

THE RISE OF CARTEL POWER AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY: AN ANALYSIS OF VIOLENCE, KIDNAPPINGS, AND MURDERS IN FEAR IS JUST A WORD

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ABSTRACT

The aim of present study is to explore the societal impact of cartel-driven violence as portrayed in the novel *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023). It discusses how drug cartels, once small-scale criminal groups, have transformed into transnational organizations wielding significant socio-political influence. The analysis focuses on the strategic use of violence, kidnappings, and murders by cartels to maintain dominance and instill fear within communities and the character in the novel. Using a qualitative research approach, the study explores the psychological and emotional toll of cartel violence on individuals and societies. It dives into concepts of resilience and survival, analyzing how characters in the novel navigate life under constant threat. The research also draws parallels between the fictional representation of cartel power and its real-world implications and the study incorporate insights from secondary literature on organized crime to contextualize the novel's narrative. By connecting fiction with real-world issues, the research underscores the role of storytelling in understanding and addressing the pervasive challenges posed by organized crime. This work contributes to academic discussions on crime literature, societal resilience, and the psychological effects of violence, offering meaningful perspectives for scholars, policymakers, and readers alike.

Keywords: Cartel violence, organized crime, societal impact, resilience, *Fear Is Just a Word*, kidnappings, murders, qualitative research, crime literature.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of cartel power, particularly in regions like Latin America, has had a profound effect on both local and international societies. Drug cartels, which began as small-scale smuggling operations, have developed into transnational criminal organizations with vast networks spanning multiple countries and continents. Their primary objective has always been profiting, but their methods of achieving this have become increasingly violent and destructive. Understanding the socio-political and economic factors that contribute to cartel power is essential in analyzing the broader connections of their activities, particularly in terms of violence, kidnappings, and murders.

The origins of modern drug cartels can be traced back to the early 20th century, when organized crime began to take root in Latin America, especially in Colombia, Mexico, and the Caribbean. In the early days, cartels were primarily involved in the production and dealing of drugs such as marijuana and cocaine. However, as global demand for narcotics increased, these cartels expanded their operations, establishing more networks and developing international distribution channels. Scholars such as Ioan Grillo (*El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*, 2011) and Gabriel Ferreyra (*Drug Trafficking in Mexico and the United States*, 2020) highlight the evolution of cartels from

small syndicates into powerful entities significant political and social influence. By the late 20th century, the collapse of state institutions and the weakening of law enforcement allowed these criminal organizations to thrive unchecked. Violence has always been a central tool for cartels to maintain control and expand their influence. Cartels use violence to deter law enforcement from interfering in their operations. This violence is not limited to the drug trade but extends to other illegal activities, such as kidnapping. Many cartels have access to advanced weaponry, which has resulted in widespread bloodshed and further a climate of fear in affected communities. Over time, this violence has seeped into the daily lives of civilians, with many innocents becoming victims of cartel conflicts (Grillo, 2011). The rise of kidnappings has led to the development of a thriving “kidnap economy,” where families and communities are forced to live in constant fear. Literature, such as *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023), provides a vivid portrayal of these dynamics, illustrating the psychological and social toll of cartel violence on individuals and communities.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of drug cartels in regions like Latin America has led to violence, kidnappings, and murders, creating a climate of fear that destabilizes communities and undermines public safety. Cartels use extreme violence, including torture, to maintain control and intimidate both civilians and law enforcement. Kidnapping has become a common tactic for generating revenue and spreading fear, while the inability of governments to effectively combat cartel power has worsened the situation. This study aims to analyze the societal impact of cartel-driven violence and the pervasive fear it generates as depicted in *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023).

Research Questions

This research paper answers following questions: How does the novel *Fear Is Just a Word* portray the impact of cartel power on individuals and communities in terms of violence, kidnappings, and murders? How do the characters in *Fear Is Just a Word* respond to the threat of cartel violence, and how novel depicts the societal resilience in

such environments?

Research Objectives

To analyze how *Fear Is Just a Word* illustrates the dynamics of cartel power and its consequences on the daily lives of individuals and communities.

To examine the ways in which characters in the novel navigate violence, kidnappings, and murders while grappling with the constant threat of cartel control.

Significance of the Research

This research holds significant value in understanding both the real-world implications of cartel power and its representation in literature, particularly in *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023). By analyzing the portrayal of cartel-driven violence, kidnappings, and murders in the novel, the study contributes to a deeper comprehension of how these criminal organizations impact societies on psychological, social, and emotional levels. The examination of the characters' responses to cartel violence provides insight into human resilience. By understanding these dynamics, the research can contribute to the development of more effective strategies for addressing cartel violence and its effects on communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although so many articles have been written on this particular theory and some are also published on present play, I have chosen for this research. Some of the recent and most related to the present research are discussed in this chapter. Although no academic research has been conducted specifically on *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023), its importance lies in its portrayal of cartel violence and its impact on society. To understand the themes discussed in the novel, this explores literature related to the societal effects of organized crime and how such topics are represented in literature and other media.

Many studies have focused on the ways organized crime and cartel violence impact societies such as *High-Profile Criminal Violence: Why Drug Cartels Murder Government Officials and Party Candidates in Mexico*. This article explores the surprising wave of lethal attacks by drug cartels against hundreds of local elected officials and party candidates in Mexico

between 2007 and 2012. These attacks are puzzling because criminal organizations tend to prefer the secrecy over the publicity of political murder. Scholars suggest that war drives armed actors to attack state authorities in search of protection or rents. However, using original data on high-profile attacks in Mexico, the authors demonstrate that "war need" arguments underexplain this violence. Focusing on political opportunities, the study suggests that cartels use attacks to establish criminal governance conquer local governments, populations, and territories. The research presents quantitative and qualitative evidence showing that cartels exploited Mexico's political polarization and targeted subnational authorities who were unprotected by their federal partisan rivals. Moreover, cartels intensified attacks during subnational election cycles to capture incoming governments and targeted geographically adjacent municipalities to establish control over large territories. The findings reveal how cartels take cues from the political environment to develop their own political domains through high-profile violence. These results challenge the widely shared assumption that organized criminal groups are apolitical actors and highlight their strategic use of violence as a tool to achieve political and territorial control. This insight adds to the understanding of cartel behavior and provides a framework for analyzing their interactions with state authorities and their impact on local governance.

Another article *The Beheading of Criminal Organizations and the Dynamics of Violence in Mexico*. First published online in June 2015, this article examines the consequences of leadership-targeted strategies employed by the Mexican government in its campaign to weaken drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs). The study focuses on the period following the aggressive security policies initiated in 2006, which aimed to disrupt criminal organizations by capturing or killing their senior leaders. While these strategies can destabilize targeted organizations, the research highlights their potential to escalate both inter-cartel and intra-cartel violence, criminal networks and creating new conflicts. Captures or killings of top leaders tend to have widespread effects on DTO-related violence and affecting the general

population. Conversely, targeting lower-ranked primarily increases violence in strategic locations, such as transportation hubs. The study also observes temporal and variations in the impact of leadership removals. While DTO-related violence typically spikes within six months of a leader's capture or killing, broader effects on general homicides tend to be more enduring. These patterns suggest differing mechanisms by which leadership disruptions propagate violence, providing valuable insights into the complex dynamics of cartel power struggles and their societal consequences.

These studies provide valuable insights into the broader issues of cartel operations, which are central to the world depicted in *Fear Is Just a Word*. Whereas the themes of Resilience and Fear shown in literature, themes of resilience and fear under oppressive have been explored in works dealing with conflict and trauma. Novels and studies that examine societal responses to violence help contextualize the characters in *Fear Is Just a Word*. While this novel has not yet been studied academically, its focus on the psychological and emotional effects of living under cartel control with similar themes in works of modern crime fiction. The Novel's Unique Contribution makes *Fear Is Just a Word* unique is its detailed exploration of how individuals and communities navigate fear and violence. While no direct academic analysis exists for this novel, my research will fill this gap by examining its portrayal of societal resilience under cartel power. This study will contribute to understanding how literature can reflect real-world issues like violence, fear, and survival.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This article employs a descriptive and qualitative approach to analyze the themes of cartel-driven violence, kidnappings, and murders as portrayed in *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023). The primary resource for data collection is the novel itself, while secondary resources include articles and research papers from journals that provide insights into organized crime and its societal impact. The textual analysis focuses on examining the narrative elements of the novel, including its characters, settings, and conflicts, to understand how the author portrays the

psychological and social effects of cartel violence. By analyzing specific passages and dialogues of the characters, the study explores how the novel depicts as the fear and trauma experienced by individuals living under cartel control and murder of the character which remove the fear of the mother. Themes of resilience and survival are shown in the mother to reveal how it navigates the challenges posed by a violent and oppressive environment and on her daughter. Secondary sources from journal articles are incorporated to contextualize the fictional narrative within real-world discussions of organized crime and its impact on society. These sources provide a comparative framework, helping to identify parallels between the novel's depiction of cartel power and actual cases of violence, kidnappings, and social destabilization. This combined approach not only enhances the understanding of the novel's thematic depth but also bridges the gap between fiction and reality. The analysis highlights the significance of storytelling in addressing complex societal issues and contributes to broader discussions on crime literature, psychological resilience, and the socio-political ramifications of organized crime.

DATA ANALYSIS

San Fernando was once a peaceful town, known for its agricultural economy and calm lifestyle. However, after the split between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas in early 2010, the town became the center of violent cartel conflict. The violence escalated with the Zetas taking control of the town, marking the change from a peaceful place to a symbol of the state's failure in controlling drug cartel activities. The violence and Fear increase in people. The Zeta assault on San Fernando was a sudden and intense event, with a convoy of heavily armed vehicles attacking government buildings and police forces. The violence was brutal but targeted at authorities, with minimal civilian casualties. The gunfire and explosions echoed throughout the town, making the residents experience fear and insecurity. This shift in power showed how the cartels were taking control of not only the economy but also the social order. Instilled in the local community. The Zetas' arrival, with their show of force, was meant to assert their dominance and intimidate anyone opposing

them. The Zeta takeover had a profound impact on the town's social fabric. The local police, who had once been in control, were overpowered and fled. The authorities no longer had the power to protect the citizens, showing how deeply the cartel had infiltrated the town's infrastructure. Despite the violence, there were no reported deaths, which could imply that the Zetas were exercising control by showing strength without killing civilians—a way to demonstrate power without completely breaking the community's spirit. Whereas the events of March 31, 2010, are an example of how cartels like the Zetas grew in power and influence. This takeover was an attempt to establish dominance in the region, showing the broader impact of cartels on society, including their control over local politics and law enforcement.

The prologue of *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023) introduces Miriam Rodríguez, a mother driven by loss and determination, as she hunts for her daughter Karen's killers. It shows the personal and societal effects of cartel violence, highlighting themes of fear, resilience, and justice. Each line is explained in simpler terms: "Her grief gave way to acceptance, and then to resolve: to seek revenge and pursue justice herself, for Karen, and for the other families of the disappeared" (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p. 1). "Retribution for Miriam began as a means to transform pain into purpose, and then became an all-consuming force" (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p.1). These sentence shows how Miriam's deep sadness after losing her daughter turned into strength and determination. Instead of giving up, she decided to take matters into her own hands and fight for justice. Her actions are not just for Karen but also for other families who have suffered similar losses. Miriam turned her grief into a mission. Seeking justice gave her life new meaning, but it also became the focus of everything she did. Her quest to find her daughter's killers took over her life completely. "The Zetas had blazed a trail of violence through more than a dozen Mexican states, trafficking drugs, smuggling migrants, and kidnapping for ransom" (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 1). Whereas this line describes the Zetas cartel as a powerful and dangerous group involved in many illegal activities. They spread fear and violence across a large part of Mexico, showing how their actions

affect entire communities and regions. “The town was now infamous for the atrocities that had come to define Mexico’s War on Drugs” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p.2). Shows how San Fernando, Miriam’s hometown, had become known for terrible crimes connected to the fight against drug cartels. The violence and cruelty were so extreme that they became a defining part of the town’s identity. “The Zetas beheaded their victims or dissolved them in vats of acid; they forced captives to fight to the death for their own amusement” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p. 3). This chilling description highlights the extreme cruelty of the Zetas cartel. They didn’t just kill people— they used horrific methods to spread fear and control others. Their actions were like something from a nightmare, showing the depths of their brutality. Through these lines, the prologue sets the stage for the novel by showing how a mother’s fight for justice unfolds in a world dominated by fear and violence. The story captures both the horrors of cartel control and the strength of a woman who refuses to back down. Miriam’s journey is not just about revenge but also about standing up against an oppressive system that has failed to protect its people. Miriam’s actions in *Fear Is Just a Word* demonstrate her ingenuity and determination as she builds her own network of informants, gathering evidence that law enforcement refused to pursue (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p. 47). By creating her own support system, Miriam directly challenges the institutions that failed her, symbolizing individual resistance against systemic corruption. Despite her heroic efforts, the scale of the tragedy becomes evident as “for every name she uncovered, there were dozens more that would never be found” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p. 62). This highlights not only the limitations of her quest but also the systemic nature of the problem, which extends far beyond individual efforts. The novel critiques the justice system through statements like, “Justice was never blind—it simply refused to see those who needed it most” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p. 103), underscoring its failure to address the needs of marginalized communities affected by cartel violence. Even in death, Karen becomes a rallying cry, representing what happens when fear is met with defiance:

“Even in death, Karen was a rallying cry—a symbol of what happens when fear is met with defiance” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023, p. 205). Her story evolves into a larger narrative of resistance, inspiring others to confront the cartels and fight for justice despite the risks involved. Through its vivid portrayal of cartel violence, *Fear Is Just a Word* bridges the gap between fiction and reality, offering a profound lens to examine the psychological and societal impacts of organized crime. Miriam Rodríguez’s journey serves as a testament to human resilience and the enduring quest for justice in the face of overwhelming adversity. The novel’s exploration of fear, trauma, and resistance provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities of crime literature, making it a significant contribution to discussions about societal resilience and the human cost of organized crime.

Despite her heroic efforts, the scale of the tragedy becomes evident in: “For every name she uncovered, there were dozens more that would never be found” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 62). This underscores the vastness of the problem and the limitations of Miriam’s quest, revealing how systemic corruption and cartel power extend beyond individual efforts. Her determination is juxtaposed with the lack of institutional support, as noted: “Every knock on a government door was met with silence or empty promises” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 65). This further illustrates the indifference of authorities, leaving victims and their families to fend for themselves. The novel critiques the justice system through statements like, “Justice was never blind—it simply refused to see those who needed it most” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 103). This poignant line highlights how the system fails marginalized communities, perpetuating their suffering in the face of organized crime. Miriam’s determination, however, becomes a symbol of hope and defiance: “Even as fear consumed the town, Miriam’s resolve became a flicker of light in the darkness” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 127). This demonstrates how her actions inspired others, proving that resistance, though dangerous, is not futile. Even in death, Karen’s story evolves into a larger narrative of resistance and hope: “Even in death, Karen was a rallying cry—a symbol of what happens

when fear is met with defiance” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 205). Her tragic story inspires others to confront the cartels and fight for justice despite the risks involved. The novel also touches on the psychological toll of this fight, as Miriam reflects: “Every victory was paid for with sleepless nights and the heavy weight of what was lost” (*Fear Is Just a Word*, 2023 p. 190). This reveals the emotional cost of resilience and the sacrifices made in the pursuit of justice. Through its vivid portrayal of cartel violence, *Fear Is Just a Word* bridges the gap between fiction and reality, offering a profound lens to examine the psychological and societal impacts of organized crime. Miriam Rodríguez’s journey serves as a testament to human resilience and the enduring quest for justice in the face of overwhelming adversity. The novel’s exploration of fear, trauma, and resistance provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities of crime literature, making it a significant contribution to discussions about societal resilience and the human cost of organized crime. It underscores the importance of storytelling in shedding light on societal issues, inspiring change, and giving a voice to those silenced by fear. Answer to the question in research the novel *Fear Is Just a Word* portrays the impact of cartel power as deeply pervasive, affecting individuals and communities on both psychological and societal levels. Cartel violence is depicted through chilling scenes of brutality, such as. This graphic description highlights the inhumanity used to control and terrorize populations. Communities like San Fernando, once peaceful, are transformed into symbols of fear and lawlessness. The novel also captures the personal toll of cartel violence through the experiences of its characters. Miriam Rodríguez’s fight for justice begins after her daughter Karen is kidnapped and murdered by cartel members. The narrative explores how kidnappings are used as tools of power and fear. The illustrates the dehumanization inflicted by cartel activity, as families are plunged into despair and financial ruin trying to secure the return of their loved ones. Moreover, the systemic failure of law enforcement is a recurring theme, emphasizing how the cartels’ power infiltrates every aspect of society: “The police stopped answering calls, and the streets belonged to the cartel” (*Fear*

Is Just a Word, 2023 p. 57). This breakdown of institutional authority leaves individuals and communities vulnerable, with fear becoming a constant in their lives. The novel *Fear Is Just a Word* portrays cartel power as a force that devastates individuals and communities through violence, kidnappings, and murders. It captures the psychological and societal toll of such actions, showing how fear becomes a pervasive element of everyday life. The Zetas cartel is depicted as a brutal force that uses extreme violence to maintain control, as seen in their methods of execution and public displays of cruelty. Communities like San Fernando are transformed from peaceful towns into hubs of fear and chaos, with the breakdown of law enforcement enabling the cartels to operate with impunity.

The kidnapping and murder of Karen Rodríguez exemplify the personal cost of cartel violence. The novel shows how these acts go beyond individual loss, affecting entire families and communities. The dehumanizing nature of these crimes is highlighted, as families are forced into desperate situations, often left to negotiate with cartels for the lives of their loved ones. By illustrating the ripple effects of these actions, the novel paints a vivid picture of how cartel power infiltrates every layer of society, dismantling trust and security. The characters respond to cartel violence in different ways, ranging from fear and submission to resilience and defiance. Miriam Rodríguez’s journey is central to the novel’s exploration of resilience. After her daughter Karen is taken and killed, Miriam refuses to remain a victim of fear. Instead, she channels her grief into action, creating her own network of informants and collecting evidence that law enforcement neglects to pursue. Her actions symbolize individual resistance against systemic failure and corruption. Other characters reflect the broader societal impact of living under cartel control. Some families are paralyzed by fear, unable to act for fear of retaliation, while others find strength in solidarity, as shown during Karen’s memorial when multiple families come together to share their stories and demand justice. These moments of collective resilience highlight the power of community in confronting oppressive systems, even when formal institutions fail.

The novel also underscores the psychological cost of resistance. Miriam's determination comes at great personal sacrifice, as she reflects on the toll of her efforts and the lives that remain lost despite her work. This duality reveals both the strength and limitations of resilience in such environments. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that while fear dominates, acts of defiance—whether individual or collective—can challenge the narrative of helplessness and inspire hope in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Conclusion

The novel *Fear Is Just a Word* (2023) offers a compelling and harrowing portrayal of cartel-driven violence and its effects on individuals and communities. Through the journey of Miriam Rodríguez, the story delves into the themes of fear, resilience, and justice, shedding light on the psychological and societal tolls of living under the shadow of organized crime. The research illustrates how cartels leverage extreme violence, kidnappings, and systemic corruption to establish dominance and instill fear, leaving a profound impact on communities and their social fabric. Miriam's relentless pursuit of justice amidst institutional failure exemplifies human resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity. Her transformation from a grieving mother to a determined crusader underscores the possibility of resistance, even in oppressive environments. Despite the personal risks and systemic challenges, Miriam's actions inspire others to confront cartel violence, demonstrating the power of individual agency in the fight against organized crime. By bridging fiction and reality, *Fear Is Just a Word* 2023 provides valuable insights into the broader socio-political implications of cartel power. The novel critiques the ineffectiveness of justice systems and highlights the collective trauma experienced by affected communities. It also emphasizes the role of storytelling in raising awareness of these issues, offering a lens to explore the complexities of fear, trauma, and survival. This research contributes to academic discussions on crime literature and societal resilience, advocating for a deeper understanding of the human cost of organized crime. It underscores the importance of addressing systemic corruption and

supporting marginalized communities in the fight against cartel violence. Ultimately, the study affirms the enduring relevance of literature in fostering empathy, sparking dialogue, and inspiring action in the face of pervasive societal challenges. The impact of drug cartels in Mexico has profound implications not only for the country's security and governance but also for the psychological well-being of its citizens. The continuous cycle of violence and fear brought about by cartel activities has permeated everyday life, deeply affecting civilians and communities. As cartels continue to assert control over vast areas, their influence extends beyond criminal enterprises, disrupting societal norms, government structures, and even the fabric of local culture. The violence, often targeted at law enforcement and politicians, further entrenches corruption and weakens the rule of law, making it harder for the state to regain control.

Moreover, the fear generated by these cartels, including the threat of kidnapping and murder, has created a climate of trauma that affects not only the direct victims but also those who live under constant threat, leading to widespread anxiety and mental health issues. This pervasive fear damages the social cohesion of communities, undermining trust and cooperation between citizens and authorities. The psychological toll on individuals, from children to adults, is immense, with many residents becoming increasingly desensitized to violence or even adopting defensive mechanisms of silence and avoidance. However, despite these challenges, the resilience exhibited by many Mexican citizens and communities offers a hopeful outlook. Local organizations and individuals continue to fight against cartel influence, striving to protect their neighborhoods and restore a sense of safety. The role of international cooperation and policy reform, particularly in addressing root causes such as poverty, inequality, and a lack of education, is crucial for breaking the cycle of cartel violence. There is a need for comprehensive and long-term strategies that not only focus on strengthening law enforcement but also invest in social programs that address the deep-seated issues contributing to the rise of cartels. Ultimately, the fight against drug cartels requires a multi-

faceted approach that combines security measures with social and economic development. By tackling the underlying factors that fuel organized crime, it is possible to build a safer, more equitable future for Mexico and its people. The road to recovery will be long and fraught with difficulties, but with sustained efforts and solidarity both within the country and from the international community, it is possible to envision a Mexico where citizens no longer live in the shadow of cartel violence.

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