From community policing to political police in Nicaragua

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Abstract

In a region plagued by high rates of violent crime and repressive policing practices, Nicaragua has earned a reputation as exceptional. Despite poverty, inequality, and a historical legacy of political violence and repression, Nicaragua has defied regional trends. It has registered low rates of violent crime while deploying policing practices that emphasized prevention over repression. April 2018 marked an end to this exceptionalism. Police attacked antigovernment protestors, and launched a sustained campaign against dissidents that continues to the present day. While the Nicaraguan police had long cultivated a reputation as community-oriented and non-repressive, they appeared to quickly change into a repressive, political force. In this paper, we trace how the Nicaraguan police have evolved over time. Relying upon longitudinal data from 1996-2019 from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, we trace the process of police reform in Nicaragua, and analyse public attitudes towards the police as these reforms unfolded. *Keywords*: Nicaragua, community policing, police reform, public trust, crime.

Resumen: De policía comunitaria a policía política en Nicaragua

En una región plagada de altos índices de delitos violentos y prácticas policiales represivas, Nicaragua se ha ganado una reputación como excepcional. A pesar de la pobreza, la desigualdad y un legado histórico de violencia política y represión, Nicaragua ha desafiado las tendencias regionales. Ha registrado bajas tasas de delitos violentos al tiempo que ha desplegado prácticas policiales que enfatizan la prevención sobre la represión. Abril de 2018 marcó el fin de este excepcionalismo. La policía atacó a manifestantes antigubernamentales y lanzó una campaña sostenida contra los disidentes que continúa hasta el día de hoy. Si bien la policía nicaragüense había cultivado durante mucho tiempo una reputación de estar orientada hacia la comunidad y no represiva, pareció transformarse rápidamente en una fuerza política represiva. En este artículo, rastreamos cómo la policía nicaragüense ha evolucionado a lo largo del tiempo. Basándonos en datos longitudinales de 1996-2019 del Proyecto de Opinión Pública de América Latina, rastreamos el proceso de reforma policial en Nicaragua y analizamos las actitudes del público hacia la policía a medida que se desarrolla-

ban estas reformas. *Palabras clave*: Nicaragua, policía comunitaria, reforma policial, confianza pública, delincuencia.

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, policing in Nicaragua has garnered a great deal of interest. In other parts of Central America, elected officials have favored a militarized approach to policing that unleashes violence and repression against suspected criminals. These zero tolerance measures have rarely lowered homicide rates, but have exacerbated cycles of repression and criminal violence (Wolf 2017). Nicaragua has largely eschewed these iron fist tactics, and until April 2018, both state and societal forces relied more heavily on preventive and community-based initiatives rather than militarized and repressive policing practices (Espinoza & Herrera 2009). These preventive and community-based policing strategies are often credited, at least partially, with maintaining comparatively low levels of crime in the country (Sibaja et al. 2006).[1]

While Nicaragua has all of the preconditions for high rates of public insecurity, its rates of violent crime are among the lowest in Central America. Like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, inequality and political violence have marked Nicaragua for much of its history. Nicaragua reports a GDP of less than a quarter of that of Costa Rica, yet over the past decade, its homicide rate was roughly the same. Nicaragua's rate of violent crime is 80 per cent lower than the other post-conflict countries in the region (Guatemala and El Salvador), despite registering lower levels of GDP per capita than these other countries. Nicaragua has maintained comparatively lower levels of crime while extolling the benefits of policing strategies that respect human rights, maintain strong ties to the community, and are holistic and preventive. For these reasons, observers have pointed to the Nicaraguan case as a potential model for other developing and democratizing countries (e.g., Cruz 2014; Stone 2012).

Given the esteem in which the Nicaraguan model is often held, the widely publicized police attacks on demonstrators in April 2018 came to many as a surprise. Tragically, this was not an isolated incident. Overt, systematic police repression against dissidents and demonstrators has continued from 2018 to the present day. According to the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH) and the Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos (ANPDH), approximately 300 people were killed in violent clashes with the police between April and August 2018; over 2,000 people were injured; and more than 2,000 arrested (many in arbitrary fashion or kidnapped by security forces) (CIDH 2018; Baldizon 2018).[2]

For some scholars, however, the police repression of 2018 was not so much a dramatic change, but rather the culmination of a police force gradually becoming more repressive and politicized. Even prior to April 2018, there were less publicized reports of smaller scale crackdowns on protestors and dissidents. As early as 2008, for example, the police did not act to curb violence

perpetrated by groups linked to the government during municipal elections (Cuadra 2018). The police also cracked down on protests in rural areas, particularly those opposing canal construction in 2013 (Orozco 2015). The police used excessive force against protestors from Unidad Nacional del Adulto Mayor (UNAM) in 2013 and mine workers in 2015 (Baldizon 2018). According to such accounts, the 2018 protests were not so much an abrupt departure from the status quo, but rather a steady evolution of more repressive policing that began in 2007. These abuses of power did not receive extensive attention, possibly because they were not as deadly as the abuses of power on full display in the other post-conflict countries of Central America. In retrospect, however, these earlier episodes were perhaps harbingers of more extreme and widespread police attacks on dissidents in the future.

Against this backdrop, we aim to understand the evolution of policing practices in Nicaragua, particularly the relationship between the police and the communities they ostensibly serve. While other scholarship has assessed how well the Nicaraguan police have adopted community-based strategies at the institutional level both pre- and post 2018 (e.g., McNeish, Martinez & Fruhling 2019), we aim to assess the Nicaraguan policing model from the perspective of citizens. For example, do public attitudes towards police reaffirm the community-oriented image that the police have cultivated and projected? Or has the public registered concerns about the police, and perhaps regarded them with suspicion or as a repressive force? In this paper, we trace the evolution of policing practices in Nicaragua, and relying upon longitudinal survey data from 1996-2019 from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), we analyze public attitudes towards police as these reforms unfolded.[3] We complement our analysis of public opinion data with field research conducted in Nicaragua in 2011 and 2013. Our analysis informs the growing literature on police reform and police-community relationships in Latin America, and discusses the implications of Nicaragua's failure to sustain police reforms for other democratizing countries.

Nicaraguan police reform in regional context

To understand why policing practices in Nicaragua were frequently regarded so positively, it is helpful to contextualize these reforms against a broader regional backdrop. Historically, the police in Latin America have served as an instrument of the government to support its power and to control citizens. Especially during the 1970s and 1980s, military dictatorships incorporated police institutions as a *fuerza de choque* rather than as an institution with a specific mission. Under the dictatorships of the twentieth century, policing typically entailed a political dimension, and police (alongside the military) were often the actors who repressed political opponents and the public more broadly. Under authoritarian rule, the primary objective of the police was typically the protection of the regime and its major stakeholders (Huggins 1998). To achieve

this objective, the police relied heavily on the indiscriminate use of force in their daily routines. Furthermore, police ranks were permeated by networks of party-affiliated activists, and most appointments in sensitive posts were determined on the basis of political affiliation or personal affinity. In most cases, police-related decisions, including strategic and operational issues, were determined by high level political actors. Nicaragua's Somoza dynasty (1936-1979) epitomized the use of police for repressive and political aims, as it relied heavily upon its National Guard to repress political opponents and instill fear in average citizens.

Democratization brought a change to policing practices, or at least it was supposed to do so. Democratic governments ostensibly shifted the primary role of the police, limiting the use of police for political purposes (e.g., to repress political opponents) and instead deploying police primarily to ensure security, control crime, and develop public security policies (Dammert 2019).[4] Here, Nicaragua registered some early successes, differentiating itself from the other post-conflict countries of Central America. Following the 1979 revolution, Nicaragua made a complete break from its prior repressive policing institution, the National Guard, and created a new civilian police force oriented towards the community with a mandate to prioritize prevention over repression. The new government separated national defense from public security and created both an army and a police force to uphold each respectively (Orozco 2015). As longtime former police director Aminta Granera explained, "We didn't know how to be police. We only knew we didn't want to be like the Somozan Guard" (The Economist 2012). According to one official who participated in the process of police reform in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, "What was clear was that we needed to create a police force that would not be repressive. That the police could never do what they had done in the past."[5] While critiques of the early Sandinista government abound, there is consensus that its new police system was a vast improvement over its notorious predecessor, particularly in the arena of human rights (Weegels 2018a, 2018b). Reformers emphasized the need to elaborate rules (and clearly explain them) to limit the use of violence, develop strategies to deter the excessive use of force, and strengthen preventive mechanisms for controlling crime. Nicaragua was unique in that it enshrined such limitations on the police's use of force in its constitution. Article 97 of the 1987 Constitution explicitly stated that the police's role was preventive, not repressive; this established an early constitutional precedent for the creation of an apolitical, civilian police force that would respect citizen rights and the rule of law.

To reorient their police forces towards protecting citizens rather than repressing them, the majority of police institutions throughout the region have created programs of community policing, and while the results are often mixed, we should consider such efforts as a step forward, recognizing the multidimensionality of the problem (Dammert 2019). Regrettably, in most countries the concept of community policing is very much concentrated in the political nar-

rative rather than in institutional practice, but two substantial elements that have emerged are the incorporation of the community perspective in police formation and the creation of mechanisms for a public accounting of police action to citizens (Muggah 2017; Ungar 2019; González 2016). Here, the Nicaraguan National Police have stood out in the region, as police reformers went beyond mere rhetoric and implemented meaningful community-oriented reforms that were communitarian, proactive, and preventative (Espinoza & Herrera 2009; McNeish et al. 2019).

After shifting the role of the police from political repression to public security, the next challenge facing democratizing countries is consolidating and upholding the rule of law. The rule of law is a critical component of democracy and governance. However, its consolidation is incomplete when justice is slow, inefficient, and corrupt; when the police are violent and inefficient; and when the incarceration system has been converted into centres truly administered by criminals (as is the case especially in El Salvador, where gangs maintain de facto control over large parts of the prisons). These challenges have been confronted only tangentially in Latin America, primarily through the development of a strategy of reforms to improve the effectiveness of the penal process. Multiple attempts to transform political policing into community-oriented policing were even more problematic due to the spread of iron fist tactics, particularly to fight the "war on drugs." In the early twenty-first century, drug trafficking routes shifted to run through Central America, and leaders throughout the region took up the mantel of the war on drugs, and its corresponding militarization of certain political groups whose infrastructure, formation, and strategy has been linked to the use of violence (Mota et al. 2012). In this area, Nicaragua's results have been mixed. Problems still abound in upholding the rule of law, particularly as levels of corruption have remained high. Still, Nicaragua's low rates of violent crime, and ability to insulate itself from the infiltration and proliferation of gangs, are often cited as evidence of successful policing strategies.

To be successful, police reforms must be comprehensive and sustained in the long term, but paradoxically they also need obvious signs of rapid progress that can be readily communicated to citizens. Without "immediate victories," the forces that resist change (both internal and external) often succeed in convincing the public that transformation is unnecessary, insufficient, and largely ineffective. Furthermore, reforms cannot be only political. The literature demonstrates that they require processes of change in justice, for example, in traditional areas of criminal justice like incarceration systems. But even more critical are investments in social protection programs, which can address not just criminality itself, but the root causes linked to the development of criminal careers in the first place. When investments in justice reform are matched with those of social protection, these cross-cutting reforms can buttress one another and provide a more holistic response to addressing crime. Indeed, Sibaja et al. (2006) point to the ways in which the Nicaraguan policing model had been

buttressed by these parallel investments in social welfare and criminal justice innovations.

Despite these complexities confronting police reforms throughout the region, some countries have clearly made progress, and bear little resemblance to their former selves. When analyzing the track record of police reform, Nicaragua was often heralded as a success story, alongside the Chilean Carabineros and the National Police of Colombia (Malone & Dammert 2020). The Nicaraguan case has received special attention, particularly as it deviated sharply from trends in the Northern Triangle countries in terms of its rejection of militarized policing approaches and its low crime rate (Cajina 2013; Johnson et al. 2012). A critical component to Nicaragua's different trajectory has been the community orientation of its national police force, which had long emphasized the limited use of violence and consolidation of preventive programs to address the root causes of criminality (Cruz 2015). The community orientation of police and investment in prevention programs would be remarkable in themselves given trends in the region, but the Nicaraguan case was all the more unusual in that these reforms occurred in a country marked by some of the highest levels of poverty and institutional weakness in the region (Cruz 2015). In the next section, we discuss Nicaragua's community-oriented reforms, and how they evolved over time.

The evolution of community policing in Nicaragua

The 1987 constitution created the new National Police force, and stipulated that the police would be a preventive rather than a repressive force. From its inception, the National Police included a network of institutions at the local level that would not only prevent crime but also exercise government presence. The Committees for the Defense of the Sandinista Revolution, as well as the so-called heads of sector, functioned as security specialists that promoted social cohesion but also consolidated a political structure that bolstered the Sandinista government. For the first decade following the revolution, the police were tasked with guaranteeing the status quo, confronting crime, and protecting the state (Rocha 2015: 9).

The first cycle of police transformation, which prioritized the creation of a civilian police force and subsequent institutional transformation, closed in 1989. In an historic election in 1990, Nicaraguans witnessed a peaceful transfer of power when Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997) replaced Daniel Ortega (1985-1990) as President. This change in power ushered in a second stage of police reform, which prioritized depoliticization, innovation, and increased community orientation. The new government approved the Law of the Ministry of Interior, and the protection of citizens was defined as a police function. Subsequent political transformations in the 1990s prioritized police reform as an essential component for constructing a "firm and lasting peace" (Beltran 2009: 1). The 1990 loss of the ruling Sandinista party led to new relationships among the

police, the new electorally victorious coalition led by President Chamorro, and the population (Beltran 2009). While the process of institutional depoliticization had begun, Rocha (2005, 2007) argues that the Sandinista structure within the police persisted despite the transformation efforts. In this changing electoral landscape, Cruz (2014: 2) contends that "Law enforcement leaders understood that in order to survive, they had to work with the community and be efficient." Police training and orientation tended to stress the non-repressive nature of the police and emphasized the police's role as one who responds to the needs of the community.[6] Still, overall investment in police personnel has been comparatively low. The number of police personnel per 100,000 inhabitants ranks among the lowest in the region, tied with rates in Honduras and Guatemala.

Nicaragua also pioneered several innovations in its policing strategies. For example, it has recruited a far greater percentage of women into its police ranks, and by 2009, approximately one third of the force was female (Drysdale-Walsh 2019; Beltran 2009). It was one of the first countries in the region to open specialized women's police stations in 1993, which were staffed exclusively by women to provide comprehensive support for victims of violence. There are some indicators that these specialized police stations and recruitment of women into police forces have generated more public trust in the police. For example, in a comparative analysis of violence against women in Nicaragua and Guatemala, Drysdale-Walsh (2019) found that as of 2011, reported cases of intra-familiar or domestic violence were three times higher in Nicaragua than Guatemala, despite the fact that actual rates of violence against women in these two countries were comparable. This indicates that women were more willing to come forward to police in Nicaragua. However, recent analyses of women's police stations have identified problems of sustainability, as resources have been siphoned off for other purposes, leadership has weakened, and conflicts between the broader women's movement and the government have eroded the political will to address violence against women (Drysdale-Walsh 2019: 186-187). Indeed, in 2019 *La Prensa* reported that the government had falsified data concerning women's police stations, and steadily closed several stations and reduced women's access to support and justice (Silva 2019).

Additional specialized policing units have addressed the security of families and the needs of youth (Cruz 2014). These initiatives are often credited with reducing the numbers of disaffected youth who join gangs in Nicaragua (Rocha 2006: 114; Espinoza & Herrera 2009). Nicaragua's emphasis on crime prevention makes it harder for gangs to recruit disaffected youth and use prisons as training grounds for new members. Nicaragua has focused "most of its efforts on prevention and intervention, which have had important results in reducing criminality and youth violence" (Sibaja et al. 2006: 8). Even incarcerated populations have access to some rehabilitative measures, such as activities and job training. Some youth join smaller-scale neighborhood gangs (*pandillas*), but

large, sophisticated gangs (*maras*) have not established a stronghold in the country. Policing strategies are not the only reason why gangs and organized crime have not fully penetrated Nicaraguan society, but they are an important part of the story (Sibaja et al. 2006). While violent crime poses problems for governance, organized crime is an even more formidable opponent, as it tends to be a well-financed, well-organized counterpart with ready access to weapons and ammunition. In many cases, organized crime is able to systematically challenge the state's monopolization of force and legitimacy. This has certainly been the case in many Central American countries, particularly the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, however, such groups have not been powerful enough to challenge the state's monopoly of force, leading to rates of homicide that are often among the lowest in the region.

These initiatives highlight the importance of a different perspective for police work, still critics have argued that repressive control measures were not completely abandoned and "violent incursions were routine" (Rodgers 2006). To be sure, the emphasis on prevention and community orientation does not mean that harsher, more punitive measures have been completely absent. For example, in 1999, the police did launch a crackdown on small, neighborhood gangs, but changed course the following year to bring policing practices into conformity with the police's constitutional mandate. In 2005, a punitive anti-gang law was debated in the National Assembly; but was ultimately defeated after legal experts argued it would violate the constitution (Sibaja et al. 2006). Still, some argue that community policing in Nicaragua included policies aimed at helping young people at risk, but often stigmatized them and kept them in the system (Weegels 2017). These examples illustrate that repressive measures were not completely absent from public security discourse and practice, but they tended to be more sporadic prior to 2018.

Ortega's 2006 presidential victory ushered in a new era of policing. While some of Ortega's early efforts to coopt the police were thwarted by opposition in the legislature, Ortega's 2007 inauguration ultimately created an opening for police reforms that would have long term disastrous consequences, particularly by undermining the police's institutional structure and rendering the police more squarely under the control of the executive. Orozco (2015) argues that the National Police began to take on two roles after Ortega's election. On one hand, the police continued to uphold their standard public security responsibilities (e.g., investigating crime, ordering traffic, apprehending and detaining suspected criminals). On the other hand, the police became more vested in guaranteeing the security of Ortega's regime, and began to define security threats as not just those that jeopardized public safety, but also those that challenged the regime. Protests against canal expansion and electoral reform were reframed as security threats, and the police began to crack down on protesters and potential regime opponents, especially in the countryside.

Even as these developments were taking place, empirical indicators on the ground, particularly in urban areas, continued to paint a very different picture of public security policy in Nicaragua compared to its counterparts in the Northern Triangle. For many sectors of the Nicaraguan population, the police with whom they had quotidian contact performed much as they had in the past. Nicaragua continued to invest in a more holistic and preventive approach to fighting crime and maintaining public security. As we noted earlier, a holistic approach combining justice reforms with social protections creates a matrix of cross-cutting reforms that can buttress one another. This different policing style is credited, at least partially, with containing rates of violent crime. In the aftermath of the Cold War, rates of violent crime in Nicaragua were starkly different from the Northern Triangle countries. Post-conflict countries are particularly vulnerable to infiltration by organized crime, as political and economic transitions take place against a backdrop of demobilized soldiers and incomplete disarmament.[7] Figure 1 illustrates that in two post-conflict countries where organized crime has been prevalent, El Salvador and Guatemala, homicide rates have been very high.[8]

Nicaragua follows a different trajectory, however. Despite plenty of demobilized combatants and a disarmament process that generated criticism, Nicaraguan rates of violent crime have risen only modestly. According to World Bank estimates, following the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, homicide rates decreased substantially, declining from a high of 15.2 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1995 to 11.2 in 1999. This is not the typical scenario of post-conflict countries, as the case of El Salvador illustrates most tragically. While homicide rates in Nicaragua rose from 2000-2006, they then declined and in 2013 registered below those of Costa Rica, the country widely regarded as the most peaceful of the region.[9] Even as the police became more politicized under Ortega, violent crime in Nicaragua remained comparatively low.

Figure 1. Homicide rates per 100,000 in Central America (2000-2017)[10]
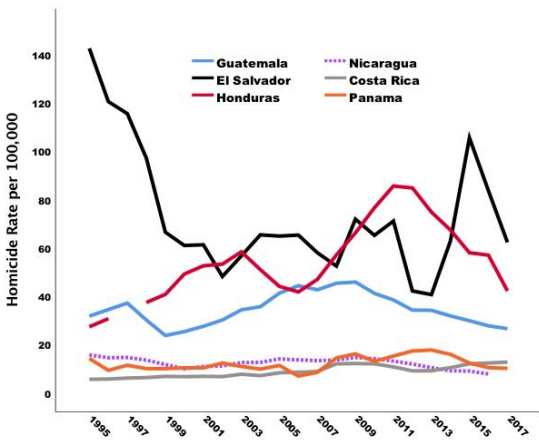

Source: World Bank World Development Indicators 1995-2017

These promising trends were interrupted in 2018, when police themselves became responsible for an increase in the homicide rate, and an era of overt political policing began. While statistics on the killings of protestors are incomplete, civil society and non-governmental organizations (such as the CIDH and the ANPDH) approximate that 300 people were killed between April and August 2018, and 595 disappeared as of July 2018. This breaks down to 3 or 4 murders per day, a situation that marks an important departure from 2017, when Nicaragua recorded a total of 347 murders. Due to government threats, the major civil society groups have not made additional data available (to our knowledge). According to the National Police of Nicaragua, the rate of homicide in Nicaragua in 2018 was 11 per 100,000 – a clear reversal of earlier promising trends.[11]

Despite this sharp reversal in 2018, it is remarkable that Nicaragua was able to contain increases in violent crime for such an extended period of time prior, given broader trends in the region. Still, while homicide rates are a valuable and widely used indicator, they do not capture the prevalence of other types of crime. Official statistics on other types of crime (e.g., burglary, assault, theft) are notoriously unreliable, particularly as they tend to gauge citizen trust and willingness to turn to the police rather than the actual occurrence of crime.[12] For that reason, scholars and practitioners typically turn to self-reported victimization in national surveys to gauge trends in other types of crime. We rely upon the Latin American Public Opinion Project's (LAPOP's) national surveys to measure rates of self-reported victimization in Nicaragua, and compare these rates to broader trends in Latin America.

Figure 2. Self-reported victimization rates 1999-2019 (LAPOP)[13]
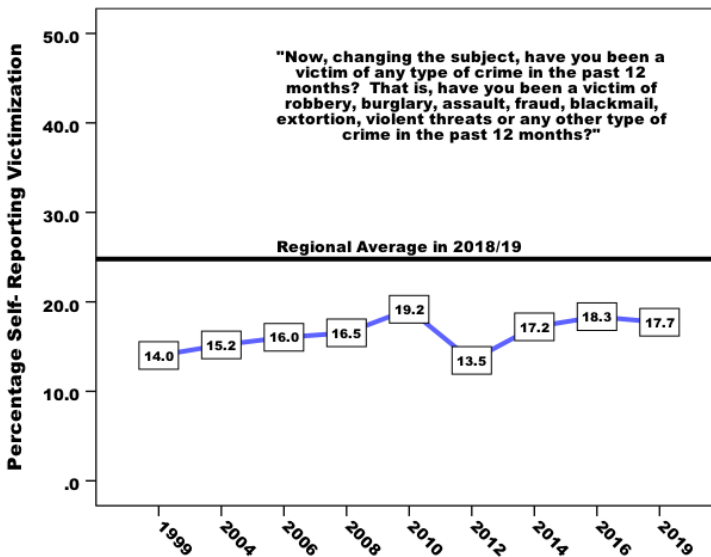
Source: 1999-2019 National Surveys of Nicaragua (LAPOP)

Figure 2 reports the percentage of Nicaraguan respondents in each survey wave who indicated they had been victimized by a crime in the past year. Overall, self-reported victimization rates rose slightly from 14.0 per cent in 1999 to 17.7 per cent in 2019 (despite a drop in 2012). While this increase was not large, independent sample t tests confirm that it was statistically significant. Still, with the exception of 2014, self-reported victimization rates in Nicaragua were on par or lower than those of Costa Rica, and lower than the regional average. Particularly when compared to other post-conflict countries, Nicaragua has managed to contain victimization rates of these other types of crime.

This overview of policing practices in Nicaragua illustrates two things. First, despite some well-warranted criticism, as well as politicization under Ortega, prior to 2018 Nicaraguan police did emphasize community-oriented approaches and refrained from the wide scale adoption of militarized policing tactics that were common in other parts of Central America. Second, this community-oriented strategy has contributed, at least partially, to very different trends in violent and non-violent crime. While the countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and to a lesser extent Guatemala report some of the highest homicide rates in the world, Nicaragua has contained criminality and registers homicide rates on par with (and sometimes lower than) Costa Rica.

Still, as we noted earlier, critics have argued that the community-based approach was more rhetoric than reality, and that the police had repeatedly employed repressive tactics on a smaller scale. Furthermore, such critics argue that the very structures that contained crime and impeded the growth of large transnational gangs also lent themselves to later politicization. Sibaja et al. (2006) note that "lingering socialist structures such as the neighborhood watch" as well as the Committees for the Defense of the Sandinista Revolution helped civil society to self-police their neighborhoods and keep more dangerous foreign gangs out (Sibaja et al. 2006: 5-6). Yet, recent analyses have highlighted that this community-oriented approach was also politically oriented, as it increased police linkages with the community, but also allowed the police to gather political information on specific individuals and organizations (McNeish et al. 2019: 16; Orozco 2015). Such civil society groups run the obvious risk of politicization, and vigilance of organized crime can swiftly be converted into vigilance of political opponents. Indeed, Ortega moved quickly to create the Consejos del Poder Ciudadano (CPC) by presidential decree in 2007, ostensibly to strengthen community level organization and promote the participation of citizens in government. Among other functions, the CPC organizations included positions to liaison with the National Police to engage local communities in issues pertaining to public safety.[14] In 2014, the Gabinetes de Familia, Comunidad y Vida replaced the CPC, and these organizations were widely criticized as increasing government control over civil society.

We now turn to examine how citizens have viewed the police during these processes of reform and retrenchment. The perspective of citizens is valuable, as it can illuminate whether citizens themselves considered the police to be

trustworthy, to respect their rights, treat them fairly, and work efficiently. We turn now to examine LAPOP's public opinion data.

Public views of the police

LAPOP first included surveys questions on the police in its 1996 national survey, asking respondents: "To what extent do you trust the National Police? (1) not at all – (7) very much." This item was part of a battery of questions measuring trust in a wide range of institutions.[15] Figure 3 charts the average levels of trust Nicaraguans registered in the police from 1996 to the present. As a point of comparison, we also include average levels of trust in other political institutions over the same time period.[16] Survey data indicate that in terms of cultivating public trust, the Nicaraguan approach to policing appears to have yielded some dividends. As Figure 3 illustrates, average levels of trust in police fluctuated from 1996 through 1998, but from 1999 through 2016, Nicaraguans trusted their police forces more than other government institutions (although this gap narrowed in 2016). Trust in police declined precipitously in 2019 (along with trust in other government institutions), however, implying that the public reacted to the police crackdowns of 2018 with significantly lower levels of trust.

Figure 3. Trust in police in Nicaragua 1996-2019 (LAPOP)

Source: 1996-2019 National Surveys of Nicaragua (LAPOP)
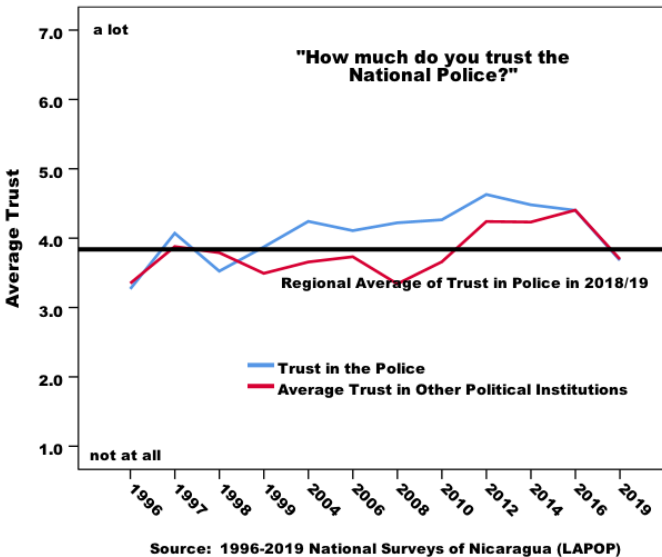
While public trust in police is high vis-à-vis other political institutions, the police have consistently earned a reputation for corruption. Starting in 2004, LAPOP included a question to measure citizens' experiences with police bribery: "Has a police officer asked you for a bribe in the last twelve months"? Respondents were coded (1) yes and (0) no. This question measures the preva-

lence of police misconduct in the form of bribe solicitation, as self-reported by respondents, and analyses of survey responses indicate that petty corruption has persisted as a serious problem. The prevalence of bribery rose steadily from 2004 through 2008, and even though it declined slightly in 2010 and 2012, by 2014 it had rebounded again and continued to increase through 2016. According to bivariate analyses, police bribe solicitation has a significant and negative impact on trust in police (r = -.146**); however, the magnitude of this relationship is not overly strong. One could infer that while people clearly do not like police bribery, they do not penalize the police too harshly for it. One explanation for this might be that many respondents indicate that corruption is pervasive throughout Nicaragua. In such a context, people might be resigned to police bribery as the price of doing business in the country.

Figure 4. Police bribe solicitation in Nicaragua (LAPOP 2004-2019)
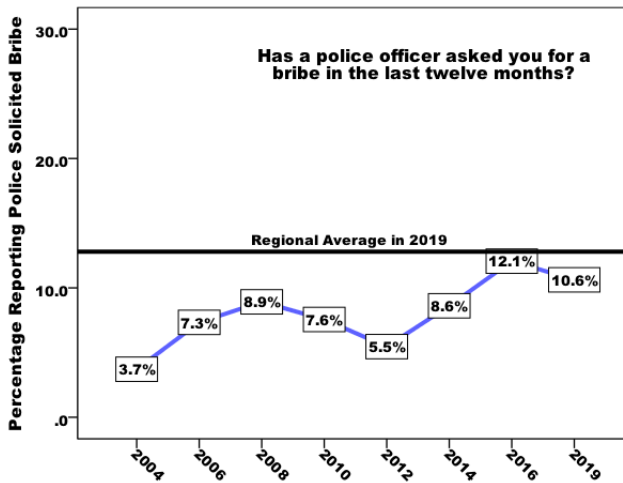
Source: 2004-2019 AmericasBarometer (LAPOP)

In more recent survey waves, LAPOP included questions to gauge additional public perceptions of police performance. In 2014 and 2016, LAPOP asked respondents, "Suppose someone enters your home to burglarize it and you call the police. How long do you think it would take the police to arrive at your house on a typical day around noon? (1) Less than 10 minutes, (2) Between 10 and 30 minutes, (3) More than 30 minutes and up to an hour, (4) More than an hour and up to three hours, (5) More than three hours, (6) [Don't read] There are no police/they would never arrive." While this is not a direct measure of police response time, it does gauge citizens' anticipation of police responsiveness to their calls. As Figure 5 reveals, on average Nicaraguans did not have high hopes that the police would respond efficiently if they called them for help, estimating average police response time to fall between one and three hours. In a regional context, Nicaraguan evaluations of police time were pessimistic, with some of the longest estimated response times in Latin America.

Figure 5. Estimated police response time in Nicaragua (LAPOP 2014-2016)
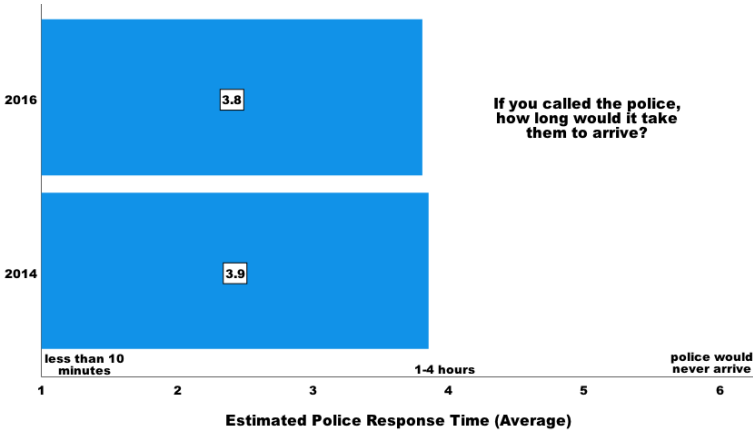
In addition to charting these longitudinal trends in public trust in police, we also aimed to determine whether attitudes towards the police were polarized alongside partisan lines. We conducted a series of regressions to examine the relationship between trust in police and political affiliation (alongside traditional socioeconomic and demographic controls typical in survey research). Here, we rely upon the LAPOP national survey data from 2008-2019, which contained identical survey questions that allow us to gauge the relationship between political affiliation and trust in police in each survey wave.

Table 1 highlights the results for our coefficient of interest–intention to vote for the incumbent (President Ortega) in the next presidential election. While this coefficient is statistically significant in every year, over time it increased steadily.

Table 1. Willingness to vote for governing party and trust in police by year. Coefficients are unstandardized, with standard errors in parentheses. *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2019
Constant	3.911***	4.684***	4.347***	4.712***	4.784***	4.292***
	(.177)	(.160)	(.163)	(.173)	(.165)	(.178)
Vote for Incumbent	.588***	.746***	.865***	.888***	1.083***	2.346***
	(.128)	(.105)	(.096)	(.099)	(.101)	(.120)
Gender	.180	-.005	.000	-.069	-.043	-.516***
	(.105)	(.096)	(.096)	(.099)	(.099)	(.104)
Income	-.172	.059	-.164	-.119	-.929**	-.580*
	(.292)	(.297)	(.297)	(.289)	(.280)	(.278)
Education	.011	-.021	-.022	-.043**	-.028*	-.034*
	(.015)	(.014)	(.014)	(.014)	(.013)	(.014)
Municipality	-.036	-.136***	-.011	-.035	-.058	-.135***
	(.037)	(.034)	(.038)	(.037)	(.036)	(.037)
Age	.041*	-.028	.018	-.029	-.005	-.008
	(.020)	(.018)	(.017)	(.018)	(.017)	(.019)
Adjusted R Squared	.017	.046	.049	.060	.090	.238
N	1469	1519	1683	1539	1516	1513

In 2008, willingness to vote for Ortega was significant but had a negligible impact on trust in police; those who supported Ortega were .588 more trusting in police than those who did not (on a 7-point scale). The overall model including socioeconomic and demographic variables and vote for the governing party predicted only 1.7 per cent of the variance in trust in police. By 2016, the magnitude of the support for Ortega variable had almost doubled, and the amount of variance the model predicted in the dependent variable trust in police was 9 per cent. In 2019, we see an even sharper contrast. The size of the coefficient for the support for Ortega variable is almost four times larger than it was in 2008, indicating that respondents who intended to vote for Ortega in the next election had 2.35 higher levels of trust in police than those who did not. On a seven-point scale, the impact of this variable on trust in police is quite large. The overall model including support for Ortega and the socioeconomic and demographic variables predicted 23.8 per cent of the variance in trust in police.Taken together, these results indicate that partisanship did play a small role in predicting trust in police in 2008, but in 2019 public trust in police was heavily contingent on people's views of the incumbent government. Trust in police became heavily politicized among the mass public following the police crackdown on protestors in 2018.

Discussion

Taken together, our analyses of survey data indicate that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, public trust in police was higher in Nicaragua than in other political institutions, and higher than average in the Latin American region as a whole. While there were problems with police corruption and police response time, overall the public did tend to register support for police. This changed in 2019, as average levels of trust in police dipped nationally, and trust in police became more contingent on partisanship. These patterns of public trust in police follow similar trajectories to the ways in which policing began to change under Ortega. Cuadra (2018) contends that the 2018 repression is rooted in changes to the police that began when President Ortega was first elected to his current term in 2007. She argues that when President Ortega assumed office, he began to coopt the police, allowing *grupos de choque* to form inside the institution that could be used for political purposes. In 2007, these groups originally formed ostensibly to provide protection to President Ortega, and donned blue shirts to distinguish themselves (Cuadra 2018). Some journalist accounts noted that this group consisted of approximately 150 men who were former members of the military, security personnel, or other Ortega sympathizers (Salinas & Solano 2009).

Rocha (2008) argues that the government also recruited youth from former *pandillas* to join these *grupos de choque* (often from the youth programs run by the National Police), and that they operated with the tacit approval of police. Over the course of ten years, Cuadra (2018) argues that these groups evolved

into full-fledged para-police, which were unleashed with violent consequences in April 2018, and that the National Police coordinated and directed the activities of these groups. Over time, these groups expanded to cover larger territories, with the complicity of the mayors' offices in several major cities, such as Managua, Matagalpa, Leon, and Jinotega. Additional changes to the police were codified by law. After a series of thwarted attempts, Ortega succeeded in passing a major change to police practices in 2014 (Law 872), and was able to eliminate the Ministry of Governance, which had supervised police and served as an intermediary between the president and chief of police. Ortega ensured that the chief of police would now serve more clearly at the behest of the president, leading several observers to caution that these new laws ran the risk of politicizing policing (Mejia Giraldo, 2014). At the local level, committees that had ostensibly existed to promote citizen participation and public security began to serve the regime more overtly. As Orozco (2015: 22) argues, these *gabinetes de familia* (Family Cabinets):

> …know who's in the opposition in each block on each street; they know who everyone's going to vote for, who supports the government… They've got it all mapped out at the base, performing functions similar to those of the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) in the eighties, exercising social control at the neighborhood level, gathering information, identifying threats and informing.

When the size and momentum of the protests in April 2018 superseded the ability of *grupos de choque* to control them, it appears the government decided to change course and send greater numbers of ex-military members and former combatants to confront them, and eventually uniformed police as well (Cuadra 2018). Para-police groups acted on the street with full knowledge of police personnel (CIDH 2018: 22). As Baldizon (2018: 155) notes, this type of exercise of political power discards legitimacy and relies upon repression to achieve obedience. Police repression against political opponents quickly became the norm in 2018, raising many questions about the sustainability of the best practices implemented and sustained throughout the 1990s and until 2018. Indeed, the Nicaraguan case raises critical questions – even when countries do succeed in reforming their police forces, how can they insulate their initial successes from setbacks? How can reformers keep authoritarian impulses from reemerging in the form of repressive police practices?

The political nature of these community-oriented reforms is essential for understanding the ways in which Nicaraguan policing changed as President Ortega consolidated political power (Romero et al. 2015). In recent years, Nicaraguan policing changed to respond to political developments in Nicaragua, rather than adhering to the larger trajectory of institutional police reform that began following the collapse of the Somoza dynasty in 1979, and the police reforms that occurred throughout the 1990s era of democratization (Cuadra 2018: 245). Furthermore, the citizen power committees created in 2007 sup-

planted earlier crime prevention committees, and later were merged into the *gabinetes de familia*, which in the name of crime prevention, engaged in direct and constant community surveillance. This context allows us to understand how community-oriented reforms were undermined, setting the stage for the 2018 crackdowns.

This tragic shift in policing practices in Nicaragua underscores the political nature of reform. Police reforms that emphasize a non-repressive role for police have no real place in an authoritarian regime. When the community challenged the leadership of President Ortega, the National Police chose sides, and now upholds the defense of the regime through repression. In this sense, the revolution has tragically come full circle, with the police fulfilling a similar role as they did under the Somoza dictatorship. What was once a promising case of police reform is now a warning sign. When the regime itself reverts back to authoritarian rule, it is highly unlikely that police will stay above the fray. This is particularly troublesome given the global retreat of democracy, and the rise of authoritarian leaders like President Ortega on a global scale.

<div align="center">***</div>

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Notes

1   To be sure, policing practices alone cannot receive all the credit for low rates of violent crime. Orozco (2015) for example notes that emigration and remittances reduce social tensions and economic deprivation in Nicaragua, which in turn lead to lower levels of violence in the country. For an interesting in-depth discussion of the dynamics of violence in urban Nicaragua, see Rodgers (2016).

2   For a broader overview of the political, economic, and social ramifications of this repression, see Aguilar Antunes, De Gori, and Villacorta (2018).

3   We thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (United States Agency for International Development, Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for the data. https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/

4   We use the term *political policing* to refer to the practice of using the police to bolster the power of the incumbent government through the repression of political opponents.

5   Author interview, Managua, Nicaragua, July 2011.

6   Participant observation of police orientation sessions in Managua, July 2013.

7   Extraordinarily high rates of violent crime in El Salvador and Honduras, and to a lesser extent Guatemala, have been widely attributed to the presence of organized criminal groups. Still, the link between high levels of violent crime and the presence of organized criminal groups is complex. Several studies highlight that it may not be merely the presence of criminal groups per se that drives violence, but whether criminal groups contest resources amongst themselves, or face reprisals from the state. For example, Bailey and Taylor (2009) point to several scenarios in which organized criminal groups are present, but do not resort to violence. The absence of violent crime in Nicaragua does not necessarily mean that organized criminal groups are completely absent, it could also indicate that organized criminal groups have hegemonic control over resources and/or territory, and find it in their best interests to avoid extensive violence. Indeed, some reports indicate that Nicaragua has become more vulnerable over time to the influence of organized crime and its accompanying corruption. For example, in 2010 Minister Ana Isabel Morales sharply rebuked judges and magistrates who consistently reduced prison sentences (or simply released) drug traffickers, which she cited as evidence of organized crime's influence over the Nicaraguan justice system. In a high-profile trial, officials from the Nicaraguan National Police and Supreme Electoral Council were charged with complicity in money laundering and drug trafficking operations (Meléndez & Orozco 2013).

8   While Honduras did not experience civil war itself, its geographical location led it to inherit many of the problems of its post-conflict neighbors (Malone 2012).

9   Studies of policing and crime widely rely upon homicide rates as a measure of overall crime in a country. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) explains, "intentional homicide is one of the most measurable and comparable indicators for monitoring violent deaths. Because of its lethal outcome, homicide is particularly amenable to temporal (longitudinal) and cross-national (geographic) comparisons: it tends to have greater definitional specificity than other crimes in different historical and national contexts… homicide statistics are accordingly considered to be relatively reliable and valid – both at the national level and for longitudinal and cross-national compar-

isons. As a readily measurable indicator, homicide is both a reasonable proxy for violent crime and a robust indicator of levels of violence within States" (UNODC 2019: 7).

10 Data are from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.

11 Policía Nacional de Nicaragua. 2018. Anuario Estadístico. https://www.policia.gob.ni/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Anuario-2018-Policia-Nacional.pdf

12 Reese (2009) notes that many factors can lead crimes to be under-reported, including: social disorganization, embarrassment of victimization, and lack of trust in judicial/policing institutions. Thus, countries with under-performing police and justice institutions often do not collect and report reliable data. Oftentimes crime rates do not necessarily reflect the actual occurrence of crime, but rather the efficacy of police and justice institutions and their legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

13 The line denoting the regional average refers to the average of the seventeen mainland Latin American countries.

14 The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board provided an overview and assessment of the CPC in English, available at https://www.refworld.org/docid/534ce41a4.html

15 LAPOP questionnaires: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2016/AB2017-v18.0-Eng-170523_W.pdf

16 We computed an index of average trust in other political institutions, which included: courts, congress, local government, and the president.

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