Research Integrity | Ethnography

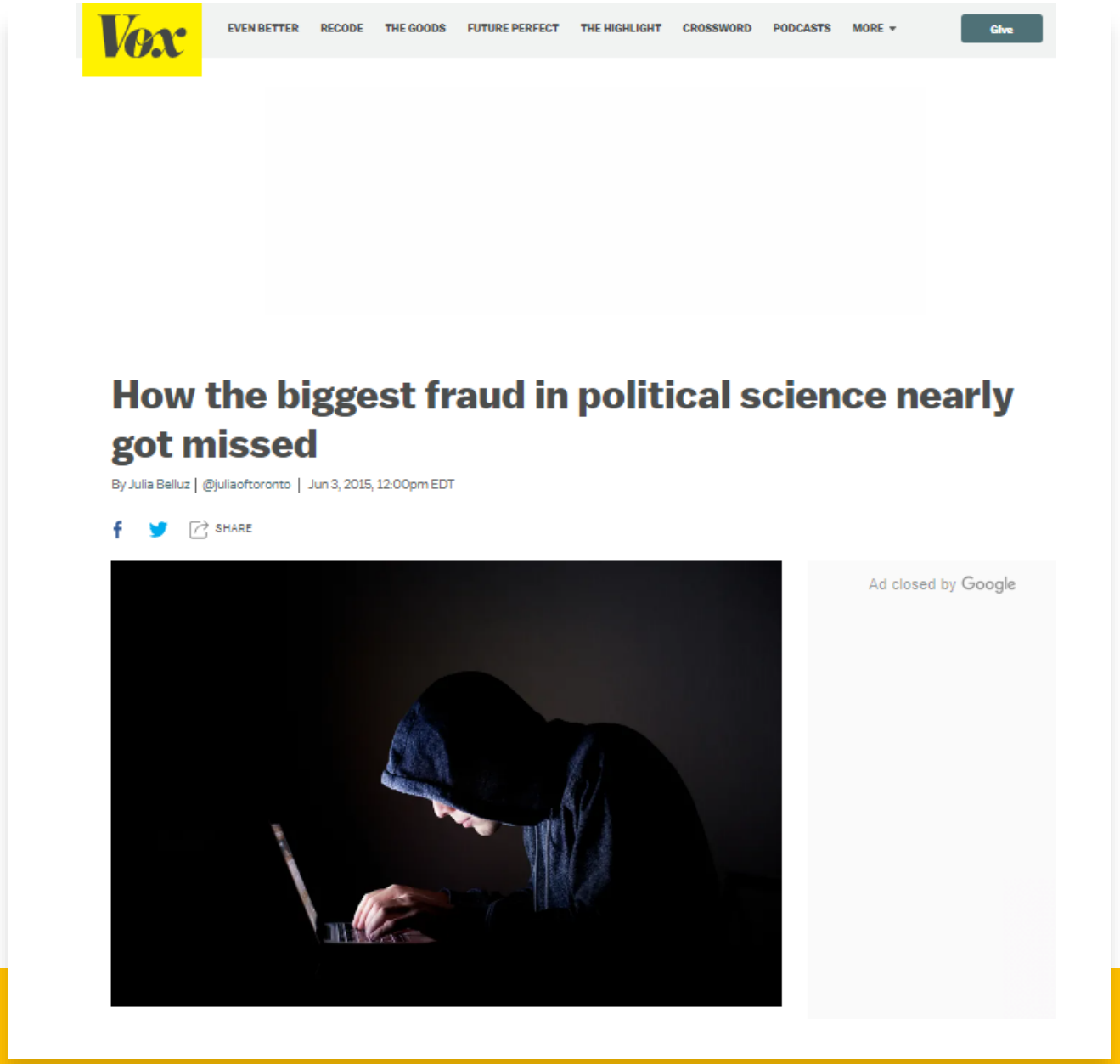
Doing Political Research, Week 8

Research Integrity

- What are the key challenges to research integrity?
- How effective are the following strategies to improve the production of political research? What advantages and drawbacks do they have?
  - Peer-review
  - Pre-registration of research plans
  - Publishing null results, formally or informally
  - Data transparency
- To what extent are these strategies compatible with qualitative and non-positivist research?

The LaCour Scandal

- Why did LaCour fabricate data? What role did institutional and structural factors play?
- How effective would proposed interventions to improve research integrity have been in preventing this scandal?
- Does the uncovering of the scandal prove that current research integrity initiatives are effective?
- What else could be done to prevent similar scandals in the future?

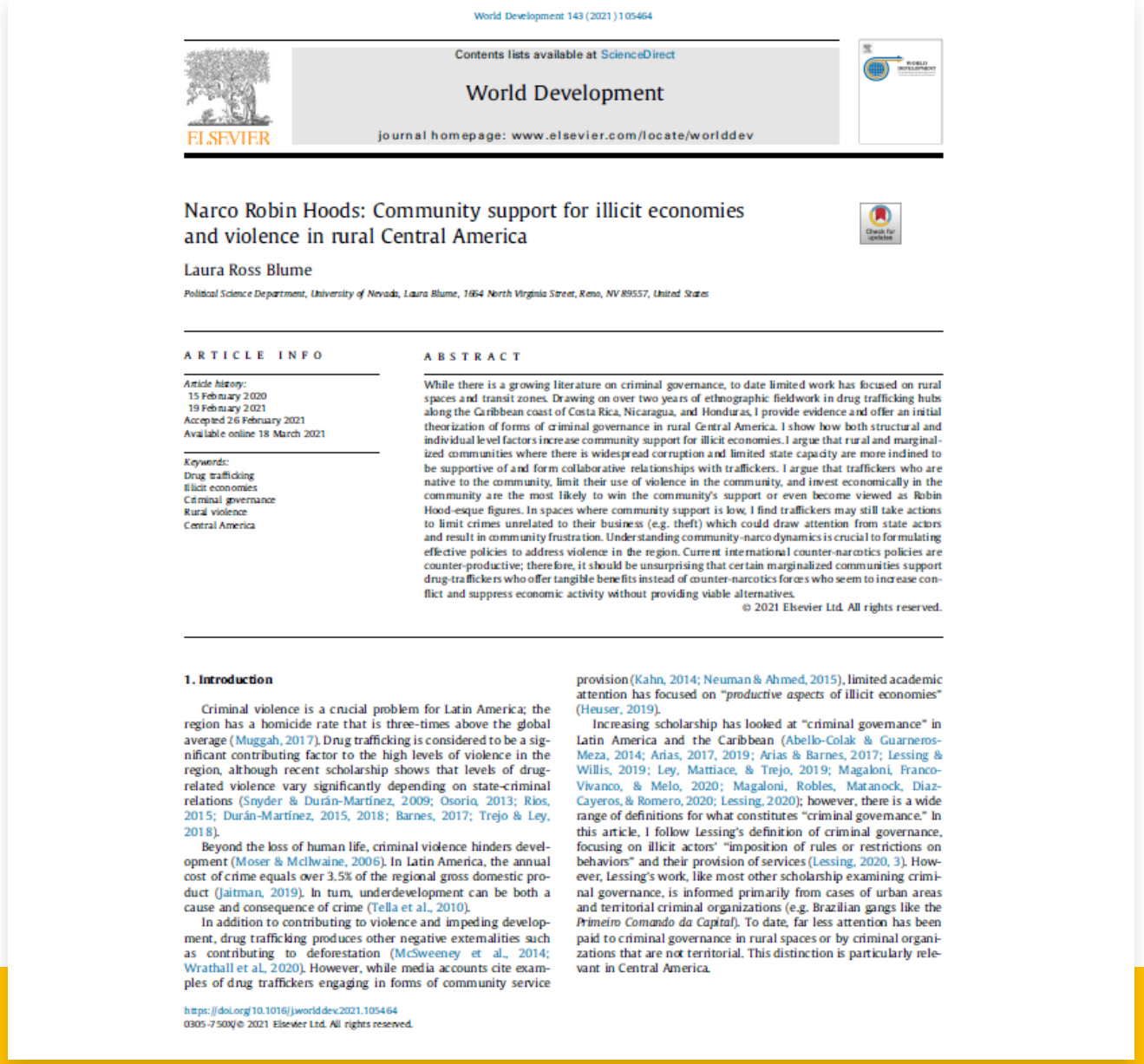


Designing an Ethnographic Research Project

- Choose a research question to investigate a political process or phenomenon and design an ethnographic study to research it.
- Which research site(s) will you observe? For how long? How will you gain access?
- Will you be overt or covert? To what extent will you (be able to) participate?
- How will you record your observations? What other practical issues will you need to account for?

Blume

- How did Blume gain access to her field sites? Was she overt or covert?
- How robust are her findings? To what extent can her findings be generalised?
- How well does she account for her positionality?
- How could the study have been improved? What other methods could have been used?



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Narco Robin Hoods: Community support for illicit economies and violence in rural Central America

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ABSTRACT

While there is a growing literature on criminal governance, to date limited work has focused on rural spaces and transit zones. Drawing on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork in drug trafficking hubs along the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras, I provide evidence and offer an initial theorization of forms of criminal governance in rural Central America. I show how both structural and individual level factors increase community support for illicit economies. I argue that rural and marginalized communities where there is widespread corruption and limited state capacity are more inclined to be supportive of and form collaborative relationships with traffickers. I argue that traffickers who are native to the community, limit their use of violence in the community, and invest economically in the community are the most likely to win the community's support or even become viewed as Robin Hood-esque figures. In spaces where community support is low, I find traffickers may still take actions to limit crimes unrelated to their business (e.g. theft) which could draw attention from state actors and result in community frustration. Understanding community-narco dynamics is crucial to formulating effective policies to address violence in the region. Current international counter-narcotics policies are counter-productive; therefore, it should be unsurprising that certain marginalized communities support drug-traffickers who offer tangible benefits instead of counter-narcotics forces who seem to increase conflict and suppress economic activity without providing viable alternatives.

1. Introduction

Criminal violence is a crucial problem for Latin America; the region has a homicide rate that is three-times above the global average (Muggah, 2017). Drug trafficking is considered to be a significant contributing factor to the high levels of violence in the region, although recent scholarship shows that levels of drug-related violence vary significantly depending on state-criminal relations (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009; Osorio, 2013; Ríos, 2015; Durán-Martínez, 2015, 2018; Barnes, 2017; Trejo & Ley, 2018).

Beyond the loss of human life, criminal violence hinders development (Moser & McIlwaine, 2006). In Latin America, the annual cost of crime equals over 3.5% of the regional gross domestic product (Jaitman, 2019). In turn, underdevelopment can be both a cause and consequence of crime (Tella et al., 2010).

In addition to contributing to violence and impeding development, drug trafficking produces other negative externalities such as contributing to deforestation (McSweeney et al., 2014; Wrathall et al., 2020). However, while media accounts cite examples of drug traffickers engaging in forms of community service provision (Kahn, 2014; Neuman & Ahmed, 2015), limited academic attention has focused on "*productive aspects* of illicit economies" (Heuser, 2019).

Increasing scholarship has looked at "criminal governance" in Latin America and the Caribbean (Abello-Colak & Guarneros-Meza, 2014; Arias, 2017, 2019; Arias & Barnes, 2017; Lessing & Willis, 2019; Ley, Mattiace, & Trejo, 2019; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, & Melo, 2020; Magaloni, Robles, Matanock, Diaz-Cayeros, & Romero, 2020; Lessing, 2020); however, there is a wide range of definitions for what constitutes "criminal governance." In this article, I follow Lessing's definition of criminal governance, focusing on illicit actors' "imposition of rules or restrictions on behaviors" and their provision of services (Lessing, 2020, 3). However, Lessing's work, like most other scholarship examining criminal governance, is informed primarily from cases of urban areas and territorial criminal organizations (e.g. Brazilian gangs like the *Primeiro Comando da Capital*). To date, far less attention has been paid to criminal governance in rural spaces or by criminal organizations that are not territorial. This distinction is particularly relevant in Central America.

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