

Homicidal Ecologies

Why has violence spiked in Latin America's contemporary democracies? What explains its temporal and spatial variation? Analyzing the region's uneven homicide levels, this book maps out a theoretical agenda focusing on three intersecting factors: the changing geography of transnational illicit political economies, the varied capacity and complicity of state institutions tasked with providing law and order, and organizational competition to control illicit territorial enclaves. These three factors inform the emergence of "homicidal ecologies" (subnational regions most susceptible to violence) in Latin America. After focusing on the contemporary causes of homicidal violence, the book analyzes the comparative historical origins of the state's weak and complicit public security forces and the rare moments in which successful institutional reform takes place. The evaluation of regional trends in Latin America is followed by the presentation of original case studies from Central America, which claims among the highest homicide rates in the world.

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Homicidal Ecologies

*Illicit Economies and Complicit States
in Latin America*

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Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-17847-2 — Homicidal Ecologies
 Deborah J. Yashar
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
 It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
 education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: <http://www.cambridge.org/9781107178472>
 DOI: 10.1017/9781316823705

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First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Yashar, Deborah J., 1963– author.

TITLE: Homicidal ecologies : violence after war and dictatorship in Latin America /
 Deborah Yashar, Princeton University.

OTHER TITLES: Violence after war and dictatorship in Latin America

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, [2018] | Series:
 Cambridge studies in comparative politics | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018017040 | ISBN 9781107178472 (alk. paper)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Violence – Central America. | Violence – Political aspects – Central
 America. | Civil war – Social aspects – Central America. | Crime – Economic aspects –
 Central America. | Central America – Social conditions. | Democratization – Latin
 America. | Democracy – Latin America.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC HN125.2.V5 Y37 2018 | DDC 303.6098–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018017040>

ISBN 978-1-107-17847-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-62965-9 Paperback

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For Sarah and Rebecca

Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
PART I INTRODUCTION	
1	I
Violence in Third Wave Democracies	3
Violence: Empirical Trends	5
Research Design	15
The Argument and Book Outline	18
Appendix: Homicide Rates in the Americas, 1995–2014	22
2	24
Engaging the Theoretical Debate and Alternative Arguments	24
Political Transitions: Civil Wars and Democratization	25
Sociological Arguments	36
Economic Incentives and Violence	44
Historical Institutional Legacies of State Formation	55
Conclusion	59
Appendix: Homicide Rates and Gini Coefficients in Latin America	61
PART II THE ARGUMENT ABOUT HOMICIDAL ECOLOGIES	
3	63
Illicit Economies and Territorial Enclaves: The Transnational Context and Domestic Footprint	65
Forefronting and Conceptualizing the Illicit	66
Latin America's Illicit Economies and Organizations: Drugs, Organized Crime, and Gangs	72
Conclusion	98

4	State Capacity and Organizational Competition: Strategic Calculations about Territory and Violence	100
	States and State Capacity: Shaping Calculations about Illicit Geographies	101
	Organizational Territorial Competition: The Micro-Mechanisms of Violence	119
	Conclusion	131
	Appendix: Alternative State Capacity Data for Rule of Law and Corruption	133
	PART III DIVERGENT TRAJECTORIES: THREE POST-CIVIL WAR CASES	
		145
5	High Violence in Post-Civil War Guatemala	149
	Violence Patterns	152
	State Capacity: Weak Law and Order	155
	Illicit Actors, Political Economies, and Organizational Territorial Competition	176
	Conclusion	199
	Appendix: Newspaper Violence Database: Guatemalan Patterns	201
6	High Violence in Post-Civil War El Salvador	208
	State Capacity: Weak Law and Order	212
	Illicit Actors, Organizational Territorial Competition, and Violence	235
	Conclusion	273
	Appendix: Newspaper Violence Database: Salvadoran Patterns	275
7	Circumscribing Violence in Post-Civil War Nicaragua	279
	Forging a More Capacious Set of Law-and-Order Institutions	282
	Violence and the Illicit in Nicaragua	312
	Coda	334
	Appendix: Homicide Rates by Nicaraguan Department	338

	<i>Contents</i>	ix
	PART IV LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD	339
8	Concluding with States	341
	Revisiting States and Violence	343
	Territories Big and Small: Policing National Boundaries and Subnational Enclaves	357
	Policy Implications and Future Research	362
	Conclusion	368
	<i>Bibliography</i>	371
	<i>Index</i>	399

Figures and Tables

FIGURES

1.1	Homicide rates in the Americas per 100,000 (1995–2014, per WHO/PAHO)	<i>page 9</i>
1.2	Homicide rates in the Americas per 100,000 (2000–2012, per UNODC)	10
1.3	Homicide rates in Latin America per 100,000 (2010, per WHO PAHO and UNODC)	11
1.4	Central America's homicide rates by subnational area	17
1.5	The argument	20
2.1	Map of Guatemala: departmental homicide rates (2004)	31
2.2	Social investment in young people in Latin America (2012)	40
2.3	Average wage and unemployment in Latin American countries in the 2000s	41
2.4	Homicide rates and Gini coefficients in Latin America, five-year averages (1997–2013)	50
2.5	Homicide rates and Gini coefficients in Latin America, annual patterns (1999–2013)	61
3.1	Cocaine seizures in Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico	82
3.2	Main global cocaine flows (2008)	84
4.1	Number of primary cocaine movements destined for or interdicted in selected Central American countries and Mexico (2000–2011)	105
4.2	Stylized calculation by drug trafficking organizations	107
4.3	Conviction rates by country for adult citizens in Central America and Mexico (2003–2013, rate per 100,000 for all crimes)	113
4.4	Perceptions of police (2000 and 2011)	115
4.5	Belief that police are involved in crime (2004–2014)	116

List of Figures and Tables

xi

4.6	The argument	132
4.7	Rule of law in Latin America (2009)	135
4.8	Distrust of police (1996–2016)	138
4.9	Indicators of corruption (2009)	142
5.1	Homicide rates in the Americas (1995–2014)	151
5.2	Homicide rates in northern Central America (2000–2012)	151
5.3	Guatemala: regional homicide levels, per 100,000 (1994, 1998, 2002, 2004)	153
5.4	Comparing geographies in Guatemala: homicide rates, organized crime groups, and prime drug trade routes	179
6.1	Homicide rates in El Salvador (1999–2015, rate per 100,000 population)	210
6.2	Homicide rates in Salvadoran departments (1999–2013, rate per 100,000)	211
6.3	Trust in Salvadoran institutions (2012 and 2004–2016)	225
6.4	Perceptions of insecurity in the Americas (2012 and 2004–2016)	226
6.5	Comparative homicide data by Salvadoran department (1965–2013)	242
6.6	Map of El Salvador's cocaine trafficking routes	260
6.7	El Salvador's subnational per capita homicide rates (2006)	268
7.1	Social indicators in Central America (early 2000s)	280
7.2	What is the most important issue facing your country in 2010?	281
7.3	Belief in Latin America that police are involved in crime (2004–2014)	308
7.4	Criminal cases filed and solved by Nicaraguan police (1997–2014)	311
7.5	Homicide rates in Nicaragua (1997–2013, per 100,000)	312
7.6	Nicaraguan police data on homicides (2000–2014, rates per 100,000)	314
7.7	Percentage identifying crime as the most important problem (2004–2014, Central America and other high-violence cases in Latin America, excluding Colombia)	316
7.8	Gangs in Central America (early 2000s)	318
7.9	Interdiction of cocaine in Nicaragua, reported by Nicaraguan police	326
7.10	Trade trafficking routes in Nicaragua, according to Nicaraguan police	328
7.11	Homicide rates in Nicaraguan departments (1998–2014, rate per 100,000 population)	333

TABLES

1.1	National homicide trajectories: stability and levels (1995–2014, based on WHO data)	12
1.2	Homicide rates in the Americas (1995–2014, per 100,000 inhabitants)	22
2.1	National homicide trajectories: stability, levels, and varied experiences with recent civil war (1995–2012)	29
2.2	Firearms owned by civilians in Central America (2007)	30
2.3	Income inequality in Latin American countries (1990–2012)	48
2.4	Inequality and violence rates (combining Tables 1.1 and 2.3)	49
3.1	Conceptualizing ideal-type institutions	71
3.2	Gang members per 100,000 in Central America	92
4.1	Reliability of police services in Latin America	139
4.2	Transnational Institute (TNI) Corruption Perceptions Index, Latin America (1998–2010)	141
4.3	Weak relationship between TNI rankings and levels of violence: a few examples	143
5.1	Firearms owned by civilians in Central America (2007)	204
5.2	Reported homicide patterns in <i>Prensa Libre</i> , Guatemala	205
6.1	El Salvador's subnational per capita homicide rates (1999–2006)	267
6.2	Homicide rates in Salvadoran departments (1965–2013, rates per 100,000 population)	270
6.3	Percentage of homicides in El Salvador reported in <i>La Prensa Gráfica</i> (2000–2010, newspaper violence database)	275
6.4	Percentage of homicides reported in El Salvador by department in <i>La Prensa Gráfica</i> (2000–2010, newspaper violence database)	276
6.5	Homicide characteristics for El Salvador reported in newspaper violence database, <i>La Prensa Gráfica</i> (2000, 2010, 2015)	277
7.1	Reliability of police services in Latin America	309
7.2	Perceptions of Central American security and safety (2010)	310
7.3	Technologies of violence reported by press for homicides in Nicaragua (2000, 2005, 2010)	315
7.4	Comparative table of Nicaraguan gangs (<i>pandillas</i>)	319
7.5	Homicide rates by Nicaraguan department (1998–2014)	338

Acknowledgments

This project was unexpected. I traveled to Central America over a decade ago to start a new research project about civil wars and the third wave of democratization. I left the field with a sense of urgency about a different topic: the violence that was taking place not before but *after* the democratic transition. Everyone I interviewed politely entertained questions about the past, but they wanted to talk about the violence that was occurring at that moment, in the aftermath of civil wars and military rule. People felt unsafe. They recounted witnessing homicides on street corners, uniformly noted how unsafe it was to take buses, and cautioned against the seeming randomness of violence in poor as well as wealthy urban neighborhoods. Political affiliations no longer seemed like a good predictor of who would become the next target of violence. Homicides were becoming commonplace. The question was why homicides had become so widespread in this period of civilian rule and why homicides were reaching epidemic proportions in some places and not others. There was an urgency to the discussions with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. I left Central America certain that there was an academic and normative imperative to analyze the violence *after* civil war and dictatorship.

Over the course of the next decade, I worked on this project, hoping that the problem would subside. It did not. While homicide rates saw some variation in Central America, a key comparison remained: violence was rampant in the northern triangle, while it was much more contained in the southern part of the isthmus. Violence rates, moreover, were high or becoming higher in other parts of the region as well – Mexico and Venezuela, in particular. Brazil’s homicide rates were always

notoriously high and remained quite alarming, particularly once subnational variation was taken into account. Thus, the project started with a focus on Central America but necessarily placed these cases in comparative perspective.

Given the scope of the project, I was fortunate to have a wonderful team of colleagues and research assistants (RAs). A few people were pivotal in helping me plan subsequent forays into the field. I am deeply grateful for the early advice provided by Consuelo Cruz, David Holiday, Rachel Sieder, Elisabeth Wood, and Loly de Zúniga. They helped me identify my first round of interviews, especially when I first started to work on El Salvador and Nicaragua. Loly de Zúniga provided invaluable logistical support in El Salvador, and I thank her for her wonderful assistance so many years ago.

I was invited to participate in two collaborative projects, in which I was able to advance my own thinking about citizenship. I thank Mario Sznajder and Luis Roniger for inviting me as a 2009 fellow in the “Contesting Liberal Citizenship” working group at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Hebrew University. The four-month hiatus provided a stimulating, deliberative environment, culminating in “Institutions and Citizenship: Reflections on the Illicit,” Mario Sznajder, Luis Roniger, and Carlos A. Forment, eds., *Shifting Frontiers of Citizenship: The Latin American Experience*, Leiden: Brill, 2012. I also thank Steven Levitsky and Kenneth Roberts for inviting me to take part in the volume workshops that culminated in “The Left and Citizenship in Latin America,” Kenneth Roberts and Steven Levitsky, eds., *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*, (2011). While I had previously worked on citizenship and ethnic politics, I updated my own thinking about citizenship in light of concerns for violence and security – ideas that were subsequently incorporated into this book.

This volume also benefited from collaborations on three other projects. I am particularly grateful to Miguel Centeno and Atul Kohli, with whom I coedited the book *States in the Developing World*; Nancy Bermeo, with whom I coedited *Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the Developing World*; and Peter Kingstone, with whom I coedited the *Handbook of Latin American Politics*. These three very different projects provided a stimulating theoretical backdrop to the issues raised in this book, and I thank my coeditors for their terrific insights, collaboration, and friendship. I am sure they will see the footprint of these edited volumes in the pages of this book. I thank in particular Miguel Centeno, who offered more than once to comment on my manuscript and gave me

Acknowledgments

xv

outstanding advice to sharpen the argument, prose, and theoretical punch line.

Many other colleagues also influenced this project in direct and indirect ways: inviting me to give talks, commenting at conferences, and/or giving general feedback on the project. For their constructive comments and collegiality, I thank Tani Adams, Peter Andreas, Desmond Arias, Mark Beissinger, Sheri Berman, Rogers Brubaker, David Collier, Ruth Collier, José Miguel Cruz, Consuelo Cruz, Diane Davis, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Kent Eaton, Tulia Faletti, David Holiday, James Holston, Amaney Jamal, Ira Katznelson, Atul Kohli, Steve Levitsky, Beatriz Magaloni, Shannan Mattiace, Maria Victoria Murillo, Grigore Pop-Eleches, Ken Roberts, José Luis Rocha, Luis Roniger, Victoria Sanford, Rachel Sieder, Dan Slater, Rich Snyder, Susan Stokes, Mario Sznajder, Kathy Thelen, Guillermo Trejo, Andreas Wimmer, and Elisabeth Wood. In turn, I thank the following universities, where I shared my work at various stages of conception, including Brown University; Columbia University; Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Ecuador; Harvard University; Hebrew University; New York University; Northwestern University; Oxford University, Social Science Research Council; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Chicago; University of Notre Dame; University of Oklahoma; University of Pennsylvania; and Yale University. I am also grateful to colleagues who attended conference sessions where I presented this work at APSA, Canadian Association for Latin America and Caribbean Studies, Latin American Studies Association, and Southeastern Council of Latin American Studies.

The project also relied on an outstanding group of RAs. Vinay Jawahar worked with me at the earliest stages of this project, and I thank him for gathering the first round of homicide data, creating GIS coded maps, and conducting an early round of interviews in El Salvador. Alisha Holland also helped by gathering bibliographic information at the start of the project. I am particularly indebted to Yanilda González and Bethany Park for the role they played when constructing and evaluating the newspaper violence database for this project. They helped oversee a team of RAs that heroically read and coded the most gruesome of articles; thanks to Sergio Gálaz García, Marcus Johnson, Nathalie Kitroeff, and Alexander Slaski for coding these entries. González and Park also played a critical role in analyzing this database and the collection of articles. Finally, I extend a special thanks to Daniela Barba-Sánchez for helping me in the final stages of this project; she meticulously

reviewed the manuscript; updated tables, maps, and figures; recreated camera-ready images; and polished the bibliography. I was fortunate to work with this extraordinary team of RAs, who showed great commitment, skill, and good humor as we worked on this difficult topic.

This project would not have happened without the generous funding opportunities provided by Princeton University. I thank the Woodrow Wilson School for the research support to travel and hire RAs. An intellectually stimulating 2008 conference on Violence and Citizenship in Post-Authoritarian Latin America provided an initial space to engage with colleagues and was sponsored by the Project on Democracy and Development, with support from the Princeton Institute for Regional Studies and the Program in Latin American Studies (PLAS). PLAS also generously subsidized the photograph for the book cover. I recognize my great fortune to have access to these resources and thank my home institution for this support.

At Cambridge University Press, Robert Dreesen was a terrific editor – providing sage advice about the book’s content, title, and cover. I am grateful for his insight, humor, creativity, and great stories. In addition, I am indebted to the three outstanding reviewers. The deeply insightful reviews sharpened my argument in more ways than I could have imagined; indeed, one of the reviewers inspired the term “homicidal ecologies.” The project manager, Samantha Town, skillfully oversaw the project, and Lois Tardío took on the unenviable task of copyediting this book. As I searched for the final book image, my colleague and friend María Gabriela Nouzeilles generously took the time to send me images by innovative artists addressing the issue of violence; she thus shared her brilliant insight into their work. In this way, I learned about Fernando Brito, the phenomenal photojournalist whose powerful photograph graces the cover of this book. I am grateful to him for granting the use of this image, from his series “Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje.”

As I complete the project, I continue to be outraged at the ongoing violence in the Latin American region and the implications for the next generation of children. While they are victims of the homicidal ecologies in which they were born, they are also victims of a torturous escape route and an unwelcoming and cruel response by many North Americans. I despair at their disadvantage and hope that this book contributes, if only in some small way, to a better understanding of their plight and a more informed and compassionate response to their plea for a better life in the Americas (both in their sending and receiving countries).

Acknowledgments

xvii

My daughters, Sarah and Rebecca Yashar-Gershman, have accompanied me on this journey – although they had little to say in the matter. They put up with my long hours, embraced our travel to difficult places, showered me with laughter, and moved me with their compassion and curiosity. They were young when this project began; they are now young women. My hope is that they never have to endure the violence that this book addresses. This book is dedicated to them.

