

PART I

INTRODUCTION

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Excerpt  
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## I

## Violence in Third Wave Democracies

Violence invokes images of military regimes, wars, and revolution, and with good reason. The twentieth century has been marked by devastating patterns of violence tied to each of these political episodes. The third wave of democratization was heralded, therefore, not only as a turn to electoral rule but also as a reversal of the violence that marked some of the darkest days in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. With the transition from authoritarian rule, many forms of violence declined significantly: the military largely returned to the barracks, human rights abuses declined in these new regimes, and the demobilization of (para)military and guerilla forces signaled the end of political violence in many parts of Latin America and Africa. Revolutionary movements (so rare to begin with) receded in this contemporary era.

Yet violence remains prevalent in Latin America's third wave of democracy. From statistical evidence to political conversation, violence is part of daily life. Homicide rates are among the highest in the world, and national surveys convey prevailing concerns about rising violence. The media commonly reports on violent crimes – with some cities reporting multiple homicides a day and others (also) riddled with concerns about kidnapping and femicide. In editorials, reports, and ethnographic studies, citizens reacting to the violence express concern about taking public transportation, walking the streets, and staying out late at night. They fear getting caught in the crossfire. In these circumstances, citizens are not only mourning the loss of loved ones but are also anticipating and strategizing to avoid further harm. The recent waves of undocumented Central Americans (including children) risking their lives to travel to the United States exemplify the noxious impact of this violence on Latin American families. Governments, nongovernmental organizations, and international institutions, in turn, are launching security reforms to address the crisis of violence – with many countries implementing harsh security

measures to deter and punish violent offenders. In short, violence remains very much a part of contemporary Latin America.

This book sets out to explain why homicidal violence has reached such high levels in the contemporary democratic period. It does so by analyzing Latin America, the world region that was among the earliest movers in the third wave of democratization (following Spain and Portugal in southern Europe) and yet has arguably become home to the most violent of third wave democracies in the contemporary period. Why has violence emerged as a pandemic phenomenon in third wave, Latin American democracies, and how do we explain its categorical, temporal, and spatial variation?

The goal of this book is to explain varied homicide levels in contemporary democracies and to chart out a theoretical agenda that focuses on violence at the intersection of three factors: the geography of illicit political economies, the capacity of state security forces, and organizational competition over territorial enclaves. These three factors interact within and across borders, explaining much of the categorical variation in violence across the region. They help explain “homicidal ecologies” (subnational regions most susceptible to violence) and associated mechanisms (to explain when and why violence spikes). Taken in reverse order, I argue in particular that organizational competition to control subnational, illicit, territorial enclaves drives the high violence patterns in the region; this competition occurs between illicit actors and/or with the state. However, the violence-inducing, competitive mechanisms are playing out in specific homicidal ecologies: geographically, violence-prone subnational enclaves are emerging most clearly along prized illicit trade and transit routes, where security forces are weak and/or corrupt (although this situation has also arisen in capital cities). While some isolated cases of violent struggle might be politically motivated (to take state power and/or influence policy), most are not. In this regard, the violence of the contemporary period is distinct – less ideological, more dispersed, more fragmented, and arguably harder to control.

Alongside these analytic and theoretical ambitions, normative concerns also motivate this book. The violence in the region is widespread, endemic, and impactful. It is affecting daily life for citizens, and yet the English-language social science literature has until recently turned a blind eye to this phenomenon. Recognizing the methodological challenges of working systematically on the illicit, this book has ventured forth nonetheless to discuss this phenomenon that has so deeply scarred many people who had hoped democracy would usher in a brighter future – at the very least one relatively free from violence. Yet, democracy has *not* done so for so many.

To understand why, we must look beyond formal institutions and national boundaries to explore the interaction of the illicit, the state, and organizational competition. The rest of this chapter introduces the phenomenon and the methods used in this book.

#### VIOLENCE: EMPIRICAL TRENDS

Latin America has a long history of violence, often surpassing that found in other regions.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, however, the face of violence in Latin America has changed dramatically. Although the data are poor, the trends are clear. In the 1960s and 1970s, Latin America was defined by authoritarian regimes marked by widespread political violence. Political assassinations, disappearances, lack of habeas corpus, and/or involuntary military recruitment were commonplace in many countries – particularly El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. With transitions away from authoritarian rule, there was a sharp decline in human rights abuses, with some recent and notable exceptions.<sup>2</sup> While state violence is not entirely a thing of the past, its scope and intensity are markedly different than that of the prior authoritarian period. The power of militaries to subvert civilian control, engage in widespread human rights abuses, and act with impunity has been seriously weakened. In this context, Latin America's third wave democracies have promoted deeper and more meaningful patterns of citizenship, with citizens gaining basic political and civil rights that were coercively denied them in earlier decades.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these advances in civil and political rights, there has been a startling rise in homicide levels in several Latin American countries. These can no longer be analyzed solely as the product of military regimes and/or civil wars (with Colombia's civil war offering the obvious exception). To the contrary, non-civil-war-related homicide rates have reached startling levels in much of the region. Based on these contemporary trends, Latin America consistently stands out in the new millennia as one of the

<sup>1</sup> Homicide levels have outpaced those in Europe and Asia by five to eight times, according to time series data (using a three-year moving average) dating from 1955 to 2012. That said, this data averages only five countries for Latin America, three for Asia/Oceania, and fifteen for Europe (UNODC 2014b: 12).

<sup>2</sup> As I complete this book, human rights abuses and political violence have risen in Venezuela (whose democratic origins predate the third wave of democracy and whose democratic future is currently uncertain).

<sup>3</sup> Not all third wave democratic countries have achieved equal levels of political and civil rights; Guatemala ranks far below Chile, for example. However, all third wave democracies have improved political and civil rights relative to those of the authoritarian period.

most violent regions in the world – especially when compared with non-civil war cases. The 2012 global average homicide rate was estimated at 6.2 per 100,000 people. Latin America (with just 8% of the global population) was responsible for the highest percentage (36%) of the 437,000 homicides reported in that year (UNODC 2014b: 11–12). Moreover, Central America (along with Southern Africa) claimed the dubious distinction of being the most violent subregion in the world, with an estimated homicide rate of four times the global average (UNODC 2014b: 12).<sup>4</sup> El Salvador has often been singled out, in particular, for its exceedingly high homicide rates, but other countries (e.g., Guatemala and Honduras) have also been standouts in this regard. Comaroff and Comaroff (2006a: 219) have cautioned against the reification of these kinds of data since “police statistics everywhere are erected on an edifice of indeterminacies and impossibilities.” Yet even while recognizing the imprecision of homicide statistics, Latin America appears to be in a category all by itself *and* also to encompass a great deal of variation therein.

This book focuses on one particularly egregious and definitive form of violence: homicides. Recognizing that other types of violence (kidnapping, armed robbery, rape, battery, etc.) are not inconsequential, I choose to focus on homicides for both normative and methodological reasons. Normatively, homicide rates are of particular concern. Homicide is arguably the most extreme form of violence: it is not necessarily the most brutal form (we can imagine horrible forms of torture that do not take one’s life, just as we can imagine a quick form of homicide), but the taking of a life is the final form. This ultimate disregard for life drives this project. What leads to this kind of violent behavior? Why do people kill others in such high numbers – especially since the numbers do not necessarily correlate with those of other patterns of violence?<sup>5</sup> Alongside these normative

<sup>4</sup> Homicide data are often difficult to gather and compare because definitions and measure of homicide vary across countries and even across national institutions within the same country. Even recognizing this problem, UNODC (2007: 53) notes as follows: most data indicate that Guatemala and El Salvador are among the most violent places in the world (alongside Jamaica, Colombia, and South Africa/Swaziland); Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua are considerably less violent; data on Honduras are incomplete, but existing evidence suggests that it is closer to Guatemala and El Salvador than to the other Central American cases. For a map of homicide rates by country or territory (2012 or latest year), see UNODC (2014b: 23).

<sup>5</sup> High homicide rates do not necessarily equal high rates of other crimes. Armed robbery victimization in 2008, for example, was reportedly highest in Ecuador (15.6%), Venezuela (13.3%), Haiti (12.1%), and Argentina (12.0%) in 2008, followed by Guatemala (11.4%), El Salvador (10.6%), and Chile (8.6%). Honduras comes in twelfth on the list, after the prior countries and Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia (World Bank 2010, volume 2: 4, based on LAPOP surveys of percentage of adults victimized by armed robbery

concerns, the motivation to focus on homicides is also methodological. It is difficult to count violence. Most of it goes unreported, and most states in the region have uneven records for the wide range of violence that takes place – e.g., rape, kidnapping, and assault. Not only have state agencies demonstrated limited capacity to keep systematic and comparable records on these forms of violence, but people also hesitate to report violent acts given limited confidence in state institutions. In this context, homicides are more reliably compared than many other forms of violence. It is not that state homicide records are excellent; it is that they are the best existing records of violent acts at this point. In this book, “homicides” refer to the intentional and unlawful taking of another life, a definition that draws from and coincides with the UN’s definition (see UNODC 2011: 15). Thus, ethical and methodological reasons combine and drive the decision to focus on homicides as the basis for identifying violence trends and rates across the region.

While homicide data represent the best comparable violence statistics that we have, it is important to underscore that the data are estimates. It is a challenge to measure and compare homicide data, not only because this assumes intentionality and not only because different states use different legal definitions, but also because developing states often lack the capacity and incentive to collect, systematize, and share statistics (although, notably, reported homicide rates are highest in cases with very low state capacity). Moreover, criminal records and health records often diverge for the same country (although datasets using one or the other tend to be broadly compatible when it comes to ranking countries). For this book, I started off using the collection of health records in the World Health Organization’s classic and oft-cited study on homicides; however, I also rely on the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) dataset, which includes criminal records reported by national police and other rule-of-law institutions (which tend to report higher numbers, on average). Were that one could say with

in past twelve months). House burglary victimization rates, based on LAPOP surveys, suggest a list led by Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia, Haiti, Chile, Paraguay, Brazil, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Panama, Mexico, Jamaica, and then Honduras. Note that the high homicide rate cases are in the bottom half of the house burglary list (World Bank 2010, volume 2: 3–4).

confidence that one set of records was always best.<sup>6</sup> Because this is not possible, I use both datasets to evaluate, rank, and triangulate data across countries.

Given the decision to focus on homicides, it is also important to emphasize what this book does and does not do. This book sets out to explain different categorical levels of homicidal violence: comparatively very high, medium, and low.<sup>7</sup> It does not explain individual acts of homicide. It also does not explain slight ordinal variations. Nor does it presume that homicide levels vary with other forms of violence, which they do not. I self-consciously restrict my argument to explaining a tripartite categorization in homicide levels. When referring to violence from this point on, I am referring only to homicides, unless otherwise stated. Thus, I cautiously but explicitly take some poetic license by interchangeably using the terms “violence” and “homicides” – even though the former is a more capacious term than the latter and violent trends across violent categories do not always coincide.

Two figures convey the cross-national trends in homicides. Figure 1.1 provides the figures reported by WHO (in collaboration with its regional counterpart, the Pan American Health Organization) on homicide rates in the Americas. The dataset begins in 1995, earlier than the UNODC dataset, but reports lower and more-discontinuous figures. Given the lack of time trend data for Bolivia, Haiti, Honduras, and Jamaica, these cases are excluded from the first graph.<sup>8</sup> Figures 1.2 and 1.3 provide UNODC figures, which start later (2000) but include more-continuous data. Notably, UNODC figures are often higher than WHO figures – especially for Honduras.

<sup>6</sup> See Ribeiro, Borges, and Cano (2015) for an overview of different data sources and their strengths and weaknesses. Import discrepancies exist in datasets using criminal records versus health records. Databases (such as those of WHO and PAHO, the Pan American Health Organization) that use health records/death certificates tend to use specific protocols (which can lead to greater reliability but also an underestimation of homicides – especially if they are not certain about how and why the death occurred). Databases that use criminal records (such as UNODC) tend to report higher homicide levels than those based on death certificates but can suffer from other problems, including differences in if/how they record intentionality – i.e., killings by police officers and/or civilians engaging in self-defense.

<sup>7</sup> As noted later, “medium” is a relative category for the region. By other regional standards, medium could be considered exceptionally high.

<sup>8</sup> These figures are the most comprehensive and commonly cited comparative figures for the region (although, as we will see in future chapters, the figures arguably underreport homicide levels – particularly for Guatemala and Mexico – and fail to report for Honduras up to 2007).



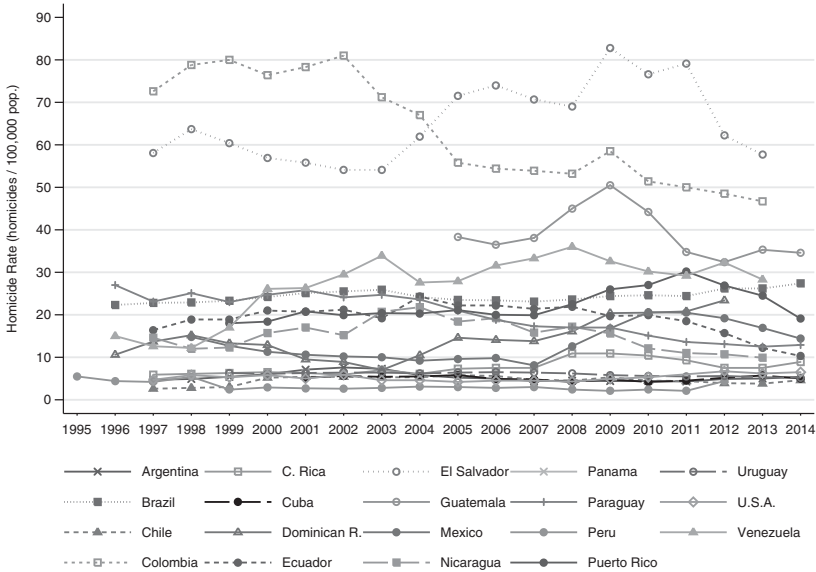


FIGURE 1.1 Homicide rates in the Americas per 100,000 (1995–2014, per WHO/PAHO)

Figure created for this project by Daniela Barba-Sánchez using Stata.

Sources: Panel dataset published online by Pan American Health Organization and World Health Organization. *Health Information Platform for the Americas (PLISA)*. Washington DC, 2016. Available at [http://phip.paho.org/views/Pro\\_Reg\\_Fin\\_Nca\\_Pub\\_Anua\\_Tab\\_Ing\\_IBS\\_homicides/Table?embed=yes&comments=no&display\\_count=no&showVizHome=no](http://phip.paho.org/views/Pro_Reg_Fin_Nca_Pub_Anua_Tab_Ing_IBS_homicides/Table?embed=yes&comments=no&display_count=no&showVizHome=no). Last visited in September 2017.

Data for Figure 1.1 are reported in the Appendix in Table 1.2. Figures marked with \* in Table 1.2 are from the panel dataset published online by Pan American Health Organization, Health Surveillance and Disease Management Area, Health Statistics and Analysis Unit. *PAHO Regional Mortality Database*. Washington DC, 2010. Available at [www.paho.org/Spanish/SHA/coredata/tabulator/newTabulator.htm](http://www.paho.org/Spanish/SHA/coredata/tabulator/newTabulator.htm).

Data for Peru come from the panel dataset published online by the Pan American Health Organization, Health Information and Analysis Unit. *Regional Core Health Data Initiative*. Washington DC, 2014. Available at [www1.paho.org/English/SHA/coredata/tabulator/newTabulator.htm](http://www1.paho.org/English/SHA/coredata/tabulator/newTabulator.htm). Last visited in July 2015. Corrected mortality rates are based on observed mortality data, applying a correction for mortality under-registration and ill-defined deaths.

Notes: Figures for Honduras are excluded from this figure since they are significantly lower than the data reported in UNDP 2013 Informe Regional de Desarrollo Humano 2013–2014 Seguridad Ciudadana con Rostro Humano: Anexo Estadístico-Metodológico. New York, NY, p. 65 (37 for 2005, 46.2 for 2006, 49.9 for 2007, 57.9 for 2008, 66.8 for 2009, 77.5 for 2010, and 86.5 for 2011).

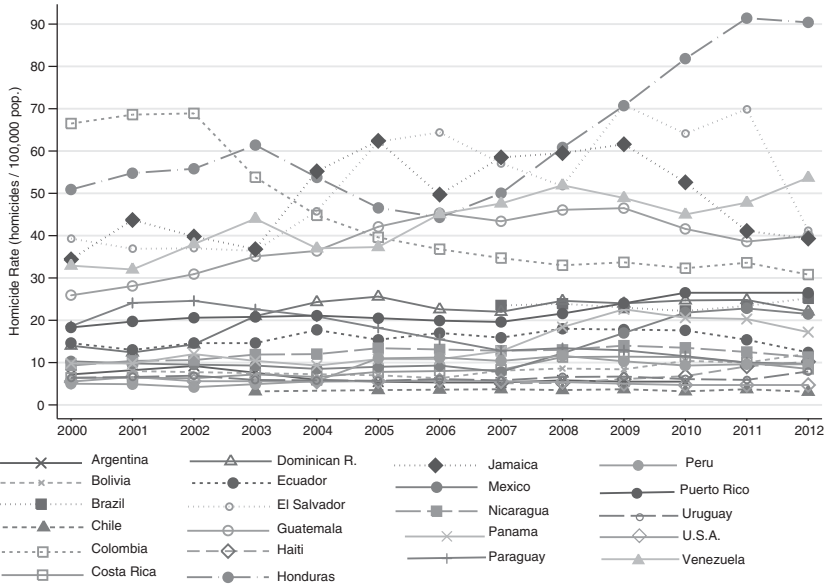


FIGURE 1.2 Homicide rates in the Americas per 100,000 (2000–2012, per UNODC)

Graph created for this project by Daniela Barba-Sánchez in June 2016 using Stata.  
 Source: UNODC 2014b. See [www.unodc.org/gsh/data.html](http://www.unodc.org/gsh/data.html).

CAPTION FOR FIGURE 1.1 (cont.)

Figures for Guatemala (1995–2004) were originally reported in the PAHO 2010 report. They were, however, dropped in the 2016 report, and thus I do not include them in this figure, although they are reported in the Appendix.

Figures for El Salvador and Guatemala are sometimes reported elsewhere as considerably higher than the figures reported in this table. See, for example, Inter-American Development Bank 2000 Report. Reprinted in Hugo Acero Velásquez. 2002. “Salud, violencia y seguridad.” *Ciudad y políticas públicas de seguridad y convivencia*. [www.suivd.gov.co/ciudad/MexicoMarzohacero.doc](http://www.suivd.gov.co/ciudad/MexicoMarzohacero.doc). Even these comparatively lower estimates, however, place these cases at the upper tier of per capita homicide rates in the region.