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Homicide Dispatch 3

What is the relationship between **organized crime** and **homicide** in **Latin America?**



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Woodrow Wilson Center and Fundación Ideas para la Paz

Index

- 2 **Introduction**
- 3 **Is Latin America the anomaly?**
- 7 **What accounts for homicide increases and decreases?**
- 9 **Criminal regulation and homicide reduction**
- 14 **The war on drugs, iron fist policies and the increase in violence**
- 16 **The root of violence: state weakness**
- 17 **References**



What is the relationship between organized crime and homicide in Latin America?

Juan Carlos Garzón-Vergara¹

Summary

Criminal and gang violence is believed to generate as much as a third of all homicides in the Western hemisphere. In some countries where collective violence is acute, this may well be true. But it is only part of the story. Organized crime groups can also reduce the extent of lethal violence in a given setting: they often regulate murder and violent crime. The extent to which such entities exert control is often in direct proportion to the relative fragility of state institutions. Where public authorities are unable to exert a monopoly over the use of force, criminal actors step in. This Homicide Dispatch critically examines the relationships between organized crime and lethal violence. In the process, it shines a light on the challenges facing public authorities intent on fighting crime. Owing to the inherent weaknesses of many governments across Latin America, they have only limited ability to reduce homicidal violence. It is only by shoring-up the state's ability to guarantee fundamental rights that meaningful improvements will be possible.

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Introduction

The characteristics and dynamics of lethal violence in many Latin American countries are tightly associated with the prevalence of organized crime and criminal economies. The size of a criminal economy can affect the extent of violent confrontations and disputes between competing factions. This is why organized crime, drug trafficking and the war on drugs are key explanatory factors for high homicide rates from Brazil and Colombia to El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico. But this is not always the case. Indeed, when comparing the situation in Latin America and the Caribbean with other parts the world, the relationships between drug trafficking, other criminal economies and violence are not so linear or straight-forward. Indeed, what is surprising is the relative absence of violence in many regions where criminal economies are active.

This *Homicide Dispatch* questions the relationships between organized crime and lethal violence. It draws principally from data generated by the Igarapé Institute's Homicide Monitor.² The first section compares the homicide rates across different regions and countries with an active organized crime presence. The goal is to identify factors that distinguish Latin America from other parts of the world including the (high) presence of firearms in homicide and the low levels of criminal prosecution for capital crimes. Section two examines how criminal networks explain the rise and fall of homicidal violence. The last section undertakes a cursory review of state measures to combat and contain organized crime and gangs, highlighting the negative consequences of overtly repressive approaches. A key conclusion is that homicide reduction measures are unlikely to succeed unless the legitimate authority of the state is established to guarantee and protect basic rights.

² See www.homicide.igarape.org.br.

Is Latin America the anomaly?

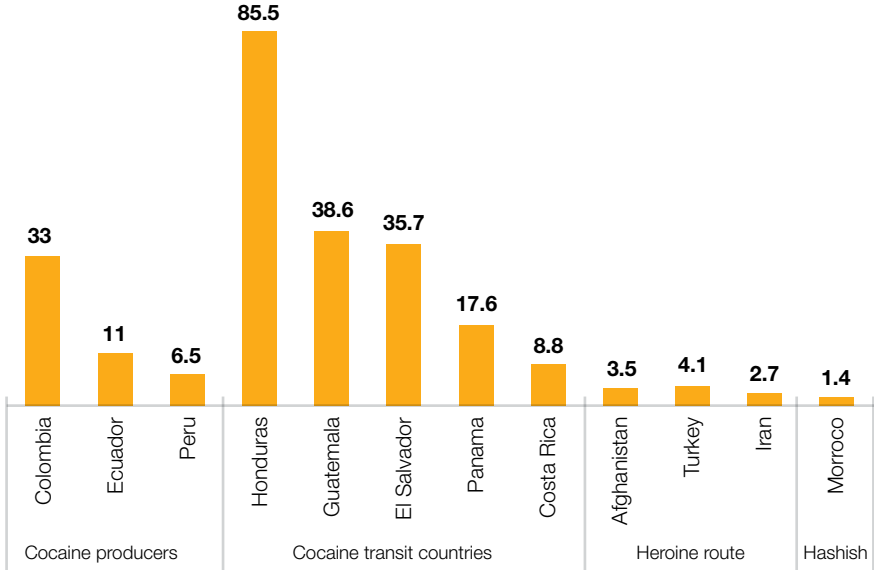
The United Nations claims that organized crime groups and gangs are responsible for more than 30 percent of registered homicides in the Americas (UNODC, 2014: 43). Central and South America stand out in particular, especially when compared to Europe and Asia, where the proportion of murders associated with collective violence³ represents less than three percent of all reported homicides. These ratios must be treated with a measure of caution since different countries count homicides differently. Even so, the figures offer some insight into the possible linkages between organized crime and lethal violence. Just because there appears to be a more robust link between criminal groups and homicides in the Americas does not necessarily mean that there is a smaller presence of analogous groups in other parts of the world. The existence of one does not ensure the prevalence of the other.

The illicit drug market helps begin to shine a light on the complex relationships between organized crime and lethal violence. The Andean region leads the world in cocaine production. Yet there is a stark contrast between high prevalence of lethal violence in Colombia (33 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012) and the comparatively low homicide rates in Peru (6.5 per 100,000) and Ecuador (11 per 100,000) (Muggah and McDermott, 2013). Meanwhile, trafficking routes in Central America – especially the so-called northern triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) – feature murder rates well above 30 per 100,000. As shown in Figure 1, these compare starkly with low rates in countries like Costa Rica and Panama (less than 15 per 100,000). Intriguingly, these comparatively “safe” countries reported sky-high rates of cocaine interdiction in 2013 (41 and 20 tons respectively) as compared to low rates in their more violent neighbors in the triangle (UNODC, 2015).

³ Collective violence is the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group – whether this group is transitory or has a more permanent identity – against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives. It includes violent conflicts between nations and groups, state and group terrorism, rape as a weapon of war, the movement of large numbers of people displaced from their homes, and gang warfare. (WHO, 2002).

The point is that the existence of an illegal economy does not necessarily translate into high levels of lethal violence. While there are data coverage and quality challenges, the evidence is still convincing. For example, Afghanistan, the leading heroin producer in the world, registers a homicide rate of just 3.5 per 100,000 inhabitants.⁴ Likewise, countries straddling the so-called “Balkans route”, which allegedly moves upwards of 70 percent of the heroin sold in Europe, are not consumed by violence. Iran and Turkey – two countries on the route – report murder rates of 4.1 and 2.7 per 100,000, respectively. Meanwhile, Morocco, one of the leading exporters of hashish, has a homicide rate of just 1.4 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Figure 1. Homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants in countries with drug trafficking presence (2012)



Source: Igarapé Institute (2015) and UNODC (2015)

⁴ Homicide figures may not capture all forms of violence. In fragile regions, such as Afghanistan, there are also deaths associated with armed conflict.

Another part of the world that underlines the convoluted relationship between organized crime and violence is the border area of Mexico and the U.S. Almost half of the Mexican municipalities located along the border recorded homicide rates of 40 per 100,000 or more (2012). Meanwhile, in adjoining U.S. counties the highest rate was 12.9 murders per 100,000. Some of the safest areas of the U.S. neighbor some of the dangerous places in Mexico, or even the world (García-Ponce and Postel, 2015). While Ciudad Juárez, in Mexico, reported 58 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012, the rate in El Paso, in Texas, was just 0.6 per 100,000. The distance between the two cities is just a few miles, but the levels of violence are of an order of magnitude apart.

There are at least two intervening factors that appear to influence the relationship between organized crime and violence. The first relates to firearm ownership and the second to relative rates of impunity. In Latin America, the percentage of homicides committed with firearms is significantly higher than the global average. Around the world, roughly 41 percent of all homicides are committed with firearms.

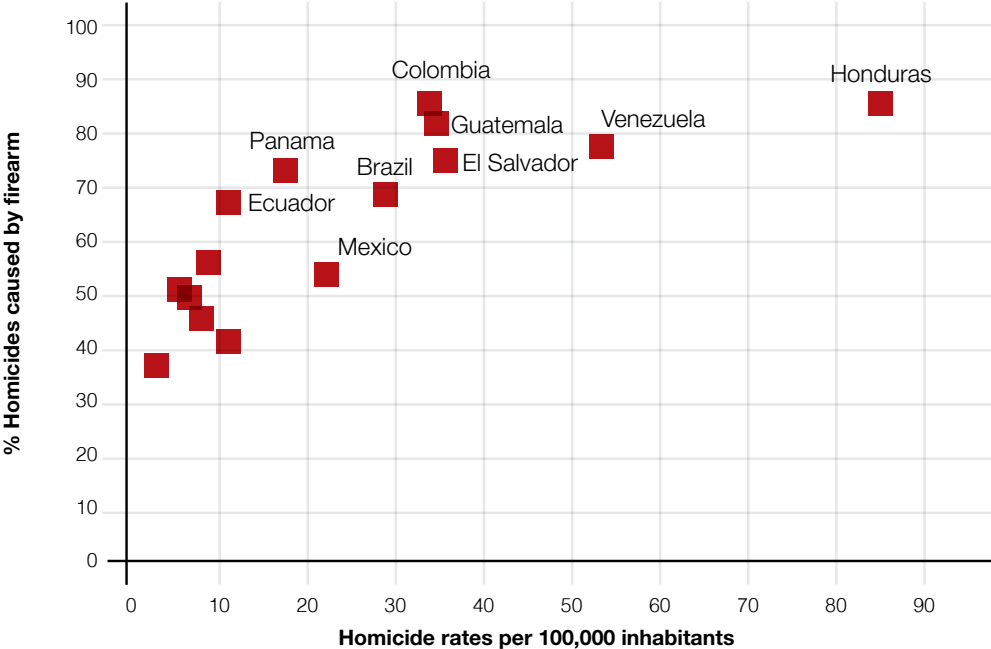
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In South America, the proportion rises to 59 percent while in Central America it is 73 percent⁵. Countries reporting high homicide rates also tend to report higher proportion of firearm homicides (Figure 2). In many of these countries, state authorities have demonstrated comparatively limited capacity to control the trafficking and possession of illicit firearms. Organized crime groups tend to also have ready access through illegal networks, but also diversion from police and military stocks.⁶

⁵ Homicide Monitor, 2016.

⁶ According to some estimates, between 45 and 80 million illegal and legal firearms are in circulation in Latin America (Stohl and Tuttle, 2008).

Figure 2. Homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants and percentage of homicides with firearms (2012)



Source: Igarapé Institute (2015) and OEA-Alertamerica (2012)

There is also a considerably high rate of impunity for capital crimes in Latin America. The regional differences are stark. For example, in Europe and Asia 80 and 85 percent of all homicides are “solved”. In the Americas, the proportion drops to 50 percent. Around the world, roughly 43 criminals are convicted for every 100 murder victims. In the Americas, only 24 per 100 homicides end up with convictions. In some countries, this figure drops below ten (UNODC, 2014: 92-94). In Brazil, less than one in every four homicides was resolved, on average (Beato, 2012). In Colombia, the impunity level of homicides between 2005 and 2010 was estimated at 96 percent (Comisión Asesora de Política Criminal, 2012). During 2007 and 2008 in Venezuela, for example, just 9 arrests were

recorded per 100 murders: 9 out of 10 homicides were unpunished (Briceño-León, Camardiel and Ávila, 2012). Given these soaring rates of impunity, it is not surprising that the judicial system is failing to deter violent crime.

It is worth recalling that criminal organizations and gangs frequently resort to instrumental violence. In countries across Latin America, the territorial presence of non-state factions also correlates with the location of homicidal violence. This is not a generalized phenomenon, but rather very specific to micro-regions. In such areas a culture of impunity can emerge in which interconnected forms of violence, that is, the deliberate use of violence to reach specific goals – interpersonal and communal – can thrive.

What accounts for homicide increases and decreases?

Criminal networks can, in certain circumstances, contribute to rising homicide rates. In some countries there is a robust relationship between specific criminal economies, especially drug trafficking, and the increase in homicide (Garzón, 2015a). In Colombia, drug production activities account for as much as 40 percent of all homicides in the country (Mejía and Restrepo, 2008). In Mexico, the homicide rate tripled between 2006 and 2010, jumping from 8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2006 to 23 per 100,000 in 2010 – an increase attributed at least partly to confrontations and paybacks between drug cartels (Calderón et al, 2013 and Poire, 2011). Meanwhile, a study of seven countries in Central America identified drug trafficking as one of the central factors driving increases in violence. Drug trafficking hotspots in these countries had homicide rates twice as high as in locales with low drug trafficking (World Bank, 2011).

The ways in which different criminal groups reproduce violence varies by country, city and neighborhood. In Honduras and El Salvador, high homicide rates are linked to the so-called maras, or gangs (Muggah, 2016). Various factions routinely engage in violent confrontations for territorial control, management of shipment and retail and as part of an alliance with more established organized crime organizations (Arnson and Olson, 2011). In Brazil, the most visible face of violence are the drug trafficking factions and militias that operate in some cities – especially in “bocas de fumo” in low-income areas adjoining wealthy neighborhoods – and engage in turf disputes. In Mexico, gangs have been used by the cartels in disputes for “las plazas” —drug distribution spots— and transit zones.

The influence of criminal networks in shaping patterns of violence in Latin America is only part of the story. The violence associated with disputes between groups, open turf wars and the use of force to impose informal order over communities is the most visible manifestation of the criminal economy. However, to genuinely understand the dynamics of homicide in Latin America, one must not only account for the places where violence is positively associated

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with organized crime, but also those spaces where homicide goes down. The latter phenomenon arises when criminal organizations control territory or have come to some kind of agreement with potential competitors and rivals.

Criminal regulation and homicide reduction

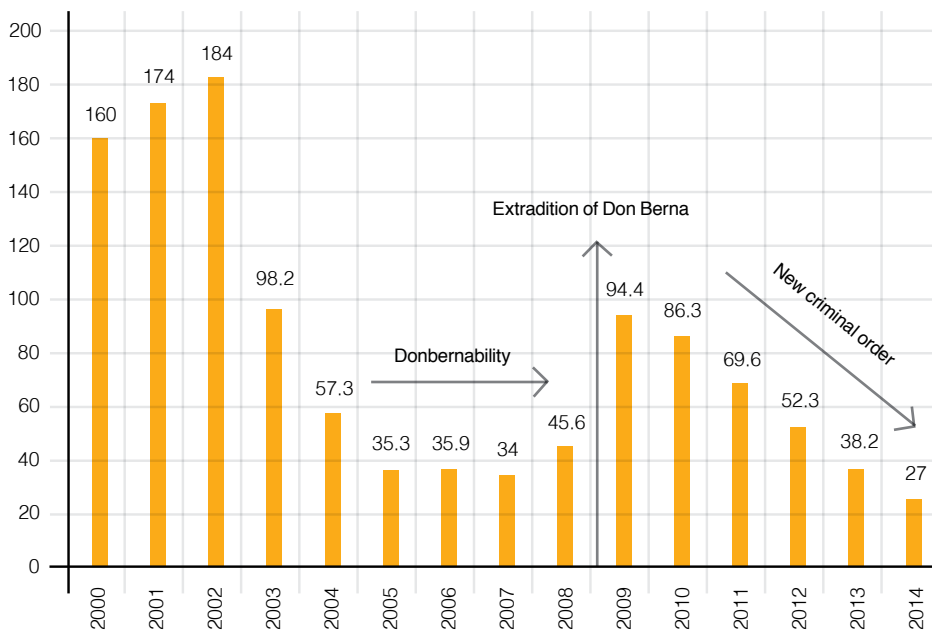
In some parts of Latin America, homicide rates are stable or decreasing. In certain cases, this is due to the presence of robust state institutions and improving social and economic conditions. In others, however, it is a function of the ability of organized crime groups to regulate the use of violence. Two examples are especially illustrative: Medellín and El Salvador. Of course variations in homicide rates are due to multiple factors and circumstances, and therefore difficult to estimate the weight of each variable.

Medellin paramilitaries and “combos” as crime regulators

A Colombian paramilitary group with close ties to drug trafficking was demobilized in late 2003. The organization was known as the Bloque Cacique Nutibara (BCN) and agreed to disarm after negotiating a settlement with the Colombian government. The group pledged to cease hostilities, surrender arms and shift to civilian life (Centro de Memoria, 2014). Notwithstanding their formal dissolution, the BCN's influence over criminal organizations in Medellín, its de facto headquarters, remained intact. It oversaw a broad network controlled and regulated by a former paramilitary commander known by the pseudonym “Don Berna”.

In the wake of the declaration to end hostilities and the growing influence of BCN, Medellín's homicide rate halved from 184 per 100,000 in 2012 to 98.2 per 100,000 in 2013. Following the group's full demobilization between 2005 and 2007, the homicide rate decreased to just 30 deaths per 100,000 for three consecutive years (Giraldo and Preciado, 2015). It was only the extradition of Don Berna to the United States in 2008 that ruptured the established order known colloquially as “Donbernabilidad”, or “Donberlability” (Llorente and Guarín, 2013). His departure triggered a burst of violence between criminal factions attempting to fill the power vacuum (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Homicide rate in Medellin (2000-2014)



Source: Medellin como Vamos, 2015

There are two dominant explanations for the decreasing levels of violence since 2009. The first suggests that there has been a reassertion of the hegemony of a singular criminal structure known as “La Oficina”, or “The Office”. This, together with pacts between the so-called “combos” (e.g. as many as 240 criminal factions that exercise local control), accounts for the sharp decline in violence. A second theory is that the public authorities were able to assert control. A focus on providing concentrated support to poorer and peripheral areas is seen as critical. The increase in budget allocations for justice and security and police operations against criminal factions are widely regarded as crucial elements of Medellin’s turn-around. Medellin, then, is experiencing a fragile criminal truce coupled with the gradual strengthening of municipal institutions.

El Salvador's gang truce

In 2012, the Salvadoran government and the country's two dominant gangs – the Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 – agreed to a truce. The effects of the measure on homicide were profound. Murder rates dropped from 70.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011 to 41 per 100,000 the following year. The truce exposed two glaring facts. First, the negotiating power of gangs was intrinsically linked to violence. Second, the authorities were to a large extent dependent on the will and ability of gang leaders to reduce lethal violence in the country (Cruz, 2013).

From the beginning, the truce was fragile and lacked public support. The executive was ambivalent and failed to invest the necessary resources to strengthen the process. It was also under intense pressure from the U.S. to not cave to the demands of gangsters. In May of 2013,



Mara Salvatrucha Graffiti in El Salvador.

in the run-up to presidential elections, the executive decided to end the truce. Homicide rates starting rising immediately. By June of 2014, as the new government took office, all channels for dialogue and mediation with the gangs were terminated. By early 2015, the executive branch announced its new anti-gang strategy (Figure 4).

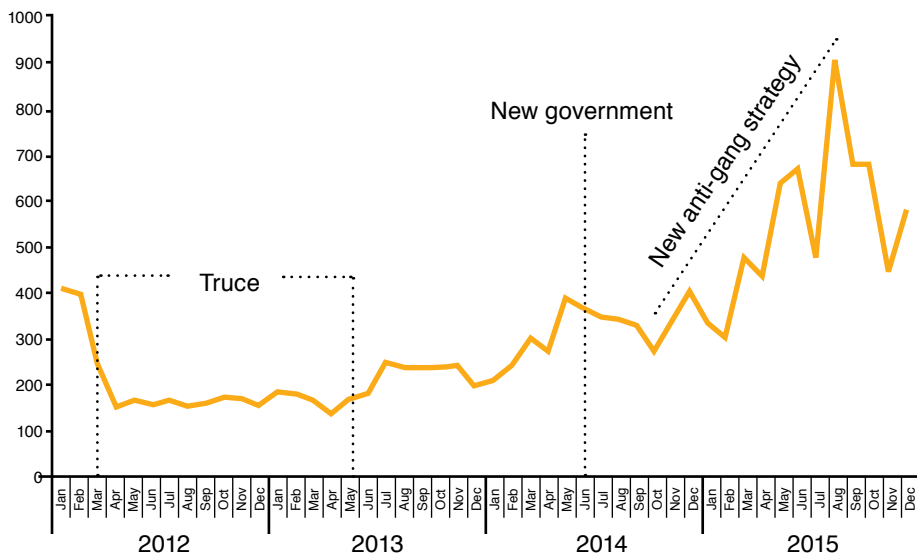
According to El Salvador National Police in El Salvador, there were 6,640 killings in the country last year. That translates into a national homicide rate of almost 104 per 100,000, 17 times the global average. Compare El Salvador's totals with the 516 slayings reported in 2014 in Canada, a country



A member of the Mara Salvatrucha gang from El Salvador. Photo: Moises Saman

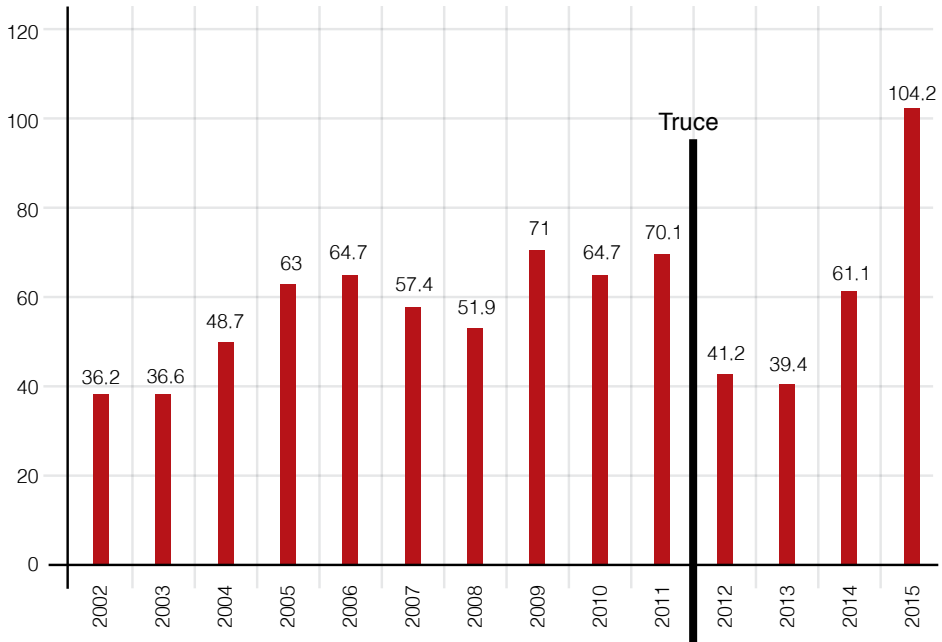
with almost six times the population. An aggressive police offensive has since been linked to dozens of massacres and disappearances of gang members (Muggah, 2016).

Figure 4. Monthly homicides in El Salvador (2012-2015)



Source: El Salvador National Police

Figure 5. Homicide rates in El Salvador before and after the truce (2002- 2015)



Source: El Salvador National Police - Prensa Gráfica, 2015

The cases of Medellín and El Salvador underline how criminal structures play a role in regulating the use of violence. Depending on their ability to control criminal networks, they are able to establish a semi-stable equilibrium. Similar structures exist in Guatemala, Brazil and Mexico where sudden sharp decreases in homicide are due to informal deals and agreements rather than concerted government-led action. The reduction in violent deaths is a positive indicator of progress, but does not always adequately explain what is going on beneath the surface.

The war on drugs, iron fist policies and the increase in violence

To fully understand the nexus between organized crime, gangs and lethal violence in Latin America, it is important to recognize the role of the state. A key focus of countries across the Americas has been waging a war on drugs and the actors who profit from them. A key strategy adopted by countries in Central and South America has been *mano dura*, or iron fist, policies. Measures include the deployment of military and police operations, increased severity of convictions and expanded incarceration. Determining the impacts of these interventions on lethal violence is challenging.

In Latin America, state efforts to disrupt illegal markets and dismantle armed groups have the unintended consequences of ratcheting up lethal violence. Researchers have found that homicide rates can increase as a consequence of drug prohibition and that interrupting illegal markets can, paradoxically, increase violence (Werb et al., 2011 and Rolles et al., 2012: 54-59). Mexico's spiraling violence since the declaration of a war on drugs in 2006 is a case in point. Across Latin America, violence associated with organized crime (executions, confrontations and aggressions) has grown more rapidly than other forms of non-violent crime (Roble et al., 2013: 9). Complicating matters, there is also a strong relationship between arrests and the elimination of gang leaders and increases in violence (Guerrero, 2011), with military interventions and increases in homicide (Espinosa and Rubin, 2015), and between gang leader arrests and ordinary crime (Calderón et al., 2013).

The drug war and iron fist policies have also enabled high rates of state-led violence, especially extra-judicial killings. Latin American countries exhibit exceedingly high police lethality rates in comparison to developed countries (Table 1). In Colombia, the so-called "false positives" case –

when innocent civilians are murdered and made to look like guerillas killed in combat – reveal the tragic consequences of a security policy based on enemy body counts (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013). In the state of Rio de Janeiro, Amnesty International estimated that around 8,500 people were killed in police interventions between 2005 and 2014 (Amnesty International, 2015).

Table 1. People killed in confrontations with on-duty police officers

Country	People killed in confrontations with on-duty police officers	Population	Reference year
Brazil	3009	193 million	2014
Mexico	1652	119 million	2011
USA	1068	311 million	2015
South Africa	706	51 million	2011
Venezuela	704	27 million	2010
Dominican Republic	268	10 million	2011
Australia	94	23 million	1992-2012
United Kingdom	15	9 million	2011
Germany	15	8.7 million	2010-2011
Finland	6	5.4 million	2013
Canada	0	33 million	2011

Source: Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública (2013: 126; 2014); The Guardian (2015); Lartey (2015)

The root of violence: state weakness

The nexus between organized crime and violence does not occur in a vacuum but in the context of weak states. In many cases public institutions are coopted by criminal factions.⁷ By contrast, states that are able to enforce the law, maintain accountable governance and keep levels of corruption relatively low are at a lower risk of confronting high rates lethal violence (Fearon, 2010 and Walter, 2010). Unless public authorities are able to establish and consolidate legitimate authority in a given territory, they will struggle to prevent and reduce homicide (Boer & Bosetti, 2015).

Ultimately, every country has some degree of organized crime and infiltration of criminal markets. The extent of their infiltration of state institutions and their influence on the formal economy obviously matters (Eisner, 2015). The critical difference lies in whether and how government authorities respond. Rather than seeking to eradicate criminal economies and structures through the use of repression, states are most effective when they reshape their behavior to make them less visible and violent (Calderón and Felbab-Brown, 2013). In Latin America, low murder rates in areas influenced by organized crime are attributable to organized crime's ability to influence the state rather than the state's effectiveness in shaping the behavior of criminal factions.

⁷ The World Bank has shown how the weakness of institutions is frequently a key driver of cycles of violence (World Bank, 2012).

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What is the relationship between organized crime and homicide in Latin America?

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The **Homicide Dispatches** are a series of short analytical articles highlighting the underlying risks and far-reaching consequences of murder, ways that governments count homicide, and innovative strategies to prevent and reduce lethal violence. The Homicide Dispatches are part of the Homicide Monitor, a data visualization tool developed by the Igarapé Institute in partnership with the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), with contributions from the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC).



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