

## State Absenteeism: Vigilantism and Security Provision in Latin America

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the underlying causes of vigilantism, moving beyond existing explanations to propose a novel perspective: state absenteeism. Drawing upon an original dataset collected at the subnational level in Guatemala, the study utilizes police station data as a proxy measure of state presence. This research paper sheds light on the intricate dynamics driving vigilantism by analyzing the interplay between state actions, security provision, and the emergence of extralegal justice mechanisms. Empirical findings suggest that existing theories do not fully explain the surge in vigilantism, underscoring the importance of considering state provision of security at the subnational level. This theoretical and empirical contribution highlights the role of the state in shaping responses to insecurity and calls for policy interventions to address the under-provision of public goods, particularly security, to strengthen the rule of law.

**Keywords:** Vigilantism, State Absenteeism, Police, Security Provision, Public Goods Provision

## INTRODUCTION

Recent studies highlight a troubling increase in vigilante justice across Latin American countries (Nussio and Clayton 2024; Bergman and Whitehead 2009; Cruz and Santamaría 2019; Nivette 2016). Self-styled citizen defense groups have sprung up throughout the region, taking up arms to fight crime in part because citizens feel that governments and institutions have failed to protect them. In Mexico alone, a staggering number of 199 citizen defense groups, known as “autodefensas,” were operating in different localities between 2013 and 2015 (El Universal, July 28th 2017). As the Latin American and Caribbean region (LAC) remains one of the most violent regions in the globe, citizens in these countries have started to make difficult choices on how to approach pressuring their governments to address the surge in organized crime and violence (Moncada 2021). Across Latin America, about one-third of individuals consider insecurity to be one of the most important problems that their countries are facing (Hinton et al. 2014). Moreover, a 2021 report from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) revealed that approximately one in five survey respondents in the LAC region had experienced a crime within the past twelve months. In response to these challenges, citizens in the region are adopting various approaches to exert pressure on their governments to take decisive action against crime and violence. These frustrations often lead communities to take security into their own hands, prompting this paper's central question: How does state absence impact the occurrence of vigilantism?

Vigilantism is defined as the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses (Bateson 2021). It is often rationalized by the notion that suitable legal forms of criminal punishment are inefficient or absent, and vigilantes typically see the

government as ineffective in enforcing laws (Migdal 1988; O'Donnell 1993; Avritzer 2002; Wood 2003; Mendoza 2007). Research indicates that individuals residing in areas characterized by high levels of crime, especially those facing socioeconomic disadvantages, frequently express dissatisfaction with the police's ability to ensure their safety and security (Goldstein 2003; 2012; Pratten and Sen 2008; Yonucu 2018). In such circumstances, where the official law enforcement apparatus is perceived as inadequate or unresponsive, alternative approaches to seeking justice and maintaining security can arise, including vigilantism (Zizumbo-Colunga 2017; Martin 2012).

This paper argues that police stations are crucial for immediate law enforcement and community safety. Their presence can deter crime, provide rapid incident responses, and build trust in the state's ability to maintain order. Conversely, a lack of policing can result in unchecked criminal activities, escalating violence, and a pervasive sense of lawlessness. This often leads to communities resorting to vigilantism to fill the enforcement gap. State absenteeism in policing has immediate and visible consequences, as unprotected communities may feel compelled to take the law into their own hands. The absence of police stations exacerbates insecurity and mistrust in the state's ability to enforce laws, leading to increased vigilante actions in response to rising crime.

Building on this understanding, this paper presents a novel perspective centered around the theory of state absenteeism. State absenteeism refers to the state's deliberate withholding of public goods and essential services, including security institutions such as police stations, from specific areas or population segments. This theory expands on prior research, particularly Mendoza's (2007) work, which argues that weak state capacity, particularly in the judicial system, creates a vacuum in legal adjudication, prompting

extralegal measures. While Mendoza focuses on the weakness of state institutions such as the courts, this paper shifts to police presence. The absence of courts leads to a backlog of unresolved cases and a lack of formal legal recourse, but the absence of police creates an immediate security vacuum warranting additional study.

Moreover, the theory of state absenteeism differs from Mendoza's argument concerning state capacity. State absenteeism involves deliberate resource allocation choices, rather than an inherent inability to extend services. State capacity refers to the overall effectiveness and reach of state institutions, often hampered by resource constraints. In contrast, state absenteeism highlights the state's choice to neglect certain areas. For example, there are currently 42 municipalities in Guatemala without a single police station, despite the Guatemalan government establishing 120 new police stations between 2004 and 2017. This selective allocation of resources demonstrates that particular communities are frequently overlooked, leading to significant security gaps. Understanding these patterns is crucial for addressing community security dynamics and developing targeted interventions.

Several additional theories seek to explain vigilantism, each offering unique perspectives. One such theory suggests cultural norms or customary law influence vigilantism, often linked to indigenous communities (Sieder 2011; Garcia and Cristina 2004; Acuna 2009). Another prominent theory ties vigilantism to path dependency, arguing that historical violence leads to community-level enforcement acceptance (Esparza 2005). Scholars have also explored how grievances from inequality and marginalization trigger collective action (Gurr 1993). Here, local-level security inequality can create a demand for vigilantism as poorer citizens feel deprived of security compared

to wealthier neighbors (Phillips 2017). Recent research focuses on understanding citizen preferences for vigilantism using innovative methods such as experiments to identify causal factors (Dow et al. 2024). These studies examine influences from perceived legitimacy of vigilante actions to trust in law enforcement (Zizumbo-Colunga 2017).

Despite existing theories, a critical gap remains in understanding *the state's role* in fostering or mitigating vigilantism. This gap is particularly pronounced in racially or ethnically diverse countries with histories of civil war or violence, where security provision is often inconsistent. This study leverages an original dataset collected at the subnational level in Guatemala, examining areas where vigilantism has occurred over time and analyzing municipal-level factors influencing vigilantism. The dataset includes comprehensive information on the location and establishment dates of every police station in Guatemala from the National Civil Police (PNC). This study uses police stations per capita as a proxy for state presence, reflecting the state's commitment to law enforcement, crime deterrence, and public safety within specific geographic areas. This approach underscores the significance of state absenteeism in shaping security outcomes and community responses.

## **PRIOR THEORIES OF THE CAUSES OF VIGILANTISM**

To investigate the potential impact of the state's inadequate provision of security on community engagement in acts of vigilantism, it is essential to begin by examining the current literature that studies the underlying causes of vigilantism. The first theory of interest centers around a path-dependency approach, which suggests that the occurrence and persistence of vigilantism in a society can be traced back to historical events and conditions that have shaped the socio-political landscape (Godoy 2002). According to

this argument, certain historical factors, such as a civil war or violent conflicts, create a path or trajectory that influences the emergence and perpetuation of vigilantism (Esparza 2017). This paper will focus on the case of Guatemala to illustrate and test this argument. In this context, the path-dependency argument asserts that the enduring legacy of the Guatemalan Civil War, marked by pervasive violence, state repression, and the erosion of law and order, has played a significant role in normalizing vigilantism as a response to persistent security challenges (Bateson 2013). Scholarship centered on this approach argues that massive violence causes social trauma to individuals and communities, and the residue of state terror may outlive its perpetrators (Godoy 2002). Moreover, this theory asserts that historical experiences of violence lead communities to resort to self-help measures and take the law into their own hands, perpetuating a cycle of vigilantism. These arguments highlight the influence of past events and conditions on the present-day prevalence and acceptance of vigilantism within a society.

While it is crucial to acknowledge these path-dependency arguments, they predominantly rely on an assumed historical trajectory in which there is an institutional "lock-in" that makes change unlikely (Beyer 2010; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). The recognition that "history matters" and that historical processes bear enduring implications for the future is a widely accepted tenet in scholarship (Greener 2005). And while this acknowledgment is valid and pivotal for understanding the roots of societal phenomena, it is equally imperative to extend our lens to contemporary state-making. In doing so, scholarship can better understand how historical legacies intersect with and shape the present-day landscape of governance and state-building. Moreover, the central claim of historical institutionalism or path dependency has a constraining effect on subsequent

trajectories and, therefore, also the theories that seek to explain modern-day phenomena (Hall and Taylor 1996; Koelble 1995; Peters and King 2005). Scholarly discourse has increasingly questioned how a society can break free from these path-dependent political processes. If institutions and policies tend to preserve the past in their structure, how can transformative change be achieved?

An additional theory that has sought to understand vigilantism revolves around cultural norms or customary law, suggesting that vigilantism is deeply rooted in societal customs. Scholars such as Sieder (2011), Garcia and Cristina (2004), and Acuna (2009) have explored this perspective. In the context of Guatemala, cultural arguments are often associated with indigenous communities, positing that their unique cultural or political identities may act as drivers for vigilantism (Morales 2015; Handy 2004; Afrin-Cabo 2011; McConkie 2023). For example, Handy (2004) argues that in rural areas of Guatemala, predominantly inhabited by indigenous communities, there is a demand for a revitalized system of community-controlled justice. This area of scholarship often self-selects and focuses on cases in highly indigenous provinces such as Alta Verapaz, Quiché, Huehuetenango, Sololá, and other regions of Guatemala where there are high levels of vigilantism (McConkie 2023). According to these cultural arguments, some scholars argue that Guatemalan indigenous communities' cultural norms and customary governance structures facilitate and embrace vigilantism as an alternative method for resolving grievances outside the formal judicial system. They often highlight the conflict between indigenous customary law and a dysfunctional legal system, suggesting that indigenous communities seek a revitalized system of community-controlled justice (Handy 2004).

Furthermore, this body of scholarship occasionally intersects with historical arguments, asserting that in indigenous communities, there are distinct sociological effects of civil war. State terror is posited to not only impact individuals' behavior but also alter preexisting institutions that were uniquely indigenous (Godoy 2002). Within this scholarly discourse, it is argued that vigilantism enables indigenous communities to establish their own sense of normalcy in their lives when the government-led justice system has failed them (Girón 2007). The concept of vigilante justice, often attributed as an intrinsic cultural aspect of indigenous communities, has encountered scrutiny and resistance from more recent academic scholars and indigenous leaders and communities. For instance, in Guatemala, many argue that this perception is a misinterpretation of the ancient Mayan governance system, predating the emergence of vigilantism. Scholars and indigenous leaders are increasingly vocal, emphasizing that indigenous customs and traditions fundamentally reject the recourse to violence for conflict resolution. For instance, Arifín-Cabo (2011,3) states:

"... Contrary to popular perception, lynchings (or acts of vigilantism) are not part of the Mayan tradition of conflict resolutions, nor what is called 'the system of Mayan justice.' Mayan customs and traditions oppose the use of violence to resolve a conflict or a problem since they pursue a type of restoring justice."

This perspective from Arifín-Cabo highlights the peaceful and non-violent nature of Mayan governance, directly contradicting the misconception that indigenous culture inherently supports vigilantism in Guatemala. Additionally, it is crucial to note that vigilantism is not exclusive to indigenous communities in Guatemala. As this paper will demonstrate, acts of vigilantism have been reported in various other contexts where the population is not primarily indigenous, including in the national capital, Guatemala City. More specifically in my data I find that roughly 40% of acts of vigilantism occur in non-



indigenous municipalities. This underscores the complexity of vigilantism as a social phenomenon influenced by various factors, transcending cultural boundaries and highlighting the need for a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis to understand its root causes and implications in different types of communities.

While cultural and path dependency theories provide extensive explanations for vigilantism, particularly in the Latin American context, other frameworks also merit consideration. Scholars have also analyzed factors such as state capacity, high crime rates, and economic inequality. For instance, Baker (2004) argues that in Africa, failing state capacity and rising crime foster vigilantism. However, findings on crime rates and state capacity vary. For example, Phillips (2017) finds that vigilantism doesn't necessarily exist in municipalities with the weakest governments or the highest crime rates in Mexico. Similarly, in countries with weak state capacity, vigilantism may not emerge at all, even in high-crime areas (Ungar 2007; Godoy 2006). An alternative explanation for vigilantism involves economic inequality, where scholars suggest that in economically unequal communities, relative deprivation leads to vigilantism (Gurr 1970). For example, in urban neighborhoods with stark income disparities, feelings of insecurity or deprivation can motivate marginalized residents to organize vigilante groups (Phillips 2017). While economic inequality theories offer insights into vigilantism's drivers, they may oversimplify the complex factors shaping community responses to insecurity.

## **THEORY OF STATE ABSENTEEISM**

In contrast to existing theories of vigilantism, this paper introduces the theory of "state absenteeism" as a compelling and comprehensive framework for understanding the phenomenon. The theory of state absenteeism posits that when the state distributes public

goods and essential services, such as security institutions and police stations, it can deliberately withhold or under provide goods to specific areas or population segments. This lack of adequate state presence in certain regions or communities can create a vacuum in security provision, leading to an environment ripe for vigilantism to emerge. When the state is absent and fails to effectively address citizens' security needs, individuals or groups may resort to extrajudicial measures to protect themselves and their communities. In the absence of reliable law enforcement, vigilantism can be perceived as a practical response to the prevailing insecurity and a way to restore a sense of order and justice within a community.

To study the theory of state absenteeism, I will examine the level of state presence at the subnational level by analyzing the establishment of police stations across Guatemala. Since police presence should promote the rule of law and project state power, citizens are expected to feel more secure. However, if the government neglects certain areas, engaging in state absenteeism, acts of vigilantism may occur due to the lack of security institutions. Notably, although the Guatemalan government has established 499 police stations since 1997, 42 out of 340 municipalities still lack a police station. This observation suggests that the government has the resources and capacity to create new police stations, but it is choosing not to provide security to various areas. If the state creates both hot and cold spots of security through the varying placement of security institutions, this deliberate state absenteeism could lead neglected communities to take the law into their own hands.

The theory of state absenteeism is particularly relevant in post-civil war Guatemala, where historical conflicts have left deep scars on the nation's institutions and

weakened state capacity (Bateson 2013). Decades of violence have perpetuated a cycle of distrust, leaving many communities disillusioned with the government's ability to provide security and protect their rights. In such a context, state absenteeism exacerbates existing social fractures, making vigilantism an appealing alternative for enforcing norms in the absence of functional state institutions. Moreover, state absenteeism is not limited to regions with a significant indigenous population but may manifest in various areas across the country where the state's presence is sporadic or inadequate. For example, socioeconomic disparities and political marginalization can exacerbate the sense of state abandonment. This context drives frustrated individuals, whether indigenous or non-indigenous, to take matters into their own hands to address their security concerns.

One essential aspect of this framework is the examination of the presence or absence of police stations throughout Guatemala. Analyzing contemporary data on police station distribution provides insights into the allocation of state resources and their correlation with incidents of vigilantism. Areas with limited police presence may experience heightened insecurity, prompting individuals or groups to resort to extrajudicial measures. Conversely, areas with substantial state presence and effective law enforcement may witness fewer incidents of vigilantism, underscoring the importance of the state in shaping community responses to security challenges. This leads to the following hypothesis:

***State Absenteeism Hypothesis:** The likelihood of vigilantism occurring in a region diminishes as the state's presence strengthens. Specifically, an increase in the number of police stations per capita correlates with a reduced probability of vigilantism.*

A significant strength of the theory of state absenteeism lies in its embrace of diverse contexts. Instead of hyper-focusing on a singular factor, such as the ethnic makeup of a community or historical impacts of civil war, this framework enables a comprehensive examination of vigilantism across various socio-economic backgrounds, political landscapes, and degrees of state presence. Such an approach allows researchers to identify common patterns and unique factors that contribute to extrajudicial justice mechanisms in diverse settings. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of vigilantism and extrajudicial violence, policymakers can design targeted interventions that address the specific root causes of vigilantism in each context, fostering sustainable peace, security, and democratic governance.

Ultimately, the theory of state absenteeism significantly contributes to the prior literature on vigilantism in post-civil war Guatemala. By exploring modern-state making and the presence or absence of police stations, this research offers valuable insights into the role of contemporary state institutions in shaping community responses to security challenges. The framework complements existing theories and underscores the importance of examining diverse contexts to gain a comprehensive understanding of vigilantism. Through this holistic analysis, researchers can identify the drivers of extrajudicial justice mechanisms and inform evidence-based interventions that address the root causes of vigilantism.

## **CASE SELECTION**

Guatemala is an ideal case study for testing the major theories that seek to explain vigilantism. Prior theories have attributed vigilantism to various factors in Guatemala, including its historical context, such as the aftermath of the civil war and the significance

of ethnic identity, where indigenous communities strive to defend their rights and autonomy (Sieder 2011; Godoy 2002; Englehart 2009). This paper presents an additional argument, termed ‘state absenteeism,’ where the state is largely absent or neglects its responsibility to provide adequate services to its citizens. Guatemala is an excellent case study to test all of these theories together.

Firstly, Guatemala has had to engage in state-building activities following the aftermath of a violent civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996. This enables theories stemming from path-dependency/civil war to be tested as data has been readily available to capture both the Civil War era as well as the rebuilding of the country following the Civil War. Secondly, the rich ethnic and racial diversity in Guatemala, particularly the experiences of indigenous communities, introduces a compelling dimension to explore cultural factors that, according to prior theories, could contribute to vigilantism. The historical marginalization of indigenous populations, coupled with their disproportionate impact by violence and human rights abuses, creates a context where cultural elements could play a pivotal role in the emergence and perpetuation of vigilantism (Pallister 2013). Indigenous populations have been disproportionately affected by violence and human rights abuses both during the civil war and throughout the post-conflict period. Moreover, indigenous groups in Guatemala have experienced high poverty rates, limited access to basic services such as healthcare and education, and have often faced extreme discrimination and racism based on ethnicity, language, and cultural practices (Roddy 2011). Efforts to address these issues have been ongoing, including legal reforms, constitutional recognition of indigenous rights, and the establishment of mechanisms for indigenous participation in decision-making processes (Roddy 2011). However, this

progress has been slow, and many challenges still persist for these citizens in Guatemala.

Furthermore, Guatemala presents a compelling case for examining vigilantism due to the abundant data available from diverse sources. This paper leverages established data sources used in prior studies alongside an original dataset meticulously curated through petitions and direct inquiries to the Guatemalan government and the Policía Nacional Civil de Guatemala (PNC). While prior scholarship has leveraged data collected from sources such as the United Nations Verification Mission to Guatemala (MINUGUA) and the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), focusing on vigilantism in the aftermath of the civil war, this paper introduces a distinctive dimension. The original dataset, specifically collected for this study, not only covers historical variables but also provides detailed contemporary information on the exact location and date of establishment of police stations throughout the country, offering a comprehensive view of police station development. This project stands out by bridging the temporal spectrum, utilizing data spanning the civil war, the post-civil war period, and the reconstruction of the state's security apparatus in the contemporary era. This unique timeline not only facilitates the testing of established theories of vigilantism but also enables an exploration of how modern-day state-building and security provision may influence the prevalence of vigilantism.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

To test the *State Absenteeism* hypothesis, I constructed an original dataset and combined it with existing data sources. I collected the original data by submitting multiple petitions and in-person requests to the Guatemalan government and the Policía Nacional Civil de Guatemala (PNC). Once the original data was collected, I was

then able to identify each existing and newly established police station in the post-civil war era which allowed for the identification of subnational variation in the number of annual acts of vigilantism. The original data was supplemented with existing data sources, such as data from the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), which provides information on the number of civil war massacres (CEH 2013). From these data sources, a municipal-level dataset was constructed containing information on whether an act of vigilantism occurred in a municipality each year, as well as the number of acts that occurred each year. The unit of analysis for this study is municipality-year. Guatemala is divided into 340 municipalities, which are grouped into 22 departments.<sup>1</sup> Data for this project is taken from 325 municipalities as the spatial domain to conduct a cross-sectional analysis. The difference between the total number of municipalities and those included in this analysis is attributed to redistricting over the years. To focus on the effect of the civil war, the analysis was restricted to municipalities that existed during this time period. The temporal domain for this analysis spanned from 2004 to 2017 due to limitations in data availability.

### **Dependent Variable**

For the dependent variable, the conceptualization of vigilantism used by Bateson (2013) is leveraged, defining an act of vigilantism as an extrajudicial killing of an individual by a group of citizens. To test the state absenteeism hypothesis, two dependent variables are employed: *Vigilantism* and *Count Vigilantism*. The *Vigilantism* variable indicates whether a municipality experienced a fatal act of vigilantism in a particular year, with municipalities where vigilantism occurred coded as 1 and those where no act

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure robust empirical findings, I provide results that have standard errors clustered at the department in the appendix.

occurred coded as 0. Approximately 5% of the municipality-years in the sample had at least one act of vigilantism. The *Count Vigilantism* variable represents the exact number of fatal vigilante acts that occurred within a municipality per year, ranging from 0 to 6. Utilizing these two variables, factors contributing to municipalities engaging in vigilantism and those increasing the frequency of these acts will be identified. The data for this project are sourced from an original dataset collected during fieldwork efforts from 2017 to 2019, supplemented by data from the Ombudsman (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos, PDH), the National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC), and specific reports from civil society organizations such as the Centro de Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos, CALDH.

### **Independent Variables**

Three primary independent variables will be used in this analysis: *Police Stations*, *Civil War Massacres*, and *Indigenous Municipality*. These variables will allow the theory of state absenteeism to be compared against the existing path-dependency and cultural arguments which have been heavily focused on in the Guatemalan context. The state absenteeism hypothesis will require the identification of the level of state absence or presence from the central government at the subnational level in the post-civil war period. To operationalize the concept of state absenteeism, I will utilize a measure that identifies the number of police stations per capita. This approach will count the total number of police stations that exist in a municipality as of the prior year and divide by the population which is then multiplied by 10,000. It is important to note that the use of the prior year's data was done to ensure the temporal ordering of the proposed hypothesis presented in the state absenteeism hypothesis. By utilizing this approach, I can examine



the depth of the state's presence by leveraging how many police stations are present in a municipality adjusted for the number of citizens the stations serve. The number of police stations in a given area can be viewed as a proxy for the state's commitment to a given area, as police stations provide security to the population and can ensure compliance with established laws. If the state-absenteeism theory holds true, an increase in the number of police stations per capita in a municipality should correspond with a decrease in acts of vigilantism. This would imply that acts of vigilantism are less likely to occur when the state is present and providing security within the municipality.

To apply the path-dependency theory, it is essential to identify government-initiated massacres at the subnational level that occurred during the Guatemalan Civil War. According to the CEH, a massacre is defined as 'an indiscriminate attack involving the execution of five or more people in the same place...whose victims were in an indefensible state' (Mezquita, 2000, pg. 208). I employ two approaches to operationalize this concept: a count measure and a binary measure. The count measure tallies the total number of government-initiated massacres occurring in each municipality throughout the civil war. Meanwhile, the binary measure serves as a robustness check and can be seen in the appendix. If the path-dependency theory holds true, the occurrence of a massacre in a municipality during the civil war should correlate with increased vigilantism in the modern day. In essence, this suggests that areas witnessing extreme violence decades ago are more likely to experience acts of vigilantism today.

In order to test the cultural argument, it is necessary to determine the proportion of indigenous people living in a particular municipality. The data from the Guatemalan national census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2002) provides the necessary

information. By calculating the percentage of indigenous citizens in a given area, it can be determined whether regions with a majority indigenous population are more likely to engage in vigilantism, as posited in the cultural argument's literature. A binary measure is employed to classify municipalities as either majority indigenous (1) or minority indigenous (0). As a robustness check an additional measure is included in the appendix that identifies the percent of indigenous population in a municipality as well. These variables are then linked to the cultural argument, which suggests that the practice of vigilantism may stem from historical Mayan indigenous culture. If this argument holds true, it would imply that areas with a high concentration of indigenous people are more inclined to engage in vigilantism.

### **Control Variables**

The literature on vigilantism has identified several additional theories that may influence the probability that a community will engage in such acts. The control variables that are included in this analysis are meant to identify municipal-level factors that should influence the likelihood that a municipality will experience an act of vigilantism in a given year. Specifically, it is crucial to account for the social environment, as well as the various demographics of the included municipalities in this study. This section will offer concise descriptions of each additional variable slated for inclusion in the statistical analysis and the rationale behind their incorporation. The first variable, homicide, serves as a proxy for crime rate, as heightened crime or homicide levels could directly impact the probability that a municipality will engage in acts of vigilantism. A measure of the homicide rate within the municipality is included and is calculated with the following equation:  $(\text{Number of homicides}/\text{population}) \times 100,000$ . Homicide data is sourced from

the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), while population data is drawn from the Guatemalan National Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2002). Municipalities with elevated homicide rates signal a need for increased security measures, suggesting a heightened risk of vigilantism.

Subsequently, a population control measure is introduced, sourced from the Guatemalan National Census Data (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2002). This control measure is essential because municipalities with larger populations may exhibit heightened probabilities of vigilantism due to the increased potential for conflicts arising from more considerable size differences among inhabitants. As population increases, crime rates and interpersonal interactions also tend to rise. This increased activity can strain governmental resources, making it challenging to provide adequate security measures. Moreover, a control variable accounting for the male population percentage is included. Males are statistically more predisposed to engaging in violent behaviors and criminal activities compared to females. Consequently, communities exhibiting higher male proportions are likelier candidates for crime and violent behaviors. The next control variable for this study will be the number of vigilante acts in a municipality in the previous year. The inclusion of a past act of vigilantism is important, as there may be theoretical reasons to expect that municipalities that engage in acts of vigilantism will continue these practices. Additionally, a measure of municipality size is included. This measure accounts for the geographic land area of each municipality and is measured in square kilometers (KMs). Larger municipalities may have more remote areas that could make vigilantism more attractive due to less proximity to means of resolving conflict via the legal system.

Furthermore, I leverage census data to craft an indicator of economic development within each municipality. This metric is derived from the proportion of households within each locality equipped with electricity. It is plausible that municipalities characterized by lower economic development are more prone to vigilantism, given the heightened likelihood of individuals resorting to criminal activities out of economic necessity. To bolster the robustness of my findings, two supplementary measures of economic development—access to running water and a sewage system—are also included in the paper's appendix. Moreover, a gauge of income inequality is incorporated, drawing from insights in the literature on marginalization and relative deprivation theories, which posits that regions marked by pronounced inequality are susceptible to heightened levels of vigilantism (Phillips 2017).

The final set of control variables is derived from a distance matrix initially compiled by Sullivan (2012). The first distance variable gauges the distance from each municipality to the national capital. This measure aids in mitigating potential issues related to state capacity. In countries with weaker states, like Guatemala, the government may struggle to enforce the rule of law in distant communities. Consequently, municipalities farther from the capital might resort to vigilantism due to the state's perceived weakness. Similarly, rural communities may encounter similar challenges. The second distance variable assesses the distance from each municipality to the department capital, serving to differentiate between rural and urban areas. As one moves away from urban centers, rural communities may become more prone to vigilantism as the state's capacity diminishes in these remote regions. With increasing distance from the

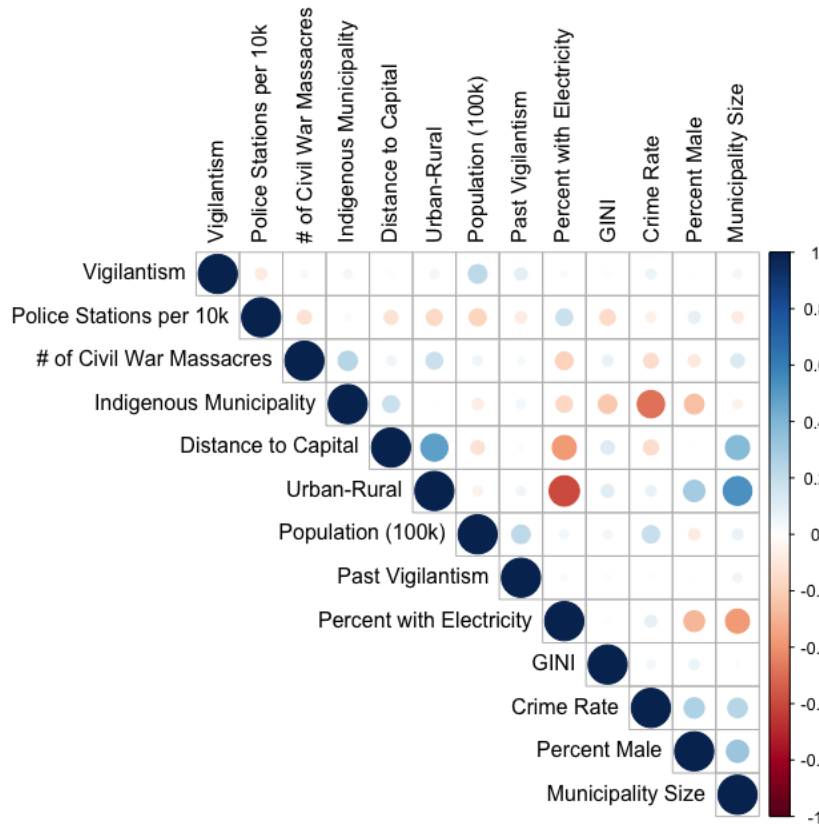
department capital, state capacity declines, potentially prompting communities to fill the void left by the state through vigilantism.

The anticipated direction of the relationship for each of the included control variables is outlined in Table 1 below, while descriptive statistics for these variables can be found in the appendix. As there is potential for multicollinearity, Figure 1 presents a correlation matrix which has been added in order to identify if any of the key variables are highly correlated. None of the primary independent variables show strong correlations with one another and the majority of the control variables appear in line with expectations. The variables that do exhibit higher correlation suggest that a Variance Inflation test may be warranted during the model estimation process.

**Table 1: Variables and Expected Relationships**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Expected Relationship</b>
<b>Police Stations Per Capita</b>	<b>Original Data</b>	-
<b># of Civil War Massacres</b>	<b>CEH (2013)</b>	+
<b>Indigenous Municipality</b>	<b>Guatemalan Census (2002)</b>	+
Urban-Rural Distance from Department Capital (logged km)	Sullivan (2012)	+
Distance from National Capital (logged km)	Sullivan (2012)	+
Homicide Rate (per 100k)	PNC	+
Population	Census	+
GINI	FUNDESA	+
% with Electricity	Guatemalan Census	-
Past Vigilantism	Original Data	+
Male Population (%)	Census	+
Municipality Size (km)	Sullivan (2012)	+

**Figure 1: Correlation Matrix**



**EMPIRICAL STRATEGY AND RESULTS**

To empirically evaluate the proposed state absenteeism hypothesis, a combination of logistic regression models and negative binomial regression models will be employed. The first dependent variable being binary necessitates logistic regression models, enabling the testing of the state absenteeism theory. The second dependent variable, being a count variable, requires a count model such as the negative binomial model.

Furthermore, a variety of robustness checks have been incorporated, detailed in the appendix for thoroughness.<sup>2</sup>

Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression models and the negative binomial models. This table first presents the logistic regression model specifications, with and without the state absenteeism variable, aiming to assess the existing theoretical arguments as well as the impact of including the theory of state absenteeism on vigilantism. Additionally, the state absenteeism model (model 2) has department-fixed effects, time-fixed effects, and two-way fixed effects added. Last, a negative binomial model is estimated utilizing two-way fixed effects. Including department fixed effects controls for unobserved attributes that do not vary over time (i.e., geographic terrain). The inclusion of the time-fixed effects controls for any unobserved attributions that are constant across all the municipalities but vary over time (i.e., a new president). Finally, the inclusion of two-way fixed effects allows for the addition of department and time-fixed effects, which account for both department-specific (time-invariant) and time-specific (unit-invariant) factors. These approaches help ensure that the observed relationships are not driven by endogeneity due to potentially relevant omitted variables<sup>3</sup>. Table 3 presents the substantive effects of the state absenteeism logistic regression by examining the change in predicted probability for each of the key independent variables.

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<sup>2</sup> Robustness checks can be found in the appendix and include the addition of additional variables, alternative measures, and removing outlier observations.

<sup>3</sup> While this approach helps reduce issues of endogeneity, it does not address the potential for reverse causality. This potential cannot be addressed due to the short temporal domain of the data, but warrants future research.

**Table 2: Logistic Regression and Negative Binomial Models**

	Logit		Count Vigilantism			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Police Stations Per Capita		-0.683*** (0.197)	-0.659*** (0.217)	-0.706*** (0.200)	-0.694*** (0.222)	-1.032*** (0.238)
Civil War Massacres	0.022 (0.015)	0.023 (0.015)	0.023 (0.019)	0.023 (0.015)	0.024 (0.019)	0.015 (0.020)
Indigenous Municipality	0.999*** (0.225)	0.909*** (0.226)	0.921*** (0.274)	0.933*** (0.229)	0.939*** (0.277)	0.800*** (0.276)
Distance to Capital	0.266* (0.149)	0.216 (0.147)	0.794*** (0.232)	0.220 (0.148)	0.808*** (0.233)	0.579** (0.247)
Urban-Rural	0.384*** (0.143)	0.284** (0.144)	-0.205 (0.172)	0.286** (0.145)	-0.206 (0.173)	-0.172 (0.173)
Population	0.903*** (0.117)	0.805*** (0.118)	0.655*** (0.138)	0.820*** (0.119)	0.672*** (0.139)	0.513*** (0.147)
Past Vigilantism	0.130 (0.144)	0.108 (0.143)	-0.017 (0.147)	0.092 (0.149)	-0.053 (0.156)	0.142 (0.143)
% with Electricity	0.667 (0.529)	0.797 (0.528)	-0.475 (0.794)	0.814 (0.531)	-0.474 (0.798)	-0.779 (0.806)
GINI	-0.854 (0.634)	-1.145* (0.626)	-0.826 (0.793)	-1.155* (0.628)	-0.847 (0.798)	-0.988 (0.794)
Crime Rate	0.010*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.002)	0.014*** (0.003)	0.018*** (0.003)
Percent Male	0.149* (0.078)	0.176** (0.079)	0.072 (0.114)	0.178** (0.079)	0.071 (0.114)	0.052 (0.115)
Municipality Geographic Size	-0.0001 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0002* (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0002 (0.0001)	0.0003** (0.0001)
Department FE	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Time FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,522	3,522	3,522	3,522	3,522	3,522
Log Likelihood	-633.52	-625.74	-588.43	-612.84	-575.28	-748.20
theta						0.218*** (0.038)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,291.04	1,277.49	1,244.87	1,275.68	1,242.56	1,588.40

Note:

\*p<.1, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.01



The findings regarding the State Absenteeism hypothesis, which explores the link between vigilantism and the presence of the state via the number of police stations per capita, are robust. Across all models, the *police station* variable exhibits a consistently negative and statistically significant association. This suggests that the presence of more police stations per capita in a municipality does indeed influence the occurrence of vigilantism and the frequency of vigilante acts. Specifically, as the number of police stations per capita increases, the likelihood of vigilantism occurring in a municipality decreases. This indicates that in areas where the state is absent, communities are more likely to take the law into their own hands due to the lack of security provided by the state.

The substantive effects of the logistic regression model can be interpreted by calculating the change in predicted probability. To calculate this change, the variable of interest is first set at 0 and then moved to a value of 1 to estimate the change in predicted probability, while holding all others at their mean besides the dichotomous variables that are set as 0<sup>4</sup>. The decision to use the value 1 is based on the distribution of the key independent variables and to allow for an easier comparison of the effect of each variable. Moving from the 0 to 1 police station per capita result in a 4.6% decrease in the predicted probability of vigilantism occurring. While this might seem like a small effect, it is important to note that the baseline probability is 5%. This would suggest that establishing additional police stations and overcoming state-absenteeism could

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<sup>4</sup> All binary variables set equal to 1

hypothetically almost completely eliminate the probability that citizens would engage in vigilantism.

Next, I investigate the path-dependency argument using the *civil war massacres* variable. Although the massacre variable shows a positive association, it fails to achieve statistical significance in any of the logistic regression models or the negative binomial model. This indicates that the path-dependency argument may not be supported, suggesting that communities affected by violence, such as massacres during the civil war, are not necessarily more inclined to engage in vigilantism in the present day.

The positive and statistically significant relationship between the occurrence of vigilantism and whether a municipality is majority indigenous is consistent across all models. This suggests that the ethnic demographic of a municipality is an important factor that influences the probability that vigilantism will occur. The substantive effect can be discussed by examining the change in predicted probability. Moving from a non-indigenous municipality to a majority indigenous municipality results in a 3.6% increase in the predicted probability of an act of vigilantism occurring. This is roughly a 60% increase compared to the baseline probability. While this finding supports the cultural argument, it is essential to note that this relationship may not solely be attributed to culture and warrants further attention.

I will now briefly discuss the substantive effects of the negative binomial regression model for each of the three independent variables using an incident rate ratio approach. For each additional police station per capita that is added to a municipality, the number of vigilante acts will decrease by 58% on average when holding all other variables constant. For each additional civil war massacre that took place in a

municipality during the civil war, the number of vigilante acts will increase by 3%. Similarly, municipalities that have a majority indigenous population will have on average 133% more cases of vigilantism.

Several of the included control variables reached statistical significance across multiple model specifications. Distance to Capital was positive and statistically significant in each of the models. This suggests that as one moves further away from the capital, the probability of vigilantism occurring increases. This finding suggests that the state may be less able to project its power and maintain order, leaving citizens to take matters of security into their own hands. The population of the municipality is also positive and statistically significant. Larger numbers of people lead to more potential points of conflict and can lead to a higher probability of vigilantism occurring. Last is the level of crime rate in a municipality. Again, this is positive and statistically significant, which suggests that areas where citizens are more threatened with insecurity are more likely to engage in vigilantism. Interestingly, there was no correlation between past and current vigilantism. This may suggest that vigilantism is not an ingrained behavior repeated over time but rather a response to current conditions.

In order to understand the impact of the *police station per capita* variable on the overall model, a series of additional tests were conducted. These tests can be found in the appendix. The logistic regression models (model 1 and 2) were compared with and without the *police station per capita* variable. The limited model was compared to the state absenteeism model to determine whether the inclusion of the state absenteeism variable improved the model's performance. To quantify the improvement of the model, the Area Under the ROC Curve was compared. The inclusion of the *police station per*

*capita* variable improved the Area Under the ROC Curve by 2%, going from 0.74 to 0.76. Next, the AIC for the limited and state absenteeism model was compared. The AIC improved from 1291 to 1277 when the *police station per capita* variable was added. Additionally, a Likelihood-Ratio Test (Chi-Square) was conducted to ensure that the addition of the *police station per capita* variable resulted in a statistically significant model. The result was indeed statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Finally, a Variance Inflation test was conducted to ensure that the model does not suffer from multicollinearity. The full results can be seen in the appendix, but no variable had a VIF higher than 4, suggesting that the model is not influenced by multicollinearity.

These tests confirm that incorporating the theory of state absenteeism enhances existing empirical models on vigilantism. This result, coupled with the substantial effects of state absenteeism having a larger magnitude than those suggested by the cultural theory, indicates that future research on vigilantism should consider the theory of state absenteeism as a critical factor.

**Table 3: Substantive Effects for Logistic Regression Model**

	<i>Change in Predicted Probability</i>
	Vigilantism
Police Stations	-0.046***
Massacre	0.001
Indigenous Municipality	0.036***
Controls	Yes

### Robustness Checks

In order to examine the robustness of these previously discussed results, several additional models with various specifications can be found in the appendix. First, each of

the primary independent variables and several key control variables are replaced with different measures to ensure that the results are not reliant on any given indicator. This is accomplished by changing one specific measure at a time to identify if any specific variable alters the findings. For the cultural argument, a measure that captures the percent of a municipality that is indigenous is used in place of the binary measure that captures if a municipality is majority indigenous or not. This can account for the potential difference between a municipality that is 51% indigenous compared to 90% indigenous. Next, a binary measure that identifies if a municipality experienced any civil war massacres is used in place of the count measure used in the path dependency argument.

Turning to the control variables, the economic indicator originally represented by the percentage of the municipality with electricity is replaced with the percentage of the municipality that has running water. This new indicator is used because fewer citizens have access to running water compared to electricity (an average of 72% vs. 78%). Additionally, a new measure is introduced to capture the percentage of the municipality with a sewage system, which averages 25% nationwide. The crime rate control, initially represented by the homicide rate, is replaced with the total number of homicides in a municipality in a given year. This change is important because the homicide rate is influenced by the population size. For instance, a municipality with 10 murders and 10,000 people have the same murder rate as one with 1 murder and 1,000 people. Using the total number of homicides ensures that the measure of crime is not skewed by population size. Lastly, the Urban-Rural measure is replaced with a measure of population density. The rationale is similar to the Urban-Rural measure: higher population density indicates a more urbanized area. This change addresses potential

limitations with the distance to the department capital measure, where a municipality could be far from its department capital but still contain a large city.

Next, an additional measure is added that captures the number of languages spoken in the municipality. The inclusion of this additional control can account for potential differences between cultures that can lead to heightened tension that could cause a rise in vigilantism. However, existing literature also mentions that increasing ethnic diversity in an area may lead to collective action problems, which could potentially reduce vigilantism (Mendoza 2007). The inclusion of this variable addresses both of these potential possibilities. Finally, Guatemala City, which has 67 police stations, was removed from the sample to ensure the results were not skewed by this potential outlier. The results of this sensitivity analysis remain consistent across all specifications, providing robust evidence for the state absenteeism theory.

## **CONCLUSION**

The significance of this paper lies in its dual contribution to our understanding of vigilantism. Firstly, the state absenteeism theory challenges existing cultural and historical explanations, highlighting the pivotal role of the state in ensuring security and preventing the adoption of vigilante justice by frustrated citizens. The empirical findings from the analysis robustly support the state absenteeism hypothesis, revealing a substantial decrease in the probability of vigilantism as the number of police stations per capita increases. This implies that state engagement and the establishment of security institutions significantly impact community responses to security challenges. Secondly, this paper introduces an original dataset crafted through extensive fieldwork efforts on modern-day state-building via the establishment of police stations. Prior literature has

acknowledged that a recurring limitation to studying vigilantism lies in the inadequate collection of reliable empirical data, hindering the rigorous testing of underlying causes (Bateson 2021). The original dataset utilized in this paper allows for testing prior vigilantism theories with modern and up-to-date data. Utilizing data from the prior literature and the new dataset demonstrates that state absence indeed impacts vigilantism. When the state is absent, vigilantism is more likely to occur.

In examining the path-dependency arguments in this paper, a positive association between historical violence during the civil war and present-day vigilantism is identified, albeit one that fails to achieve statistical significance. This suggests that while there may be a tendency for communities affected by civil war violence to exhibit higher levels of vigilantism, this relationship is not strong enough to be deemed statistically significant. However, this nuanced finding raises intriguing questions that warrant further investigation. While this paper indicates that communities affected by civil war violence are not necessarily inclined to engage in vigilantism in the present day, it prompts us to consider the possibility that the effect of civil war violence is diminishing over time. As societies evolve and heal from the scars of conflict, the once-potent influence of historical trauma may gradually wane, giving rise to new dynamics and mitigating factors that shape patterns of vigilantism. This is an interesting potential that underscores the complexity of post-conflict societies and suggests that the interplay between past violence and present-day behavior is dynamic rather than static. Future research examining path dependency and the effects of violence should direct their attention toward understanding how these shifts over time may influence vigilantism.

In testing the cultural arguments, this paper finds a positive and statistically significant relationship between the occurrence of vigilantism and whether a municipality is majority indigenous, which is consistent across all models. This suggests that the ethnic demographic of a municipality is an important factor that influences the probability that vigilantism will occur. However, my data reveals that acts of vigilantism also happen in areas where communities are predominately non-indigenous, signifying that this is not strictly a “cultural” phenomenon. When looking at this finding, it is important to think about how vigilantism is not limited to even the Latin American region. For example, in recent reports, there has been an explosion of instances of vigilante justice making news headlines globally. For instance, a cursory internet search yields many examples, spanning from isolated incidents of vigilantism to large-scale group efforts seeking to create informal patrol groups to monitor and prevent crime and violence. A compelling illustration can be found in a May 2023 report by Al Jazeera, shedding light on the escalating vigilante justice in Haiti amidst a backdrop of surging gang violence and a shortfall in police capacity to combat such turmoil effectively. In alternative settings, such as Nigeria, vigilante groups have stepped into the security void left by the state, assuming a pivotal role in safeguarding the Nigerian public. Fortunately, academic scholarship has embarked on an exploration of this phenomenon, casting its investigative net globally. A noteworthy example is the work of Berg and Wendt (2011), whose international perspective delves into the historical roots of vigilantism. Encompassing fourteen countries across five continents, this extensive study challenges the notion that vigilantism is confined to a singular country or exclusively targets specific population groups, such as racial or ethnic communities.



Diverging from prevailing theories predominantly focused on historical or cultural factors to explain vigilantism, this paper introduces the novel theoretical framework of state absenteeism. This theory posits that lack of state presence in specific regions or communities creates a void in security provision, thereby laying the groundwork for the emergence of vigilantism. When the state fails to adequately address citizens' security needs, individuals or groups may resort to extrajudicial measures as a means of safeguarding themselves and their communities. Indeed, the results of this paper demonstrate that state absenteeism is a crucial theory to consider when examining vigilantism. The empirical findings from the analysis robustly support the state absenteeism hypothesis, revealing a substantial decrease in the probability of vigilantism as the number of police stations per capita increases. This suggests that state presence and the establishment of security institutions significantly impact community responses to security challenges. While the findings are robust, further research is warranted to delve deeper into the underlying factors driving the emergence of state absenteeism. For example, it would be valuable to investigate why the state chooses particular communities for selective distribution of goods and whether there is a consistent pattern of absence in providing goods in certain communities. Additionally, exploring how these communities fill the void left by the state by providing their own informal public goods could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of governance and community resilience.

By recognizing the broader implications of state absenteeism across various public goods and services, policymakers can better understand the root causes of socioeconomic disparities and design more targeted interventions to address them.

Addressing state absenteeism requires concerted efforts to strengthen governance structures, enhance transparency and accountability, and prioritize equitable resource allocation across all sectors. By doing so, governments can foster inclusive development, mitigate the risk of social unrest, and build resilient and prosperous societies for all citizens.

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