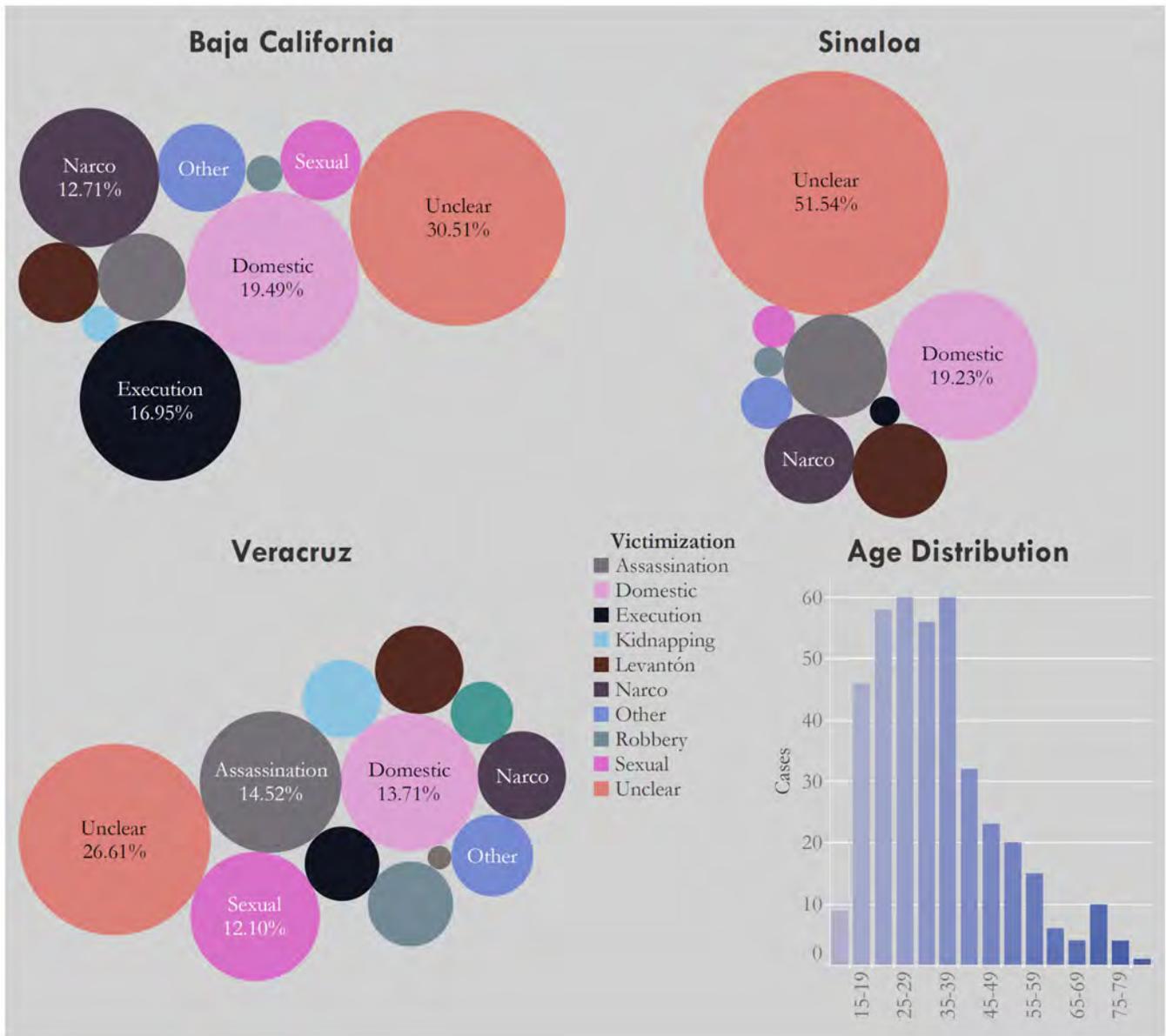
On the morning of May 14, 2017, the body of Belén Hernández Cruz, 40, was found in a vacant lot on the western edge of Mexicali. It appeared she had been run over by a car. Days later, authorities arrested her boyfriend Ignacio “N” for the crime. According to the investigation, after a night drinking, the couple began arguing on their way home and Ignacio pushed her from the car. As she lay on the ground, he allegedly drove over her repeatedly. While horrific, such instances of extreme domestic violence are not uncommon in Baja California. Three cases involved partners setting women on fire, and most domestic cases involved beating, burning, or stabbing. These cases represent a stark counterpoint to those involving organized crime—while the degrees of brutality may, occasionally, resemble each other, in Mexicali in particular, almost all femicides are domestic or sexual, and have been since 2013. – Michael Lettieri



Femicides in Baja California, 2016-2017



Appendix 1: Comparative Victimization Profiles



Appendix 2: Methodology

Our methodology is collaborative and open-access, and we work with partners on both sides of the border.

This project seeks to identify cases that may fit the academic definition of femicide, and as such uses a methodology that produces different numbers than many activist organizations. It should not be interpreted as invalidating these other tallies produced with different intent or criteria. Nevertheless, we believe our approach offers the most transparent and rigorous comparative accounting of femicides.*

This dataset excludes women killed as part of a mixed-gender mass killing, but does include cases where a mixed-gender group was attacked and only the woman was killed. Also excluded are murders of girls under the age of 10. In around 18% of the cases, the age of the victim could not be determined; these cases were coded as age 0.

Causes of death have been determined based on newspaper reports. In cases where multiple forms of violence were present (i.e. beating before death) the suspected cause of death is listed. These are also generalized, and more specific information can be found in the details of each case.

*Other records of violence against women include both academic and activist projects:

- Estela Casados González's project at the Universidad Veracruzana, *Asesinatos de mujeres y niñas por razón de Género: Femicidio en la entidad veracruzana*
- María Salguero's open source map: <https://femicidiosmx.crowdmap.com/>
- Counts by women's organizations in nearly every state.

All these projects contribute to a full and responsible accounting of gender violence in Mexico and serve to force authorities to take steps such as issuing Gender Violence Alerts.

Victimization Profiles were classified made based on the following criteria:

- **Narco:** All attacks with heavy weaponry (AK-47s), the presence of a "Narcomanta," or known connection to narco-trafficking.
- **Execution:** When the body presented signs of an execution, such as bound hands and a gunshot to the head.
- **Assassination:** All murders that occurred in public, usually involving a scenario that resembled a mob hit where a single or multiple gunmen target a victim.
- **Levantón:** Cases of forced disappearance, however brief, where the report notes that the victim was taken by force before being killed, or had been missing for a period of time.
- **Kidnapping:** Distinguished from levantón in that a ransom was requested.
- **Robbery:** Murders occurring as part of a robbery.
- **Sexual:** All cases where the victim's body is found naked or half-naked, all cases where reports observe evidence of rape, cases where the victim was a sex-worker or was found in a motel associated with sex-work.
- **Domestic:** Typically cases where the aggressor is a romantic partner or former romantic partner, but also includes cases involving family members such as children or parents. Non-lethal domestic violence is often cited as a factor that leads to femicide.

These classifications are approximations and are based on the best available information. Many cases may fit into multiple categories, for example, a levantón may have a sexual component, however the classifications are not overlapping in this dataset and a final, single, determination was made based on the clearest evidence.

These classifications also seek to highlight the extent to which femicides are not exclusively a drug war phenomenon, and as such the "Narco" classification is used sparingly and in cases where clear connections can be verified. Thus

while the patterns of violence in executions, assassinations, and levantones may be linked to organized crime, it is important to acknowledge that not all of these cases involved women linked to narcotrafficking.

Two additional circumstances present methodological challenges. First, in cases where no clear victimization profile was apparent, we have chosen to provide substantial details and classify the case as “Unclear.” Second, we have chosen to exclude cases where it is unclear that a murder occurred—for example in instances of drownings or potential suicides—and minimal information is available in the newsmedia.

Data was compiled from searches of online newsmedia during 2016 and 2017. The methodology used presents several biases. First, there is bias toward cases occurring in areas where media coverage is ample. Culiacán, for instance, may be overreported in comparison to rural parts of the Sinaloa. Second, it is possible that newsmedia did not report certain kinds of killings associated with narcotrafficking for reasons of safety. Third, domestic violence is chronically underreported, and while this may be less true for domestic murders, there is still reason to believe some cases may evade media coverage. Given a classification scheme that uses identification of a domestic aggressor as a requirement for categorization, it is possible that murders currently classified as unclear, assassination, sexual, levantón, execution, random, or predatory are all also domestic violence cases. Fourth, even in cases that receive some media coverage, there is often only fragmentary information and the lack of follow-up coverage of cases prevents more detailed analysis. Yet by capturing as much information as possible, this approach allows for subsequent research using freedom-of-information requests, and highlights the extent to which femicides remain a marginalized part of the public conversation in Mexico.



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The Trans-Border Institute helps to build sustainable peace in Mexico and the border region through research, outreach, and teaching. A part of the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, since 1994 Kroc TBI has worked to empower students and partners on both sides of the border to develop their own solutions to violence and corruption. Our approach combines teaching, collaborative research and public outreach to engage students in protecting the most vulnerable populations. We encourage alternatives to the war on drugs and the militarization of the border.

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