"The Criminal Actors Have a Social Base in Their Communities": Gangs and Service Provision in Medellín, Colombia

Caroline Doyle

ABSTRACT

In the last ten years, Medellín, Colombia has undergone significant socioeconomic improvements and a reduction in homicides. By drawing from qualitative data collected in Medellín, this article shows how, despite these improvements, residents in the marginalized neighborhoods maintain a perception that the state is unable or unwilling to provide them with services, such as employment and order or social control. Criminal gangs in these neighborhoods appear to rely on, and even exploit, the weakness of the state, as they are able to get citizens to perceive them as more reliable and legitimate than the state. This article argues that it is important for Latin American policymakers to promote citizen engagement in the design and implementation of policies to reduce current levels of violence.

Keywords: Medellín, Colombia; gangs; criminal governance; Latin America; urban violence

Gangs in Latin America are known for their extreme levels of violence (Marinho and Tinoco 2017; Rodgers and Baird 2015; McDermott 2018). But why do urban residents from marginalized neighborhoods continue to rely on gangs for services, such as employment and social order and control, despite their awareness of the use of often extreme violence from these criminal actors? This article provides insights for Latin American violence prevention and reduction policymakers in their efforts to design and implement policies to address the high levels of violence in the region. Ultimately, it argues the importance of citizen engagement in the development and implementation of policies to ensure that any perceptions urban residents might have of the inadequacy or inability of the state can be adequately addressed.

In Medellín, Colombia, in the mid-2000s, significant investments were made in the marginalized neighborhoods to raise the welfare levels of the poor and to bring government and planning closer to civil society (Echeverri and Orsini 2011;

Caroline Doyle is a lecturer in the School of Business at the University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia. c.doyle@adfa.edu.au. ORCID 0000-0001-6264-5443. Conflicts of interest: Caroline Doyle declares none.

 DOI 10.1017/lap.2020.31

Doyle 2019; Fajardo and Andrews 2014). The city became known internationally for its innovative social urbanism policies and for the significant reduction of homicides (Abello-Colak and Pearce 2015; Cerdá et al. 2012; Jaitman and Guerrero 2015; Muggah 2015; Patiño et al. 2014; *UN-Habitat* 2007). Yet despite the reduction in homicides, there are estimates of up to 350 different gangs operating in the city and up to 13,500 gang members. These gangs are responsible for up to 60 percent of homicides in the city and other acts of severe violence, such as dismemberment and forced urban displacement (Doyle 2019).

By drawing from qualitative data collected in Medellín, this article provides insights to show that while the criminal actors engage in violence, and often extreme violence, they can be perceived by residents from the marginalized neighborhoods as more effective service providers, in terms of employment and social order and control, than the state.

The purpose of this article is not to provide a discussion of what these gangs are trying to do, but rather, how the community members perceive these actors and the services they provide. The article concludes that Latin American urban policymakers should be concentrating their efforts on acknowledging the perception of the role of the state and of criminal gangs in marginalized neighborhoods, in attempting to reduce the levels of violence in the region. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of these policymakers to ensure that any violence prevention policy approaches are not just "top-down" but also "bottom-up"; that they promote citizen participation, specifically from citizens of marginalized neighborhoods, along with policymakers and state officials. Through this process, policymakers will be in a better position to address adequately any perceptions urban residents might have of the inadequacy or inability of the state.

The article first reviews the relevant literature on criminal governance by gangs in marginalized neighborhoods. This review shows how gangs tend to govern, such as providing authority and order, in areas where the power of the state presence is weak, and how that weakness can also contribute to the creation of gangs. This governance does present a challenge to the state, as, in some cases, the community can perceive gangs as being more effective, and even legitimate, than the state, despite their use of sometimes extreme violence.

The article then moves to qualitative data collected in Medellín. The data presented show how, despite the increase of service provision by the local state in the marginalized neighborhoods, residents from these neighborhoods continue to be attracted to gang membership because they perceive a lack of legitimate opportunities in the wider society, among other factors. The gangs also provide a sense of order and authority in the community, which residents continue to perceive the state is unable or unwilling to provide them.

The article concludes by arguing that, in the perception of community members, criminal gangs in Medellín appear to rely on, and even exploit, the perception of the weakness of the state in the marginalized neighborhoods. However, these community members do have ambivalent feelings toward the gang members. The insights show how important it is for policymakers to acknowledge the perception

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the role of the state and of gangs in marginalized neighborhoods and how criminal gangs can rely on, and even exploit, the weakness of the state. By acknowledging this, policymakers need to ensure that violence prevention policy approaches are not just top-down but also bottom-up, promoting the participation of marginalized citizens in the development and implementation of policies.

Gangs and Criminal Governance

Gangs have featured as a social phenomenon for generations; however, their regional growth and transnational influence in the last 20 years is "without precedent" (Muggah 2012, 47). Given this observation, some scholars have warned of an impending "gang insurgency" in urban environments because of the threat these groups pose to both security and socioeconomic development (Manwaring 2005; Sullivan and Bunker 2007).

The definition of gangs varies throughout the academic literature. Some scholars emphasize the need to distinguish between groups of individuals committing less well organized and well planned crimes without any clearly defined purpose, and street gangs and gangs linked to organized crime (Klein 2005; Hauck and Peterke 2010). The latter often have more of a formal organization structure, with the leader operating the gang like a business (Sullivan and Bunker 2007). Scholars have also acknowledged the importance of distinguishing gangs from other nonstate armed groups (NSAGs). While NSAGs often have the overarching objective of overthrowing the state, gangs rarely pursue this goal (Kalyvas 2006), and gangs' behavior patterns indicate that they tend to be motivated principally by their own interests, such as economic gain (Rodgers and Jensen 2008).

Over the past two decades, scholars have examined the criminal governance practices of gangs, such as their governance over populations within a specific territory (Arias 2014; Campana and Varese 2018; Levitt and Venatesh 2000; Lessing and Willis 2019; Skarbek 2011; Wolff 2015). Previous research has shown how gangs tend to govern areas where they are physically based and where the power of the state presence is weak (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Campana and Varese 2018; Hume 2004; Levitt and Venatesh 2000; Koonings and Kruijt 1999; Jones and Rodgers 2016). For example, Arias (2014) argues that gangs can exploit opportunities to operate as "parallel" or "alternative sources" of political and economic power where the state has limited presence or limited legitimacy. Examples of this "parallel power" have come from different Latin American countries. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Arias (2006) showed how gangs were constructed in coalition with corrupt elements of state institutions. Politicians and the gangs tended to interact directly with the state in the form of providing "kickbacks" to security forces, who, in turn, provided the gangs with weapons. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, Goldstein found how, given the weakness of the state in the marginalized neighborhoods, gangs provided "an alternative justice system—a parallel [system] . . . among the poorest" (2003, 207).

Previous research has shown how gang members often act—or promise to do so—in predictable ways, which can be in contrast to the actions of the state, which,

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the community's perception, appears to act in an arbitrary fashion (Jones and Rodgers 2016). As an example, in Nicaragua, Rodgers (2006) explored how gangs complied with a cardinal "golden rule" not to harm local inhabitants; the victims of local gangs were outsiders. Gang members actively protected locals from outside thieves and other gangs, which was in contrast to the often unpredictable actions of the state, such as often violent police patrols of neighborhoods (Rodgers 2006). While gang members can act in more predictable ways than the state, Arias (2006, 298) argues that the boundaries between criminal and formal state governance are routinely "jagged, shifting and even porous." For example, a gang could monopolize drug sales and prohibit crime against properties but leave unregulated other areas, such as transport networks and local politics (Lessing and Willis 2019).

Recent research has analyzed governance practices of gangs in state-run environments, such as prisons (Butler et al. 2018; Johnson and Densely 2018; Lessing and Willis 2019; Skarbek 2014, 2016). In these environments, the state may be weak, but it is far from absent. Lessing and Willis (2019, 605) argue how the prison gang governance is "deeply paradoxical as it is both opposed to and symbiotic with the state." From research in prisons in the United States, Skarbek (2014, 2016) proposes that prison gangs emerge in prison populations where decentralized mechanisms of governance, such as an inmate code, cannot be relied on, or when prison officials do not provide adequate governance. More recently, Butler et al. (2018) examined how the market for governance provision in prison should, in principle, move toward a monopoly because of the economies of scale, as seen in other protection markets (Gambetta 1993; Schelling 1971; Tilly 2005).

In their efforts to better understand the governance practices of gangs, scholars have found it useful to incorporate vigilantism literature in their analytical framework. This is because previous research has shown how the emergence and continuance of vigilante formations is often premised on a distrust of the police and a perceived lack of initiative by the police in providing basic human and economic security (Buur and Jensen 2004; Dixon and Johns 2001; Goldstein 2003; Pratten 2008). As an example, from his studies in Bolivia, Goldstein (2003) argues that vigilante violence represents a simultaneous embrace and rejection of the official order because it reaffirms the power of the state to enforce the law while also suggesting that justice may be attained apart from the law. He also acknowledges that through vigilantism, the politically marginalized have an avenue for communicating their grievances about the inadequacies of the state's official legal order. Therefore, vigilante groups do need to rely on the weakness of the state in their efforts to provide authority and order to marginalized communities.

Previous research has also shown how the weakness, or perceived weakness, of the state can be one of the many contributing factors that can lead individuals to seek gang membership (Baird 2011; Bourgois 1995; Winton 2014; Young 2007; Zubillaga 2009). Some individuals without job mobility may turn to a gang for an alternative identity and for a sense of "meaning." From the gang, these marginalized individuals can find social recognition and economic prospects that they perceive they are unable to find from the wider society. For example, in the United States, Bourgois

(1995) observed how young men in a New York ghetto, unable to find stable jobs, took refuge in gangs, and through this membership were able to reconstruct their masculinity and gain some "respect." In Caracas, Venezuela, Zubillaga (2009) argues, young men from marginalized neighborhoods perceive social mobility as an "empty promise." Therefore, these individuals look to the gangs to gain some "respect" and also some economic advancement. More recently, Baird (2018) questioned the role of masculinities in the reproduction of gang membership in Medellín. Among the gang members interviewed, some were driven by ambition when joining a gang and others by desperation connected to poverty, exclusion, or family dysfunction. Individuals joined gangs not just as a mechanism for survival but as a path to some sort of success and as a way to develop their masculine identities.

The literature reviewed reveals that while gangs do not seek to overthrow the state, they do present a significant challenge to the state, given that residents from marginalized neighborhoods can perceive them as being more effective, or even more legitimate, service providers than the state. Gangs tend to emerge in areas where the state is weak, and these criminal actors can exploit this weakness to operate as "parallel" or "alternative sources" of political and economic power. Criminal gangs appear to rely on, and even exploit, the weakness of the state to justify their role in a community. These themes will now be used to analyze gangs and their governance practices in the marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín.

Methodology

Fieldwork for this research was conducted in Medellín in 2014 and 2015. The purpose of this fieldwork was to gain insight into how the socioeconomic improvements in the marginalized neighborhoods had impacted residents' perception of the state. Thus, semistructured interviews were conducted with a range of individuals, such as government workers, nongovernment officials, researchers, and community leaders, who had good knowledge of the perception of the state and of criminal gangs in the marginalized neighborhoods. Medellín is organized into 16 *comunas* (communities) with 11 to 26 neighborhoods in each *comuna*. About 8 of these *comunas* are considered to be marginalized (*Medellín Como Vamos* 2017).

The interview questions were open-ended and designed to ensure that the interviews were more of a conversation (Burnham et al. 2008; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005). Participants were found using two nonprobability techniques: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. In the purposive sampling, samples were drawn strategically from individuals who were "on paper" to have knowledge about the activities and characteristics of gangs in the marginalized neighborhoods. The snowball sample technique was used to complement the purposive sampling by interviewing actors recommended by participants from the purposive sample (Valdez and Kaplan 1998). The interviews were all conducted in Spanish and translated by the author, who is fluent in Spanish and English.

Given the nature of the research topic, information is provided on the research participants to demonstrate how their views accurately represent those of the resi-

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dents from the marginalized neighborhoods. The former government official has more than 10 years' experience working in the marginalized communities, developing and implementing social policies. One of the community leaders has been the director of a cultural center in one of the marginalized neighborhoods for the past 20 years. The other community leader works in a community center in one of the marginalized neighborhoods. One NGO worker (2014) has more than 20 years' experience working as a researcher in an NGO investigating violence and conflict in Medellín. The other NGO worker (2015) is the director of an NGO that investigates organized crime and criminal gangs in Medellín. The government official has more than 30 years' experience as a violence prevention policymaker and human rights advocate in Medellín. The research center director has an in-depth understanding of recent levels of violence of Medellín. With the exception of the former government official, the current government official and the research center director, all the participants are residents of the marginalized communities. Given the nature of this research, all participants requested that their identity remain anonymous. Primary, secondary, and tertiary documents were also analyzed to build and deepen understanding of the characteristics of criminal gangs in Medellín (Burnham et al. 2008). The article also draws from recent media accounts and research to complement the data collection period in 2014 and 2015.

While the researcher did attempt to contact former and current gang members, challenging and dangerous situations were encountered during fieldwork, which limited this interaction. For example, during fieldwork in 2015, a local journalist was threatened by local criminal groups, and three human rights workers were assassinated in less than a month, including a potential participant in this research, shot 25 times in a poor neighborhood (Franco García 2015; Palma Laverde 2015). Following the advice of local contacts, the author limited interaction with certain individuals and travel to particular neighborhoods to protect her safety (Doyle and McCarthy-Jones 2017).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of the nature of Colombia's contemporary criminal landscape, a brief explanation of historical and current conflicts is included, as the conflicts between criminal groups in Medellín do form an important part of the history of the city. This explanation also emphasizes how these criminal actors differ from others in the region.

Medellín, Colombia

Medellín is the second-largest Colombian city and is a compelling case study for analyzing effective service provision in marginalized neighborhoods, for two reasons. First, the socioeconomic improvements in the city over the past ten years have made it known internationally as a benchmark for Latin American urban policymakers. From 2004 on, the local government made significant investments in the physical infrastructure of the poorest areas of the city, a policy that coined the name social urbanism. This policy was concerned with the provision of infrastructure, construction of public buildings, and improved provision of services in the marginalized

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

communities, with the objective of raising the welfare levels of the poor and marginalized (Abello-Colak and Guarneros-Meza 2014; Echeverri and Orsini 2011; Fajardo and Andrews 2014).

The local government also further developed the participatory planning and budgeting program to bring government and planning closer to civil society, as well as to legitimate local government and promote transparency (Fajardo and Andrews 2014; Maclean 2014; Uran 2010). Improvements under the banner of social urbanism included a 13-point increase in the quality of life index in the intervention neighborhoods from 1997 to 2007 and a 32 percent reduction in homicides from 2004 to 2007 (*Medellín Como Vamos* 2007). Various international organizations and researchers claimed that the social urbanism policies caused the reduction in homicides, as the interventions appeared to follow the assumptions of the most influential urban violence reduction and prevention theoretical approaches, "social disorganization" and "broken windows" (Cerdá et al. 2012; Jaitman and Guerrero 2015; Muggah 2015; Patiño et al. 2014; *UN-Habitat* 2007).

The second reason that Medellín is a compelling case for analyzing service provision in the marginalized neighborhoods is because over the past 30 years, different types of nonstate armed groups have had a significant presence in these neighborhoods (Doyle 2019). These groups have generally been classified by government officials and the media into three groups: criminal gangs (*bandas* or *combos*), left-wing militias, and right-wing paramilitaries (Doyle 2019). The "operational objectives" between these groups have become blurred (Lamb 2010; Melguizo and Cronshaw 2001). For example, the militias emerged in the early 1980s as a result of national negotiations with the left-wing guerrilla group *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (19th of April Movement, M-19), but by the early 1990s, some militia groups became involved in narcotrafficking (Gutiérrez and Jaramillo 2004; Melguizo and Cronshaw 2001). Furthermore, although the right-wing paramilitaries, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AUC), were initially formed with the objective of providing a civil defense service against the left-wing guerrillas, in the late 1990s, many members became involved in narcotrafficking, and the leader of the AUC even claimed that "70 percent of the AUC's revenue came from narcotrafficking" (Amnesty International 2005, 8).

Over the years, the paramilitaries became a parallel system and strategic ally of the state. Civico (2012) argues that this relationship highlighted the ambiguity of the Colombian state. More recently, scholars have examined the often collaborative relationship between the violent actors in Medellín and the state. Moncada (2016), for example, examines the relationship between political, business, and criminal actors in Medellín.

The third nonstate armed group in Medellín is the criminal *bandas*. These criminal actors emerged about the late 1980s, most of them working directly and indirectly for the Medellín cartel led by Pablo Escobar (Salazar 1990; Bagley 1988). The Medellín cartel initially had monopoly control of the US cocaine market, but the Cali cartel obtained control of the New York and Washington cocaine markets in the early 1990s, resulting in violent conflicts between these cartels (Riaño Alcalá 2006).

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Following Escobar's death in 1993, most *banda* members started working as "contractors" for the criminal organization Oficina de Envigado (La Oficina), led by Diego Murillo Bejarano, known as Don Berna. This Oficina was a network that connected customers to its violent services, such as selective assassinations, and charged a finder's fee (Gutiérrez and Jaramillo 2004; Hylton 2007). It was around this time that Colombian drug-trafficking organizations became known as BACRIM (criminal bands, *bandas criminales*) (McDermott 2014b). In 2008, Don Berna was extradited to the United States on drug-trafficking charges; homicide rates in the city increased more than 60 percent from 2008 to 2009, as the leaders of the remaining criminal groups had limited control and influence over members (Jaramillo and Gil Ramírez 2014; McDermott 2014a).

The removal of Don Berna also opened up space for a new group, Los Urabeños, loosely linked to the AUC, to expand its growing drug-trafficking network and attempt to take over La Oficina (McDermott 2014a). Over the next five years, brutal violence continued between these competing criminal groups. About 2013, the "business model" of La Oficina and Los Urabeños changed from using homicidal violence to obtain or maintain territorial control to cooperation between the groups, an agreement called the *pacto de fusil* (gun pact) (Abello-Colak and Pearce 2015; Doyle 2019; Jaramillo and Gil Ramírez 2014; McDermott 2014a). A Medellín-based analyst, Gil Ramírez (2013), argues that this pact is an example of the power of Colombian criminal organizations and their ability to have an impact on homicide patterns in the city. More recently, the Medellín-based researcher Dávila (2018a) has identified how understanding formal and informal rules in local communities is crucial to understanding the recent reduction of homicides in Medellín.

Previous research has revealed how these different nonstate violent groups have provided "alternative forms of authority" in the marginalized neighborhoods (Doyle 2019). For example, residents from the marginalized neighborhoods perceived the left-wing militia as a legitimate authority and supported its actions as it regulated social behavior and provided a sense of a governing body (Angarita 2003; Medina Franco 2006; Lamb 2010; Salazar 1990). Medina Franco argues that the militia provided security services to the community, acting as a type of "local congress for those who had the most trivial social or political issue" (2006, 37).

In the late 1990s, the right-wing AUC provided order to the marginalized neighborhoods with activities such as engaging in "bloody social cleansing campaigns" to maintain order (*El Colombiano* 2002). The AUC introduced its own set of rules, such as prohibiting formal gatherings in the street and collecting extortion payments from businesses and transport companies (Rozema 2008). Medellín is a unique case study in that from a community perspective, it did not appear to matter if its territory was controlled by the militia, the AUC, or the criminal *bandas*, as long as a group provided a sense of security and a constructive, communitarian set of activities, because there was a perception that the state was unable or unwilling to provide this support (Gutiérrez and Jaramillo 2004).

It has been reported that the *bandas* or *combos* in Medellín supply services, such as car robberies, extortion, and local drug dealing, for more "sophisticated" criminal

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groups, such as the BACRIM, which are capable of transnational criminal activities (McDermott 2014b). Given data collection limitations, there is no precise understanding as to how many criminal gangs, generally labeled by government officials and the media as *bandas* or *combos,* are currently present in the city.[1] In 2014 and 2015, the following estimates were provided by NGO workers who had good knowledge of the criminal *bandas*.

> In Medellín we could have about 350 *bandas*. . . . There could be around 13,500 members and that is just in Medellín.
>
> We could say there are about 200 different structures in the city where there are around 8,000 to 10,000 people involved.

More recent estimates by government officials and researchers range from 119 to 247 different criminal *bandas (El Colombiano* 2014). Despite the disagreement on the specific number of criminal *bandas* and individuals involved, there is a consensus that patterns of violence in the city are related to conflicts between these groups (Duncan and Tobón 2018). As an example, from January to July 2018, in one Medellín community, the Comuna 13, there were 44 homicides, which local authorities linked to conflicts between "longstanding criminal structures" in the community (Posada 2018). From a recent analysis of homicide data in the city, Dávila (2018b) found that 60 percent of homicide victims were young males from the marginalized neighborhoods, with the perpetrators of violence fitting similar characteristics.

The *bandas* are responsible for criminal acts, such as forced urban displacement, dismemberment, and local extortion. Forced urban displacement involves threatening residents to leave their territory or face severe consequences, such as death. In 2017, almost three thousand cases of forced urban displacement were reported, increasing from just over one thousand in 2016 (*Medellín Como Vamos* 2018). The criminal *bandas* use this type of violence because they can gain access to the profits, such as from extortion payments, from particular territories. Estimates report that one criminal *banda* can earn up to USD$3.5 million per year from these payments, and there are estimates of up to 59,000 victims of extortion in the city (*Medellín Como Vamos* 2018; *Semana* 2016).

Another form of violence is dismemberment, which the gangs use either to make a victim "disappear" or to display the victim's body in a public area to send a clear message to any potential "rule breakers" (Rosser 2015). Two recent examples of this type of violence come from January 2018, when a suitcase containing the remains of a person was found in a public park in an elite Medellín neighborhood and the tortured bodies of five males were found wrapped in sheets dumped in different parts of the city (Benincore Agudelo 2018; Zambrano Benavides 2018). Authorities stated that the way these bodies were dumped indicated that criminal actors were behind the assassinations and were sending a message to the wider community (Restrepo 2018). These acts of violence show how criminal actors continue to have significant presence in the city, despite the recent reduction in homicides.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Qualitative data collected in Medellín show how these criminal actors provide services, such as employment and social order and control, in the marginalized neighborhoods, given the residents' perception that the state is unable or unwilling to provide this governance.

Gangs and Criminal Governance in the Marginalized Neighborhoods

When participants were questioned about how the recent social interventions had improved life in the marginalized neighborhoods, they acknowledged that despite some improvements, residents continue to hold a perception of the lack of legitimate opportunities in the wider society. For example, the community leader said,

> Young people [from the poorer communities] finish school and realize that they don't have access to employment opportunities. . . . For this reason, young people don't want to study anymore, there is no motivation to stay in school. . . . They would have liked to have done something after studying, but they realize that in this society, they can't. . . . (Community Leader a 2015)

The government official also spoke of this perception by individuals from the marginalized neighborhoods.

> The Secretary of Education did a study about the abandonment of studies and they concluded that there is abandonment because the parents [from the poorer communities] don't value studying as a way of becoming someone. The parents don't pressure the kids to go to school to study or continue learning, so that they go to university so that they are able to earn money honestly and become someone in life. There could be some families where they do recognize the importance of working hard, but well, when the son arrives home with a new television or bread or whatever, the mother doesn't care where the money [or goods] came from, as the most important thing is that he brought something into the house. (Government Official 2015)

This perception of a lack of legitimate opportunities is confirmed in statistics that show Medellín as one of the most unequal cities in Latin America, with a very high Gini coefficient of 0.52 in 2017 (*Medellín Como Vamos* 2018). The former government official spoke of how these perceptions can lead some individuals to seek membership in a criminal *banda*.

> If you are 14 years old and you see 50 percent or more of 20-year-olds in your neighborhood unemployed and you realize that the possibility of getting into university is about 1 or 2 out of every 100, which really in your perception is zero. . . . Then this lack of opportunities for many young people [from the marginalized neighborhoods] is what pushes them into violence. . . . The armed group pays you money and you get some social recognition which you don't get from society. (Former Government Official 2014)

The former government official commented on how there is a perception that membership in a gang provides an individual with a "social status," a status they per-

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ceive themselves unable to obtain from the wider society. One of the community leaders also acknowledged how the community perceives gang members as being important persons in the community.

> The armed actors have a social role, the society accepts them as warriors, so the community accepts that these warriors have some social status within the society. The community gives the recognition of the social status of these individuals. (Community Leader b 2015)

Not only did the participants acknowledge the social status given to gang members from the community, but they also acknowledged the economic benefits gang membership provides and how, given the perception of, or knowledge of, the lack of legitimate opportunities in the wider society, these economic benefits can encourage individuals to seek membership. For example, one of the NGO workers said,

> In a *banda* there are some people who earn eighty thousand pesos a week [USD$240]. . . . Others will earn two million pesos [USD$600] or five million pesos [USD$1,500] a month. The boss of a large *combo* will earn up to thirty million pesos [USD$9,000] per month. . . . This is without counting their monthly bonuses. . . ! (NGO Worker 2014)

The research center director acknowledged the perception that individuals from the marginalized neighborhoods are unable to obtain these economic benefits from the wider society.

> Money is part of the criminal structures, and these salaries are divided between the members of the *combo*. This money is then used to give food to the family, better clothes, giving a nice present to your girlfriend. . . . Working in a *combo* is a job, and their salary permits them to have this life. It is easier to be in a *combo* where your salary is over one million pesos [US$300] than "killing yourself" working in a laboring job where they pay you a minimum salary of six hundred thousand pesos [US$190 a month]. . . . Because from a *plaza de vicio* [drug-dealing corner], the minimum that they will make is four million pesos [US$1,200]—which is more than five times the minimum salary! (Research Center Director 2014)

The official discussed how employment in minimum salary jobs for individuals from the marginalized neighborhoods can be in labor-intensive positions and may require long hours. However, given the range of gang member "duties," they may be less "onerous." One of the community leaders stated,

> [Employment can include] selling mobile phone calls in public; street sellers in the center of the city are all controlled by the armed groups. . . . Here is one example. A person steals some petrol from a pipe, but this person needs security, they call the security *carritos*, who warn you when the police are approaching. . . . This person also needs a driver. . . . (Community Leader a 2015)

Not only do the gangs rely on the weakness of the state in providing employment opportunities to residents from the marginalized neighborhoods, they also rely on the perception of state weakness to give them space to impose authority and

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order. This is the role taken by the different nonstate armed groups, such as the left-wing militia and the right-wing paramilitaries (Angarita 2003; Lamb 2010; Medina Franco 2006; Rozema 2008; Salazar 1990). From a community perspective, it did not appear to matter which nonstate armed group controlled a neighborhood as long as a group provided a sense of security, given a the perception of state weakness (Gutiérrez and Jaramillo 2004). Despite the recent increased state investment in the marginalized neighborhoods, the alternative form of authority and order by nonstate criminal actors has continued. As an example, in 2018, Duncan and Tobón found that 45 percent of residents from the marginalized neighborhoods relied on both the authorities and criminal *bandas* in resolving neighborhood robberies and disputes.

During fieldwork, many individuals commented on how they "used the 'services' of the Oficina because they would be able to quickly resolve my problem and the police would not be bothered with my small problem" or that the community needed *"mas policia y mas combos"* (more police and more criminal gangs) to provide social order and control in a neighborhood. The government official spoke of how residents rely on the criminal actors to regulate the neighborhoods, given their perception of the inability of the state to provide this regulation.

> The armed groups charge about five thousand pesos [USD$1.70], and they say, "while these boys are in the neighborhood nothing will happen." It is almost like "more *oficinas* and more police"—the *oficina* has its law and the police have their law. You could go to one of the northeastern [marginalized] neighborhoods and they will say, "wow, we live really well, there are no gunfights, there are no homicides, but we are paying for this service." (Government Official 2015)

The government official acknowledged that residents have a perception that the criminal actors can provide them with security and safety; however, residents are forced to pay for this service, a service they perceive that the state is unable to provide them. One of the NGO workers provided further explanation as to why residents may perceive the criminal actors as being more effective in regulating local security and safety issues than the state.

> Every now and then there are violent events, which shows you that there isn't calm and peace in the city. There is a subtle control . . . whatever neighborhood you go to, you will find the police, the local government, local schools, the health center, and these armed actors. . . . It is almost like a kind of nonconflictive coexistence. . . . With actors who have been around for so long, they have a nexus with the community, with the politicians, with the legality. It is almost like an invisible pact. . . . With so much history of illegal actors and criminal organizations in this city, it means that for many people, it doesn't matter if the security provided to them is state forces or paramilitary or militia or *bandas*. Whatever actor guarantees their security, the principal reason for using these actors is because we feel safe. But the residents are willing to give their security to an illegal armed group and they are relinquishing control . . . because they know that they cannot just go to the "Office of Internal Control of the Delinquent Groups" to complain about someone. The residents just have to put up with these individuals and their actions. (NGO Worker 2014)

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The NGO worker acknowledged how the criminal actors exploit the perception of the weaknesses of the state to provide services to the community. The limits of the "services" provided by the gangs are not clear-cut, and residents need to be aware of the often "delicate" and "complex" control provided by the gangs. Residents are aware of the risks of relying on these criminal groups, such as their use of often extreme violence, but they have a perception that this is their only option to feel safe, given their perception of the inability of the state to provide them with security. The other NGO worker spoke of the daily interactions he and residents of the neighborhood have with the criminal actors when he said, "When I get home on a daily basis, I can see them on the corner, the boys are there. I don't report them to the police, because otherwise [I know that] they will mess with you. [For example] I know that they have raped someone's daughter!" (NGO Worker 2014). The worker then went on to discuss the range of services the criminal actors provide to the community and how the community perceives it is left with little choice but to rely on the criminal actors.

> If I have a debt to pay, they offer me a loan, and if I need someone to look after the house while I am away, they can do it. The criminal actors have a social base in their communities. . . . The community is either scared of these actors or they have some affection toward them. . . . They either live with them or they are obligated for their control. . . . There are people from the neighborhood who come and fight against the police when they want to arrest them. . . . These groups provide a large service. . . . They help to regulate everything. . . . It has become normal to live with the two groups. One group gives a quick action, one helps me to study, and another group provides me with security so that I am able to go and study. There are public roads, public services, and the other group provides me with security. (NGO Worker 2014)

These NGO workers acknowledged that the community is aware of the negative effects of relying on the criminal actors to provide them with security, such as threats of violence or assassinations. However, residents perceive that the state is unable to meet their daily needs; thus they are forced to rely on these criminal actors. The threats of violence by these criminal actors were evident during fieldwork. In May 2015, a community leader who was known for making complaints against the criminal *bandas*' use of intimidation in the participatory budgeting process was shot 25 times in a marginalized neighborhood. The assassination of this community leader, along with two other leaders within a month, demonstrates the ability that the criminal actors do have to silence anyone who speaks out against them (Franco García 2015). Events such as this assassination show the community's ambivalent feelings toward the criminal actors.

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Discussion

Gangs in Latin American urban environments are known for their extreme levels of violence, but for many urban residents in marginalized neighborhoods, the role that gangs play in their community has become part of their day-to-day life, given the provision of services by these criminal actors. For many residents, the weakness of the state, or the perception of the inability of the state, leaves them with a perception that they need to rely on the criminal gangs to provide them with services, such as authority and order. However, the use of often extreme violence by these criminal actors can result in community members feeling ambivalent toward them. Latin American urban policymakers should ensure they have a good understanding of how gangs interact with the state and the community in their efforts to reduce current levels of violence and prevent future outbreaks.

In Medellín, in recent years the local government increased the capacity for service provision in the marginalized neighborhoods. Significant investments were made in these neighborhoods with the objective of improving the welfare levels of the poor and marginalized and reducing levels of inequality (Echeverri and Orsini 2011; Fajardo and Andrews 2014). There were improvements in the quality of life and a reduction in homicides (Cerdá et al. 2012; Jaitman and Guerrero 2015; Muggah 2015; Patiño et al. 2014; *UN-Habitat* 2007). However, despite this increased capacity for service provision, there are estimates of up to 350 different criminal *bandas* operating in the city and up to 13,500 gang members in 2015. Many residents of the marginalized neighborhoods can perceive the criminal actors as being more effective service providers in areas of employment and social order and control than the state.

Qualitative data collected in Medellín reveal how unemployment and underemployment in the marginalized neighborhoods continue to limit residents' social mobility. Residents from these neighborhoods perceive that there is a lack of legitimate opportunities in the formal society. This perception has the effect of "pushing" socially and economically marginalized individuals into opportunities offered by the criminal *bandas*. Participants spoke of how individuals from the poorer neighborhoods "would have liked to do something after studying but realized in this society they can't" and "an armed group . . . gives you social recognition that you don't get from society."

Gang membership also provides a mechanism to address this perceived lack of opportunities. One participant commented, "it is easier to be a *combo* . . . rather than killing yourself working in a laboring job where they pay you a minimum salary." Membership in a gang thus provides marginalized individuals with social benefits, such as social status and respect, and economic benefits they perceive they are unable to obtain from the wider society. However, as acknowledged by Baird (2018), gang membership can also be linked to masculine identities, among other factors.

In Medellín, different nonstate armed groups have provided governance in the marginalized neighborhoods for the past 30 years. There has been an often collaborative relationship between these violent actors and the state (Civico 2012; Moncada

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2016). For the community, the lack of commitment to a specific nonstate group, such as the left-wing militia or right-wing paramilitary, indicates that it was looking for control that, they perceived, the state was unable or unwilling to provide to them. The participants interviewed for this study spoke of how residents continue to perceive that the state is unable or unwilling to provide order in the marginalized neighborhoods. Participants spoke of how the "criminal actors have a social base in their communities. . . . They help to regulate everything" and "the principal reason for using these actors is because we feel safe." The criminal *bandas* are able to maintain order in a community and thereby gain some support or acceptance from residents. While the community may fear these actors because of their capacity to engage in violence and threats of violence rather than support it, it is interested in their provision of security, given the perception that these actors are more efficient and effective than the state.

Even though the criminal *bandas* in Medellín are not seeking to overthrow the government, they do present a significant challenge to the government, as the community perceives them as more legitimate or reliable than the state. The criminal *bandas* have become embedded in the structure of the community, and they create a structure for the community that residents perceive the state is unable to provide. The data presented show how these criminal actors appear to rely on residents' perceiving the state as being inadequate or ineffective, as this perception is an important factor in the continuing existence of these criminal actors.

Conclusions

In Latin American urban environments, gangs pose a significant threat to both security and socioeconomic development. This article has provided insights into why urban residents from marginalized neighborhoods continue to rely on gangs for services, such as employment and social order and control, despite their awareness of the use of often extreme violence from these criminal actors. By drawing from qualitative data collected in Medellín, this article has shown how despite the recent increased public investment and extension of public services in the marginalized neighborhoods, criminal gangs continue to have a significant presence. In this city, there has been a history of nonstate armed groups providing alternative forms of governance and of an often collaborative relationship between them and the state. While these gangs have the capacity to engage in violence and have been known to do so, residents from the marginalized neighborhoods can perceive them as more effective service providers than the state in areas of employment and social order and control. The gangs appear to rely on, and even exploit, the perception of the weakness of the state in the marginalized neighborhoods.

The insights provided in this article reveal the importance to Latin American policymakers of acknowledging the perceptions that residents from marginalized neighborhoods have of the state and of criminal gangs. It is argued that by acknowledging these perceptions, policymakers would be better equipped to design and implement policies to reduce levels of violence and prevent future outbreaks. Ulti-

https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2020.31 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mately, it is the responsibility of policymakers to ensure that violence prevention policy approaches are not just top-down but also bottom-up, policies that promote and encourage the participation of citizens from the marginalized neighborhoods.

However, the question remains if Medellín is an outlier. The criminal governance in the marginalized neighborhoods appears to be a paradox. The local government increased service provision in the marginalized neighborhoods, and the number of homicides dropped; however, the residents continue to hold a perception of the weakness of the state. Future research could analyze other Latin American cities that have experienced reductions in violence, such as homicides. For example, the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula experienced a 50 percent reduction in homicides from 2016 to 2017 (from 112 homicides per 100,000 residents to 51 per 100,000) (Panting 2018), but local media have reported how gangs continue to have a significant presence and control over the lives of residents in the marginalized neighborhoods (Bonello 2018).

Research could therefore analyze how these local residents perceive the state and these local gangs. This could not only better inform policymakers on violence prevention and reduction but also ensure that policymakers are promoting citizen participation in the development and implementation of policies. It is only through case study approaches, such as this research, that Latin American policymakers can be provided with some of the tools needed to reduce the high levels of violence in the region.

Note

1. In Medellín, some refer to *combos* as smaller neighborhood gangs and *bandas* as being associated directly with organized crime groups. This article uses only the term *banda*; however, the particular term a participant used has not been changed.

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