

Why ‘crime wars’? Central America

POL 126

Prof. Juan Tellez

Spring 2022

TODAY

Crime as war?

Homicidal ecologies

Guatemala

Nicaragua

HW

SIGAR

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/lawfare-podcast-collapse-afghan-security-forces>

Crime as war?

Crime (war) in CA

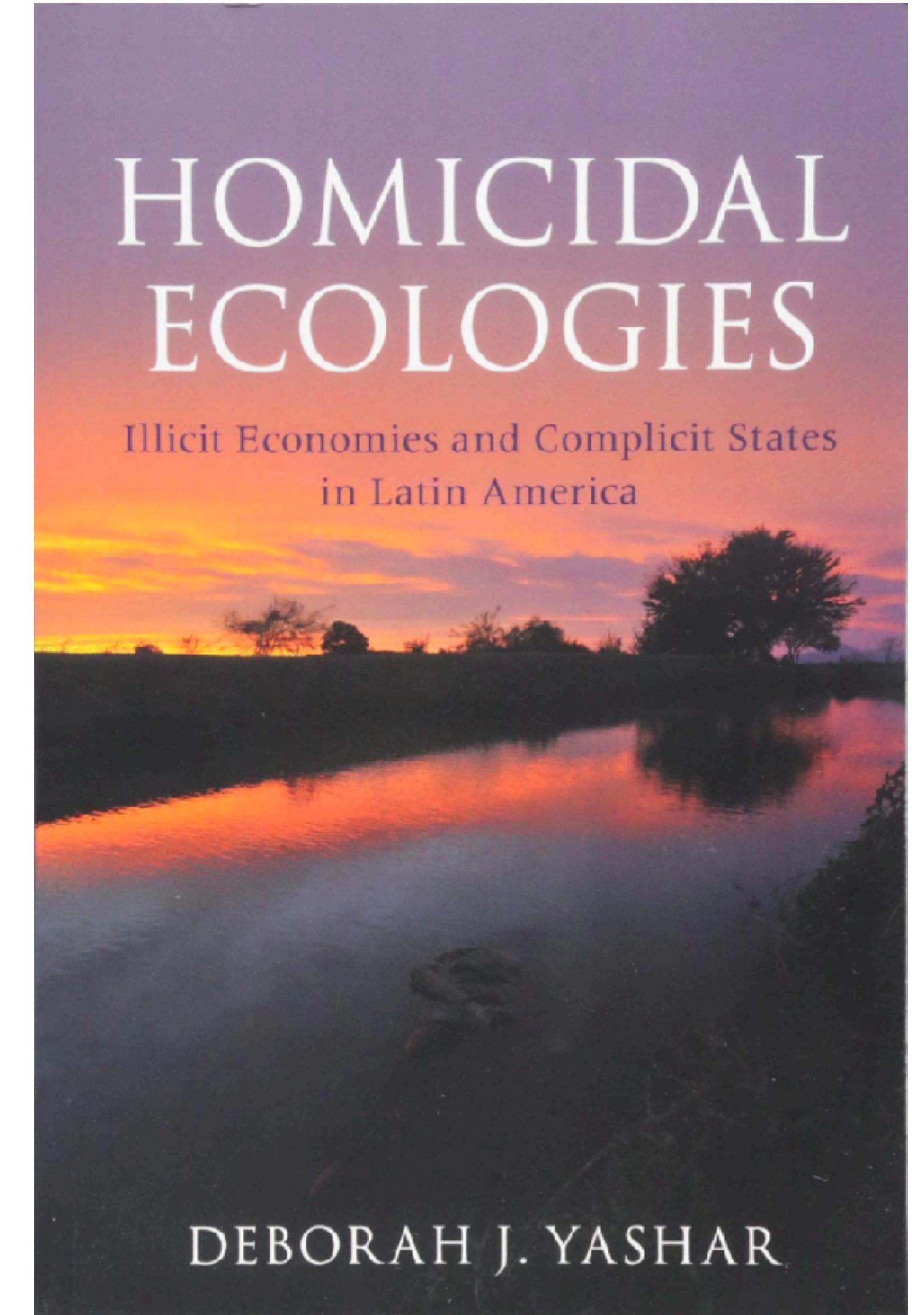


The book

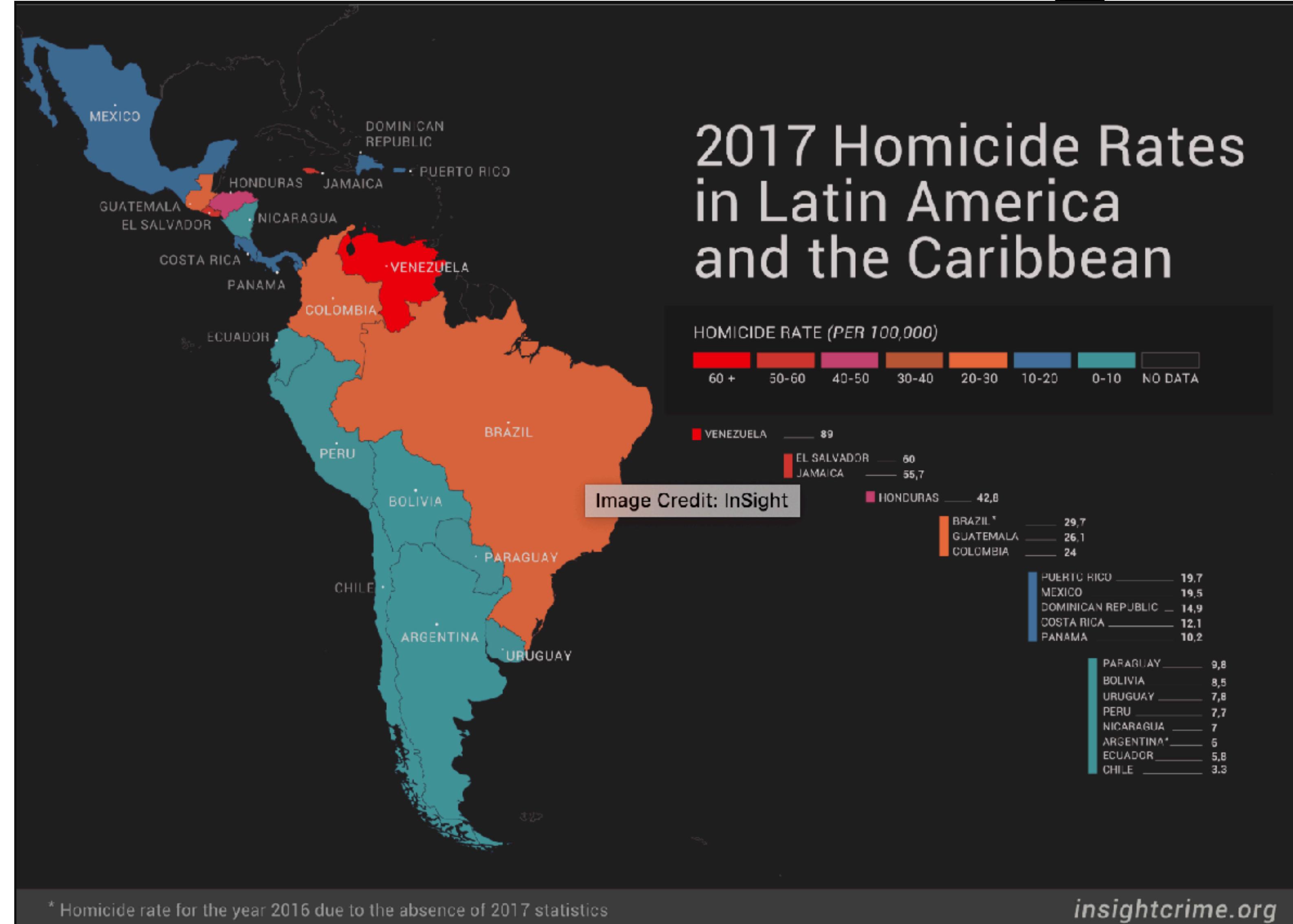
Central America plagued by violence

Puzzle: what is the **source** of violence in the region today? And why does it **vary** subnationally?

Two chapters:
Guatemala vs.
Nicaragua (why these two cases?)



The Northern Triangle



Three factors

Why so violent?

Three factors:

Geography of drug routes

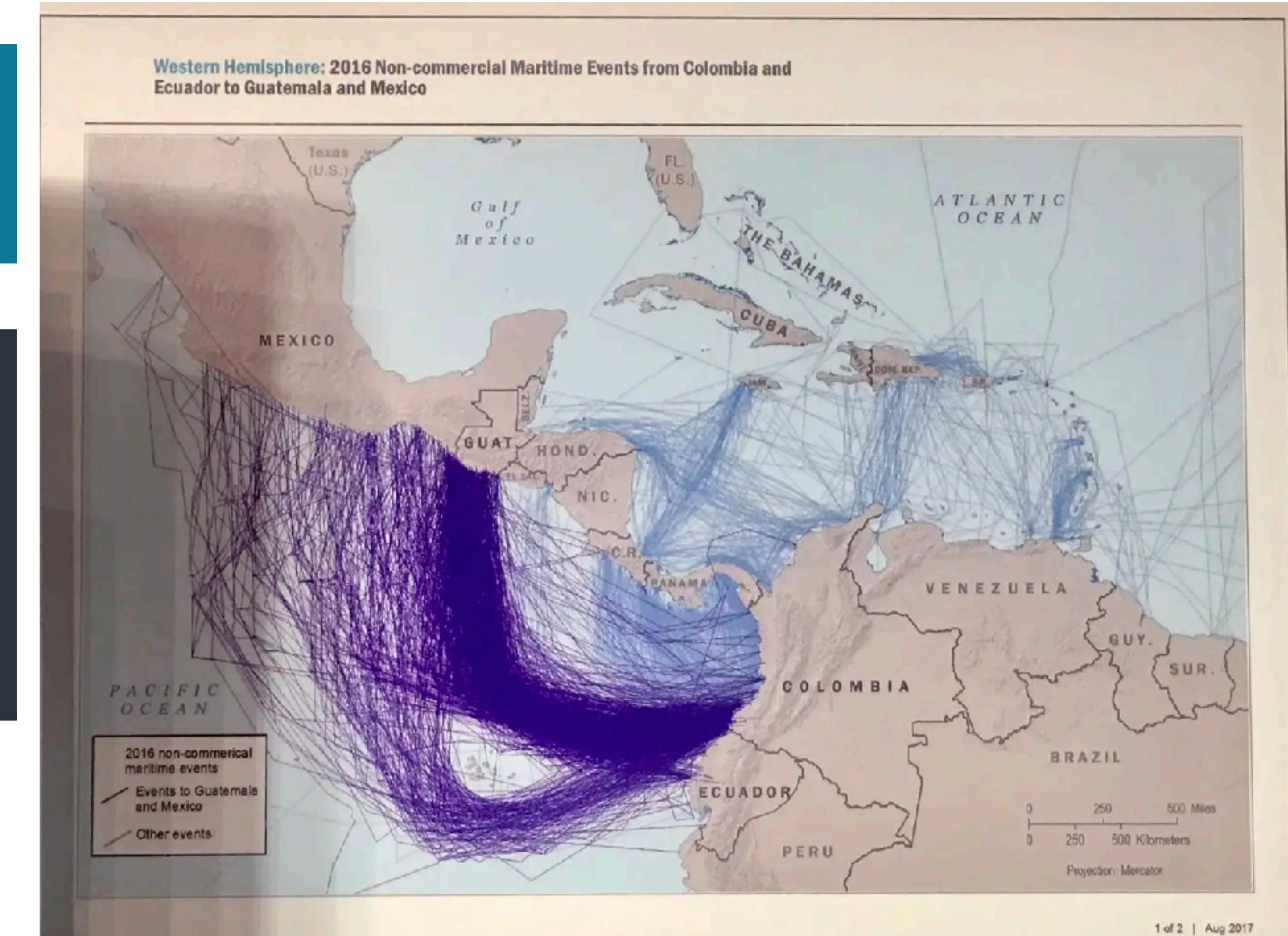
Weak/complicit states

Cartel competition

Producers: Colombia, Bolivia, Peru

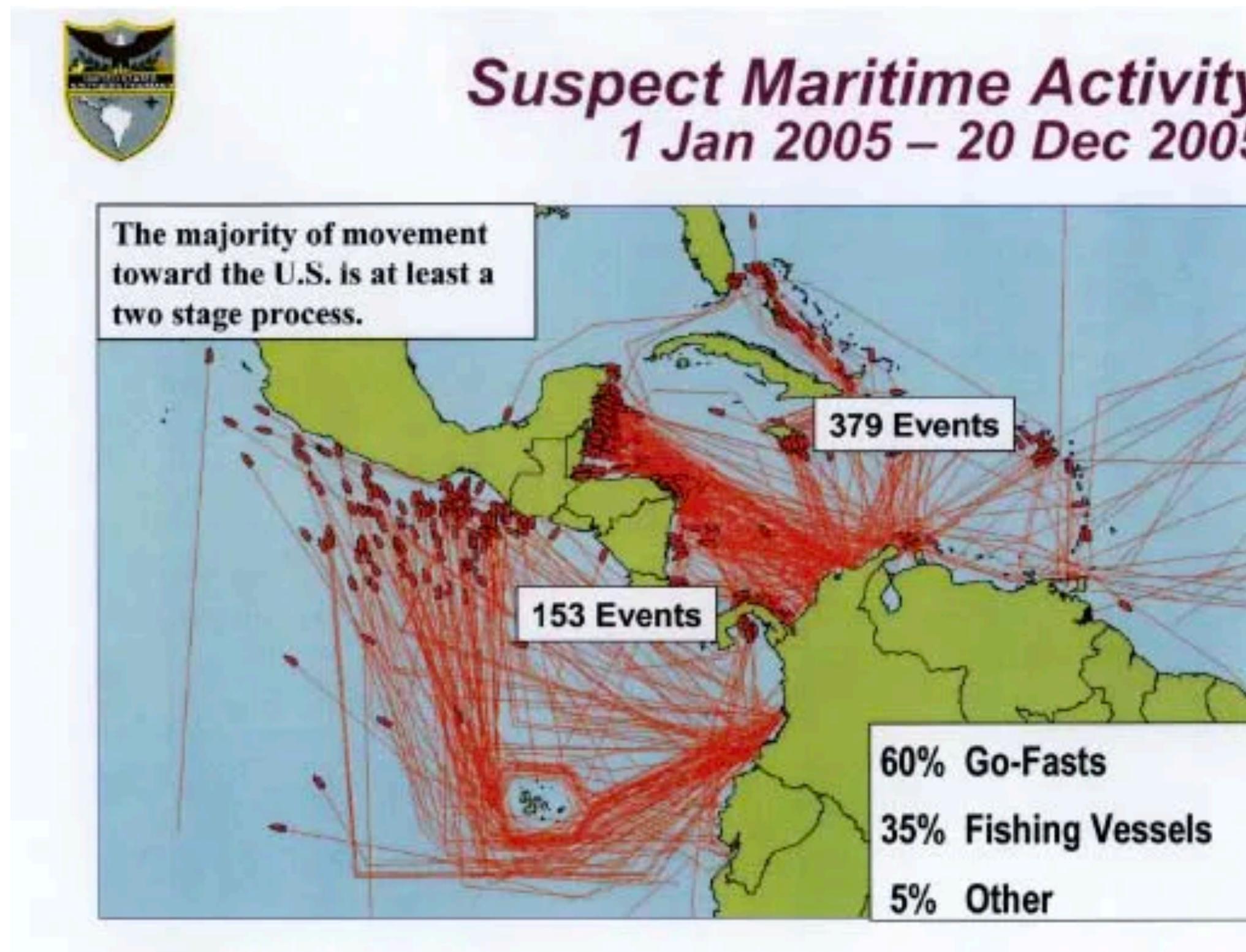
Bulk of cocaine goes:
Colombia/Ecuador →
Guatemala/Mexico →
US border

Mostly boats, some air





US SOUTHERN COMMAND



UNCLASSIFIED

Source: Department of Defense, Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) South



UNCLASSIFIED

Source: Department of Defense, Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) South



Suspect Maritime Activity

2014

Maritime Traffic

68% of all coca moves through Pacific



The area covered by traffickers [in Pacific] is as big as the continental US

CHANGING DRUG ROUTES

Height of Pablo Escobar era (1980s), 75% of coca moved through Caribbean

Massive US effort to shut down Caribbean transit moved routes west

Snorkel Pablo Escobar's Sunken Drug Plane In The Bahamas

Just off Norman's Cay lies a corroding reminder of paradise's brief but sinister past.

JOHN McMAHON · UPDATED: JAN 24, 2019 · ORIGINAL: JAN 31, 2018

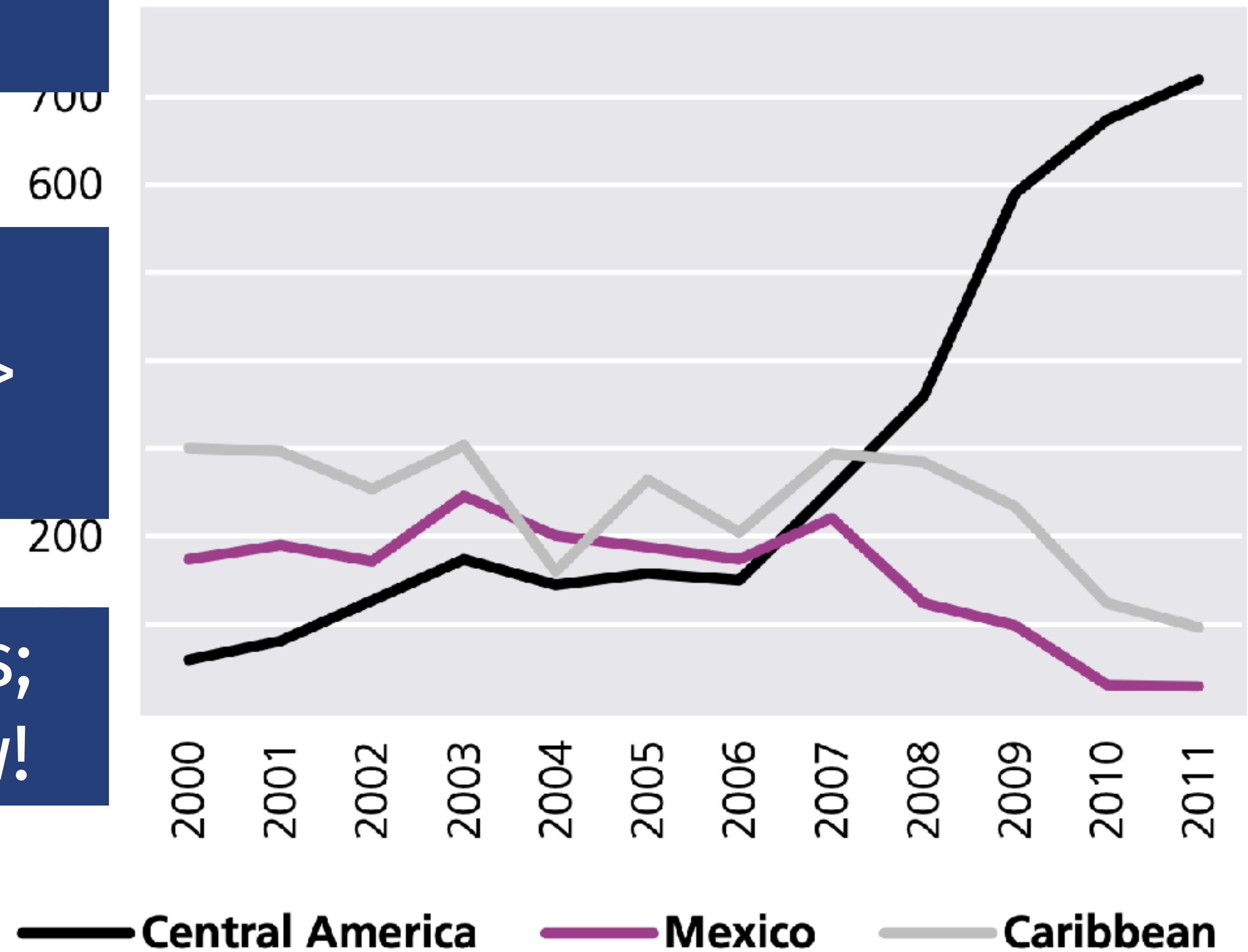


Figure 22: Number of primary cocaine movements destined for, or interdicted in, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, 2000-2011

By 2010, over 80% was going through Central America

Boat to CA →
cross border into Mexico →
cross into US

Note: all our data is seizures;
might be lots we don't know!



Guatemala (high crime)

The three factors in Guate



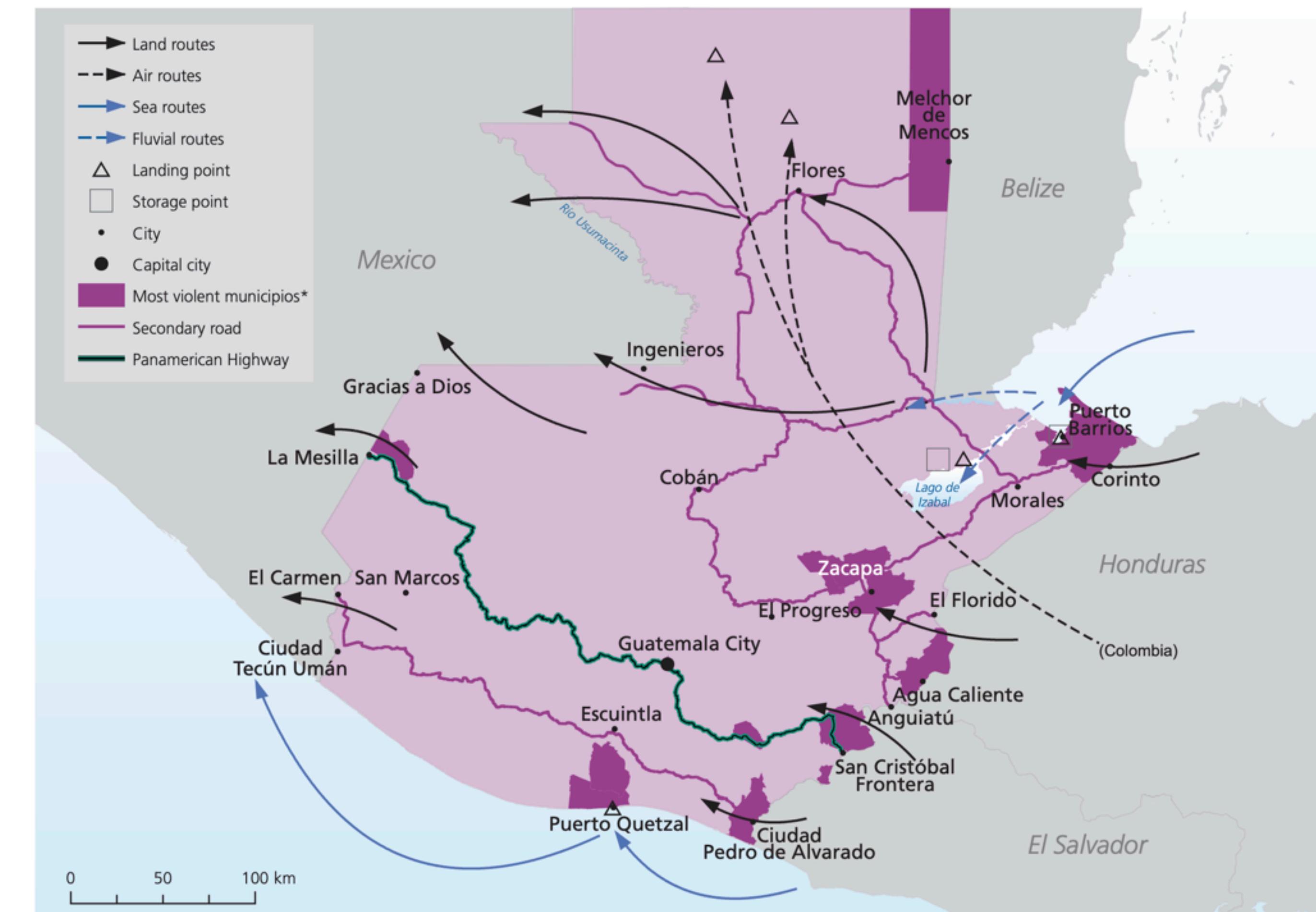
Drug routes in Guate

“When it comes to Central American trafficking, all roads lead to Guatemala”

Drug routes either up through the west or Petén

What stands out about the dark purple areas?

Map 8: Cocaine trafficking routes in Guatemala



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region and national police data

*Selected among the municipalities with highest homicide rates (<100 homicides per 100,000 population)

Why not directly to Mexico?

Mexican government has cracked down
on direct shipments to Mexico

Mexican state >> Guatemalan state

Traffickers constantly adapt to state
efforts

Adaptation

In 2009 Honduras experienced a coup

Traffickers began diverting VZLA
→ DR flights to Honduras

Traffickers constantly adapting;
state often just pushing crime
around the corner

AN OLD-FASHIONED COUP

As elections loom, can a deposed leader return?



By William Finnegan November 22, 2009



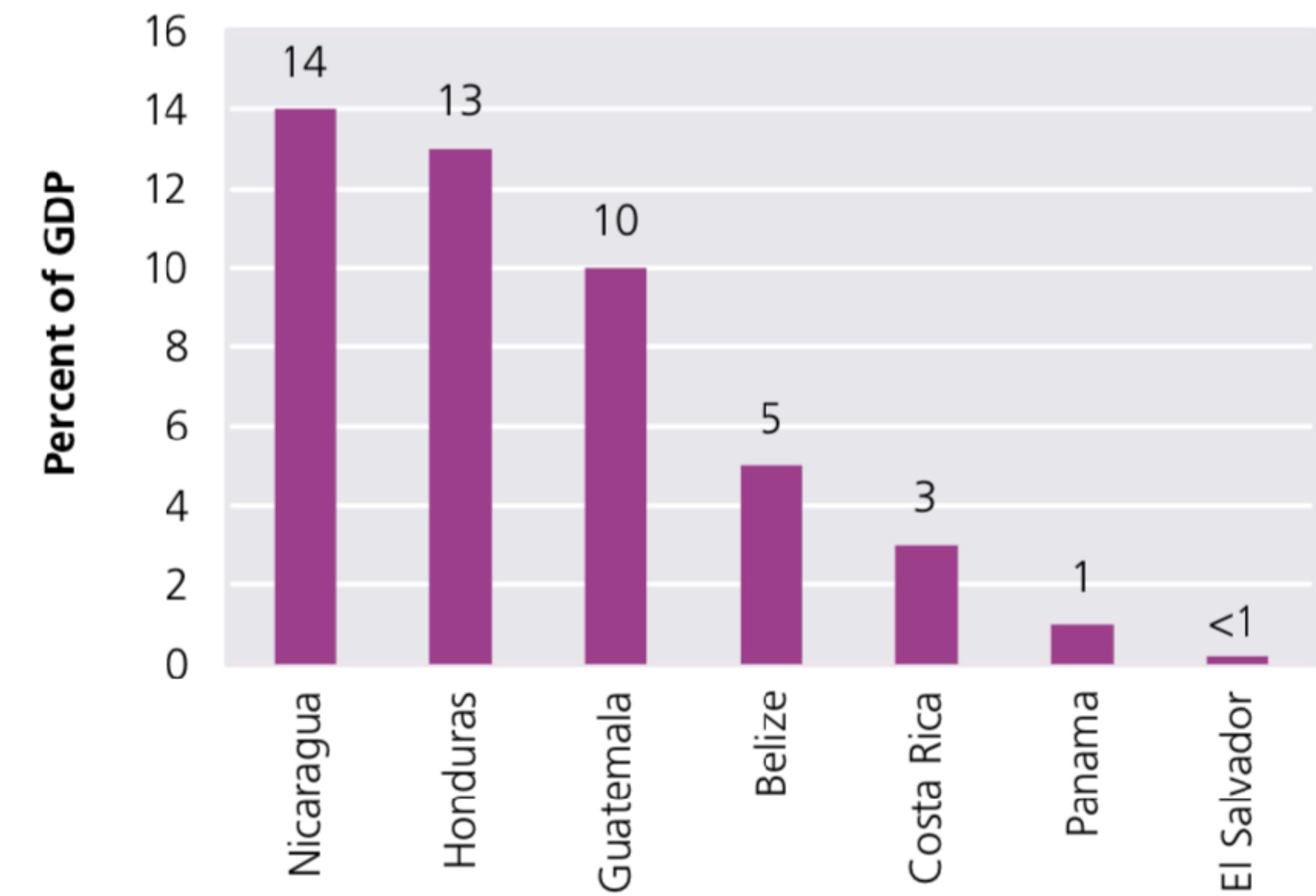
The scale of the problem

\$4 billion dollars in cocaine passes through Guatemala

Entire region spends \$3 billion on counternarcotics

Disproportionate economic power gives traffickers huge leverage

Figure 36: Share of GDP represented by value of cocaine transiting each country, 2010



Weak/complicit state in Guate

Three key actors

The police

The courts

The prisons

The police in Guate

How does Yashar describe Guate police?

All over LA, police weird mix of ineffective and predatory

Low pay

Extortion

Cooperate with drug traffickers

“recycling” problem officers

No professionalization

Lack of internal accountability

What do citizens do?

Someone steals your car but police are ineffective, corrupt, or both; what do you do?

Community justice in Guate



Legacies of the war

Yashar notes that homicide rate is low in Western Highlands

Surprising given that's where **civil war hit hardest**

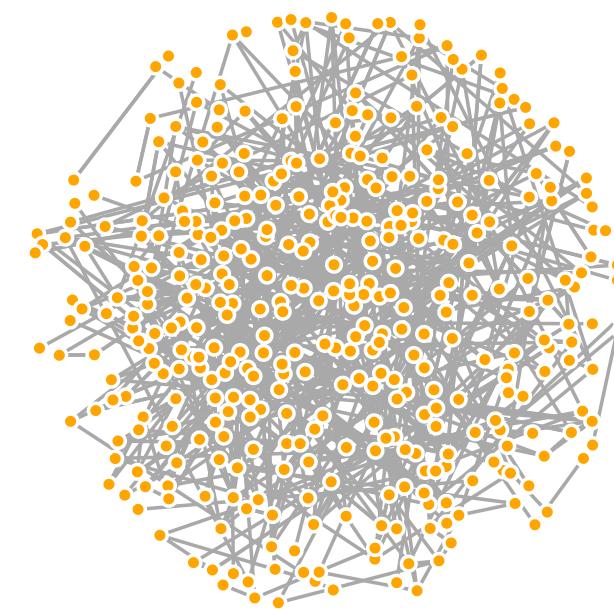
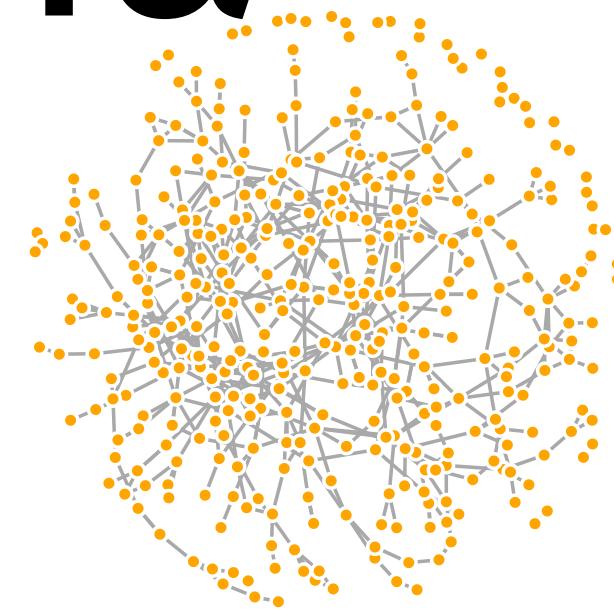
Lots of reports of vigilante violence in these areas



These are also places where **self-defense groups** formed!

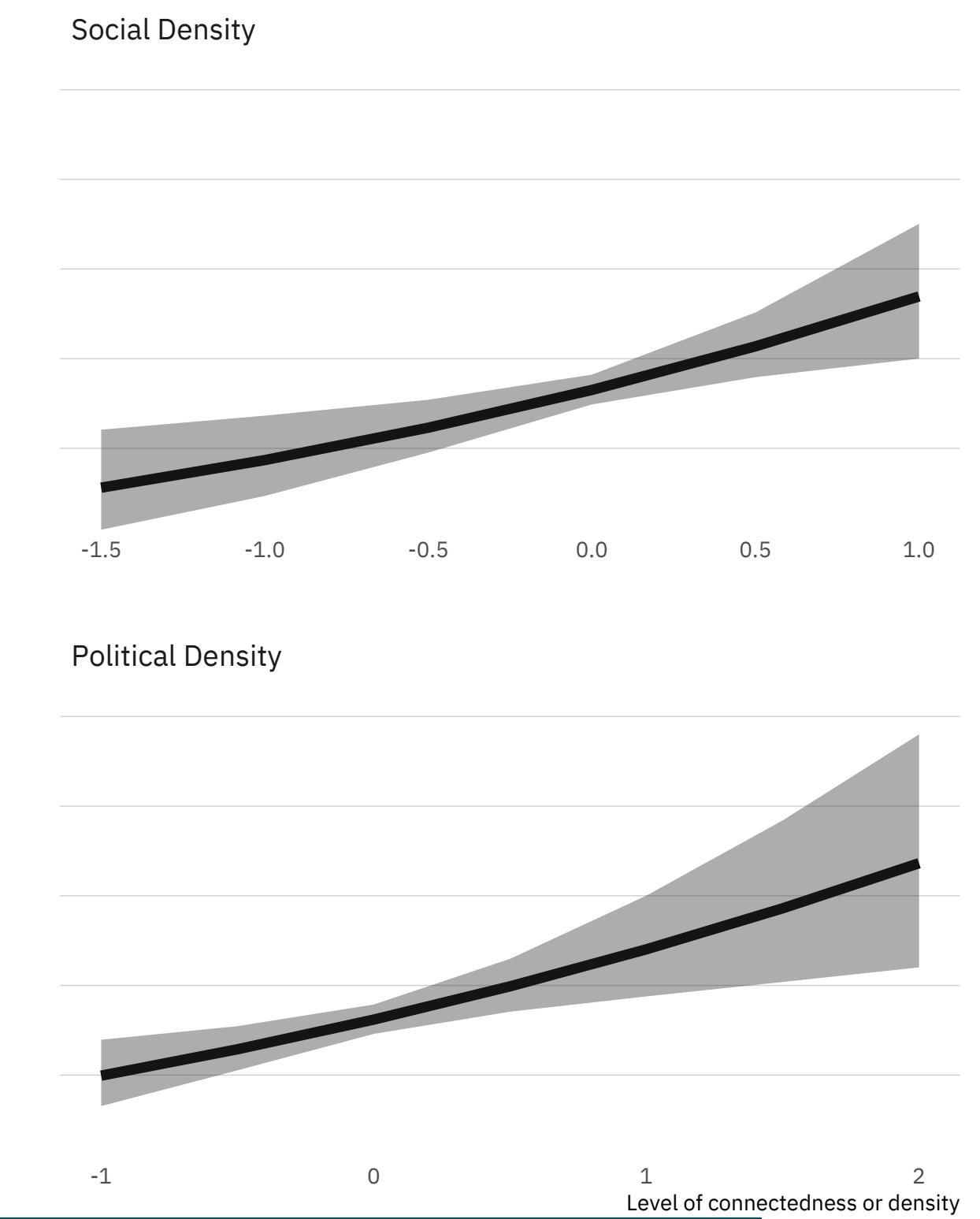
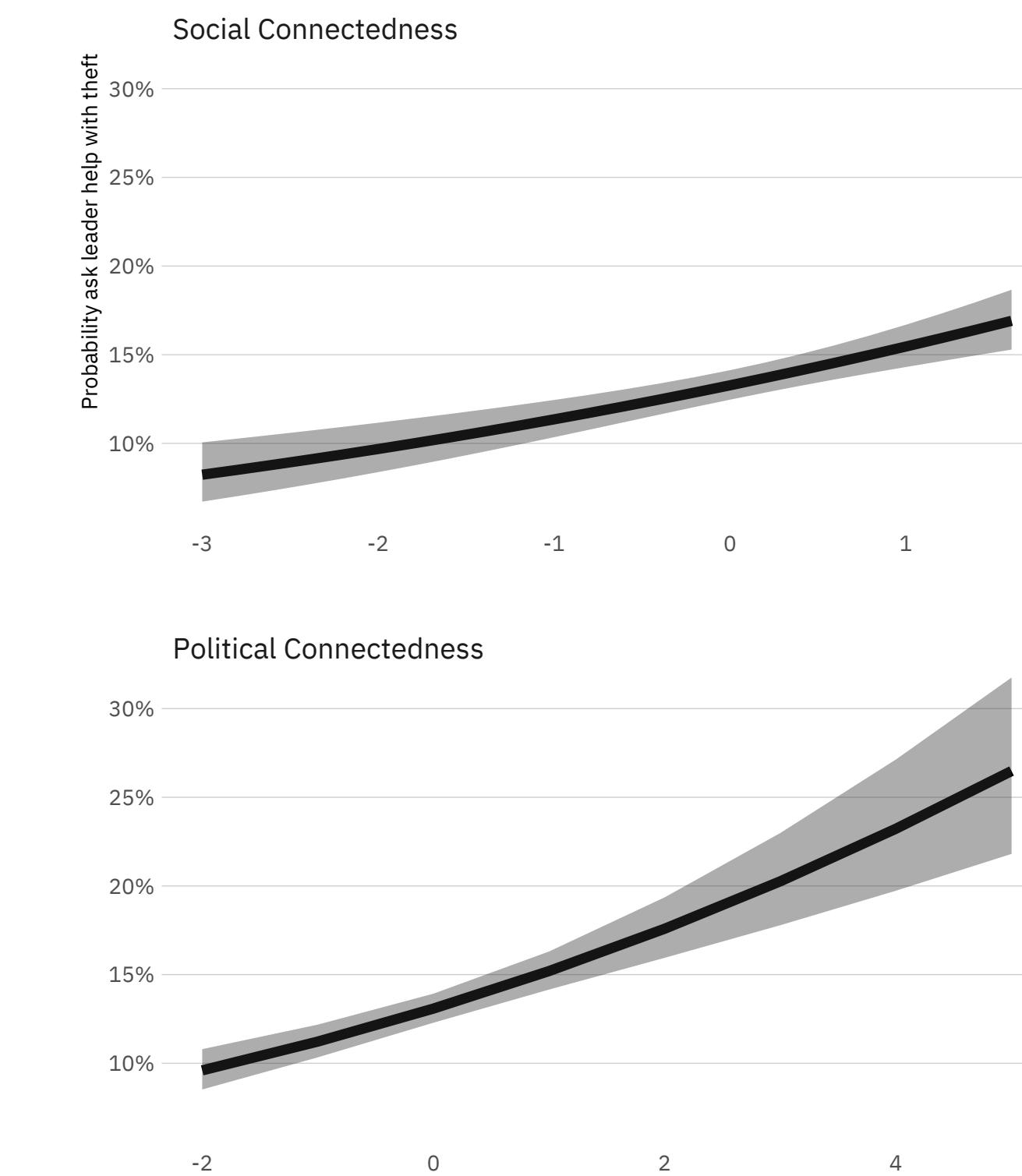
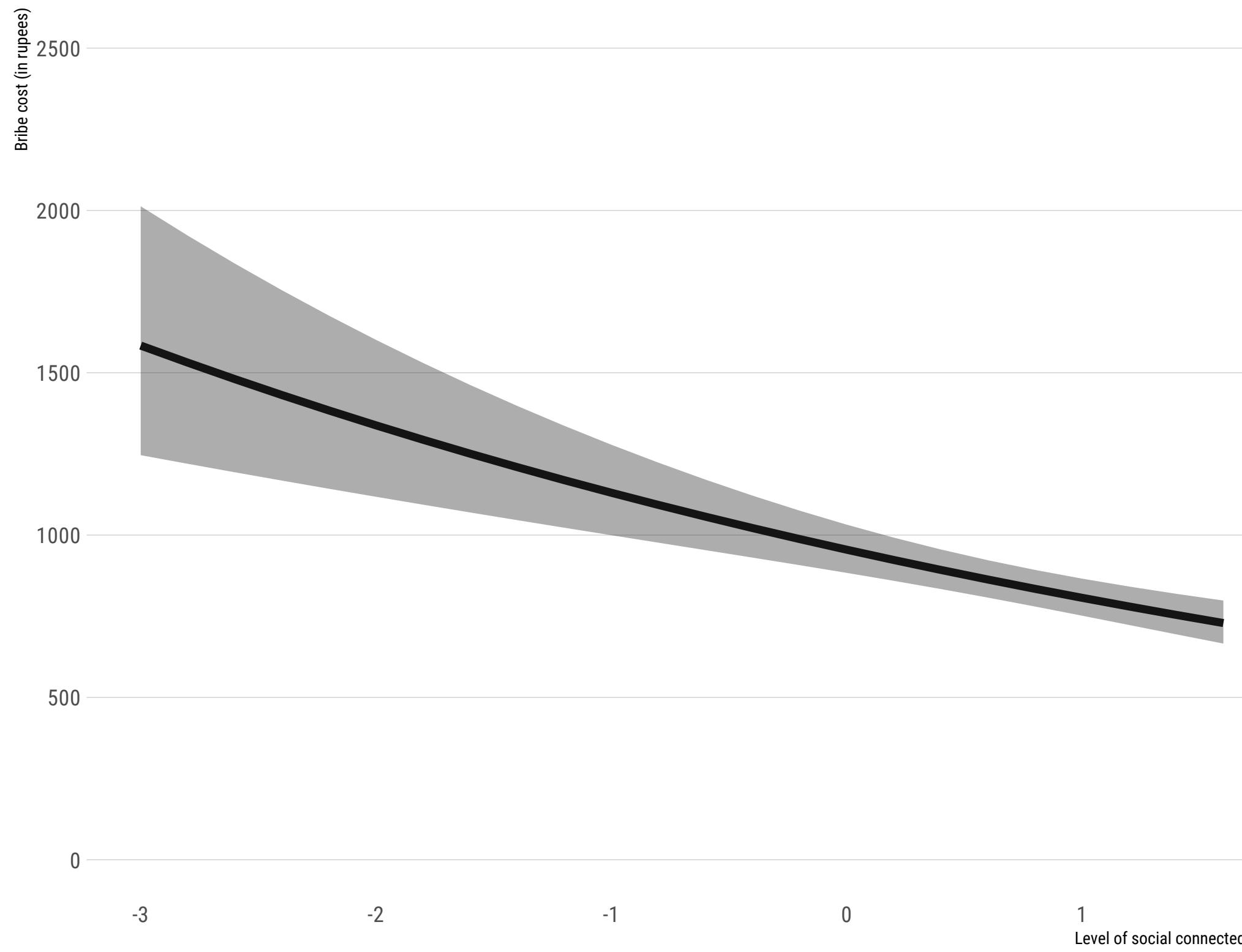
My research in India

We mapped people's social networks across 170 slums in Bangalore, Patna, Jaipur (India)



Who they talk to regularly, who they spend time with, who they might ask for a small favor

More well connected people, and more connected slums:



Pay less in bribes, more likely to get special favors

Why better service?

How are these communities with better networks able to get better police services?

Leverage size and ability to coordinate to **exchange votes** for **better service (clientelism)**



Very important in slums where citizens have few legal rights!

The courts

What problems plague Guate's courts?

Weak response/
conviction rates

Low capacity/few
judges

Low tech

Low training

High corruption

Security issues

Prisons

How does Yashar describe Guate's prisons?

Overcrowded

Inmates can still dictate
crime outside of prison

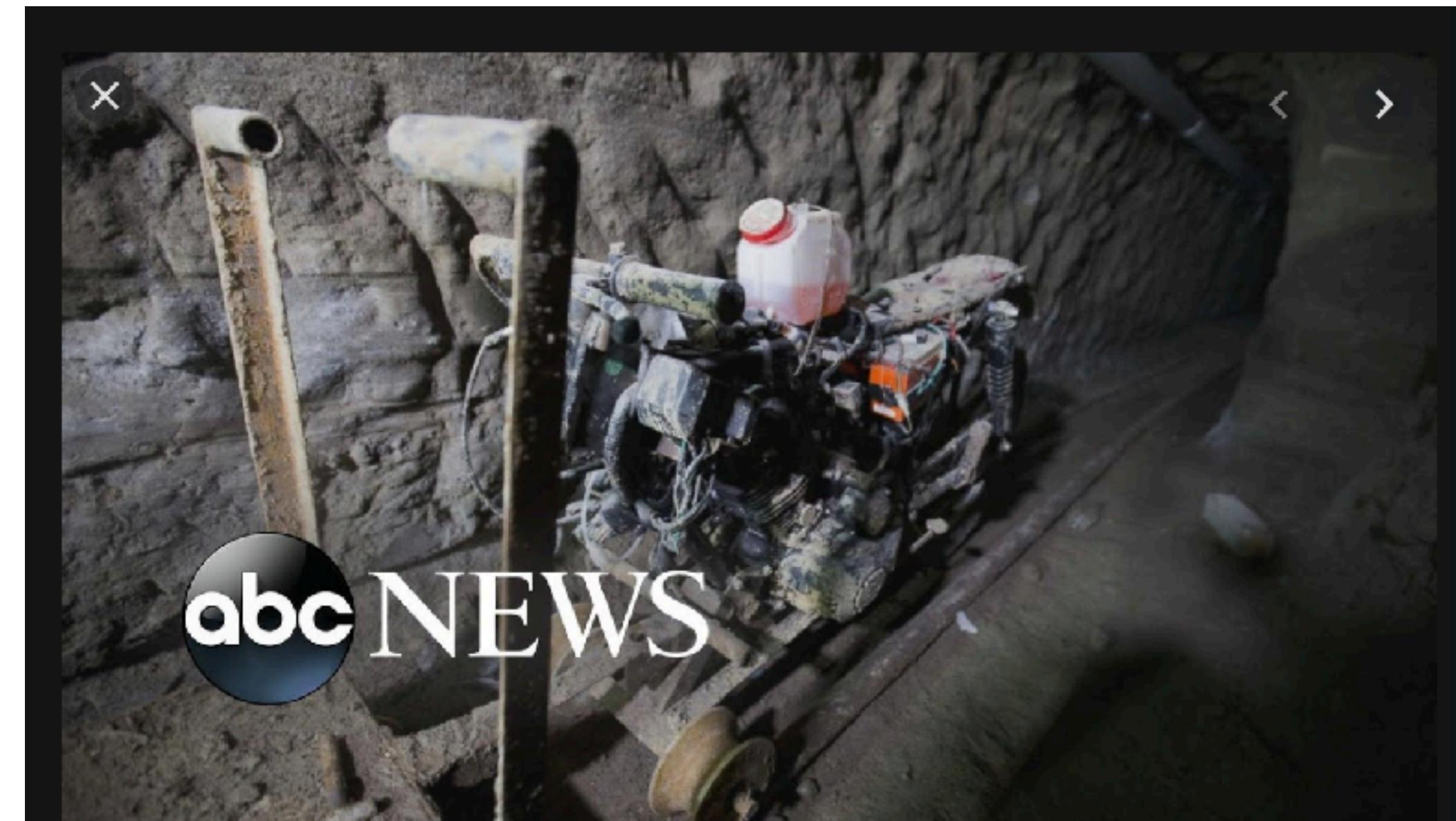
Complicity of guards

La Catedral: Inside The Luxurious Prison Colombia Allowed Pablo Escobar To Make For Himself

By Gina Dimuro

Published January 7, 2019 | Updated August 30, 2019

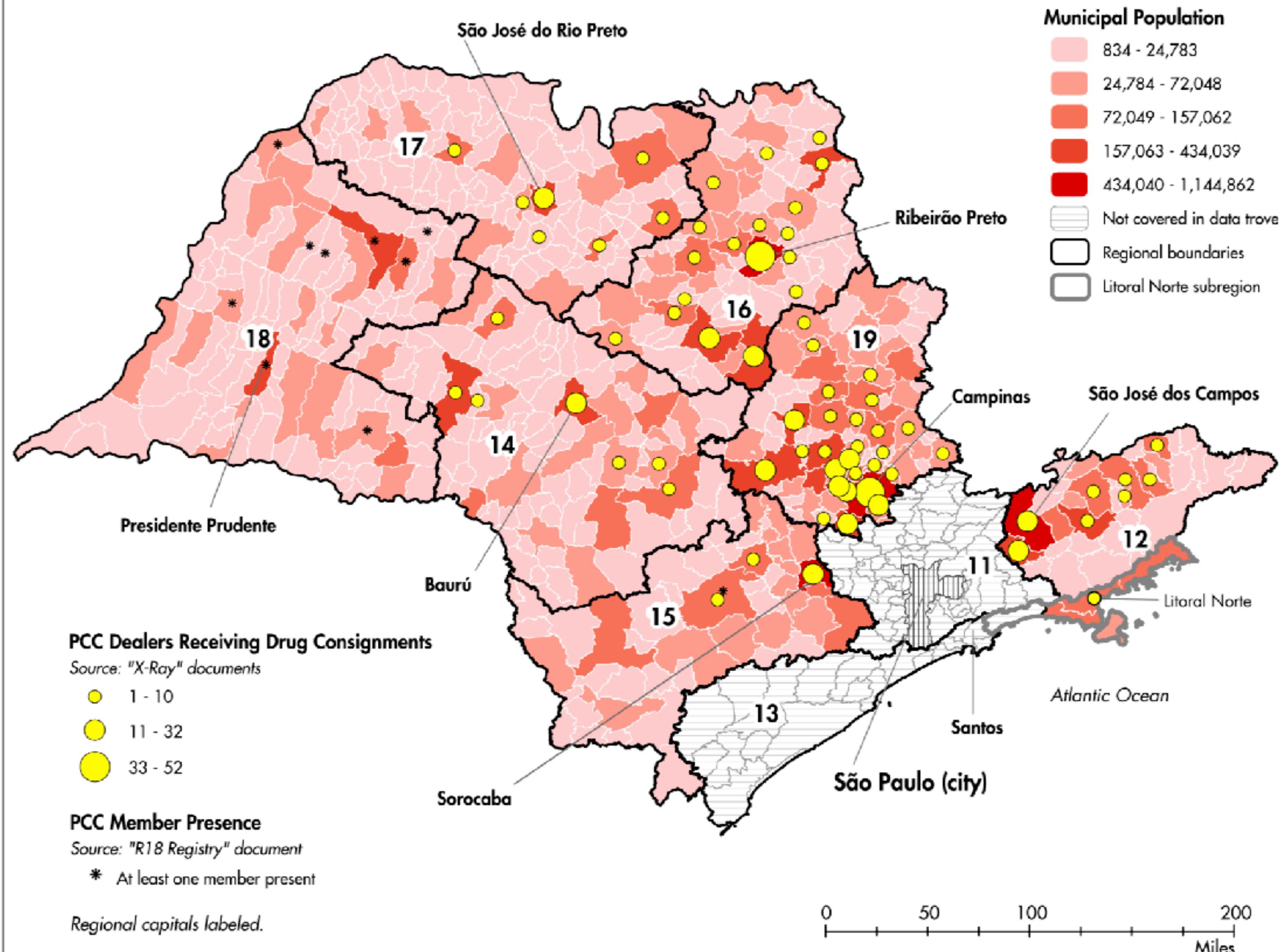
The fortress was specially constructed on a foggy mountainside to keep Escobar's enemies out — and not the cocaine kingpin in.



Go Inside Mexican Drug Lord "El Chapo" Prison Escape Tunnel | Good Morning America | ABC News



FIGURE 3. PCC Administrative Structure and Drug Trafficking in São Paulo's Interior



Gangs continue to operate from *within* prison

The third factor

Violence = drug trade + weak states +
competition

Competition in Guate

Who are the actors competing over the drug trade?

Cartels (mexican)

Gangs (*maras*)

Cartels

Does presence of cartel alone produce violence?

Broad swathes of land in the southwest of the country (where the *Cartel del Pacífico* and their allies, the Chamaleas, operate) and in the interior provinces of Alta and Baja Verapaz (area of influence of the Zetas) have very little violence. The most troubled areas in Guatemala appear to be along the borders with Honduras and El Salvador, areas that could be contested by *Cartel del Pacífico* ally *Los Mendozas* and *Zetas* ally *Los Lorenzanas*. (UNODC 2012: 66–67)

Need **competition**; under one-sided control
relatively peaceful (kinda like Kalyvas?)

Gang competition

MS-13

vs.

Calle-18

Drug dealing

Extortion

Mostly urban areas,
the capital

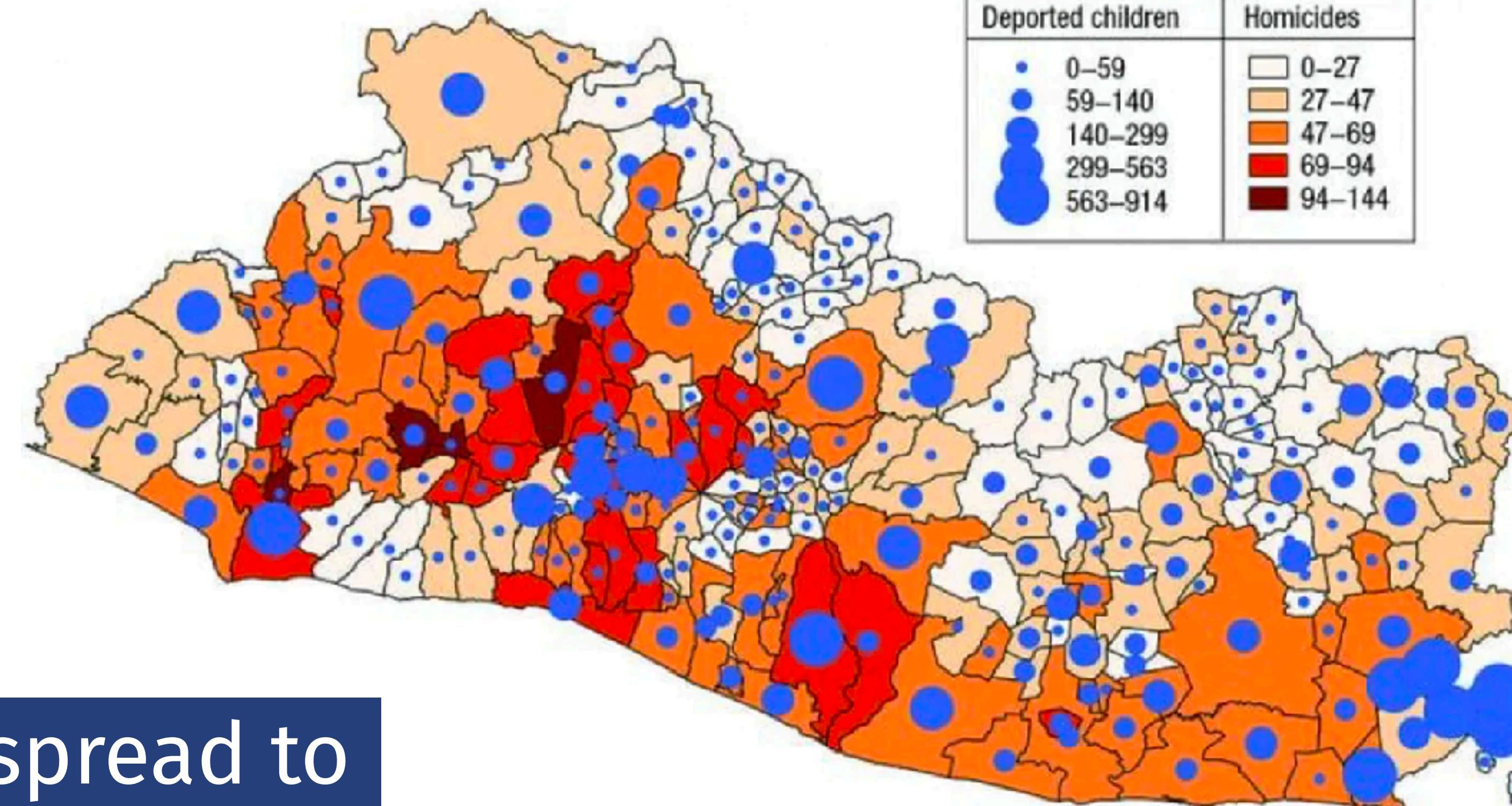
Migration and gangs

MS-13 forms in...

Los Angeles

Salvadorian self-protection from other gangs

Deportations from US part of spread to CA, especially El Salvador



Example: competition over extortion

Huge number of Guatemalans depend on buses to get from outskirts/shanty-towns to city center

Gangs frequently rob/“tax” these lines

Competition and violence

Gangs compete over extortion
rackets

Gangs also compete over
control of prisons

**Assailant tosses grenade into Guatemalan bus,
killing 2, wounding 15**

NEWS Jul 12, 2010 Guelph Mercury



GUATEMALA CITY - Two people are dead and 15 wounded after an unidentified assailant tossed a grenade into a bus in Guatemala's capital.

The killings come amid a series of attacks against buses, which are frequent targets of extortion by gangs in Central America.

Police spokesman Donald Gonzalez says the bus was attacked at a parking lot along its route.

He said Monday that one possible motive under investigation is intimidation by gang members who extort bus drivers with threats of violence.

Prison Riot In Northern Brazil Leaves At Least 57 Inmates Dead

July 30, 2019 · 3:33 AM ET

SCOTT NEUMAN 



A police officer patrols the surroundings of the Altamira Regional Recovery Centre after at least 52 inmates were killed in a prison riot, in the Brazilian northern city of Altamira, Pará state, on Monday.

Bruno Santos/AFP/Getty Images

At least 57 prisoners were killed by fellow inmates during a prison riot in northern Brazil in what authorities have described as a "targeted act" by gang members directed at a rival group.

Peten

Three factors converge in Peten

Incredible given mostly a national forest, low population density

Border to Mexico and Belize

Few police, very corrupt, weak state



Homicidal ecologies in Guate

Drug flows: border with Mexico,
ports, cities

Weak/complicit state: police /
state weak, compromised

Competition: movement of
Mexican cartels south, gang
battle over extortion rackets

Guatemalan presidential candidate arrested in Miami in drug-trafficking plot

Sofia Menchu

3 MIN READ



GUATEMALA CITY (Reuters) - A Guatemalan presidential candidate was arrested in Miami on Wednesday and charged with an elaborate plot to use drug cartel money to win the election and assassinate rivals, according to U.S. officials, two months before voters head to the polls.

Mario Estrada, candidate of the center-right National Change Union, who is polling far behind other rivals, is accused along with another man, Juan Pablo Gonzalez, of seeking between \$10 and \$12 million from Mexico's powerful Sinaloa Cartel to fund his campaign and transport cocaine into the United States.

"Estrada and Gonzalez conspired to solicit Sinaloa Cartel money to finance a corrupt scheme to elect Estrada president of Guatemala," Geoffrey Berman, U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, said in a statement.

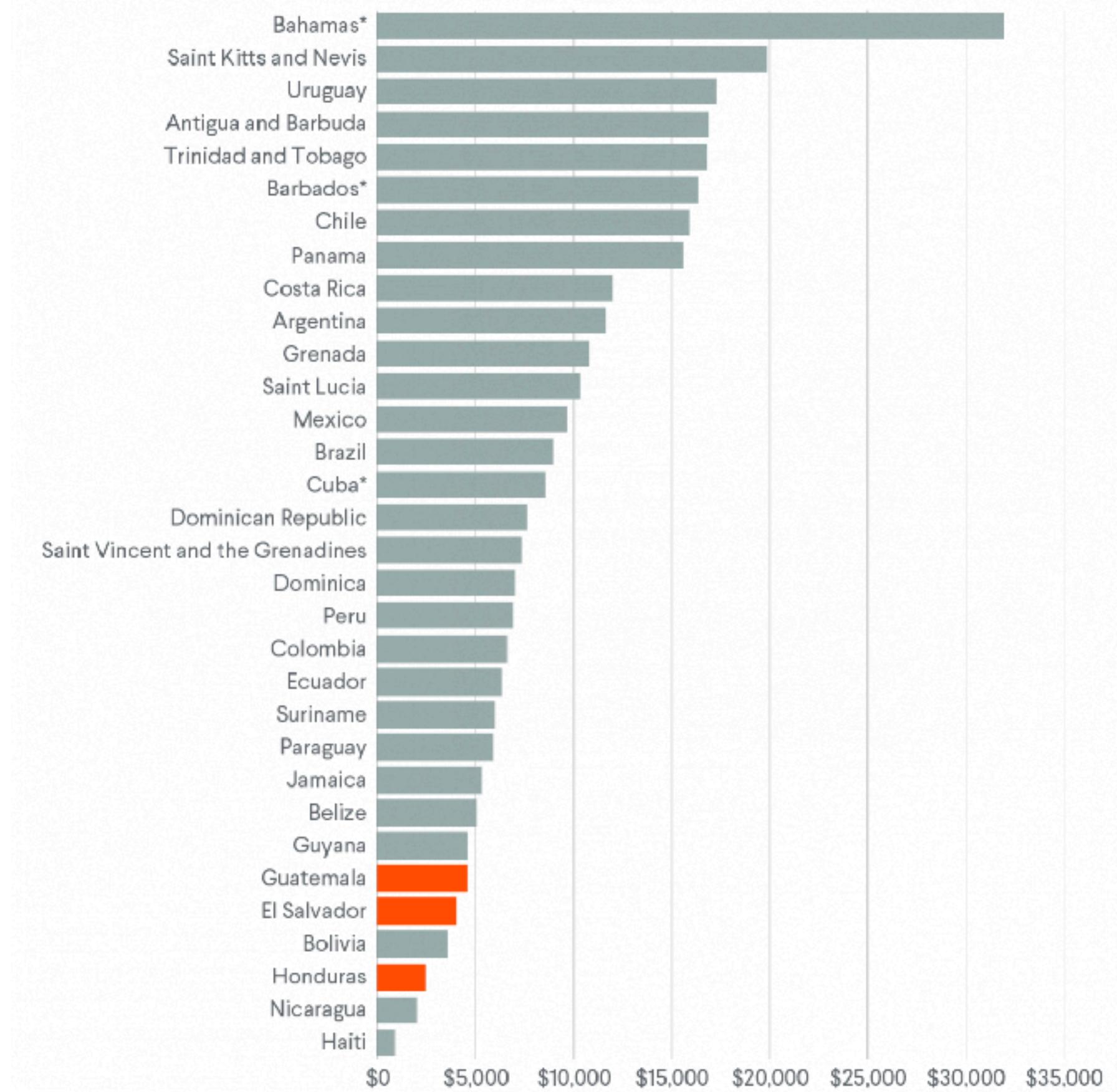


Nicaragua is different (at this time!)



Scraping By in the Northern Triangle

Gross domestic product per capita, 2018



*2017 data

Source: World Bank.

Nicaragua is different

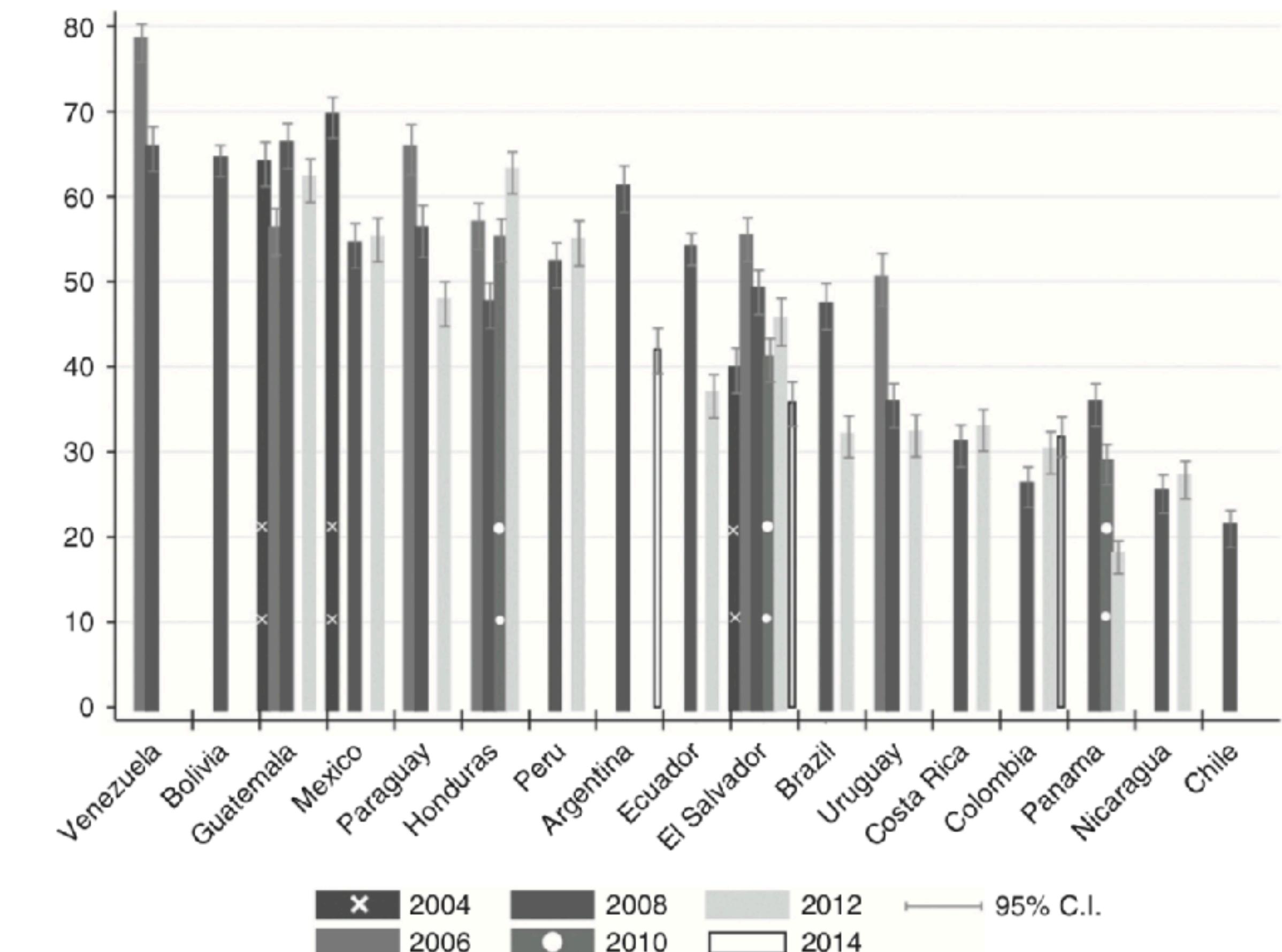
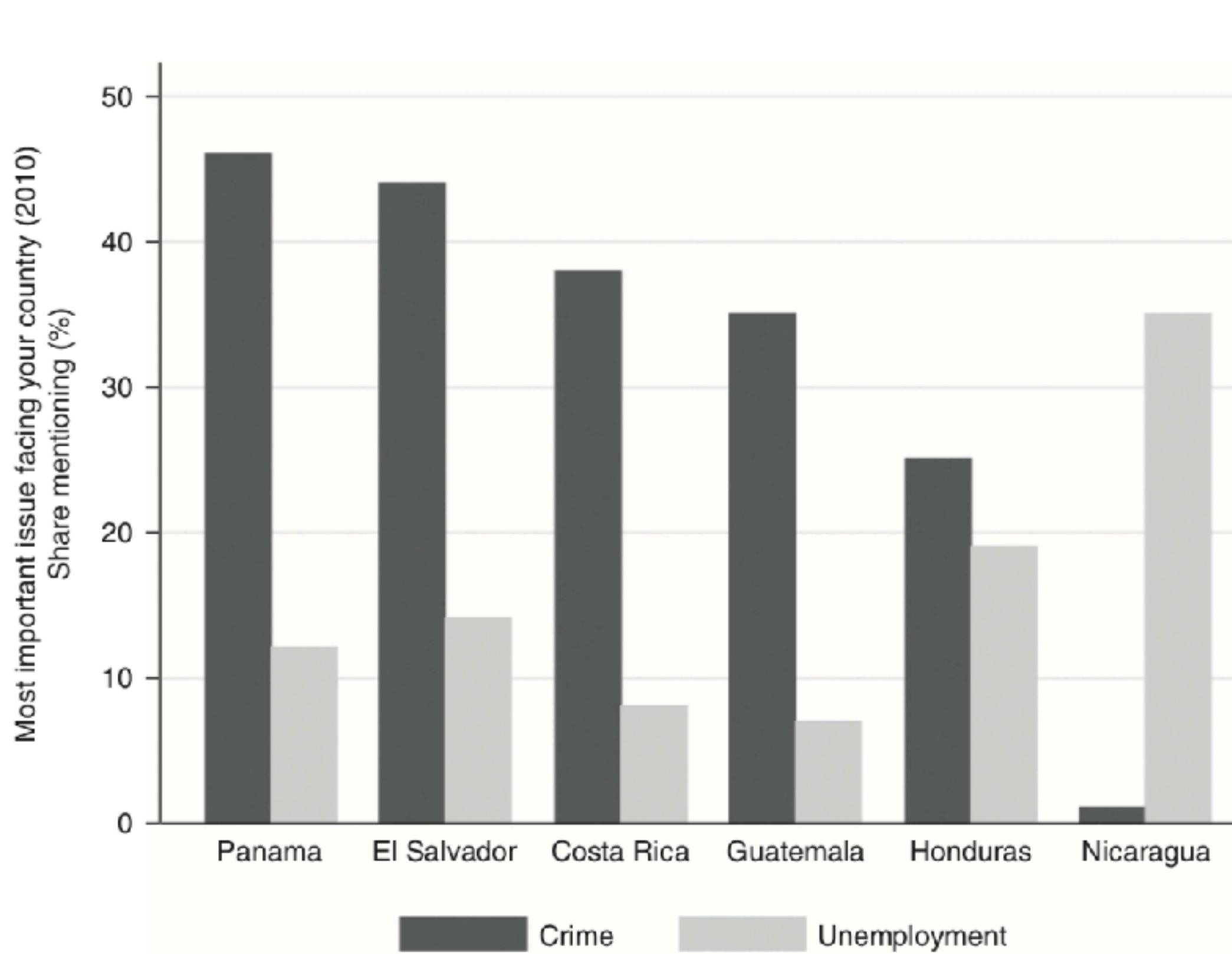


FIGURE 7.3 Belief in Latin America that police are involved in crime (2004–2014)
Source: LAPOP 2004–2012 Core Data. Specific country data for years 2010 and 2014.

Nicaraguan Revolution (1961-1990)

Sandinista rebels oust
dictator – civil war with anti-
rebel forces (“contras”) in
1980s

Contra (“counter”)
revolutionary war extremely
bloody



Sandinistas out of power

Sandinistas surprisingly lose elections in 1990
and peacefully turn over power

Military and police laws in 1990s to make
security forces less “partisan”

Guatemala's Civil War

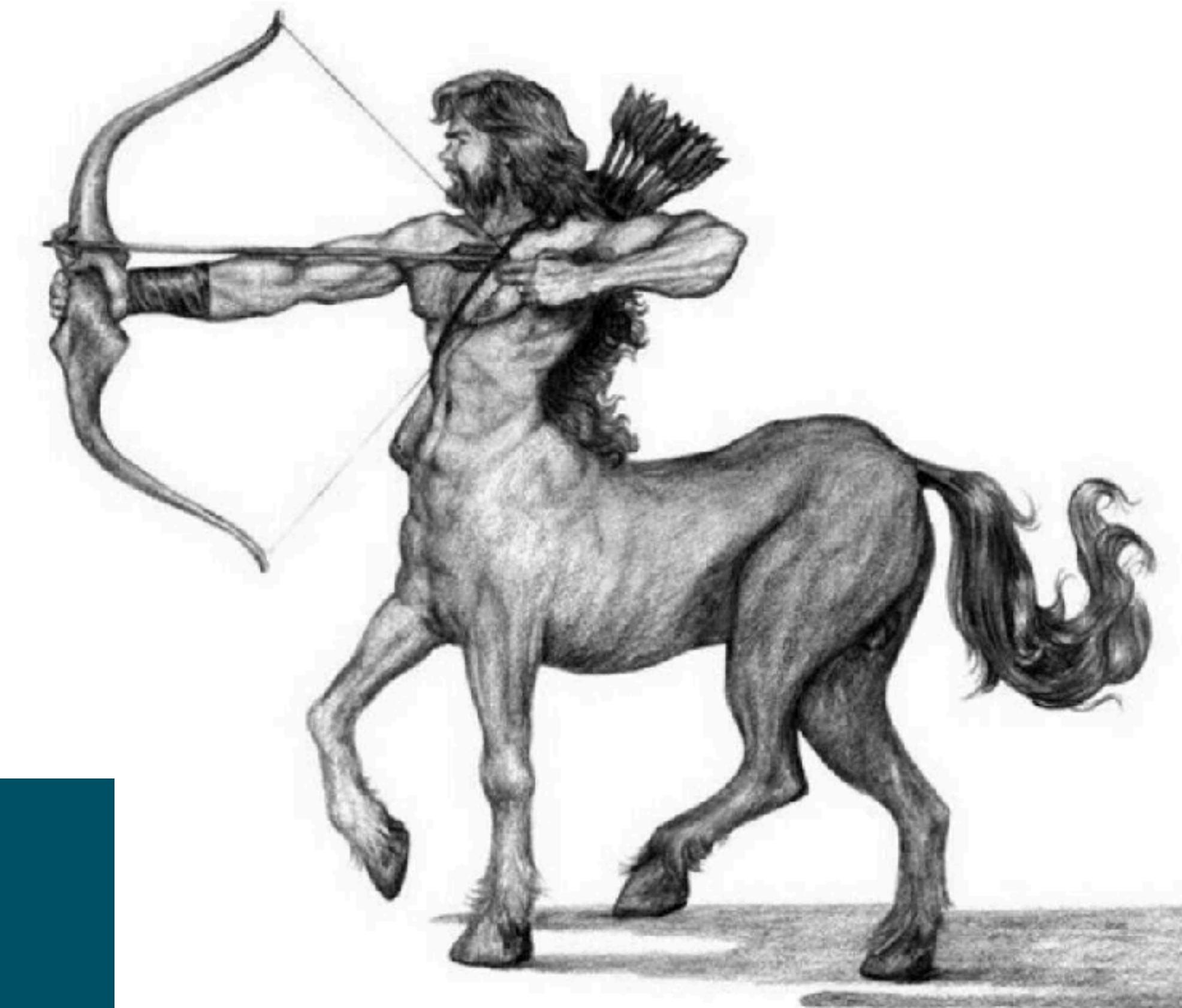
1960 to 1996, 200k dead or missing

Nicaragua: rebels win quickly,
defend revolution

Guatemala: long insurgency
that ends in negotiated defeat

The “centaurized” Guatemalan state
doesn’t change much post war

Nicaragua able to loosen grip of military on state

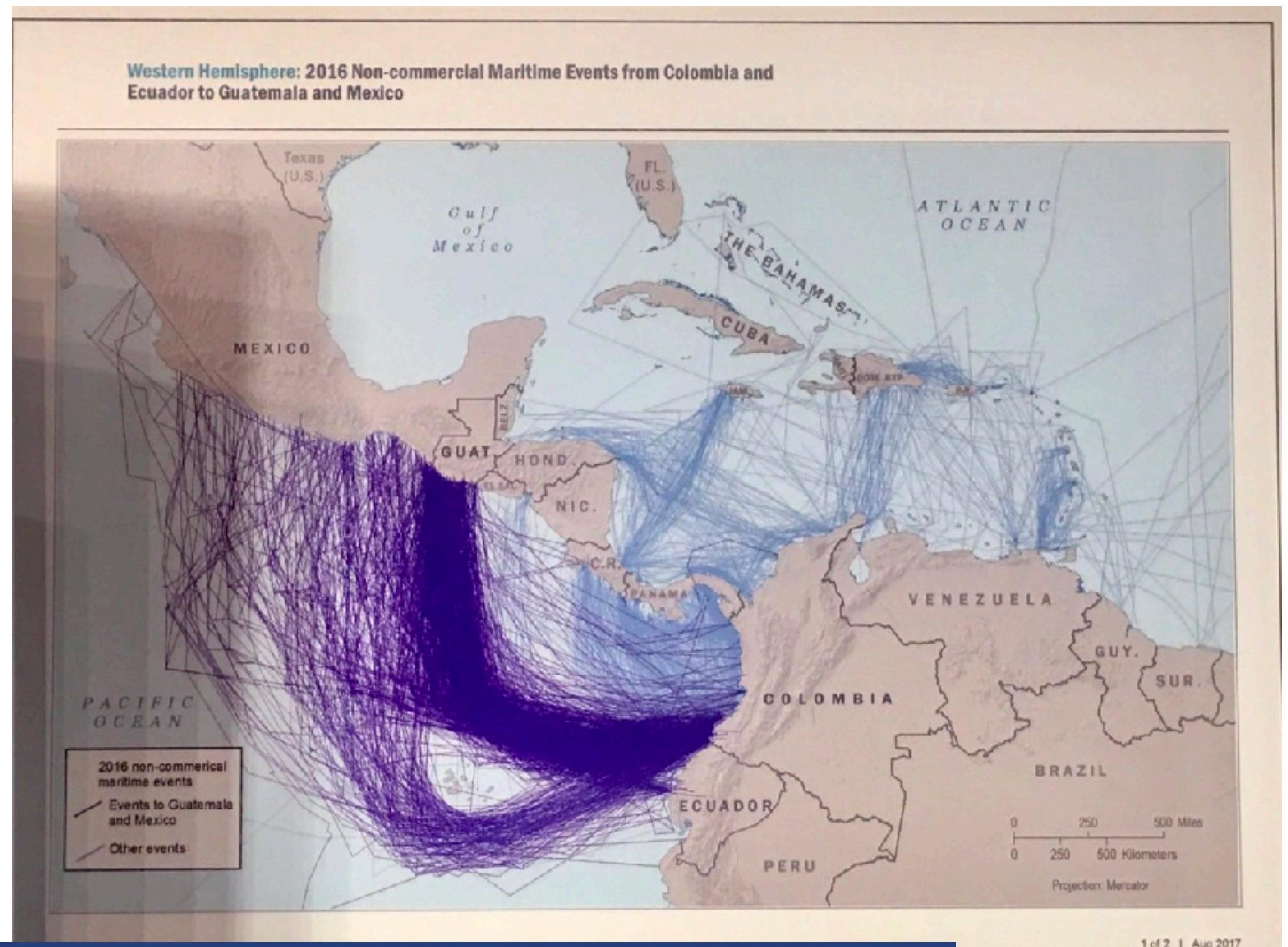


The three factors in Nicaragua

Violence = drug trade + weak states +
competition

Nicaragua: blessed by geography

— Air --- Land - - - Water



Relatively less appealing routes

Nicaragua: competition

Areas with more competing cartels do have more violence, but nothing on the scale of Guate

“For the most part, gangs in Nicaragua are small youth gangs that are territorial in nature... involved in petty crime.”

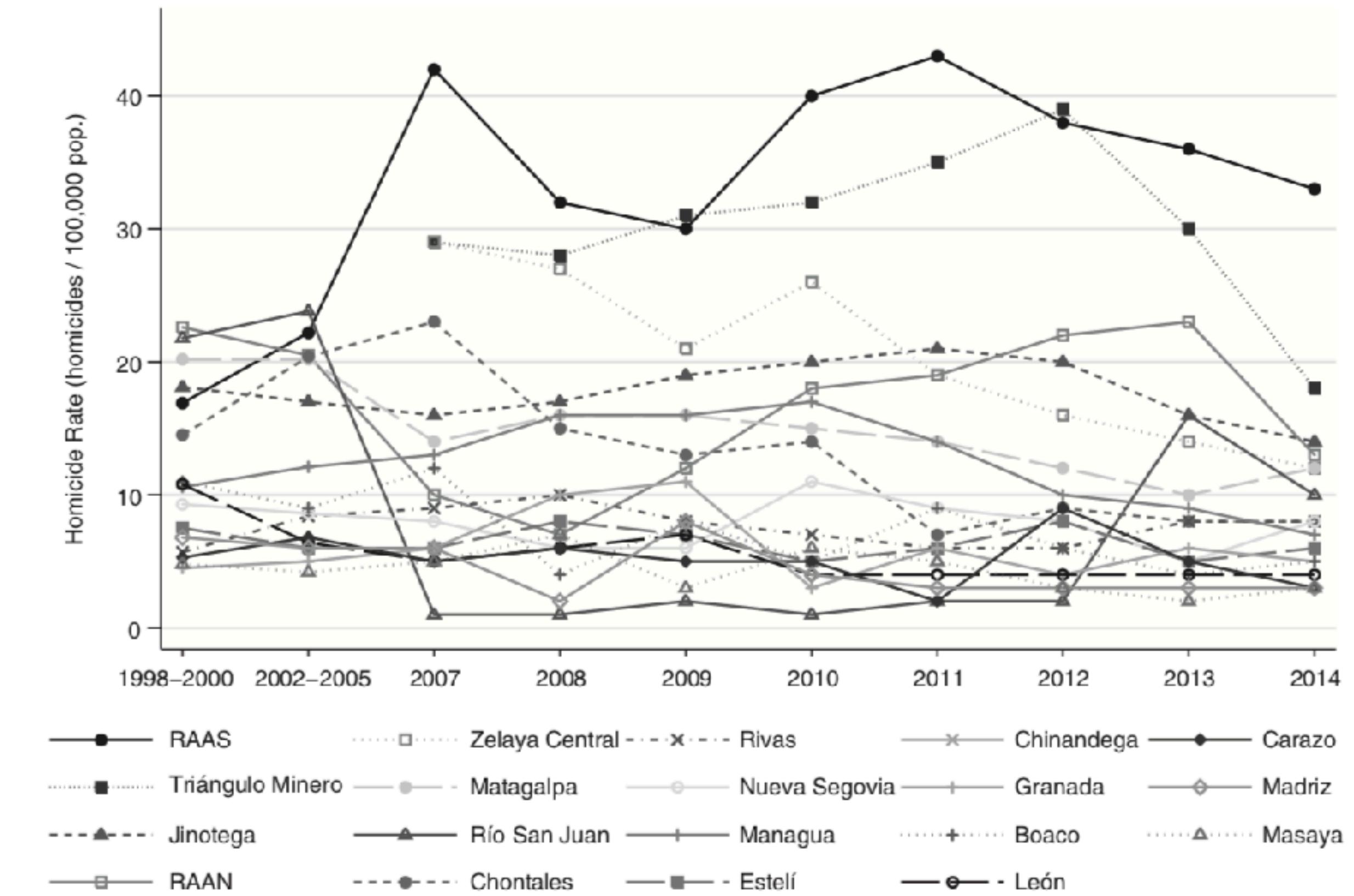


FIGURE 7.11 Homicide rates in Nicaraguan departments (1998–2014, rate per 100,000 population)

Nicaragua: the police

How does Yashar describe Nicaraguan police?

High morale/loyalty

Professionalization

Community policing

Non-partisan

Higher trust

High accountability

Separation of military
and police

Loyalty in the Nicaraguan police

Nicaraguan police seem more dedicated to social good; why?

Yashar claims because of Revolution;
but that was a long time ago

How do these commitments persist over time? Or how do the police do to foster this?

Or maybe it's easier to be loyal when there's fewer cartels around

Community policing

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

SIGN IN

SUBSCR

WORLD

‘We Do All We Can So That People Don’t Kill Each Other’: The Experiment to Stop Latin America’s Carnage

Places in Ecuador and Colombia are exceptions to the region’s surge in homicides; turning gang members into garbage collectors, and firing hundreds of corrupt police officers



Community policing

The US Has Spent \$14B on Community Policing—What Have We Learned So Far?

Gauging whether a community policing program has been successful ultimately depends on how you define success.



Yashar claims community policing is a big factor – but evidence elsewhere is mixed

Community policing

What does this look like in Nicaragua
(and in general)?

Cop as community problem-solver vs.
crime-punisher

Develop ties to community,
esp. gangs

presence/patrols

Active role in deterring crime (neighborhood watches, etc.)

Community decides how/what to police

Why the difference

If Nicaragua's approach works, why don't Northern Triangle countries switch to this?

Part of the reasons are static: geography of drug trade + institutional “inertia”

But part of it is a choice about how to deal with the drug trade

Is Nicaragua in the war on drugs?

Some evidence Nicaragua has largely decided to allow drug trade to happen, “regulating” it

“People in the government know that the drugs are crossing there. But as long as they don't generate too much violence and too much conflict and disrupt the social order, they can just pass.”



A mansion owned by Ted Hayman, one of the most notorious kingpins in Bluefields, Nicaragua. After his arrest last year, some people took to the streets to protest.

Involvement with **Drug** Traffickers and use of **Drug** Money for Campaign Finance

- - - - -

30. (U) Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista have regularly received money to finance FSLN electoral campaigns from international **drug** traffickers, usually in return for ordering Sandinista judges to allow traffickers caught by the police and military to go free. Most of these schemes are orchestrated by Lenin Cerna, the former Director of State Security, and are supervised by Sandinista Supreme Court

"We're the ones dealing with all of the dead people and all of the fighting, yet the consumers, the ones who provoke the phenomenon, are the ones who also decide who is doing a good job combating drugs," Suarez says. "That's why, some leaders have said, 'Let's legalize this and let the drugs flow north. Because if we don't, the *gringos* are going to keep swallowing drugs, while we kill each other."

account. There are credible reports that some of the money went to fund upcoming FSLN electoral campaigns, while the rest went to individual Sandinista judges, including Solis and Arguello.

But things are changing . . .

OPINION

Op-Ed: Nicaragua was one of Latin America's least violent countries. Now it's in a tailspin



Paramilitaries are seen on a truck at Monimbo neighborhood in Masaya, Nicaragua, on July 18. (Marvin Recinos / AFP/Getty Images)

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RECAP

Nicaragua and Guatemala had very different levels of criminal violence

Part of the difference is **static factors**, like geography

But part of it too is how **civil wars** transformed each of these societies