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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; Rios, 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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Cocaine trafficking through Central America has increased over the last two decades, making the isthmus a crucial bridge between Andean producer countries and illegal markets in the United States. Current estimates from the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) suggest that over 90% of the cocaine arriving in the US has first transited through Central America. Despite the region's growing significance, limited academic work has focused explicitly on Central American traffickers, even though they differ from their Mexican and South American counterparts in some important ways.

Central American narco-traffickers are primarily *transportistas*. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) define *transportistas* as:

> They are "groups" only in the loosest sense of the word [...] They do not need the rigid structures essential to territory-bound groups, because they do not seek to control territory and, for the most part, they are not in direct competition with one another. Their goal is to bring merchandise from point A to point B, and there are generally many ways of doing this. (UNODC, 2012, p. 26)

In essence, they are the freelancers of the drug world, who move product along the supply chain and also sometimes store it for periods of time. While South American and Mexican drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) – as well as other criminal syndicates – outsource to *transportistas* in Central America, these relationships are not exclusive and do not demand the same level of territorial control. Central American traffickers primarily work independently or in loose networks, commonly built on familial ties. While the isthmus has not experienced turf wars between DTOs the way Mexico has over the past decade, that is not to say these locations are "monopolistic" in the same sense that, for example, a Mexican locality could be dominated by the Sinaloa Cartel. This is an important distinction, given that prior research shows criminal organizations are more likely to be benevolent if they are monopolistic (Gambetta, 1996; Magaloni et al., 2020) and previous work has emphasized criminal competition as a key driver of narco-violence (Rios, 2015; Durán-Martínez, 2015, 2018; Blume, 2017).

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to patterns of criminal governance, it has so far been depicted as a predominately urban phenomenon which has left a significant gap in understanding patterns of rural criminal governance. This article provides evidence and an initial theorization of forms of criminal governance in rural Central America. In doing so, I extend theories of criminal governance to zones that are underrepresented in the literature and examine spaces that support a different node in the illicit cocaine supply chain: transport. Based on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork along the Caribbean coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, I use a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019) to explore *transportistas*' strategies vis-à-vis the communities where they operate.

Specifically, I address two questions: (1) What relations emerge between *transportistas* and communities where they operate? (2) What factors increase community support of narcos in rural areas and transit zones? Drawing from extensive ethnographic fieldwork, I present detailed profiles of specific traffickers and communities to show that *transportistas* benefit from developing supportive community relations and that they engage in forms of criminal governance. Traffickers provide a variety of public goods (e.g. infrastructure, informal credit, etc.), take actions to win favor (e.g. hosting free public concerts, ad-hoc cash handouts), and engage in policing (e.g. offering forms of dispute resolution, limiting crimes unrelated to trafficking). Under certain conditions, these traffickers even emerge to be Robin Hood-esque figures in their communities, garnering significant social support.[1] I also draw on cross-case comparisons to illustrate how criminal governance differs depending on larger political and institutional contexts.

I identify a series of both structural and individual level factors that increase community support for *transportistas*. The key structural factors are: (1) high levels of corruption, (2) low state capacity, (3) high levels of marginalization and poverty, and (4) small population size. The individual level factors include: (1) whether traffickers are native to the community, (2) traffickers' economic impact, (3) their use of violence within the community, and (4) whether they engage in policing (limiting crimes unrelated to the drug trade) and dispute resolution. While structural factors are specific to the community or location, individual level factors vary with each trafficker and, therefore, it is possible to have differences in support for different traffickers operating within the same community.

Understanding patterns of community support for the drug trade is crucial to formulating effective policies to address violence in the region. Just as criminals need civilian cooperation, so does law enforcement to do their job effectively (Tyler & Fagan, 2008). Further, state interventions have varying impacts on violence depending on the different preexisting patterns of criminal governance in the spaces where the state intervenes (Lessing, 2017; Arias, 2017; Magaloni et al., 2020). Thus, increased understanding of criminal governance is necessary to better formulate policies addressing chronic criminal violence. The various configurations of narco-community relations have implications for the different patterns of narco-violence experienced throughout Central America. I find that, all else being equal, higher levels of community support result in lower levels of drug-related violence.

I conclude this article with a discussion of the policy implications of these findings, highlighting that current counter-narcotics strategies focused on interdiction and arresting *transportistas* can exacerbate the conditions leading communities to support illicit economies in the first place. Moreover, arresting *transportistas* and the often-militarized counter-narcotics strategies pursued in Central America risk increasing violence since these approaches ignore the embeddedness inherent to criminal operations. Instead, addressing underlying problems of inadequate state capacity, corruption, marginalization, and lack of access to legal markets would likely be more effective at reducing reliance on illicit economies and ultimately prove more productive to counter-narcotics objectives by addressing traffickers' social bases of support.

2. Literature review & theory

Lessing (2020) begins his article conceptualizing criminal governance with the disconcerting fact that one consequence of urbanization is that "tens if not hundreds of millions of people live under some form of criminal governance" (p.1). Similarly, Arias and Barnes (2017), note that, "armed groups emerge, in part, from particular conditions of *urban* disorder and infrastructural limitations" (p.451, emphasis added). These statements make it seem like criminal governance is unique to urban spaces. Moreover, work on criminal organizations and violence in Latin America more broadly has overwhelmingly focused on urban spaces (Jütersonke et al., 2009; Moncada, 2016; Albarracín, 2018; Berg & Carranza, 2018; Durán-Martínez, 2018; Antillano, Arias, & Zubillaga, 2020). However, recent scholarship on the role traffickers play in shaping land transformation within Central America (McSweeney et al.,

[1] While I did not hear locals necessary use the exact term "Robin Hoods," the way they spoke about many *transportistas* fit the folklore character. Moreover, it was also a term that seemed to resonate the few occasions I used it with residents in various communities.

2017; Sesnie et al., 2017; Devine, Currit, Reygadas, Liller, & Allen, 2020; Wrathall et al., 2020), makes it clear that illicit economies and criminal actors are definitely a more-than-urban problem.

Rural areas may experience criminal governance differently than do urban areas. To understand this difference, we need to explore the factors that determine the type of relationship that evolves between communities and traffickers. Malkin (2001) work on narco-traffickers in rural Mexico shows that the cultural allure of the illicit trade as a means of economic mobility encourages positive perceptions of the narco-economy. While I do not focus on the cultural alure, the lack of alternative means of upward economic mobility in many parts of rural Central America have similarly made communities more accepting of illicit economies. As Slack (2019) notes, "for many living in Mexico and Central America the only people they can relate to as having successfully changed their economic class" are either those who have migrated to the US or narco-traffickers (p. 109).

Both Van Dun (2014) and Heuser (2019) conducted ethnographic work in rural Peruvian cocaine enclaves. Van Dun (2014) observes that, "in these regions, the drug trade is so extensive that the negative stigma loses meaning and the inhabitants do not see its presence as socially disruptive or inherently violent" (p. 396). While making important contributions to understanding how criminal organizations operate in rural spaces, it is not clear these findings extend to Central America or to transit zones more broadly. First, the longevity of criminal presence may be key to explaining supportive community relationships and eliminating stigmas surrounding illicit economies. Van Dun (2014) notes that "by the 1980s, coca cultivation dominated the local economy" (p. 397). But can we expect similar patterns of community support in areas where illicit economies are not as well established? Between 2001 and 2014, "Central America became the preferred trafficking corridor following interdiction campaigns in Mexico and the eastern Caribbean" (Magliocca et al., 2019, p. 7786). Thus, the presence of *transportistas* is relatively novel compared to the presence of the coca producers studied by Van Dun (2014) or Heuser (2019).

Furthermore, these studies of Peru, as well as works on criminal organizations in Mexico, focus on production zones. Illicit narcotics production inherently requires control of territory to cultivate crops and makes the criminal enterprise less mobile than the work of *transportista* organizations. Simply, it is much easier to change smuggling routes than move crops. While the cultivation of illicit crops may be a stable presence in a given space, traffickers moving through a space, or temporarily storing product in it, is not. *Transportistas* frequently change routes, and the multiplicity of groups in the region allows them flexibility to adapt based on changing patterns of enforcement, making these operations far more transient. This transient nature of *transportista* operations may point to one of the mechanisms that increases support for traffickers: limited violence associated with the illicit trade. Koivu (2016) notes that the degree to which illicit enterprises are territory-dependent will determine the extent to which these groups rely on coercion, with more dependence on territory resulting in more coercion. This argument suggests that production zones should be more violent places than transit zones, and therefore it is surprising that both Heuser (2019) and Van Dun (2014) find extensive community support for the narco-industry and limited violence in Peruvian cocaine enclaves. Nonetheless, based on Koivu (2016), we may assume that *transportistas* will be less likely to use coercion than territorially-bound criminal organizations, increasing the likelihood of collaborative community relations.

Magaloni et al. (2020) provide one of the most thorough explorations of why criminal groups either "prey" upon or provide assistance to the communities they operate in. Using survey data from list experiments, they argue that in Mexico, monopolistic criminal groups provide more services and that territorial competition results in more extortion. They also find that, "less hierarchical DTOs exhibit significantly higher levels of extortion and less assistance than more hierarchical criminal organizations" (p. 1129). Based on these findings and understandings of *transportistas* as loose networks that lack monopolistic territorial control, we might expect that service provision would be limited in Central American transit zones and that extortion would be common. However, I found limited evidence of extortion in the rural Central American communities where I conducted fieldwork. While extortion is crucial to gangs, *transportistas* generally do not engage in extortion. While Mexican DTOs have significantly expanded into kidnapping, human trafficking, and extortion, Central American *transportistas* have far less diversified criminal portfolios and rely almost exclusively on trafficking narcotics.[2]

This leads to important differences in terms of criminal governance. As Lessing states, "it is not surprising that gangs predate, control the physical space where they conduct illegal transactions, or regulate those transactions. What is puzzling is that they also provide public goods and impose rules on additional actors," (2020, p. 3). This is particularly puzzling in the case of *transportistas* given that they do not seek to control territory to the same extent as other criminal groups. However, my findings will illustrate that *transportistas* still benefit from cultivating community support in the spaces where they work. Moreover, I argue that *transportistas* actually have greater potential to win favor with residents in the spaces where they operate specifically because they are less territorially-bound and their profits come from outside the community. While a favela resident may reluctantly support a local gang – in part due to lack of viable alternatives – they may resent that gang's profits coming from the sale of drugs within the favela and/or the extortion of local business. In contrast, a trafficker who moves cocaine along a supply chain serving markets in wealthier countries and bringing those profits back to their own impoverished, marginalized community is perhaps the essence of the Robin Hood persona: a criminal outlaw who steals from the rich to give to the poor.

Following the call of Arias (2017, p. 249) to expand attention on criminal governance outside of major cities, this paper contributes to this emerging field by showing how Central American *transportistas* engage in various forms of governance and what factors contribute to their gaining support. I identify several structural and individual factors that increase community support for traffickers in rural transit zones. I argue support is likely to be higher in areas with lower state capacity, remote and peripheral areas, what O'Donnell (1993) referred to as "brown areas." Additionally, areas with higher levels of marginalization and poverty are likely to support traffickers. This reflects literature on crime in urban America illustrates how the combination of systemic marginalization, limited viable economic alternatives, and criminals' embeddedness in certain communities can garner supportive relations between residents and drug dealers (Duck & Rawls, 2012; Duck, 2015, 2016).

In addition, areas with higher levels of state corruption are more likely to have supportive relationships with traffickers. This is partly due to similar mechanisms as state capacity and marginalization: corruption increases the likelihood that traffickers will be able to provide basic services that the government has neglected. Moreover, without extensive corruption, traffickers will not have the necessary level of impunity to engage in certain governance activities. For example, undertaking infrastructure projects or host-

[2] I did very occasionally hear of narco-traffickers' involvement in timber, wildlife, and sex trafficking; this was not the norm in any localities where I conducted fieldwork.

ing public events would not be options for a trafficking network trying to evade state attention.

Community size also factors into the support for or resistance of illicit activity. In rural areas it is harder to hide illicit activities and thus traffickers are incentivized to maintain collaborative relations with the population. Building on Arjona (2017) theory of rebel governance, Magaloni et al. (2020) argue that collaboration between communities and criminal actors is similarly shaped by the strength of the community. Following this logic, the more tightly knit the community is, the less coercive the criminal groups will be. Given that rural communities are often highly cohesive, it is logical to find supportive relationships between traffickers and civilian populations in these spaces.

These structural factors are interconnected. For example, state capacity is often lower in rural areas compared to urban centers, and rural spaces also tend to be more marginalized. Further, corruption can flourish in isolated areas with limited state capacity and limited economic opportunities. These structural factors suggest that rural communities are more likely to be supportive of illicit economies, making it all the more important for increased scholarly attention to the dynamics of criminal governance within rural spaces.

The next set of factors I identify are at the individual level – that is, they depend on the specific trafficker and, therefore, can produce variance even within the same locality if more than one trafficker operates there. It was not uncommon for locals to have more positive views of certain traffickers compared to others. The key individual level factors are traffickers' nativeness, their economic impact in the community, their use of violence, and provision of policing. Traffickers are far more likely to establish collaborative relationships when they are "homegrown" (native to that area) (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, & Melo, 2020). Related to why poverty and marginalization increase support, traffickers who share more of their profits and are seen as key employers in the area are more likely to be respected and admired. Finally, traffickers' use of violence impacts levels of community support. Traffickers who limit their use of violence in the neighborhood, as well as limit the visibility of violence (Durán-Martínez, 2015), are more likely to be seen favorably. Similarly, traffickers who offer forms of dispute resolution or engage in "policing" (Lessing, 2020) crimes that impact the local population – kidnapping, theft, assault, extortion – are also likely to garner more support.

3. Methods

3.0.1. Comparative ethnography of illicit economies

The findings in this paper are drawn from over two years of comparative ethnographic fieldwork, conducted between January 2017 and January 2020. I worked in four departments along the Caribbean coast of Central America: (1) Gracias a Dios (GAD), Honduras; (2) the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN) in Nicaragua; (3) the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS) in Nicaragua; and (4) Limón province in Costa Rica. Fig. 1 provides a map of these areas.

I based my research in the capital city of each of these departments and traveled extensively within each department, primarily to coastal communities with the reputation of being, or having historically been, drug trafficking hotspots. I have deliberately chosen to not name the communities where I worked, or specify locations where interviews took place, to further protect the anonymity of my informants. Where the name of a town has been changed, I make it clear in a footnote. All individuals' names are pseudonyms.

During fieldwork, I relied heavily on snowball sampling to build a network of contacts, arrange interviews, and gain access to sources and locations. Whenever possible, I sought information from those with first-hand knowledge of drug-trafficking, whether that was former or current traffickers themselves or those within traffickers' inner circles – their wives, girlfriends, and family members. I always tried to speak with a diverse group of people in each case location; thus, my sources ranged from local government officials (both elected officials and bureaucrats), to missionaries, NGO workers, and village elders. While I spoke and interacted with members of the security apparatus (police, military, etc.) in each case location, this proved increasingly difficult for practical and personal safety reasons as my fieldwork progressed.

Given my concern that many of my sources – especially those directly involved in criminal activity – might have various reasons to mislead me, I always sought out multiple accounts of the same incidents, ideally hearing the same information from several sources who were not from the same location, social circle, and/or profession. While I cross checked information via police records, news articles, and other informants, I generally do not cite these materials because doing so could reveal the identity of those who participated in the project. Similarly, I have omitted details in vignettes or other pieces of evidence that could reveal the identities of my informants; researching illicit economies demands extra consideration and protection of subjects' identities.

In addition to informal interviews, I immersed myself in these communities and, whenever possible, conducted participant observation (as laws and safety allowed). Participant observation methods also provided a means to crosscheck the information I received in interviews by verifying that what I heard matched what I was seeing, something that Adler (1993) notes is an important step when conducting fieldwork on drug-trafficking. Additionally, using ethnographic techniques often gave me access to people I could not have directly approached for an interview.

Being a "gringa" – a white American woman – led to both challenges and opportunities for the research. For example, I was first met with skepticism, and worried I might be mistaken for a DEA agent, which would limit my access to information in addition to threatening my safety. However, clearly being an outsider sparked curiosity, which lead to repeat conversations where I could build rapport. Being a relatively young, female researcher also helped immensely in my gaining access to, and ultimately winning the trust of, many of the individuals, especially male, with whom I spoke. My positionality also likely had the impact of shielding me from violence within the areas where I conducted fieldwork; many of my key informants were protective of me and inclined to hide their own use of violence from me. To address this potential bias, I always sought to gain information from a variety of sources (e.g. even if I knew the local trafficker in question, I assumed they might not admit their use of violence to me, so I spoke with numerous members of the communities where they worked to crosscheck information). I also found that many participants who at first denied any direct knowledge of or involvement in violent crimes would later open up to me about their experiences as both victims and/or perpetrators of violence.

I tried to be as transparent as possible about my research interests and objectives. While the individuals who facilitated introductions between me and local traffickers often asked that I initially be vague about the topic of my research,[3] I never intentionally misled anyone and, once rapport was established, I was always as forthcoming as possible. While I would have generally been more comfortable meeting with interlocutors in public spaces, I always allowed my informants to decide where they would like to meet due to my concern for protecting them.

[3] For example, saying I was writing a dissertation looking at comparative citizen security in the region, as opposed to immediately saying I was interested in drug-trafficking.

Fig. 1. Map of Fieldwork Locations.

Lastly, I found it was usually not constructive to take notes during my interviews, so almost all my notes were taken following discussions. Therefore, all quotes in this paper are pulled from field notes recorded as soon as possible after a given encounter, and may be slightly paraphrased, although I have always strived to maintain as much authenticity and accuracy as possible. All my interviews occurred in Spanish, English, or English Creole. Conversations that occurred in Spanish have been translated, and quotes in English Creole were edited to make them comprehensible for a broader English-speaking audience.

3.1. Case selection

By working in adjacent departments along the Caribbean coast, my cases fall along overlapping cocaine trafficking routes. In fact, many of the same traffickers operated in more than one case location, allowing me to observe differences in how they interacted with various communities or even in different national contexts. Moreover, in each department there were several key individuals, or small groups of aligned individuals, engaged in trafficking operations. In addition to *transportistas*, there are *tumbadores,* or pirates as they are more commonly called on the Caribbean coast – those who steal drug shipments. Given the lower barriers to entry, many *transportistas* start out as pirates. There are also "part-time" narcos who work searching for packages of cocaine that have washed up on shore or who make trips to *Dos Aguas*.[4] Theft of drug shipments creates a form of competition and certainly generates the potential for violence. However, the networked nature of *transportista* operations allows for shifting routes frequently and means they do not have territorial control. Moreover, almost all traffickers on the isthmus would be considered mid-to-low-level traffickers in comparison to counterparts in Mexico, where organized criminal syndicates have exhibited the power to challenge the state.[5]

While the cases along the Caribbean coast reflected similar levels of criminal territorial control and criminal competition, they also offered rich variation on several structural factors which I found impacted narco-community relations, such as the degree of urbanization and marginalization. Different legacies of colonization and decades of state neglect and marginalization have resulted in lower socio-economic development along the Caribbean coast compared to the rest of the isthmus. However, there is also significant variation both subnationally and cross-nationally in terms of marginalization. For example, while still more marginalized than other parts of the country, Costa Rica's Caribbean coast has a far more diversified economy, higher socio-economic development, and stronger state presence than in either Nicaragua or Honduras. Table 1 compares the three case countries across a variety of indicators using the most recent data available from the The World Bank (2020a), The World Bank (2020b), The World Bank (2020c) and The World Bank (2020d).[6]

Furthermore, by working in both the department capitals as well as smaller communities along the coast, I worked in areas that varied greatly in terms of how rural they were. I conducted fieldwork in places that ranged in population from a few hundred residents to Puerto Limón, which has a population of over 98,000.

[4] A maritime location off the coast of Limón, Costa Rica were two ocean currents meet and it is common to find floating sacks of drugs that have been abandoned during marine pursuits.

[5] For the purpose of this article, I refer to *transportistas*, pirates, and "part-time narcos," as traffickers or narcos, clarifying individuals' more specific roles only when doing so does not risk exposing the identity of the individual in question.

[6] Urban population is measured as the percent of the total population and data for all cases is from 2019. Literacy rate is the "adult total," i.e., the percent of people aged 15 and above who are literate; data is from 2018 for Honduras and Costa Rica and from 2015 for Nicaragua. The infant mortality rate is calculated per 1000 live births and data for all 3 cases is from 2019. The access of basic sanitation services is the indicator for the percent of the population who are using at least basic sanitation services and data for all cases is from 2017.

Table 1
Cross-National Differences in Structural Factors Impacting Support.

	Urban Population (%)	Literacy Rate	Infant Mortality Rate	Access to Basic Sanitation Services (%)
Honduras	58	87	15	81
Nicaragua	59	83	14	74
Costa Rica	80	98	8	98

Traffickers' relationships with communities are also influenced by national politics and varying state capacities, and my cases offer rich variation in terms of politics, corruption, and state capacity. Since 2006, when Daniel Ortega was re-elected as President, Nicaragua has become increasingly authoritarian. Under Ortega's regime, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has expanded its control over all levels of government and institutions. Nicaragua has extremely high levels of corruption across a variety of measures (Coppedge, et al., 2020). In contrast, while corruption has been described as "the operating system" in Honduras (Chayes, 2017), the country has a multi-party system with more competitive (though not free or fair) elections compared to Nicaragua. In terms of narco-state dynamics, this results in a highly corrupt, but more decentralized or less coordinated environment – pointing to one of the reasons for the country's high homicide rate. Finally, Costa Rica is often viewed as a regional exception due to the country's far lower levels of corruption, institutionalized democracy, greater state capacity, and higher levels of economic development.[7]

Finally, the three countries where I conducted fieldwork have drastically different levels of violence. In 2019, Honduras had an official homicide rate of 42 per 100,000 compared to 12 per 100,000 in Costa Rica (UNODC, 2019) or 7 per 100,000 in Nicaragua (Dalby & Carranza, 2019). While many of the reasons for the cross-national differences in violence fall beyond the scope of this article, these differences have implications at the local level in terms of narcos' relationships to communities. By exploring *transportistas*' relationships with communities and understanding how they engage in forms of criminal governance, a more holistic understanding of violence in the region is possible.

4. Findings

4.1. Comparative community support

I argue that there are four main structural factors that make communities more or less likely to support traffickers: (1) corruption, (2) state capacity, (3) marginalization, and (4) the size of the community. The table below offers a comparison of these factors across various localities where I conducted fieldwork.[8] While all these factors are inter-related, state capacity and marginalization are particularly inherently connected. For example, state capacity is often measured in terms of the government's ability to provide basic health and education services, and yet deficiencies in either of these areas is also often a sign of marginalization. In Table 2, I include departmental data on the child mortality rate (deaths of infants and children under 5, per 1000 live births) and a measure of whether the specific community is connected to the capital of the country by road as proxy of state capacity and marginalization.[9] In addition, I have coded for each location the relative level of state corruption and provided the population range.[10]

Structural factors determine the potential for community support; i.e., some communities are more likely predisposed to support illicit economies. However, there is also variation based on the specific trafficker(s) who operate there, as Table 3 illustrates. In particular, support is highest in locations where traffickers, or the majority of traffickers, are native to the community, make significant economic contributions, and limit their use of lethal violence. In addition to regulating homicides, in certain locations traffickers also limit non-lethal crimes (e.g. theft, kidnapping). This regulation of crime, or what Lessing (2020) terms "policing," I find most commonly occurs in locations where individual-level support for traffickers is otherwise low. Table 3 provides a comparison of these individual-level factors.[11]

Finally, Table 4 presents the levels of support from both the structural and individual factors side-by-side, as well as the observed level of community support for traffickers that I witnessed and heard of in that location. At the national level, support is lowest in Costa Rica and strongest in Nicaragua, with relatively strong support in Honduras, too. The following sub-sections present ethnographic evidence of these differences and offer a more detailed portrait of criminal governance along the Caribbean coast.

4.2. The Kings of Ocaña[12]

Under the hot afternoon sun, Hugo sent someone to get him another bottle of rum and continued chatting with Marlon. Empty bottles and beer cans lay scattered on the grass around their feet. Hugo's three bodyguards all had their hands resting on their guns, heads swiveling. It was relatively common knowledge in that region that Hugo was still wanted by the government and supposedly in hiding – although here Hugo sat, drinking and chatting with his friends as they watched the local sports teams prepare for the game that day. I looked across the field and saw a small group of police on the other side. I leaned over to whisper to my more trusted informant, Dane, who was sitting next to me a few feet behind Marlon and Hugo: "How is it that Hugo and Marlon can be here when there are cops here?" I nodded across the field towards the uniformed officers.

Dane laughed and reiterated what Marlon had told me that morning – no one can touch him – or anyone who is part of his entourage – in Ocaña. This was the community Marlon grew up in, where his fam-

[7] For comparison, in 2016, Costa Rica had a GDP per capita of $13,986 versus $4,872 and $4,435 respectively in Nicaragua and Honduras (Coppedge, et al., 2020). The Varieties of Democracy dataset ranks Costa Rica as having a far more equitable distribution of resources, with Honduras having the least equitable of the three cases (Coppedge, et al., 2020). Similarly, Costa Rica is ranked as having significantly better control over corruption, with Nicaragua having the worst amongst these (Coppedge, et al., 2020).

[8] The names of localities have been omitted to preserve anonymity; however, the codes reflect the countries these locations are in: HND = Honduras, NIC= Nicaragua, CR=Costa Rica

[9] All data is from 2011, the only year where data was available for all the cases. Costa Rica data is from INEC (2011), Nicaragua data is from INIDE (2013), and Honduras data is from INE (2013).

[10] A variety of metrics of corruption from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2020) note highly different levels of corruption and control of corruption between Costa Rica compared to Honduras or Nicaragua, with Costa Rica consistently being far less corrupt.

[11] I coded economic impact based on whether it was common for traffickers to provide handouts, subsidize public events and services, or be key employers within the community. Violence is coded in terms of homicide rates (when available at the local level) with homicide rates under 10 per 100,000 counted as low and rates over 40 per 100,000 counted as high. When data was limited or only available at the departmental level, I also considered reported instances of lethal violence both from during my fieldwork as well as monitoring news reports. Whether traffickers were native, whether they engaged in policing, and the level of support were coded based on ethnographic research.

[12] Name of community has been changed.

Table 2
Structural Factors Impacting Potential for Community Support.

Location	Corruption (national)	Road to Capital?	IMR (2011)	Population	Potential for Community Support
HND-1	High	No	51	under 3000	High
HND-2	High	No	51	under 3000	High
HND-3	High	No	51	3,000-10,000	High
HND-4	High	No	51	over 10,000	Moderate
NIC-1	High	No	41	under 3,000	High
NIC-2	High	Yes	26	over 10,000	Moderate
NIC-3	High	Yes	41	over 10,000	Moderate
NIC-4	High	No	26	under 3,000	High
NIC-5	High	No	41	under 3,000	High
CR-1	Low	Yes	10.5	over 10,000	Low
CR-2	Low	No	10.5	under 3,000	Moderate
CR-3	Low	Yes	10.5	3,000-10,000	Low

Table 3
Individual Factors Impacting Community Support for Traffickers.

Location	Native Traffickers	Economic Impact	Violence	Policing	Support for Traffickers
HND-1	No	Moderate	Med	Yes	Low
HND-2	Yes	High	Low	No	High
HND-3	Yes	High	High	No	Moderate
HND-4	No	Moderate	Med	Yes	Low
NIC-1	Yes	Moderate	Low	No	High
NIC-2	Yes	Low	Med	No	Moderate
NIC-3	Yes	Low	Med	No	Moderate
NIC-4	Yes	High	Low	No	High
NIC-5	Yes	Moderate	Low	No	High
CR-1	No	Low	High	Yes	Low
CR-2	Yes	Low	Low	No	Moderate
CR-3	No	Low	Low	Yes	Low

Table 4
Structural & Individual factors & Observed Support Level.

	Potential for Support (Structural Factors)	Individual Factors Impacting Support	Observed Level of Community Support
HND-1	High	Low	Moderate
HND-2	High	High	Strong
HND-3	High	Moderate	Moderate
HND-4	Moderate	Low	Moderate
NIC-1	High	High	Strong
NIC-2	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
NIC-3	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
NIC-4	High	High	Strong
NIC-5	High	High	Strong
CR-1	Low	Low	Weak
CR-2	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
CR-3	Low	Low	Weak

ily lived. He had done so much for the people in Ocaña. So, when Hugo is here with Marlon he's protected. Marlon was in his village, and in Dane's words, Marlon was "the king" here, which made him and all those around him "untouchable."

Ocaña is a very small community in Nicaragua, with a population under 2000 inhabitants. No roads connect the community to the rest of the region; it is only accessible by boat. There is no running water, extremely limited cell coverage, and very few residents have even the extremely sporadic electricity. Marlon and his relatives regularly let neighbors come to charge their cellphones or other small portable electronics at their home.

Marlon told me that he had "opportunities" that others in his community did not, which allowed him to be the one "to make it big." Marlon had made significant profits trafficking cocaine and he proudly gave back to "his people" out of a sense of obligation to support them. As I spent time with him, it became obvious that people from his community expected him to pay for things for them – they would routinely approach him to ask for beers, cigarettes, or a small handout of 100–500 Cordobas (roughly $3–18 USD).

This relationship was symbiotic – Marlon shared his income from drug trafficking and his community widely respected him. When I ended fieldwork, Marlon was no longer "in hiding," in part due to his political connections within the FSLN, and he had mostly retired from trafficking – or at least that was what he told me. Yet, Marlon insisted that when he had faced pressure from counter-narcotics forces years prior, his community support had been vital to his evading arrest. Similarly, while Hugo spent a few years working in Honduras, he had returned to Nicaragua, in part, due to the benefits of being in "his community." Another prominent trafficker who was arrested before I began fieldwork in his community still benefited from widespread support even after his arrest. Residents were still nostalgic about the times before his arrest and continued to maintain his properties within the community.

Marlon clearly worked to cultivate community support and I never heard of him using violence in Ocaña, where everyone appeared to genuinely respect him. The same was true of Hugo in his small and marginalized community. These traffickers' communities were largely shielded from drug-related violence, which contributed to their being widely viewed as Robin Hood-esque figures in their respective communities. However, in more urban areas in the region, several residents I spoke with expressed fear of Marlon, Hugo, and other *transportistas*.

Furthermore, the language that people use to describe trafficking eschews its relation to violence and illegality. In Nicaragua, the most common phrase used to describe the event of a community experiencing a recent cocaine windfall was to say that drugs "fell."[13] However, after having several beers one night, Dane bluntly explained to me:

[13] This seemed to hold true for Creole speakers who used the English verb, as well as Spanish speakers who used the verb "*caer*."

Well, of course, they say the drugs 'fell' or that they 'found it' – and I mean stuff does wash up on shore and people totally find drugs all the time – but communities often see this stuff as a blessing and if they instead said – 'hey, a local group of guys went out last night and jacked the shit and murdered a bunch of people and tossed their bodies into the ocean' – well shit, that sounds pretty bad and ruins the party. So, it isn't always just that drugs are 'falling,' but that sure sounds better.

Money from trafficking has ripple effects in the greater economy in the region, increasing the chance that communities have positive perceptions of traffickers. Bars, clothing stores, and other legal businesses experience observable increases in business when more cocaine is moving through the area. Moreover, the lack of economic development in many parts of the coast, combined with militarization under the guise of counter-narcotics, results in many communities perceiving the local *transportistas* as having "done more for the community than the government ever has."

In sum, Nicaraguan *transportistas* benefit from strong support in many of the communities where they operate in the country. Since the majority of traffickers working on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua are natives of the area, these traffickers are more inclined to establish collaborative as opposed to coercive or predatory relations. Moreover, high levels of marginalization, rampant corruption, and limited state capacity in Nicaragua foster the conditions for strong support of *transportistas*. Furthermore, the generally low levels of narco-violence in the country help traffickers win favor with civilians and traffickers also work to further limit the visibility, as well as control narratives, of violence to maintain their local support. Along the Caribbean coast, support was found to be higher in small villages, like Ocaña, as opposed to urban centers, and villages with higher levels of marginalization were more supportive of traffickers given that they became more economically dependent on illicit economies.

4.3. Sebastian & Eduardo's Legacies in San Lorenzo[14]

It was a warm evening in Honduras. Yasmine and I were sitting in the hammocks outside her home, drinking gifiti[15] *and chatting about the arrest of Sebastian, a high-level drug-trafficker from a neighboring village. He had been one of the top local traffickers for years. When I had tried to bring up the topic, broadly asking Yasmine about his arrest, she rolled her eyes in frustration. "Nothing has changed; it is not like arresting him will stop the drug traffic. You know this… you were just in Aguilares,*[16] *and they will keep finding places to land planes and bring in boats. What changes is who is trafficking. The narcos who are already replacing Sebastian are not from here.*"

She paused to sip her drink, allowing me to clarify a point that Yasmine had made during prior conversations: "And narcos who aren't from here do more damage?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly! whereas Sebastian did a lot for the community! he gave so many people jobs."

San Lorenzo, the community that Sebastian was both from and operated in, is larger than Ocaña, but still a small community of under 5000 residents. Like Ocaña, San Lorenzo is not accessible by road. San Lorenzo is in the same municipality as Aguilares, an area notorious for clandestine runways that are commonly used by traffickers from San Lorenzo and the surrounding area. San Lorenzo has fairly consistent cellphone coverage, while Aguilares does not have any. No community in Gracias a Dios has potable running water and, like in Ocaña, very few residents enjoy regular electricity.

San Lorenzo is typical of small communities in GAD. As a resident of a neighboring community told me: "We know [who is involved in trafficking]; it's a small community so we know everyone. We know what they eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner, what they drink, when they go to sleep, what position they sleep in…" The impossibility of keeping secrets in small, rural towns can be irksome to locals, but for traffickers it presents more serious challenges since they cannot simply hide often detailed knowledge of their whereabouts and operations from their neighbors. This increases narcos' inclination to win favor with locals, even for narcos who are not from the community.

In 2013, there was a free, public event hosted in San Lorenzo's park to celebrate Mothers' Day. The event included a concert by popular local musicians, as well as activities for children and their parents to enjoy. A trafficker, Eduardo, organized and funded the affair. According to several local sources, the event "nearly turned into a massacre" when Eduardo's enemies arrived from another part of Honduras with plans to assassinate him in response to his theft of a shipment of cocaine. Not wanting to attack in the midst of the crowded park filled with mothers and children, Eduardo's enemies waited until that evening, when he and his entourage returned to their local hotel. Narrowly surviving the initial attack, Eduardo was killed shortly thereafter in a nearby village.

Eduardo's legacy remains a controversial matter in San Lorenzo and throughout Gracias a Dios. While some I spoke with lauded his philanthropy, many remembered the trafficker more for his extreme displays of violence, such as the time he paraded the head of one of his victims through town. Several residents whom I spoke with about the late trafficker referred to his outsider status, noting that Eduardo was a Nicaraguan citizen and not native to the Honduran communities where he operated. The fact that Eduardo was not native to the space where he worked is a crucial distinction between Eduardo and Sebastian. Sebastian, like Marlon in Ocaña, was native to the community where he worked, which helped him establish collaborative community relations.

While Eduardo engaged in actions to win support, he also displayed a willingness to use coercion, and the communities in which he operated certainly did not respect him in the way that they respected Sebastian. Eduardo also did not benefit from the same political support that Sebastian had via his family's involvement in local politics. Most residents viewed Sebastian favorably, many noting he was one of the "good" narcos who did not engage in violence, at least not in the community.

This avoidance of violence was not unique to Sebastian. Rather, the majority of traffickers in GAD tried to limit violence within the department. This helps explains how GAD has maintained one of the lowest departmental homicide rates in Honduras and yet has also been one of the areas most impacted by narco-violence. Over a dozen residents whom I spoke with had a relative who had been killed in the last decade, yet a significant share of those murders happened in other Honduran departments. As a key informant explained, the idea of keeping one's own house clean had become a shared value amongst traffickers in GAD, the majority of whom would rather perpetrate violence elsewhere. My informant also noted a practical reason for this: it is easier to escape in the big cities, whereas there are not many ways out of GAD, given that no roads connect the department to the rest of Honduras. Moreover, having narco-violence geographically removed from the communities where they operate helps traffickers maintain positive community relations.

In sum, Sebastian and Eduardo again illustrate how traffickers working in rural and marginalized spaces will both benefit from and likely need community support, albeit to varying degrees. Where these traffickers differ is that Sebastian was a native of

[14] Name of community has been changed.

[15] Gifiti is a traditional Garifuna alcoholic beverage commonly found along the Caribbean coast of Honduras and Nicaragua, particularly in Indigenous and afro-descendent communities.

[16] Name of community has been changed.

San Lorenzo, increasing his acceptance in the community. Similarly, and in part due to his native connections with the community, Sebastian refrained from using violence in the area. In contrast, Eduardo did engage in often brutal and spectacular displays of violence to enforce codes of silence in San Lorenzo, while also simultaneously working to win favor among residents. This distinction highlights the importance of whether traffickers are native to the community they operate in determining the forms of criminal governance that traffickers will undertake. While San Lorenzo has many structural factors that increase potential narco-support within the community, the differences between Sebastian and Eduardo also illustrate how individual factors can impact community support. Many residents who expressed a general acceptance for trafficking, distinguished between "good" (less violent, local) narcos and "bad" (more violence prone, non-local) narcos.

4.4. Victor's alternative dispute resolution

"Hurry up, hurry up!" barked Kenny, as we all scrambled into the vehicle, dripping wet from the torrential downpour. Before Cristina could even shut her door all the way, Kenny peeled out of his parking spot, tires screeching. As Kenny sped down the dark road away from the center of San Miguel[17] *and the bar we had just left, the group began rehashing the specifics of the incident that had sent us fleeing.*

Apparently, a pair of local "thugs" had tried to instigate a fight with Fabio. Seeing how drunk he was, they thought he'd be an easy target. However, Fabio, who spent the later part of the evening swaying to the blasting music with his arm wrapped around a pillar to hold himself upright, had been too intoxicated to even realize what was happening. Failing to accomplish their goal with Fabio, they began arguing with Cristina's husband, Oscar. Oscar went to tell Kenny about what was happening; Kenny was the largest man in our group and was also carrying a Glock. Kenny, wanting to avoid problems, "especially out with a damn gringa," told Cristina we were leaving immediately. Cristina and Oscar had come to get me and Fabio and we made our way towards the exit. The four of us reached the street without any issues, but the same two men had closed in on Kenny – blocking his exit and pushing him backwards. Kenny dove between the men onto the street and, at that exact moment, thunder had rumbled ominously as it began pouring rain. Kenny took off running towards the car; leaving the four of us confused and staggering behind him. Kenny and Oscar believed the heavy rain was the only reason the two men had not bothered following us.

"Their issue was never with you all. They wanted to start shit, but their goal was to get to me, to get me to pull [the Glock] out so one of them could grab it, and – BLAH!" Kenny signaled with his hand getting shot in the head, "and steal the thing."

"No dude, fuck that! they don't know who I am or who we know. Bring me to Victor's!!" yelled Oscar. "He'll settle this shit."

Victor was arrested about a year after the evening when Oscar demanded Kenny drive us all to see Victor for him to resolve their dispute with the men from the bar. In the aftermath of Victor's arrest, residents of San Miguel noted that armed assaults and other crimes increased in the area. One resident lamented that the increase in crime would not have occurred if Victor were not incarcerated since he would have sent his men to "solve" the problem. Victor's efforts to minimize non-drug related crimes and provide alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to community members illustrates one of the main ways in which Costa Rican narcos engage in governance given the limited space for maneuver, but need to maintain some trust with their local communities.

[17] Name of community has been changed.

Victor was from and, until his arrest, lived outside the center of San Miguel. San Miguel was a relatively small town with a population under 5000. In comparison to San Lorenzo or Ocaña, however, it was fairly well developed. From San Miguel one could be in Puerto Limón in less than an hour or in the capital San José in under 5 h. Residents in San Miguel enjoy potable running water and consistent electricity – luxurious standards of living compared to areas further up the coast. The region also boasts a significant tourism industry.

Given the lower level of marginalization and higher levels of economic development and diversification in Costa Rica, communities are less dependent on illicit economies and are not likely to be "won over" by the small amounts of money commonly offered by traffickers in other coastal localities. While in Honduras and Nicaragua traffickers would routinely hand out small amounts of money to residents upon a plane or boat landing (commonly $5–35 USD), that was not common in Limón. A drug dealer from Limón told me that traffickers never gave back to people who were not their family, girlfriends, or employees. That is not to say that there were not clear instances of narco-money trickling into the broader economy in Costa Rica. Yet, levels of marginalization in Limón province are significantly lower than other parts of the Caribbean coast, which limits the degree to which economic influxes of narco-activity affect a broader public, and thus lower the level of community support and alter narco-community dynamics.

Additionally, Costa Rica has higher state capacity and far lower levels of corruption than Honduras or Nicaragua. This has broad implications for how narcos operate in the country and incentivizes traffickers to avoid drawing attention to themselves which, in turn, reduces opportunities for winning community support. However, it also points to one of the ways that Limón traffickers do win minimal levels of community tolerance.

When asking about violence in Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, I repeatedly heard the phrase: "*aquí, no se roban, solo se matan*," ("here, they don't steal, they just kill"). One way in which traffickers garner community acceptance is by reducing crimes unrelated to their business (e.g. theft), which could draw attention from state actors and/or result in community frustration. As one local explained, robberies and petty crimes draw more police into Puerto Limón, spurring the police to set up roadblocks. Roadblocks are problematic for the traffickers due to their need to move people and merchandise without inspection, so narcos work to keep crime lower. Many residents of Puerto Limón explained that they felt a greater sense of personal security in their own city than other parts of Costa Rica, particularly in terms of their ability to do things like walk at night with cell phones out. While the perceptions of safety depended a lot on the specific neighborhood in Puerto Limón, generally people perceived that the importance of drug trafficking was that it limited random or petty crime compared to other large Costa Rican cities.

In sum, while people did not espouse the same level of respect for traffickers in Limón and none of the *transportistas* developed Robin Hood-esque personas, many residents did express appreciation for the informal crime prevention and dispute resolution roles that traffickers sometimes fulfilled. The lower levels of support observed in Costa Rica are not surprising; in terms of the structural factors that make communities predisposed to support traffickers, Costa Rica was the where I observed the least collaborative community relations. Less corruption, greater state capacity, and lower levels of marginalization all contribute to Costa Ricans being less likely to support traffickers and these factors also make it harder for traffickers to have a significant economic impact. The fact that many *transportistas* operating out of Limón are not native to the province further erodes traffickers' support. Nonetheless, these traffickers still need a certain level of community cooperation or at least need the community to not actively oppose their opera-

tions. If a majority of residents in San Miguel or Puerto Limón were actively opposed to traffickers and collaborating with authorities, that would greatly impede trafficking operations. Thus, at a minimum, a certain degree of community tolerance or indifference is crucial; one way that traffickers earn this is through policing non-trafficking crime and offering informal dispute resolution.

4.5. Summary

Community support is often a symbiotic relationship between communities and traffickers. As one trafficker memorably told me, "trafficking is sort of like child-rearing; it takes a village." Communities are a local labor pool for traffickers – they help load/unload planes and boats, they may help store drugs and/or money, etc. As one resident of GAD explained, there are many people behind the scenes who provide crucial support for the traffickers: they cook food for narcos, wash their clothes, offer shelter, etc. Thus, traffickers offer employment and increased economic activity in areas lacking in both. In addition, traffickers may build infrastructure and provide an informal social safety net. These aspects of supportive community relations are similar across national contexts, yet as the findings section highlighted, there are also important differences between countries as well as significant variation within countries. These various configurations of narco-community relations, in turn, offer more nuanced understandings of criminal governance and expand academic understanding of patterns of violence in rural transit zones.

5. Discussion

While the existing literature on criminal governance focuses on urban spaces and territorial criminal groups, this article has shown that *transportistas* benefit from establishing cooperative community relations, particularly when operating in rural spaces. This article has also highlighted three other structural factors that foster increased cooperation between civilians and traffickers: widespread state corruption, limited state capacity, and high levels of marginalization. When traffickers work in spaces with limited state capacity and/or rampant corruption, they are able to engage in more flagrant efforts to rally public opinion in their favor. Systematic failure of the state to provide basic services and security for civilian populations opens the possibility of traffickers meeting these needs. Moreover, rampant corruption provides the impunity for traffickers to engage in efforts that win favor with the community. On the other hand, heightened state capacity and lower levels of corruption restrict the possibilities for traffickers to garner support. For example, traffickers in contexts like Costa Rica are not able to host large public events or engage in behavior that would attract state attention. However, all along the Caribbean coast *transportistas* engage in various forms of criminal governance.

Marginalized areas are more likely to see benefits from illicit economies and thus more likely to support traffickers; this argument supports prior work that has shown that more marginalized areas will be more conducive to supporting illicit economies (Valdez & Kaplan, 2007; Ríos, 2010; Felbab-Brown, 2011; Dube, García-Ponce, & Thom, 2016; Vo, 2018). However, the finding that marginalized areas are more supportive of *transportistas* and that this support in turn can result in lower levels of narco-violence is contrary to the literature arguing that socially excluded communities face higher levels of criminal violence (Berkman, 2007; Hale, 2013). As with the literature on criminal governance in Latin America, most work on marginalization and crime has largely focused on urban spaces. Yet, rural areas in Latin America are commonly some of the most marginalized spaces and, while not free from violence, they are more likely to have less visible forms of violence (Arias & Marston, 2017) and face greater issues with under-reporting. Therefore, the comparative ethnographic methodology (Simmons & Smith, 2019) used in this article offers a closer examination of how *transportistas* engage in forms of criminal governance and provides for greater understanding of violence in these spaces.

Sociologists have noted that in the context of marginalization and having to "hustle" to survive (Venkatesh, 2008a, 2008b), residents make decisions about what is permissible behavior in the community. Extensive scholarship, particularly ethnographic work in urban America, has shown that many communities with significant gang activity and high levels of crime are the result of failed state policies and a lack of viable alternatives (Bourgois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2008a, 2008b; Goffman, 2009; Contreras, 2013; Duck, 2015, 2016). Importantly, it is not a result of some collective moral deficiency or glorification of criminal activity that communities tolerate gangs or support *transportistas*, but rather a reflection of the socio-economic realities within their community.

While structural factors make certain communities more likely to support illicit economies, there is also variation in levels of support based on whether traffickers are native to that community, the degree to which traffickers impact the local economy, and whether traffickers limit their use of violence. I also found that in spaces where traffickers would otherwise have limited support, traffickers may engage in policing and dispute resolution, limiting non narco-related crimes, to win community tolerance. For example, while *transportistas* in Limón may not be hosting concerts, they do offer dispute resolution and work to limit non-drug related crime.

Understanding what increases community support for illicit economies is important in part because of the impact this support has on traffickers' behavior, specifically their use of violence. Recent scholarship has linked the level of community organization – particularly that within Indigenous groups – to communities' ability to resist the intrusion of narcos (Romero & Mendoza, 2015; Vélez & Lobo, 2019; Ley et al., 2019). However, this assumes resistance as the de facto relation between communities and illicit economies. This may be a logical assumption, especially when considering criminal organizations that are predatory and territorial; however, in the absence of genuine economic alternatives and in places where the only real interactions with state officials are negative – *transportistas* may garner support and this support, in turn, shields communities from narco-violence. Therefore, it is possible that in some rural communities there may be low levels of narco-violence, not because of a lack of "narco-intrusion," but because of the community support for traffickers.

Across these cases, I found that, all else being equal, higher levels of support resulted in lower levels of violence. Traffickers that have significant social bases of support are less likely to have to rely on violence to protect their operations. Trafficking-related violence, measured in terms of homicides, was often highest in Limón where traffickers enjoyed limited support. In Gracias a Dios, the more marginalized and rural communities tended to have lower rates of violence due to the supportive relationships that evolved, especially in locations where most of the traffickers were natives of the community. Similarly, narco-violence in Nicaragua was notably lower, with most of the homicides on the Caribbean coast resulting from political repression, land conflicts, or domestic violence.

Traffickers who refrained from violence, or at least limited violence in their community, were also more likely to be seen as a "good" narco. In addition, traffickers operating in locations where there is less narco-related violence in general, such as the case of Nicaragua, benefit from fewer negative perceptions of the illicit trade by communities, which are thus more inclined to support traffickers. In places where there is greater narco-related violence, such as in Honduras, traffickers could still limit specific communi-

ties' exposure to that violence to try to maintain support within those spaces, as observed in Gracias a Dios.

This theory complements Duck (2015), who offers a strong case for how solidarity between residents and drug dealers offers a form of protection to both the criminals and community. Moreover, recent comparative work on violence in urban Honduras argues that community organization and interpersonal ties decrease utility of violence for a variety of criminal organizations (Berg & Carranza, 2018). I extend these frames to rural contexts in the isthmus by increasing attention to *transportistas*' relationships to the communities where they operate. I find that in rural contexts, interpersonal ties should further decrease the utility of narco-violence, which may suggest opportunities to adjust drug policy in the interest of decreasing violence.

6. Conclusion: Policy implications

Development and drug policy have often been considered as separate spheres, but drug policy that is focused on interdiction undermines rural livelihoods and erodes community trust in government. High-profile cases of violence resulting from counter-drug operations, such as the 2012 attack in the Honduran community of Ahuas (Forde, 2017), lead to communities' legitimate skepticism of state forces. Moreover, the emphasis placed on arresting traffickers can often ignore the embeddedness of these individuals in their communities; when a narco-Robin Hood is arrested, their successor will not necessarily establish the same collaborative community relations. Drug trafficking through GAD has certainly not decreased as a result of Sebastian's imprisonment; all that has changed is *who* is trafficking. Those who replaced Sebastian are not native to San Lorenzo and thus less likely to cultivate the same level of support and more likely to engage in violence, like Eduardo did in the past. These arrests may also undermine security in the community by failing to account for how criminals were engaged in governance functions. For example, Victor's arrest did not have any impact in terms of reducing smuggling through Limón; however, residents reported increases in non-trafficking crimes in the aftermath of his arrest that had tangible negative consequences for residents. While cocaine trafficking may not negatively impact residents, they are certainly impacted by robberies and assaults. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that current policies frequently increase violence instead of reducing it.

Existing research demonstrates the "balloon effects" of crackdowns on drug production and trafficking, where intensified enforcement usually only displaces the illicit activity. Much of this displacement pushes traffickers into increasingly remote areas and generates additional problems – such as the dramatic rise in trafficking-related forest loss occurring in Central America (McSweeney et al., 2014; McSweeney, Wrathall, Nielsen, & Pearson, 2018; Magliocca et al., 2019; Wrathall et al., 2020). This makes understanding the relationships between traffickers and communities in rural spaces even more important.

Current policy priorities focus on intercepting drug shipments and arresting *transportistas,* instead of limiting violence related to the drug-trade. If the same resources being spent on militarized counter-narcotics efforts were instead invested in education, infrastructure, and development programs, the outcome may be drastically different: communities with greater capacity, higher levels of trust in the government, and access to services and infrastructure have fewer reasons to support narcos. However, until there is a major shift in international and national policies surrounding narcotics, my findings suggest that community support, or at least tolerance, of narco-traffickers who offer tangible benefits will continue, especially as counter-narcotics forces appear to stifle economic activity without providing alternatives – while also inciting increased violence.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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