

INTRODUCTION

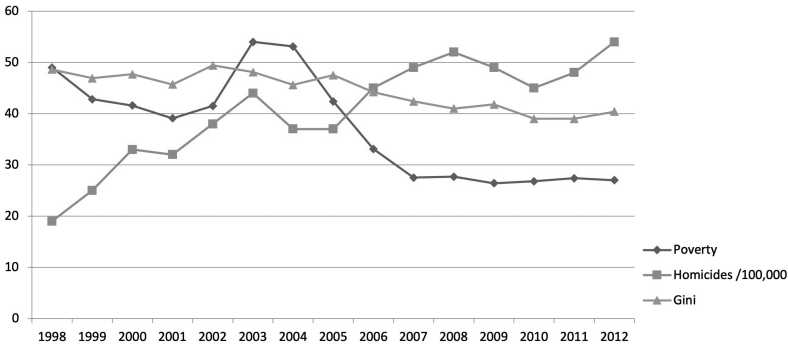
THE PARADOX OF VIOLENCE IN VENEZUELA

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Inequality generates injustice and injustice generates violence. The Bible says so.

—Hugo Chávez on his weekly *Hello President* television show (Chávez 2003)

The history of violence in Venezuela during the presidencies of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro challenges a common assumption that runs through much academic and everyday discourse on violence—that poverty and inequality are its underlying causes. Between 2004 and 2011 the Venezuelan government used windfall oil profits to strengthen social policies that economically benefited the poorest social sectors and the results were clear: the number of poor households, unemployment levels, and the rate of child malnourishment all declined.¹ Life expectancy increased from 73 to 74.3 (PROVEA 2012, xxxvi), and the Gini coefficient used for measuring inequality dropped from .46 to .39 (viii). Yet during this same period, violence measured by homicide rates soared. Even according to official statistics—which tend to be more conservative—the homicide rate in Venezuela almost tripled. In 1998, the year before Chávez became president, the homicide rate was 20 per 100,000 inhabitants. Fifteen years later, it had risen to 56 per 100,000 inhabitants. Violence was already a concern in the 1990s, of course. Indeed, it



GRAPH I.1. Paradox of violence in Venezuela. The relationship of poverty, inequality, and homicide during the windfall of oil revenues in Venezuela. Source: Poverty, data.worldbank.org; Homicide, Ministerio del Poder Popular para Interior y Justicia reported in <http://prodavinci.com/blogs/las-muertes-por-violencia-en-venezuela-comparadas-con-el-mundo-por-anabella-abadi-m-nu-meralia/>; Gini, National Institute for Statistics (Venezuela). Note: For the Gini coefficient, the vertical axis should be read as 0, 0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, 0.5, and 0.6.

routinely topped polls as citizens' number one concern and was one reason for the anti-status quo sentiment that brought Chávez to power. But rates skyrocketed during the Chávez period. This is what we are calling the paradox of violence in Venezuela.

Over the past several years, we have facilitated a discussion among an interdisciplinary group of scholars examining crime and violence in Venezuela—a discussion which led to this book. In it we seek to understand why violence steadily increased during the governments of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. In doing so, we also seek to contribute to long-standing debates in the social sciences. These chapters reveal a need to reorient how we think about violence and its relationship to poverty, inequality, and the state.² They do not argue there is no relationship between poverty, inequality, and crime, but that particular models of governance, citizen security policies, and persisting structural social deficits affect how this relationship plays out and have their own independent effects.

We argue that during Chavismo, violence increased in Venezuela as a result of the following interrelated factors: extraordinary oil revenues and the hypertrophic growth of the state, a particular type of revolutionary governance, failed citizen security reform and the resurgence of militarized policing, and continued concentrated disadvantage. Extraordinary oil revenues contributed to intrastate struggles and state fragmentation, limiting state institutions' interest in and capacity to regulate so-

cial life. The Chavista governments' efforts to revolutionize Venezuelan society, branded "twenty-first-century socialism" after 2006, produced institutions that were even less capable of coordinating sustainable public policy and ordering society, and less able to provide security to its territory and populations. These institutions generated competition between actors and between institutions as well as the atomization of the means and exercise of force; in other words, they spurred a pluralization of violent, armed actors. This occurred in the midst of abundant resources, yet these processes and persisting pockets of exclusion and the growth of illicit markets in the region led to a surge in violence.

The data analyzed by Josefina Bruni Celli and Javier Rodriguez in chapter 3 show that there is a long-term trend in Venezuela in which increases in oil revenue are tied not only to state spending but to violence. These findings coincide with those of Marcelo Bergman (2018), who shows that economic growth has led to more violence in a number of countries in the region, but point in a different direction. Bruni Celli and Rodriguez suggest that an influx of revenue can actually undermine state institutions, leading to institutional weakening and incentivizing impunity. In the period under study here, while the Chávez government used extraordinary oil revenues to reduce poverty and inequality, its revolutionary project effectively converted the state into a battlefield. And while there were more resources circulating in the economy—one of the factors Bergman identifies as driving the increase in violence—most of the Chávez government's antipoverty efforts did not uniformly reduce poverty. Persisting spaces of "concentrated disadvantage" unaddressed by state benefits created cleavages and sources of conflict within lower and working-class communities, contributing to a continued expansion of crime and violence (Antillano 2016).

Guiding our analysis is a sociological approach with a couple of key aspects. First, in contrast to common wisdom and even considerable criminological research, in this book we analyze violence not as a lack of norms or values, an inability to control emotions, or the result of biographical trauma, but rather as a practice that rational, contextually embedded actors use to assert or maintain control in social relations (Auyero and Berti 2015). Contexts in which there is competition over resources, social and institutional structures that do not distribute resources in a stable way, and institutions that do not provide for the resolution of conflict will see violence emerge as individuals and groups seek to capture resources and assert dominance over each other (Bergman 2018; Arias 2017; Lessing 2018). Interaction, competition, and violence are shot through with emotion, but even expressive violence is generally part of an effort to develop reputation—itsself a resource or form of capi-

tal—for individuals and groups (Bergman 2018; Smilde 2007; Zubillaga 2007). Second, we see the state as a processual set of relationships; that is to say, not as a unitary or coherent entity, but as a heterogeneous field riddled by contradictions and struggles, sometimes more than others (Migdal 2001; Mann 2012). While terms such as *state capacity* or *state fragility* have their usefulness, we think it is necessary to move beyond their implicit assumption of a unitary interest in providing security. We see the state not just as a set of institutions but as a space in which conflicts and tensions between political actors with diverse interests play out; violence can result from these tensions but also be used as a resource to gain the upper hand in conflict, or permitted in processes of forbearance in which political actors do not enforce laws to maintain support or alliances (Holland 2017; Willis 2015). In other words, violence is not only a problem of the state's inability to act but also the result of state actors' actions and decisions. This is essential to explaining how and why the Venezuelan state not only failed to provide security to its citizens but also became a systematic violator of this most basic of rights, as will be seen in the chapters by Keymer Ávila (chapter 8) and Leonard Gómez and Rebecca Hanson (chapter 9). To be clear, we do not think that state capacity is irrelevant, but that concentrating on it alone misses the problem. Indeed, informed by the work of Javier Auyero, Jose Miguel Cruz, Angélica Durán-Martínez, Desmond Arias, and Benjamin Lessing we understand state policies and practices as central to explaining when and why violence is deployed by state and criminal actors.

LEADING EXPLANATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN VENEZUELA

Explaining homicide rates has been central to Venezuela's political conflict from the time Hugo Chávez campaigned for the presidency in the late 1990s. He campaigned and governed with a traditional leftist perspective that suggested reducing poverty and inequality would reduce crime. Less than a month after taking office in 1999 Chávez famously declared that if his daughter were dying of hunger, he would commit a crime to feed her. The assumption of a direct causal relationship, with increases in poverty and inequality leading to increases in crime and violence, is not just characteristic of Chavismo or traditional leftism. Social scientists in the United States have long posited such a connection (see, for example, Blau and Blau 1982; Ehrlich 1973; Hsieh and Pugh 1993; Messner 1982; Sachsida et al. 2009). Some scholars of Latin America have argued that poverty, unemployment, volatile and mediocre growth in the economy—often thought to be driven by neoliberal policies—have incentivized violence as a survival mechanism in the face of precarity,

insecurity, and exclusion (O'Neill and Kedron 2011; Zubillaga 2007; Humphrey 2013, Fajnzylber et al. 2002; Chinchilla 2003; PNUD 2009; Moser 2004; Kilanski and Auyero 2015). It is also a commonsense assumption accepted by broad sectors of many, perhaps most, societies. In fact, this assumption was one of the few points that Chávez had in common with his opponents. In Venezuela's polarized political context, critical commentators frequently accepted the terms of this causal portrait, but inverted the equation, using the increase in violence as evidence of an increase in poverty. But as can be seen in graph I.1, violence did not increase during the Chávez years because of an increase in poverty, but despite a decrease. Without a doubt, the rise in violence has rightfully had a central place in opposition critique of the Chávez and then Maduro governments. But how to explain this increase and how to understand its relationship to Chavista governments is not straightforward.

Opposition commentators and scholars have also frequently argued that Chávez's combative form of governance and polarizing rhetoric produced social psychological effects leading to violence. Comparing homicide rates with elections and political events, Steven Tremaria (2016, 70, 74) claims that in Venezuela, polarization produced "tension and hostility among the population" with "interpersonal violence peaking at times of heightened political tension" (see also Humphrey and Valverde 2013). While it is true that increasing political and class conflict has led to a series of violent confrontations between state institutions and civil society, the vast majority of violence in Venezuela has not been an expression of Venezuela's national-level political conflict. Rather, it is primarily intraclass violence occurring among men living in zones of exclusion, engaged in struggles for dominance over social spaces or illicit economies. Many of them are targeted by and in conflict with state security forces, or caught up as indirect victims in these conflicts. This violence is not linked to institutional politics, political parties, or political action in the sense of seeking state power.

Another common explanation is that leftist and or socialist governments are simply ill equipped to address crime and violence since they misunderstand the problem. Indeed, the Left has historically had an uneasy relationship with the institutions of "law and order," often intentionally marginalizing these institutions in its discussions of crime and insecurity. Jock Young (1986) has referred to this as "the characteristic syndrome of left idealism . . . Crime itself is played down, marginalized, and is not the focus of attention." While it is true that during the first years of the Chávez government little attention was paid to the state security apparatus, after 2008 the government spent considerable resources implementing what began as a textbook citizen security reform

(although other aspects of the justice system remained largely ignored). Furthermore, after the launch of militarized policies, massive incarceration took place and the prison's population increased by almost 67 percent between 2009 and 2011, representing "the highest confined population in history," according to the minister of justice (see Antillano et al. 2016).³ A quick scan around the region shows there is no necessary link between left-wing governing projects and increasing crime and violence. Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world. Yet most of the violence is concentrated in the northern triangle of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, countries not led for leftist governments. In contrast, the increase in crime and violence in leftist Nicaragua has been comparatively small.⁴ Homicide rates in countries like Ecuador under President Rafael Correa and Bolivia under President Evo Morales increased only slightly, but remained some of the lowest in the region.

Finally, another term frequently used to explain violence is one borrowed from twentieth-century sociology: *anomie*. The Venezuelan sociologist Roberto Briceño-Leon (2017) suggests that the looting in the 1989 Caracazo undermined respect for private property, and Hugo Chávez's 1992 coup d'état undercut norms against taking power by force. The result was anomie, a break in the social pact and institutions of social control. We agree that a fracturing of the rule of law and fragmentation of institutions of social control is a central causal factor in Venezuela's surge in violence—what Natalie Gan (2020) has called an "anomic state" that no longer follows its own official rules. But we disagree with uses of anomie to denote normlessness and a vacuum of social relations that presumably leads to a chaotic war of all against all. As the chapters in this book show, the mechanisms driving violence are not social psychological, nor the result of a lack of shared values and norms. Rather, institutions that first were challenged under the neoliberalism of the 1990s eroded further under the revolutionary governance of Chavismo, with sources and forms of social control multiplying and competing. As we discuss further, by 2002 state actors believed it was in their best interest to permit the existence of or provide outright support for non-state armed actors. The number of armed actors has increased dramatically since then, such that state institutions no longer have the capacity to regulate violence. Nevertheless, the violence that occurred was not anomic, but rather formed part of projects seeking to establish social control within complex microsocial configurations. In Andrés Antillano's chapter in this volume (chapter 4) we see that violent contexts too are structured by norms and values that regulate it as a form of interaction (see also our discussion of Waverly Duck's work below). As in Javier Auyero et al.'s (2014) description of Buenos Aires, the Venezuelan state is neither

completely absent, nor does its iron fist lead to absolute control; instead, the intermittent, selective, and contradictory presence of the state contributes to widespread depacification.

Furthermore, the reach of the state has actually expanded under Chavismo, and this includes security institutions and alliances with parastate armed actors. There are more police, soldiers, and parastate armed actors than ever before, and they kill and incarcerate more people than ever before. This contributes to disruption and disorder in communities and facilitates the growth of illicit markets (see chapter 9). Indeed, the increased rates of incarceration combined with inattention to the penal system generated spaces where criminal networks developed, exacerbating violence on the outside. Later, under the government of Nicolás Maduro, lethal tactical units invaded sectors for varying lengths of time, usually leaving behind a power vacuum that would quickly be filled by more organized non-state armed actors. Thus, the problem is not so much an absence of state as it is a violent presence. The concept of anomie leads analysis away from these processes, obfuscating more than it reveals. Reducing violence is not about filling a normless void, but challenging and altering existing norms and social structures inside and outside of the state.

So is Chavismo to blame for the surge in violence? After twenty years in power, how could it be otherwise? Nevertheless, the leading explanations forwarded in a politically polarized context are wide of the mark. The revolutionary project championed by Hugo Chávez is responsible for the surge in violence, but not in the way most people think. And, while Venezuela is often discussed as an exceptional case, violence in the country is also driven by broader regional trends, three of which are relevant to our explanation. Embedding our four causal factors in these regional trends can help us better understand violence in Venezuela.

VENEZUELA AND VIOLENCE IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

Since the early 2000s, Latin America has been considered the most violent region in the world. According to a 2013 report by the United Nation's Development Program (PNUD 2013), it is the only region where lethal violence increased between 2000 and 2010.⁵ While homicide rates in most regions have fallen by as much as 50 percent, in Latin America they increased by 12 percent. Latin America has, of course, witnessed mass violence in the past due to colonialism, slavery, civil wars, dictatorships, and revolutions, but there have been unprecedented changes in the quantity and quality of violence in the twenty-first century. Many countries in the region suffer from rates of armed violence as high or higher

than those in countries affected by war (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2011, 51–65), and that violence has taken on new forms and expressions (see, for example, Arias and Goldstein 2010; Civico 2012; Koonings and Krujit 2007). While political, state-driven violence was dominant in the twentieth century, contemporary violence has taken on a lateral form—that is, civilian-on-civilian violence, carried out by non-state actors across relatively horizontal networks. Guns, illicit economies, and the pluralization of violent actors are fundamental to understanding how violence has evolved across the region (see Koonings and Krujit 2004; Arias 2006; Cruz 2010; Arias and Barnes 2017). These three trends run through the four factors we develop in the following sections to explain the paradox of violence in Venezuela. This book locates these regional trends in a particular time and place, specifying how they matter within the Venezuelan context.

The proliferation of guns in Latin America is essential to explaining increasing violence throughout Latin America (Briceño-León and Zubillaga 2002).⁶ According to the Small Arms Survey (2012), Latin America has the greatest proportion of firearm-related fatalities in the world. But even among countries with high homicide levels, Venezuela stands out—among the population between ten and nineteen years of age, Venezuela has the highest percentage of homicides using guns, 94 percent (Otamendi 2019, 6).⁷ Firearms are an important part of our explanation precisely because the circulation of legal and illegal guns is intimately connected (Cano 2001). Legal firearms are one of the primary channels through which guns are obtained for the commission of crimes in the region. Firearms and other weapons are often stolen from, sold, or “rented” by state security forces, another way in which loose connections between state and non-state groups contribute to violence. In fact, Verónica Zubillaga et al.’s research with armed youths has demonstrated that police officers are their principal source of weapons (Zubillaga, Llorens and Souto 2015). At the microsocial level, the uncontrolled proliferation of guns has meant that everyday interpersonal conflicts become lethal conflicts as they are no longer solved by insults or fisticuffs but by bullets (see chapter 5).

In many Latin American countries armed actors have pluralized, challenging the state as the main coercive actor. The proliferation of civilian militias, criminal organizations, and paramilitary groups (Rodgers 2006; Arjona 2016; Civico 2012) have led Enrique Desmond Arias and Daniel M. Goldstein (2010) to conceptualize much of Latin American as “violently plural.” For example, in Colombia, military and paramilitary groups have killed with impunity in both urban and rural areas. These same paramilitary groups, aided by government initiatives

and even funding, eventually transformed into major players in the drug trade. In Venezuela, gangs, armed community groups often referred to as *colectivos*, and even security forces have multiplied over the past twenty years. In some cases, state policies intended to fight crime have contributed to this proliferation. As Andrés Antillano shows in chapter 4, militarized interventions and the massive imprisonment of young men with knowledge and experience in illicit economies favored the advancement of illicit networks and the development of more sophisticated criminal groups. In other cases, state actors have actively supported non-state armed groups. This was particularly true after the short-lived coup d'état in April 2002, in which many officers from the Metropolitan Police of Caracas participated. This marked the beginning of their marginalization and probably their increased involvement in crime, and contributed to the government's support for armed *colectivos*.

An increase in illicit markets is also an important part of the regional surge in violence (Yashar 2018). Dynamic transnational actors look for spaces of weak or complicit state control and develop routes accordingly. Changes in drug trafficking routes after crackdowns are an important part of the story of surges in violence across the region. As Plan Colombia successfully diminished drug trafficking from the Caribbean coast of Colombia, it forced some routes to move through neighboring states, including Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela. The map of violence in Venezuela does indeed show that armed violence has increased along drug transportation routes as well as border regions in which drugs are one among several illicit markets.

Nevertheless, research shows that illicit markets in themselves do not cause violence—contested illicit markets do (see Thoumi 2012; Andreas and Wallman 2009). Thus, while increased drug trafficking is part of the equation, it is not a sufficient cause of violence. For example, Juan Camilo Castillo and Dorothy Kronick (2020) argue that state seizure of illegal goods, by disrupting supply, can fuel violence. Using case studies in Mexico and Burma, Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán-Martínez (2009) propose that the exercise of violence might be a function of the capacity of actors—namely, illicit traffickers and public officials—to establish pacts in which public officials establish protection and traffickers demonstrate that they are trustworthy (also see Lessing 2018 on Mexico). When these pacts rupture, the disruption catalyzes violence (Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009). Similarly, in his reflection on drug markets and the selective use of violence, Richard Friman (2009, 287) affirms that “once markets are consolidated in the hands of organized networks . . . the levels of large-scale violence tend to decrease” (see also Rodgers 2015 for Nicaragua). Disruption gets us closer to understanding the rise

of violence in Venezuela, pushing us beyond drug trafficking in and of itself. At a more micro level, research by Antillano and Zubillaga (2014) has also demonstrated that various social, institutional, and cultural factors must be taken into account in order to explain why microtrafficking produces violence in some barrios and not others. Changes in delivery practices (delivering drugs to the buyer's home, for example) and informal social control mechanisms can modify the relationship between violence and drug trafficking.

Guns, pluralized violence, and illicit markets are an essential part of our story, then, but their impact in Venezuela cannot be understood in isolation from the particular factors at play inside the country: the hypertrophic growth of the state, revolutionary governance, failed citizen security reform and the resurgence of militarized policing, and continued concentrated disadvantage. The proliferation of guns and armed groups in the country, for example, is intimately connected to the context of revolutionary governance, which facilitated access to weapons by non-state actors. Failed police reform and the persistence of militarized policing—which gave the police access to military-grade weapons—help us to understand the circulation of weapons and the pluralization of violent actors. Illicit activities are not inherent or exclusive to marginalized areas, but in neighborhoods where disadvantage is concentrated, illicit markets emerge as residents seek alternative survival strategies; thus, while poverty and inequality declined during much of the Chávez period, the persistence of concentrated disadvantage provided space in which illicit markets could flourish. While conflicts occur among illicit organizations without the presence of state security forces, the militarization of security and incredibly violent police raids have caused consistent disruption in illicit markets; this has produced a defensive response by criminal groups and, as a result, their strengthening. Thus, they are essential to explaining conflicts in these spaces.

RETHINKING VIOLENCE IN VENEZUELA

The conceptual framework presented here has emerged out of a cross-national, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary discussion and debate over the past seven years among historians, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists from across the region. Contributors brought their disciplines' approaches and questions to bear on the paradox presented in this introduction; over time each contribution was strengthened through interdisciplinary engagement. Taken together, the chapters in this volume suggest that violence has increased due to the interrelated factors mentioned earlier: extraordinary oil revenues and the hypertrophic growth

of the state, a particular type of revolutionary governance, failed citizen security reform and resurgent militarized policing, and continued concentrated disadvantage. These four factors are obviously not discrete but overlap, mutually reinforcing each other.

Hypertrophic Growth of the State and Economy

Marcelo Bergman has argued that one of the reasons for soaring crime rates throughout Latin America is economic growth leading to rising consumerism. He suggests that “prosperity usually provides greater returns on criminal activity because there are more opportunities and targets” (Bergman 2018, 140; see also Rosenfeld and Levin 2016). Also, rising consumption also creates secondary markets for illicit consumer goods that fuel property crime and the violence associated with it. He suggests that the rapid increase in opportunities for crime and violence can overwhelm police forces and the justice system, further reducing the “costs” of crime, leading a country’s crime rate to spiral out of control. Bergman’s explanation of Latin America’s surge in violence would certainly seem to apply to Venezuela, given the extraordinary oil windfall Venezuela received during the presidency of Hugo Chávez. Of course, the case of Venezuela may be a little different from others in the region since the economy is dominated by the state and its spending and distribution of oil rents. Nevertheless, given that Chavismo’s economic policies led to soaring levels of consumption (PROVEA 2012), the processes that Bergman describes may have been at work.

However, there is one pesky fact that is often overlooked with respect to Venezuela: in the 1990s and through 2010 there is no clear evidence of an increase in criminality in Venezuela apart from homicide. Crime figures are notoriously unreliable, of course, but both in the 1990s (Zubillaga 2003) and 2000s (PROVEA 2010; Sanjuan 2011), under different governments, measured by both official statistics and victimization surveys, violence surged at the same time that rates of burglary, robbery, and auto theft were largely stagnant (although high). Thus, while the “more money, more crime” thesis points us in the right direction, we cannot assume that crime is a direct function of consumption, nor that violence is a direct function of other forms of crime. What seems to have happened in Venezuela is that while crime itself did not increase, it became increasingly violent (Zubillaga 2003; Sanjuan 2011).

In chapter 3, Josefina Bruni Celli and Javier Rodriguez show a strong correlation between oil income and violence between 1970 and 1988 and then again from 1999 to 2016. The relationship was presumably different from 1989 to 1998, during the neoliberal period when violence rose without oil revenue rising. But examining more closely, they find no re-

relationship between economic growth and violence. Instead they focus on the way that an influx of resources can lead to hypertrophic expansion; rather than solidifying the state, this influx reduces its institutional capacity, which in turn increases impunity. An influx of extraordinary resources can undermine incentives for political leaders to build effective state institutions, reducing the state's ability to exercise social control. Though this phenomenon precedes Chávez, from 2004 to 2013 his government received the largest influx of oil wealth in Venezuelan history, which led to hypertrophic growth of the state, reducing capacity and willingness to exercise social control at multiple levels.

It is important to remember that oil in and of itself is not a curse (Dunning 2008), and that the trade-off between the state's ability to provide social inclusion and order have been pointed out more broadly (Centeno, Kohli and Yashar 2017). But petro-economies do have a number of consistent structural problems that challenge economic policy makers. In the case of Venezuela, "the combination of an incoherent socialist program made classic petro-state problems all the more severe, drawing from the worst features of each" (Velasco 2016). This in part explains the surprising inverse relationship between inequality and violence in Venezuela. When oil revenue goes up, inequality goes down, as the government spends more money on its people. Yet hypertrophic growth of the state reduces the strength of the same institutions that regulate society. What is more, the same oil revenue that creates hypertrophic state growth, produces struggles within state sectors as actors fight to secure control over resources.

Revolutionary Governance

We know from elsewhere that political conflict and change can exacerbate violence. Jose Miguel Cruz (2016, 388) writes that the democratic transition in El Salvador produced disruption and violence, in part because it "increased state fragmentation, pitching state operators at different levels and institutions against each other. This struggle has translated into the constant renegotiation of power and authority between state representatives and other social actors outside the electoral field" (see also Yashar 2018). Angélica Durán-Martínez (2015) points out that violence connected to drug trafficking in Colombia and Mexico becomes more visible and frequent when trafficking organizations compete, and the state security apparatus is fragmented. Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley Gutierrez (2020) show how electoral contestation can lead to violence when the state is penetrated by criminal rackets.

Venezuela has its own version of political conflict facilitating violence. Hugo Chávez's revolutionary project generated intense fragmenta-

tion and power struggles. On the one hand, previously dominant social, economic, and political groups being displaced by Hugo Chávez's efforts to revolutionize Venezuela fought intensely to maintain their positions. Of course, a number of governmental attempts to transform socioeconomic relationships in the region have generated political polarization and potent opposition mobilization in recent decades (see Roberts 1998). But in Venezuela, the process was even more conflictive. Chavismo's desire to overturn Venezuelan politics was expressed by their referring to the 1958–1999 period as the Fourth Republic and the Chavista period as the Fifth Republic. Some Chavista leaders even spoke of themselves as working for a “new hegemony.” In response, many of those who belonged to the previously dominant political class saw themselves defending pluralist democracy against the Chavista political project. Opposition responses included street mobilization, a coup d'état attempt in 2002, a general strike in 2002–2003, and multiple waves of mobilization over the next decade. This is not the place to provide a comprehensive review of these political battles, but we can suggest that each side's interpretation of the situation as a fight to the death hamstrung efforts to address violence. What is important for our purposes is that these political clashes diminished not only the state's capacity but state actors' interest in intervening in key areas of citizen security—such as gun control and judicial and penal reform. Public officials across the board were simply not focused on the challenges presented by changes in criminality. Furthermore, the Chávez government's citizen security failures were a primary campaign issue and some opposition governors and mayors refused to work with Chavista state institutions that were attempting to implement security reform.

On the other hand, the parts of the state apparatus controlled by Chavismo were continually mobilized and fighting for the survival of their project. Distrustful of the police after 2002, and fearful of foreign military intervention after the US invasion of Iraq and tensions with Colombia, Chávez began to promote what he called a “peaceful but armed revolution.” He made explicit that “the revolution is armed to defend its achievements, to defend its advancement, to defend itself against threats and conspiracies” (see chapter 5). This resulted in an “outsourcing” of some security functions to non-state armed actors. Although some are supported by the communities from which they emerged and are more trusted than the police (see Velasco 2015), the proliferation of armed parastate groups with political goals and economic interests implies the establishment of alternative regimes of domination in many geographic sectors (Arias and Barnes 2017). This pluralization of violent actors destabilized police-state relations, fragmented the state security apparatus,

and led to more frequent and more visible violence (Durán-Martínez 2015; Davis 2017).

More broadly, the coalitions Chávez brought together were incredibly diverse and, in some cases, had opposing, even contradictory, goals as well as visions for how to achieve them. In a governance system marked by personalism—Chávez was the lynchpin holding together a patchwork of civilian, military, intellectual, and activist groups from early on (Lopez Maya 2011)—and the erosion of institutionalization—decisions regarding resources generally depended on a small group—internal struggles for access to spaces of power became fierce. These struggles likewise impeded an effective response to violence. For example, during the Chávez and Maduro administrations there has been a consistent rotation of leaders in and out of the Ministry of Justice—seventeen in the span of twenty-three years.⁸ As a rule, new ministers suspend, obstruct, or reverse the decisions made by their predecessors (see chapter 6). Clashes between civilian and military sectors within Chavismo also weakened the government's ability to follow through with a number of citizen security reforms. Those aligned with the military staunchly rejected the process of civilian police reform starting in 2006, actually stopping the legislative project for a year in 2007. They also fought and obstructed the three-year process during which the Presidential Disarmament Commission—led by human rights activists, and the National Assembly's Mixed Commission—heavily influenced by former military officers, fought over restrictions on the selling and carrying of guns and control over ammunition production. Some government officials, many of whom were either active or retired military officers with financial interests in arms imports or ammunition production, opposed plans to prohibit retail sale of guns, provide personal defense licenses, and mark ammunition. By the time the bill became a law, it had been watered down to assuage the armed forces. As Durán-Martínez (2015, 6) notes, "Enforcement efficacy depends on the ability to coordinate enforcement actions." Throughout this period struggles between Chavismo and the opposition and within Chavismo made coordination next to impossible, impeding effective action by the state to intervene in matters of citizen security.

This polarization and conflict moved far beyond struggle for control of the central institutions of government and affected multiple sectors of society. When social hierarchies are challenged, individuals and groups frequently attempt to (re)assert social dominance by deploying violence (Kruger and Fitzgerald 2012; Karakurt and Cumbie 2012). A clear example of this can be seen with conflict between labor unions. Since 2001 the Chávez government tried to open up organized labor by, on the

one hand, obliging unions to hold elections supervised by the National Electoral Council, and on the other hand, sponsoring parallel Chavista unions.⁹ This disruption resulted in a continuing, shifting collage of new and old unions vying for dominance in any given work or organizational site. As the economy boomed during the Chávez years in both the public and private sector, union-related armed violence surged as unions fought to dominate work sites, especially in the construction sector. While *sindicariato*, a term combining *sindicato* (union) and *sicariato* (assassination), is not a main cause of Venezuela's murder rate, it illustrates larger dynamics of disruption and competition in violence (Lucena 2011).

In sum, Venezuela's tragic levels of violence were not the direct result of its long-term political conflict, and the great majority of Venezuela's violence is not motivated by the quest for state power (with an important exception described at the end of the next section). However, it is also important to understand the indirect effects of this conflict. The Chávez and then Maduro government's efforts to revolutionize the state apparatus and construct a new hegemony destabilized institutions of governance from the central government to states, to municipalities to neighborhoods. The reaction against these changes and competition within government institutions in some cases led to violence, but more often reduced the state's interest in and ability to exercise monopoly over violence as well as social control more broadly.

FAILED CITIZEN SECURITY REFORM AND RESURGENT MILITARIZED POLICING

Guided by the idea that the best way to reduce crime and violence is to increase investment in social and economic policies addressing poverty and inequality, the Chávez government, during its first seven years, paid little attention to the effectiveness of police forces. Worse yet, police forces became a site for political polarization and conflict. In the period of heightened confrontation starting in 2001, different police forces were commanded by political actors struggling against one another (Antillano 2006). The police's continued deterioration and involvement in crime came to the fore in 2006 with a series of high-profile cases of violence in which police were involved (see chapters 7 and 8). In the wake of public outrage, the Chávez government created an initiative to study Venezuela's police forces and recommend reforms: the National Commission on Police Reform (CONAREPOL). It succeeded in proposing a new police law that was eventually passed in 2008 and put into effect in 2009, leading to an extensive restructuring of Venezuela's police forces, police training, and oversight mechanisms. The 2009 reform regulated the types of weapons that officers could carry, banning officers from carrying

military-grade arms and limiting them to nine-millimeter pistols. New offices were created where citizens could report officer misconduct, and human rights became part of the core curriculum for police training and retraining. Police officers were trained in the progressive and differential use of force.

The reform, however, became another example of how competing interests within Chavismo hamstrung the state's ability to effectively intervene in citizen security. For the most part, it was human rights activists, under the skeptical eye of some leftist factions and the military components of the Chávez government, who carried out the reforms with backing from some state actors.¹⁰ From the beginning, certain factions within the government lambasted reform and viewed policing as a right-wing impediment to the construction of socialism. In 2007 the CONAREPOL's recommendations were shelved by new minister of interior and justice and retired military officer Pedro Carreño, who referred to the reform as "right wing" and "bourgeois." The reform was revived a year later when a new minister was appointed. These divergent perspectives resulted in sporadic and erratic implementation. And the Chávez government was never exclusively committed to *civilian* policing. Within months of hitting the streets at the end of 2009, the Bolivarian National Police coexisted with the Bicentennial Security Program (DIBISE), which had heavily armed National Guard officers carrying out operations in which they roared into the barrios on motorcycles in the middle of the night, dragged suspects out of their houses without warrants, and then declared success to the media. Similar *operativos* (raids), such as *Madrugonazo al hampa* (Dawn Raid on Crime) in 2011 and *Plan Patria Segura* (Secure Nation Plan) in 2013, conducted by other security forces continued, delegitimizing the nonrepressive approach to citizen security advocated by reformers.

Over time, the need to gain and maintain the support of Chavista factions resistant to the plan led police reformers to emphasize the "humanist" elements of their reform over the enforcement elements. They pushed forward not only with human rights training but also placed more emphasis on community activities and youth programs that emphasized sports and music. Nevertheless, many Chavista leaders remained dubious. The military resented a loss of control over police forces as well as the ample opportunities for corruption and kickbacks provided by equipping them. Police officers also resented the change, believing that being handed over to civilians discredited and delegitimized them (Hanson 2017). The background, of course, is the long-term control of policing by the military in Venezuela, a phenomenon typical of the region (Bailey and Dammert 2006; Ungar 2011; Withers, Santos, and Isacson 2010).

Political polarization, as chapter 7 shows, also placed police reformers in a difficult position. When people were asked about the Chávez government's police reform in general, government supporters praised it while government opponents criticized it. However, when people were asked about the actual content of the reforms—for example, the progressive and differential use of force—government opponents were more likely to respond positively than government supporters. Though police reformers framed their efforts as part of the transition to twenty-first-century socialism, many Chavistas did not support them in practice. Worse yet, those who identified as opposition supporters and actually supported the content of the reforms rejected the police reform project because it was associated with a political project they opposed.

Despite these challenges, reformers achieved a lot. The Chávez administration created the Bolivarian National Police, founded the National Experimental Security University (Universidad Experimental de la Seguridad, UNES), created the General Police Council (Consejo General de Policía) and the Presidential Commission on Gun Control (Comisión Presidencial para el Control de Armas, Municiones y el Desarme). By 2012 it seemed as if civilian reformers were gaining the upper hand. That year Chávez consolidated the various citizen security reform initiatives into the Grand Mission Full Life Venezuela (Gran Misión a Toda Vida Venezuela), developed and implemented mostly by pro-government civilians and human rights activists. However, the tables quickly turned after Hugo Chávez's reelection in 2012. In October of that year, he asked the minister of interior and justice, Tarek El Aissami, who had been a main proponent of civilian police reform within the government, to resign from his post and run for governor of Aragua State. With El Aissami out of the game and Chávez clearly ill, civilian police reform lost its momentum. One important casualty was the effort at control of guns and ammunition. Initially an ambitious effort, it was progressively picked apart by stakeholders. Once Maduro was president a largely ineffectual, watered-down law was put into effect.

It is during the Maduro presidency that we see a more direct link between Venezuela's political conflict and violence (see Cruz 2016; Antillano and Ávila 2017; Zubillaga and Hanson 2018). When Chávez passed away in March 2013, Nicolás Maduro won the April snap election by a percentage so small it shocked everyone—roughly 2 percentage points, despite Chávez having left him with a twenty-point advantage at the time of his death. Starting his presidency in a weak position, Maduro identified the Armed Forces as a sort of security blanket. If we trace the heads of ministries in the country, the growing influence of the military across state institutions becomes evident. In 1999, at the beginning of

Hugh Chávez's first administration, 10 percent of heads of government ministries were military officers. By 2009 this number had increased to 22 percent, and between 2014 (Maduro's second year in office) and 2017 it rose from 29 percent to 50 percent (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018).

One of Maduro's first decisions as president was the creation of the Secure Nation Plan (Plan Patria Segura), which redeployed the Armed Forces to perform citizen security functions. This plan had the usual nefarious results of increasing civilian death at the hands of armed security forces while making no headway against crime. In January 2014, after the public uproar over the horrendous murder of former Miss Venezuela Monica Spear and her husband while on a visit to Venezuela, Maduro put the symbolic nail in the coffin of citizen police reform, removing human rights activist Soraya El Achkar from her position as rector of the UNES and replacing her with a military officer. In chapter 8 Keymer Ávila reminds us that police militarization is not a new phenomenon in Venezuela. The police in Venezuela remained under military control even after democratization, and, like military governments throughout the region, Venezuela continued to conceptualize policing in terms of the national security doctrine (see Hernández 1986; Skurski and Coronil 2005). While militarized policing never disappeared under Chávez, it reached new heights and took new directions under the Maduro government. In 2015 the Maduro government initiated the most nefarious citizen security program of all. The Operation Liberation of the People (Operación de Liberación del Pueblo, OLP) brought together various civilian and military security forces to carry out raids, shooting up neighborhoods in broad daylight in a media-savvy display of force with hooded police officers. Human rights group PROVEA reported that over six hundred people were killed in OLP raids in 2016 alone. Though the police in Venezuela have long had a *license* to kill, in chapter 9 Leonard Gómez and Rebecca Hanson suggest that new initiatives like the OLP have in effect an *order* to kill.¹¹ As they discuss in their chapter, this change in policy altered criminal organizations, in some cases motivating increased cooperation between them and in others generating conflict as gangs moved into new sectors or migrated out of the city into rural areas.

In sum, the early years of the Chávez government saw police forces that were largely abandoned and in many cases shunned in favor of non-state armed actors as well as the proliferation of firearms. Efforts at police reform after 2006 never fully convinced Hugo Chávez and always competed with militarized policing initiatives.¹² But when Nicolás Maduro assumed power as a weak president in 2013 he progressively gave more space in the state apparatus to the military, including control over the police forces. This resurgence of militarized policing expanded the

role of the state as a key violent actor (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018). In addition to being a significant cause of violent deaths, these militarized operations have had the effect of disrupting settled criminal networks and thereby creating violent battles for dominance, incentivizing criminal networks to band together and become further organized to confront violent police raids.

Failure to Reduce Concentrated Disadvantage

The fact that violence in Venezuela correlates with economic growth does not mean that poverty and inequality are irrelevant. The mere fact that most lethal violence takes place in popular¹³ barrios and has poor, young men as its victims is indication enough that poverty and exclusion are part of the causal portrait. Understanding the idea of concentrated disadvantage can help us understand how, and point us to some of the shortcomings of the Chavista project.

Debates on crime in the United States have tended to focus on the dramatic discrepancies between Black and white populations, which have long led to racist and other essentialist interpretations of a “culture of poverty.” In recent decades, however, sociologists have developed a perspective that looks at “concentrated disadvantage,” which refers to a convergence of various structural conditions that result from residential segregation and social and economic isolation.¹⁴ Concentrated disadvantage includes poverty but also unemployment and underemployment, female-headed families, lack of professional workers, and absence of college graduates; these better predict patterns of violence (see Sampson and Wilson 1995, 2018; Krivo and Peterson 1996). By undermining formal and informal crime control mechanisms at the level of the household and the community, as well as preventing opportunities for economic and social inclusion, concentrated disadvantage creates opportunities for crime and violence. Highlighting the role of political institutions in the production of disadvantage, Robert Vargas (2016) shows how conflicts over political power within local governments undermine violence reduction efforts by obstructing local level organizing and fracturing collective efficacy.

For our purposes here it is important to see how these factors work. Concentrated disadvantage should not be understood as a focalized mechanisms of frustration-aggression or relative deprivation. It is not that people are poor and therefore they act out. Rather, over generations public policies and other processes produce social and economic isolation, erecting barriers to the consolidation and reproduction of formal and informal mechanisms of social control. Where families and communities are persistently barred from accessing social and economic re-

sources, it may be more difficult for collective efficacy—or the trust and cohesion among neighbors that facilitates informal social control—to develop (Sampson and Wilson 1995; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Robert Sampson et al. emphasize that this is a structural theory that is not based in motivations, but rather the microdynamics of neighborhoods and households produced by social structural features, while Lauren Krivo and Ruth Peterson (2012) highlight the historical patterns of social policies that reproduce structural disadvantage in these places.

There have been useful corrections of this perspective, and the social disorganization school of thought from which it emerges. Waverly Duck (2012, 2009) taps into a tradition that challenges the notion of “disorder” in poor neighborhoods. He shows that poor neighborhoods, even those with high rates of violence, are organized by complex interactional orders, and reveals the identifiable logic of seemingly “senseless” killings (2009). Duck argues that given the high stakes residents of violent neighborhoods confront, they are even more likely to learn and observe the local order than in other contexts. However, he makes an important distinction that gets at the source of much of the confusion around the terms *anomie* and *disorder*. He points out that the highly structured interactional orders that he describes are often quite at odds with the values, beliefs, and goals of the people who inhabit them. Thus, the issue is not a lack of values or norms, but that residents’ values and beliefs may be largely irrelevant to navigating the contexts they live in and therefore do not actually impact their behavior. Rather, their survival strategies in violent contexts are governed by locally grounded codes.

The Chávez government’s achievements in reducing poverty and inequality when measured at the national level cover over significant gaps of structural disadvantage. While social policies undoubtedly empowered some people and communities and generated cohesion and social capital in some places, in others they resulted in new lines of social conflict within popular sectors (Antillano 2016). Despite considerable efforts, housing construction did not keep up with demand, leaving overcrowded neighborhoods with high rates of residential mobility. While overall employment went down, it remained high among poor young men. A gender analysis is instructive here, as social policy and participatory initiatives had very different impacts on the lives of men and women. While education coverage increased, over half of all young men were not enrolled in school or education initiatives. Women participated in much higher numbers in the government’s many participatory initiatives (Fernandes 2008).

The continued decay of the judicial system (Smilde 2015) disproportionately affected the poorer social classes, leaving them to their own

resources for conflict resolution (Brinks 2008). One state institution did become much more influential in the lives of young men under Chavismo: prison. Increasing rates of incarceration carried with it all of the typical deleterious biographical and social effects.

While our chapters do not directly focus on concentrated disadvantage, they point to its importance in explaining violence in Venezuela (see chapters 5, 6, and 11); future research should include concentrated disadvantage in its analysis of crime and violence in the country (see chapter 12).

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book represents an interdisciplinary effort at explaining violence in Venezuela. Chapters cover a range of methods, including ethnography, survey research, statistical analysis, and interviews, thereby providing a multifaceted and multilayered approach to the problem. The framework presented in this introduction does not represent a series of hypotheses “proven” by the empirical chapters of this book; rather, it presents a series of constructs to orient the reader and weave together overlapping but distinct insights. We hope this book will focus discussion of violence in Venezuela and the region not just by providing explanations, but through exhibiting tension points that can point to agendas for further research.

Part I, “The Shape of Violence,” seeks to provide a nuanced and empirically grounded portrait of the problem of violence in the country. In chapter 1 Josbelk González Mejías and Dorothy Kronick look at the controversy over the homicide rate in Venezuela, showing how different institutions’ methods for counting homicides complicate estimation. They use a novel dataset to estimate the violent death rate, suggesting it provides a more accurate indicator than homicides. They arrive at an astronomical rate of 70 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants for 2015. In chapter 2 José Luis Fernández-Shaw Guerra looks at the increasing heterogeneity of violence in Venezuela. While violence in Latin America has generally been considered an urban problem since the third wave of democratization, he shows the growth of rural violence, evidencing the need for contextually based analysis.

Part II, “Causals Processes and Cycles of Violence,” looks at the causes of violence. In chapter 3 Josefina Bruni Celli and Javier Rodríguez show a striking direct relationship between state oil income and violence, except during the neoliberal period of the 1990s when state fragility probably had other causes. They make clear the need to step back from the standard assumption that violence is the result of poverty and inequality and consider how certain influxes of resources might under-

mine institution building. In the absence of effective state institutions, armed conflict and coercive social orders emerge. In chapter 4 Andrés Antillano uses ethnographic research in a Venezuelan prison to reveal the way violence operates as a means of domination and sovereignty in social relations at the same time that it can revalorize socially excluded subjects. In chapter 5 Verónica Zubillaga looks at the importance of handguns in Venezuela's violence.

Part III, "From Civilian Police Reform to Resurgent Militarized Policing," looks at the various ways authorities have sought to address violence as well as the challenges they have faced. In chapter 6 Luis Gerardo Gabaldón details the government's efforts at police reform and how these efforts came up short, showing how politicization and ideological discrepancies within the government weakened citizen security initiatives. In chapter 7 Rebecca Hanson and David Smilde use polling data to reveal the Catch-22 police reformers found themselves in, with politicization and polarization destabilizing reform not only from within the state but within society. We show that government backers supported the reform in the abstract, but did not sympathize with its main tenets, while those who sympathized with its progressive elements tended not to support the government. Chapters 8 and 9 look at the at the growth of militarized policing and how it has contributed to violence, with Keymer Ávila focusing on weak state institutions and Leonard Gómez and Rebecca Hanson looking at performances of state power. These elaborate spectacles not only produce state violence; they also alter criminal networks in such a way that incentivizes the use of violence between gangs or between increasingly organized gangs and the state.

Part IV, "Responses to Violence: Looking Back, Looking Forward," looks at responses to violence. In chapter 10 Manuel Llorens asks how communities have responded to chronic violence in a context of mounting insecurity, pluralized violence, and state institutions too fragmented to provide effective solutions. Although communities have been transformed by trauma, Llorens also finds that local organizations in some spaces have engaged in violence prevention, with anti-violence pacts among communities being notably effective in some contexts. In chapter 11 Enrique Desmond Arias provides some regional points of comparison. He looks at the variety of policy hits and misses in Brazil and Colombia and suggests that lessons can be drawn out for Venezuela. While acknowledging that "high levels of crime establish a pernicious resilience," Arias details how some countries in the region have successfully decreased record breaking rates of violence. In the final reflections we look at the current context in which crime has decreased and illicit markets reorganized in the midst of an economic collapse and a wave

of out-migration, and discuss what this might mean for the conceptual framework we put forward in the introduction.

CONCLUSION

During his presidency, Hugo Chávez succeeded in reducing poverty and incorporating sectors that had been long marginalized and ignored into Venezuela's political life. Nevertheless, conflicts and struggles within Chavismo resulted in an approach that focused on state-spending that failed to address structural inequalities in a universal way, constant institutional change, ambivalent and eclectic attempts to reform criminal justice institutions, and continued militarized policing. This approach not only failed to reduce violence, it facilitated a dramatic increase in it. Taken together, the material presented in this book underlines the fact that reducing poverty and inequality—while important goals in themselves—are not the same as reducing crime and violence. The latter is driven by multiple causal dynamics that are related to poverty and inequality, but largely in indirect, nonlinear ways. As has occurred under previous governments, a boom in oil prices was followed by massive public spending. Under Chávez, oil revenue was invested in health, education, and food initiatives. However, this approach did not alter pockets of concentrated disadvantage in poor neighborhoods and coexisted with a considerable de-structuration of the policing, justice, and corrections systems. As a result, the most important causal factors of violence were not improved—they worsened. Indeed, the Chávez period shows that success in reducing poverty and inequality is undercut when state institutions become increasingly fragmented, there is unequal distribution of government institutional coverage—including in crime prevention (Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza 2000, 247)—and the provision of security falls to communities or other non-state actors.