

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

# Crime and Its Aftermath: New Inroads in the Study of Violence and Public Safety

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Vulnerabilidad y violencia en América Latina y el Caribe: Paisaje cultural y diseño urbano.** Edited by Markus Gottsbacher and John De Boer. Mexico City: Proyectos Estratégicos Consultoría; Siglo Veintiuno, 2016. Pp. 432. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9786070307447.

**Violence and Resilience in Latin America Cities.** Edited by Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt. London: Zed Books, 2015. Pp. ix + 195. \$28.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781780324562.

**The Punitive City: Privatized Policing and Protection in Neoliberal Mexico.** By Markus-Michael Müller. London: Zed Books, 2016. Pp. vii + 179. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781783606962.

**Violence and Crime in Latin America: Representations and Politics.** Edited by Gema Santamaría and David Carey Jr. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 320. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780806155746.

**Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico.** By Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xix+ 349. \$34.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108795272.

**Homicidal Ecologies: Illicit Economies and Complicit States in Latin America.** By Deborah J. Yashar. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xvii + 250. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781316629659.

**Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogotá.** By Austin Zeiderman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 290. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822361626.

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The study of crime and public safety has grown significantly over the last decade. Scholars and experts have been peeling the layers of different aspects of the rise in violence and criminality that has plagued the region over the last twenty-five years. Most studies indicate that the region is the leader in homicides (Latin America has 25 percent of the world's homicides) unevenly concentrated in several metropolitan areas and large cities of a few countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico. The majority of the research has naturally focused on extreme violence, despite the fact that all countries have other major crime problems that remain understudied.

New research questions and designs have emerged to account for the current high rates of criminality. This growing number of studies has produced several works around the causes of such large violence. For example, a recent book review essay in *LARR* reviews eight excellent books on the causes of extreme violence, offering institutional, social, and political perspectives for the out-of-control violence.<sup>1</sup> Other studies are

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Albarraquín and Nicholas Barnes, "Criminal Violence in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 55, no. 2 (2020): 397–406, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.975>.

under way. This literature, however, has paid less attention to criminological issues that are overwhelming citizens and governments in the region, such as the high individual feelings of vulnerability to crime, the significant increase in property crime, the heightened levels of interpersonal violence, and the growth of illicit markets and its impact on criminality, among others. Since crime has penetrated almost every corner of Latin America, there is a need to better understand how criminality has elicited different individual and social strategies to endure these rising insecurities. Despite their great social and political impact, we know much less about how fear, resilience, and social narratives have elicited responses to crime.

Latin America lacks a solid tradition of empirically driven studies on criminality. As opposed to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the field of criminology in Latin America has been historically taught at law schools, emphasizing theoretical and doctrine aspects of the crime problem. Penal law perspectives focus on the philosophical dimensions of law breaking and rights protection, while sociological perspectives study the predictors and social consequences of criminal activity. Thus legal approaches to the study of crime have completely lacked an empirical and/or quantitative framework. Fortunately, this started to change over the last decade, as many scholars began to collect data and test hypotheses in search of causality.

The books reviewed in this essay are part of this emerging body of literature. Nevertheless, this new wave of studies lacks a core corpus of theories and methods widely shared by specialists. Anthropologists, political scientist, sociologists, and economists seem to speak to their own disciplines rather than engaging in conversations about crime and public safety from similar foundations. The outcome has been a wide range of studies that at times do not converse, or that are ignored by scholars from other disciplines despite the important contributions they make. Academic research tends to become insular at the same time that contributions from different disciplines are essential to understanding the complexity of crime in the region.

The books reviewed in the following pages belong to a new generation of studies interested in explaining not only why crime spiked but also how people cope with catastrophic violent environments, as well as with the low-end criminality that has permeated most Latin American cities and countryside. Three of the books address the eruption of crime and violence, and four discuss the aftermath of the crime surge. Together they represent a glimpse of the new literature. This essay briefly assesses the main contributions of each volume, their strengths, and weaknesses. In the final section, I make critical remarks pertaining to methodological issues and the agenda for future research.

## Crime Surge and Sociopolitical Responses

In a very persuasive and elegant analysis, Deborah Yashar's book *Homicidal Ecologies: Illicit Economies and Complicit States in Latin America* studies the outbreak of catastrophic homicide rates in El Salvador and Guatemala as compared to relatively modest rates in Nicaragua. She not only develops a model on the effect of illicit markets in the growth of homicides, which has been tackled by other scholars,<sup>2</sup> but she also identifies the conditions under which the strong demand for illicit goods triggers lethal competitions among groups that ultimately yields exceptionally high murder rates.

Rather than a linear causal effect, Yashar claims that outbreaks of extreme violence foster an environment or ecosystem where criminality becomes out of control (El Salvador). As she recognized while she was searching for a title for her book, this becomes an *ecology* of homicides where many other patterns of criminality grow. The author concludes that areas of El Salvador and Guatemala are trapped in perverse equilibria in which crimes diversify and state enforcement capacities are neutralized, producing toxic environments difficult to reverse.

Yashar's book, along with Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley's, to be reviewed next, makes important methodological contribution to the studies on crime and safety in Latin America. To produce replicable studies, they identify a good question and assemble testable data when it is lacking. Using a painstaking collection of available data from archives, newspapers, and scattered official sources, Yashar lends strong proof to one basic claim in criminology: crime is geographically heterogeneous, or unevenly dispersed across wide cities or regions, and at the same time different crimes tends to concentrate in certain blocks, neighborhoods, or enclaves.

<sup>2</sup> Several works examine the impact of growing illicit markets in triggering and amplifying crime. Angélica Durán-Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops, and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), analyses the high violence in Mexico and Colombia as they face the surging threat of transshipment of illegal drugs. Jose Miguel Cruz, in "Central American Maras: From Youth Gangs to Transnational Protection Rackets," *Global Crime* 11, no. 4 (2010): 379–398, mostly deals with Central America countries facing extortions rings led by the Maras. Marcelo Bergman, *More Money, More Crime: Prosperity and Rising Crime in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), analyzes the impact of illicit market of consumer goods that originate in thefts and other crimes in eighteen countries of Latin America.

Three variables account for out-of-control homicidal ecologies: the impact of the larger profits that illicit economies generate, the difference in state enforcement capacities, and the level of competition between groups for the control of illegal drug-trafficking routes as well as the monopoly to extort. As Central America became a transit corridor for cocaine en route to the US markets, and while state capacities varied in concentrated regions and nations, the profits for illicit gains generated deadly competition among groups for the control of drug routes, and between *maras* for the control of extortion rings heavily concentrated in specific urban areas. Yashar makes a significant scholarly contribution not only by identifying the interplay of these three variables but also by providing substantial evidence to support her claims. Nicaragua and El Salvador had different trajectories because in the first case, no serious competitions among groups were found. Subnational fragmentation in Guatemala or El Salvador, on the other hand, invited serious fighting between organizations for the control of extortion rings and drug shipments.

Is the fragmentation the result of these fights, or are cartels and established extortion rings those that undermined state enforcement capacities, generating more crime? The author emphasizes that a key determinant for spiking homicides are the organizations taking control of enclaves poorly controlled by states. But how did these organizations come to garnish enough power to neutralized state weaknesses? Illicit economies play the key role, yet they yield different outcomes: low criminality in Nicaragua (where fragmentation vis-à-vis state capacities are contained) and high criminality in El Salvador and Guatemala. The successful establishment of drug corridors and extortion sanctuaries actually increased the drug trade and extortion rate, producing even higher criminality. According to Yashar, “No single factor determines the outcome. The combination of factors, however, can be deadly” (19).

The explanation for the outbreak of lethal violence in Central America is endogenous to the three variables, creating ecologies of homicides, vicious cycles of violence that are hard to break. The precise causal variable remains unclear as Yashar points at the interplay of illicit economies, poor state capacities, and competition among fragmented organizations as the best approach to understand the tragedy of recent decades. This is a commendable contribution that underpins the importance of studying the interplay of factors that produce a given equilibria of low or high homicides. Once ecosystems are established, they take the life of their own.

Mexico is another case of the fast outbreak of violence. Trejo and Ley’s book is one of the most comprehensive and insightful explanations for this critical upsurge of violence since the 1990s. It is a gem of excellent research in a sea of publications on Mexico’s “war on drugs” that at times lack clear focus. This work lays out a very compelling argument that measures the effect of the political transition to democracy and the crucial role this democratization process played in triggering high levels of criminality. This research is backed by many sources of information, including, as Yashar’s work, an original data set of homicides assembled by the authors and extracted from newspapers covering more than two decades. Using this evidence they run negative binomial regression and synthetic control models to measure the effects of other independent variables, such as party affiliation at different levels of government (federal, state, and municipal), political fragmentation, decapitation of cartels’ strategies, access to firearms, and sociodemographic variables. The authors also qualitatively analyze several case studies to provide a causal explanation that goes from party alternation to the outbreak of intracartel wars to unpack how democratic alternation triggered the growth of cartel militias, and how the type of subnational party alignment impacted intergovernment coordination that ultimately has affected the intensity of violence.

Trejo and Ley claim that the type of transition from an authoritarian to a weak illiberal democracy that failed to promote serious reforms of the security forces has been crucial. Such transition has enabled the interaction of criminal organizations and public officers to endure during these years. These thick networks of criminal organizations, politicians, and security officers have historically specialized in extracting profits from illicit activities. The authors call this “the grey zone of criminality” (exchanging security protection for bribes) that prospered during the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Insitucional) regime. Once opposition parties began to win gubernatorial races in the late 1980s and 1990s and protection eroded, cartels started the buildup of militias by hiring recently fired security personnel. This prompted fights for turf between criminal organizations for a share of the lucrative illegal drug routes on their way to the United States.<sup>3</sup>

This book offers many excellent insights into the deterioration of public safety in Mexico. I highlight three. First, as opposed to many studies claiming that Mexico was on the road to low crime because homicides decreased from 1990 to 2007, the authors rightly show that the onset of criminality should be searched for in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Only a new phase, the intensification of violence, was the

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the book falls short in explaining why two states without alternation, such as Tamaulipas and Sinaloa, still experienced very high levels of violence.

result of President Calderon's 2007 launch of Mexico's war on drug cartels. Second, the book highlights the weaknesses of institutions during "unfinished" transitions that ended up having such damaging outcomes. The introduction of the "political variable" is a welcome contribution. Third, this work makes very important and elegant inroads in examining the networks of illegalities and the collusion of security forces. The "grey zone of criminality" and the role played by agents of formal institutions are absolutely essential to understand the rise in crime in the entire region.

This book, however, falls short in a few areas that need further development. I signal two. First, questions remain for the generalization of the claims. This is an excellent book about Mexico, yet it is unclear how well this theory can be extrapolated to other places, despite the authors' attempt. Unfinished transitions in the context of thick grey zones of criminality and large opportunities for illegal profits have not always generated large-scale violence. Ecuador and Bolivia and especially Paraguay (which, like Mexico, transitioned from one-party authoritarian rule to alternation even at subnational levels, and also became a large illicit-drugs supplier) did not experience a comparable outgrowth of violence. Moreover, nations that had serious security and prosecutorial reforms after transitions are numbered, yet only a few countries experienced the explosion of criminality as in Mexico.

Second, this book does not study thoroughly the role played by the business of illegal drugs. It is hard to ask for more in a 349-page book, yet this is a crucial variable not well developed in the models and rarely analyzed in depth.<sup>4</sup> The cartels' benefits from the cocaine business in the 1980s were minimal, but they probably increased fivefold in the following twenty years. The incentives to fight for the right to buy, to safely transport, and to smuggle drugs into the United States dramatically increased during this period. The strategic value of coastal areas where drugs were illegally introduced to Mexico (Guerrero and Michoacán) and the control of busy trans-shipping zones (Tijuana, Juarez, and Matamoros) give these areas a much higher "price tag" than other regions. Moreover, it can be claimed, that precisely the size and characteristics of the drug business are as important as an independent variable as the political variable in triggering the intercartel war, regardless of the state of transition. In sum, *Votes, Drugs, and Violence* is more about votes and politics and less about drugs and illicit economies.

The gruesome violence and increased vulnerability to crime have led many scholars to study patterns of people's resilience in crime-ridden cities to understand why the uneven distribution of crime and violence in fragmented cities and specific areas has produced fear across the entire urban landscape. Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt's *Violence and Resilience in Latin American Cities* assembles the work of researchers to produce seven articles on urban fragility and how it fosters strategies of resilience in different urban settings across the region.

This book focuses on the consequences of increase in violence. They ask how citizens live under chronic fear, how they respond, and what patterns of behavior they adopt. As the editors state, this book studies the "dynamic interplay between danger and safety, or fragility and resilience" (3).

In the first chapter, the authors inquire into the causes of crime rise by examining classic correlates of criminality, such as easy access to firearms, larger numbers of idle youngsters, and diminished state capacities. In these chapters the editors search for a response to a critical Latin American riddle: why, in spite of major social and political development since the mid-1990s, crime has not abated. They document three important processes: social indicators have significantly improved, the urban infrastructure in marginalized barrios has been upgraded (there is better transportation and access to services, hospitals and schools, shopping and supermarkets, and so on), and democracy has been stabilized. Despite these improvements, crime increased and vulnerability worsened.

The core argument of this book is that fragility and vulnerability have mobilized a menu of strategies of urban resilience that they summarize in an illuminating table (1.1), ranging from individuals' accommodation and avoidance to urban settings and institutional approaches (such as vigilantism, community policing, pacification programs, and gated communities). According to their analysis, the factors that may elicit larger probabilities of success are, first of all, "good governance" at both national and municipal levels, good policing, data transparency, truce between fighting gangs, and social bottom-up initiatives. Resilience, defined as "the capacity to cope, mitigate, bounce back, recover, or restore in face of severe violence" (16), becomes the central piece of the book.

<sup>4</sup> The regression models include one control variable for the international price of cocaine; however, this does not capture the scale of the market, the profits it generates, the role of synthetic drugs, and Mexico's new role in the illegal drugs world market since the 1990s.

This work is organized around case studies. In the second chapter the editors present a challenging comparative study of violence and resilience in five megacities of the region (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Lima, and Mexico City), depicting the trends and patterns of rising crime, fragility, and different resilience approaches in these metropolises. The other six chapters examine specific case studies: Caracas (Roberto Briceño León), Bogotá (Alan Gilbert), San Salvador (Wim Savenije and Chris van der Borgh), San José (Abelardo Morales Gamboa), Kingston (Rivka Jaffe), and Santo Domingo (Lilian Bobea). Unfortunately, these chapters lack an encompassing theory of rising violence and vulnerability. Nevertheless, the editors persuasively argue that severe urban fragility became a driver for crime. Several aspects characterize this urban fragility: growing social inequality, spatial segregation, deficient urban planning, proliferation of criminal enclaves, and deficient policing.

An important contribution of this book is that it systematically studies the plethora of strategies adopted by actors to face social fragility. One shortcoming is the uneven nature of the city studies, as each chapter relies on different types of evidence. *Violence and Resilience* makes an important contribution to the study of cities in their search for measures to cope with, mitigate, and gain peaceful resolution to severe violence, a research field that merits close attention in Latin America.

In a similar vein, other studies inquire into the aftermath of the violence explosion. The devastating effects of criminality have elicited research that focus on the sometimes forgotten side of the crime wave, particularly on the victims and the vulnerability of selected groups and spaces. The book coedited by Markus Gottsbacher and John De Boer, *Vulnerabilidad y violencia en América Latina y el Caribe* (there is an English version), assembles an impressive list of scholars from the region who contribute to map the “many faces” of vulnerabilities and violence, such as the well-known menace of gangs and state violence toward unprotected citizens, the less-known violence suffered by indigenous women, the prosecution of minorities, the abuse suffered by migrants, the vulnerability of peoples with disabilities, and gender violence. This book examines the strategies different people and communities have developed to face the challenges of the current waves of criminality. These papers are less about crime and more about strategies of coping with the region’s rising violence.

Similarly to Koonings and Kruijt’s volume, the authors claim that although some forms of abuse and extreme violence have historic roots, new violent patterns are emerging and pose significant challenges to the region. Rather than focusing in the perennial vulnerability of people in “normal times,” this book examines the new “context of extreme violence” that mobilizes strategies of resilience and protection. The editors claim: “instead of talking about vulnerable populations we should rather change and talk of populations living in vulnerable contexts” (20, my translation).

The articles focus on social strategies for coping with risks and fear, most of them undertaking a bottom-up approach and studying the reaction of vulnerable populations, eliciting strategies that were not always successful or progressive, such as lynching and vigilantism.

This book has seventeen chapters that examine a range of topics and geographies of ten different countries (including Jamaica, from the Caribbean); it was sponsored by the International Development Research Centre. Most articles study very violent countries (Mexico, Colombia and Brazil, and the Northern Triangle), and focus on highly vulnerable areas of cities within these countries. This is a major strength of this book as it sheds light particularly on the regions and contexts where crime and violence have hit the hardest. The dialogue between the papers, however, is scant, and mostly, this book represents a collection of many excellent studies on single countries or a salient topic (gender, fear of crime, gangs, and so on). Most papers respond to the underlying theme of this book: How do context of high violence trigger social and individual reactions to extreme criminality?

According to the authors, vulnerabilities imply risks, and the articles analyze such risks in different geographical, social, and political contexts. Yet, the large number of papers lack a coherent thread or a shared social mechanism that can explain why these risks have significantly grown. The reader may wonder whether this represents a list of vulnerabilities from different countries, or whether there are similar processes that have triggered more risks in the region.

A very welcomed perspective on public security has been the study of local government initiatives facing the consequences of rising crime. Two recent studies on Mexico City and Bogotá analyze political choices, implementation of policies, and managerial responses to face the challenges to the aftermath of rise in crime.

In his book *The Punitive City: Privatized Policing and Protection in Neoliberal Mexico*, Markus-Michael Müller studies the process by which securitization became a central theme in Mexico City, while he also examines the privatization of individual safety and its consequences. This is indeed a regional trend. In this work Müller

offers a conceptual debate as to how the process of securitization and the privatization of security became an integral part of neoliberal discourse. The book studies how political actors within a democratic context privileged security over other policy concerns, and how local actors have overemphasized local governance on insecurity and punishment over other goals such as freedom and liberty.

This book studies the case of Mexico City and its punitive turn under PRD rule.<sup>5</sup> For Müller, a very distressing and somewhat understudied question is how punitive approaches to public security were taken not only by right-wing policy makers but also by leftist governments “that criminalize and punish exactly those segments of the local population that represent their most important electoral constituency” (11). And this is one of the central questions that this book and other critical studies face: How did the simultaneous expansion of punitive and welfare policies come about? Why do progressive governments adopt so-called repressive policies that, according to the author, contributed to the perpetuation of social exclusion and marginalization?

Throughout its chapters the book engages in the study of punitive responses and particularly the privatization of individual safety. Müller traces to the old clientelism new forms of political patronage, linking political bosses’ promises of “security” in exchange for votes

As the author claims, this book has a clear agenda of “desecuritization” of the political and academic discourse, while he searches to embed the discourse of insecurity within a broader political-economy perspective capable of providing alternative responses to urban violence and that “could challenge the ongoing criminalization of urban marginality throughout the region” (15). Of course, there is nothing wrong with this agenda, except that research must first firmly establish the connection between the search for safety and protection and how this affects further marginalization.

The prose of the book is sometimes “heavy,” and rather than an empirical assessment of the problem Müller engages in theoretical reflections that demand a careful reading. Nonetheless, a reader might be less receptive to the claims since there is no systematic attempt to present hypotheses to be tested, or empirical evidence that supports the many assertions being made. This is a well-thought-out essay that invites a more grounded empirical examination.

In his anthropological voyage into Colombia’s capital, *Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogotá*, Austin Zeiderman studies what he calls the process of endangerment that conditions the individual experience of the city. The author makes a valuable distinction between danger and the endangerment process by claiming that, under the latter, “histories of violence often produces enduring cultures of fear that are difficult to dispel” (ix); and therefore, it is worthwhile to focus attention on how endangerment came about and its scope and depth as it affects the lives of millions in this country.

Colombia had to withstand massive displacement of populations due to internal strife and high levels of violence that merited serious studies on its impact on crime and violence. Massive displacement resulted from long fights between guerrilla groups (FARC), the *paramilitares*, and the army for territorial control in coca-growing areas, as well as other conflicts that prompted migration from rural areas into large cities. Zeiderman focuses specifically in a relatively understudied feature of the crime and conflict in the region: how anticipation of threats of violence affects the organization of urban life. This is important because major conflicts and displacement have led the Bogotá administrations of Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa (1995–2003) to allocate resources to protect vulnerable populations and reduce insecurity.

Rather than seeking a “tough on crime” “law and order approach,” the author unpacks the implemented “risk management approach” to deal with the aftermath of violence among vulnerable populations. The book nonetheless enters murky waters as it tries to frame the debates within two paradigms, the neoliberal municipal *governmentality* and the urban political economy, claiming that these approaches fall short to truly understand the scope of problems of many cities in the global South.

Zeiderman calls his method “ethnography of endangerment,” a process geared at understanding how concerns of insecurities influence urban politics in Colombia, even as the city, the author claims, became remarkably safer. Transcending the extensive literature on the effects of trauma in personal experience and the enduring cultures of fear that they produce, this book seeks to extend these studies into the realm of politics and implementation. On the basis of a two-year field research project that included interviews, review of documentation, visits, and personal observations, the author examines plans, studies, laws, and maps, as well as the routine practices of risk management operators. The book describes many personal

<sup>5</sup> PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática) is a left-leaning party that broke from the long-standing ruling PRI in the late 1980s and 1990s. PRD has governed Mexico City uninterruptedly since 1997.

engagements of the author, producing a text that has a dense narrative and very detailed encounters, well suited for specialists.

The main contribution is that the author sheds light on the political process of implementing resettlement programs in Bogotá, and the management of risk in the urban periphery. The legacies of conflicts and violence in Colombia has made the problem of displacement a critical area of study in Latin America, and a focus on these problems is very much welcomed. However, this is an extensive book for scholars interested in the painstaking process of implementation process, and scholars interested in urban studies.

A very different approach to the study on the impact of criminality is taken in the book edited by David Carey Jr. and Gema Santamaría, *Violence and Crime in Latin America*, which assembles an impressive collection of essays written by scholars at the forefront of their disciplines. By putting together many excellent papers, the editors seek to raise awareness of not only the problem of crime in the region but mainly the social perceptions of violence and the representation of crime. Historians, anthropologists, and political scientists address from different angles the meanings of crimes and violence and how these have impacted rising fear and social reaction to the perceived threat of violence.

Carey and Santamaría have a clear goal in mind. They claim that “perceptions and representations of crime are just as important as violent acts themselves in shaping responses to violence and crimes” (4). Their goal is to make the case that people are mobilized against crime not only by the true threat of criminality but by social perceptions. In so doing, this book provides a meaningful contribution to the field: the need to take seriously how perceptions and representations of crime are formed, and the different social responses they elicit, ranging from active collective actions to passive indifference. As Jenny Pearce states in the conclusion, this has serious implications for citizenship and democracy in the region.

This edited volume is organized in three sections. The fascinating first part has four papers dealing with the extralegal violence, including lynching and other questionable forms of “justice.” The second has four papers dealing with the processes of how crime concepts are socially constructed. And the third section, on the politics and visibility of violence, includes three articles on Guatemala, Mexico, Brazil, and Jamaica.

Most papers analyze historic cases. Yet, as Diane E. Davis states in the epilogue, the pervasive violence in the region has persisted over time but has not unfolded equally across time and space. Unfortunately, these studies do not examine how violence is transmitted and how it spills over into the realm of perceptions and representation. In short, the papers do not identify a social mechanism that explains the historical trajectories of violence as well as the contagious nature of violence across regions.

The book makes a convincing claim that we need to transcend true crime and violence to understand the plethora of public responses to them, because people indeed react to perceptions and representations. For example, in 2016 the homicide rates in Rio de Janeiro were at least eight times higher than in Santiago de Chile. Yet, fear of crime in both cities shows similar rates. Identifying the social processes that construct perceptions may yield a better understanding of the variables that shape fear of crime and the role played by legal state enforcement and deterrence.

Despite the clear efforts by the authors to make references and generate a “dialogue” between the papers, this book has the natural dispersion of edited volumes. The range of topics is wide, and so are the methods. However, they accomplish their initial goal of creating awareness on the need to be particularly mindful not only to criminal activity but to the different ways crime and violence were socially interpreted and mobilized individuals, providing a solid stepping stone on which to build more systematic research about the conditions, historic legacies, and social processes that give rise to different courses of action.

### **The Search for a New Research Agenda**

As valuable as the emerging literature on criminality and violence in the region has been, research is facing challenges in grasping the effect that crime and insecurity has posed on the social landscape of Latin America. As the sample of these reviewed works indicate, scholarship has a long way to go to understand the intricacies and characteristics of the crime waves that have plagued most of the continent over the last two decades, and the myriad of responses taken to cope with rising violence. In the last part of this essay, I will argue that two features of scholarly research must be addressed in the coming years: we need to keep paying attention to methods and data, and we must broaden the agenda of topics to be examined. Without making light of the research agenda of the global North, scholars specializing in Latin America must pay attention to specific issues that are salient to the global South.

### **Methods and data**

The books reviewed examined the consequences of the rising crime in the region, yet we still lack clear measurements and metrics about the true scope of the crime threat and its aftermath. Scholars in the field of crime and public security in Latin America are usually at the mercy of available data produced by an array of public institutions in conducting their research. For the most part, these data have been collected for other public offices or for specific policy goals, and they do not properly stem from research initiatives and designs that seek to determine causal effects. Very rarely can scholars in Latin America design original studies that properly identify dependent and independent variables, adequately measure them, and assess the impact of one upon the other. Often, many studies rely on proxies and questionable assumptions that allow them to confirm or reject “hunches” and hypotheses.

The scant resources and the lack of strong funding for basic research in the field of crime and public safety have had dire consequences. Most studies rely on ethnographies and field interviews; scattered available descriptive data; general surveys; review of press, documents, and archival information; and theoretical elaboration based on few indicators and poor information. The seven books reviewed in this essay are testaments to these efforts. Of course, there is nothing wrong with these research approaches, but Latin America still lacks the vibrant scholarship that can empirically test hypotheses in these fields in a consistent, rigorous way. This state of affairs produces an outpouring of edited volumes of articles that under a uniform approach or theme seek to provide different perspectives of the subject under study. There is a very large literature on crime and citizen security in Latin America that is based on this type of scholarly production. This review essay is an example of such a trend: three out of the seven books are edited volumes.

A new important contribution would be the welcoming of solid, well thought-out and developed investigations around elaborate single research questions. Encompassing studies of a single topic allow social scientists to focus on important research questions that need to be responded to, a stepping stone to build knowledge. As opposed to journal articles, monographic books offer the opportunity to undertake complex and large questions rarely seen in highly selective and career-advancing journal papers. Larger and deep research questions that set an agenda and attempt to address multiple variable causations are better suited for books that usually represent the culmination of long projects and many years of study. The field of crime and public safety may benefit largely from an emerging body of this type of scholarly productions.

Yashar's as well as Trejo and Ley's books are examples of the work that the region needs: an important research question, a parsimonious identification of variables, and an intensive search of qualitative and quantitative data that tests and support a complex argument. One lesson, these and other studies show, is that scholars in the region must pursue a painstaking strategy that allows them to optimize the limited resources offered for research designs and data sources from official and public sources in order to test ambitious questions.

### **Latin American criminality**

A second goal scholars must pursue is to ask an array of questions that need abundant scholarship that is now missing. There is a long list of topics that are “backstage” or nonexistent in the global North but are crucial for Latin America. For example, themes such as gang violence and disarmament, shantytown violence and pacification, micro-trafficking in devastated communities, violence against women and femicides, illegal markets that begins from robberies of tradeable goods, and many others, are secondary topics in the crime and public safety literature of the global North, yet these are at the core research agenda of the global South. The widespread, catastrophic violence in the region cannot be solely explained by inadequate state institutions. Carrying good fieldwork and building solid databases will allow scholars to better understand, for example, who enters bloody criminal careers, under what conditions they do so, what the exit costs are, the scope of action of individuals and groups, and so on. Or, for example, untangling the particular roles of gender violence in the region, especially while more gender equality is pursued, constitutes a central theme of public agendas.

To make inroads in these fields, a very important methodological observation is in place. Although there is an academic fascination and attention to high levels of unusual violence in the region, scientific studies must be able to isolate the factors that it produces. If for example we search to understand why extreme violence is triggered by criminal organizations in given environments, or for instance why violence against women emerge in certain areas, we must undertake research with controls to explain why these types of violence do not erupt in others places or scenarios. This is “methods 101” that comprehensive studies attempting to explain violence must consider. Studies of *maras*, drug-trafficking organizations, and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (to name a few) are interesting case studies, but we truly need to empirically search for answers as



to why, for example, micro-trafficking is far from violent in most parts of the hemisphere, or to better isolate the range and types of violence against women in different countries to understand the full range of gender violence in Latin America. In short, the upcoming research agenda must transcend individual accounts of violence. Experimental, quasi-experimental or at least robust control studies are needed to fully grasp the violence in the region. Although we can learn much from individual case studies, social research should benefit more from comparative analysis of similar variables in different cases, as chapter 2 of Koonings and Kruijt's analysis on resilience strategies, or Yashar's and Trejo and Ley's books on rising violence attempt to show.

In the same vein, research on Latin American violence should pay more attention to the apparently growing number of victims of sexual assaults and domestic violence. To be sure, this has always been a significant driver of crime rates, yet we still lack accurate and comparative measurements. As the number of femicides seems to be growing, strategies of coping (panic buttons, restricted access, shelters, and so on) remain vastly understudied. Beyond anecdotal accounts, initial descriptive information, or a few case studies on gender violence, the region needs rigorous analysis with controls that can elicit better theories and ultimately better policies to address this growing threat to women's safety.

Despite the great strides made in research of crime and public security in Latin America, there is a dire necessity to improve methods, the quality of data, and the need to diversify the fields of study. After decades of democratization and judicial reforms, there is a need also to scientifically assess the impact of such reforms.<sup>6</sup> In the midst of mass incarceration there is only an incipient research on the effect of prisons on crime, while there are no studies of the millions of people who are released from jails every year. To fully understand the effect of criminality in the region, rigorous studies on the criminal justice system as well as the role played by illicit economies, micro-trafficking, and crime among vulnerable populations are paramount.

### Author Information

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<sup>6</sup> There is an excellent review by Rachel Sieder on this topic: "Revisiting the Judicialization of Politics in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 55, no. 1 (2020): 159–167, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.772>.

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