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In Teenage Killers, Mexico Confronts a Bloody Future

By Ioan Grillo / Mexico City

The most striking thing about the skinny 14-year-old was his eyes. They looked like they belonged to a bloodied war veteran — which, of course, he was, being in prison for two killings. As I talked to him in a prison cell, Miguel Angel Cantu opened those eyes wide in a penetrating glare of hatred and anger that could strike fear into grown men. But those eyes could not hide the suffering behind them. Cantu had killed two men in Ciudad Juárez street beefs. It was low-level gangbanger stuff. But the Juárez prison's director of inmates, Oswaldo Hogaz, warned that the powerful cartels would soon hire adolescents like Cantu to do their dirty work. "These kids are cheap, bloodthirsty, and they know the government can't punish them much," he said.

[\(Watch TIME's video "Narcocorridos: Singing Songs of Drug Violence."\)](#)

That was five years ago. Cantu is back on the streets, and Hogaz's warning has proved prescient. The next generation of teenage killers aren't just spilling blood in street clashes; some are working as hit men for Mexico's psychopathic criminal armies. That much became national news last week with the arrest of Edgar Jimenez Lugo, whose alias is "El Ponchis." This 14-year-old is accused of committing four murders for a drug cartel and taking part in torture and decapitations. Jimenez, born in San Diego, is a U.S. citizen. If he is convicted, the law of the Mexican state where he was arrested requires that, since he is under the age of 16, his maximum prison term be three years. After that, Jimenez might be back on U.S. streets.

[\(See pictures of a Mexican drug gang's "holy war."\)](#)

Jimenez has rapidly gained international notoriety. Blurred images of his face have flashed on television screens from Atlanta to Australia. In keeping with Mexican tradition, he was thrust before reporters and

confessed to the murders and mutilation. TV analysts speculated on what might have motivated him to kill, while a journalist somewhere came to the conclusion that his alias meant "the Cloak" — an observation that instantly became global conventional wisdom. Actually, if you ask Mexican middle-school kids what El Ponchis means, they will say that it refers to someone who likes techno music, with its "punchy punchy" beats.

[\(Watch TIME's video "Seeking a Safe Place in Drug-Embattled Juárez."\)](#)

Apart from his confession, Jimenez also posed in incriminating videos, which he had saved on his cell phone. In one, he squats in front of a group of gunmen wearing a baseball cap and holding a Kalashnikov rifle — looking like the gang mascot. In another, he stands by a prisoner who is hung up like a piece of meat with his shirt off and tape over his mouth. Jimenez hits him with a stick. Rumors have circulated that there are videos of El Ponchis chopping off heads, but no one seems to have seen them or have them.

Soldiers arrested Jimenez on his way to the airport in Cuernavaca, an hour's drive from Mexico City. He was with his older sister, and they carried guns, cocaine and tickets to Tijuana, over the border from San Diego. When he was paraded before reporters soon after, he said he was going to the U.S. to see his stepmother, while his mother is reported to live nearby in central Mexico. He said he was forced to commit the murders: "When I was 11, they picked me up. They said they would kill me ... I've killed four people, decapitated them. I felt bad doing it. They made me. They said if I didn't do it, they would kill me." Jimenez is being held in prison on weapons, drugs and murder charges.

Soldiers arrested other gang members shown in the videos in a raid in October. They allegedly formed a cell of a trafficking organization called the South Pacific Cartel, or CPS, headed by fugitive Hector Beltran Leyva. The CPS has waged a brutal campaign of terrorism this year in small towns and ranches for control of the lush, green state of Morelos, south of Mexico City. It has long been an area where traffickers fly in cocaine from South America, before trucking it up to the U.S. border. But the CPS has morphed into a broader criminal organization, also running local drug-dealing, kidnapping and protection rackets. Soldiers estimate that the CPS is behind about 200 murders of a total of 332 homicides in Morelos this year. Other detained gang members said they were paid \$3,000 for each killing to share among the cell.

Since his arrest, El Ponchis has filled the front pages of Mexican as well as international newspapers. But while his story stirred disgust in the U.S., there was little surprise. Youth prisons in Mexico are now full of minors who have been arrested for crimes linked to the drug war. Earlier this year, I visited the same penitentiary in Juárez where I had met Cantu in 2005. Most of the inmates had been convicted of drug-related murders, kidnapping and drug trafficking. I asked prison psychologist Elizabeth Villegas what effect

such crimes could have on the minds of these teenagers, what kind of men it could make them. "They don't feel anything that they have murdered people," Villegas replied. "They just don't understand the pain that they have caused others. Most come from broken families. They don't recognize rules or limits."

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