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Gangs, Violence, and Extortion in Northern Central America

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The Street Gangs in Central America Research Initiative

Resilient Communities against Transnational Gangs
(RESCAT)

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Introduction

Government officials in northern Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) claim the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 are primarily responsible for violence in their countries. These gangs have been identified to exert violence, extortion rackets, and confront security forces that enter gang-controlled communities (Seelke, 2014; Natarajan et al, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2017; Servicio Social Pasionista (SSPAS), 2017; Insight Crime and Asociación para una Sociedad mas Justa (ASJ) [Association for a more Just Society] 2016, Arce, 2015). But exactly how do gangs contribute to violence and extortion rackets in these countries? What are the differences, if any, on how the gangs commit these crimes in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador? This working paper discusses the complex violence dynamics in northern Central America and argues that a chronic deficiency in data, weak rule of law, and impunity exacerbate insecurity in these countries.

The Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 originated in Los Angeles, California and are now present throughout the United States, northern Central America, Spain, and Italy (Franco, 2008; Valdez, 2009; Seelke, 2016; Valencia, 2016; Finklea, 2018; Dudley & Avalos, 2018). Barrio 18 was formed in the 1960s by mixed-race Mexican, and MS-13 was formed in latter 1980s by Salvadorans who fled the civil war (Franco, 2008; Valdez, 2009; Seelke, 2016; Wolf, 2012). Some scholars argue gang culture was exported when individuals with criminal records were deported to their country of origin, while other scholars argue voluntary migration contributed to gangs' presence in northern Central America (Arana, 2005; Franco, 2008; Seelke, 2016; Cruz, 2010). It is imperative to clarify that a criminal removal from the United States is not synonymous, nor does it imply a perfect correlation with a gang member being removed.

Nonetheless, these gangs have become major security concerns in northern Central America. This study examined the concentration of crimes often attributed

exclusively to gangs (homicides, extortion, and confrontations) using administrative data from the Salvadoran National Civilian Police, Honduran Prosecutor's Office, and Guatemalan National Civilian Police. Interviews with subject matter experts supplemented the quantitative analysis to gain further understanding of violence dynamics per country. This paper follows with a literature review on homicides, extortion, and confrontations trends in northern Central America, a methodology section, results, and a discussion.

## The Violence Landscape in Central America

Latin America and the Caribbean contribute approximately eight percent of the global population and roughly 33 percent of the world's homicides (Igarape Institute, 2021). In 2011 and 2015, Honduras and El Salvador, respectively, had been crowned countries with the highest homicide rate in the world. At that time, Honduras had a homicide rate of 86 per 100,000 people, averaging approximately 20 homicides per day (IUDPAS, 2011). El Salvador had approximately one murder per hour with a homicide rate of 105 per 100,000 in 2015 (Gagne, 2016). Guatemala's highest reported homicide rate was 45 per 100,000 people in 2009, however, it is important to note that municipalities along its southern border far exceed the national rate (Espinoza, 2018). As of 2020, all countries have reported decreased homicides rates, with the assistance to some extent of COVID lockdowns: El Salvador reported a homicide rate of 19.7, Honduras reported 37.6, and Guatemala reported 15.3 per 100,000 people (Asmann & Jones, 2021).

Unfortunately, Central Americans have experienced violence for decades. In the 1980s, violence was primarily attributed to security forces and insurgency groups during armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador, and military regimes in Honduras (U.S. Institute of Peace, 1999; Betancur, 1993; Valencia Cervantes, 2013). Since early 2000s, Central American government officials have attributed violence in their countries to MS-13 and Barrio 18. For example, former Guatemalan President Otto

Perez Molina (2012-2015), removed from office for corruption, blamed "more than 40%" of homicides to battles between these gangs (Insight Crime, 2016). Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez (2014- 2022) stated "as much as 80%" of homicides are due to organized crime (Insight Crime, 2016). And former Salvadoran Minister of Justice and Security General David Munguia Payés, arrested in 2020 for negotiations with gangs, stated 90% of homicides were gang members (Diario1, 2015; El Mundo, 2020). These statements give the impression gangs are the primary actors that contribute to violence.

Figure 1: Total Homicides per Country
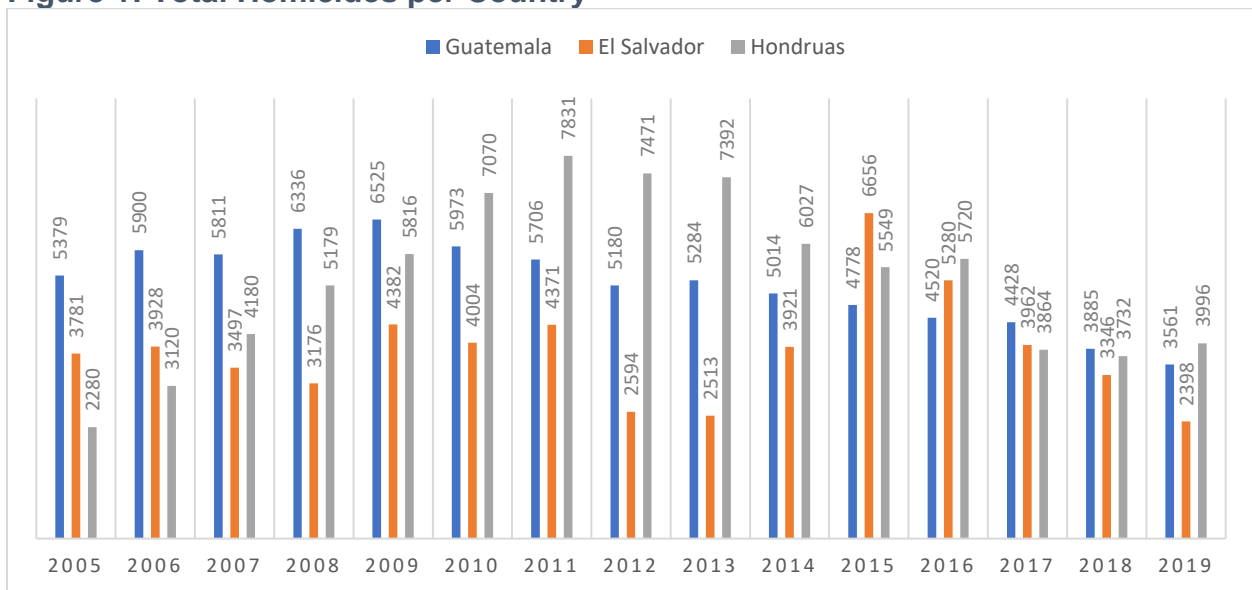
Source: El Salvador: Fiscalía de la Republica de El Salvador; Honduras: Ministerio Publico; Guatemala: 2005-2014-PNC, 2015-2020-Ministerio Publico

However, official statements become questionable when examining each country´s administrative data and impunity levels. In 2014, 95% of homicides lived in impunity in Guatemala; Honduras reported reduced homicide impunity from 96% in 2013 to 87% in 2017; and 95% of homicides went without punishment from 2011-2013 in El Salvador (Espinoza, 2018; Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia, 2019). Moreover, studies have concluded that gangs can contribute anywhere between 11.3% to 26.4% of homicides (Reyna, 2017) or up to 35% (Procuradoria para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, 2017), depending on the year studied. In Honduras, official data for 2015

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attributes 5% of homicides to gangs while 46.8% of homicides had no motive listed (IUDPAS, 2015). Insight Crime (2016) found 41% of homicides had characteristics of gang-related activities in the City of Guatemala, denoting this statistic could not be generalized through the Guatemalan territory. These impunity levels beg to question who else is contributing to violence in these countries?

Furthermore, Salvadoran and Honduran security forces have reported gangs confronting forces when entering communities with gang presence (SSPAS, 2017; ASJ, 2015; Arce, 2015). An attack on security forces by gangs insinuates gangs have the capacity (weapons and training) to confront security forces. Confrontations have been most prevalent (or most documented) in El Salvador compared to its neighbors (SSPAS, 2017). In Honduras, Barrio 18 has been identified to attack security forces compared to MS-13 (Insight Crime and ASJ, 2015; Arce, 2015). More recent reports place into question whether legal confrontations are occurring between gangs and security forces.

Some confrontations in these countries have been described as "extrajudicial executions." In September 2017, the Human Rights Institute of the Centro American University (IDHUCA) and SSPAS denounced extrajudicial executions to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. There, Commissioner Cavallaro declared that with a ratio of 50 suspected gang member deaths to 1 security personal was a case of some confrontations and many cases of extrajudicial executions (Rauda Zablah, 2017). By February 2018, Special Rapporteur for Extrajudicial Executions, Agnes Callamard concluded that there were an existence of "patterns of behavior that could be considered as extrajudicial executions and excessive use of force" on behalf of the state (Labrador, 2018). In addition to these conflicting violence dynamics, gangs have also been identified for extortion rackets.

Extortion impacts economic losses and contributes to violence. Salguero (2016) found Salvadorans paid $756 million in extortions, resulting in approximately 3 percent of the country's GDP. Honduran gangs charged urban and inter-urban bus driver $425 weekly and cab drivers approximately $170 weekly (Insight Crime & ASJ, 2015). From 2006 to 2013, 622 bus drivers were murdered in Guatemala when extortion was not

paid; making bus drivers' homicide rate double the national homicide rate in 2013 (Mendoza, 2014). In September 2010, Salvadoran gangs paralyzed the country's transportation system for three days, as a form to protest anti-gang legislation (InSight Crime, 2010). These incidents make the transportation sector one of the most impacted businesses with regards to extortion (Natarajan et al, 2015; ICG, 2017; Global Initiative Against Organized Crime, 2019).

Moreover, analyses have found extortion to be a crime of opportunity. In El Salvador, a business survey conducted by FUSADES (2016) found that 42 percent of small businesses surveyed reported being a victim of extortion within the last year. Forty-nine percent reported being extorted when there was gang presence compared to only 28 percent when these groups were not present (FUSADES, 2016). The Guatemalan DIPANDA unit (*Division Nacional contra el Desarrollo de Pandillas* – National Division Against Gang Development) has identified a 90/10 typology for extortion: 90% of extortions are committed by opportunist groups while 10% are committed by structured groups such as gangs (Edelman, 2020).

While government officials have identified the Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and Barrio 18 to strategically implement violence and extortion rackets, administrative data place into question officials' statements. Furthermore, the opportunist dynamics within extortions identified in Guatemala, as well as the concern regarding extrajudicial executions rather than confrontations in El Salvador, call for a thorough analysis of violence in these countries.

Methodology

This study applied a sequential explanatory mixed method design to understand the spatial concentration and dynamics of homicides, extortion, and confrontations. Phase I used administrative data to examine the concentration of these crimes at the municipality level. Phase II incorporated 33 purposive, semi-structured interviews with

subject matter experts (academics, police officers, and NGO personnel). Subject matter experts reviewed maps to provide insight on why these crimes concentrated in certain municipalities and whether there was gang presence in those areas. This methodology allowed the qualitative data to supplement the quantitative data taking into consideration the administrative data is not disaggregated by gang versus non- gang events. Lastly, observational notes from ethnographic work conducted by the author who lived in El Salvador (10 months), Honduras (6 months) and Guatemala (5 months) are incorporated.

Data collection for this study took place from September 2016 to August 2018. The *Policía Nacional Civil, PNC* (National Civilian Police) of El Salvador provided homicide, extortion, and confrontation data at the municipality level from 2002-2015. Official homicide and extortion data were obtained from the *Ministerio Publico*, MP (Prosecutor's Office) of Honduras from 2002-2015. The *Policía Nacional Civil, PNC* (National Civilian Police) of Guatemala provided homicide and extortion data at the municipality level from 2011 to 2017. Municipality population data were provided by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Institute of Statistics) per respective country. A total of thirty-three purposive, semi-structured interviews were conducted: ten participants in El Salvador (three academics, four NGO personnel, and three officers), twelve in Honduras (three academics, five NGO personnel, and four officers), and eleven in Guatemala (five academics, three NGO personnel, and three officers).

Different data analyses were conducted per country based on data availability. Location quotients (LQ) were computed for homicides and extortions in El Salvador, while traditional homicide and extortion rates were calculated for Honduras and Guatemala. Location quotients (LQ) measure the percentage of some activity (homicide/extortion) in a spatial unit (municipality) relative to the percentage of that same activity in the entire study region (country) (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993). Therefore, LQ highlight areas most affected by homicides and extortion. Population projections are based on the 2001 Honduran Census and 2002 Guatemalan Census.

Municipalities were coded and spatially joined using QGIS. Participants were shown maps from 2007-2015 for El Salvador and Honduras and 2011-2017 for Guatemala.

Results

This section begins with a discussion on the spatial concentration of crimes, followed by the contextual explanation for the concentration of these crimes per country.

El Salvador

Figure 2 displays the average homicide and extortion LQs from 2007-2015 in El Salvador. LQ scores below 1 are considered low or non-problematic areas, LQs equal to one are normal, and LQs above 1 are considered high or where crimes highly concentrate. The Salvadoran government classifies information regarding the territorial presence of gangs; thereby limiting the possibility of overlaying a map of gang presence to examine whether crimes align with municipalities where gang presence is identified. The LQ maps for homicides show a consistent concentration in the western region of the country, while extortions concentrate in the eastern and northeastern border region.

Figure 2: 2007-2015 LQ Average Homicides and Extortions and 2013-2015 Average Confrontations in El Salvador
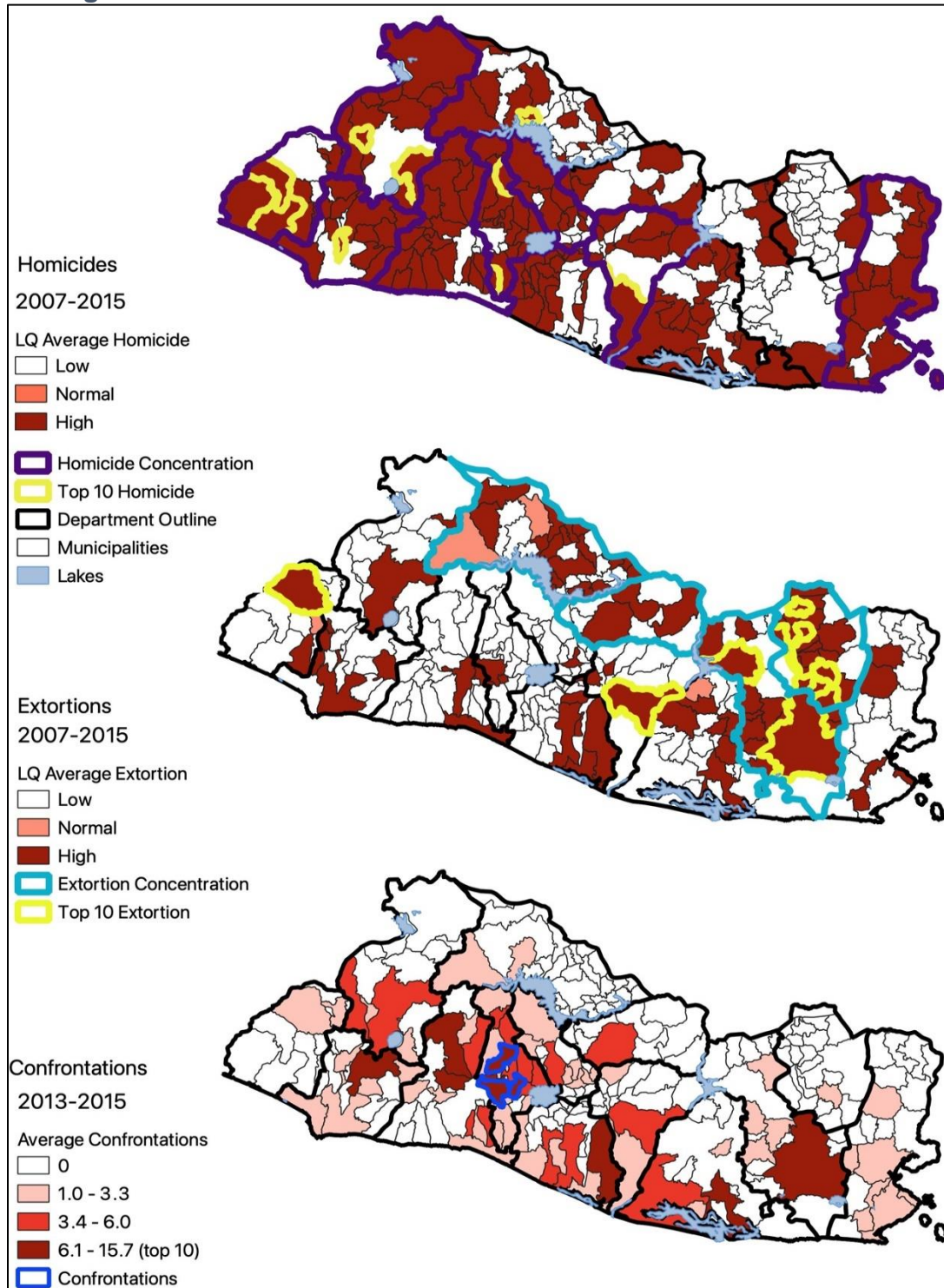
Source: Official National Civilian Police Data, Mapped by Author

Table 1: Top 10 Municipalities for Homicide, Extortion, and Confrontations in El Salvador

Homicide	Average LQC	Extortion	Average LQC	Confrontations	Average
1. Jujutla	1.75	1. San Francisco Gotera	2.11	1. San Salvador (El Salvador)	15.67
2. Coatepeque	1.66	2. San Miguel	1.67	2. Apopa (San Salvador)	11.00
3. El Porvenir	1.61	3. Osicala	1.63	3. Soyapango (San Salvador)	9.67
4. Tecoluca	1.60	4. Jocoaitique	1.58	4. Mejicanos (San Salvador	8.67
5. San Francisco Menéndez	1.59	5. Yamabal	1.57	5. Usulután (Usulután)	8.67
6. Nahulingo	1.56	6. El Divisadero	1.56	6. Zacatecoluca (La Paz)	8.33
7. Guazapa	1.55	7. San Simón	1.53	7. Colon (La Libertad)	6.67
8. Tacuba	1.55	8. Sesori	1.52	8. Izalco (Sonsonate)	6.33
9. Rosario de Mora	1.55	9. San Vicente	1.44	9. San Juan Opico (La Libertad)	6.00
10. El Paraíso	1.54	10. Ahuachapán	1.43	10. San Miguel (San Miguel)	6.00

Table 1 lists the top 10 municipalities for averaged homicide and extortion from 2007-2015. The top 10 municipalities for homicides include: Jujutla (Ahuachapán) with an average LQ of 1.75, followed by Coatepeque (Santa Ana) 1.66, El Porvenir (Santa Ana) 1.61, Tecoluca (San Vicente) 1.60, San Francisco Menéndez (Ahuachapán) 1.59, Nahulingo (Sonsonate) 1.56, Guazapa (San Salvador) 1.55, Tacuba (Ahuachapán) 1.55, Rosario de Mora (San Salvador) 1.55, and El Paraíso (Chalatenango) 1.54. The top 10 municipalities for extortion include: San Francisco Gotera (Morazán) with an average LQ of 2.11, followed by San Miguel (San Miguel) 1.67, Osicala (Morazán) 1.63, Jocaitique (Morazán) 1.58, Yamabal (Morazán) 1.57, El Divisadero (Morazán) 1.56, San Simon (Morazán) 1.53, Sensori (San Miguel)1.52, San Vicente (San Vicente) 1.44, and Ahuachapán (Ahuachapán) 1.43. The average confrontations for the top ten municipalities from 2013-2015 are also listed in Table 1. The top four municipalities are known to have gang-controlled neighborhoods.

Correlations resulted in negative associations for homicide and extortion. A strong negative correlations was found for 2015 with $r(260)= -0.746$, $p<.01$. The remaining years reported weak negative correlations, in 2014 with $r(260)= -0.388$, $p<.01$, 2013 with $r(260)= -0.284$, $p<.01$, 2012 with $r(260)= -0.323$, $p<.01$, 2011 with $r(260)= -0.196$, $p<.0$, and 2009 with $r(260)= -0.163$, $p<.01$. Lastly, 2010 did not have a statistically significant correlation. Therefore, as homicide or extortion increased in some municipalities it decreased for others.

Interviews with subject matter experts revealed homicides in El Salvador were attributed to various actors and motives, not exclusively the gangs. Participants identified various forms of gang-and-non-gang violence: 1) internal disputes within the gangs, 2) discipline within the gangs, 3) rivalries amongst the gangs, 4) as a disciplinary consequence towards civilians who did not abide by gang rules, 5) *sicariato* – gangs hired to commit murder, and 6) non-gang related homicides. Officers and NGO participants described violence had evolved from gun shots to dismembering victims.

> "ósea 2010, 2011 el discurso era 90% de los homicidios los comete los pandilleros, y no, eran mucho menos 15%-20%. A partir de 2012, 2013 suben a 30%-35% según los datos de la fiscalía. Creo que se ha mantenido más o menos en estos últimos años. Pero justo cuando la pandilla dice que no va asesinar, se vinculan más homicidios hace a ella, para mí no tiene sentido, y eso nunca lo he entendido." (Like in 2010, 2011 the discourse was 90% of homicides were committed by gangs, and no, it was much less [about] 15%-20%. Starting in 2012, 2013 it increases to 20%-35% according to data from the Prosecutor's Office. I think it has maintained more or less in these last years. But just when the gangs say they are not going to assassinate [due to the Truce], more homicides are linked to them, to me it doesn't make sense, and I've never understood that) (Personal Interview with NGO #7, July 2017)

One law enforcement and one NGO participant described that while government officials portrayed most homicides were due to gangs, data did not support these

claims. The officer highlighted that by doing this, resources were allocated and targeted towards gangs and thereby limited resources for other crimes.

Participants were initially surprised with where extortion concentrated in El Salvador. Two themes were highlighted for extortion maps: 1) imitators and 2) concentration of extortion in areas known to receive remittances. Participants described one of the challenges to accurate extortion data is due to imitators who use the gangs' name to extort. All sectors (officers, NGO, and academics) identified the underreporting of extortion due to fear and/or lack of trust in institutions. An academic participant pointed out extortion concentrates in areas known to receive remittances. Law enforcement participants described investigations had revealed neighbors or family members extorted individuals known to receive remittances. Two police officers stated there would not be a direct relationship between extortions and homicides because homicides were not exclusive to not paying extortion.

Since 2013, the Salvadoran government has publicly stated gangs attack security forces (police and soldiers) entering gang-controlled neighborhoods. All NGO participants and two academics questioned the legitimacy of confrontations and described these as "extrajudicial executions." An NGO participant provided the example that in any confrontations there were often more wounded than dead and fairly distributed on both sides; yet in El Salvador, there were more dead than wounded and always on the gang front. NGO participants shared testimonies of youth who had been tortured in their communities or police precincts, extrajudicially executed by security forces, and drew correlations to torture tactics used during El Salvador's civil war. Furthermore, interviewees clarified youth were criminalized for living in a gang-controlled neighborhood or having a family member who was in a gang.

"*Es que también, ahí se asume que la pandilla ataca y por tanto está defendiendo el territorio, pero a veces no es así, jajaja. Yo creo que la policía ataca porque quiere matarlos, punto.*" (It's also, there is an assumption that the gang attacks and therefore is defending its territory, but sometimes it is not like that, hahaha. I

think the police attack because they want to kill them, period.) (Personal interview with NGO #11, July 2017).

 "A lot of the torture techniques that were used during the war are still used to the T by cops on kids today." (Personal Interview with NGO #8, July 2017)

In conclusion, violence dynamics in El Salvador are much more complex than publicized. While homicides predominantly concentrate in the western region, extortions concentrate in the eastern region where remittances are prominent and muddled with imitators, and confrontations were described as extrajudicial executions rather than gangs' protecting their territory. Gangs were identified to have presence throughout Salvadoran territory, yet multiple actors were identified to contribute to crimes and violence in El Salvador.

Honduras

Table 2 lists the top 10 municipalities with average homicide and extortion rate for 2007-2015 in Honduras. The municipalities with the highest average homicide rate are San Pedro Sula (Cortes) with an average of 24.22 per 10,000 people, followed by La Ceiba (Atlántida) 21.22, La Esperanza (Intibucá) 20.32, Tocoa (Colon) 18.04, La Encarnacion (Ocotepeque) 14.60, Gracias (Lempira) 14.50, Comayagua (Comayagua) 14.19, Santa Fe (Ocotepeque) 14.20, Trujillo (Colon) 14.16, and Yoro (Yoro) 13.57. Three of the top 10 municipalities were identified for gang presence and seven of the top 10 municipalities were identified for narcotrafficking activities. The municipalities with the highest average extortion are San Pedro Sula (Cortes) with 4.10 per 10,000 residents, followed by La Ceiba (Atlántida) 3.48, La Esperanza (Intibucá) 3.30, Comayagua (Comayagua) 2.18, Distrito Central-Tegucigalpa (Francisco Morazán) 1.69, Roatan (Islas de la Bahia) 1.39, Santa Rosa de Copan (Copan) 1.29, Tela (Atlántida) 1.25, Puerto Cortes (Cortes) 1.09, and Siguatepeque (Comayagua) 1.04. 163 municipalities out of 298 did not report extortion. Figure 3 illustrates the concentration of homicides and extortions as well as

municipalities identified for gang presence (outlined in blue) and departments identified for narcotrafficking group activities (outlined in green).

Correlations resulted in weak and moderate positive associations for homicide and extortion. Weak positive correlations were found for 2015 with $r(296)= 0.345$, $p<.01$ and in 2009 with, $r(296)= 0.374$, $p<.01$. Moderate positive correlations were found for 2014 with $r(296)= 0.407$, $p<.01$, 2013 with $r(296)= 0.400$, $p<.01$, 2012 with $r(296)= 0.422$, $p<.01$, 2011 with $r(296)= 0.429$, $p<.01$, 2010 with $r(296)= 0.456$, $p<.01$, 2008 with $r(296)= 0.473$, $p<.01$, and 2007 with $r(296)= 0.407$, $p<.01$. The weak and moderate positive correlations suggest that as homicides increased in some municipalities so did extortion.

Figure 3: 2007-2015 Average Homicide and Extortion Rate in Honduras
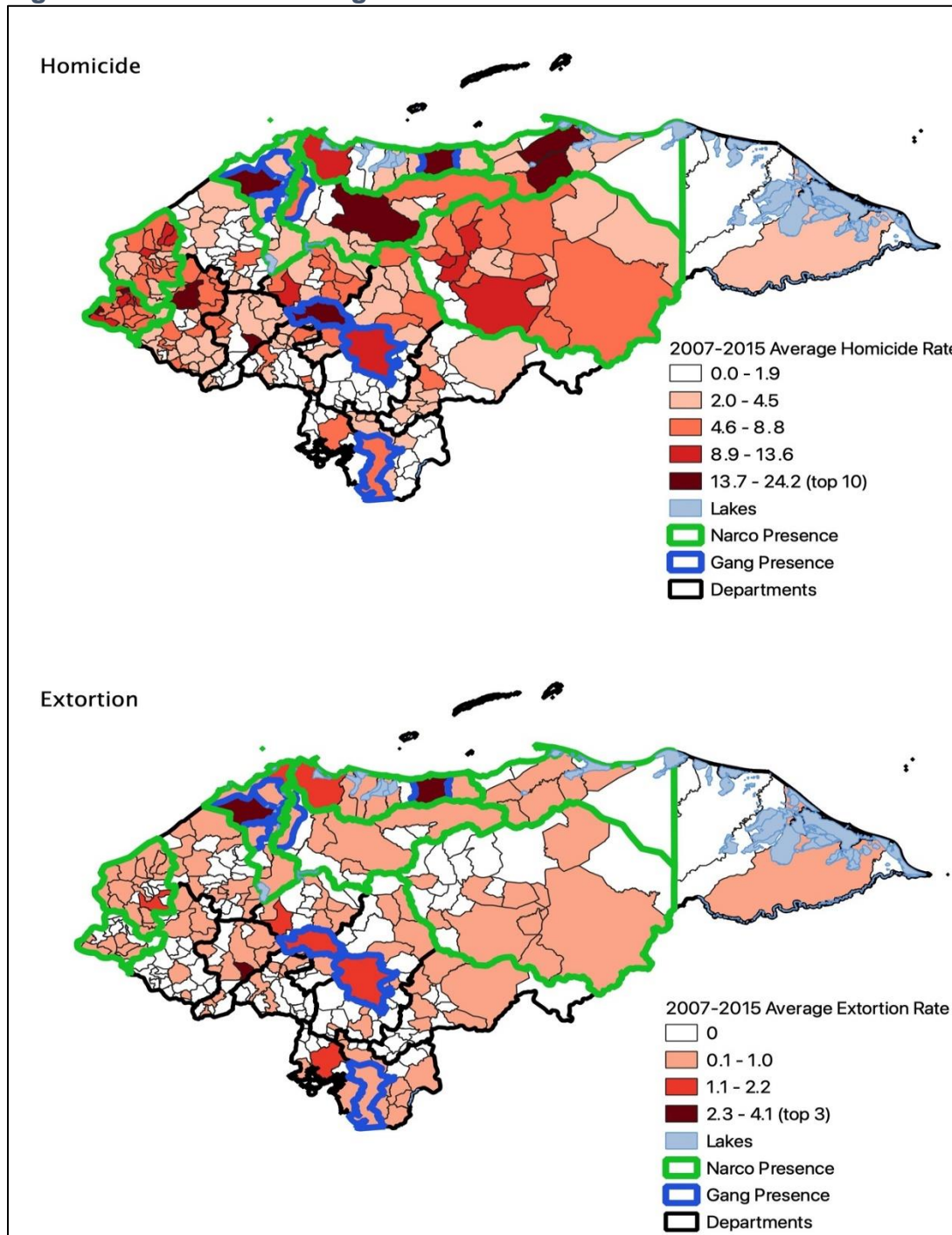
Source: Official Ministerio Publico Data, Mapped by Author

Table 2: Top 10 Homicide and Extortion Municipalities in Honduras

Homicide	Municipality	Average Rate	Extortion	Municipality	Average Rate
1	San Pedro Sula	24.22	1	San Pedro Sula	4.10
2	La Ceiba	21.22	2	La Ceiba	3.48
3	La Esperanza	20.32	3	La Esperanza	3.30
4	Tocoa	18.04	4	Comayagua	2.18
5	La Encarnacion	14.60	5	Distrito Central	1.69
6	Gracias	14.50	6	Roatan	1.39
7	Santa Fe	14.20	7	Sta. Rosa de Copan	1.29
8	Comayagua	14.19	8	Tela	1.25
9	Trujillo	14.16	9	Puerto Cortes	1.09
10	Yoro	13.57	10	Siguatepeque	1.04

Honduran participants identified various actors and motives for homicides in their country. Honduran interviews revealed three main themes: 1) gang violence, 2) narcotrafficking violence, and 3) skepticism regarding official data.

Gangs were identified to be present in large urban centers and partly contributing to violence. Academic and law enforcement interviewees pointed out the presence of various gangs (i.e. Los Chirizos, El Combo Que No Se Deja, and Los Benajmins; not exclusively MS-13 and Barrio 18) conducting street level drug sales which led to disputes over territory. Participants pointed out the following urban centers for multiple illicit groups, large population, and businesses: Tegucigalpa located within Francisco Morazán, San Pedro Sula is Cortes, and La Ceiba located in Atlántida. Officers identified Valle de Sula (which includes the municipalities of Choloma, La Lima, Progreso, Villa Nueva, Cofradia, and San Pedro Sula), Tegucigalpa, and La Ceiba as concerning areas with gang prevalence. Officers emphasized MS-13 was predominantly present in San Pedro Sula while Barrio 18 was more prevalent in Tegucigalpa based on arrest data.

Participants highlighted territorial control is exclusive per group: gangs controlling neighborhoods within cities and narcotrafficking groups controlling trafficking corridors. Honduran narcotrafficking groups were identified to be in the departments of Olancho, Yoro, Colon, Lempira, Copan, Cortes, Atlántida, and

Ocotepeque. For example, planes fly into Olancho with merchandise which is then moved via land through Yoro into Atlántida. The department of Colon, Atlántida, and Cortes all have maritime access points. The departments of Ocotepeque and Copan have border entry points with El Salvador and Guatemala respectively. Participants emphasized most municipalities with high homicide levels were known for narcotrafficking or conflicts amongst narcotrafficking groups rather than gang activities.

> *"Eh… siempre en el caso de Honduras hay que ver todos estos datos con mucha precaución. Ya sea por ineficiencia de las instituciones para colocar los datos exactos o por manipulación de los datos por parte de las instituciones."* (Always in the case of Honduras [one] must see all this data with great caution. Either because of inefficiency of the institutions to place the exact data or because of data manipulation by institutions. (Personal Interview with Academic #1, March 2018).

All Honduran participants expressed a lack of trust in official National Police data. Academic participants described police data was fabricated after police reforms created different police divisions and funding was scares. Furthermore, academic and NGO participants critically questioned the reduction in homicides since 2013. Participants identified various reasons for the drastic reduction in homicides, none were attributed to public policies implemented by the government. Academic and NGO interviewees attributed the reduction of homicides to how homicides were being recorded: 1) multiple homicides (massacres) were recorded as one homicide (incident), 2) in rural areas, families would bury the body rather than taking it to the morgue, 3) homicides not being recorded, and 4) there was harsh criticism that reason for death was being categorized differently. While some participants completely reject the reduction in homicides and claimed data fabrication, others believed there had been a decrease but not as drastic as claimed by officials.

Multiple groups were identified to conduct extortion in Honduras. The *Fuerza Nacional Anti-Extorsión*, FNA (Anti-Extortion National Force) had identified 48 different gangs/criminal bands that commit extortion, including "independent" actors. Officers had identified MS-13, Barrio 18, Los Chirizos, El Combo Que No Se Deja, individuals who use the gangs name, and corrupt police officers to commit extortion. Interviewees provided examples of transportation personnel collaborating with gangs to extort bus owners or competing companies, unhappy employees using the gangs name to extort their employers, and/or family members knowledgeable of individuals receiving remittances. Officers distinguished gangs extorted a specific amount on a routine basis while imitators asked for one large sums of cash. An academic and NGO participant pointed out extortion often led to fear, extortion payments, managing businesses incognito, or abandoning homes but was not determining all homicides in Honduras. Extortion was described to be underreported due to fear and/or only reporting extortion when paying three or more groups.

MS-13 and Barrio 18 were identified to extort differently. All participants described Barrio 18 to extort businesses within their territory, including the ladies who sold tortillas (most vulnerable). MS-13 was described to extort small amounts or no businesses within their territory, rather focusing extortion on the transportation sector. Officers described MS-13's strategy to gain sympathy within their communities. NGO and officers identified this benefited MS-13 since neighbors would inform the gang of police patrols or if others tried to extort within the communities so the gang would eliminate competitors. Officers described MS-13 maintained their territory free from residents disrupting illicit activities by reporting to the police. Academic and NGO participants described this also prevented gangs from being arrested, tortured, or murdered by corrupt law enforcement. Officers and NGO participants highlighted MS-13 had automatically reduced violence levels in their communities to avoid police intervention.

Most disturbing in the case of Honduras, was the common theme of corrupt National Police officers involved in extortions. Participants described officers acting as

delinquent groups committing extortion, involved with gangs committing extortion, and/or not arresting gang members in exchange for a portion of extortion funds. An NGO participant shared local vendors perspective: "*Si la policía es ineficiente, mejor le pago a los pandilleros. Además, no me van a matar y me va a cuidar.*" (If the police are inefficient, it's better to pay gang members. Besides, they won't kill me and will take care of me.) (Personal Interview with NGO #2, March 2018). Academic and NGO participants described extortion to function as an informal form of security.

In conclusion, violence is not exclusive to gangs in Honduras, but aggravated with domestic narcotrafficking groups, imitators, and corrupt police officers. While gangs are prevalent in urban centers, narcotrafficking groups are prevalent in trafficking corridors. It should be noted that territory control is exclusive for these groups. Extortions were also committed by imitators and more concerning is the involvement of corrupt police officers.
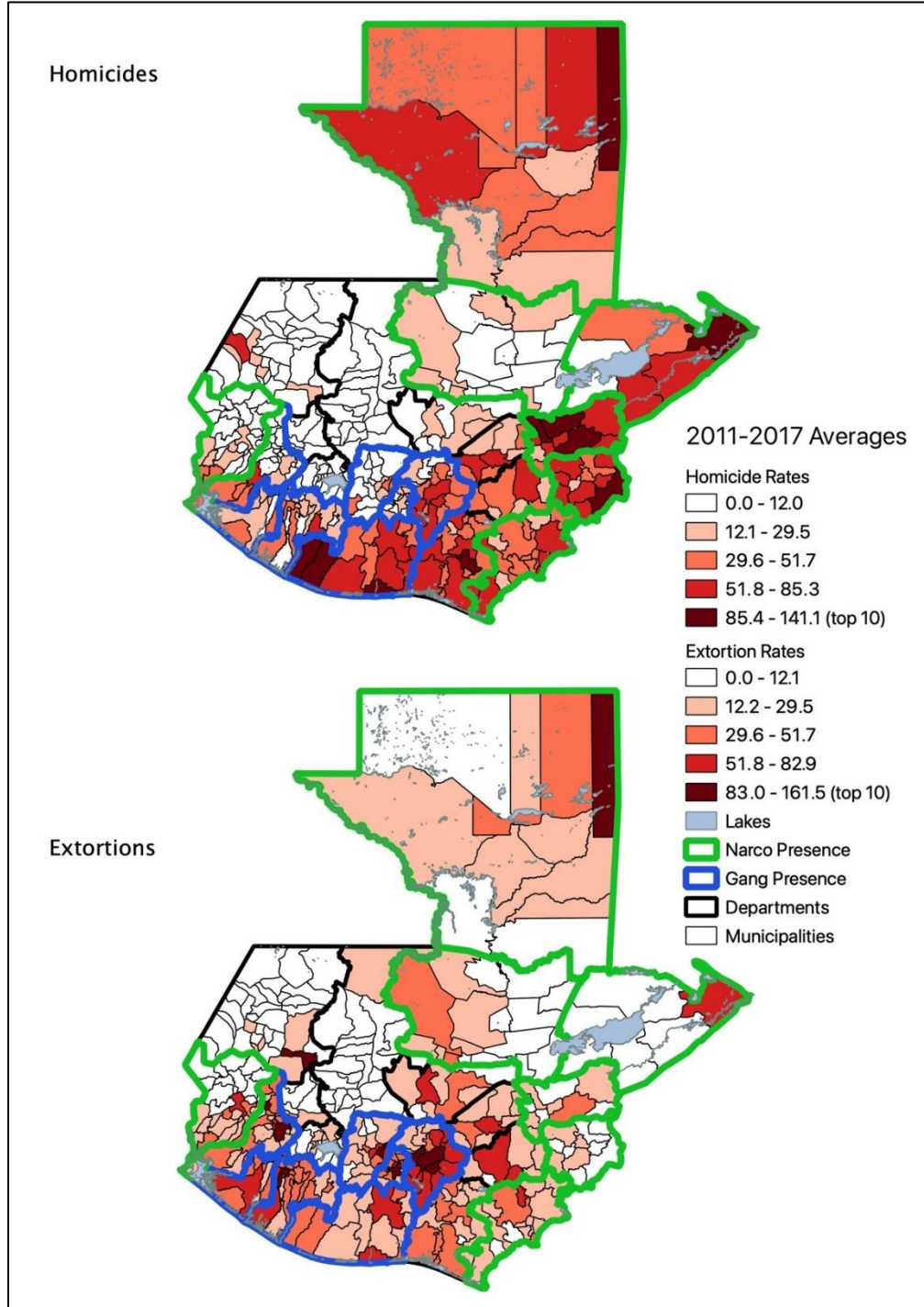
Guatemala

Table 3 lists the top ten municipalities with the highest homicide and extortion rates per 100,000 people from 2011 to 2017 in Guatemala. The average homicide rate was led by Nueva Concepcion (Escuintla) with a rate of 141.15 per 100,000 people, followed by San Jose (Escuintla) with 135.46, Melchor de Mencos (Petén) 125.4, Puerto Barrio (Izabal) 106.24, Teculutn (Zacapa) 105.87, Esquipulas (Chiquimula) 103.28, Zacapa (Zacapa) 95.78, Tiquisate (Escuintla) 95.16, Rio Hondo (Zacapa) 89.83, and Santa Maria Ixhuatn (Santa Rosa) 87.60. The average extortion rate was led by the city of Guatemala (Guatemala) with 161.54 per 100,000 people, followed by Quetzaltenango (Quetzaltenango) 153.61, Antigua Guatemala (Sacatepéquez) 102.23, Mazatenango (Suchitepéquez) 97.24, Melchor de Mencos (Petén) 96.52, Mixco (Guatemala) 91.16, Chimaltenango (Chimaltenango) 87.69, Huehuetenango (Huehuetenango) 85.99, Santa Catarina Pinula (Guatemala) 83.56, and Sibilia (Quetzaltenango) 82.87. Figure 4 illustrates the concentration of homicide and extortions, departments identified as

narcotrafficking corridors (outlined in green), and departments identified for gang presence (outlined in blue).

Figure 4: 2011-2017 Average Homicide and Extortion Rates in Guatemala

Source: *Official National Civilian Police Data, Mapped by Author*

All studied years in Guatemala resulted in weak positive correlations for homicide and extortion: in 2011 $r(334)=0.101$, $p<.01$; in 2012 $r(334)=0.179$, $p<.01$; in 2013 $r(334)=0.118$, $p<.01$; in 2014 $r(334)=0.178$, $p<.01$; in 2015 $r(334)=0.045$, $p<.01$; in 2016 $r(334)=0.078$, $p<.01$; and 2017 $r(334)=0.156$, $p<.01$. Therefore, indicating that as homicides increased so did extortion.

Table 3: Top 10 Municipalities for Homicide and Extortion Rates in Guatemala

Homicide	Municipality	Average Rate	Extortion	Municipality	Average Rate
1	Nueva Concepción	141.15	1	Guatemala	161.54
2	San José	135.46	2	Quetzaltenango	153.61
3	Melchor de Mencos	125.47	3	Antigua Guatemala	102.23
4	Puerto Barrios	106.24	4	Mazatenango	97.24
5	Teculutn	105.87	5	Melchor de Mencos	96.52
6	Esquipulas	103.28	6	Mixco	91.16
7	Zacapa	95.78	7	Chimaltenango	87.69
8	Tiquisate	95.16	8	Huehuetenango	85.99
9	Ro Hondo	89.83	9	Santa Catarina Pinula	83.56
10	Santa Maria Ixhuatán	87.6	10	Sibilia	82.87

Guatemalan interviews revealed four main themes: 1) gang violence, 2) narcotrafficking violence, 3) the indigenous community, and 4) lack of data. Like its neighbors, participants identified data in their countries did not support gangs commit most homicides.

> "*Donde hay narcos, no hay pandilleros.*" (Where there are narcos, there are no gangs.) (Personal Interview with NGO personnel #9, August 2018)

Homicides in each department were identified to be attributed to different actors and motives. Academic and NGO participants highlighted border municipalities (often associated with narcotrafficking) had higher homicide rates than the metropolitan area

(often associated with gangs). Officers identified gang presence in the departments of Chimaltenango, Guatemala, Sacatepéquez, Retalhuleu, Suchitepéquez, Escuintla, and Quetzaltenango. All participants identified the municipalities of Guatemala, Villa Nueva, and Mixco to have gang presence. These municipalities are also considered urban centers within the department of Guatemala. All participants identified the departments of Zacapa, Izabal, Chiquimula, Petén, Alta Verapaz, Jutiapa, and San Marcos to have narcotrafficking activities. Two participants highlighted there is no gang presence in narcotrafficking areas because *no le gusta esa clase de gente* (they do not like those [gang members] kind of people). (Personal Interview with Academic #10, August 2018). Participants emphasized nearly no homicides were reported where the Mayan communities have the largest concentration (Quiche, Huehuetenango, Totonicapán, and San Marcos); thereby, reducing the overall national homicide rate.

Gang violence was identified as a form of discipline, control, and to cause an impact on society. All interviewees described gang related homicides to be attributed to 1) murders against its own members, 2) murders of rival gang members, 3) extortion and 4) *sicariato*. Participants described gang violence to be applied: within gang ranks to maintain discipline, exerted on rivals (including gang members or corrupt police officers), and as *sicarios* (hired assassins). Guatemalan NGO participants described gangs as "systems of interest" that use violence for "auto purging" or "auto control" for those who betray the gang. Participants detailed how members were murdered for keeping money, drugs, weapons, being romantically involved with high-ranking members partners, *ladiarse* (slang for going sideways) or not following rules. Participants in all countries described MS-13 to use violence strategically compared to Barrio 18.

Academics detailed the lack of data to support claims of gangs being responsible for large portions of homicides. For example, academics and NGO participants highlighted 60 percent of PNC data does not list motive for homicides, only listing "investigating, unknown, or ignored." Furthermore, a maximum of 10 percent of the remaining 40 percent were attributed to gangs. Academic and NGO participants

distinguished the municipalities of Guatemala, Villa Nueva, and Mixco could have higher gang violence since gangs were prevalent in those areas. However, cautioned this could not be generalized to other municipalities of the country.

Participants identified homicides and extortion are not mutually exclusive. Academics and officers provided explanations for the low correlation between homicides and extortions maybe due to 1) some municipalities not reporting extortion and 2) extortions are not the only explanation to homicides in the country. Academics provided key differences of victims for these crimes, detailing how homicide victims are youth between the ages of 18-25 years old, while extortion victims are 35 and older.

Participants identified three main groups conducting extortion and differences in each dynamic. First, Barrio 18 was identified to extort the most vulnerable groups: small businesses and "even" the ladies who sold tortillas. MS-13 was identified to have greater economic capacity because it extorted larger businesses. Lastly, imitators (e.g. individuals, family members, or colleagues using the gangs' name to conduct extortion) were identified as a third groups contributing to extortion in Guatemala. A law enforcement participant detailed the special task force on extortion identified a 90/10 typology: 90 percent of extortions are committed by imitators and 10 percent are committed by gangs. Investigations also revealed extortions were conducted from within prison. Moreover, officers were able to identify gangs and imitators conduct extortion differently: imitators demand one large sum payment, while gangs demand systematic smaller payments. Fear and lack of trust in the police were identified to contribute to underreporting of this crime.

In conclusion, Guatemala has various actors and motives that contribute to violence and extortion. The concentration of some homicides was attributed to gangs in urban areas and narcotrafficking groups in border municipalities known for trafficking. Extortion also had the dynamic of imitators with a recognized typology of 90 percent due to imitators and only 10 percent due to gangs. The indigenous population contributes to Guatemala's overall homicide rate remaining low with a lack of homicide and extortion reports in the western highlands. These findings support an academic

participants response: violence in Guatemala is disorganized due to the various actors and motives.

Discussion

This study finds although government officials claim gangs contribute to most of the violence (and use "gangs" interchangeably and synonymous to "homicides"), administrative data does not support these arguments. Violence was identified to be attributed to 1) inter-and-intra gang violence primarily concentrate in urban centers, 2) inter-and-intra narcotrafficking violence predominantly concentrated in border municipalities, 3) state violence, and 4) non-gang related violence. Therefore, there are multiple illicit actors contributing to violence dynamics in northern Central America. Unfortunately, the state was also identified as a contributor to violence whether directly with accusations of extrajudicial murders or indirectly with deficient data to carry out investigations and thereby contributing to a weak rule of law and impunity.

Gangs were found to contribute to violence in various manners. MS-13 and Barrio 18 exert violence to 1) maintain discipline within gangs (intra gang violence), 2) against rivals (inter gang violence), 3) against those who disobey orders, and 4) as *sicarios* (hitmen). Moreover, gang violence was described to have evolved from simple shootings to dismembering individuals. In the case of Guatemala and Honduras, violence is aggravated with inter-and-intra narcotrafficking group violence in different geographical areas to those of gangs. Lastly, the Salvadoran case suggests the state is also a contributing actor to violence with tortures, excessive use of force, and "extrajudicial executions" taking place.

Extortion in these countries was also identified to be conducted by multiple actors. The use of the gangs' name to conduct extortion by various imitators, the low levels of trust in institutions to report extortion, and fear create the perfect recipe for impunity to persist. Most concerning in the case of Honduras was the recurring theme

of corrupt officers conducting extortion. Moreover, the multiple actors places into question the profitability of extortion for gangs. For example, an ICG (2017) report conducted a simple calculation of dividing the total amount of extortion funds by estimated gang members in El Salvador and found it resulted in $15 a week, half the minimum wage of rural workers.

The data limitation in northern Central America should concern any researcher and policymaker. Without reliable and valid data, accurate measures of violence and its offenders become difficult, if not impossible. This limitation further debilitates the ability to develop public policies that could tackle insecurity. These countries would benefit from capacity building in data collection and analysis and criminal investigations to understand violence, extortion, and gang dynamics. Furthermore, criminal investigations and reliable data would contribute to identifying problem, distinguishing various actors (i.e. imitators vs gangs), and counter political rhetoric.

In conclusion, although MS-13 and Barrio 18 contribute to violence in northern Central America, the deficiency in data makes it difficult to determine exactly how much gangs are contributing to insecurity. Moreover, the prevalent themes that others, including the state, contribute to violence and the persistent fear to report crimes due to a lack of trust in institutions exacerbates insecurity in these countries.

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