



**Cashing In on Violence:
The Effects of Neoliberalism on the Emergence of Youth Gangs in
Latin America**

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I analyze the conditions brought about by neoliberal reforms that contributed to the emergence of youth gangs in Latin America in the 1980s and 90s. I draw upon economic determinism theory to help explain this phenomenon. I then assess the extent to which four factors—state-sponsored political violence, economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and migration (both external and internal)—contributed to higher youth gang participation rates by conducting a comparative case study analysis. This analysis examines the factors that led to the emergence of youth gangs in Guatemala and Brazil. I surmise that the findings of this study are transferable and applicable to the whole of Latin America. I argue that the latter three factors were primarily responsible for compelling individuals to join youth gangs. Finally, I recommend governmental policies that Latin American governments ought to adopt if they wish to eradicate youth gang violence.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED — The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

ADA — *Amigos dos Amigos* or the Friends of Friends (Brazilian gang)

CNI — *Confederação Nacional da Indústria* or the Brazilian National Confederation of Industry

CV — *Comando Vermelho* or the Red Command (Brazilian gang)

DEA — Drug Enforcement Administration

DTO — Drug Trafficking Organization

ECLAC — United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

FDN — *Família do Norte* or the Family of the North (Brazilian gang)

GDP — Gross Domestic Product

IIRIRA — Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act

ILO — International Labor Organization

INCSR — International Narcotics Control Strategy Report

INL — Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs

M-18 — *Barrio 18, Mara Deiciocho*, or the 18th Street Gang (Guatemalan gang)

MS-13 — *Mara Salvatrucha* (Guatemalan gang)

NAFTA — North American Free Trade Agreement

PCC — *Primeiro Comando da Capital* or First Command of the Capital (Brazilian gang)

TC — *Terceiro Comando* or the Third Command (Brazilian gang)

TCP — *Terceiro Comando Puro* or the Pure Third Command (Brazilian gang)

UFCO — United Fruit Company

UNODC — United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

USAID — United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION

Guatemala and Brazil consistently rank among the top 15 countries experiencing violence in the world, which is due in no small part to the perpetuation of youth violence in these regions (De Jesus & Hernandez 2019; Foster 2018). But for 12-year-old Saúl, joining a *mará* (Guatemalan youth gang) in his hometown of Guatemala City was his only choice after he was tossed out of his house by his abusive parents and was left homeless. The *mará* gave him a place to stay, clothes to wear, and food to eat, which points to the ways in which his youth gang was able to support him financially (Brenneman 2012). Likewise, 13-year-old Wanderson, who lives nearly 4,000 miles away in Rio de Janeiro, originally found himself drawn to his local *comando* (Brazilian youth gang) as a way to improve both his cultural and economic capital (Scott 2018). He was born into a poor family and thus came to view youth gang membership as his way out of the *favela* (Brazilian slum).

Saúl and Wanderson's stories are compelling in that they speak to a problem facing many other youths in Latin America. This problem of course is the severe paucity of economic opportunities for young people residing in the region. Viewed from this lens, Saúl and Wanderson's decisions to get involved in their respective youth gangs were motivated by the financial incentives that these organizations had to offer. What these two did not anticipate upon their entry, however, was just how much the next few years of their lives would be characterized by larceny, extortion, drug trafficking, rape, and murder. Such is the culture of Latin American youth gangs: naïve children are lured in by promises of economic opportunity and they inadvertently transform into violent criminals vilified by the government, the media, and society itself. Yet, how legitimate are these depictions of youth gang members, and is it fair to rest all of

the blame on their shoulders? If we are shaped by the society in which we live, are these individuals not just products of their environment?

This study seeks to analyze the extent to which factors beyond any one person's control facilitated in the surge of youth gang participation in Latin America during the late-twentieth century. In carrying out this task, I will first examine the historical relevance of youth groups in Latin American society. Dating back to the early to mid-twentieth century, youths have served as prominent social actors in the region. With regard to Latin America's protracted history with repressive dictatorships and military governments, university students in particular have been at the forefront of calls for reform. Indeed, student protesters are not too far removed from youth gang members in that the two groups are merely rebelling against the rules of their respective societies. In many cases, the two groups are called to action by the very same societal issues. Therefore examining the history of youth activism in Latin America serves to give a better understanding of the factors that would cause youth gangs, which are groups that inherently rebel against their own society, to form.

Keeping in mind the many similarities between student protesters and youth gang members, I then explore where the two seemingly diverged, leading the former to focus their energy on peaceful demonstrations while the latter resorted to carrying out largely criminal activities. I draw upon economic determinism theory to explain how the advent of neoliberalism in Latin America led to this discrepancy by producing factors that compelled youth to increasingly participate in these organizations. The four specific factors that I cite to explain this phenomenon include state-sponsored political violence, economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and migration. I then apply these factors to two cases: the emergence of *maras* in Guatemala and *comandos* in Brazil during the 1980s and 90s. These countries, while vastly

different, both experienced an upsurge of youth gang participation due in large part to a combination of these factors. This makes for a compelling comparative case study and, to my knowledge, no such analysis has been done until now. Finally, I conclude my study by indicating the significance of these findings as they relate to youth gang policy interventions and approaches. Rather than simply demonizing and castigating youth gang members, any real hope of bringing an end to the decades of violence rests on the ability of governments to recognize and address the social problems that led people to join these youth gangs in the first place.

CHAPTER 1: Framing Youth Gangs in a Historical Context

A Brief History of Youths as Social Actors in Guatemala and Brazil

In conceptualizing youth gangs, it is helpful to take a broad view of what constitutes a youth group in Latin American society. There is a universal aspect with regard to how youth “congregate in more or less recognized peer groups and engage in collective behavior... young people learn to socialize and interact with their physical and social environment through the group” (Rodgers 1999: 2). Sports teams, friendship networks, and youth gangs are all examples of youth groups. Although conceptually distinct, Rodgers (1999) notes that these groups share many of the same characteristics, such as a propensity to meet face to face, to display solidarity, and to develop group awareness and attachment to a local territory. Dating back to the early to mid-twentieth century in Latin America, youth groups have occupied a prominent role as social actors in the region.

Guatemala

Youth activism in Guatemala can be traced back to the 1954 *coup d'état* that ousted then-president Jacobo Árbenz. Such a flagrant subversion of democracy struck a chord with youth groups and university students throughout Guatemala (Levenson-Estrada 2013). Árbenz, who was democratically-elected, planned to institute land reforms as well as wealth redistribution programs for a citizenry that had long been exploited by multinational corporations, like the United Fruit Company (UFCO). The UFCO owned approximately 42% of Guatemala's land, which amounted to nearly 700,000 acres, and Árbenz hoped to return a significant portion of it back to the Guatemalan people (Moye 1998). The United States, which was in the midst of the Cold War, grew concerned that Guatemala with its bold reforms was

beginning to resemble its communist-ruled Soviet rival. Thus, with the support of the U.S, Guatemalan elites staged a coup against Árbenz and replaced him with Castillo Armas, a staunch anticommunist.¹

One of Armas' first moves as president was to write a new constitution for Guatemala, which outlawed trade unions and political parties. As a result, university groups became one of the few remaining spaces for public opposition to the new regime (Vrana 2017). Students from the University of San Carlos of Guatemala took up such activism and they regularly demonstrated against the Armas regime in the form of writing anti-government articles in the school newspaper or by heckling military officers who passed by them on their way to class (Vrana 2017). A military government succeeded Armas shortly after he was assassinated by one of his disgruntled bodyguards and the state grew even more repressive towards its people. The government regularly jailed, tortured, and killed citizens who spoke out against the regime (Levenson Estrada 2013). Out of this state brutality arose armed guerrillas who were inspired by Marxist ideologies and the recent success of the Cuban Revolution.² Among the first to join the *guerrilleros* in 1960 were students and other young people who sought to return to a pre-1954 coup Guatemala (Levenson-Estrada 2013). The government harshly retaliated against this guerrilla mobilization and thus began a 36 year-long civil war, which resulted in the deaths and disappearances of hundreds of thousands Guatemalans.

The degree of violence in Guatemala only escalated in the 1980s, which prompted many to seek relocation. It is estimated that over one million Guatemalans were displaced within the

¹ Between 1945 and 1991, the United States pursued a policy of *containment* in which it sought to prevent the spread of communism to other parts of the world. It feared a domino effect, whereby the destabilization of one country would destabilize another, allowing for communism to dominate the entire region. To keep this from happening, the U.S. engaged in several military interventions during this period (Wilde 2020).

² On New Year's Eve 1958, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and their guerilla forces successfully overthrew then Cuban president Fulgencio Batista in what became known as the Cuban Revolution. This event would inspire other left-wing groups around Latin America to similarly rise up and take action against their governments (Suarez 1972).

country during this period while another million sought refuge outside of the country (Green 2009). Many of these individuals came to the U.S. (the Los Angeles area in particular) with the hope of starting a new life. Among them were tens of thousands of children who were still processing the death and destruction they had laid witness to in their native country. Life did not get any easier for these individuals as they faced new difficulties of racism, rejection, and unemployment in an unfamiliar city (Levenson-Estrada 2013). Having been brought up around a culture of violence and desperately searching for a way to fit into their new environment, many of these young people turned to LA gangs founded by other Central Americans, such as *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (M-18). For the first time, these youth gangs, also known collectively as *maras*, offered these individuals a sense of belonging and camaraderie with their American peers. Yet the *maras*' LA-presence was short lived, as newly-implemented immigration policies in the 1990s led to the forced deportation of tens of thousands of Guatemalans back to their native country (Rodgers 2009). Once back in Guatemala, these *maras* flourished due in large part to the recruitment of *ex-guerrilleros* as well as the burgeoning drug trade that provided an economic incentive to join. Guatemalan *maras* still enjoy an active, albeit violent, presence in the country to this day.

Brazil

Brazil was also home to a strong youth presence prior to the emergence of youth gangs in the country, which is due in no small part to its own brush with state-sponsored violence. Although Brazil did not undergo a civil war during this period like Guatemala, its citizens experienced political unrest in the form of a repressive military government with a penchant for draconian measures and police brutality. Under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas during the

1940s, the military regularly kidnapped journalists, stripped scholars of their political rights, censored newspapers, and banned books that portrayed the government in a negative light (Smallman 1999). Student groups at Brazilian universities, also inspired by the Cuban revolution, mobilized with the hope of bringing change to Brazil (Langland 2013). Many of them rejoiced when left-leaning president João Goulart took office in the early 1960s. Goulart was someone who was willing to institute agrarian reforms and negotiate with the Brazilian Communist Party (Weis 1991). Yet this joy was short-lived as Goulart was overthrown by the military with the support of the U.S. government in 1964 (Pereira 2018).

After the coup, the newly-installed military government was met with increasingly violent protests from youth groups and student organizations. The unrest reached its peak in 1968 when police forces killed 18-year old Edson Luís during a student protest in Rio de Janeiro (Gould 2009). This led to months of further protests in which the Brazilian police arrested, tortured, and killed hundreds of students for their participation. Ultimately, the government quashed the demonstrations and passed Institutional Act Number Five, which was a law that essentially banned all civil liberties granted to Brazilian citizens and legalized censorship, state surveillance, and full authoritarian state rule (Guerchon 1971). In addition, the government formally granted itself the power to arrest any individual who dared oppose it. Thus, it is within this context that youth gangs in Brazil got their start.

In the years following the implementation of Institutional Act Number 5, thousands more young people were arrested in Brazil for any sort of suspected allegiance to leftist organizations (Gould 2009). Many were sent to the Candido Mendes prison on the island of Ilha Grande, which is just off the coast of Rio de Janeiro. This is significant because, once there, these political prisoners interacted with common criminals who taught them Marxist organizational tactics that

they would later utilize in the formation of their youth gangs, which they called *comandos* (Rodgers & Baird 2016). Once their prison sentences expired, these individuals returned to their *favelas* with newfound enthusiasm about their *comandos*. These organizations were initially portrayed as being community-oriented and they viewed themselves as simply fulfilling a role that the neglectful Brazilian State was supposed to. *Comandos* demonstrated this by offering protection and social services, such as childcare and tutoring programs, to the people living in their *favelas*. They were inspired by the *boa vizinhanca*, which is a phrase meaning “communal life” that they picked up from their Marxist friends in prison (Rodgers & Baird 2016: 24). Yet, not unlike their *maras* counterparts in Guatemala, as the profits from the drug trade began to surge, the *comandos* shifted their focus to violence and criminal activity, which is a trend that continues to this day in Brazil.

A Brief History of the Drug Trade and its Ties to Youth Gangs

The trafficking of drugs has been one of the most lucrative, albeit illicit, industries in Latin American history. Latin America’s central role in the drug trade stems largely from its unique position as the world’s only source of the coca plant, whose leaves are crushed to make cocaine (Seelke et al. 2011). It also boasts the necessary conditions to effectively produce large swaths of cannabis, which is used to produce marijuana. Another important factor contributing to the region’s prominence in the drug trade is its proximity to the U.S, which is a major drug consumption market (Seelke et al. 2011). Other factors such as the lack of viable economic opportunities for many of the region’s citizens, underfunded law enforcement and security forces, and broken judicial and political systems all coalesce to make Latin America the perfect hub for the drug trade (Seelke et al. 2011).

Although drugs have long occupied a prominent role in Latin American society (the indigenous peoples of the region would regularly use hallucinogens for religious purposes while Europeans began importing cannabis during the colonial period), it was not until the late 1970s that the modern drug trade was born (Gootenberg & Campos 2015). Around this period, Pablo Escobar and his infamous Medellín cartel emerged on the scene and revolutionized the industry. Escobar cashed in on the trafficking of Colombian cocaine to other parts of the world. At its height, Escobar's cartel controlled 80% of the world's cocaine supply and earned more than \$4 billion a year from its dealings (Green et al. 2015). What differentiated Escobar from those before him was his entrepreneurial shrewdness and strikingly charismatic nature: he operated his cartel not unlike a Fortune 500 corporation and he enlisted in the fierce loyalty of Medellín youth prepared to do his bidding (Green et al. 2015). Not only were these teenagers hired to aid in the distribution process, but they were also employed as contract killers (also known as *sicarios*), tasked with killing officials who refused to take bribes and anyone else who stood in the way of the cartel (Salazar 1994).

Following Escobar's death, other drug cartels were quick to emulate his business model, especially with regard to his inclination to enlist in the help of youths. Contemporary cartels regularly employ youth gangs in their drug distribution efforts. With 60% of the world's cocaine supply flowing through Central America, drug trafficking is among one of the main dealings of MS-13 and M-18 (Seelke et al. 2011; USAID 2006). They are responsible for smuggling drugs into the United States. Drugs destined for Europe, on the other hand, typically depart Latin America from the shores of Brazil by way of its resident *comandos* (Seelke et al. 2011). To this day, the drug trade and youth gangs remain firmly intertwined, which has in turn contributed to high levels of violence in Latin America.

Defining Violence and the Latin American Youth Gang

Before delving into contemporary scholarship related to the specific social problems that facilitated the emergence of youth gangs in Latin America, it is essential to historically contextualize youth formations and their relation to violent and criminal activities in the region. From its bloody struggles for independence from Spain and Portugal to its incessant political infighting due to civil war and internal strife, violence seems to be an enduring fixture of Latin American society. However, since the late-twentieth century, the nature of violence in the region has taken on a new form. According to Caldeira (1996: 199), in much of Latin America, “the most visible forms of violence stem not from ideological conflicts over the nature of the political system but from delinquency and crime.” At an average of 13 homicides per 100,000 people, the homicide rate in Latin America climbed to the highest in the world by the 1990s (Neto 2002). In addition, this period also saw a dramatic increase in the number of thefts, burglaries, and contact crimes (robberies, sexual incidents, and threats/assaults) reported. Theft rates in Latin America are at least 30% higher than any other region in the world while contact crime rates are at least 70% higher (Soares & Naritomi 2010). This surge in crime rates led the Pan American Health Organization to proclaim violence as a “social pandemic” in Latin America in 1996.

Much of this increase in violence and crime is often attributed to the existence of youth gangs. Although a relatively new feature of Latin American society, youth gangs have existed for centuries. In fact, the first youth gangs may have emerged in the United States as early as 1783, just as the Revolutionary War was coming to an end (Sante 1991). In his qualitative study of gangs in Chicago, Thrasher (1927) defined a gang as:

An interstitial group, originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective

behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, *esprit de corps*, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.

This definition describes the basic institutional structure of Latin American youth gangs, but there are two important features that differentiate them from other gangs, such as African-American gangs (i.e., the Bloods, the Crips) and Caucasian motorcycle gangs (i.e., Hells Angels, the Pagans). Firstly, identity formation is among the most important reasons that members cite for joining these gangs, especially with regard to individuals who feel isolated or removed from their society (Dammert 2017). Secondly, although most gangs have both adult and nonadult members, Latin American youth gangs consist of members aged 7-25 (Rodgers 1999).

Perhaps not unlike other gangs, however, is the extent to which Latin American youth gangs are regarded as a “problem” or a “threat” (Strocka 2006). Although violence can manifest itself in a variety of ways, youth gangs almost invariably get blamed for the violence that occurs in the region (Jones & Rodgers 2010). Yet when it comes to determining just how responsible they are for this violence, the data is unclear: estimates of the total proportion of violence attributed to these groups vary widely from 10 to 60 percent (UNODC 2007). In spite of this relative uncertainty regarding their propensity for violence, youth gangs are typically the first to be accused of mugging, theft, drug dealing, rape, assault, and kidnapping. There have even been attempts to link them to revolution and global terrorism (Jones & Rodgers 2010). Many of these claims, however, owe themselves to sensationalist portrayals by the media and Latin American governments. While youth gangs are certainly of significant concern for the safety of Latin America, much of the information surrounding them remains profoundly misunderstood. Research into youth gangs can thus benefit from theories that help to explain their emergence.

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Assumptions: Neoliberalism and its Impact on Youth Gang Participation

Economic determinism is a theory that suggests that economic factors come to “form the foundation and determine the conditions of all other human or social manifestations” (Ellwood 1911: 36). Much of the literature examining the conditions that helped contribute to an increase in youth gang participation cites Latin America’s acceptance of a neoliberal economic system in the 1980s as a significant circumstance (Rodgers 1999; Hoffman & Centeno 2003; Strocka 2006; Prevost & Vanden 2010). Scholars theorize that neoliberalism compelled youths to join these organizations by yielding a variety of factors. I identified four that I thought were particularly significant to the emergence of youth gangs: state-sponsored political violence, economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and internal and external migration. In order to see how this subject relates to economic determinism theory, it is important to first understand the concepts of *comparative advantage* and *dependency* as well as the extent to which Latin America has served as an economic enterprise to its more industrialized neighbors for centuries.

Dating back to when Europeans first arrived in their search for the New World, people have profited off of the wealth of resources that Latin America has to offer. In a comparative advantage model, countries specialize in the export of a product that they can produce better than anyone else (Costinot & Donaldson 2012). Countries then typically trade this product to another country in exchange for a product for which that country has a comparative advantage.³ The problem with comparative advantage in the Latin American context, however, is that oftentimes

³ A good example that helps to demonstrate this model in action is Colombian-Japanese trade relations. Historically, Colombia has specialized in the production of coffee because the country has the perfect climate to cultivate coffee beans. The country then utilizes the profits it makes from selling coffee to import products from other countries, like computers from Japan (Prevost & Vanden 2010).

trades with more industrialized nations have been inequitable. The majority of products that come out of Latin America are raw materials, whereas most of the products from the industrialized countries are finished goods. Typically, finished goods that have to be imported are worth much more than the raw materials that Latin American countries export.⁴ Thus, when import costs exceed export revenues, Latin American countries suffer from commercial deficits, which in turn lead to economic recessions (Deardorff 1994). Unfortunately for Latin America, this problem arises far too often because its economy has become very much dependent on imports from industrialized nations.

This problem of dependency is further outlined by the Prebisch thesis, which states that industrialized countries require trading partners that can assume the responsibility of producing raw materials so that they can assemble their finished goods (Frankenhoff 1962). This concept is better known as the center-periphery model, where industrialized countries are at the center of the international economy while their underdeveloped counterparts exist within the periphery. Latin America is firmly situated in the latter position due in large part to its postcolonial legacy. Although many Latin American countries gained independence from Spain and Portugal in the early-to-mid nineteenth century, many of these new republics lacked the capital and funds needed to govern properly. Western nations that were just beginning to embrace industrialization took advantage of Latin America's desperate position and proposed that they trade their crops and minerals in exchange for the finished goods coming out of their factories. Latin America hastily accepted this agreement and thus, their center-periphery relationship was solidified (Platt 1980).

⁴ To draw it back to the Colombian-Japanese example, Colombia needs to produce a vast amount of coffee beans just to match the small amount of computers that the Japanese need to produce if the two countries were to trade with one another (Prevost & Vanden 2010).

For the next century, the Latin American economy became almost entirely reliant on its Western neighbors. Much of the inequality in Latin America stems from this inequitable relationship. For instance, Latin American countries were slow to accept industrialization because they were already receiving the finished products that factories typically produce from the United States and Europe. It was not until the 1940s that Latin America finally began its mass-industrialization movement and it still finds itself playing catch-up to this day. Neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 90s only served to exacerbate this situation. Neoliberalism is an economic ideology that encourages governments to dismantle their nationalist economies of old and to embrace a liberal free-market economy instead (O'Toole 2003). As a result of this change, government spending was vastly reduced, which came at a great cost to recipients of key social programs, like education and healthcare (Prevost & Vanden 2010). In addition, transnational corporations that prioritized profits over people were allowed to operate with fewer regulations in place. For instance, if the corporations thought that they could produce certain raw materials for less money in other parts of the Global South, they fired the Latin American workers and outsourced their labor elsewhere. The individuals who were fortunate enough to keep their jobs saw their wages drop significantly. Latin American governments were largely ineffective during this period as politicians were far more concerned with protecting "the economy from capital flight or investment strikes" as opposed to improving wealth distribution or attenuating poverty (Hoffman & Centeno 2003: 372).

It is within this context that Latin American youth gangs started to emerge. This thesis posits that neoliberalism created the perfect set of conditions whereby individuals felt compelled to participate in youth gang culture. The four factors yielded by these neoliberal reforms are explained in further detail below.

State-Sponsored Political Violence

It is no secret that Latin America has had a long history of governments willing to employ violence in order to forcefully exert their will on the people. This was especially common during the latter half of the twentieth century as authorities perceived state-sponsored political violence to be a “necessary condition for the incorporation of nations into the global market economy under neoliberalism” (Sanchez 2006: 178). Neoliberalism was initially met with resistance by those who were negatively affected by its implementation. Ranging from quiet public protests in Argentina to massive political mobilizations in Peru, opposition towards neoliberal policies took on a variety of forms (Sanchez 2006). In the face of these demonstrations, states doubled down on their use of force so as to compel the public to accept an unpopular system. Viewed from this lens, young people joined youth gangs in order to fight fire with fire. It was clear that their governments failed to have their best interests in mind. Thus, it is conceivable that youths would be all the more willing to use violence of their own as “a basic tool for survival” (Sanchez 2006: 181).

Economic Volatility

Growing economic inequality has also been identified as a factor that accounts for the desire of young people to join youth gangs. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Latin America is the most unequal region in the world (Ibarra & Byanyima 2016). A study conducted by the World Bank discovered that the richest 10% of people own about 48% of the region’s wealth while the poorest 10% own just 1.6% (De Ferranti et al. 2003). Latin America’s adoption of neoliberal policies only

exacerbated the issue. These free-market capitalist reforms negatively impacted male youth in the region at a disproportionate rate. Outsourcing of labor to other parts of the world, coupled with dramatic reductions in wages, have resulted in a significant decline in male participation in the labor market (Strocka 2006). Scholars theorize that when these low-skilled, undereducated individuals lose their traditionally masculine roles as breadwinners, they have no choice but to turn to violence. Another World Bank study has demonstrated that countries with a higher degree of inequality also have higher levels of violence (Fajnzylber et al. 1998). Growing resentment towards the government for its economic failures combined with a desire to gain an acknowledged identity thus result in increased levels of youth gang participation.

The Rise of the Drug Trade

Scholars have also attributed rising youth gang participation rates to the prevalence of the drug trade in Latin America. The early to mid-1980s saw a worldwide surge in the use of cocaine and marijuana and it was only a matter of time before youth gangs got involved in the distribution process (Howell & Decker 1999). As was previously mentioned, the rise of neoliberal policies resulted in a profound lack of opportunities for youth, which in turn increased their involvement in the “informal economy” and illegality (Fernandes 2013). In addition, a decline in employment rates and minimum wages compelled individuals to view drug trafficking as a way to reclaim their previously-tarnished reputation as the family breadwinners. Drug trafficking also allowed youths to obtain desired consumer products that they would not be able to acquire by socially accepted means (Strocka 2006). Violence undoubtedly increased in Latin America as drug trafficking became the primary function of youth gangs. These once simple

groups gradually transformed into organized crime units that engaged in transnational warfare against rival youth gangs as well as local and federal authorities (Dammert 2017).

The transnational nature of the drug trade also has its roots in neoliberal reforms. A study by Buxton (2006) found that drug traffickers took advantage of the expansion of international markets, faster modes of transportation, and reduced border controls that neoliberal reforms helped to foster. Furthermore, because so many farms and factories had either downsized or moved overseas during this period, there was readily available land and warehouse space that could be used for the cultivation and transit of drugs (Herrera 2019). Thus, it is no coincidence that the emergence of the drug trade coincided with the advent of neoliberalism.

Internal and External Migration

Internal and external migration is the fourth factor cited by scholars to explain this youth gang phenomenon; it too can be traced back to neoliberalism. For instance, its ideas of trade liberalization, privatization of basic services, and deregulation of markets increasingly displaced people from their rural livelihoods in Central America and Mexico (Carney 2019). Finding themselves without work in their native countries, many of these individuals resorted to migration to the United States where they were welcomed as agricultural laborers (Popke 2011). Many chose to relocate to California in particular due to its abundant nature of agricultural work. Once there, children of migrant workers had a difficult time adjusting to their new environment; for many, joining Los Angeles-based gangs like MS-13 and M-18 served as a source of refuge. When immigration laws were ramped up in the 1990s, many of these Latin American youths were deported back to their native countries where they went on to create new branches of their gang organizations.

In other parts of Latin America, neoliberalism had a more punitive effect. Many young men during this period underwent a rather forceful internal migration from their homes to prison. After passing free-market reforms in the 1980s, many states began to be characterized by an increasingly tough-on-crime stance, specifically towards social segments who were structurally excluded from the neoliberal state (Rivera et al. 2017). In particular, young males living in poor neighborhoods were targeted by *mano dura* (or “Iron Fist”) policies that law enforcement agencies adopted (Hume 2007). These individuals were among the most likely to resist the effects of neoliberal policies, which is something that the dominant classes that profited from the system viewed as disorderly and threatening. Thus, this propelled the increased use of police and imprisonment in order to prevent them from undermining the authority of the state (Wacquant 2011). It was in prison, however, where many of these individuals decided to join youth gangs. *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) and *Comando Vermelho* (CV) are among some of the more prominent youth gangs in Brazil that recruit their members through the prison system. Similar to their Central American counterparts, these Brazilian gangs provide prisoners with a sense of identity and camaraderie in an otherwise foreign environment. Gang culture follows these individuals even when they are released from prison.

Alternative Theories to Explain the Emergence of Latin American Youth Gangs

Scholars of Latin America often cite various other theories to explain the emergence of youth gang participation in the region. Chief among these theories is the cycle of violence theory, which suggests that there is a link between the violence that one experiences as a child and the subsequent violence that one chooses to engage in later in life (Reckdenwald et al. 2013). While typically applied to instances of intimate partner violence or sexual abuse (i.e. a child is

victimized by a parent and later grows up to abuse their own spouse and/or children), the cycle of violence theory can also be employed in the study of youth gangs. These individuals suggest that Latin American children who bore witness to the political violence carried out by their governments during the tumultuous latter half of the twentieth century became compelled to join youth gangs and participate in violent activities of their own (Levenson-Estrada 2013). Much of this political violence, of course, stemmed from the neoliberal reforms passed by Latin American governments.

There are many theories that have been offered to explain how violence seemingly begets violence. One of the most often cited explanations, social learning theory, illustrates how abused children or children who observe the abuse of their family and friends learn to be aggressive through a process of behavioral conditioning and imitation (Hines & Saudino 2002). A variety of environmental factors can account for this sort of abuse with state-sponsored political violence being one of them. Political violence, which is understood as “the violence directly and purposefully administered in the name of political ideology, movement, or state such as the physical repression of dissent by the army or the police as well as its converse, popular armed struggle against a repressive regime,” was particularly prevalent in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century (Bourgois 2001: 7). Between 1965-1997, nearly 430,000 Latin American citizens were killed as a result of state-sponsored political violence (Perez 2011). Much of this political violence, of course, stemmed from the neoliberal reforms passed by these Latin American governments.

This dramatic level of bloodshed compelled many Central Americans to flee from their repressive governments. As was previously mentioned, tens of thousands of Guatemalans and Salvadorans migrated to California in the 1980s and 90s to escape the violence and to seek out

new opportunities. However, the memory of this violence was not easily forgotten by these individuals; it was merely recontextualized. Some scholars suggest that youths who had experienced violence in their native countries were in need of an outlet to relieve stress, express anger, or control others (Kalmuss 1984). For many, this outlet manifested itself in gang participation as a large swath of Central American youth would go on to join MS-13 and M-18. In fact, several studies have demonstrated that participation in youth gangs was inherently linked to state barbarism in Central America (Vigil 2002; Hayden 2004).

In other parts of Latin America, political violence was coupled with an increased police presence on the streets. The aforementioned *mano dura* policies were an approach that many law enforcement agencies across the region adopted to curb urban crime. In reality, however, they were largely used to silence those who protested their states' repressive governments. Between 1992-1999, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia reported a 75% average increase in prison populations, with political prisoners making up a significant proportion of those imprisoned (Ungar 2003). It is in prison where a lot of these individuals decided to turn to a life of crime. Not unlike their Central American counterparts, many of these South Americans needed an outlet to make sense of the political violence they had experienced on the outside as well as the violence they were continuing to experience in prison. For instance, the 1991 massacre of 111 inmates by prison guards in a São Paulo prison allegedly sparked the genesis of the PCC (Jones & Rodgers 2010). Once released from prison, many of these individuals would go on to enlist other members from their communities in their gang-related activities.

While the cycle of violence theory has received some empirical support, there are serious shortcomings to the validity of the theory. For instance, several investigations into the theory have failed to demonstrate a significant relationship between abuse experienced as a child and

subsequent violent behavior (Smith & Thornberry 1995; Zingraff et al. 1993). Widom et al. (2007) indicate that a substantial proportion of victims of violence seem to be resilient to the negative effects of abuse. In addition, scholars find that economic disadvantage has a stronger effect on those who decide to carry out violence than the experience of violence as a child (Wright & Fagan 2013). Furthermore, the application of this theory to the study of Latin American youth gangs is fairly limited in scope. This leads me to believe that the cycle of violence theory serves more as a supplement to economic determinism theory. This is evidenced by the fact that much of the violence that makes up the basis of the cycle of violence theory was brought about by neoliberal reforms.

It is clear that neoliberalism had a unique effect on Latin American youth gang participation that no other circumstance could replicate. Due to the economic harm done to them by their government's policies, many male youths felt as if they had nowhere else to turn but to a life of crime. Drug trafficking, robbery, extortion, and other activities that make up the informal economy serve to provide these individuals with a reliable source of income. Youth gang culture also presented a sense of identity that many felt was otherwise stripped away from them. It is thus no surprise that many of these youth gangs started to gain prominence during this period of neoliberal reform.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

Aims of this Study

In this study, I aim to analyze how neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 90s may have helped create the ideal conditions for the emergence of youth gangs in Latin America. I have already identified four specific factors yielded by neoliberalism: state-sponsored political violence, economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and an increase in external and internal migration. Now, I seek to understand which specific factors accounted for the aforementioned phenomena. In order to do so, I will compare my findings for Guatemala and Brazil with those of the rest of Latin America. I will indicate whether Guatemala and Brazil stand out or if they are in line with their Latin American neighbors. This will help me determine which factors in particular correlate with this rise in youth gang activity. From there, I will report my findings and recommend ways in which Latin American governments may wish to address the problems that allowed for these youth gangs to arise in the first place.

Methods

In carrying out this study, I conducted a comparative case study of Brazil and Guatemala that examined the four factors produced by neoliberal reforms to analyze the extent to which they accounted for the emergence of youth gangs. I chose this research design because I sought to illustrate the similarities and differences between two countries that a) passed extensive neoliberal reforms and b) witnessed an upsurge of youth gang-related activities during the late-twentieth century. This allowed me to generate evidence about how the context of the two regions influenced this specific outcome. I surmised that a comparative case study analysis would allow me to test the scope, applicability, and transferability of these factors in other

contexts. In addition, I concluded that selecting this method would help me identify the specific issues that need to be targeted and addressed if these countries ever wish to rid themselves of the youth gang violence that continues to plague their streets to this day. It is my belief that interventionist policies ought to focus on tackling the specific societal factors that allowed for these groups to emerge in the first place.

In selecting cases for this case study, I noted that several Latin American countries met the aforementioned criteria. Chile, for instance, experienced a period of vast neoliberal reforms under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (Taylor 2006). Around the same time, *pandillas* (Chilean youth gangs) became fairly common in Chilean society (Rodgers 1999). Mexico, who joined the neoliberal-friendly North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, similarly oversaw an uptick in *cholo* (Mexican youth gang) activity during this period (Rodgers 1999). The reason I chose not to use these countries (or a host of other countries) in my case study is because I wanted to choose two areas of study that would be uniquely different from one another. Choosing countries with contrasting characteristics would in effect demonstrate the general applicability of the findings of this study to other countries with strong youth gang presences. Thus, apart from their geographical attachments to Latin America, the cases I chose for this study could not be more diametric.

For starters, Brazil is no stranger to the world stage: it has the 7th largest population (roughly 211.7 million people), is the 5th largest country (nearly 3.3 million square miles), and has the 8th highest GDP at approximately \$2.05 trillion (U.S. and World Population Clock 2020; Worldometer 2020; GPS 2020). Guatemala, on the other hand, does not enjoy nearly the same global dominance as Brazil: it is rather small in size (about 42,000 square miles, which is about the size of the state of Tennessee) and has a population of roughly 18 million people and a GDP

of about \$75.6 billion (Anywhere 2020; Worldometer 2020). The two countries also have distinct cultural differences. Guatemala was colonized by Spain and although the main language spoken there is Spanish, it also has a large Mayan population that retains its own culture and language. Meanwhile, the main language spoken in Brazil is Portuguese due to Portugal's colonial legacy in the area. Brazilians typically trace their ancestry to Europe, Africa, and the indigenous peoples of South America. Given all of the differences between the countries, it is quite surprising that the two witnessed a spike in youth gang activity around the same time under the same conditions. These key similarities make for a very compelling case study analysis. In addition, I was able to find a significant amount of data on both Guatemala and Brazil, which was helpful in measuring my variables and comparing them to other Latin American countries.

The dependent variable that I examined in this study is the emergence of youth gangs during the 1980s and 90s in Latin America. Measuring this variable quantitatively proved to be quite difficult, but I chose to focus specifically on the number of youth gang members reported by local authorities in each country. I retrieved this information from various government organizations (the U.S. Justice Department and the World Bank) and watchdog agencies (InSight Crime and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) that publish data about gang violence in Latin America on an annual basis.

The four factors produced by neoliberal reforms—state-sponsored political violence, economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and migration (external with regard to Guatemala and internal with regard to Brazil)—serve as the independent variables of this study. I measured these variables quantitatively through a variety of means. For instance, I measured *state-sponsored political violence* by looking at the approximate number of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances in both countries. This data was made available to me by publications

from academics and researchers who had reported on this phenomenon in scholarly journals. I set about measuring *economic volatility* by examining youth unemployment rates in both countries. Individuals who fall into this category are between the ages of 15 and 24 and they report that they are without work, that they are available for work, and that they have taken active steps to find work in the last four weeks. I retrieved this data from reports published by various economic agencies and organizations (the Danish Trade Union Development Agency, the Center for International Private Enterprise, the World Bank, and the International Labor Office).

I assessed the *rise of the drug trade* in Latin America by inspecting cocaine and marijuana seizures in each country between 1991 and 2011. This information was reported by the U.S. State Department, specifically the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). Every year, the INL produces a highly detailed document entitled the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) that outlines the efforts of countries to combat the international drug trade. It is through this source that I was able to track cocaine and cannabis seizures in each Latin American country, year by year. The furthest back the reports go is 1991, which is just before neoliberal policies started to go into effect. Therefore, tracking the amount of drug seizures (measured in metric tons) between 1991 and 2011 helped to demonstrate whether or not neoliberalism was associated with the rise of the drug trade.

Finally, I measured *migratory patterns* in each country in slightly different ways. Because I was looking at external migration in Guatemala, I measured the number of immigrant arrivals to the U.S. between 1986 and 1996, a period of peak neoliberal policy implementation in Central America. I obtained this data by visiting the Yearbook of Immigration Statistics made available by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In addition, because I was also tracking the return of Guatemalans to their native countries due to stricter American immigration laws, I measured

the number of deportees from the U.S. to Guatemala, which is data I obtained from the U.S. Justice Department, specifically the Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division. As a point of comparison, I also looked at the number of immigrant arrivals from Brazil to the U.S. as well as the number of Brazilian deportees. In Brazil, I was looking at internal migratory patterns, specifically the *favela*-to-prison pipeline, so I looked at the number of incarcerated men per 100,000 individuals between 1992 and 2012, before and after *mano dura* policies were implemented in Brazil. I obtained this data from *Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública*, an annual Brazilian report on public security. I measured the same statistic as it pertained to incarcerated men in Guatemala by looking at a report put out by the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research.

Finally, I compared my findings for Guatemala and Brazil with other parts of Latin America to see if other countries could attribute the emergence of youth gangs to the four factors I was studying. Admittedly, finding this data proved to be difficult. One of the problems I often encountered was that not all countries released data for the variables that I was measuring. For instance, in measuring the rise of the drug trade, I noticed that only nine Latin American countries (Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela) reported on the specific number of metric tons of cocaine and cannabis seized by authorities dating back to 1991. Other countries would go on to produce these numbers in later years, but for the purposes of my research, I wanted to report on numbers that were produced as close to the advent of neoliberalism as possible. For that reason, I produced the average cocaine and cannabis seizures (in metric tons) for these nine Latin American countries and used it as a basis of comparison for my two cases.

I undertook a similar procedure when it came to extracting data related to migratory patterns. In looking at external migration statistics, I noticed that not all Latin American countries experienced a grand exodus of migrants with their sights set on the United States. In the Northern Triangle of Central America, however, this seemed to be very much the trend. It is for this reason that I chose to exclusively focus on Central American immigrant arrivals to the U.S. between the years of 1986 and 1996. I also focused exclusively on Central American deportees from the U.S. between the years of 1996 and 2000 (when strict immigration policies that deported many illegal immigrants to their countries of origin were signed into law). With regard to internal migration, rather than reporting on all Latin American prison population rates, I chose to focus on the prison population rates of South American countries with similar demographics and criminal statistics as Brazil (namely Uruguay, Peru, Colombia, and Chile). I measured the prison population rates for these countries between the years of 1992 and 2012.

It is also difficult to assess just how involved youth gangs are in the drug trade. For example, local authorities in Latin America usually do not report on whether drug seizures originated from youth gangs or if they came directly from the drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) themselves. In addition, considering just how violent the nature of the drug trade is, collecting this sort of information can be an incredibly dangerous task. Due to the existing ties that youth gangs and DTOs have with one another, I simply measured the amount of cocaine and cannabis that local authorities seized in each country for a certain year. This data may distort the level of youth gang involvement in the drug trade, but it is the closest estimate we have to measuring this variable.

For other variables that I was measuring, I found data for the whole of Latin America to be much more readily available. For instance, with regard to measuring the youth unemployment

rate in the region, I discovered that the World Bank produced data that identified the average Latin American youth unemployment rate dating back to 1991 (prior to neoliberal policies going fully into effect). This served as a helpful basis of comparison for the respective youth unemployment rates of Guatemala and Brazil.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

Dependent Variable

Youth Gang Membership

Guatemala

Estimates of the number of gang members in Guatemala vary widely, ranging from 14,000 to 165,000. This reflects the weaknesses and limitations of data collection systems in the country, where data varies by source and where police and judicial data systems are plagued by consistent underreporting (USAID 2006). The National Civilian Police reports that there are about 340 *maras* in Guatemala—they are most active in the areas of Guatemala City, Villa Nueva, Mixco, and Amatitlan. MS-13 makes up about 80% of the total number of gang members in Guatemala whereas M-18 comprises about 15% (USAID 2006). The remaining 5% of *marareros* come from smaller, homegrown gangs.

Brazil

Similar to Guatemala, it is difficult to measure the number of gang members in Brazil due to poor reporting measures. It is estimated that the number of Brazilians involved with *comandos* ranges from 30,000 to more than 100,000 (Coutinho 2019; Anderson 2009). There are at least 27 active gangs in Brazil, with the PCC and the Red Command being the largest two (Coutinho 2019). Other gangs include the *Família do Norte* (FDN), the *Amigos dos Amigos* (ADA), the Pure Third Command (TCP), and the Third Command (TC). The majority of these gangs conduct their operations out of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and the Brazilian capital of Brasilia (InSight Crime 2013).

Latin America

Once again, it is unclear just how many youth gang members there are in Latin America, let alone in each Latin American country. As Figure 1 demonstrates, estimates vary widely. While some countries, like Paraguay and Costa Rica, report having little more than a couple thousand youth gang members, other countries, like Mexico and Colombia, allege to have members totaling in the hundreds of thousands. As Rodgers (1999) put it, the size of a youth gang is not important; what is important is recognition of the distinct role that youth gangs take up in Latin American societies. If youth gangs are said to consistently contribute to the violence and crime of a region, then their mere existence is enough to warrant detailed observation and analysis.

Independent Variables

State-Sponsored Political Violence

Guatemala

Between the years 1954 and 1996, Guatemala oversaw a period of greatly heightened violence as civil war ravaged the country. The state was largely responsible for the vast majority of violence, considering it waged a campaign of repressive terror against Guatemalan citizens through the use of the military, the police, semi-autonomous “death squads,” and state-organized “civil patrols” (Ball et al. 1999). It is estimated that, during the Guatemalan Civil War, the state committed more than 200,000 extrajudicial killings and 45,000 forced disappearances (Ibarra 2013). However, it is important to note that ethnicity played a significant role in this conflict. The Guatemalan government almost exclusively targeted the country’s indigenous Mayan

population in their killings—some scholars even argue that these acts met the formal definition of genocide (Kistler 2014; Oettler 2006).

How does this translate over to youth gang formation? Not much, as it turns out. The majority of youth gang members identify as Ladinos, the other ethnic group in Guatemala that derives its ancestry from a mix of Native Americans and Europeans (Söchtig et al. 2015). Observational data also indicates that Mayan Guatemala has historically been less violent than urban and rural Ladino Guatemala in spite of their history of trauma from the civil war (Lesniewski et al. 2021). Thus, there is little evidence to suggest that a relationship exists between the violence carried out during the Guatemalan Civil War and the *maras*' own propensity for violence.

Brazil

Unlike Guatemala, there was no civil war to be had in Brazil. The country did, however, bear witness to an oppressive military dictatorship that regularly stifled freedom of speech and suppressed opposition. Yet, it is important to note that Brazil did not come nearly as close to the Guatemalan government's level of violence: the military regime was only responsible for approximately 475 deaths and disappearances between the years 1964 and 1985 (Serbin 2019). Once again, indigenous peoples found themselves bearing the brunt of the violence as an estimated 8,350 of them were killed by way of massacres, prisons, torture, and ill-treatment carried out by the Brazilian government (Brasil & Farias 2014). If state-sponsored political violence were to be a motivating factor for individuals to join youth gangs, then surely there would have been indigenous peoples joining in droves. However, the data tells a different story: young Afro-Brazilian men, who are descended from the African slaves brought over to the

country from the Atlantic slave trade, are the most likely to join Brazil's youth gangs (Minority Rights Group 2021; Fernandes 2013). Therefore, there is a lack of evidence to prove that state-sponsored political violence in Brazil compelled individuals to join youth gangs.

Latin America

State-sponsored political violence has not been uncommon in Latin America's history; in fact, brutal military dictatorships were very much the norm in the region during the latter half of the twentieth century. Argentina's dictatorship (which lasted from 1976-1983) was particularly notorious because it was responsible for the deaths of at least 15,000 people (Serbin 2019). Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who ruled Nicaragua as a dictator from 1967-1972 and then again from 1974-1979, was accused of several human rights violations, including cases of illegal imprisonment and the murder of hundreds of Nicaraguans (DeYoung 1977).

Curiously, however, is how little this political violence resulted in increased youth gang participation rates. In fact, in the two aforementioned countries where political violence was perhaps the most prevalent, there was no reported rise in youth gang activity in the direct aftermath of the military regimes. Youth gangs in Argentina (known as *barras*), for instance, are relatively small and are only known for their petty delinquency—such as acts of pickpocketing, shoplifting, and carjacking (Rodgers 1999). Youth gangs in Nicaragua (known as *pandillas*) are even less active. Unlike its Central American neighbors, Nicaragua has a relatively small youth gang presence and its *pandilleros* are not nearly as violent as their *mara* counterparts (Schout 2018). All in all, it would appear that state-sponsored political violence had little to no impact in the emergence of youth gangs in Latin America during the 1980s and 90s.

Economic Volatility

Guatemala

By all accounts, it seems as though the Guatemalan economy is robust. Over the past 30 years, the Guatemalan GDP has increased from nearly \$9.5 billion to more than \$76 billion, making it the largest economy in Central America (World Bank 2020). Yet the country's success has not translated into success for everyone: it is estimated that about 80% of the population lives in poverty with most of these individuals living on less than \$2 a day (Anywhere 2021). In addition, Guatemala has the sixth highest rate of malnutrition in the world, with only 40% of Guatemalan families enjoying food security (World Bank 2020). Among the hardest hit are Guatemalan youth: many suffer from health problems and are often victims of their country's culture of violence (Humanium 2021). One of the main indicators of youth struggles within the Guatemalan economy is the youth unemployment rate, which has steadily increased over the past thirty years. As Figure 3 demonstrates, between 1991 and 2019, the Guatemalan youth unemployment rate has increased by a rate of 0.0467% per year. With this rate on the rise, it is clear that Guatemalan youth are finding their job prospects extremely limited. When this is the case, it is no surprise that they would turn to a life of crime, which for many is the only avenue capable of providing them with a livable wage.

Brazil

Similar to Guatemala, Brazil appears to have a booming economy on paper: at nearly \$1.84 trillion, it has the highest GDP in all of Latin America (Statista 2020). In addition, Brazil has the second largest trade flow in Latin America and is the world's largest exporter of meat, coffee, and sugar (CNI 2021). Also like Guatemala, however, is the exuberant amount of poverty

that exists in Brazil: more than 54.8 million people (or roughly 26.5% of the population) live below the poverty line (Alves 2018). Brazilian youth are also in a very difficult position, seeing as 13.3 million Brazilian children lack access to healthy living conditions, 8.8 million lack a formal education, and 7.6 million cannot access clean drinking water (Skousen 2020). The youth unemployment rate in Brazil is also exceptionally high compared to other countries in Latin America. As Figure 4 demonstrates, between 1991 and 2019, the youth unemployment rate increased from 11.62% to 27.39%, which is a rate of increase of about 0.426% per year. This profound lack of economic opportunities may be the reason why adolescents tend to get involved in the Brazilian gang culture.

Latin America

Since the transition to a neoliberal system in the 1990s, Latin America's economy has experienced growth at an average rate of 4% per year (Cervo 2016). The region as a whole certainly benefited from the expansion in world trade, along with an increase in its exports. Yet, in recent years, it is evident that the GDP growth of Latin America is not up to speed with the rest of the world. For instance, as Cervo (2016) indicates, global growth reached a level of 2.4% in 2013 and 2.6% in 2014 whereas growth in Latin America reached only 1.1%. In addition, some of Latin America's largest economies, such as Brazil and Venezuela, have faced serious economic crises over the past decade (Cervo & Lessa 2014). On top of that, Latin America is among one of the most unequal regions in the world (Ibarra & Byanyima 2016; De Ferranti et al. 2003). In fact, as the rich continue to get richer, the poorer grow poorer—one recent study indicated that an estimated 191 million Latin Americans (roughly 31% of the population) live in poverty, which is the highest total the region has seen in the past 15 years (ECLAC 2019).

Much like in Guatemala and Brazil, Latin American youth bear the brunt of the region's dismal economic conditions. More than 30% of the youth population in Latin America lives in poverty (ECLAC 2011). In addition, as of 2011, the unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group is three times as high as it is for the population of individuals living in the 30-64 age group (ECLAC 2011). It appears that this rate has increased in recent years; as Figure 5 demonstrates, between 1991 and 2019, the youth unemployment rate in Latin America rose from 11.37% to 17.75%, which is a rate of increase of about 0.115% per year. It is likely that this failure to guarantee Latin American youth better job prospects compels them to join criminal networks, such as youth gangs, which at least offer them decent wages.

Rise of the Drug Trade

Guatemala

Guatemalan youth gangs are almost intrinsically linked to the drug trade. In 2007, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released a report that specifically focused on crime and its impact on the region. The report stated that Guatemala (along with other Central American countries) has the “misfortune of being placed between drug supply and drug demand” (UNODC 2007: 250). Guatemala's close proximity to the United States makes it a natural corridor for the trafficking of drugs, namely cocaine, marijuana, and heroin (INCSR 2012). In recent years, Guatemalan *maras* have become more involved in the drug trade, evolving from “disparate associations of street gangs... to increasingly organized transnational criminal syndicates” (McDermott 2013). The two principal *maras* in Guatemala, MS-13 and M-18, have reorganized themselves under more centralized leadership, with *ranfleros* (or “leaders”) at the top and *paros* (or “auxiliaries”) at the bottom, ready to act at their respective gang's bidding.

Maras often team up with the *Zetas* and *Sinaloas* of Mexico, two prominent DTOS, and call on *paros* to aid in the distribution process (McDermott 2013; DEA 2017).

The drug trade enjoys a very active presence in Guatemala. However, the prevalence of certain drugs has changed dramatically over the years. As Figure 8 indicates, cocaine seizures have been trending downwards in recent years. Between 1991 and 2011, there was a near 58% decrease in cocaine seizures that the Guatemalan government and the Anti-Narcotics Analysis and Information Services reported. It is a completely different story on the cannabis side of things. As Figure 9 demonstrates, cannabis seizures skyrocketed between 1991 and 2011, accounting for an increase of more than 60,000%. This could very well mean that the efforts of Guatemalan authorities to crack down on cannabis distribution have improved remarkably. Another option is also possible, that being that Guatemala has increasingly been the site for drug trafficking. Either way, it is clear that drugs have taken up a much more discernible presence, pointing to the rise of the drug trade in Guatemala.

Brazil

It is also quite common for Brazilian *comandos* to be involved in the drug trade. They are so common, in fact, that there is a name for youth gangs that are specifically centered around drug-trafficking: *quadrilhas*. Gang members are known colloquially as *quadrilheiros*, they are between the ages of 13 and 25 years old, and they are traditionally led by the eldest gang member, known as the *cabeça* (Rodgers 1999). One of the most prominent *quadrilhas*, the Red Command, first got involved in trafficking when the cocaine trade began to boom in the 1980s and the Colombian cartels enlisted in their help distributing the drug (InSight Crime 2013). Today, it is estimated that the Red Command and other *quadrilhas* like it (the PCC, the ADA)

ship one ton of Colombian cocaine to Brazil each month from Paraguay, which has become a cocaine trafficking hub (InSight Crime 2013).

Once again, it is difficult to determine just how involved Brazilian youth gangs are in the drug trade. Brazilian authorities, like Guatemalan ones, do not publicly report on the sources from which they seize large quantities of cocaine and cannabis. However, due to the relatively close proximity that Brazil is to Colombia and the noted ties that *quadrilhas* have with drug traffickers, it is safe to assume that these groups are reasonably involved in the drug trade. Reports from the Federal Police, the Brazilian government's lead agency for counternarcotics, seemingly demonstrate this as well. Figure 8 shows that cocaine seizures have augmented considerably between 1991 and 2011, accounting for a nearly 311% increase. Figure 9 also shows that the same trend is true for cannabis, with seizures increasing by a rate of more than 900% between 1991 and 2011. This spike in seizures also serves to demonstrate just how prominent the drug trade has become in Brazil in recent years.

Latin America

Drug trafficking has also become deeply embedded in the activities of other youth gangs around Latin America. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in Colombia, where youth gangs were brought under the influence of Pablo Escobar's infamous Medellín Cartel in the 1990s. They were regularly charged with drug distribution as well as carrying out assassinations against rival cartels (Salazar 1994). Around the same time, Mexican youth gangs (also known as *cholos*) started to get involved in the illegal drug market as well (Rodgers 1999). Over the past 30 years, DTOs, such as the Federation, the Gulf Cartel, the Juárez Cartel, and the Tijuana Cartel, have cultivated relationships with *cholos* and have enlisted in their help in the transport of cocaine,

marijuana, and methamphetamine to other parts of Mexico as well as to the Midwest and Southwest regions in the United States (National Drug Intelligence Center 2008). Similar partnerships have been forged between youth gangs and DTOs in other parts of Latin America.

As was previously mentioned, not all Latin American countries made their cocaine and cannabis seizure data readily accessible. Aside from Guatemala and Brazil, only Belize, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela reported on this information from as far back as 1991. I used these nine countries to formulate a Latin American average of cocaine and cannabis seizures (although I recognize that these numbers are not truly representative of the entirety of Latin America). As Figure 8 demonstrates, these nine Latin American countries experienced more than a 40% average increase in cocaine seizures between 1991 and 2011. In addition, Figure 9 shows that they experienced a nearly 310% average increase in cannabis seizures. It is clear that, much like Guatemala and Brazil, the drug trade has become increasingly prevalent in Latin America as a whole.

Migration

Guatemala

External migration to and from Guatemala can best be described as sporadic. As Figure 10 will demonstrate, there was a large number of people who departed Guatemala beginning in the mid-1980s. Many of these individuals were fleeing violence brought on by the Guatemalan Civil War or they were pursuing economic opportunities elsewhere after neoliberal reforms passed by their country resulted in lower wages and fewer job prospects. This mass exodus reached its peak in 1990; in that year alone, more than 32,000 Guatemalans immigrated to the United States. The vast majority of these immigrants (nearly 60%) settled down in Southern

California, specifically in the city of Los Angeles. It was on the streets of LA where many Guatemalan youths would come to be exposed to gang culture for the first time.

After 1990, migration from Guatemala to the U.S. began to taper off. During this period, the U.S. began to pass several measures to restrict immigration. The Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), for instance, went into effect in 1997. This far-reaching bill cracked down on illegal immigration from predominantly Latin American countries by providing more funding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and making it easier to deport Latin American immigrants residing in the U.S. Figure 11 indicates that tens of thousands of Guatemalans were deported back to their native country between the years 1997 and 2000. This is significant because, upon returning to Guatemala, young people brought back with them the gang culture they picked up in the U.S. Not long after these mass deportations, MS-13 and M-18 gangs (which got their start in LA) began to sprout up in Guatemala City.

Brazil

A different sort of migration began taking shape in Brazil during the early-1990s. This internal migration, which I refer to as the *favela*-to-prison pipeline, resulted in thousands of young Brazilians being moved forcibly from their homes to prison cells. As Figure 12 demonstrates, the prison population rate increased from 74 imprisoned Brazilians (per 100,000) in 1992 to 270 in 2012, which is a nearly 265% percentage increase. As was previously mentioned, *mano dura* (or *Fica Vivo*, as it is often referred to by Brazilians) policies put a large portion of Brazilians in prison in response to violent protests regarding neoliberal reforms. These policies disproportionately targeted young people, who were believed to be the primary

perpetrators of this violence. This is significant because it was during this time spent in prison that many young people were introduced to the Brazilian gang culture. It follows that the more youths that were imprisoned, the more people that were likely to be indoctrinated into the *comando* system.

Latin America

With regard to external migration, the number of Central Americans who migrated to and from the United States closely resembled the numbers reported for Guatemala. The reason I only reported my findings for El Salvador and Honduras is because these countries similarly oversaw a mass exodus of people, a subsequent deportation period, and an emergence of youth gangs shortly thereafter. Figure 10, for instance, shows that the two aforementioned countries basically mirrored Guatemala in the number of immigrants admitted to the U.S. In fact, the number of Salvadoran immigrants who migrated to the U.S. were consistently double that of Guatemalan immigrants. In the same vein, the number of individuals who were deported back to their home countries after 1997 were parallel to the numbers reported for Guatemala. Figure 11 shows that the U.S. actually deported more Salvadorans and Hondurans than Guatemalans during this period. Tracking this process is once again significant because it helps to explain how MS-13 and M-18 grew in size and scope in Central America during the mid-1990s.

Higher rates of internal migration in other Latin American countries may also help to explain increased youth gang membership. Uruguay, Peru, Colombia, and Chile all saw an emergence of youth gangs in the 1990s. These countries also witnessed a spike in prison population rates during this period. Figure 12 demonstrates that, between 1992 and 2012, all four countries reported a steady increase in the number of individuals residing in their prisons. It is

important to note that Chile, which is home to a large number of youth gang organizations (*pandillas* as they are known there), has one of the highest prison population rates in South America. The same trend is evident in Uruguay, a country where the PCC regularly recruits members and enlists them in their operations.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Discussion

This comparative case study began with the premise that, in order to understand why youth gangs emerged in the 1980s and 90s in Latin America, it was important to study the relationship between neoliberalism and the four factors that were produced as a result of it (state-sponsored political violence, economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and migration). This idea is based on economic determinism theory, which suggests that Latin America's embrace of neoliberal reforms in the latter half of the twentieth century compelled young people residing within the region to join youth gangs in droves.

However, before I could compare the case studies I chose in relation to the aforementioned theoretical framework, I found it necessary to examine the history of youths as prominent social actors in Latin America. As a result, the beginning of this study focused on defining youth groups and looking at their roles in areas of political activism, drug trafficking, and violent activities. This, in turn, helped to explain how youths came to be tied to the four factors analyzed in this study.

I then set about defining these factors and explaining why economic determinism, not the cycle of violence theory, served as the best theoretical framework to explain their materialization. For instance, I argued that neoliberalism was responsible for political violence (in the sense that Latin American states aggressively stifled public opposition to the reforms they passed), economic volatility (by sending jobs overseas and significantly lowering the wages of workers), the rise of the drug trade (by creating international markets and reduced border controls that benefitted the transport of drugs), and increased migration (by forcing some to move to the U.S. for better economic opportunities and making it easier for others to end up in

prison). The cycle of violence theory, however, has some serious shortcomings in linking violence to the emergence of youth gangs—namely, in the sense that there is little to no research to indicate that experiencing violence compels individuals to want to join these organizations and conduct violence of their own.

With this in mind, it is easy to see how state-sponsored political violence borne out of neoliberal reforms failed to qualify as a meaningful factor in the emergence of youth gangs. Neither Guatemala nor Brazil had a significant population of individuals who experienced governmental atrocities and then felt compelled to join youth gangs. Those who were targeted for extrajudicial killings and disappearances were mainly the indigenous populations who are not as involved in youth gang culture as other ethnic groups in their respective countries. In addition, even in other Latin American countries where widespread political violence took place, the presence of youth gangs was not always evident. This of course leads me to believe that state-sponsored political violence did not have much of an effect on youth gang participation. If anything, this factor is secondary to the three other factors that I analyzed in this study.

My research indicates that these three factors—economic volatility, the rise of the drug trade, and migration—are the three factors that most accounted for the emergence of youth gangs in Latin America. With regard to economic volatility, this materialized itself in the form of the rising youth unemployment rate, which indicates that Latin American youths turned to a life of crime due to the profound lack of economic opportunities for them. The overall rise in cocaine and cannabis seizures throughout the region also demonstrates that more and more youths are being drawn towards the drug trade to finance their costs of living. Finally, migratory patterns (both external and internal) show that individuals are indoctrinated into the youth gang culture

upon migrating to a place where these organizations are prevalent (i.e. the streets of Los Angeles, the Brazilian prison cells).

Putting all three of these factors together creates the perfect set of conditions whereby youths felt compelled to join their local *mara* or *comando*. It is important to note that, for most individuals, the decision to join a youth gang was not an easy one. Framing youth gangs as fun pastimes that Latin American adolescents get involved with in order to socialize and hang out with friends is simply an inaccurate representation of youth gang culture. While some do operate in this fashion, many specifically focus on carrying out criminal activities. In fact, as Brenneman (2012) puts it, youths recognize that joining a gang is a giant step toward sabotaging their futures. Putting a tattoo on one's face or body (as so many members often do as part of their initiation into the gang) severely undermines one's prospects of ever finding a job and makes one an easy-to-spot target for the police and enemy gang members. Also, in joining these gangs, youths are seemingly accepting their own mortality. Levenson-Estrada (2013) points out that, because death is a defining feature of everyday life for gang members, these individuals come to embrace the idea of giving their life in service of their gang. It is no surprise that youth gang members who are killed while on the job come to be martyred by their peers (Rodgers 2006). With all the negative repercussions of youth gang culture in mind, it is clear that joining one of these organizations is often viewed as a last resort. The conditions in which these individuals live make it so that they join not out of desire, but out of necessity.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study of course lead me to pose another question: What can be done to combat the issue of youth gang violence? Youth gangs maintain a very active presence in

Latin American society in the 21st century and many would describe them as much more violent today than they were thirty years ago. It is clear that zero-tolerance, *mano dura* policies, which were implemented by Latin American governments to not only discourage protestors of neoliberalism but also to combat youth gang violence, have failed to produce results. These approaches, while effective in increasing arrest and incarceration rates, have not helped to curb youth gang involvement (Moestue et al. 2013). Research shows that putting gang members behind bars radicalizes gangs and pushes them towards more organized forms of criminality (Jütersonke et al. 2009). Incarcerated youth gang members are afforded the privilege of being able to recruit other prisoners to join their organizations and train them while in prison. In addition, the Pan American Health Organization reported that homicide rates actually rose as *mano dura* policies became harsher (Garcia 2015).

I believe that in order to combat youth gang violence, policies ought to be geared towards addressing the societal problems that compelled individuals to join youth gangs in the first place. For starters, Latin American countries can distribute social resources more effectively and equitably. As has been previously mentioned, Latin America is the most unequal region of the world and this owes itself to governments' propensity to undertax their wealthiest individuals and corporations. The region's average tax-to-GDP ratio (which is a measure used to ascertain how well countries can use the taxes of their citizens to finance their public expenditures) was 23.1% in 2018, compared to the international average of 34.3% (O'Boyle 2020). On top of that, government spending on social programs (like education and healthcare) was gutted as a result of the neoliberal reforms that were passed in the 1980s and 90s.

It is of the utmost importance that Latin American governments increase taxes on the rich so as to better fund education and healthcare. With regard to education, a large share of active

gang members are either at risk of quitting school or being out of the school system altogether. According to Chávez (2018), many of the individuals who do drop out of school claimed that they had little other prospects for the future besides joining gangs. Efforts must be taken to reshape this narrative. There ought to be more of a focus on cultivating further educational and career opportunities past the primary and secondary school levels. More funds should also be dedicated towards guidance counseling and mentoring programs. In addition, distributing more resources to schools could allow them to increase funding for afterschool programs and extracurricular and sporting activities. These changes in the educational system could keep youths off the streets while also demonstrating that gang involvement is not the only avenue available to them.

Investing more in public health could also be instrumental in tackling youth gang violence. Youth involvement in gangs is often viewed through a criminal justice lens and the public health perspective on this issue is wholly ignored. However, as Haegerich et al. (2013) argue, public health officials can play a critical role in addressing the issue: they propose developing violence prevention programs as well as gang intervention programs. With the input of public health professionals, these programs would find a positive way for youths to affirm their independence and their passage from adolescence into adulthood while also offering more rewarding and less violent alternatives to gangs. These programs would likely resemble a Big Brothers Big Sisters model where at-risk youths are paired with community leaders, religious leaders, and retired gang members who encourage them to choose different, less violent paths. Public health officials can also help address the needs of gang-affiliated youth, who are at an increased risk of developing mental health conditions including conduct disorder, antisocial personality disorder, anxiety, psychosis, and drug and alcohol dependence (Hughes et al. 2015).

However, before Latin America can do any of this, it needs to dedicate more of its resources to public health initiatives. According to Ramirez (2016), the region's average investment in public health (3.5%) is well below that of the average for Western countries (8.8%). Focusing more attention on public health can truly be the difference maker in the fight against youth gang violence.

Increased job opportunities for young people in Latin America is also key to eradicating youth gang violence. As this study has shown, individuals join youth gangs when faced with dire economic circumstances. This problem partially stems from a flawed education system, which often fails to provide youngsters with the basic skills required in the labor market—an estimated 50% of young Latin Americans do not have basic reading skills while 65% do not have basic mathematical skills (González-Velosa et al. 2012). Youths could benefit from having access to more job training programs in their schools. This change would increase their probability of being able to find formal jobs once they graduate.

However, Latin American governments have to confront another problem with regard to youth employment opportunities: they have to ensure that there are quality jobs available to young people that also pay their employees decent wages. 6 out of 10 of the jobs that youths *are* able to find exist within the “informal” sector and do not include contracts, benefits, or social security rights (Herranz 2016). Latin American countries must address this issue by reforming their labor market policies in order to make sure that those who work in the informal sector are not being exploited by their employers. This may materialize itself in the form of placing sanctions or refusing to do business with corporations that do not pay their employees liveable wages so as to discourage this sort of behavior. Within the formal sector, these countries can also pass policies that stimulate the demand for young employees; such policies could include giving

tax credits to companies that employ a certain quota of young people. Perhaps another solution could involve offering up more government contracts to youths for public works jobs. Finally, it behooves Latin America to transition to a net-zero emission economy. A recent ILO report found that an economy centered on renewable energy and decarbonization could bring as many as 15 million jobs to the region by 2030 (Koop 2020). This in turn would almost surely make up for the millions of jobs that were lost due to neoliberal reforms. Each of these solutions could help to curb youth unemployment while providing alternative opportunities for at-risk youth considering a life of crime.

Latin America must also do something to address the drug trade permeating its borders. Some of the strategies that have been proposed mirror the ones I have already mentioned: investing in social programs, improving health and social services, and increasing funding for schools so that they can better their efforts to keep youths occupied and away from drugs. Another solution that has been suggested? Decriminalizing drugs entirely. The governments of Colombia and Guatemala have proposed legislation that would legalize drugs, which would purportedly cut the profits obtained by the cartels and thus hamstring youth gangs from being involved in the drug business (Leung 2018). Decriminalization would also prevent rival DTOs from fighting over limited lucrative drug transit routes, which would in turn dramatically lessen the levels of violence reported in the region (Bolton 2012). Finally, decriminalization would almost certainly address the issue of overcrowded prisons across Latin America—most of those behind bars today are low-level distributors and street dealers (Bolton 2012). Freeing those convicted of drug-related offenses would allow Latin American governments to allocate public spending elsewhere, such as social programs, job trainings, and education.

Finally, another strategy that Latin American countries ought to consider is legalizing youth gangs entirely. Due to the criminal activities with which they are involved, youth gangs are illegal in most of Latin America. However, in 2007, Ecuador took an interesting approach towards youth gangs when it became the first country to start legalizing them. Before that decision, violence was on the rise in Ecuador, which was due in no small part to youth gangs. The Latin Kings (the most prominent youth gang organization in Ecuador) were thought to be responsible for more than a quarter of the homicides in the country (Echenique 2020). Yet, once the Latin Kings were legalized and became formally recognized as an “urban youth group” by the state, murder rates plummeted: they decreased from 15.35 per 100,000 people in 2011 to 5 per 100,000 people in 2017 (Samuel 2019). Brotherton & Gude (2017) reported that, after legalization, these gangs were eligible to apply for state funding to develop cultural and education initiatives, use public spaces for events, and participate in politics. They also indicated that youth gangs were far less likely to participate in violence when they peacefully coexisted with the government and the police. This example clearly demonstrates that policies of social inclusion are much more powerful in combatting gang violence than are policies of social exclusion.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper certainly have much broader implications for the contemporary study of political sociology. For starters, it is clear that the disintegration of social programs and services as a result of changing economic systems can be detrimental to society as a whole. As my paper demonstrates, neoliberalism brought with it a decline in economic opportunities for youths, an expanded drug market, and an environment that fomented the movement and

resettlement of certain populations, which would in turn compel individuals to join youth gangs in droves. Such a development, while certainly unintentional, led to higher rates of violence in Latin American society. Perhaps this comparative case study can showcase how the embracement of certain economic policies can produce unforeseen consequences. Ronald Reagan's trickle-down economics and tax cuts for the wealthy, which some scholars have claimed led to the recession of 2008, is one example that comes to mind.

Another application of this study involves examining how economic systems come to shape social behavior. My research shows that young people were much more willing to participate in violent youth gang activities when wages declined and job prospects all but disappeared for them. I also observed how neoliberalism had the added effect of transforming the identity of certain individuals. Young men in particular, who felt ostracized from society thanks to the free market reforms that stripped them of their jobs, found themselves in search of new identities. This identity came in the form of youth gang participation, which allowed these individuals to bond with others who felt as though they too occupied the margins of society. Thus, one could perhaps draw a connection between this study and studies that link capitalism to people's increasingly self-interested behavior.

This study was not without its limitations, however. One such constraint was limiting the scope of my study to Latin America. Youths are involved in gangs all throughout the world, from the *triad* of Hong Kong to the *agberos* of Lagos. My study could have benefitted from comparing the conditions that compelled these young people to get involved with their respective youth gangs. In fact, the *Wah Ching* (or the Youth of China) is a prominent youth gang made up of Chinese immigrants that was founded in San Francisco, California. This of course is very

similar to how the *maras* of Guatemala got their start. Further research could examine if links between these two gangs (i.e. structure, activities, motivations) exist.

Another limitation of this study is that I was not able to collect my own data. All of the data utilized in this thesis comes from academics and/or government officials, who were collecting data for their own research projects and policy briefs. The problem with this is that I was hard-pressed to find data that closely aligned itself with the specific variables I chose for my study. For instance, in order to measure economic volatility, I intended on measuring underemployment rates in Latin America alongside youth unemployment rates so that I could get a better understanding of how dismal the economic opportunities were for young people of the region. Underemployment is the measure of which people in a labor force are employed at jobs that fail to pay their workers liveable wages. However, I quickly discovered that I could not include the underemployment rate in my study because most Latin American countries did not start to report this measure until 2012, well after neoliberal reforms had come to be passed. Of course, collecting quantitative data for a topic as broad and expansive as this one is quite a difficult task. Perhaps future research dedicated to this subject would benefit from recording qualitative data in the form of interviews and ethnographic studies of youth gang members.

I would also be remiss if I did not mention how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is affecting not only youth gangs, but Latin American society as a whole. The coronavirus pandemic is a relatively new development (it is a little over a year old as of the writing of this thesis), meaning that there are few scholarly articles that explore the subject in great detail. According to some reports, however, it appears that lockdowns in Latin American countries are credited with reducing murder and crime rates (Padgett 2020). Another interesting development is that youth gangs are bringing it upon themselves to provide aid to communities in need. The

Red Command in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, has tasked itself with imposing curfews and social distancing measures on residents and local shops, while also handing out sanitation items, medical supplies, and food (Cruz & Fonseca 2021). In addition, MS-13 in Guatemala pledged to suspend the collection of extortion money as a relief measure for struggling markets and businesses (ACLED 2020).

Despite these contributions to their communities, scholars predict that youth gangs are not likely to stay like this once the pandemic subsides. Padgett (2020) discusses how these organizations feel even more emboldened when state institutions are weakened—natural disasters and pandemics thus create an environment where criminal groups can deepen their power, according to him. In addition, Cruz & Fonseca (2021) warn that the COVID-19 pandemic could further push at-risk youth to the margins of society; with schools closed and unemployment numbers way up, it is more likely that young people could fall into the clutches of youth gangs operating in their communities. As the pandemic continues to drag on, the extent to which youth gangs and at-risk youth will be impacted remains unclear. Thus, future research into this subject will have to look at the effects of the coronavirus on youth gang organizations.

Finally, an extension of the topic at hand that I did not get to examine in this study, but would like to explore in future research, is how individuals come to cut ties with their youth gang organizations. Throughout this study, I looked at the appeal of youth gangs and why young people may feel enticed to join them, but I would be interested in seeing what factors into their decision to leave. For example, Brenneman (2012) notes that many ex-youth gang members in Guatemala renounce their ties upon discovering religion. Although “deserting” the gang is oftentimes regarded as a capital offense, most *maras* tend to give a special pass to gang members who report having experienced an evangelical conversion (Brenneman 2012). Other former gang

members report “aging out” as a reason for leaving; they say that they just grew out of the gang and developed other friendships or interests (Decker et al. 2017). Nevertheless, it is clear that one’s reason for leaving typically manifests itself at the individual level. Thus, I believe that it would be beneficial to further examine these reasons for leaving so that better youth gang intervention strategies can be developed and implemented. One can only hope that this in turn will bring an end to youth gang violence in Latin America.

APPENDIX

	Lowest estimate	Highest estimate
Countries	Gang membership	
Paraguay	500	1,600
Panama	1,300	2,000
Costa Rica	2,600	3,000
Venezuela	3,600	4,500
Nicaragua	4,500	8,500
Peru	4,700	14,000
Ecuador	5,000	20,000
Bolivia	7,000	25,000
El Salvador	10,000	20,000
Honduras	12,000	36,000
Guatemala	14,000	165,000
Brazil	30,000	100,000
Mexico	50,000	100,000
Colombia	78,000	150,000

Figure 1: Estimated gang membership by country. The first column lists the country, the second column lists the lowest gang membership estimate reported, and the third column lists the highest gang membership estimate reported.

Estimated gang membership in various Latin American countries

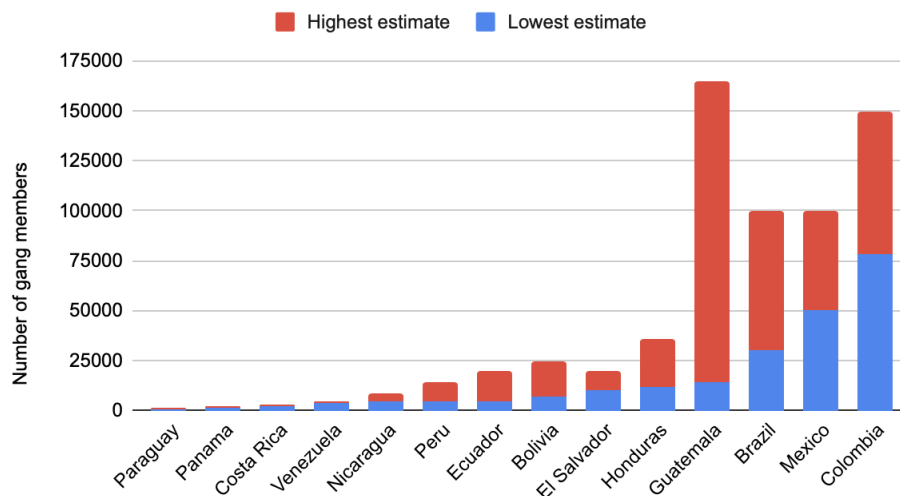


Figure 2: Estimated gang membership by country. The blue bar corresponds with the lowest gang membership estimate reported by that country while the red bar corresponds with the highest gang membership estimate reported.

Youth Unemployment Rate in Guatemala (1991 - 2019)

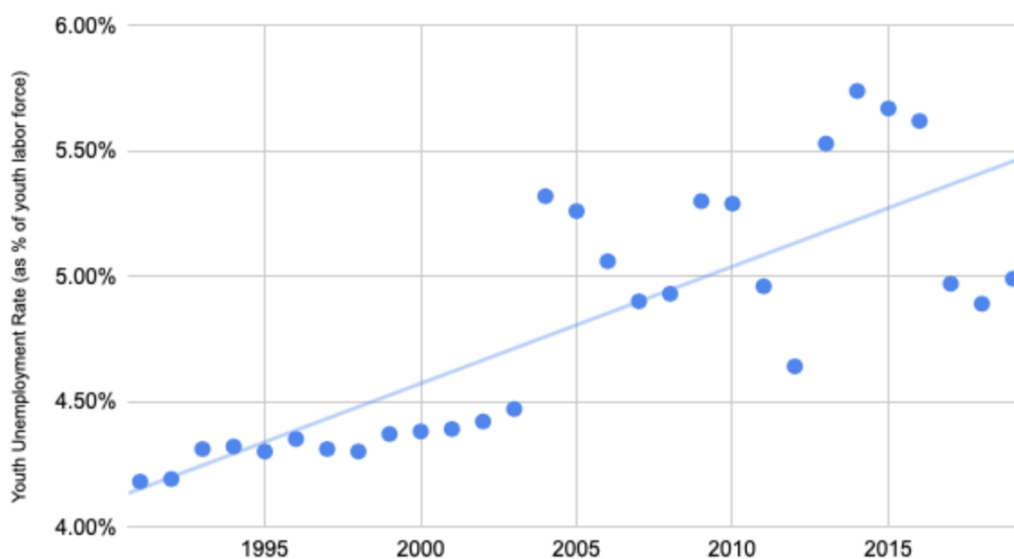


Figure 3: Youth Unemployment Rate in Guatemala (1991 - 2019). The blue line represents the rate of increase in youth unemployment rates.

Youth Unemployment Rate in Brazil (1991 - 2019)

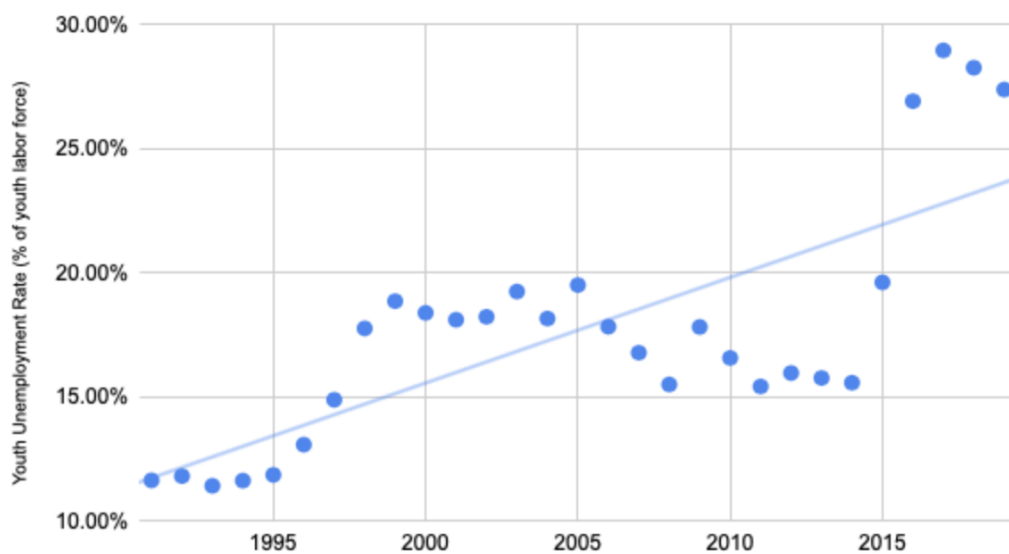


Figure 4: Youth Unemployment Rate in Guatemala (1991 - 2019). The blue line represents the rate of increase in youth unemployment rates.

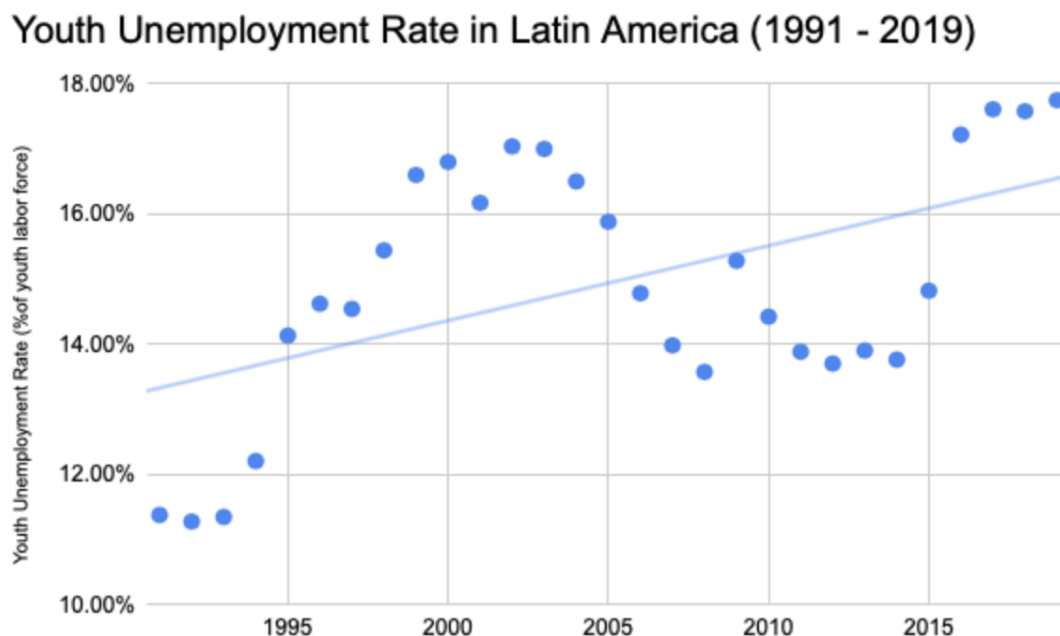


Figure 5: Youth Unemployment Rate in Latin America (1991 - 2019). The blue line represents the rate of increase in youth unemployment rates.

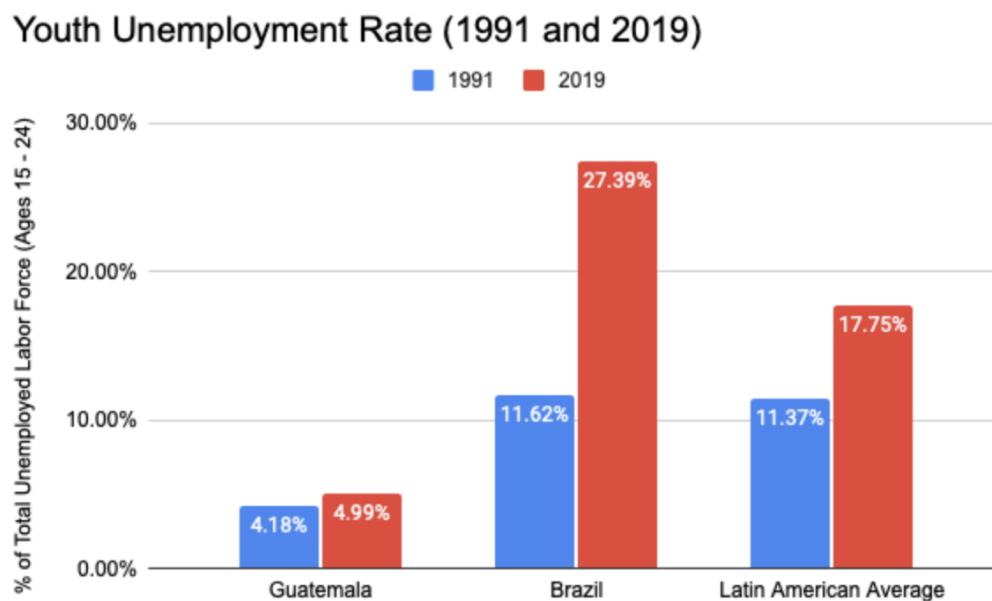


Figure 6: Youth Unemployment Rates in Guatemala, Brazil, and Latin America (1991 and 2019). The blue bar represents youth unemployment rates in 1991 whereas the red bar represents youth unemployment rates in 2019.

	1991	2011	Percentage Change
Belize	0.013 metric tons of cocaine seizures 0.8 metric tons of cannabis seizures	2.6 metric tons of cocaine seizures 72 metric tons of cannabis seizures	19900% increase 8900% increase
Brazil	3.7 metric tons of cocaine seizures 8.5 metric tons of cannabis seizures	15.2 metric tons of cocaine seizures 87.4 metric tons of cannabis seizures	310.81% increase 928.24% increase
Colombia	77.07 metric tons of cocaine seizures 329 metric tons of cannabis seizures	124 metric tons of cocaine seizures 69 metric tons of cannabis seizures	60.89% increase 79.03% decrease
Ecuador	1.190 metric tons of cocaine seizures 0.171 metric tons of cannabis seizures	21.1 metric tons of cocaine seizures 4.5 metric tons of cannabis seizures	1673.11% increase 2531.58% increase
Guatemala	15.4 metric tons of cocaine seizures 1.3 metric tons of cannabis seizures	6.493 metric tons of cocaine seizures 789.25 metric tons of cannabis seizures	57.84% decrease 60611.54% increase
Mexico	50.3 metric tons of cocaine seizures 254.9 metric tons of cannabis seizures	6 metric tons of cocaine seizures 909 metric tons of cannabis seizures	88.07% decrease 256.61% increase
Panama	9.30 metric tons of cocaine seizures 9.88 metric tons of cannabis seizures	34 metric tons of cocaine seizures 4.9 metric tons of cannabis seizures	265.59% increase 50.4% decrease
Paraguay	0.041 metric tons of cocaine seizures 0.97 metric tons of cannabis seizures	1.294 metric tons of cocaine seizures 540 metric tons of cannabis seizures	3056.1% increase 55570.1% increase
Venezuela	9.80 metric tons of cocaine seizures 3.67 metric tons of cannabis seizures	26 metric tons of cocaine seizures 16 metric tons of cannabis seizures	165.31% increase 335.97% increase
Average	18.53 metric tons of cocaine seizures 67.69 metric tons of cannabis seizures	26.02 metric tons of cocaine seizures 276.89 metric tons of cannabis seizures	40.42% increase 309.06% increase

Figure 7: Cocaine and Cannabis Seizures in Latin America (1991 and 2011). The first column lists the country, the second column lists cocaine and cannabis seizures (in metric tons) in 1991, the third column lists cocaine and cannabis seizures (in metric tons) in 2011, and the fourth column lists the percentage change between the 1991 and 2011 numbers.

Cocaine Seizures (1991 and 2011)

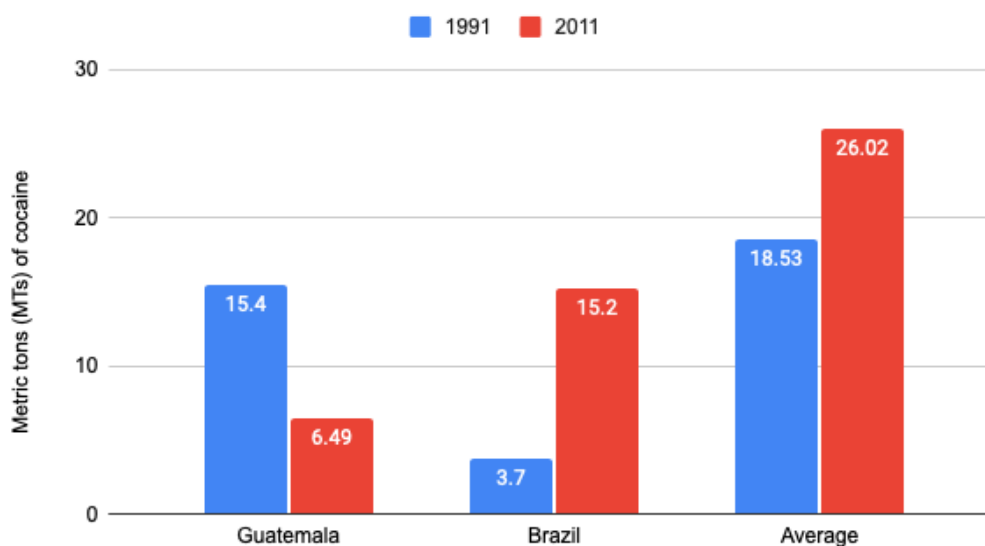


Figure 8: Cocaine Seizures (1991 and 2011). The blue bar represents cocaine seizures in 1991 whereas the red bar represents cocaine seizures in 2011.

Cannabis Seizures (1991 and 2011)

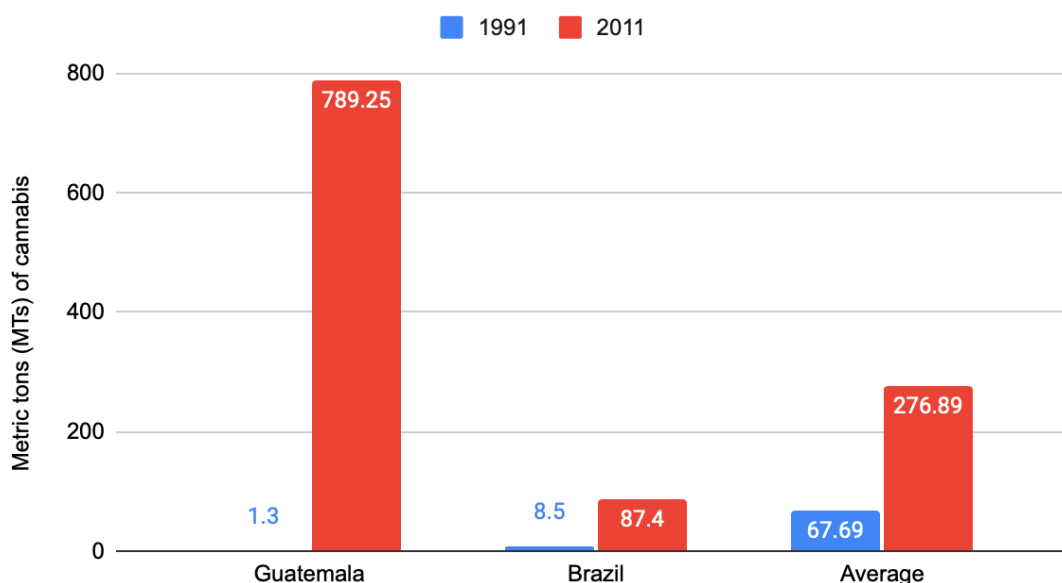


Figure 9: Cannabis Seizures (1991 and 2011). The blue bar represents cannabis seizures in 1991 whereas the red bar represents cannabis seizures in 2011.

Immigrants Admitted to the United States (1986 - 1996)

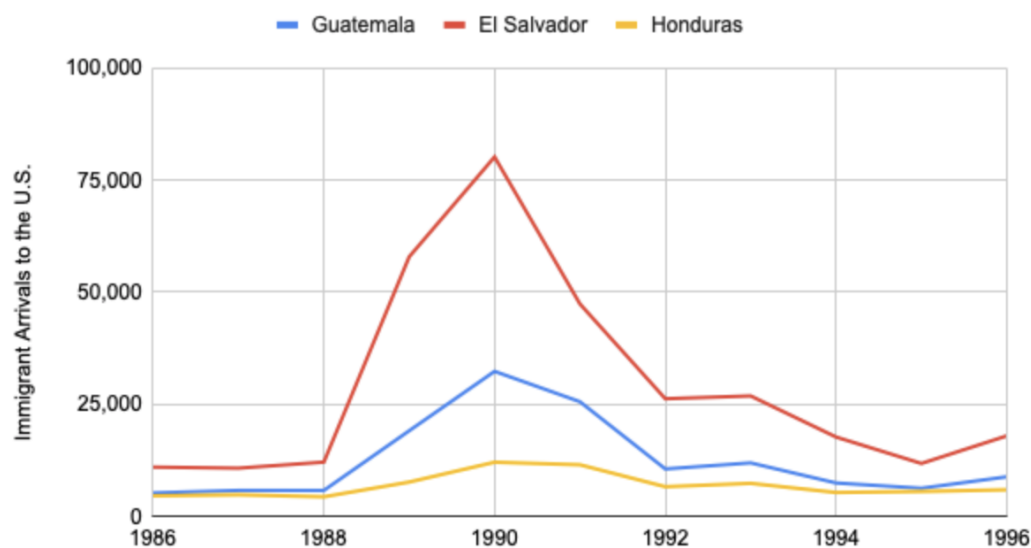


Figure 10: Central American Immigrants Admitted to the United States (1986-1996). The blue line represents Guatemalan migration trends while the red and yellow lines represent Salvadoran and Honduran ones, respectively.

Deportees from the U.S. by Country of Origin (1996 - 2000)

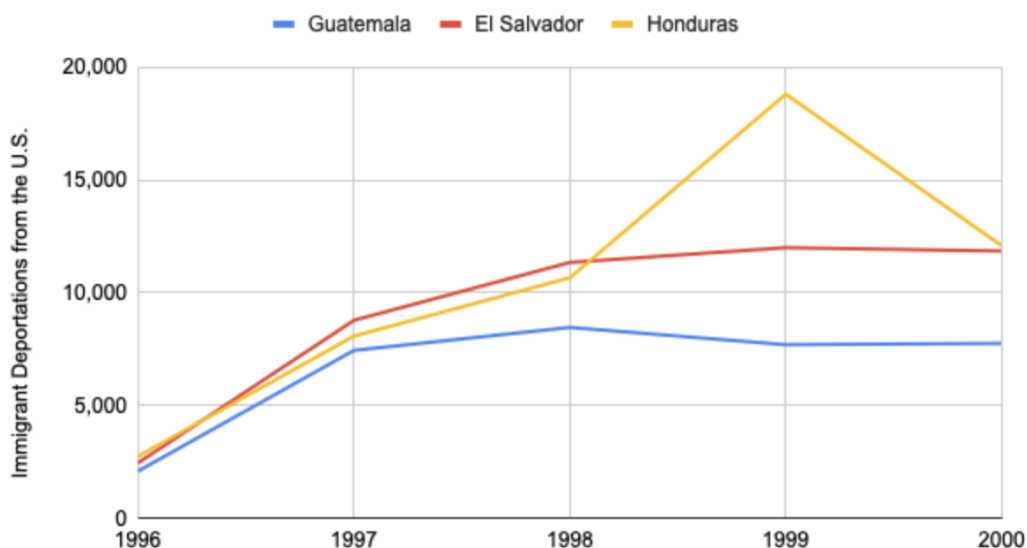


Figure 11: Central American Deportees from the U.S. (1996-2000). The blue line represents Guatemalan deportation trends while the red and yellow lines represent Salvadoran and Honduran ones, respectively.

Prison Population Rate (1992 - 2012)

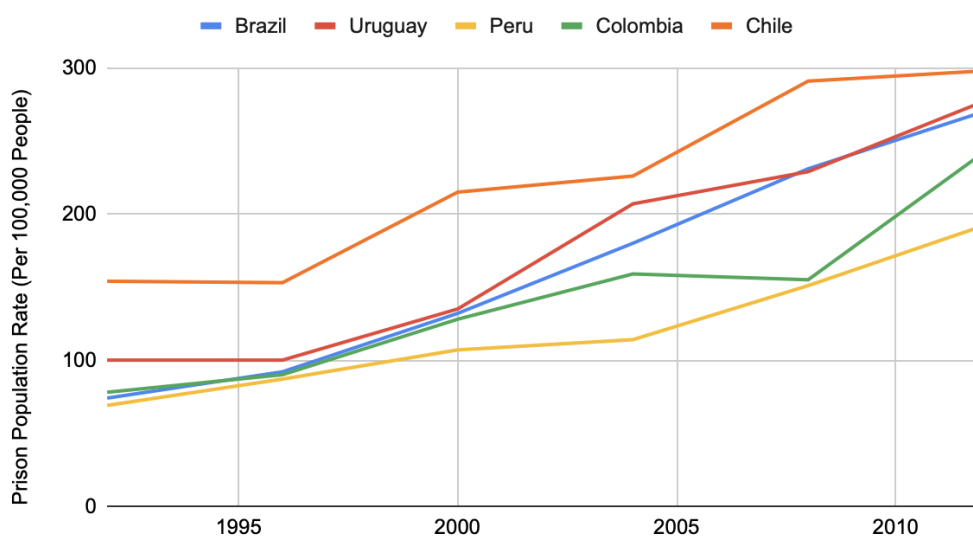


Figure 12: Prison Population Rates in Key South American Countries (1992-2012). The blue line represents Brazilian incarceration trends while the red, yellow, green, and orange lines represent Uruguayan, Peruvian, Colombian, and Chilean ones, respectively.

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