



Violent Disorder in Ciudad Juarez: A Spatial Analysis of Homicide

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Abstract

This HASOW Discussion Paper considers how demographic and socioeconomic factors correlate with homicidal violence in the context of Mexico's "war on drugs". We draw on Ciudad Juarez as a case study and social disorganization theory as an organizing framework. Social disorganization is expected to produce higher levels of homicidal violence. And while evidence detects several social disorganization factors associated with homicidal violence in Ciudad Juarez not all relationships appear as predicted by the theory. Drawing on public census and crime data, our statistical assessment detects 6 significant variables (or risks) positively associated with homicidal violence in Ciudad Juarez between 2009 and 2010. Likewise, the assessment finds 6 specific variables (or protective factors) that are negatively associated with above average homicide in the city between 2009 and 2010. The data and level of analysis do not conclusively present causation, nor was this the intent. Rather, we propose a baseline model for testing spatial-temporal dynamics of organized violence.

Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean – indeed much of the world – is going through an unprecedented period of urbanization. Much of this urban growth is occurring not in upper-income settings but rather in the expanding cities and slums of lower- and middle-income countries. And many of the fastest growing metropolises are also witnessing a sharp escalation in the incidence and severity of urban violence.¹ There is growing acknowledgment about the ways in which the urban poor are directly and indirectly implicated in such violence and the wider consequences of violence in cities for national and regional stability more generally.²

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An obvious manifestation of urban violence is the physical and psychological harm against persons – from homicide to other forms of victimization. For more than a century social scientists have studied the ways in which such violence reconfigures social and spatial relations and triggers renewed cycles of insecurity spanning generations. For example, Bourdieu (1998) shows how “structural” forms of urban violence arising from the degradation of urban economies and austerity measures contributes to a “break down” in social life and new forms of violence. It is often symbolically and discursively apparent in protests, riots, disturbances, emergency declarations and insurgencies.³

One of the most disconcerting concentrations of urban violence in contemporary Latin America is in Mexico. In just over half a decade, Mexico’s war on drugs has claimed almost 65,000 lives with most of these intentional deaths concentrated in northern states.⁴ While the country’s national homicide rate has actually remained steady and even appears to have slightly declined over the past decade to 18 homicides per 100,000⁵, many intermediate cities in northern and eastern Mexico witnessed a surge to well above 150 homicides per 100,000. The escalation is linked to deployment of more than 60,000 soldiers by President Calderon since 2006 and an intensification of inter-cartel violence.⁶ What is especially unsettling is the appalling brutality and ritualized nature of violence, often intended to send messages to secure territory and influence.

1 See UNODC (2011) and Muggah (2012).

2 See Muggah (2012) and Muggah and Savage (2012).

3 Extending the symbolic to the physical, O’Neill and Rodgers (2012) recently introduced the concept of “infrastructural violence” in order to draw attention to the political economy shaping the social and geographic dimensions of urban violence and the implications for “spatially just cities.”

4 See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-16518267>.

5 See Hope (2012).

6 See Guerrero (2011, 2012).

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The causes of organized criminal violence in Mexico are routinely distilled by to competition between rival factions of cartels, gangs and state security actors. Perpetrators are described as consisting of young males, influenced as they may be by competition over transit routes. Victims are themselves narrowly cast as former criminals or unfortunate collateral damage. The deafening silence from the media and research community ensures that reporting on both causes and consequences of Mexico's drug war is periodic, uneven and circumspect.⁷ We contend, however, that a more robust examination of the correlates of organized violence is required to better understand means of minimizing and reducing it. And while the narrative of violent competition is necessary it is not sufficient. We argue that social disorganization appears to enhance the vulnerability of communities to organized violence.

This paper explains the dynamics of organized violence in Ciudad Juarez. The first section considers the theoretical parameters of social disorganization theory and explains its origins and implications for the design of our assessment of the correlates of organized violence. Section two considers the dynamics of organized violence and some of its attributed causes in Ciudad Juarez. Section three focuses in on the methods and data sources for determining the relationship between socio-economic factors (independent variables) and homicidal violence (dependent variables) in Ciudad Juarez. The fourth section examines the extent to which specific variables were positively or negatively correlated and detects a host of risk and protective factors. The paper closes with a short set of concluding reflections.

Social disorganization and violence

In order to fully understand the extent of Mexico's urban violence crisis it is necessary to reflect not just on its intensity and organization, but also to consider its geographic dimensions. Indeed, consideration of the geography of violent crime is hardly unprecedented. For decades, human geographers have investigated spatial aspects of criminal behavior and criminality (Georges, 1978). The field has a long and distinguished academic tradition that can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Lowman, 1986 and Muchembled, 2012). While not treated at length in this paper, the development of the field passed through three distinct stages: (1) the French cartographic school of the nineteenth century, (2) the Chicago ecological school of the early twentieth century, and (3) the more modern (and arguably

⁷ See Newsweek (2012), Arsenault (2011), Booth (2010), Castillo (2010), Orrego (2010).

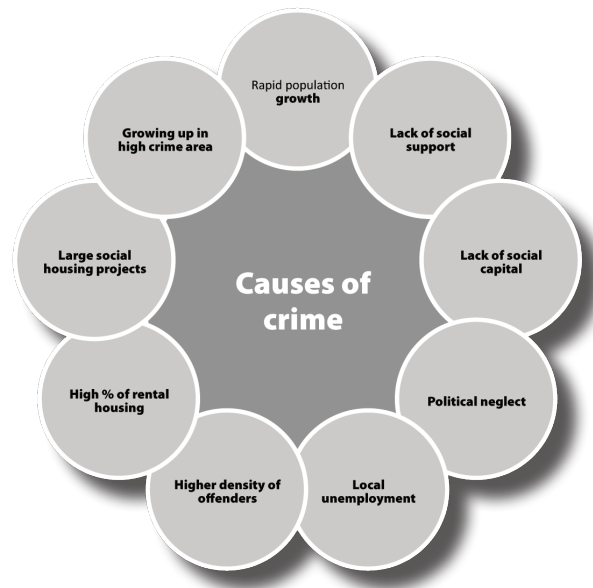
international) so-called school of the geography of crime (Lowman, 1986).

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A wide range of social scientists have contributed to the spatial study of violent crime. Prominent among them is the sociologist Max Weber who traced the evolution of order and violence in Western European cities in his 1921 volume, *The City*. Geographers and sociologists elaborated on his seminal work examining the interaction of contemporary of residents with the social and physical built environment of rapidly industrializing cities. A particular concern amongst these early scholars – and one addressed comprehensively by the aforementioned Chicago school – was the ways in which the built-up city – and in particular its rapid urbanization – negatively affected pre-existing individual bonds within communities. They discovered that social ties established through living in close proximity could be reconfigured by new forms of interaction favoring fluid market transactions over deeper kinship ties. These new relations were temporary, transitory and instrumental. Building on the findings of nineteenth century sociologist Emile Durkheim, proponents of the Chicago school noted how the progressive fraying of communal ties resulted in anomie and eventually a rise in neighborhood crime and criminal violence.

In analyzing demographic shifts within a single city, Chicago school affiliates detected a number of possible causal mechanisms shaping trends in criminal violence. As described above, one causal mechanism proposed was that rapid population growth contributed to social disorganization (Burgess, 1925). Related, rapid population growth also contributed to undermining the institutional capacity of public authorities and community entities to exert local social controls, especially in low-income and ethnically diverse communities (Shaw and McKay, 1942). These and other insights gave rise to the so-called “Theory of Social Disorganization”, now widely used in contemporary criminological and geographical scholarship.

Figure 1. **Social disorganization causes of crime: a selection of factors**

Social disorganization theory is a macro-theory. It seeks to explain aggregated criminal behavior by focusing on the compositional and contextual characteristics of specific settings. Contemporary formulations of the theory suggest that it is not reservedly the ethnic composition of specific settings that are the principal drivers of neighborhood crime, but also the real and relative absence of social support networks, social capital, and the inability of communities to maintain collective action (Morenoff et al 2001; Sampson et al 1997). Yet a number of key insights of scholars in the French and Chicago schools hold constant today in Mexico. Specifically, drug-related and property crimes are highly spatially concentrated (Vilalta, 2010a, 2010b), as is the tendency of criminals to live close to areas where they operate (Vilalta, 2010b; Van Dijk, 1999; Singer, 1981). It is for this reason that certain city areas can be classified as “crime endemic” (Vilalta, 2010a; Eck and Weisburd, 1995).

There are competing explanations for what contributes to the causes of social disorganization and the spatial concentration of violent crime in so-called “hot spots” (see Figure 1). Certain scholars contend, for example, that there are typically areas within cities that offer more intrinsic opportunities for criminal activity owing to political neglect and the absence of state presence (Ackerman and Murray, 2004; Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003) together with local economic decay (Morenoff and Sampson, 2007; Ackerman, 1998, Sampson and Wilson, 1995). In the US, for example, some researchers have detected a correlation between the robbery of convenience stores and local rates of

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The Humanitarian Action in Situations other than War (HASOW) project is based at the International Relations Institute of the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (IRI-PUC) with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The aim of HASOW is to comprehensively assess the dynamics of urban violence and the changing face of humanitarian action. Administered between 2011 and 2013, HASOW focuses on the dynamics of organized violence in urban settings, including Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad Juarez, Medellin and Port-au-Prince.

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