



Photo by Fernando Antonio/Associated Press.

CENTRAL AMERICA

Honduran soldiers outside Congress during a December 2012 political crisis.

Citizenship Under Siege

by Wendy Muse Sinek

Democracy appears to be firmly established in Central America. The civil wars that ravaged many countries in the region during the 1970s and 80s have come to a definitive end. Brutal authoritarian leaders in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador have been replaced by democratically elected officials. With the exception of Cuba, countries across Central America and the Caribbean hold free and fair elections for political office and have enshrined political and civil rights in their constitutions. And yet, conversations with ordinary citizens reveal that democratic rights and freedoms remain elusive for many. In a talk sponsored by UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies, Deborah Yashar, a professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, described the violence that many Central Americans experience on a daily basis.

In the early 2000s, Latin America was the most violent region in the world. According to data from the World

Health Organization, the average homicide rate was more than five times the global average, with 27.5 homicides per 100,000 people in Latin America compared to five per 100,000 elsewhere in the world. More recently, a 2011 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that the number of homicides by firearms in Central America was more than three times greater than the world average. Unsurprisingly, the 2010 Latinobarómetro survey found that nine out of 10 Latin Americans fear becoming a victim of violent crime. Statistics like these demonstrate the phenomenal human toll that violence has taken on society. What has been underexplored, however, is the role that violence plays in reducing the quality of democracy by curtailing individual citizenship rights.

To better understand why some areas of Central America have been more affected by violence than others, Yashar has embarked on a multi-year research project. For the purposes

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Photo by Johan Ordoñez/Getty Images.

Guatemalan police officers accused of kidnapping, robbery, and abuse of authority head to court.

of her study, she defines violence in terms of homicide rates for a given area. Data for all forms of violence in the region are inconsistent and difficult to obtain. Homicide rates, however, are among the best-documented types of violence and are therefore most amenable to analysis.

Yashar chose to focus on Central America for two main reasons. While homicide rates are relatively high across Latin America, murder is extraordinarily common in Central America. Second, and more puzzling, is the fact that some Central American countries experience far more violence than others despite sharing similar histories. For example, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua all experienced civil wars in which state officials committed numerous human rights abuses against ordinary citizens. By the early 2000s, however, all three had successfully transitioned from an authoritarian to a democratic regime, and at present, each has similar levels of economic inequality. Despite these commonalities, rates of violence are extremely high in El Salvador and Guatemala but relatively low in Nicaragua. Why do rates of violent crime vary so widely from one country to another, especially given their similarities on other counts?

Three explanations are commonly given to explain high levels of violence in Central America: a legacy of

civil war, inequality, and weak civil society. Yashar finds all three unconvincing, because they do not account for where the violence is actually taking place. Those making the civil war argument reason that war leaves a legacy of violence in its wake. When families are torn apart, weapons are prevalent, and states have become militarized, people become habituated to violent acts, making violence more commonplace. However, high levels of violence are recorded in countries that didn't have civil wars, such as Honduras, and low levels of violence appear in countries that did, namely Nicaragua. Furthermore, from a subnational perspective, the regions within each country where homicide rates are highest are not the areas in which the civil wars were fought.

Others scholars point to high levels of inequality as contributing to patterns of violence. In Latin America, however, there is no simple correlation between violence and inequality. Yashar analyzed econometric data from the World Bank and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and found that countries with the lowest levels of inequality also have the lowest levels of violence. However, high levels of violence are found in countries with high levels of inequality, as well as in countries where wealth is distributed far more



Photo by Ann Kroon.

Nicaraguan police officers participate in a cooperative training session put on by the national police academy and the Swedish police force.

equitably. What is more, homicide rates in Latin America are actually much higher than the region's average level of inequality would predict.

The quality of civil society is a third common explanation for varying levels of violence. During the 1990s, a wave of research on the role of social networks indicated that a strong civil society — particularly dense networks of civic associations — can foster social peace. However, in recent years, a similar body of work has found that a strong civil society can support social groups with criminal or violent intentions, as well as peaceful ones. In sum, none of the predominant theories can satisfactorily explain disparate levels of criminal violence in the region.

Instead, Yashar contends that we should move past regional or single-country explanations such as those presented above and consider dynamics at the sub-national level. In doing so, she finds a compelling explanation for the pattern of violence that is rooted in the trade and transit of illicit goods. Specifically, homicide rates are highest in areas that contain drug transit routes, particularly for cocaine. In the late 1990s, much of the cocaine produced in Latin America reached U.S. shores via the Caribbean. By 2012, however, cocaine was far more likely to travel through Central America

and Mexico, through both overland and maritime routes. Changes in the violent crime rate have paralleled this shift in drug transit corridors. Homicide rates in El Salvador and Guatemala are highest around ports and international borders — areas through which drug trade routes currently pass. It is not the production of drugs per se that correlates with high levels of violence; instead, higher homicide rates occur along the route those drugs take as they make their way to market in the United States.

It is important, then, to know what determines the route drugs will take. Illicit goods routinely move through Honduras and Guatemala, while Nicaragua and Costa Rica are not so thoroughly overrun. Why? Yashar finds that drugs tend to pass through areas where the state is weak and/or complicit in crime. Drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are essentially profit-seeking multinational organizations. It makes sense for goods in any economic sector to take the most direct route to their consumers in order to keep transportation costs low. Within the illegal economy, however, DTOs must also consider the risks of transporting drugs. Crime bosses prefer routes that are not only geographically favorable but also pose the least risk of prosecution.

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Countries with relatively weaker states — or where those in power are complicit in illicit activity — are thus most amenable to crime. Weak states are, by definition, less able to enforce the rule of law. If the state is unable to monitor illegal activity, arrest perpetrators, and hold them accountable through the judicial system, crime poses fewer risks. In some areas, corruption within the police force is rampant, and individual officers are themselves involved in the drug trade. Moreover, if judges can be bribed and courts are ineffective in prosecuting criminals, then arrests made by the police become fairly meaningless. Narcotraffickers consider all these factors when determining the routes that illicit drugs should take to reach the United States. As with any international business, drug trafficking organizations choose the path of least resistance: in their case, areas with low state capacity.

Assessing state capacity is challenging for researchers, not least because it is difficult to disentangle outcomes from the measures chosen. For example, it may be that drug traffickers corrupt police wherever they go. If this is the case, state capacity in areas with high levels of trafficking might diminish over time in response to crime, rather than the other way round. To disentangle cause from effect, Yashar is exploring subnational dynamics in depth. The Nicaraguan case is an illustrative example.

Like many Central American countries, Nicaragua is plagued by corruption, and state officials are assumed to be involved in illegal activity. However, Nicaragua has better-than-average state capacity in one particular respect: its police force is highly professionalized compared to other countries in the region. Qualitative data reveal that Nicaraguans are far more likely to take pride in the police force as an institution than residents of other Central American countries. People in Nicaragua expect that the police will serve the public good, and the country's judicial system is regarded as one of the best in the region. Since the likelihood of being caught and prosecuted is higher in Nicaragua, drug traffickers bypass the country, sending their product through neighboring nations with lower state capacity.

While the state capacity theory helps explain the location of illicit drug routes, a central question remains unanswered: why does violence occur along drug transit routes? The ideal state of affairs for any business enterprise, including drug trafficking organizations, is one of peaceful hegemony. All corporations would prefer to corner the market without having to compete for customers, and DTOs are no different. Although criminal organizations use the threat of violence to keep people in line, they generally prefer to avoid violence when possible because it is expensive to undertake and incites

retaliation, both from rival criminal organizations and from the state. Extrajudicial killings tend to be limited to the minimum necessary to maintain credibility and fend off territorial rivals.

Yashar's line of reasoning thus predicts that violence will occur when the control of drug transit routes is in flux. Drug trafficking organizations engage in violence to stave off competition from rivals, to punish perceived informants, and to hamper the state's capacity for enforcement. Evidence indicates that homicide rates do not rise wherever criminal organizations operate. On the contrary, when a DTO has effectively secured a given trade route, homicide rates tend to be low. Instead, murder rates rise in areas where competition for the control of drug transit routes is most keen. In short, neither DTOs nor illicit drugs correlate with violence on their own. However, when criminal organizations actively compete with each other to control drug trade routes, violence is more likely.

Yashar emphasized that her research remains a work in progress. She, along with a team of graduate students, will continue to analyze quantitative and qualitative data from throughout Central America to assess the arguments presented here. However, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from her work thus far. First, Yashar contends that we need to look past broad regional explanations to understand why violence occurs where it does. Transit routes for illicit goods, particularly cocaine, are central factors that should be more fully explored.

Her findings also hold significant implications for public policy. As criminal organizations strive to control territory, their conflict is not contained within national borders, nor is it uniform throughout the Central American region. Thus, any solutions devised to address rising levels of violence should take both international and subnational politics into account.

There are also important implications for all who care about the quality of democracy across Latin America as a whole. One of the most basic rights that citizens enjoy is the right to physical security. Regardless of regime type, states should control the legitimate use of force in society and prosecute those who commit extrajudicial violence according to the rule of law. The right to personal security is so fundamental that many scholars who write about citizenship tend to assume that such protection exists. In many areas of Latin America, however, citizens cannot take their right to physical safety for granted.

Aside from the human toll taken on individuals and families, violence affects the quality of democracy that people experience in multiple ways. The 2010 Latinobarómetro survey revealed that while many Latin Americans enjoy multiple types of freedom —

particularly freedom of religious expression — very few believe that the state provides adequate protection against crime. José Miguel Cruz, a political scientist at Vanderbilt University, found that while a majority of Latin Americans prefer democracy to all other regime types, escalating crime rates are prompting a shift in public opinion. As of 2008, slightly less than half of all Latin Americans indicated that they would be willing to trade democracy for authoritarianism if a strong leader could effectively address rising rates of everyday violence. At the broadest level, rampant violence negatively affects collective preferences for democracy.

Violence also affects the way individuals experience democracy in their day-to-day lives. Marginalized populations across Latin America have rarely enjoyed full citizenship rights; the unequal protection of rights is nothing new. What is distinctive about the current period, however, is the power of violence to transform the contours of civic life. Those who live under conditions of constant physical insecurity and fear of random violence may make political choices they would not otherwise consider, such as favoring authoritarian regimes. Individuals may

also conclude that the political game is one they cannot influence, given the climate of violence, and withdraw from civic participation altogether. Neither outcome is healthy for democracy. Illicit activities, particularly the violence caused by competition over drug trafficking routes, are placing fundamental citizenship rights under siege in Central America.

Deborah Yashar is a professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and co-director of the Project on Democracy and Development. She spoke for CLAS on April 30, 2012.

Wendy Muse Sinek received her Ph.D. from the Charles and Louise Travers Department of Political Science and is the coordinator of the Haas Scholars Program at UC Berkeley.

VIDEO AVAILABLE AT CLAS.BERKELEY.EDU

Nicaraguan kids playing cops and robbers.



Photo by Eric Molina.