

Gustavo Albuquerque

PHD CANDIDATE · VANCOUVER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
6000 Iona Drive Vancouver, BC Canada, V6T 1L4
☎ +1 778-887-4726 | ✉ gtovaralbuquerque@gmail.com

Research Statement

I am an Applied Microeconomist with an interest in understanding the causes and consequences of violence. My work employ historic and administrative data to understand causes and consequences of violent behavior. More specifically, how it was affected by economic incentives, institutional settings, political institutions, and past even episodes of violence.

The first chapter of my dissertation studies the long term effects of large scale temporary violence in homicide rates. I analyze the case of Guatemala's civil war massacres and assemble data on their locations and homicides between 2016-2019, to test whether there is association between the two. I find that highly victimized municipalities have fewer homicides today. Exploring precipitation variation as an instrument for massacres, I provide evidence that such relation is causal. Generalized trust is also higher in municipalities with more massacres, suggesting a mechanism connecting past violence and present peace through increased local cohesion.

This finding goes against some of the main theories for the origins of Central America's high homicide rates (e.g. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2019) that blame the authoritarian and turbulent past for a significant part of the high homicide rates of the region. Although previous academic literature has found that early exposure to civil war violence increases the likelihood of criminal behavior later in life (e.g. Miguel et al. (2011)), another strand of it finds that exposure to civil war violence can increase prosocial behavior (e.g. Bauer et al. 2016). My results indicate that the second type of effects predominate, shedding light on the importance of social norms to the determination of crime rates.

The second chapter of my dissertation explore police archives produced at a time when Guatemala had an authoritarian government fighting a leftist insurrection. These documents were never intended to go public at the time of their making and were not redacted. Files register from human resources management to repressive operations against political dissidents and anything in between, providing a unique window to observe the police work in a repressive environment.

The main challenge of this project is that these files were stored as scanned images of the original files, and thus could not be used as a regular dataset without extensive previous treatment. I am leveraging recent machine learning developments to transcribe the whole AHPN corpus, organize it and quantify its contents in an automated and easily replicable way. In the next months, I will investigate how much police effort was directed to different goals, like combating robbery or repressing political dissent. Additionally, I will research how this effort varied with time and space, and whether this variation was correlated with the political changes Guatemala went through the studied period (1980-1990).

Although this project is still far from complete, I hope it can be a relevant contribution to the fields of political economy and history. The final data will be publicly available, making it the first text dataset with near-universal coverage of police produced documentation. Previous archival works (e.g. Sullivan 2016) often transcribe only core text fragments and transform it in quantitative data using hand-coding, a process not amenable to replication.

The data can be a valuable tool not only for academic researchers interested in police forces, but also human rights advocates and relatives of former persecuted individuals. Instead of looking the currently disorganized archives file per file, it will be possible to search by keywords, names, places, and browse by topic. This project has received funding from the CIDER Small Grants in Innovative Data.

Other research I made in the past also had violence and crime as relevant variables. In the remainder chapter of my thesis, I study the impact of cultural and political practices of indigenous peoples of Mexico on their resilience to

the effects of the drug war. Previous projects have focused on the impact of marijuana legalization and pedestrian density on crime frequency.

Since time immemorial humans have been physical disputes to allocate resources. As a consequence, these disputes (and the threat of them) has shaped cultural practices, state formation, and economic outcomes. In the future, I intend to keep working on the determinants and consequences of violence. The project on police archives is still in its infancy and as I advance in better understanding the archive's contents, more descriptive and then causal research should follow. Additional projects will build on the tools and contacts obtained in the execution of the current projects. I intend to understand when and how state actors decides for the use of force and how this decisions shape state formation, institutions, and economic outcomes