



William J. Perry Center *for* Hemispheric Defense Studies

Latin America

Prof. Arturo C. Sotomayor

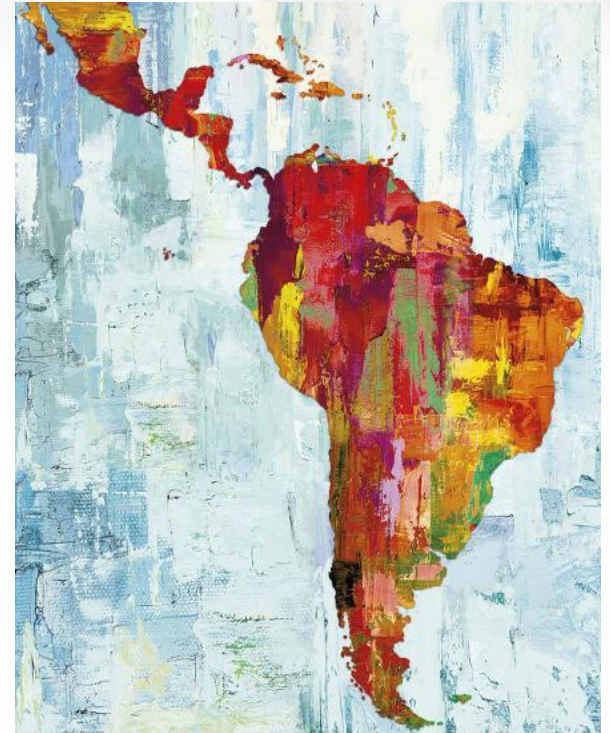
Presentation for the Capstone Executive Spouse Development
Course, National Defense University



05/14/2025

Lecture outline: Four Puzzles for Discussion

- What is Latin America?
- Why is Latin America peaceful but violent?
- Why is Latin America so wealthy and poor?
- Why Latin America represents so much potential, but also risk?



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

- Geography
- Territory
- Set of countries



El mapa político de América Latina

Gobiernos actuales

Izquierda Derecha Centro

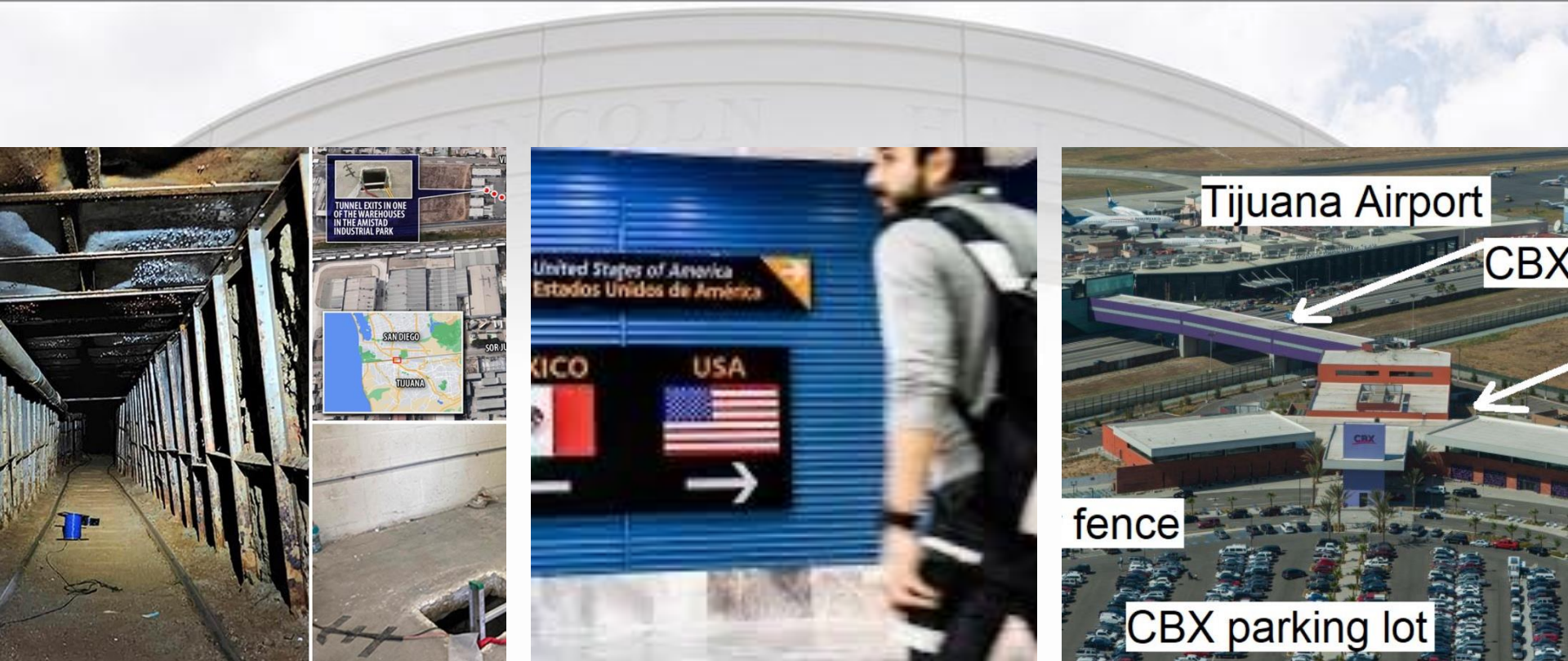


*La presidenta electa de Honduras asumirá en enero de 2022

**El presidente electo de Chile asumirá en marzo de 2022

AFP





Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

- Territorial border
- Borderline between legality and illegality



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

- **Complex borders**
 - Historically fluid
 - Porous
 - Evolving

Images: NASA Earth Observatory

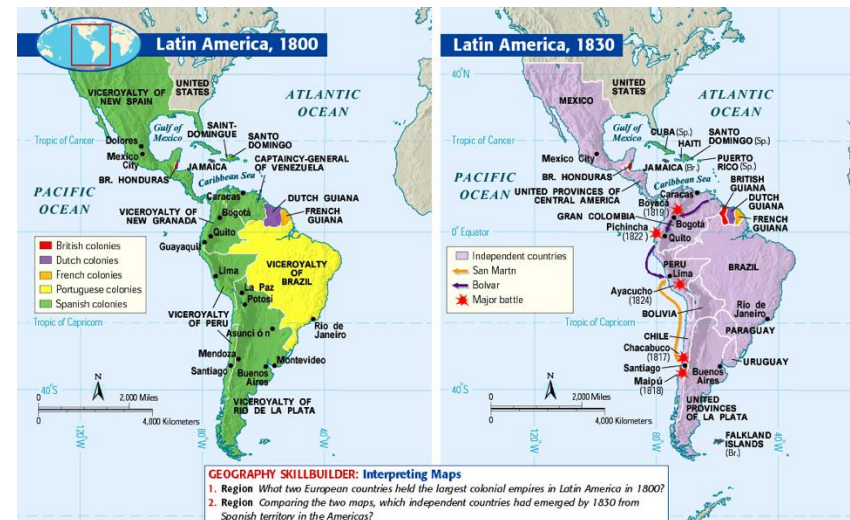
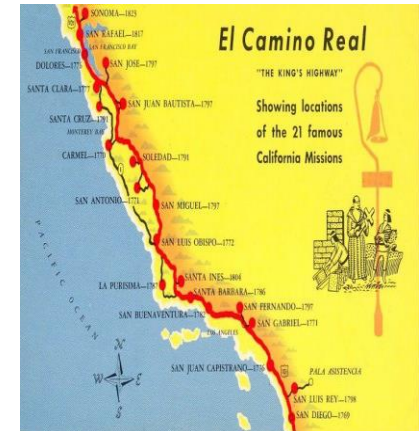


Puzzle 1:
Not all you
see in a
map is Latin
America



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

- Transnational history
 - Pre-Hispanic civilizations
 - Common colonial heritage
 - Similar path towards independence



Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

Transnational movements: society and demographics

- Demographically heterogeneous
- Marked by historical diasporas: European, Japanese
- Shaped by immigrants and emigrants

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean



Intra-regional migration in Latin America

Source: International Migration Institute and UNHCR



Venezuela's sprawling LatAm exodus

Which Latin American countries are home to the most Venezuelan migrants and refugees?



Subscribe to our global politics newsletter Signal at gzeromedia.com

Source: UNHCR

GZERO

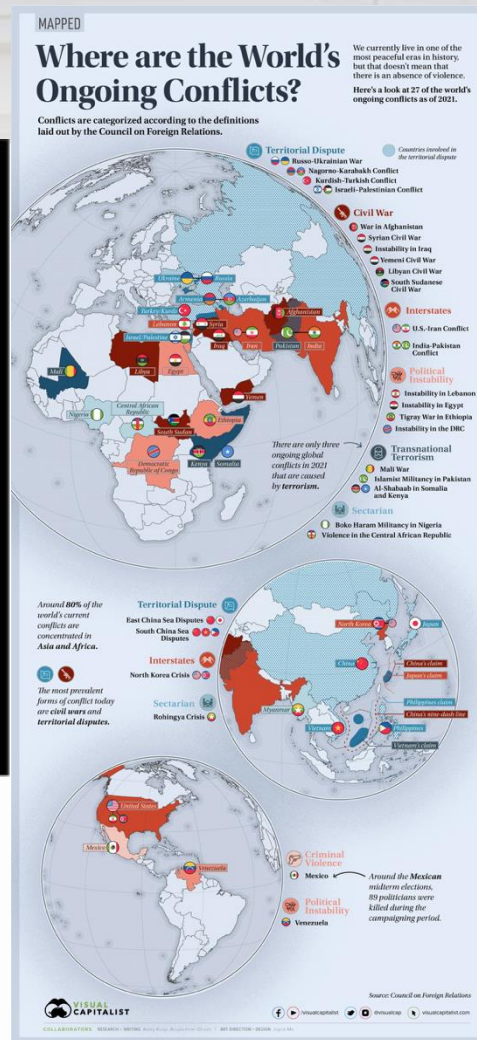
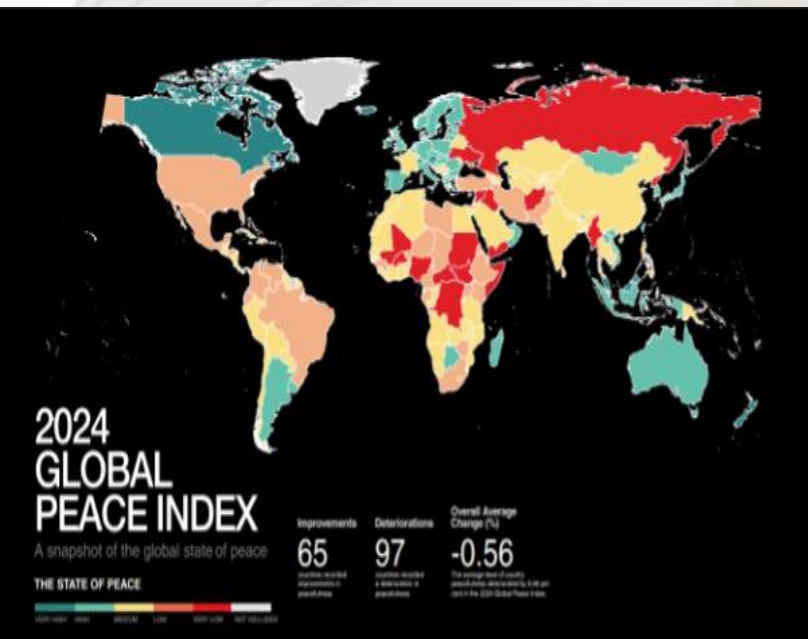


Puzzle 1: What is Latin America?

Latin America as an idea and a political community

- Conceived by people who perceive themselves as part of a collective group
- It is not simply restricted to nations, it is a supranational movement
- Common ideas:
 - Bolivarianism
 - Republicanism
 - Anti-colonialism
 - Anti-imperialism





Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

Source: Global Peace Index 2024, Institute of Economics and Peace

Negative peace:

- No war between neighboring states
- Low levels of inter-state conflict
- Few border disputes are militarized
- Military budgets are relatively low

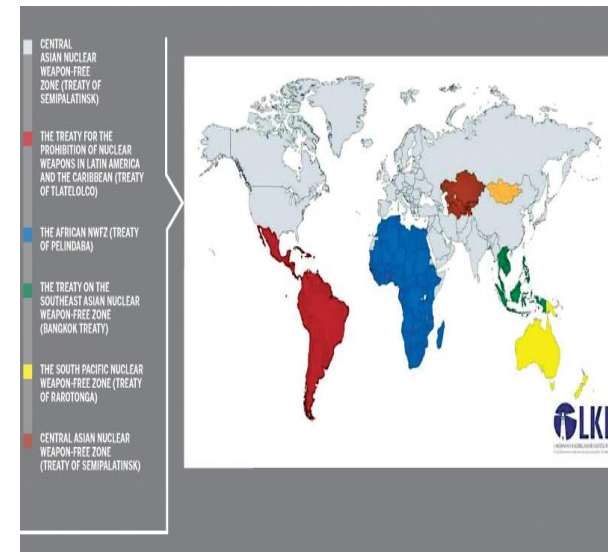


Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

- Border disputes resolved via courts (judicial settlement)
- Nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are banned by treaty
- Third-party mediation and electoral monitoring are common

Map: Economist 2024

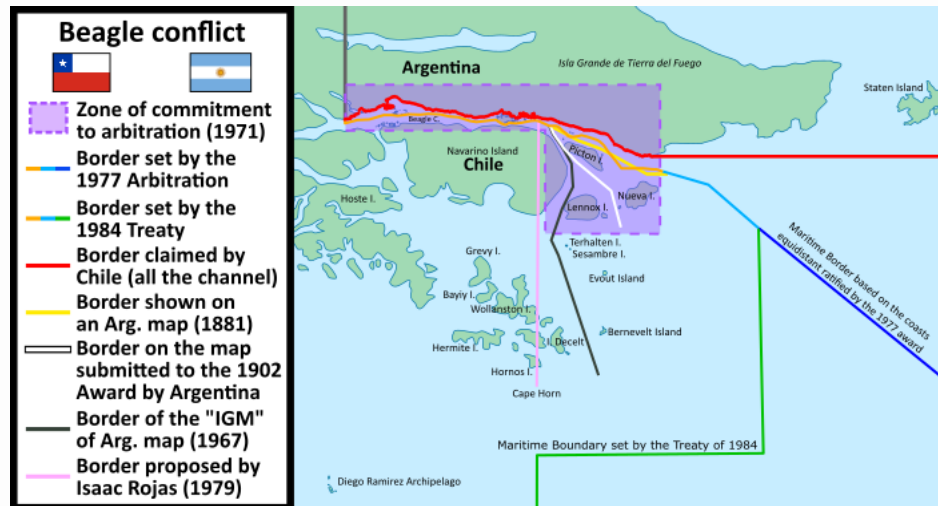
Images: OPANAL 1968, OAS mission in Bolivia 2024



Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

Why no inter-state
militarized violence?

- Legalism as a regional norm
- Law as “the weapon of the weak”
- Regional powers as pacifiers
- Lessons of history
- Omnibalancing



Puzzle 2: Peaceful but Violent

Domestic and political violence

- Coups
- Insurgency
- **Revolution**
 - Social revolutions
 - Land reform (peasants)
- Regional rebellions
- Caudillo wars



Puzzle 2 Latin America: Peaceful but Violent

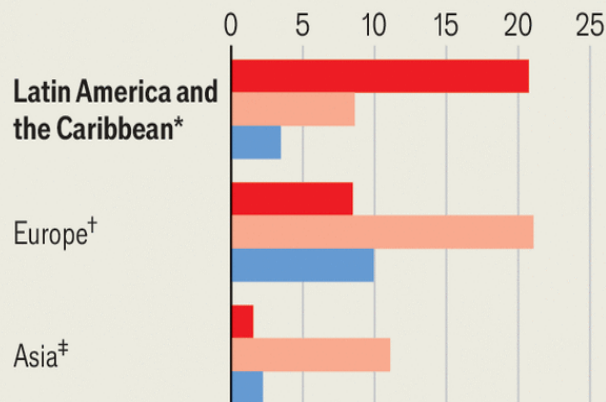
Source: "Global
Study on
Homicide," UN
Office on Drugs
and Crime, 2019;
Economist 2024

A deficit of justice

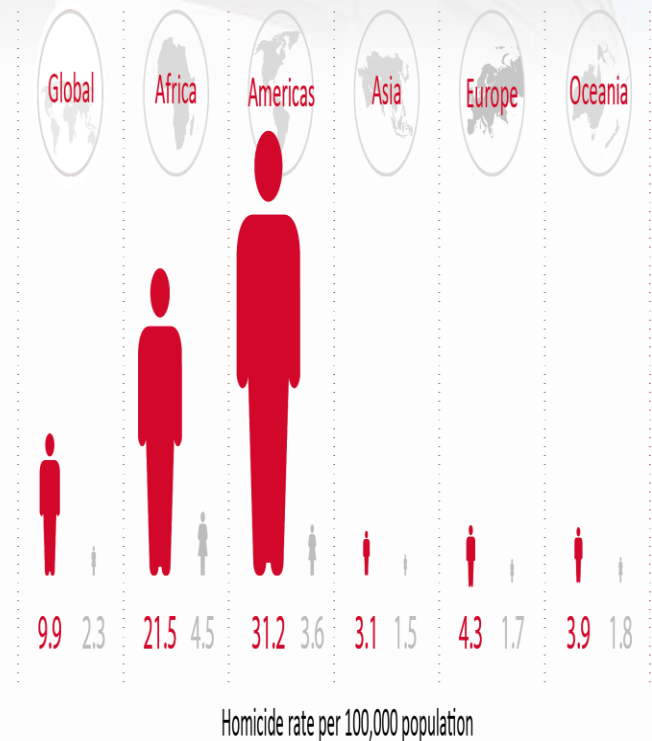
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Rates per 100,000 people, 2021 or latest available

- Victims of intentional homicide
- Judges or magistrates
- People convicted of intentional homicide

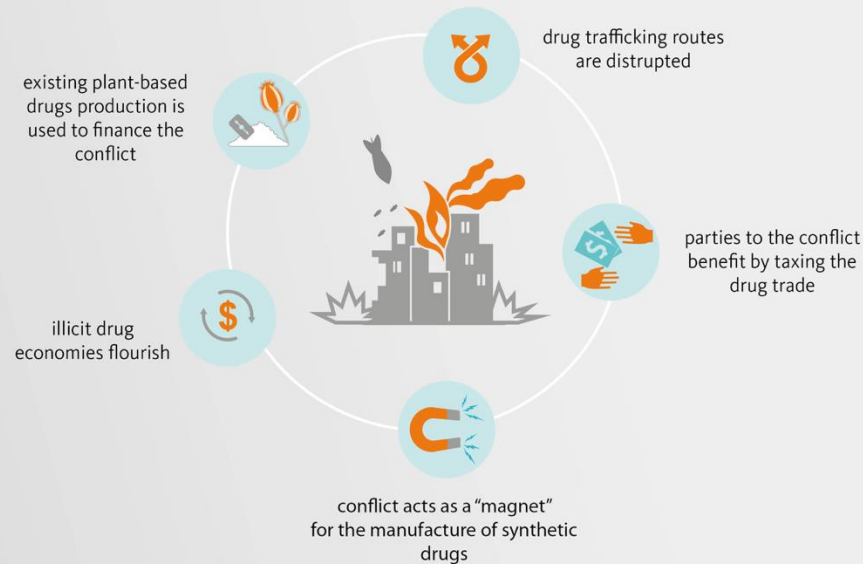


Source: UNODC *20 countries †35 countries ‡10 countries



Rule of law: a common challenge

WEAK RULE OF LAW IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES TO THE ILLICIT DRUG TRADE



UNODC
Research



Homicide: Complex, non-linear, and heterogenous

Data from: Insight Crime and Economist



Murderous municipalities

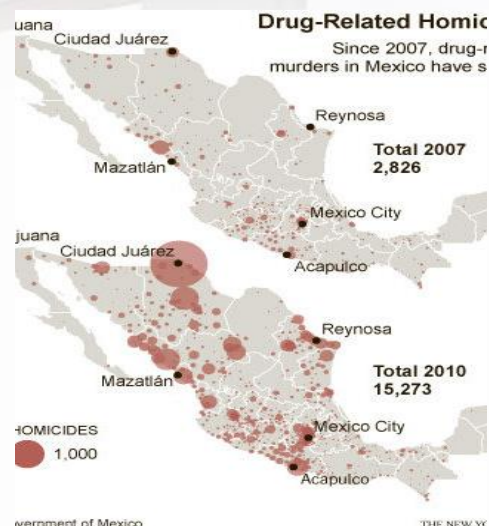
Homicides per 100,000 people, 50 highest cities*



Sources: Igarapé Institute; United Nations

*With population of 250,000 or more [†]2022





Puzzle 2 Latin America, peaceful but violent: State generated violence (political violence), drug related violence, urban violence and gang-related or youth violence.



Political violence

- Political violence in Latin America can be defined as the use of force or intimidation to achieve political goals, typically involving state actors, insurgent groups, or both. It encompasses a wide range of actions, including coups, guerrilla warfare, state repression, and terrorism, all aimed at influencing or maintaining power structures within a country. This form of violence is often rooted in ideological conflicts, socio-economic inequalities, and the struggle for political control, and has been a recurring feature of Latin American politics throughout much of the 20th and early 21st centuries.



Drug related violence

Source: The Economist 2022

- Violence perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs)
- Transnational organized crime refers to those self-perpetuating associations of individuals who **operate transnationally** (globally, across borders) for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, **monetary and/or commercial gains**, while protecting their activities through a pattern of **corruption, violence** or while protecting their illegal activities through a transnational **organizational structure** and the exploitation of transnational commerce or communication mechanisms (**adaptability**).

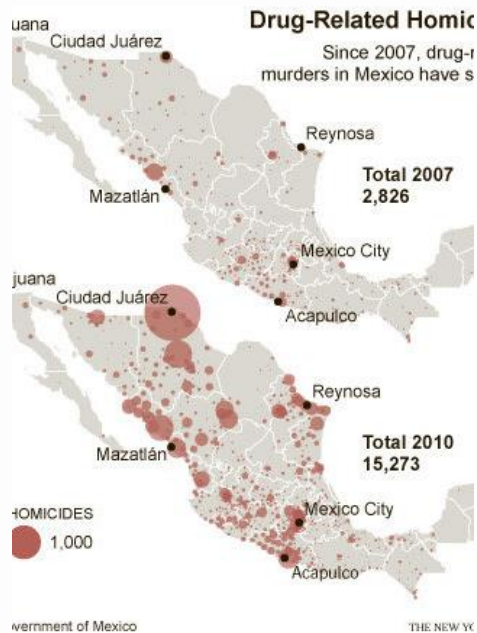


The Economist



Factors that shape drug related violence: Turf Wars

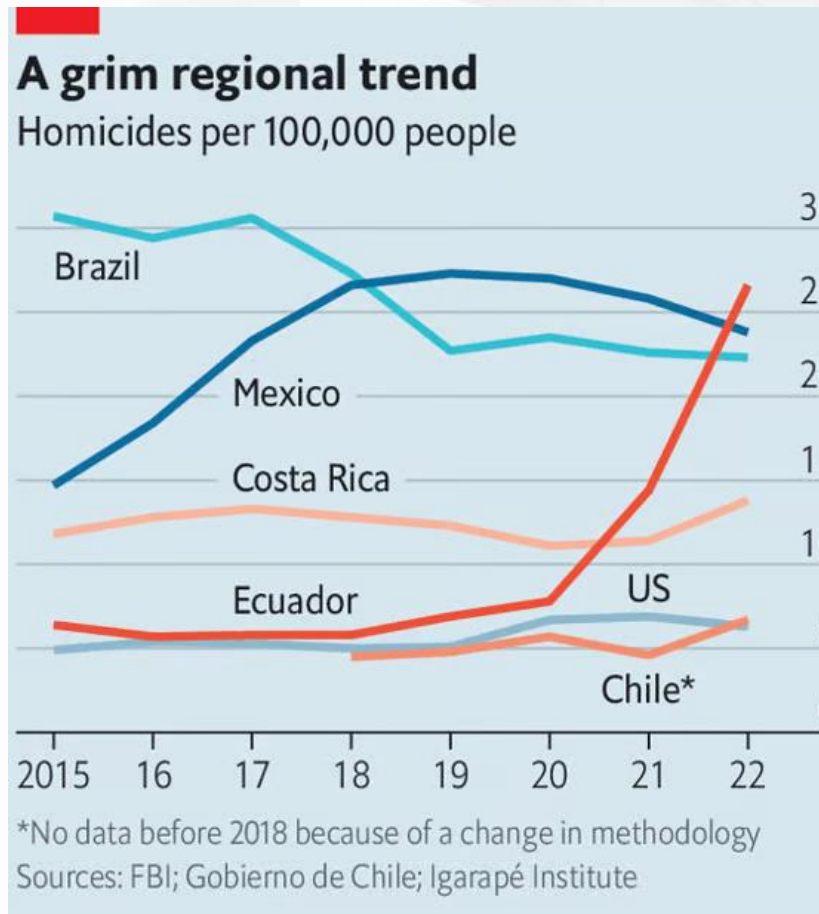
Source: Ginger Thompson and James C. McKinley Jr., "Mexico's Drug Cartels Wage Fierce Battle for their Turf," *New York Times*, January 14, 2005.
June S. Beittel, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations," Congressional Research Service, June 7, 2022.



Gang-related crime

Source: Economist 2023

Gang-related violence in Latin America refers to the criminal activities and conflicts perpetrated by organized youth groups known by various names such as gangs or maras. These gangs, primarily composed of young males aged 13-25, engage in a wide range of violent acts including assaults, robberies, drug trafficking, territorial disputes, and homicides. The violence often stems from conflicts with rival gangs, law enforcement, or as part of their criminal enterprises, significantly contributing to the region's high crime rates and challenging public safety and state control in many Latin American countries. Unlike TCOs, which functions across borders, gang-related violence is territorial and mostly urban.



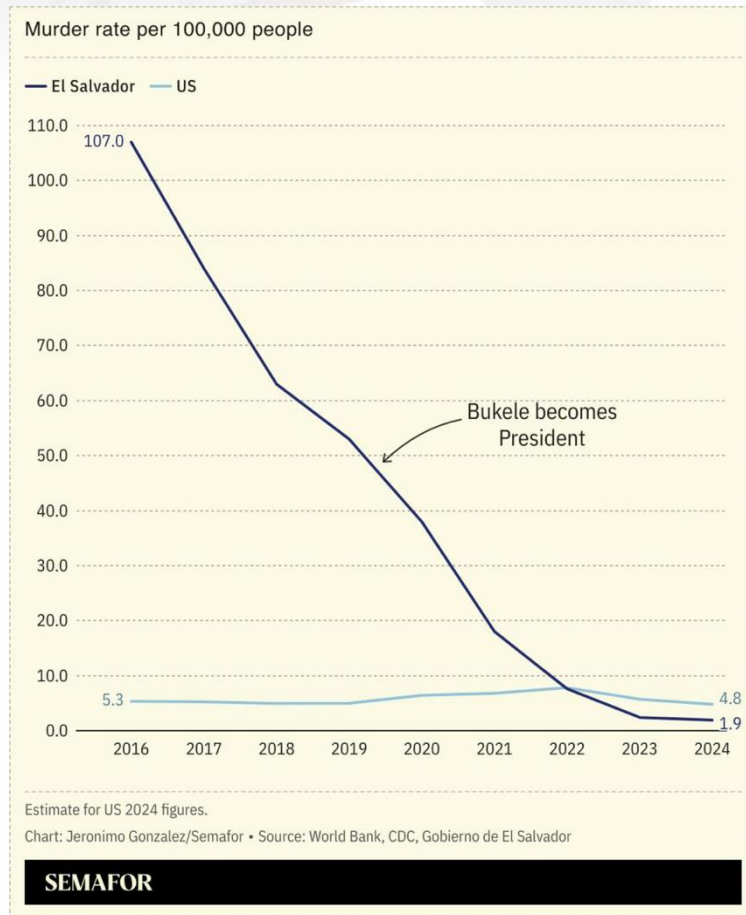
Haitian crisis: political, gang violence, and urban crime

- Overt involvement of gangs in politics (G9 and Family)
- Lack of elected officials and resigning officials (political crisis)
- No rapid international force to de-escalate violence (long history of failed UN peace missions).



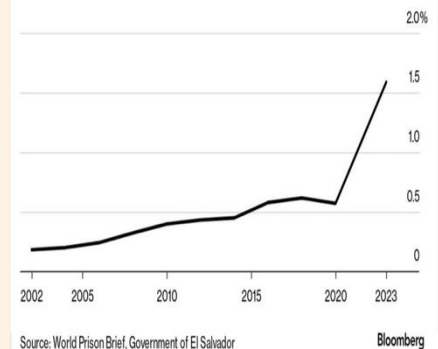
El Salvador's model: pros, cons, and lessons for the future

Source: Jeronimo Gonzalez, World Bank, 2024



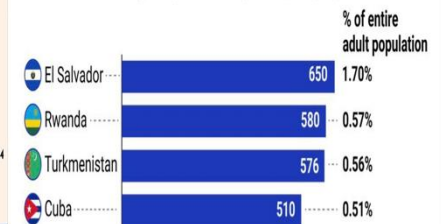
El Salvador Has Jailed 1.6% of its Population

The country has the world's highest incarceration rate, triple that of the US



How does El Salvador's prison rate stack up?

Countries with the highest prison rates per 100,000 people



Puzzle 3: Why is Latin America so wealthy and poor?

Wealth is abundant, but poorly distributed

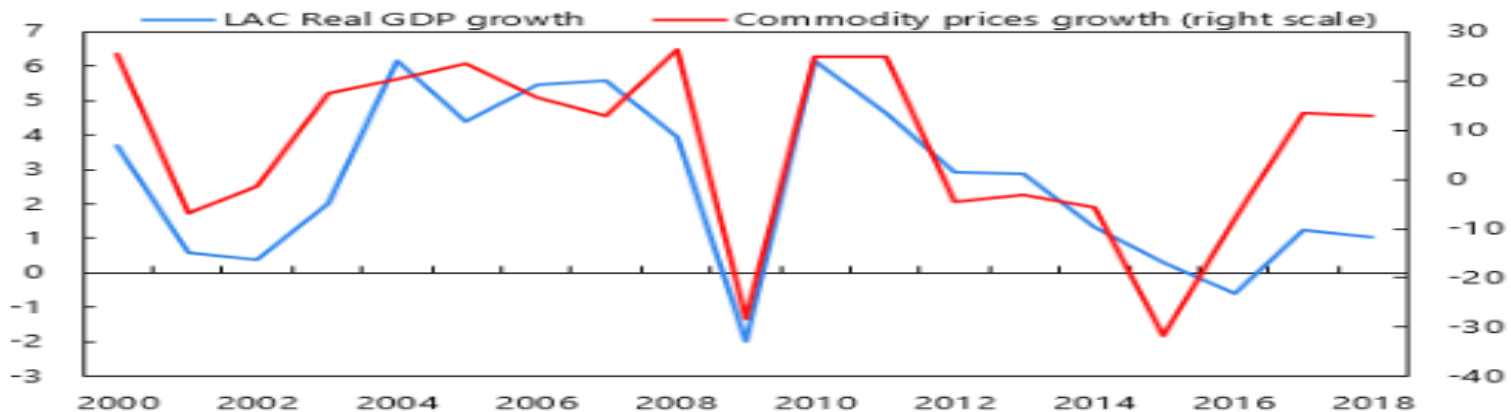


Puzzle 3: Why is Latin America so wealthy and poor?

Economic growth and commodity price moves

Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean is highly correlated with global commodity price changes.

(percent)



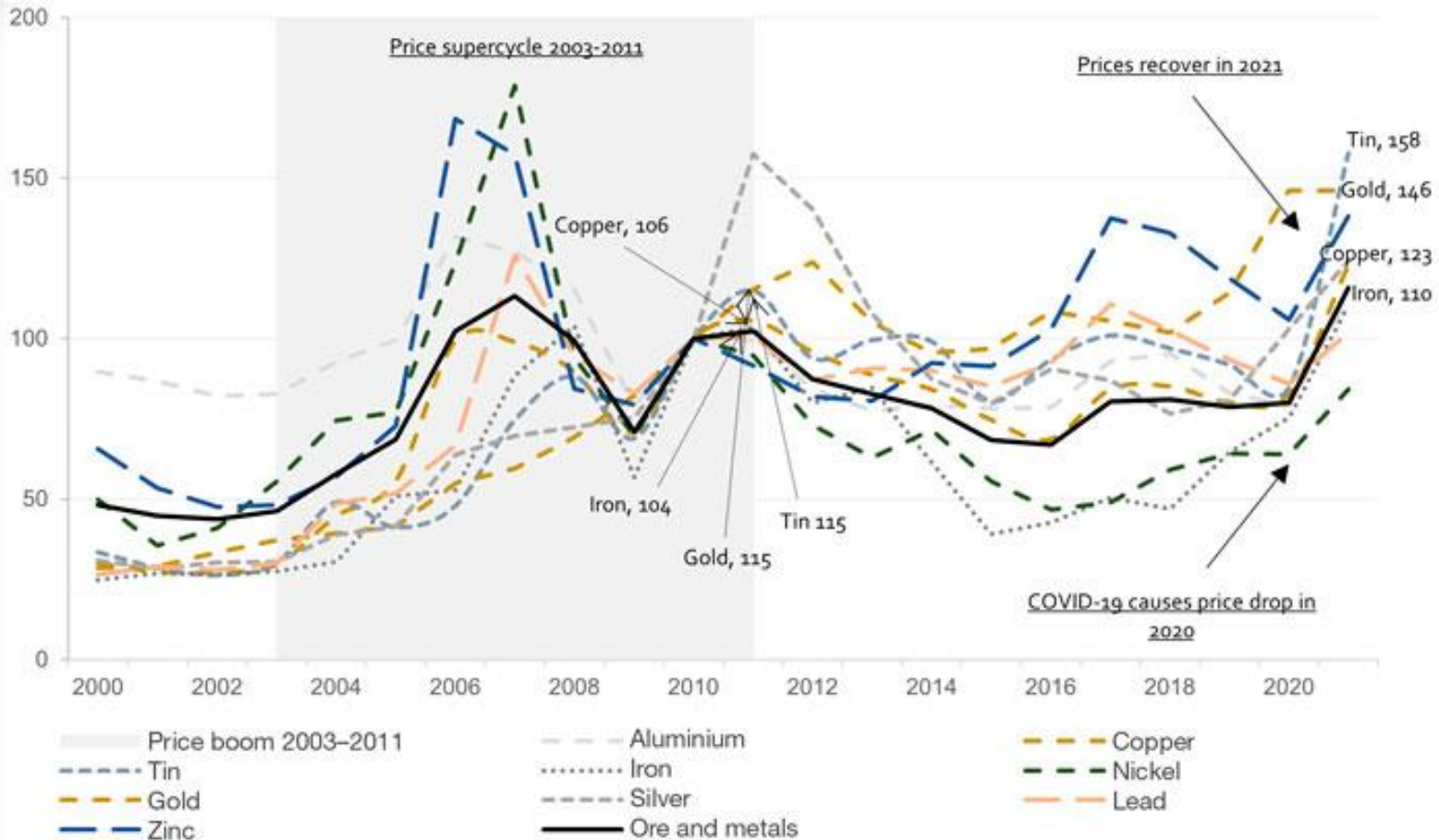
Sources: IMF, Primary Commodity Price System database; and IMF, World Economic Outlook database.

INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND



Critical minerals

Source: ECLAC, 2022

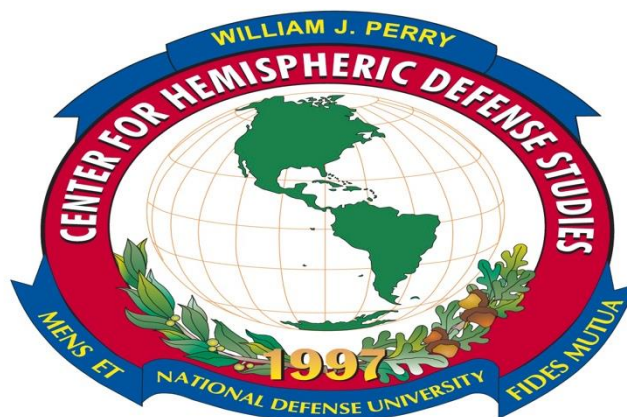


Puzzle 4: So much potential, yet so much risk Latin America in an era of strategic competition





Want to learn more about Latin America?



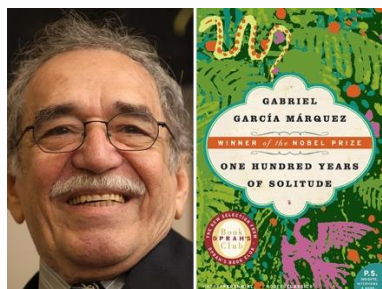
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