

Exploring the Variation in Levels of Drug-related Violence¹

Explorando a variação nos níveis de violência relacionada às drogas

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INTRODUCTION

Latin America is the most violent region in the world.² That violence manifests itself in several ways, but what particularly draws attention are the horrendous and high levels of violence in the context of the illegal drug trade. The levels of violence in many Latin American drug producing, transit and consuming countries escalated so fast and to levels so high that civil society and policymakers have desperately grasped at ‘common sense’ straws — whether implementing a ‘mano dura’ strategy, blaming systemic corruption in the polity or police, or hoping that legalization of drugs will bring peace. By misunderstanding the phenomenon, public discourse and policy make little progress in controlling the violence that has devastated communities and, indeed, entire countries.

But drug-related violence is neither constant, nor sufficiently explained by the mere existence of an illegal drug trade. Violence in illegal drug markets is rare in Western Europe, Canada, Australia and Japan despite millions of consumers, undoubtedly thousands of dealers and even important sources of production in the first three areas. Madrid, gateway to Europe for many drugs transiting from Africa and Latin America, experiences little drug-related violence, nor does Vancouver, gateway for Asian produced drugs into North America.³ The United States, with an illegal drug market worth annually more than \$100 billion, probably the largest

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number of drug dealers in the world, and a significant producer of illegal drugs,⁴ has little drug-related violence compared to Latin America. The U.S. experienced relatively high levels of drug-related violence in the 1980s (as well as in the 1920s when alcohol was illegal) but those levels have declined consistently beginning in the 1990s and despite significant spikes in the markets for methamphetamine, MDMA and now illegal opioids. To complicate matters further, Mexico has been involved in the marijuana and heroin trade for more than half a century, and the cocaine trade for two decades, yet it has never before experienced the level of violence which has erupted since 2006. Empirical data clearly demonstrate that around the drug-consuming, drug-dealing, drug-producing and drug money-laundering world large scale outbreaks of violence are sporadic rather than consistent (Jacques and Wright, 2008; see also the data in The World Bank 1990-2018 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>).

Public discourse, including by high profile NGOs such as the International Drug Policy Consortium (2021⁵), continues arguing that violence is the result of the illegal drug trade, with some postulating therefore that legalizing the drug trade is the only answer to the violence (e.g., Carpenter, 2011). Though we may like to separate countries into producers, traffickers, consumers, money launderers, the reality of the illegal drug trade demonstrates that the major players tend to combine various aspects. For example, Brazil both consumes illegal drugs and serves as a transit country, while Mexico produces illegal drugs, consumes them, traffics its own illegally produced drugs, and serves as a transit country for illegal drugs produced elsewhere.

But as Bergman noted already in 2006, a new wave of scholarship was analyzing the drugs-violence nexus specifically looking for the determinants of violence. It is widely recognized among academics who study violence itself rather than just illegal drug markets, that illegal markets are not inherently places of high rates of violence. Among the now contemporary wave, nevertheless, there is no agreement regarding a general approach that can integrate their research.

The tasks necessary to gain understanding of the complexity of the relationship between violence and illegal drug markets are theoretical, methodological and empirical. This paper proposes a framework for understanding variations in levels of violence in illegal drug markets. The literature review examines the characteristics and nature of violence in the illegal drug trade, distinguishing its systemic elements from the violence of individuals. There is a growing literature looking at variations in levels of violence; some of these explanations compete, while others

could be complementary. We lack an overarching theoretical framework that integrates complementary arguments into a general causal argument. The elegance of economic theories which dominates the literature, even those incorporating markets and states, needs to be complicated by the nuances from civil society and criminal groups. Only a sophisticated and comprehensive framework can provide the analytical insights necessary to develop policy that will diminish violence rather than contribute to its occurrence. The conclusion discusses the theoretical, methodological, and empirical challenges to developing a general framework for analyzing violence in the illegal drug trade. A general framework guides analysis across all cases, regardless of region, drug, or level of violence. What differs among empirical cases are the values of the causal variables in the distinct context, not the relationship among those variables; variation in levels of violence are the result of differing values among the causal variables. The conclusion ends by suggesting avenues for research.

THINKING ABOUT DRUG TRADE VIOLENCE

The violence that dominates discussions of drugs and violence in Latin America is not the violence by addicts either out of control⁶ or looking for money for their next fix, or of crazed foot soldiers of criminal organizations unable to follow orders on when and where to use violence (Goldstein 1985; Ungar 2011, 14-16). Nor is the link to terrorism or the use of models of terrorist behavior particularly useful for understanding general violence in the illegal drug trade (e.g., Naylor 2002). Violence from these sources exist, but there are not enough of these incidents to account for the homicide rates that draw our attention to Latin America (Cf. Heinemann and Verner 2006). Rather, it is the violence by organizations involved to some degree in the illegal market that drives the alleged causal connection between drugs and violence.

In the dominant public policy discussion drugs cause violence because the attraction of profits is so large. That logic means that this violence is not sporadic and irrational, but strategic. Accepting the idea of strategic action opens up avenues for research from a cost/benefit perspective. Strategic, however, does not mean that the costs and benefits are correctly calculated, nor that the goal is only to make money. Rather, strategic means that the violence is instrumental even if the goal is identity formation or personal and organizational reputation and the decision-making process is ambiguous and not entirely controlled by a centralized authority structure. The strategic use of violence means that when criminals perceive the risks of violence to outweigh the benefits of using it to pursue their

criminal activities, they will limit recourse to violence. The point of using a strategic analysis is NOT that OC can be eliminated by effective policing (no free society can be cleansed of all crime), but that OC can be incentivized to engage in minimal levels of violence (Felbab-Brown 2013).

The pioneering work of Becker (1968) and Schelling (1967, 1971) in the 1960s, and Goldstein (1985) and Reuter (1983; Reuter and Haaga 1989) in the 1980s, give us theoretical reasons for beginning to understand why the illegal drug trade is not inherently characterized by high levels of violence. Despite the power of these rational institutionalist theories, we also need to push forward on understanding the relationship among factors that cross theoretical boundaries to explain the variation in drug-related violence rates over time and across place. Felbab-Brown's provocative empirical work (2013), as well as by Reuter and his various collaborators (Reuter and Kleiman 1986; Reuter, MacCoun and Murphy 1990; Reuter 2009; Levi and Reuter 2006, 289-375; Bushway and Reuter 2009, 389-451), span the globe demonstrating how theoretical insights into criminal organizations reveals counter-intuitive dynamics at work in illicit markets.

Focusing on costs, the effectiveness of police and the judicial system is thus argued to be a significant determinant in whether illicit markets become violent or not. Kleemans demonstrates that state determinants of costs explains the difference in criminal violence between low levels in most of Western Europe and higher levels in Italy and the U.S. (2007, 161-215). Where the state can impose high costs maintaining a low profile while committing crimes rather than engaging in violence that draws attention is the preferred strategy for organized crime (OC). Turning to the very high levels of violence in Latin America, corruption and incompetence in the criminal justice and political systems are important factors utilized to explain why the costs of violent crime in most of Latin America are so low. Since costs are considered relative to benefits, even the cartel-state violence that Lessing 2017 focuses on ultimately depends (though he does not recognize it) on weak criminal justice and political systems.

A deeper look at the strategy of criminal violence brings to the fore the idea of 'systemic violence'—lacking recourse to legal means to increase one's sense of security, enforce contracts or resolve interpersonal issues makes it more likely that violence will be used by participants in that illegal market (Goldstein 1985; Snyder and Durán-Martínez, 2009; Andreas and Wallman, 2009; Jacques and Allen 2015, 87-89). From that literature I highlight three factors in systemic violence: the structure of the market in terms of its competitiveness, the intensity and effectiveness of the legal system (including police, judiciary and penal institutions), and the organizational characteristics of criminal groups. Contemporary scholarship on

violence, drugs, criminal organizations and governance in Latin America largely fits into a framework for understanding systemic violence, filling in particular details about how the three factors can vary. There are, however, some important studies breaking out of, or adding to, the trilogy I pull from the systemic violence perspective. These other works examine the importance of social capital, perceptions of violence by society or groups, and risk assessments of individuals of incarceration and death as influences in the criminal propensity to violence. These six hypothesized causal variables of violence in the context of illegal drug markets are discussed individually before turning to their potential interactions.

The *competitive structure of the market* impacts the propensity to use violence. While it is true that illegality creates rents because of the potential costs associated with violating the law, illegality itself does not inevitably make those rents exorbitant or determine how they are distributed. Competitive markets drive down rents, even in illegal markets. The inherent characteristics of illicit drugs (meaning those not determined by legal status) are relative ease of production, low capital requirements, and an individual size and weight (marijuana is the exception) that makes transportation cheap. These characteristics should produce low barriers to entry and therefore competitive markets. The benefits of using violence in this type of market is low, thereby reducing the propensity for the use of violence.

The competitive structure of illegal markets, however, is influenced by the quality of state enforcement of the market's illegality. Effective law enforcement supports competitiveness by raising the risks of arrest, successful prosecution, and loss of rents. At the retail level, a dealer worries about a buyer potentially being an undercover agent or quickly turning state's evidence if caught herself and turning in her supplier. Consequently, there is an incentive at the retail level to limit the number of people to whom one sells as a means of lowering the probability of being arrested. A variety of studies of retail drug trafficking support this deduction. Effectively functioning states do not have "a" drug market, but multiple drug markets, even for the same substance; and the markets are not necessarily large or formally organized. We do not yet have detailed analyses of Latin American retail drug markets, but with the increase in consumption across the region (Brazil is now the second largest consumer of cocaine after the U.S.) studies of drug markets in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere could be suggestive of what we might find in Latin America. For example, a study of a four-block area in Brooklyn uncovered four parallel but separate markets, one ethnically based, another geared toward working persons, a third characterized by users/dealers selling to other

users/dealers, and prostitutes hustling sex for drugs for themselves and their partners. Though many buyers are willing to buy from sellers representing different markets, sellers “prefer to define a market and to locate and retain repeat customers [in order] to increase business and reduce the probability of arrest” (Johnson, Hamid and Sanabria 1991, 67; also Denton and O’Malley 1999, 513-530; Waldorf and Murphy 1995, 11-32; Reuter and Haggga 1989, xii, 39-40). Neither is the scourge of synthetic opium use via the prescription drug OxyContin the result of monopolistic organized crime; rather it is a decentralized process that spreads mainly by word of mouth and is partly fueled by well-intentioned primary care doctors trying to stay up to date with advances in pain medication and keep a client base that demands such medication (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2014; Samsa 2014).

The same logic creating competition should ideally apply across the value chain of illegal psychoactive substances. Producers, their suppliers, regional buyers, international traffickers, national distributors and regional distributors all must deal with operating in social contexts in which the penalty for interacting with unreliable partners or clients would be high. Even international trafficking is affected by these characteristics. Crossing international borders into states with effective law enforcement should lead to cooperative pooling of drug shipments across time and place to minimize the cost to one trafficker of a successful interdiction.

By the same logic, ineffective enforcement reduces the probability of paying costs for violating the law. The reduction in costs stimulates criminal efforts to monopolize segments of the market and generate higher rents for the group.

The structure of illegal markets has other consequences for how and when violence is used. Snyder and Durán-Martínez point out that the structure of illicit markets influences the structure of state-sponsored protection rackets, and thus the propensity for violence (Snyder and Duran-Martínez 2009, 259; see also Chinchilla 2017). They also note that when corrupt law enforcement or politicians have *not* been deterring crime but rather protecting it, the levels of violence can be low and rise with reforms of policing that subvert the state-sponsored protection rackets (2009, 253-273).

2. The *intensity and effectiveness of law enforcement* makes organizations worry more about internal informants or members’ plea bargaining to get reduced sentences. This factor drives violence inward. Felbab-Brown (2013) points out that, *ceteris paribus*, intense law enforcement can create spikes in violence between criminal groups. She also demonstrates that if law enforcement does not weaken all groups equally and simultaneou-

sly, stronger groups will see an opportunity to attack their newly weakened rivals (also Schaefer, Bahney and Riley 2009; Rios 2013). Bergman, 2019 *Illegal Drugs, Drug Trafficking and Violence in Latin America* Ch 6 Nevertheless, the lesson we should take from Lessing 2017 is that intensity of law enforcement without effectiveness can propel drug cartels into violent confrontation with the state.

The effectiveness of criminal justice institutions counters the drive for creating oligopoly to capture the rents inherent in illicit markets. Driving out competitors from a lucrative market requires forcing them to cede operations or pay a tax to someone, which they would only do if threatened with violence. Criminal organizations need to discipline members not to defect to competitors or plea bargain if they are arrested. But using violence publicizes the threat of the criminal group in the eyes of the citizenry, and thus their pressure on the government to pursue that criminal group in particular.

The probability of getting punished is dependent upon law enforcement's ability to arrest a suspect with sufficient evidence for a penalty to be applied; how compelling such evidence is required to be will depend upon the formal and informal characteristics of the legal system within which one operates (The Sentencing Project 2018). Penalties for getting caught violating the drug laws also vary not only across countries, but among subnational units (e.g., state and local legal codes). Penalties vary dramatically across countries and socio-economic strata as well (Mustard 2001, 285-314). Judges and juries (where they exist) need to be uncorruptible to convict and penitentiaries need to be run by the state in ways that deprive inmates of their freedom to continue to participate in criminal activities. Effective criminal justice systems can do all these.

The greater the rents to be had, the more effective criminal justice institutions need to be. Because the drug trade is so lucrative new criminal organizations will seek to replace the one that was dismantled by law enforcement, thus making continuous and effective pursuit of organized crime a necessity (Williams and Savona 1996; Farer 1999). That pursuit relies not only on having 'political will' but also appropriate legislation and sufficient resources to detect and punish organized crime. Thus a government with low levels of corruption and which effectively provides public goods in other arenas can still have a society that is victimized by organized crime if the criminal justice system lacks the proper legislation and adequate implementation resources (Nathanson Centre for the Study of Organized Crime and Corruption N.D.; McDermott 2014:11). Following this logic, in 2000 the UN created the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and provides technical assistance to enhance the performance of

law enforcement and judicial bodies in accordance with the Convention, promote international cooperation in the fight against organized crime and assess and help revise national legislation (United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention 2003; Williams and Savona, 1996). But as Lea (2010) notes, it is not just administrative and professional competence that matters, but the relationship that police, the government and criminals have with local communities that determines the effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

The *organizational characteristics of groups* have an impact on how much and against whom violence is used. Loosely organized groups are most likely to use violence inward as a means of disciplining members and violence can be a means by which one ascends whatever hierarchy within the group. In contrast, large criminal organizations are more likely to generate trust within it, be able to use non-violent means to ensure behavior, and have clearer metrics for rising within the organization (Friman 2004; Stevens and Bewley-Taylor with Dreyfus 2009; Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016). This doesn't make larger more complex organizations peaceful; they are just more likely to use their violence against rivals or the government. The organizational structure of groups will be influenced by the governance challenges they face (see prior discussion regarding law enforcement) and will have an impact on their propensity to violence. (Lessing and Willis, 2019 and Skarbeck 2014 on prison violence and drug gangs; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Bergman 2019 Ch5 on diversification of criminal activity).

The power of an organized crime group needs to be conceptualized not just in terms of its firepower and membership. These variables are the result of the organization's ability to launder money, purchase weapons, ammunition and powerful vehicles, establish safe spaces for the leadership and gather intelligence regarding the market, rivals, and government. We can hypothesize that any effective strategy to weaken the organization's ability to use violence will have to diminish its capacity to successfully accomplish these other tasks as well. We need, therefore, to analyze the connections among these criminal activities as they relate to the propensity to use violence and not just to the existence of drug trafficking organizations.

The role of Social Capital. Given that the market is embedded in a society the level of systemic violence will be influenced by the social interactions that occur within that society and not simply by state level incentives regarding the use of violence. These social interactions can be usefully conceptualized as 'social capital' — "the set of rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, and

society's institutional arrangements that enables members to achieve their individual and community objectives" (Lederman, Loayza and Menéndez, 2002). The three most widely used metrics to measure social capital are participation in social organizations, attitudes of civic cooperation, and the sense of interpersonal trust.

Several studies using the concept of 'social capital' suggest that, despite some measurement issues, the link between social capital and violent crime is complex and causal. Social capital can decrease a sense of insecurity in society or within a group and it can also increase confidence in others, thereby diminishing the need for strong discipline within the society or group. At the level of the individual, social capital should also mitigate feelings of alienation and make individuals less risk acceptant for the benefits ostensibly offered by violence. Social capital can also contribute to political capital, and thus to the support for effectively functioning democracies (Booth and Richard, 2009). Effective governments with citizen support can increase governmental ability to identify, capture and punish criminals and thus affect the propensity of criminals to engage in violent crime. (Lea 2010)

Social capital defined as perceptions of social trust and membership in voluntary associations, has been found to help explain homicide rate variation even within a nation and after accounting for age, income, level of urbanization, and region. Local markets in which interpersonal relationships guide transactions both provide non-violent means to work out issues and make control of specific places for retail sale less important since seller and buyer can meet in many different places.

The relationship between social capital and violence, however, may be non-linear, with feedback mechanisms whereby violence undermines social capital, making violence more likely to escalate (Galeaa, Karpatia and Kennedy 2002, 1373-1383). Consequently, once the level of violence reaches some threshold, the impact of improvements in social capital needs to be complemented by other factors to mitigate violence. Age, region, and level of urbanization would be hard to modify, but income improvements through development or redistribution can be achieved in the short-medium term.

At this point, however, the social capital argument is not robust, but seems to depend on the measurement and data set utilized. Lederman, Loayza and Menéndez (2002, 511-512) found that participation in or attitudes regarding social interactions could not be verified as statistically significant social capital variables. Rather, they found that trust was an important factor accounting for the occurrence of violent crime even after controlling for a variety of other variables. Yet, in their analyses of the

impact of social capital for its implications for democracy in eight Latin American countries, Booth and Richard (2009) find that trust is not a statistically significant contributor and argue that “In this region where the rule of law is often weak, consumer protection flawed, corruption fairly high, and democratic institutions still young, little trust has developed among citizens”. Moriconi’s 2018 study illustrates the challenges faced by analysts pursuing this line of argumentation. He examines cultural factors that could affect trust and documents a correlation between decreasing trust and increasing violence in Argentina. Moriconi does not, however, explain why with such a depth of cultural perversion regarding legitimacy norms as he finds, Argentina ranks comparatively low for violence in the region.

Social capital can be created in the context of weak state institutions, and this has important implications for the study of violence. Spaces are not ungoverned, and when the state is incompetent, inefficient or simply corrupt and does not deliver the public goods of citizen security and pathways to legitimate prosperity, organized crime will compete for governance and create distinct forms of social capital (Keister 2014; Schultze-Kraft, Chinchilla and Moriconi, 2018, Dudley 2018). Once OC has inserted itself into this role it becomes more difficult for the state’s security apparatus (police and judicial system) to combat crime as local populations find it in their interest to help OC avoid police or fail to provide evidence for prosecution (Felbab-Brown 2013; Arias 2006; Lederman, Loayza and Menéndez 2002; Lea 2010).

Perceptions of Violence. We should consider one more factor from the literature on criminal violence —perceptions of its occurrence and its legitimacy. Studies on crime demonstrate that the public’s perception of the prevalence of crime may often be at odds with the reality of it, with crime rates, including homicides, falling yet citizens feeling more insecure (Pew Research Center, 2018). Studies also demonstrate the underreporting of murders (Maltz 1999; Wittebrood, Junger 2002, 153-173). Thus, the visibility as well as perception of criminal violence is a factor to consider when thinking about the variations in levels of violence in illicit drug markets. (Durán-Martínez 2018)

The balance between ‘hiding in plain sight’ and engaging in activity that draws attention (e.g., violence) is fragile because it depends on factors beyond the control of participants in the illegal drug trade. Technological advances may contribute to shielding or revealing behavior (Mares 2009). Durán-Martínez (2015 and 2017) argues that drug traffickers’ strategies to publicize their use of violence can vary over time, depending upon their relationship to state power. When the state protects criminals their use of violence raises the cost to government of such protection because the

violence frightens citizens, who then pressure their government to respond to the violence. Alternatively, when the state is effective, criminals hide their violence because they do not want to draw the attention of law enforcement (Kleemans 2007).

Willis 2015 demonstrates that perceptions of the legitimacy of violence help us understand the fluidity of governance structures around homicide. His work in Rio demonstrates that police and the PCC developed a norm regarding how deadly violence was incorporated into the de facto governance structure in the favela. When one party violated the terms of governance the other considered it legitimate to utilize violence to re-establish or generate new terms.

Individual risk acceptance of incarceration and death. Incarceration is a potential cost of illegal activity, but its deterrent impact depends on whether it actually severs the social connections that matter to the individual (e.g., family or group), leads to a loss of the wealth gained from illegality, and duration. As studies of prison gangs in the U.S. and Latin America demonstrate, incarceration does not necessarily imply such ruptures but rather strengthen them, nor is loss of wealth inevitable.

The ultimate risk associated with violence in the illegal drug trade is premature death. But the risk of death is mitigated by using one's wealth to create a security perimeter against the threat of others' violence — bodyguards, fortified vehicles and living compounds, even plastic surgery to change one's appearance. The risk acceptance of participants regarding death is also a factor. Some leaders of criminal organizations are willing to go out in a blaze of glory and bask in the idea that *narcocorridos* (ballads to drug dealers) will give them immortality. Yet others wish to use their illegal gains to fund outwardly appearing legitimate sources of wealth and live respectably to old age. Clearly, these two personalities will weigh the risk of death differently. If any of the leadership are young, they tend to be more risk acceptant.⁷ The risk acceptance of youth can be influenced by their perception of life's prospects. Social programs targeted to this group (e.g., conditional cash transfers) rather than broad redistribution programs may have an impact on their propensity to criminal, especially violent, behavior (Lance 2014; Antillano, Pojomovsky, Zubillaga, Sepúlveda and Hanson 2016)

CHALLENGES FOR ANALYZING VIOLENCE IN THE DRUG TRADE

Understanding the dynamics of drug trade related violence is of fundamental importance for Latin America. The empirical evidence from Europe, Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere demonstrates that a state can have

a competitive drug market, effective criminal justice institutions, strong social capital and suffer low levels of drug related violence. Clearly, it is not the drug market per se that is ‘responsible’ for the high levels of violence we find periodically in Colombia, Brazilian favelas, and Mexico. Nor is it simply poverty, corruption, or a lack of policing capacity. It is the interaction among a variety of factors that matters; I identified six but there are studies that include many more hypothesized causal variables. As social scientists, we cannot be satisfied with so many variables correlated with the outcome. “Thick description” does not substitute for causal analysis, and mere correlation cannot demonstrate causation.

We need a general argument about violence associated with the illegal drug trade which can account for its varying levels in countries struggling with poverty, corruption, terrorism, and pariah leaders, as well as its low levels in rich, stable democracies in which the rule of law “reigns.” The argument that the costs and benefits of using violence determine the strategic choice of violence is not trivial and provides the unifying structure that should integrate the different arguments in the contemporary literature regarding the determinants of violence.

This general framework for analysis will provide more comprehensive and complex answers to the question of why a global illegal market would manifest itself so violently in one particular region. The claim is not that Latin America suffers from some ‘unique’ variables that are not present in other regions. The same determinants should be operable in all regions if the logic of the arguments regarding crime and violence are correct; what should matter is how those determinants manifest themselves and combine in some, but not all, Latin American countries.⁸

The first challenge we face is to bring the selected causal variables together theoretically. That means thinking about their interaction, not just their presence — as noted in the literature review, they are not independent of each other. We can assume that some can reinforce others, some can undermine others, and it may even be the case that some are independent of the others. What we need are theoretical understandings of their relationships and development of hypotheses regarding how their interaction influences the level of violence occurring in a context in which an illegal drug trade exists. I have suggested some links among the six variables, but identifying linkages is not the same as theorizing relationships.

A second challenge concerns definitions and metrics. Powerful hypotheses require clear definitions of variables and clear measurements regarding their presence in specific cases. In other words, if we are to judge the impact of a variable, we need to know what we are looking for and have a metric to indicate its character (whether that be existence or not or

where along a range of values) in a specific case. Definitions and metrics are not inherent or obvious — e.g., how do we define “effectiveness of law enforcement” in a non-tautological manner and what metrics can we use to measure degrees of effectiveness? Although measurement and data is affected by politics (Andreas and Greenhill 2010), evidence-based scholarship demands it. Many case studies use different definitions of, or metrics for key variables, making it impossible for their research results to cumulate into a body of knowledge about the causes of drug-related violence.

A third challenge relates to research design. The empirical evaluation of hypotheses regarding causes of violence needs strong qualitative case studies, not just large-N statistical studies. But the case studies need to be comparative, whether the analyst looks at one or many cases. These comparisons require structured and focused studies utilizing similar causal logics and the relevant hypothesized variables. Single case studies with unique variables or without variables determined significant in other studies are most likely to fall into the ‘thick description’ category and be of little use beyond the case.

A simple appeal to ‘contexts’ for explanation is not sufficient. ‘Contexts’ are often about distinct institutional structures, whether they be markets, states, criminal organizations or societies. Institutions generate incentives that guide behavior, but many analysts and policymakers underestimate the power of institutions to affect behavior by ignoring how distinct strategies work to generate similar outcomes in different institutional contexts. The key insight is that whether the strategy of violence is used to affect relative costs and benefits of the expected outcome varies by the institutional context in which participants find themselves. The challenge is to theorize those differences in context and test them empirically.

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NOTAS

1. I thank Marcial García Suárez for helpful comments. All responsibility for views presented herein is mine alone.
2. The homicide rate is the best proxy available for determining the level of violence in a society because it is less underreported than other crimes and is roughly comparable across most countries. The region scores highest on a variety of measures of homicide: intentional homicide, intimate partner/family related; use of firearms, and homicide rate within prisons. Three of the top five subregions for homicide include Central America (including Mexico), South America and the Caribbean. In addition, the region has the highest rate of impunity for homicide, as measured by the rate at which murderers are convicted convictions are generated for homicides. The UNODC attributes some of this difference to the fact that more homicides in the region are connected to organized crime and gangs and notes that the impunity rate in the region has been rising since 2007. UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide* Vienna, Austria 2013, 11, 12, 15, 18.
3. For an overview comparison of all aspects of the drug trade, see the annual *World Drug Report* by the UN Office of Drugs and Crime.
4. For the value of the market, *How Big is the U.S. Market for Illegal Drugs?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Research Brief, 2014; for production, see the annual UNODC World Drug Reports. I deduce the number of drug dealers from two factors: the number of current users in 2013 was more than 24 million (“Drug Facts” NIH, NIDA) and U.S. law enforcement impact on the risk behavior of distributors and retailers of illegal drugs, as discussed below.
5. From the webpage: “Although much more research needs to be done on the links between the drug trade and violence, high homicide rates in some Latin American countries are linked to the illicit drug trade. The violence associated with the drug trade affects producer and transit countries alike.”
6. Social violence is an important phenomenon in Latin America and ingesting psychoactive substances can trigger the use of violence whose origins lie deeper in social, cultural and personality contexts. Cf., Rivera 2016, Santamaría and Carey 2017.
7. Reuter 2009 suggests that one reason why the U.S. crack cocaine trade was so violent in the 1980s was because it was the first time since the 1920s that young males were heavily involved in retail and distribution of an illegal drug. He notes that Al Capone was 22 when he dominated the illegal alcohol trade and violence was rampant.
8. For a description of the many factors at work in Mexico and the cacophony of theories purporting to explain the outbreak of high levels of violence in the drug trade see Paul, Clarke and Serena, 2014, 17–28.
9. I thank Marcial García Suárez for helpful comments. All responsibility for views presented herein is mine alone.

EXPLORING THE VARIATION IN LEVELS OF DRUG-RELATED VIOLENCE⁹

ABSTRACT

This article reviews the literature on the relationship between the illegal drug trade and violence. The literature review examines the characteristics and nature of violence in the illegal drug trade, distinguishing its systemic elements from the violence of individuals. There is a growing literature looking at variations in levels of violence; some of these explanations compete, while others could be complementary. We lack an overarching theoretical framework that integrates complementary arguments into a general causal argument. The conclusion discusses the theoretical, methodological, and empirical challenges to developing a general framework for analyzing violence in the illegal drug trade. A general framework guides analysis across all cases, regardless of region, drug, or level of violence. What differs among empirical cases are the values of the causal variables in the distinct context, not the relationship among those variables; variation in levels of violence is the result of differing values among the causal variables. The conclusion ends by suggesting avenues for research.

Keywords: Violence; Crime; Drugs; Illegal Trade; Rio de Janeiro.

RESUMO

Este artigo revisa a literatura sobre a relação entre o comércio ilegal de drogas e a violência. A revisão da literatura examina as características e a natureza da violência no comércio ilegal de drogas, distinguindo seus elementos sistêmicos da violência praticada por indivíduos. Há uma literatura crescente que analisa variações nos níveis de violência; algumas destas explicações competem, enquanto outras poderiam ser complementares. Falta-nos uma estrutura teórica abrangente que integre argumentos complementares em um argumento causal geral. A conclusão discutida são os desafios teóricos, metodológicos e empíricos para desenvolver uma estrutura geral no sentido de analisar a violência no comércio ilegal de drogas. Uma estrutura geral orienta a análise em todos os casos, independentemente da região, da droga ou do nível de violência. O que difere entre os casos empíricos são os valores das variáveis causais no contexto distinto, não a relação entre essas variáveis; a variação nos níveis de violência é o resultado de valores diferentes entre as variáveis causais. A conclusão termina sugerindo caminhos para a pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Violência; Crime; Drogas; Comércio Ilegal; Rio de Janeiro.

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