Vicarious Victimization and Support for Iron Fist Crime Control Measures in Guatemala

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Violent crime rates have been climbing in Central America, a fact many commentators and scholars point to as the reason for strong citizen support for authoritarian crime control policies. Yet sociological theories of deviance and political theories of media effects suggest that it is not a rise in *actual* crime but the *perception* of a rise in crime that fuels punitive policy and rhetoric. Following this logic, I argue that high crime rates and direct personal experiences with crime are not the only forces that push citizens to support authoritarian measures. Instead, one of the driving forces behind citizen support for authoritarian crime control policies is how individuals perceive crime shaped by how public discourse defines the crime problem and how citizens experience crime indirectly through particular forms of vicarious victimization such as news media coverage of crime. I test this claim using an original survey experiment conducted in Guatemala City in 2011,[i] inspired by experiments conducted by Iyengar (1991), who found that the framing of television news affects people's understanding of the causes of crime and possible solutions.

Research on the factors that influence individual attitudes towards crime finds that perceptions of insecurity do not necessarily reflect the actual amount and intensity of crime in a given area. Instead, this literature argues that citizens become concerned with crime because the media reports a rise in crime (Erikson 1966; Fishman 1978; Scheingold 1984). This research has been conducted almost exclusively in the context of stagnant or declining crime rates in the US, Canada, and Europe and has not often been empirically tested outside of advanced industrialized countries. Scholarly work on fear of crime in Latin America has begun to apply findings from the media effects literature to the context of developing countries (see Cruz 1996, 1999, 2000, 2003; Dammert and

Malone 2002; Hume 2004, 2007; Fuentes 2005; Germán Rey 2005; Martel Trigueros 2006; Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz 2006; Holland 2010; Adams 2011; Dammert 2012), but this growing body of work has not yet been able to make solid causal claims as to the influence of the news media on citizens attitudes. This project extends the literature on both media effects and crime in Latin America by employing a survey experiment to test hypotheses about the causal relationship between the crime news and attitudes towards crime control in Guatemala.

The results reported here also have relevance beyond the study of media effects and public opinion. Citizens' responses to the growing threat of violent crime have a profound impact on democracy in the region, and understanding these responses gives us further insight into democratic weakness. When the need for order trumps all other issues on the public agenda, security becomes more valuable than civil and political rights. As Cruz (2000) writes, the biggest threat to democratic consolidation comes from the authoritarian attitudes of citizens who support the restriction of rights in an effort to confront violent crime. Adams (2011) echoes this assertion, pointing to studies that show that citizen demands for security and justice lead to "popular opposition to fundamental tenets of democracy" such as due process and human rights (30). In this context, crime undercuts the rule of law and democratic consolidation both in terms of abusive, illegal, or arbitrary actions of the state (see Brinks 2004; Holston and Caldeira 1998; Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Cano 1999; Zaverucha 1999; Ungar 2000; Hinton 2006) and by eroding public trust in the justice system, undermining public support for civil and human rights, and promoting vigilante and other private forms of justice (see Cruz 2000, 2006; Caldeira 2000; Godoy 2008; Malone 2010; Bateson 2010; Adams 2011).

Background: Guatemala

The northern triangle of Central America is currently one of the most violent regions in the world. According to official statistics, the homicide rate in Guatemala rose 185 percent between 1999 and 2009, peaking at 48 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2009 (Rodriguez et al 2007; Bonilla 2009). Over the past three years, homicide rates in Guatemala have fallen to 41 per 100,000 (Mendoza 2012), but crime and violence remain a pressing concern for Guatemalans.[ii] In the survey examined here, 98 percent of respondents believed that crime rates were rising and 92 percent believed that current crime levels represented a threat to the future welfare of the country. For citizens, crime is the main focal point of interactions with the state. As Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit (2011) describe, Guatemalan citizens "often imagine their relationship to the state and capital city through the lenses of urban violence and danger" (14).

Given its high levels of violent crime and sensational crime news culture, Guatemala represents a most difficult case in which to test hypotheses about the relationship between crime news and public opinion. Media effects should be more difficult to find in a situation where both violent crime rates and consumption of sensational crime news reporting is already high. If exposure to crime news can have a statistically significant impact on citizen attitudes in Guatemala City then we should expect that it would also have an impact where the news media is less lurid and/or violent crime less common.

Experts point to the combination of poverty, inequality, and lack of an effective justice system as contributing factors to this rise in violent crime (Beltrán 2009; Godoy 2008). Much of the violence is attributed to illegal armed groups or clandestine security

organizations that are tightly entwined with the military, powerful political figures, and state institutions (Peacock and Beltrán 2003). The presence of street gangs, which control many of the poorer neighborhoods in urban areas, adds to this climate of violence (Martel Trigueros 2006; Cruz 2010, 2011; Camus 2011; Wolf 2012).[iii] The criminal justice system's response to violence is weak at best—detention, sentencing and conviction rates are abysmally low. In the first nine months of 2009 (from January to October) there were 5,116 homicides in the country, yet only 7 percent of these homicide cases led to an arrest and only 2 percent ended with a guilty verdict (Bonilla 2009). Due to the state's inability to cope with organized crime and corruption, the United Nations and the Guatemalan government created the National Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) in 2007, an independent body designed to support investigations of illegal and clandestine security structures.[iv]

Crime has become a key topic in Guatemalan politics. In 2007, crime control policies became a central focal point of the presidential election, with the two leading candidates taking up opposing positions on the issue. Álvaro Colom Argueta, the leader of the center-left *Unión Nacional de la Esperanza* (UNE), promised to fight crime with "intelligence" and proposed police, prison, and judicial reforms as well as programs to reduce poverty and unemployment. Otto Pérez Molina, a former army general and head of the *Partido Patriota* (PP), campaigned on the slogan "*urge mano dura*" (we need an iron fist!), promising to increase military involvement in crime control and the reinstatement of the infamous civil patrols (Bartlett 2007). In 2011, the front-running candidates, Otto Pérez Molina and Manuel Baldizón, both promised get-tough crime policies. Continuing his use of the slogan *"urge mano dura,"* Pérez centered his

campaign on promises to reduce the murder rate by half through an expansion of the police force and the use of the armed forces to attack drug traffickers. Baldizón, in turn, campaigned on an array of populist promises, including an additional annual bonus to all workers and the reinstatement of the death penalty.

The graphic daily newspaper *Nuestro Diario* dominates print and broadcast coverage of crime in Guatemala. *Nuestro Diario* currently sells an average of 300,000 papers daily, more than twice the circulation of its biggest competitor. The emergence of *Nuestro Diario* into the media market led to a rise in readership that nearly doubled the number of people reading newspapers in Guatemala (LaMay 2007). *Nuestro Diario*'s dramatic rise in circulation over the last decade places it with Brazil's *O Globo* and Argentina's *Clarín* as the top selling newspapers in all of Latin America. Experts claim that at least four people read each copy of *Nuestro Diario*, as it is often passed from person to person on public buses and in marketplaces, thereby allowing the paper to reach an estimated 1.2 million people (author interview 2009).

Popular among young people, *Nuestro Diario* is notorious for sensationalist journalism, and it is this yellow journalism that many cite as the reason for its success (LaMay 2007). As one journalist describes, *Nuestro Diario* takes advantage of the morbid and plays on the public's attraction to voyeurism, a lucrative business practice that has shifted both print and broadcast media in Guatemala towards more violent and sensationalist news reporting (author interview 2009). In this sense, murder becomes entertainment. Violence sells, capturing an audience with what one Guatemalan columnist describes as "a form of necrophiliac pornography" (Berganza 2008).[v]

Hypotheses

According to the media effects literature, citizens become concerned with crime not only because actual crime rates rise; instead, people are often strongly influenced by media reports of a rise in crime or violence. In fact, studies conducted in North America and Europe demonstrate that public outcry against crime often coincides with steady or falling crime rates (Fishman 1978; Scheingold 1984; Caldeira 2000). News coverage of crime and other representations of crime in public discourse create an alternate vision of reality, which, however much it may differ from the reality of statistics, obscures the facts reflected in crime rates and technical reports. The media reports an incident in a particular way, the public responds accordingly, and a particular image of crime becomes self-perpetuating. News coverage categorizes and labels victims and criminals, identifying the good and the bad. Violence on a city bus must be the work of street gangs, the teenager shot by a security guard must be a thief, and the woman burned by the lynch mob must have done something to deserve her fate.

This is not to say that the reality of crime, the facts and statistics, are not important. The collection and analysis of such facts and statistics is invaluable both at the micro level of individual investigations and the macro level of crime policy. Nor are individuals passive receptors of mediated images of crime, blindly accepting what the popular media tells them is true. Instead, as Baudrillard (1995) argues, uncertainty as to what is true and what is constructed makes facts less important. This uncertainty blurs the line between the real and the perceived until the differences no longer matter. I develop the hypothesis that vicarious victimization via exposure to crime news drives support for

authoritarian crime control policies from this idea that the dominant images of crime in public discourse are just as important as the numerical reality of crime.

According to the theory of agenda setting, cues created by the news media force the public's attention to certain issues, while theories of media framing posit that how the media frame an issue can change how people think about it (Lippmann 1922; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Funkhouser 1973; Lang and Lang 1991; Kinder 1998; Howitt 1998). Through agenda setting, topics prioritized by the media become the issues citizens believe are the most important. The news media force attention to these topics by constantly presenting them to the public, making some problems more salient than others (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Lang and Lang 1991). Based on the constructivist idea that individuals understand reality through particular "frames" that give order and meaning to events and experiences, theories of media framing argue that how the media address a problem influences what attitudes citizens have towards that issue (Beckett 1994).

In their study of the agenda setting power of the mass media, McCombs and Shaw (1972) find that while the media are relatively successful in defining which issues individuals think about, they are much less effective in influencing how individuals think about these issues. In other words, the media can set the agenda, but media frames do not have much effect. Studies specific to crime news, however, show that certain media frames can reinforce the basic ideas behind punitive crime control policies (Becker 1966; Iyengar 1991; Caldeira 2000). Iyengar (1991), for example, finds that event oriented reports lead viewers of television news to blame an offense on the personal qualities of an individual offender and to support punitive punishment. Gordon and Heath (1991), in

turn, find that readers of newspapers that devote the majority of their reporting to crime display higher levels of fear of crime than those who read other types of newspapers.

In this study, I examine four hypotheses about the relationship between exposure to crime news and support for authoritarian crime control measures. The first hypothesis states that crime news has an agenda setting function—exposure to crime news makes citizens more aware of the crime problem. The second hypothesis posits that exposure to crime news has a direct effect on support for authoritarian crime control measures.

H_1: exposure to crime news $\rightarrow$ higher awareness of crime problem

H_2: exposure to crime news $\rightarrow$ support for authoritarian crime control measures

The third hypothesis inserts a second step on the path from exposure to crime news to support for authoritarian crime control measures—fear of crime. The relationship between crime news and fear has inconsistent support in the literature (for a discussion see Heath and Gilbert 1996; Beckett 1997; Howitt 1998). The intention here is to examine whether there is a relationship between crime news and fear of crime in the context of high crime rates and high levels of fear. The fourth hypothesis changes this second step in the path, replacing fear of crime with distrust in government institutions. This hypothesis is based on the logic that crime news not only reports criminal activity but also exposes the state's inability to fight crime, which could lead citizens to lose confidence in state institutions (Dammert and Malone 2002; Zimring and Johnson 2006; Adams 2011; Dammert 2012). Some argue that criminal justice institutions are able to control how the news media portrays them by promoting "legitimizing images" that push politically aware citizens towards higher levels of support (Gibson, Caldeira, and Baird 1998). I contend, however, that the judiciary and other criminal justice institutions are

much less likely to promote legitimizing images outside the advanced industrial democracies. Instead, as Malone (2010) argues the news media often publishes delegitimizing images of the criminal justice system. This distrust in government, in turn, promotes higher levels of support for authoritarian crime control measures.

H_3: exposure to crime news $\rightarrow$ fear of crime $\rightarrow$ support for authoritarian crime control measures

H_4: exposure to crime news $\rightarrow$ distrust in government $\rightarrow$ support for authoritarian crime control measures

Support for Authoritarian Crime Control

I test the hypotheses outlined above with a survey experiment that exposes two treatment groups to different types of crime news (for a discussion of the use of survey experiments in political science, see Drukman et al 2004; Druckman et al. 2006; Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2006; Horiuchi, Imai and Taniguchi 2007). By using a survey experiment, I can compare the opinions of respondents in the treatment and control groups, and make causal claims about the effect of news media exposure on respondents' attitudes.

The survey experiment was conducted in Guatemala City and the surrounding metropolitan area in the fall of 2011.[vi] Respondents were placed in one of three groups: a control group, exposed to three news articles that had nothing to do with crime or violence; the first treatment group, exposed to two news reports of non-crime related news and one new report of a murder; and the second treatment group, exposed to the same two non-crime related articles used in the first treatment group and an article that

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reports a lynching.[vii] Respondents were exposed to the news articles corresponding to their group and then asked questions relating to crime and crime control.

In order to address H_1, I operationalize awareness of crime as a political and a personal problem, and measure it in two ways. The first measure, listing crime as the most serious problem the country faces, comes from an open-ended survey item, following the logic that if people are made more aware of crime, they will be more likely to rank it high on the national agenda.[viii] The second measure, self-reported victimization,[ix] is less intuitive. By itself, reports of crime victimization do not indicate a higher awareness of crime. However, a higher level of reported victimization in one or both of the treatment groups as compared to the control group suggests that exposure to crime news brings crime to the front of respondents' thoughts and pushes them to either exaggerate their own personal experience with crime or remember incidents that they would have otherwise overlooked.

The last three hypotheses deal with attitudes towards authoritarian crime control measures. While there are myriad authoritarian crime control measures across Latin America, I operationalize support for authoritarian crime control as support for extralegal policing, support for vigilantism, and support for presidential candidate (and now President) Otto Pérez Molina, whose presidential campaign revolved around the slogan "*urge mano dura*" (we need an iron fist!). Extralegal policing and vigilantism represent the public and private manifestations of the restriction of rights in reaction to crime (Godoy 2006). They are by definition illegal acts, whether perpetrated by state or private actors. Support for such actions suggests a level of frustration with the law and with the criminal justice system that goes beyond the impulse for democratic reform. I include

self-reported voting for Otto Pérez Molina as a measure of citizen support for legalized authoritarian policing (as opposed to extralegal policing and vigilantism). Pérez Molina, with his emphasis on the need for militarized "iron fist" crime control policies, represents the further institutionalization and political legitimization of authoritarian crime control policy. Otto Pérez Molina was not the only candidate in the 2011 elections to promote authoritarian crime control—his major rival, Manuel Baldizón, campaigned on promises to reinstate the death penalty—but he is the focal point of *mano dura* politics in Guatemala. Interpretations of what *mano dura* means vary widely among citizens, but when asked an open-ended question as to what "*mano dura*" meant to them,[x] 15 percent of respondents replied that these words represented a specific candidate's political campaign. Even though other politicians support authoritarian crime control policies, in Guatemala iron fist policies are strongly linked to Otto Pérez Molina and the PP.

I measure support for extralegal policing with a forced choice survey item that asks respondents whether they think the authorities must always respect the law or if it is permissible to act outside they law to capture criminals.[xi] This measure does not take into account legalized authoritarian policing, such as the anti-gang laws in El Salvador, but instead asks respondents to imagine a scenario where the police act outside the boundaries of whatever laws are in place. The measure of support for vigilantism comes from a survey item that asks respondents if they agree that people in a neighborhood should organize to protect themselves and fight crime on their own.[xii] Although vigilantism in Guatemala frequently manifests as lynch mobs and is often associated with rural, indigenous areas (see Mendoza 2007; Godoy 2006; Handy 2004), vigilantism— both in the form of lynch mobs and organized neighborhood vigilante groups—takes

place in urban areas as well, including Guatemala City.[xiii] The survey item asks

respondents about organizing to protect the neighborhood (which could include activities

ranging from a neighborhood watch to a lynch mob) rather than whether they support

lynching specifically in an attempt to avoid social desirability bias.

The support for Otto Pérez Molina measure is a variable coded in two ways. For

the difference of means test, support for Otto Pérez Molina is coded as a dummy variable,

with 1 for respondents who reported they had voted for Otto Pérez Molina in the

September 2011 presidential election.[xiv] Those who reported they voted for someone

other than Otto Pérez Molina and those who reported not being registered to vote (about

25 percent of respondents) are coded as 0.[xv] For the regression analysis, I code support

for Otto Pérez Molina as a categorical variable, with 0 representing respondents who are

not registered to vote, 1 representing those who voted for someone other than Otto Pérez

Molina, and 2 representing those who voted for Otto Pérez Molina.

H_3 and H_4 insert fear of crime and distrust in government into the relationship

between crime news and support for authoritarian crime control measures. The item used

here to measure fear of crime asks respondents to assess how safe they feel in their

neighborhood when thinking of the possibility of being a victim of crime.[xvi] I

operationalize distrust in government as dissatisfaction with government performance

(see Feldman 1983; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007). I measure distrust

in government in two ways. First, I create a variable using a polychoric principle

component analysis[xvii] that includes items asking respondents to report how much they

trust the judicial system to punish criminals, whether they think the National Civil Police

is trustworthy, and how much they agree that the justice system can provide a fair

trial.[xviii] Second, I use an open-ended survey items that asks respondents who report that they think crime has risen in the last twelve months whom they blame for this rise in crime. I then recode this item as a dummy variable, with those who hold the government responsible for the rise in crime coded as 1 and all others coded as zero.[xix]

Results

In the following section, I examine the impact of my experimental treatments on my dependent variables using a difference of means test. Table 1 reports the percentage of respondents who report that crime is the biggest problem in the country and who report to have been a victim of crime in the last year. I consider the differences in means to be significant if the p value is less than 0.05 in a one-tailed t-test, with the expectation that means will be larger in the experimental treatments groups.

Insert Table 1 here

Neither of the experimental treatments has a significant effect on listing crime as the biggest problem in the country. This may be due to the already high number of respondents who believe crime is the most serious issue Guatemala faces, as well as the context of the survey, which was conducted in September of 2011, a week after the first round of presidential elections in which crime was the most visible campaign issue. One more reminder of the crime problem did not affect its salience as a political issue.

Exposure to the murder article, on the other hand, has a significant impact on reporting having been a victim of crime in the last year. I expected exposure to crime news to have an impact on reports of crime victimization because it brings crime to the front of respondents' minds (Zaller and Feldman 1992). The murder report in particular may resonate with respondents because its narrative emphasizes the arbitrary and

ubiquitous nature of violent crime and encourages readers to identify with the victim. The article on lynching, alternatively, may alienate readers who do not identify with the victims and cannot imagine themselves as part of a lynch mob. Instead of reminding respondents of their own experiences, it may serve as an example of how their own lives are safe relative to the lives of others. The impact of exposure to crime news on self-reported victimization is especially noteworthy given the context of the survey. Crime was already a salient issue in public discourse due to the presidential elections held the previous week. The effect of the treatment may be more powerful than estimated here in order for it to stand out in a context already saturated with discourse on crime.

Insert Table 2 here

Table 2 reports the results of my analysis of the impact of the experimental treatments on support for authoritarian crime control, fear of crime, and distrust in government.[xx] Contrary to expectations, exposure to crime news has no significant impact on support for extralegal policing, support for vigilantism, or fear of crime. In contrast to Malone's (2010) finding that media exposure has little impact on public trust in the police and the judiciary in Central America, Table 2 shows that exposure to media coverage of murder makes respondents less trusting of criminal justice institutions and more likely to blame the government for a rise in crime over the last year.

The news articles used in the experimental give a victim-centered, event oriented account of crime where perpetrators are often unidentified and police rarely have information as the details and motive of a crime. Whether these news reports reflect the "true" nature of crime and criminal justice in Guatemala is irrelevant. While violent crime *is* normal, the police *are* ineffective, and perpetrators *are* unlikely to be caught, it is

not the truth of the article that matters but the immediacy of such images that is important. What matters is what images of reality the public consume and how these "truths" are (or are not) discussed in public forums. But this does not explain why the murder article had a significant effect while the news report of lynching did not. One could argue that being exposed to the lynching article would also promote images that delegitimize the criminal justice system. News coverage of murder reminds readers that violent crime is a common occurrence and often goes unpunished. News coverage of a lynching reminds readers that citizens expect crimes to go unpunished and often take the law into their own hands. The lynching article describes the discovery of the tortured bodies of two men accused of theft that had been beaten and shot to death by a lynch mob in a village near Huehuetenango. Such images convey a feeling of lawlessness and the absence of institutionalized justice. The lynching, however, occurred in a rural, indigenous area far from Guatemala City, a factor that may have something to do with the relatively small and insignificant difference between the group exposed to the lynching article and the control group. The murder, which took place in the central business district in the capital city, is a more immediate and personalized threat. Despite the fact that vigilante justice is also prevalent in the capital, the lynching represents a phenomenon that many in urban areas see as distant, provincial, and associated with indigenous communities that are still considered by some to be inhabited by backwards peasants. Lynchings, from this perspective, do not represent a problem with the justice system but are instead a problem that springs from the rural indigenous communities themselves.

Table 3 reports the results of four logistic regression models used to test the second part of H₃ and H₄—that fear of crime (H₃) and distrust in government (H₄) lead to

support for authoritarian crime control measures. These models include dummy variables that represent the experimental treatments and control variables including age, education, income, and gender. In addition, I control for crime victimization, crime talk, perceived gang presence, and readership of *Nuestro Diario*.

I include crime talk and perceived gang presence because they represent alternate forms of vicarious victimization. Through crime talk, citizens receive information about crime by discussing crime news or retelling their own or others crime stories. I expect that respondents who talk about crime (as measured by a survey item that asks respondents how many times per week they talk about crime with other people[xxi]) are more often will be more likely to support authoritarian crime control measures. I include perceived gang presence as a type of "incivility"—social and physical conditions within a neighborhood that residents interpret as threatening (Garofalo 1981; Skogan 1990; Wilson 1975; Wilson and Kelling 1982; Taylor 1996)—and measure it with a survey item that asks respondents whether there are gangs in their neighborhood.[xxii] I focus on street gangs rather than drug traffickers or organized crime due to politicians' and citizens' propensity to blame crime and violence on gangs (see Camus 2011). In this context, a visible gang presence is a constant reminder of potential crime and violence.

In addition, I include a variable that reflects readership of *Nuestro Diario* in an attempt to control for the level of exposure to crime news similar to the experimental treatments (the treatments come straight from the pages of *Nuestro Diario*). The *Nuestro Diario* variable is measured through a survey item that asks respondents what newspaper they read most frequently,[xxiii] and is coded 1 for *Nuestro Diario* and 0 for all other newspapers or if the respondent does not read the newspaper.

Table 3 reports the results of a logistic regression model based on multiple imputation. Because a large amount of data is missing from the income variable (22 percent), greatly reducing the number of observations when using list-wise deletion, I use multivariate imputation by chained equations (Royston 2004) to impute missing values for income across 10 independent datasets.[xxiv] Unlike other methods of dealing with missing data that can bias estimates and narrow confidence intervals, such as list-wise deletion or single imputation, multiple imputation uses several independent datasets to estimate variance both within and between imputations and uses the pooled results of all datasets to produce estimates of the model in question.[xxv]

Neither fear of crime nor distrust in institutions has a significant effect on support for extralegal policing. Instead, crime victims and those who report a gang presence in their neighborhood are more likely to support extralegal policing. The effects of a perceived gang presence and victimization are intuitive: victims of crime and those who notice gangs in their neighborhood want to see criminals caught by any means necessary due to their personal experience with crime and the threatening societal perception of gang members. The impact of perceived gang presence on support for extralegal policing suggests that although the experimental treatments have no impact, other forms of vicarious victimization influence attitudes towards authoritarian crime control measures.

Insert Table 3 here

The impact of crime victimization on support for extralegal policing shows that direct experience of crime is important. Those who have been recent victims of crime may feel anger or resentment towards criminals that may cause them to condone extralegal policing. We must remember, however, that the difference of means test shows

that the victimization variable does not necessarily represent an accurate picture of victimization. Rather than holding steady across the treatment and control groups, self-reported victimization rates rose in the group exposed to the murder article (and this rise was not due to chance). Exposure to crime news, then, affects support for extralegal policing via its effects on self-reported victimization.

Contrary to expectations, fear of crime has no significant relationship with support for vigilantism. Blaming the government for a rise in crime, however, does have a positive, significant effect on support for vigilantism, as predicted by H_3. This suggests that it is not fear that motivates citizens to support authoritarian crime control measures, nor is it always a personal experience with crime that matters. Reading *Nuestro Diario* is the only other variable with an independent effect on support for vigilantism. Those who report reading *Nuestro Diario* are more likely to support vigilantism, a finding that bolsters the claim that Guatemala represents a most difficult case to test the effects of sensational crime news on public attitudes. If being exposed to this particular newspaper in every-day life is a significant predictor of support for vigilantism, then it will be that much more difficult to find an effect of exposure to one more article on murder or lynching taken from that newspaper. This also suggests that long-term exposure to event oriented crime news such as that published in *Nuestro Diario* may have a causal effect on authoritarian attitudes towards crime control, a scenario that cannot be tested within the parameters of this experiment.

Once again, it should be noted that the survey item used to measure support for vigilantism does not ask respondents if they support lynch mobs. Instead, it asks them whether or not they agree that citizens should organize in order to protect themselves and

fight crime on their own. In Guatemala City, references to privately organized crime control groups such as a neighborhood watch bring to mind so-called "justice" groups (such as the *Angeles Justicieros*, a vigilante group that operates in La Terminal market) and impromptu neighborhood beatings of suspected thieves. The question does not name these organizations or loosely organized events directly in an attempt to include acts of vigilantism other than lynching and to avoid social desirability bias.

A more intuitive finding might be that those who lack confidence in the police, see the courts as unable to guarantee a fair trial, and do not trust the judiciary to punish criminals are more likely to support taking the law into their own hands. But it appears that deficiencies in the criminal justice system are not enough to push citizens to support vigilantism. Rather than blame criminals, gangs, poverty, drugs, or the police for a rise in crime, the majority of respondents (42 percent) blame the government, and it is this belief that the government has failed—not just that it is untrustworthy, but that its actions have made a bad situation worse than it was before—that leads people to support vigilantism.

As Table 3 reports and the t-test reported above confirms, being part of the treatment group exposed to the murder article has a significant positive impact on voting for Otto Pérez Molina.[xxvi] Education and crime talk are also significant predictors. Those with higher education levels are more likely to report voting for Pérez Molina, as are those who talk more often about crime. This is not to suggest that vicarious victimization such as being exposed to crime news or talking about crime makes people more likely to vote for a candidate who bases his campaign on promises of imposing authoritarian crime control policies. The nature of the survey experiment does not allow for such claims. Instead, it demonstrates that vicarious exposure to crime makes respondents more likely

to report voting for Otto Pérez Molina, a candidate who made *mano dura* policies the main focus of his presidential campaign. This could be because the news article about murder reminded respondents of why they voted for Pérez Molina and thus made them more likely to vocalize their support. It could also be due to a form of social desirability bias, where exposure to crime news makes a respondent feel that when faced with written and visual evidence of an unsolved violent crime, the "correct" answer in terms of vote choice must be the candidate who promised a swift and harsh authoritarian response.

Discussion

The above analysis suggests that crime news has varying effects on citizen support for authoritarian crime control measures. I want to emphasize three important findings: the impact of media coverage of crime on self-reported victimization, the relationship between exposure to crime news, distrust in government, and support for vigilantism, and the impact of crime news and crime talk on vote choice.

The impact of exposure to news coverage of murder on self-reported victimization is, at first glance, difficult to explain. Does reading about a murder in a news story suddenly make a respondent remember a previously forgotten experience with crime? But if we take the victimization measure as subjective then the influence of crime news makes more sense. In order to explain framing effects, Zaller and Feldman (1992) propose that most people respond to survey questions using whatever information is "at the top of their heads at the moment of answering" (pg. 579). According to Zaller and Feldman's (1992) response and accessibility axioms, respondents answer survey questions by considering what is most salient to them at the moment of response. While Zaller and Feldman are addressing individuals' attitudes rather than self-reported events,

these axioms could explain the impact of exposure to crime news on reports of victimization—news about crime reminds respondents when they themselves or close friends, neighbors, or family members have been crime victims. This in turn could make them more likely to exaggerate their own experiences or report the experiences of friends or family as their own. In turn, reading about crime could make respondents more comfortable reporting their own experiences. News coverage of crime, then, has an indirect influence on other attitudes, such as support for extralegal policing, via its influence on self-reported crime victimization.

The research design used for this study cannot determine what long-term effects the influence crime news has on how individuals perceive their own victimization. The experiment can only tell us if exposure to crime news has a short-term effect. Yet by showing that reading a news article about murder makes respondents more likely to report being a victim of crime, it opens the door for further study. It could be that constant bombardment with sensational, event oriented crime news has a cumulative effect, where each additional exposure pushes individuals further towards thinking about crime and supporting punitive or extralegal solutions. It could also be that individual crime news articles can spark a memory of a forgotten experience or a propensity for exaggeration, but long-term exposure contributes to a culture of violence, were violence becomes a banal, commonplace occurrence. The finding that reading *Nuestro Diario* is a significant predictor of support for vigilantism suggests that exposure to sensational crime news may have long term cumulative effects, a question that should be explored in bigger and more nuanced experiments.

The impact of crime news on retrospective vote choice may also have to do with Zaller and Feldman's (1992) response and accessibility axioms. Exposure to a newspaper article about murder has a positive impact on self-reported voting for Otto Pérez Molina in the first round of the 2011 presidential elections. This does not necessarily mean that those who read crime news more often are more likely to vote for a candidate whose main political platform is authoritarian crime control policies. Instead, reading about murder makes people more likely to report their vote for Pérez Molina. While this explanation may have more to say about survey response than about people's attitudes, it has implications beyond the limits of a survey questionnaire. Given Guatemala's sensational media environment, the impact of exposure to one additional newspaper article about murder is especially noteworthy. While the design of this experiment restricts further examination of the link between crime news and vote choice, further research should examine this relationship both within the Guatemalan context and in other Central American countries where crime control is an important political issue.

An interesting and important finding of this study is the relationship between crime news, distrust in government, and support for vigilantism. The two measures of distrust in government—distrust in criminal justice institutions and blaming the government for a rise in crime—are the only attitudes significantly affected by exposure to crime news. In turn, holding the government responsible for rising crime rates has a significant impact on support for vigilantism. In a country where sensational crime news is the norm, this overexposure exacerbates discontent with weak government institutions. In their study of crime news and attitudes towards crime control, Zimring and Johnson (2006) find that distrust in institutions makes people more punitive, an effect that seems

paradoxical—by supporting state-sponsored authoritarian crime control measures, citizens who do not trust the government or criminal justice institutions ironically place even more power in the hands of the very government institutions with which they find fault. Yet this is not exactly what plays out in this case. Instead, distrust in government leads to support for vigilantism, which brings with it an implicit rejection of state-led crime control of any kind, authoritarian or otherwise. Faced not just with inefficiency and corruption, but a perceived failure of the government to control crime, citizens support a privatized form of authoritarian crime control. This is still a punitive form of crime control, but not in the sense of the harsher laws and stricter sentencing (which depend on state action) that Zimring and Johnson consider.

These findings have troubling implications for democracy, especially in the Guatemalan context. When citizens lack trust in the criminal justice system and blame government (rather than criminals) for rising crime rates, the judicial system and the rule of law lose their legitimacy. The rule of law is an integral part of democracy and its loss of legitimacy is worrying. A 2010 survey conducted in Guatemala attests to this dilemma, reporting that 56 percent of respondents agree that the military would be justified in overthrowing the government given high crime rates (LAPOP 2010).

The next step should be to test these findings outside of the context of urban Guatemala. It may be that Guatemala is an outlier, caught up in a perfect storm of crime, corruption, impunity, weak institutions, and a sensationalist media. Yet Guatemala's situation is not entirely unique, as many countries in Latin America and around the world suffer similar maladies. Further research could examine the relationship between crime news, distrust in government, and support for authoritarian crime control in countries that

have similar problems with high crime rates and sensationalist news media, like Brazil or

Mexico, and in countries where crime rates have fallen in recent years, such as Colombia.

In addition, it would beneficial to expand this study to include countries with relatively

low crime rates but high support of authoritarian crime control measures, such as

Argentina, or with low crime rates and low support for authoritarian measures, like Chile.

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Table 1: Awareness of Crime

Treatment Groups vs. Control Group

(One Tailed T-test)

Murder News Group vs. Control Group

	Crime as Biggest Problem	Victimization
Control	82%	39%
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Murder	82%	47%*
	(0.02)	(0.03)
t	-0.09	-1.83
N	503	503

Lynching News Group vs. Control Group

	Crime as Biggest Problem	Victimization
Control	82%	39%
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Lynching	85%	39%
	(0.02)	(0.03)
t	-1.05	0.05
N	497	497

*difference of mean is significant, $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Support for Authoritarian Crime Control Measures

Treatment Groups v. Control Group

(One Tailed T-test)

Murder News Group vs. Control Group

	Extralegal Policing	Vigilantism	Vote for Otto Pérez Molina	Fear of Crime	Distrust in Criminal Justice	Government Responsible for Rise in Crime
Control	33% (0.03)	89% (0.02)	15% (0.02)	3.07 (0.08)	3.88 (0.06)	36% (0.03)
Murder	35% (0.03)	91% (0.02)	25%** (0.03)	2.99 (0.08)	4.02* (0.06)	48%** (0.03)
t	-0.47	-0.61	-2.90	0.75	-1.77	-2.61
df	493	499	502	499	471	502

Lynching News Group vs. Control Group

	Extralegal Policing	Vigilantism	Vote for Otto Pérez Molina	Fear of Crime	Distrust in Criminal Justice	Government Responsible for Rise in Crime
Control	33% (0.03)	89% (0.02)	15% (0.02)	3.07 (0.08)	3.88 (0.06)	36% (0.03)
Lynching	34% (0.03)	85% (0.02)	24%** (0.03)	3.09 (0.07)	3.94 (0.06)	41% (0.03)
t	-0.29	1.43	-2.40	-0.17	-0.80	-0.96
df	487	491	496	495	466	496

*difference of means is significant, $p < 0.05$
** difference of means is significant, $p < 0.01$

Table 3: Support for Authoritarian Crime Control Measures

Multiple Imputed Regression Coefficients

	Multiple Imputed Logistic Regression		Multiple Imputed Multinomial Logistic Regression
	Extralegal Policing	Vigilantism	Vote for Otto Pérez Molina
Fear of crime	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.14 (0.10)	0.09 (0.07)
Distrust in Criminal Justice	0.13 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.09)
Government Responsible for Rise in Crime	-0.31 (0.18)	0.66* (0.24)	0.31 (0.23)
Victimization	0.44** (0.11)	0.24 (0.18)	-0.03 (0.24)
Perceived Gang Presence	0.34* (0.14)	-0.13 (0.18)	-0.05 (0.19)
Crime Talk	0.06 (0.10)	0.11 (0.16)	0.46* (0.21)
Nuestro Diario	0.02 (0.17)	0.53* (0.23)	0.00 (0.16)
Age	0.01 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.14)	0.18 (0.09)
Education	0.04 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.12* (0.04)
Income	-0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.10)	0.01 (0.05)
Gender	0.23 (0.13)	0.04 (0.22)	-0.17 (0.23)
Treatment (murder)	-0.06 (0.16)	0.07 (0.25)	0.67** (0.16)
Treatment (lynching)	0.04 (0.18)	-0.51 (0.31)	0.53 (0.33)
N	629	629	635
F distribution	34.14**	239.83**	3013.62**

$* p < 0.05$
$** p < 0.01$

Notes

[ii] Only El Salvador (69 per 100,000 in 2011) and Honduras (92 per 100,000 in 2011) outpace Guatemala in terms of murder rates (UNDOC 2012). However, since March of 2012, the homicide rate in El Salvador has dropped dramatically due in large part to a controversial peace treaty between the two main street gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Barrio 18.

[iii] Often, the lines between the state security apparatus, clandestine armed groups, drug traffickers, and street gangs blur (see WOLA 2006). The systematic murder of bus drivers in Guatemala city provides a good example. In 2009, over 170 bus drivers were killed while on duty. In most cases, masked men on motorcycles shot drivers through the doors of their buses, without even the pretense of robbery. Authorities have linked these crimes to street gangs and organized crime extorting bus companies for protection money. However, rumors and some official government statements have also linked these crimes to drug traffickers seeking to deflect police attention away from rural operations, shadowy underground organizations bent on destabilizing the government, and political parties whose platforms emphasize iron fist responses to crime.

iv While the CICIG has made some headway in combating corruption and impunity, the commission has also faced grave setbacks, including the resignation of the head of the commission in 2010.

v The columnist is referring specifically to a front page story in *Nuestro Diario* from November of 2008 featuring a photo of an imprisoned gang member holding the decapitated head of rival murdered during a prison riot. The day the photograph appeared, *Nuestro Diario* sold more newspapers than any other day in its history (authors interview 2009).

vi I conducted the survey in association with the Guatemalan survey research firm Aragón & Asociados. We used stratified random sampling, with municipalities as the primary sampling unit. Each sampling point within a municipality had a quota of 10 interviews, divided between men and women of voting age. Sampling points were assigned according to population density. Sampling points were stratified at the neighborhood level within the larger municipalities of Guatemala City, Villa Nueva, and Mixco. Respondents were selected at each sampling point by starting at the northeastern corner of a city block and then moving along the points of the compass until the quota of ten respondents was filled. 755 respondents were interviewed in Spanish, with interviews conducted face to face in respondents' homes. The sampled municipalities included: Guatemala; Villa Nueva; Mixco; San Juan Sacatepéquez; Petapa; Villa Canales; Chinautla; Amatitlán; Santa Catarina Pinula; Palencia; San José Pinula; San Pedro Sacatepéquez; San Pedro Ayampuc; Fraijanes; San Raymundo.

vii The news reports are from recent editions of *Nuestro Diario*. The non-crime related news reports included articles on a teachers' strike, a sinkhole, and destruction caused by

flooding. The articles on crime detailed the murder of an off-duty security guard and the lynching of two men accused of theft. Due to the restrictions of testing these hypotheses with a small pilot study, I focus my attention on the influence of event oriented crime coverage, which Iyengar (1991) found to be the type of media frame that pushed respondents towards more punitive attitudes. The full text and translation of these articles are available upon request.

[viii] *¿Cuál es el problema más grave que está enfrentando el país?*

[ix] *¿Ha sido usted o algún miembro de su familia víctima de algún acto de delincuencia en los últimos 12 meses?*

[x] *¿Muchos políticos hablan de la aplicación de mano dura contra los delincuentes. ¿Qué significa "Mano dura" para usted?*

[xi] *Para capturar delincuentes, ¿cree usted necesario que las autoridades siempre deben respetar las leyes o en ocasiones pueden actuar al margen de la ley?*

[xii] *¿Está usted de acuerdo o en desacuerdo en que los vecinos se organicen en su colonia o barrio para protegerse y combatir el crimen y la delincuencia por su propia cuenta?*

[xiii] According to official statistics, 13 people died in lynchings in the department of Guatemala in 2011, which constituted 27 percent of deaths due to lynching in the country as a whole (Mendoza 2012).

[xiv] *¿Por quien votó para presidente en las últimas elecciones presidenciales?*

[xv] Similar results were found using a measure of support for Otto Pérez Molina where respondents not registered to vote are coded as missing.

[xvi] *¿Qué tan seguro se siente usted en su barrio o colonia, muy seguro, seguro, más o menos seguro, inseguro, muy inseguro ante la posibilidad de ser victima de un asalto, robo ó agresión ú otro tipo de delito?*

[xvii] I use principle component analysis here to find patterns of correlation between the three survey items in question and reducing these variables down to one eigenvector that best represents this relationship. The polychoric principle component analysis uses polychoric correlations to more accurately derive Eigen values for discrete categorical data (Kolenikov and Angeles 2008).

[xviii] *Si usted fuera víctima de un robo o asalto, ¿cuánto confiaría en que el sistema judicial castigaría al culpable: Mucho, poco o nada?; ¿Cree que la Policía Nacional Civil es confiable?; ¿Hasta que punto diría usted qué los tribunales de justicia garantizan un juicio justo?* Each of these variables were recoded so that higher scores represent those who have no confidence that the judicial system will punish offenders, that do not trust the police, and that do not think that the judiciary can guarantee a fair trial. The measure is a continuous variable that runs from 0 to 5.

[xix] While these two measures of distrust in government—distrust in the criminal justice system and blaming the government for a rise in crime—are conceptually linked, they are not highly correlated empirically (with a polyserial correlation of 0.01).

[xx] As in Table 1, the table lists the group mean, with standard errors in parentheses. For the binary variables, the mean is reported as the percent of respondents who had positive responses to the survey items. I consider the differences in means to be significant if $p < 0.05$ in a one-tailed t-test, with the expectation that means will be larger in the experimental treatments groups (with the exception of support for vigilantism in the

group exposed to the news report of lynching, which I expect to have a smaller mean than the control group).

[xxi] *¿Cuántas veces por semana diría usted que hablamos de la delincuencia con otras personas?*

[xxii] *¿En su barrio, existen pandillas o maras?*

[xxiii] *¿Qué periódico lee con más frecuencia?*

[xxiv] Exploration of the data suggests that the missing income values do not seem to be dependent on age, gender, education, treatment group, or any other of a number of possible independent variables and are therefore treated as if they are missing at random.

[xxv] The imputation model includes variables that had no missing data, including age, education, gender, marital status, size of family, municipality, voter registration, and crime victimization.

[xxvi] The results reported in Table 3 come from a multinomial logistic regression model that compares those who voted for Pérez Molina with a base group that voted for other candidates.