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A Diagnostic of Urban Corruption in Mexico

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A Diagnostic of Urban Corruption in Mexico

In spite of the promises of urban life, cities are no panacea. Their governments have been known to promote policies that disadvantage the poor and other vulnerable residents (Piccato 2001). In the developing world, urban population growth can result in overcrowding (Abu-Lughod 2004), and the worsening of environmental problems (Molina and Molina 2002). Criminality and violence are additional concerns (Caldeira 2000 ; Moncada 2009). In Mexico, between 2006 and 2017, more than one-hundred mayors were murdered in the context of an ongoing drug war (Valencia 2017).

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Our focus, however, is on the issue of corruption. According to survey data, in Latin America, approximately 17 percent of residents pay bribes in the process of applying for permits from their city government. We seek to complement this statistic with an *under the hood* look at corruption-related complaints. (The full version of our study [can be viewed as a policy paper](#) published by the Baker Institute of Public Policy at Rice University.)

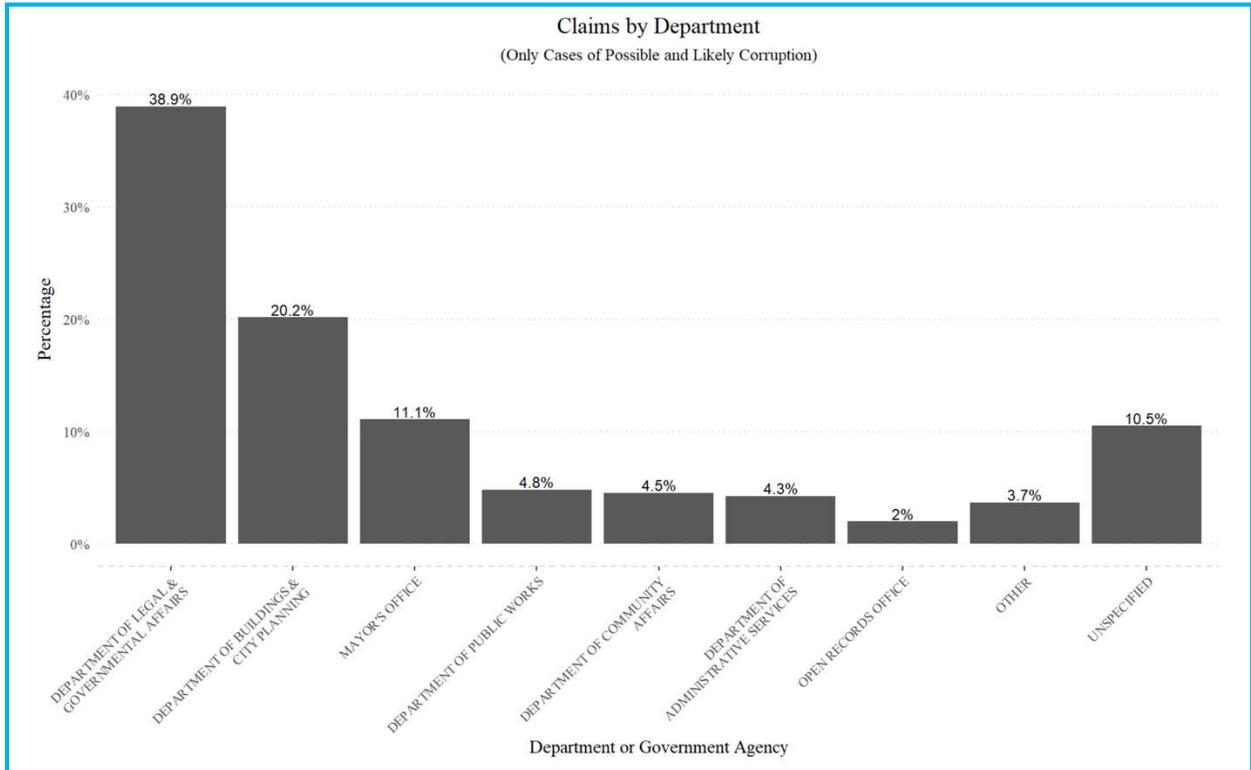
We examine a unique dataset containing 445 claims submitted over a two-year period to the anticorruption agency (or ACA) of a crucial urban district in central Mexico. Our study provides a diagnostic of corruption vulnerabilities that can be replicated in other urban districts in Mexico. By applying the proposed taxonomy to a series of corruption claims, we are able to uncover the government agencies that attract the most complaints, spotlight trending concerns, and unveil some insights. One such insight is that a majority of claims handled by the ACA are relevant. However, 22 percent of the claims do not have any apparent connection to corruption; instead, they refer to human resource issues and various public service concerns. For example, one such claim is from a government official who complains about running out of office supplies, while another is from a citizen who is frustrated at interruptions to the water supply. Given that ACAs are often overburdened, we recommend that irrelevant claims be referred to the appropriate authorities, instead of being added to the workload of investigators.

Of course, deciding between relevant and irrelevant complaints is not a simple task. A number of claims are so ambiguous that it is unclear whether they refer to corruption or inefficiency. This serves as a reminder that corruption and inefficiency are related phenomena, and that ACAs cannot afford to ignore inefficiencies. However, the larger takeaway is that ACAs everywhere should adopt a relatively loose standard of what counts as a relevant claim worth registering in its system. Not every claim should arouse suspicion. That being said, if a claim has at least a possible connection to corruption, then it merits inspection. The goal is to provide strategic vigilance.

Focusing on the claims that have at least a possible link to corruption, 19 percent of them in our dataset refer to instances in which officials limit access to government information. Another 14.5 percent of relevant claims point to inefficiencies. Bribery and kickback schemes make up 10.2 percent of claims, while the remaining 56.3 percent refer to myriad questionable behaviors also covered by our taxonomy. Government employees who receive a salary without

showing up to work, the suspicious loss of official documents from municipal archives, government officials who privilege bureaucratic lobbyists—these are some of the unwarranted activities highlighted by our analysis.

In terms of problematic agencies, as is highlighted in the table, the agencies responsible for regulating the construction sector—specifically, the Department of Buildings & City Planning and the Department of Public Works—are two of the ones that stand out as having collected a relatively large number of corruption-related claims. These agencies apply significant discretion in overseeing capital-intensive activities.



In summary, our research finds that agencies enjoying ample discretionary powers concentrate a greater number of corruption-related claims. Through targeted audits, high-profile prosecutions, and clear messaging, anticorruption agencies in Mexico can signal that there are real legal consequences to the abuse of public office. Government officials must be mindful that they can be held accountable for their actions.

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This publication is part of an ongoing series of contributions from practitioners, policymakers, and civil society leaders in the public integrity community. If you have expertise you would like to share, please contact us at CAPI@law.columbia.edu.

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