

THE PRESSURE TO BRING IN A BODY

How Systematic Killing Transformed Police Raids and Gangs in Post-Chávez Venezuela

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In July 2015 the Operation Liberation of the People (Operación de Liberación del Pueblo, OLP) was launched in the barrio of Cota 905 in Caracas. That day fourteen people were killed and over two hundred were arrested by the Bolivarian National Guard. A few hours after the raid was over, President Nicolás Maduro unveiled the militarized strategy, presenting it as a new security plan to fight crime.¹ Suggesting that his former approach had been “soft-on-crime,” Maduro proclaimed: “Enough! I extended my hand, and they believed it was a sign of weakness. He who robs and kills is an enemy of the people.”

Over the course of the following year, state violence increased rapidly. While security forces in Brazil have long been considered some of the most violent in the region, in 2016 security forces in Venezuela eclipsed them. That year, Brazil’s police forces were responsible for 4,219 deaths while security forces in Venezuela killed 4,667 people—a proportion three times higher, given that Brazil has seven times the population of Venezuela (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018). While the police in Venezuela have historically engaged in extralegal and unnecessary violence, police killings have never come close to the numbers registered in recent years. How can we account for this increase in lethal violence deployed by state security forces? And what can it tell us more broadly about variations in police violence in the region?

In this chapter we zoom in on tough-on-crime policies—referred to in the region as *mano dura*—implemented since 2015 and the militarization of the police associated with them. In line with the argument presented in the introduction, we explore the recrudescence and transformations of militarized security that have occurred during the administration of Nicolás Maduro. In chapter 8 Keymer Ávila embeds this militarization of security in the theory of necropolitics, highlighting the drop-by-drop massacre as a form of governance. Our research takes on the same phenomenon, but from an in situ perspective. We analyze the Operation Liberation of the People as well as the Special Action Forces (las Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales, FAES) of the Bolivarian National Police (Policía Nacional Bolivariana, PNB) from 2015 to 2019. This analysis is based on one hundred interviews conducted between 2018 and 2019 with men and women officers from various security forces, ranging in age from twenty-three to forty-seven years old.² These include Venezuela's forensic and investigative police (Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas, CICPC), the PNB, and municipal and state police forces in the states of Miranda and Táchira. These interviews include a diverse sample of ranks, from the lowest rank to the highest. We use Venezuelan police ranks here, which are as follows (from lowest to highest): *oficial*, *oficial agregado*, *oficial jefe*, *supervisor*, *supervisor agregado*, *supervisor jefe*, *comisionado*, *comisionado agregado*, *comisionado jefe*, *comisario general*.

Police violence is a multifaceted problem. Theories that seek to explain it tend to focus on the situational characteristics of officers and citizens engaged in interactions, the behavioral predisposition of officers, and the culture and informal norms that structure the world of the police (Worden 1995). From the perspective of critical criminology, police violence is understood as a form of political repression with the aim of controlling groups that destabilize or challenge state policies; scholars in this field have also highlighted police violence as a form of social control more broadly (Antillano 2010; Neocleous 2006). From these perspectives, marginalized and vulnerable groups are the targets of police repression, which maintains domination by and hegemony of elite groups (Coronil and Skurski 1991). Nevertheless, the strategies deployed by the police that serve these functions are not homogeneous or static. Here we seek to examine the variation among strategies and plans in Venezuela to better explain the violence they produce. We share the view of José Miguel Cruz (2016), who argues that in order to comprehend violence in Latin America, we must place at the center of our analysis the numerous ways in which the state directly contributes to violence—in this case, transforming policing practices through the orders received from

the Ministry of Justice (MIJ)—in the search for legitimacy and political authority during a period of extreme political and economic crisis.

While OLP raids and those later carried out by FAES officers have received attention by journalists and human rights advocates, raids (and police violence more generally) have largely been portrayed as a tool of political control that targets dissidents and critics of the Chavista government. While we recognize that state security forces have engaged in political repression, this chapter advances a different thesis—that the Maduro administration has used lethal violence principally as a form of social control of popular sectors.

One of the key factors in understanding the increase in violence in Venezuela—homicide rates in particular—during this period is the militarization of citizen security. As discussed in the introduction and in chapter 6, Hugo Chávez promoted a police reform based on the protection of human rights and the progressive and differential use of force; despite inconsistent implementation it did result in a reduction in particular forms of police repression (at public protests, for example) (PROVEA 2013). His successor has moved away from this reform and toward a completely militarized vision of security, resulting in the flagrant abuse of human rights (UN Human Rights Council 2020). Recognizing this militarization is essential to understanding current rates of state violence as well as other trends in violence in recent years. We identify three mechanisms that emerged during a turn from carceral punitivism toward a pattern of systematic killing that contribute to violence (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018).

Due to the lack of official data and considering that police institutions ferociously protect any information having to do with police procedure, interviews with officers is one of the few methods available to study security plans in Venezuela. Researchers should, of course, analyze police narratives with care and caution (LeBrón 2019; Spade 2015). The moral universe of “violence workers” is structured by a logic that justifies extreme acts of cruelty (Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbaro 2002), and their discourse tends to defend decisions made within this institution. Furthermore, “the silence behind the thin blue line” (Hodges and Pugh 2018)—the informal agreement among officers to not report illegal, dishonest, and/or inappropriate activity—is a fundamental element of police culture across the Americas.

It is not surprising, then, that many of those we interviewed declined or refused to answer questions about the violation of human rights during raids, explaining that “entre bomberos no se pisan la manguera” (firefighters don’t step on each other’s hoses). Indeed, police culture is structured by a code of silence enforced by isolation, hermetic

institutions, and intense loyalty among officers (Reiner 1985). Keeping these characteristics in mind, it is notable that the majority of officers we interviewed were not in agreement with the policies of their institution and expressed their inconformity openly. A majority of officers were particularly critical of the excessive use of force used during raids. In the words of one PNB officer with twenty-one years on the force: “The OLP doesn’t mean Operation Liberation of the People but rather Operation Eliminate the People.”³ The fact that these opinions contradict dominant police culture suggests that many officers chose not to tow the institutional line when talking about raids.

MANO DURA AND THE INCREASE IN VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Decades of research on *mano dura* policies in Latin America have shown that they do not achieve their purported goal—to reduce crime.⁴ Far from what is promoted by state discourse, these policies have contributed to prison overcrowding, human rights violations, and homicide rates throughout the region. After the implementation of *mano dura* and super *mano dura* plans in Central America, security forces detained thousands of youths simply because they were suspected of belonging to a gang. From 2003 to 2005, law enforcement agencies in El Salvador and Guatemala arrested more than fifty thousand “gang members” in those two countries combined, and as a consequence, police abuse and prison overcrowding multiplied (Cruz 2011b). Mass incarceration and prison overcrowding has been shown to improve gang coordination and organizing in Latin America (Lessing and Denyer Willis 2019).

Andrés Antillano and Keymer Ávila (2017, 86) argue that heavy-handed policies could increase police violence due to signals from higher up the chain of command that “have a cascade or contagion effect that permeates the actions of other security forces and reinforces patterns of collective and diffuse institutional violence.” Other studies have highlighted how police violence can result in gangs transforming into better articulated criminal organizations. Thus, instead of weakening gangs, these plans produce better structured and more powerful organizations (Cruz 2011), even more capable of attacking and confronting the police. And as Benjamin Lessing (2018) has argued, comparing the cases of Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico, in a context of “unconditional repression”—a war without quarter—certain organizations will be more willing to use violence against state agents, a strategy of “violent lobbying” to weaken *de jure* policy. Existing literature, then, suggests *mano dura* policies can contribute to crime.

Mo Hume (2007, 739), analyzing *mano dura* policies in El Salvador,

highlights how they generate a “discourse in order to feed a vicious circle of violence, where fear and chaos become legitimating agents for greater repression and a continuation of authoritarian measures.” In Venezuela, the pattern of systematic killing we describe here has been preceded and accompanied by a discursive process surrounding the military character of security forces and the lethal stigmatization of the poor (Zubillaga and Hanson 2018). This official discourse fostered by state representatives provides an ethical framework against which police activities are measured and legitimized. Similarly, José Miguel Cruz (2016, 387) argues, “When the head of government or the national police chief use their platform to . . . publicly authorize government officials and civilians to use all means possible to tackle crime, they are also shaping the norms by which government crackdowns and extralegal activities may be publicly judged and accepted. They condone violence by redefining the boundaries of legitimate force.” Using interview data, we explore the results of *mano dura* policies in the Venezuelan context, from the point of view of the actors charged with carrying out security policy. Taking these studies as a reference, we propose three factors that would explain the increase in lethal violence within the framework of these policies in Venezuela: the change in the logic of police raids, the reorganization of the criminal world in response to this, and the disruption of illicit markets.

Police repression has a long history in Venezuela. While the second wave democracies of many countries in the region collapsed in the 1960s and 1970s, Venezuela’s democracy remained stable after transitioning from a military dictatorship in 1958. This political stability came at the expense of brutal repression, and police violence was key to solidifying the democratic regime against threats posed by competing parties, leftist organizations, or those that might sympathize with opposing groups (Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Velasco 2015; Coronil and Skurski 1991). Since 1985, nongovernmental organizations like Red de Apoyo por la Justicia y la Paz (Justice and Peace Support Network) and the Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA) have published reports on extrajudicial killings, torture, and corruption, denouncing the frequent violation of human rights by security forces in the country.

These human rights violations have often occurred during police raids, which have become an increasingly common crime fighting strategy since the 1970s. While early on these were “exceptions”—used principally during holidays and particular weekends—Tosca Hernández (1991) observes that police raids became part of the formal judicial apparatus long before the Bolivarian Revolution. The *Ley sobre Vagos y Maleantes*

(Law of Vagrants and Thugs), approved in 1939, opened the door to mass raids, giving discretion to police and civilian authorities that “guaranteed speed in detention and court proceedings, assuring complete defenselessness on the part of the defendant” (Hernández 1986, 159). Despite the fact that the Supreme Court declared this law unconstitutional in 1997, raids continued. From 2010 to 2011 alone, four security plans that deployed mass raids were implemented: Operación Cangrejo (Operation Cold Case), Madrugonazo al Hampa (Dawn Raid on Crime), Guardia del Pueblo (The People’s Guard), and the Dispositivo Bicentenario de Seguridad (Bicentennial Security Plan), resulting in alarming rates of incarceration.

During his time as president, Hugo Chávez supported both militarized and integral, “humanist” approaches to security. In 2008 a police reform was implemented (see chapter 6), during which the PNB, the National Experimental University of Security (Universidad Nacional Experimental de la Seguridad, UNES), and the General Police Council (Consejo General de Policía, CGP) were created. The new policing law passed as part of the reform—the Bolivarian National Police Law (Police Service and *Ley Orgánica del Servicio de Policía y Cuerpo de Policía Nacional Bolivariana*, henceforth National Police Law)—affirms that the right to life is fundamental and that the use of lethal force is only justified to defend the life of the officer or another person.

After Hugo Chávez died in 2013 his successor, Nicolás Maduro, began to dismantle this reform little by little. In 2014 Maduro stated that the PNB should be characterized by military discipline, aligning himself with the previous model of policing in the country. In Venezuela several branches of the armed forces, including the National Guard, have intervened extensively in patrols and police deployment since the transition to democracy in 1958 (CONAREPOL 2007; Skurski and Coronil 2006). A principal goal of the police reform was to remove the military from domestic policing. Thus, the militarized raids we analyze here roundly contradict the ideological base of the formation of the UNES and its police academies and the civilian character of the police established in the National Police Law and Law for Policing Statutes (*Ley del Estatuto de la Función Policial*).

As Ávila describes in chapter 8, militarized raids have been used by governments in the name of “security” long before the Bolivarian Revolution. However, we suggest that raids in post-Chávez Venezuela are based on a logic different from the one that motivated and justified police violence before 2015. In an effort to convince citizens that it could fight crime effectively, the Venezuelan government drew on already accepted policing practices; alongside mass arrests, these militarized raids

sought to exhibit mass death. This has produced rates of killings by the police never before seen in the country. This lethality is the product of a transition from a period in which the police had the right to kill to a stage in which they have a direct order to exterminate groups regarded as threats to society. Therefore, the rates of police violence in recent years are a continuation of the past but also an expression of the ruptures and contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution.

THE OLP AND FAES

The Operation Liberation of the People was established through presidential decree no. 1,471 and consisted of “mixed commissions.” The decree created the Popular System of Protection for Peace (Sistema Popular de Protección para la Paz), defined as an “innovative, efficient, and revolutionary mechanism of articulation that consists of the integration of all state powers, at the national, state, and municipal level, Popular Power and communal governments . . . in order to promote and establish a new form of planning criminal policy . . . in the face of any internal or external threat.”

After the OLP was launched, an astonishing jump in state violence occurred. Compared to the year before the number of people killed by state security forces increased by 88 percent (Ávila 2017). Numerous reports of violations were made (Human Rights Watch 2016; PROVEA 2017), and in the wake of constant outcry over killings and irregular police actions the government decided to rename the plan Operation for the Humanist Liberation of the People (Operación de Liberación Humanista del Pueblo, OLHP), as if declaring the plan as “humanist” would make it so.⁵ Yet by July 2017 the OLHP was eliminated and a new tactical group was announced to “protect el people”: the PNB’s Special Action Forces (las Fuerzas de Acciones Especiales, FAES).

Originally proposed by National Guard general Néstor Reverol Torres—minister of the MIJ from 2016 to 2020—and Alexis Escalona Marrero—then vice minister of citizen security—the FAES was publicly launched during a press conference in which Escalona described the units as “being in the streets day in and day out with the goal of defending *el pueblo*, always adhering to the respect and guarantee of human rights” (Monitor de Víctimas 2018b).

In less than a year the FAES were implicated in a number of massacres, including at a youth detention center in the state of Amazonas (see chapter 8). In May 2020 FAES agents killed thirteen people in a barrio of Petare in eastern Caracas, during raids that sought to capture the *pran* (leader) of the gang that controlled barrios in the area. Based on his

review of documents published after the raid, Zair Mundaray, once one of Venezuela's top anti-corruption prosecutors, explained that all of the bodies recovered had been shot twice in the chest, what he referred to as a "double tap" (*El Nacional* 2020). Mundaray emphasized that it was impossible that this would occur thirteen times in a row during a conflict between the police and a gang. According to Mundaray, "The similarity of the wounds indicate a high possibility of extrajudicial executions."

VIOLENCE GENERATED BY RAIDS

Police officers in Latin America are known for excessive use of force and for acting above the law. Even after the transition to democracy, police forces in the region have continued to practice torture, extralegal killings, and mass arrests that violate due process. Nevertheless, rates of these kinds of human rights violations are not constant. How can we explain variation in police violence? Why are killings by police officers higher at some points in time and lower in others? There are many variables to consider in explaining this variation; here, we focus on state policy, a factor that has received less attention, and how this policy shapes the strategies and goals of the police institution.

The Green Light

As discussed earlier, *operativos* and *redadas* in Venezuela have historically aimed to arrest en masse. According to officers we interviewed, however, incarceration is no longer the goal of raids. In contrast to the descriptions given by Hernández (1991) of raids from the 1950s to the 1980s—when killing was permitted, but was not the goal of the raids—the officers we interviewed used words like *eliminate*, *liquidate*, and *wipe out* when we asked them why the government created the OLP and then the FAES.

Ronald, oficial agregado of the PNB with three years on the force, described OLP and FAES raids like this: "[The order is] to wipe out the delinquents . . . there is something that we say in certain environments, there was a green light given, no one from the prosecutor's office or the *defensoría* [a state-funded human rights agency] was present [during the raids], nobody. [The order is] 'Go and get rid of these delinquents that have the state very concerned [*porque tienen en zozobra al Estado*].'" Alejandro, an officer from the investigations division of the FAES with twenty-five years as a police officer, told us, "The order is to go and kill everyone, it's that simple . . . If there is a criminal organization it doesn't matter who gets taken down. Like the president said once: 'You all resolve this problem for me, it doesn't matter who goes down.'"

Officers' discourse would suggest that the police were given a blank

check to kill. Yet if we review the data, we see that raids have been based in traditional police practice. In fact, demographic data of those killed during raids are practically identical to those who have been arrested in the past. A report published by the nongovernmental organization Caracas Mi Convive in 2019 revealed that “the victims of security forces are largely young men from excluded sectors, with little education who worked in the informal sector or were unemployed.” This implies a pattern of discrimination towards the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of the city. The “extermination of threats” carries an implicit understanding that is shared by both the police and much of Venezuelan society (Briceño-León 2005)—threats reside in popular sectors, in the poor and the working class. The officers we interviewed alluded to a certain profile when talking about the targets of raids—“because he is Black” or “he has a tattoo”—a profile built on the bodies of youths that have become the symbol of delinquency through state and popular discourse.

Various officers commented that a warrant was taken as “evidence” that someone was a danger to society, which “justified” their elimination. During an interview with Guillermo, a supervisor jefe of the FAES who had spent twenty years on the force, he explained:

Hermano, if someone has a warrant out for homicide it's a gift, we have a green light to kill him. These are people, you and I both know, that have to be eliminated, they are the dregs of society and you can't give them a break or a chance to kill someone else, these people can't be rehabilitated. They are the ones that have made this country a living hell. If a guy is wanted for robbery, depending on how we capture him we decide whether or not to kill him [*si lo jodemos o no*]. If he comes at us, we kill him right then and there, if we arrest him and verify that he is wanted, he meets the same end, we make everything look good [*lo cuadramos*], we take him wherever is convenient and eliminate him . . . If it wasn't for us we would be overrun with delinquents.

Young men involved in criminal activities that we interviewed were well aware of where they would end up if caught up in a raid. During an interview, one of them explained to us, “I am no innocent. I deserve to be sentenced. You get me? But based in Venezuelan law . . . Because I know that they are going to kill me. The law doesn't exist in Venezuela, it doesn't exist, our future is determined and that we know, those of us in this life.” In this context, the mark of a criminal record does not only lead to social death (Price 2015), but increasingly to physical extermination. Less than a year after our fieldwork in rural sectors in the state of Miranda, eight of the nine young men (all who were known as *delincuentes*, or criminals) that we interviewed had been killed by the police; the only one who remained alive had no criminal record.

Police culture across the Americas is characterized by an “us versus them” mentality, loyalty that reproduces impunity, masculine ideals of physical force, and the belief that the police is a heroic force that maintains the line between order and chaos (Kurtz and Upton 2017). Given that the discourse around the raids legitimizes these characteristics and amplifies the capacity of police agents to represent them, it is not surprising that officers like Guillermo support raids in the “fight against crime.”

Nevertheless, perspectives of other officers differed from that of Guillermo's. Grecia, oficial agregada in the PNB who agreed to be interviewed without a recorder, maintained that the FAES and the PNB should have different uniforms so that “people don't generalize what the FAES does to the entire PNB.” She felt that FAES abuse of authority had stained the reputation of the entire force and wanted to separate herself from their actions. Alejandro expressed a similar concern: “Everyone thinks that I am a delinquent just like you [as if speaking to an officer from the OLP], because you violate human rights . . . people don't know what the FAES is, people don't know they are a special group, people only know that a police officer is from an institution and they put us all in the same bag, so it's like we say, *malamente paga justo por pecador* [the good pay for what the sinners do], even if you aren't the sinner who committed the sin.” Even though he was a member of the FAES and had participated in a few OLP raids, in his interview Alejandro criticized the actions taken by officers during raids.

While survey data show that the OLP was quite popular among citizens when first implemented, many of the officers we interviewed criticized the plan for the dysfunctional way in which it was implemented. Officers described the OLP as improvised, which resulted in a “disaster in citizen security.” Indeed, it is unclear what (if any) formal guidelines regulate the actions officers can or should take during them. None of the officers we interviewed were aware of a manual or protocol that structured the action of police officers during the first two years of the OLP. Ramon, a PNB comisionado who participated in OLP raids on a number of occasions, told us, “When I was called to an OLP raid they never showed me a document or gave instructions for action, and no one explained to us any norm about how to conduct them.” A protocol was finally published in 2017, not for the OLP but the OLHP, right before the government eliminated the OLHP and created the FAES. Just like the OLP, none of the officers we interviewed—including members of these tactical units—knew of a manual or protocol document that regulates police discretion and behavior during raids.

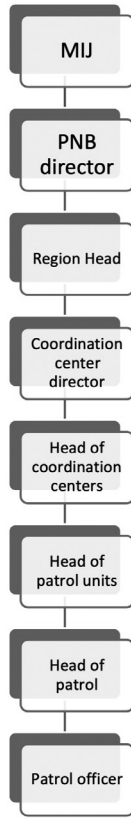


FIGURE 9.1. Hierarchy of police forces in Venezuela.

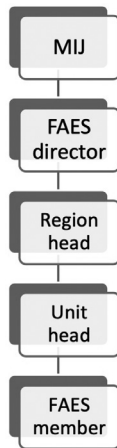


FIGURE 9.2. Hierarchy of the FAES.

Both the OLP and the FAES share a particular characteristic in regard to hierarchy and how information flows through the institution. Officers in both depend directly on the MIJ and obey orders that come directly from this ministry. If we compare the hierarchical structure of the FAES and that mandated by the National Police Law, one can quickly notice the difference. Figure 9.1 shows the structure of police forces according to the National Police Law and police manuals. In Figure 9.2 we see the hierarchy structure of the FAES, which we have constructed through our interviews.

As tactical groups within the PNB, the FAES should report and be accountable to the director of this police force. Yet all of the FAES officers that we interviewed reported that they did not receive orders from the PNB director but instead from the minister; that is, FAES officers report not the director of their institution but instead to the minister of justice. According to Guillermo, the FAES *supervisor jefe* quoted earlier, “If it is a significant matter the minister orders (the raid), if not, the commander of each group in each state makes decisions about raids.”

Miguel, a FAES member and twenty-four year veteran police officer, told us: “If a complaint appears at the end of the day nothing happens because we clean things up [*se cuadra bien*]. Besides, we are protected by the minister.” The report issued by the UN’s International Fact-Finding Mission (2020) in Venezuela corroborates the officers’ statements. According to the report: “The large majority of illegal deaths committed by security forces have not resulted in prosecutions and in no moment has an officer in charge been brought to justice.” When we asked Guillermo if he was worried someone might report violations committed by the tactical units he replied, “Who the fuck is going to report us? And if they report us, we have a green light, we are untouchable. Those who kill must die, it is the only way to solve this shit.”

Ethnographic work by Francisco Sánchez (2020) suggests that officers have good reason to believe they have protected status. Sánchez has documented the various ways in which judicial bureaucracy blocks access to information about raids, protecting and reproducing impunity, from denying mothers’ requests for their sons’ bodies to repeatedly changing the prosecutor in charge of the case.

As Martha K. Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Philip G. Zimbardo (2002) have noted in the Brazilian context, and Omar Eduardo Rojas Bolaños and Fabián Leonardo Benavides Silva (2017) found in the case of false positives in Colombia, organizational autonomy and operational independence of security forces facilitates brutality and practically guarantees no supervision, giving form to “atrocious environments.” It is notable that this autonomy and independence seems to have similar

outcomes across quite different country contexts. The simplification of hierarchy suggests that “far from being isolated acts, these crimes are coordinated and committed in conformity with state policy, with the knowledge and direct support of commanders and high ranking members of the government” (United Nations Human Rights Council 2020).

Many of the interviewees talked about the lack of supervision and oversight and how this has resulted in the indiscriminate killing of what officers labeled “delinquents” and “innocents” alike. According to FAES commanders, they are charged with a certain number of raids each week, and these raids must “get results,” increasing the likelihood that “innocents fall.” According to Guillermo: “They ask us for statistics, weekly raids, if we don’t, this draws attention to us, they may even replace us. They want results.” Sergio, supervisor jefe of the PNB with over twenty years on the force who had requested a transfer and was working in another branch, told us that he decided to quit for this reason: “Our bosses don’t distinguish between them [innocents and delinquents] because of the pressure to bring in a body.” According to those interviewed, this requires brigades to constantly look for people to kill who might simply be implicated in a minor crime, in order to comply with the orders of superiors. These findings are coherent with previous research. As Jerome Skolnick (1966, 110) wrote, “The demand for police ‘efficiency’ creates a type of ‘professional’ police practice in which the concern for legality is minimal.” Without a doubt this change in policy has contributed to the drastic difference in the number of killings that have occurred by PNB in the course of only a few years. According to human rights monitors, in 2010 PNB officers were responsible for twelve violations of the right to life; the following year, this number dropped to eight. By 2016, this number had increased to 53, and rose to 159 in 2018.⁶

These critiques of disorderly implementation and concern over the lack of differentiation between the “innocent” and the “guilty” make sense if we remember that a heroic discourse, which provides a moral justification for killing, is a key component of police culture. There is an underlying assumption that those who are killed are deserving of death, that the violent actions taken by the police work to protect society and *ciudadanos sanos* (clean or good citizens). The haphazard implementation of the OLP, along with the lack of supervision, erases this justification for officers, converting them into agents of chaos rather than order, thus blurring the line they draw to distinguish “us” from “them.”

While raids in recent years seem to have generated substantial chaos within state security institutions, the ostentatious spectacle of the raid can produce the illusion of a state capable of protecting its territory and

controlling its population. As Hernández (1991, 161) wrote: “The real ‘success’ of extraordinary police raids resides in their deceptive ability to satisfy the social desire to get rid of crime . . . rooted in commonsense of society.” Of course, as Robb Larkins (2015) has noted, these short-term performances of security also demonstrate the state’s inability to control territory on a day-to-day basis. Yet even while putting the state’s incapacity on display, these performances provide opportunities to “act like a state” (Wedeen 2008); they create short periods of time—if only for a few hours—wherein state actors perform the provision of safety and security. They are moments in which the state exhibits its domination and reveals its precarity at the same time.

Tactical Groups and Criminal Gangs

Here we look at how the green light to kill given by the MIJ affected criminal groups. According to interviews with officers, this green light catalyzed a wave of transformations as gangs reorganized in order to face the war that had been declared on them (Zubillaga, Hanson, and Antillano 2021). As discussed in the introduction, state institutions during the Bolivarian Revolution have become increasingly fragmented, including the state security apparatus. This fragmentation, along with the government’s policy of unconditional repression during the OLP years, saw gangs respond with increasingly visible and frequent violence, as the model developed by Angelica Durán-Martínez (2015) would predict. These transformations generated conflict, both between police officers and gangs and within gangs themselves.

In all of the interviews we conducted, officers agreed that gangs in Venezuela were more organized, more violent, and better armed than in the past. Many officers suggested that this was due to the OLP and the changes it produced. When we asked a FAES supervisor jefe if the OLP had weakened or had strengthened criminal gangs, he responded: “They are definitely stronger . . . They no longer use revolvers, or shotguns, now they use automatic weapons, mostly Glocks, imagine . . . It’s to counteract the police, of course, they have grenades, they have rifles, they have handguns, but it is for this reason, to counter the police, no other reason . . . The change has been incredible, you wouldn’t believe it. When you participate in OLP raids and neutralize one of them . . . they are going to get prepared for the next one. You better believe it, they get totally prepared.”

Given that the militarization of citizen security implies the elimination of restrictions and regulations on the use of force, one might think this process would make officers feel safer. Yet, the conflict produced by state repression has instead made them feel more vulnerable. An officer

from the Sucre municipal police spoke without mincing words when we asked him if he believed that the OLP had made gangs respect the lives of police officers more: “It has become a war. It has become a war and I will tell you why. Because they will say ‘look . . . they killed five of ours, we are going to kill five of theirs,’ so then we are going to kill twenty of theirs, and on and on.” An official agregado of the PNB agreed: “Before, the combat between security forces and the community was more basic. Now it’s more specialized. It’s not the same to enter a community where before there wasn’t even a pistol and now there are grenades.”

According to Javier, a PNB official with six years on the force, “The number of police officers killed has increased . . . Let’s put it this way, the [OLP] was a cleansing, right? And delinquents have become increasingly filled with hate towards the police, police officers. They don’t care what color your uniform is, what your rank is, if you were a friend in the past, whatever. They are coming for that officer . . . Before they killed an officer and that was it, but now they are burning the body, leaving them unrecognizable.”

Another officer from the CICPC told us what happened after the FAES killed the leader of a gang in a city along the coast in the state of Miranda: “They killed a leader of a gang and three weeks later they threw grenades into the station . . . Thank god they didn’t explode . . . they threw two grenades but they didn’t go off.”

What officers’ statements suggest is that state policy has exacerbated conflict between criminal organizations and state security forces. The state has participated in the creation of more dangerous criminal groups, whose existence then justifies increased state repression, catalyzing a cycle of violence that is difficult to end. In fact, attacks against the police and military by groups with grenades and high-caliber weapons started becoming more common in the same year in which the OLP was implemented. By September 2015, news outlets published stories on sixteen separate attacks against police and military stations throughout the country (Hanson 2016). The following month, then-leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela), Freddy Bernal, claimed that the attacks were evidence of the effectiveness of the raids.

While many officers blamed the OLP for the reorganization and strengthening of gangs in some sectors, others attributed these changes to policies and strategies implemented before OLP—specifically what became known as the *zonas de paz*, or peace zones. Interviews with both police officers and gang members suggest that this policy of peace zones allowed gangs to articulate and obtain high-caliber weapons and tear gas.

The peace zones were promoted in 2013 by then-vice minister of citizen security José Vicente Rangel Ávalos. The plan aimed at establishing meetings with leaders of gangs in the country, in order to convince them to desist in engaging in violence and turn over their weapons in exchange for resources and credits to be received from the government through cooperatives (see Zubillaga, Hanson, and Antillano 2021). The cooperatives were intended to incentivize agricultural and industrial development within communities. Initially, peace zones were experimented with in four states—Miranda, Aragua, Falcón, and Guárico—as well as sectors in Caracas.

According to interviews that we conducted with youths who engaged in criminal activities in a rural town in the state of Miranda, the money was turned over to groups with no supervision or accountability. Rather than investing in agriculture they chose to buy high-caliber weapons and grenades, largely purchased from military officers. Gangs within these peace zones, then, were given the opportunity to acquire weapons that in the past would have not been obtainable and granted impunity to commit crimes within their jurisdiction, leaving extensive control in the hands of a few leaders.

When we asked a member of the FAES about his perception of the peace zones, he explained:

Look, these peace zones have been a disaster. . . from these peace zones came the increase in delinquency in these sectors because they had more strength, they got stronger, the government gave them money, gave them credits to make housing materials, to mount cacao businesses. But what did they do with this money? What they did was buy weapons, with all these sectors watching. In all of the cacao zones around here, most . . . gangs are organized and have these weapons thanks to this, that the government gave them credits so that they would create cooperatives. And that was the last thing they did.

In short, it was state policies that allowed gangs to take over territory, giving them time to become more organized and obtain military grade weapons (see also Risquez 2015). Ironically, this “pacification plan” ended up justifying the implementation of militarized raids. When state actors decided that the situation had gotten out of hand, that gangs in these zones (and elsewhere) were becoming a threat, they moved to militarize the police and wipe out gangs.

Violence among Gangs

While previous studies have shown how police repression can produce more structured and more powerful criminal groups, it is important

to keep in mind that the impact of militarization and *mano dura* policies is not homogeneous. Our interviews suggest that raids had different impacts in the sectors where they were deployed. If in some contexts gangs ended up consolidating in order to combat the police, in others raids catalyzed the displacement of gangs towards rural sectors. In fact, in a survey we conducted in 2018, 22 percent of those who thought the OLP was effective at reducing crime attributed its efficacy to its ability to make “delinquents move from the area” (Hanson and Gómez 2018). Evidence suggests that they simply fled to other places. This migration is fundamental to understanding the conflict among gangs in the current Venezuelan context. According to our interviews, raids have pushed gangs to change their *modus operandi* and migrate to other sectors to shield themselves from the police, carrying existing conflicts with them and creating new conflicts in places where previously they did not exist. This amounts to an expansion of violence and criminality into new territories.

Rural sectors outside of major cities, like Barlovento and mountainous areas such as the Valles del Tuy in the state of Miranda, have been common destinations for gang members once their neighborhoods have been overtaken by raids. These regions have forests and mountains that make it difficult for tactical groups to find and attack them. As an officer from the CICPC who works in Barlovento put it: “Starting a few years ago delinquents have been coming here, because here there are more places to hide and they end up fucking everything up, they start stealing, killing, kidnapping and they take over the territory . . . so you have to kill them, if we don’t kill them we at least have to make sure they go back to their *barrio* in Caracas so we don’t have issues in our jurisdiction.”

One citizen that lives in a small town in Barlovento told us: “Ever since *los malandros* [the thugs] arrived from Caracas, from that fucking *barrio* Pinto Salinas, our peace and tranquility disappeared. Now no one can go out and they go around threatening people, they have even killed some, something that had never happened in this *pueblo* before.” This territorial displacement of gangs can help us understand the increase in deaths by guns in rural areas, while gun death rates in the Metropolitan Area of Caracas seem to have remained stable (see chapter 2).

While official discourse assures citizens that the intervention of state forces in marginalized sectors has made them safer, data suggest that this is unlikely. Previous research has shown that illicit markets in and of themselves do not necessarily cause violence; rather it is their disruption that catalyzes conflict (Thoumi 2012; Snyder and Duran-Martinez, 2009). In this case, disruption is caused by state policy, an insight that is useful in understanding patterns of violence in Venezuela in recent

years. When asked about the consequences of the OLP, a PNB officer told us: “If a gang was in one place, they migrated somewhere else and in this place where they migrated they modified the strategies that they had used in the place they abandoned. These spaces without gangs that were taken by organizations, they generated new delinquents that tried to take control of the zone . . . and this generated conflicts among those groups that were establishing themselves there . . . so we see confrontations among gangs, something that doesn’t allow these groups to leave because now they have time operating there.”

One PNB officer who works in the state of Miranda, drawing on a discourse that justifies elimination by dehumanizing targets of raids, complained that when OLP raids killed a gang leader, “all of the cockroaches came scurrying out.” Similarly another officer from the PNB told us that the intention behind the OLP was a good one—to wipe out gang leaders. Nevertheless, once this goal had been accomplished, when the OLP withdrew from a neighborhood, gangs returned and became even stronger. Gang members came back to reestablish themselves with more members from the community, members who, according to the officers we interviewed, held grudges and were enraged at the police for the repression used during raids. In the words of yet another PNB officer: “If we go up every fifteen days [the gangs] come back, they rearm themselves, they regroup and it is like a sickness, we inject an antibiotic but it doesn’t work.” These statements illustrate the dehumanizing rhetoric that *mano dura* policies depend on but also the ultimate failure of those same policies as they provoke conflicts among lower ranking gang members who seek to occupy the position of the leaders killed by the police.

ASSESSING POLICE RAIDS IN POST-CHAVEZ VENEZUELA

Police raids under Nicolás Maduro and Minister of Justice Néstor Reverol have led to the most lethal period of policing in Venezuelan history. The 2020 report published by the United Nations International Fact-Finding Mission in Venezuela lays bare the results of the changes we have discussed here: patterns of violence and crimes coordinated at the highest levels of the state, in conformity with state policy that constitute crimes against humanity. This is not a problem of a few bad apples.

The Ministry of Justice claims that the raids we examine here have contributed to a reduction in violence in recent years through their “cleansing” of *antisociales* (criminals) in the barrios. Yet, while it is true that homicide rights have decreased since a peak in 2016, these raids have not contributed to this decrease for the reasons the MIJ has given.

Rather than “eliminating” delinquency, in some places they have contributed to the reorganization of gangs with more territorial control than in the past.

The articulation of gangs is essential to explaining homicide rates in the country and why they have dropped in recent years. Similar to cases documented in El Salvador and Colombia (Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016), pacts and agreements between gangs—in the Venezuelan case in order to protect themselves from the police—have significantly reduced violence. As such, while we have argued that the raids generate conflict, the net effect has been the reduction in homicides. As Angélica Durán-Martínez’s (2015) research would predict, criminal organizations are more measured and use forms of violence less visible once markets have been monopolized. Yet, while data at the national level show a decrease, we must keep in mind subnational variation. For example, our data suggest that *mano dura* policies during this period have not only led to gang consolidation; they are also responsible for exacerbating and displacing conflicts. In some cases, these raids have catalyzed the migration of gangs to other sectors or states, which destabilizes illicit markets and produces conflict between gangs. It is likely that raids have resulted in spikes in violence in certain sectors where they destabilize illicit markets and drive gangs into other areas of the country.

A review of raids under Maduro’s government provides insight into how citizen security policies have changed during the Bolivarian Revolution. Necropolitical governance has become the dominant mode during Maduro’s presidency. Under the Chávez government, legitimacy was based on social spending that led the quality of life for many to improve; at the same time the prison population grew, fed by those that state spending did not reach (largely young poor men). Without oil rents to distribute and facing decreasing popularity among the poor and working classes (Chavismo’s base), the Venezuelan government has turned to systematic killing as a way to enforce social control but also gain support through a tough-on-crime rhetoric and spectacle. This strategy is not new. Pointing to events like the El Amparo massacre in 1988 and the Caracazo in 1989, Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski (1991) have analyzed moments of economic collapse in Venezuela and how the state has attempted to recuperate control and legitimacy during periods of fractured hegemony. In these moments, Coronil and Skurski (1991) emphasize how the state transforms itself into an agent of mass death in the face of the “threat” presented by popular sectors when petroleum rents are no longer sufficient to incorporate them into the modernizing project. Violent attacks against this “threat” can be used to maintain social control when hegemony is threatened. For those who work from the

theoretical perspective of necropolitics (see Mbembe 2011), the practice of death and murder of “killable” populations is an essential resource for state sovereignty.

Despite the fact that these raids disproportionately affect Chavismo’s former base, concerns about crime and the reaction of governments can serve as a mechanism to mobilize consensus across class lines (Holland 2013), providing a base of legitimacy. Indeed, it is not surprising that the OLP was launched in an electoral year. Early on in its implementation, survey respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of the OLP (Smilde 2016a). Despite dwindling economic capital and decreasing political popularity, the government was able to generate at least some legitimacy through its *mano dura* policies. Raids can symbolically legitimize authorities through dramatic anti-crime campaigns, laying the groundwork for nationalism built on the delinquent as enemy. And while social control in Venezuela has historically depended on repression—whether in periods of dictatorship and democracy—past abuses have been completely eclipsed by the plans implemented by the Maduro administration.

From the outside, policing is business as usual. This normalization of police raids allows the government to appeal to a conventional approach to crime fighting, one that makes sense to many Venezuelans (Briceño-León 2005). While these tactical groups are not new, in the post-Chávez period these tactics have become the dominant logic; in other words, the OLP and the FAES do not only represent a return to the past only but also a distinct period of institutional violence at a time when police violence has become state policy. Indeed, official discourse in Venezuela doesn’t even attempt to pretend that preventative or community policing—pillars of the police reform—matter.

As Zubillaga and Hanson (2018) have noted, the logic underlying the OLP and the FAES represents a shift from carceral punitivism—initiated in 2009—as the dominant model of crime governance to a new phase of systematic extralegal killing. The government in the past few years has seen crime as an epidemic, a virus or plague to the body politic that must be eliminated at any cost. While mass detention continues to be an important mechanism of state control in dealing with the current political and economic crisis, the systematic killing that has occurred during these raids “has become the fundamental strategy of control over popular sectors, constituting the state, specifically a military and police sector, as a fundamental actor in lethal violence in the country” (2018, 34). In fact, the OLP and the FAES stand out for their intensity and the number of raids that have been deployed in their name. For example, the daily deployment of raids in La Cota 905 and El Cementerio at the beginning of the OLP has no comparison in the entire history of the country.

Even if the OLP and the FAES represent an important turn in the country, we must look beyond them to understand any transformation that has occurred in criminal groups in the country. The peace zones, the flow of weapons into these spaces, the lack of planning when the PNB was first deployed to replace the Metropolitan Police, and the inconsistent implementation of police reform have all contributed to chaos in the area of citizen security and contributed to periods of intense conflict between armed groups and state security forces.

These policies have generated a cycle of violence: they feed armed actors in Venezuela, which eventually works to justify the creation of plans such as the OLP and groups like the FAES, raids that represent a new era of institutional violence in the country and promote other changes and transformations in these criminal organizations. Venezuelans, then, are left unprotected against a tyranny that uses violence through extermination groups, violence that disproportionality affects the poorest inhabitants of urban barrios and rural sectors.