Moral reasoning and support for punitive violence: A multi-methods analysis*

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Abstract

When do residents in communities affected by violent crime support punitive violence? Are they less likely to support harsh punishments when they use moral principles to guide their decisions? Does the use of dehumanizing language to describe criminals predict support for harsh punishments? We document and analyze decisions about responding to crime from 62 in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals affected by violence in the Mexican state of Michoacán to address these questions. We conduct a quantitative analysis of how different forms of moral reasoning are related to punishment preferences for specific crime events, and a qualitative content analysis to investigate mechanisms. We find that two types of moral reasoning are particularly associated with support for punitive punishments: “consequentialist” reasoning that involves weighing the costs and benefits of an action, and reasoning that dehumanizes accused criminals. “Deontological” reasoning about the right or just action, while extremely common, is used more equally across arguments for and against punitive violence. Analysis of social media posts of elites provides suggestive evidence that these patterns hold with elites who have more influence on the occurrence of violence events and criminal justice policy. Our results provide micro-foundations for theories that assume that consequentialist decision-making leads to support for punitive violence in high-violence, high-impunity settings, and show how psychological processes like dehumanization can feed into those processes.

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1 Introduction

Criminal violence is an increasingly dominant security threat as criminal organizations have evolved and interstate and civil wars have declined (Pettersson and Eck, 2018; UNODC, 2019). A central question in the development of strategies to control violence and enact justice is how punitive responses to crime should be. For many ordinary citizens these are not theoretical puzzles, but everyday dilemmas with high stakes. Why do some people seek harsh justice, while others focus on policies that prevent future harm? Does variation in the way that people make decisions in the wake of crimes help explain preferences for harsh, extrajudicial responses?

Recent cross-national evidence shows that the practice of lynching—a form of punitive violence—is widespread in 46 countries and has occurred in more than 100 over the last four decades (Jung and Cohen, 2019). An official attempt to document lynchings in Mexico, the site of the fieldwork for our study, found more than 300 attempted and realized lynchings between 2015 and 2018 (CNDH Mexico and IIS, 2019). Extrajudicial violence is also perpetrated by state agents at alarming levels (Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo, 2020). Furthermore, public opinion surveys show strong public support for lynchings and vigilante groups (Schedler, 2018).

Political scientists have proposed several explanations for why people support punitive violence. First, citizens in crime-affected communities may use a cost-benefit logic to judge extrajudicial violence and support it if it is likely to make them safer. In other words, citizens may weigh the expected risks and benefits of harsh crime responses, and then support the response that seems likely to maximize their welfare. However, others have argued that extrajudicial violence is often counterproductive, and have looked at more psychological mechanisms to explain why individuals would prefer something that could lead to more violence. Decision-making based on moral principles and dehumanization of accused perpetrators are two alternative explanations that could explain why individuals support punitive violence even if it ends up making them less safe.

In this article, we examine support for punitive violence by analyzing how individuals explain their preferred responses to crime. Extralegal punitive violence is a particularly severe form of vigilantism, which Bateson (2020) defines as the “extralegal prevention, investigation, or punish-

ment of offenses.” Individuals engage in moral reasoning when making decisions about punitive violence—considerations of the right and wrong ways to respond to crime. We focus on two domains of moral reasoning: *deontological* versus *consequentialist*, and *dehumanization* versus *empathy*. Consequentialist logic argues that responses to violence should maximize future benefits such as security. In contrast, deontological reasoning argues one should take actions because they are the right thing to do, regardless of personal or societal benefits. Our second dimension of moral reasoning considers perceptions of accused criminals. In some cases, people dehumanize accused perpetrators as animals or incurable diseases threatening society, while others show empathy toward the accused. We assess whether the type of moral reasoning that an individual applies to a crime event is indicative of the extent to which they view extrajudicial violence as acceptable or even preferable.

We draw on 62 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with residents in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, Mexico. These interviews cover 570 unique crime events coded based on their content and the type of moral reasoning used by interviewees to describe their preferred crime response. This methodology provides a detailed picture of how people affected by crime and violence make sense of their experiences and preferences in their own words. Our approach allows us to see how the same individual makes decisions about distinct types of crime events across both hypothetical and personal experiences. We use in-depth content analysis and quantitative methods to analyze the correlation between forms of moral reasoning and crime response preferences.

We find that interviewees are more likely to support punitive violence when they use consequentialist moral reasoning, and when they dehumanize accused perpetrators. The fact that consequentialism is positively associated with support for punitive violence shows the limits of the increasingly common argument that careful consideration of costs and benefits can prevent retaliatory violence (Blattman, Jamison and Sheridan, 2017; Heller et al., 2017). In the context of high crime and impunity in Michoacán, careful cost-benefit considerations do not seem linked to lower support for punitive violence. To the extent that these calculations end up producing suboptimal outcomes, such as spirals of violence or the erosion of the formal justice system, it may be because individuals misperceive the ability of punitive violence to prevent future crime or discount potential

negative consequences in a setting with multiple, unstable security risks. Deontological moral reasoning, while highly common, is more weakly associated with support for punitive violence. Our results suggest that it is not deontological reasoning in general but specific deontological arguments that underlie support for punitive violence, and highlight that deontological arguments against punitive violence are also common. Finally, we find that dehumanization is strongly related to support for punitive violence.

Can these patterns in a sample of citizens help us understand the occurrence of violent events or policy outcomes? While we largely leave this question to future research, we provide an initial analysis of the moral reasoning frames used by two elites with significant influence over criminal justice in Morelia: the current Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and a Morelian pro-vigilante social movement called Revolución Social. Like our pro-punishment interviewees, Revolución Social frequently uses consequentialist and dehumanizing moral rhetoric to advocate for punitive violence, while the president, whose policies on crime span a range of punitive and restorative positions, relies heavily on deontological reasoning.

Our study contributes to a growing literature on vigilante violence. Several studies have found that the occurrence of vigilante violence is explained by enabling factors, including the existence of organizations that facilitate collective action (Moncada, 2021) and the availability of funds (Phillips, 2017; Ley, Ibarra Olivo and Meseguer, 2019). Others have argued that citizens engage in vigilante acts when the state is less likely to punish them for it, lowering its expected cost (Jaffrey, 2020; Wilke, 2020). We provide micro-foundations for those arguments by showing that cost-benefit calculations are at the heart of many pro-vigilante decisions in the words of those actually making the decisions. We also add to research on the psychological drivers of vigilantism. Previous work has found that perceptions of the legitimacy of legal processes (Tankebe and Asif, 2016; Smith, 2019; Jung and Cohen, 2019), individual need for cognition (Sargent, 2004), and emotional responses (García-Ponce, Young and Zeitsoff, 2018) can drive support for punitive violence. Our finding that dehumanization of accused perpetrators plays a powerful role in support for punitive violence shows that psychological explanations for punitive violence are both separate from and can be integrated into cost-benefit analyses.

2 Moral reasoning and responses to crime

People affected by violent crimes often desire a response. How do citizens make decisions about crime responses in contexts where state authorities appear unwilling or unable of responding? In this section, we outline expectations about how individuals in high violence, low rule-of-law communities make decisions about responding to crime. We argue that decisions about crime responses have both a social and moral dimension, and draw on research from cognitive and social psychology on different types of moral reasoning to form our expectations. We consider four modes of moral reasoning: consequentialist, deontological, dehumanizing, and empathic reasoning.

2.1 Consequentialist reasoning

Many theories of vigilantism assume that its supporters and participants rely on consequentialist reasoning—comparing the expected costs and benefits of available responses—to form preferences over crime responses. From reporting crimes to the police to supporting vigilante groups, scholars have argued that individuals are sensitive to the expected risks and rewards (Skogan, 1990; Jaffrey, 2020; Wilke, 2020). The perceived benefits of punitive violence could include a deterrent effect on future crime, or the incapacitation of repeat offenders. Perceived costs of punitive violence include the risk of punishment by the state, or retaliation by the target or their allies. The relationship between consequentialist moral reasoning and support for harsh punishments thus depends on context. Beliefs about the effectiveness of punitive and non-punitive responses, such as recidivism and impunity rates, institutional corruption, and the capacity of accused criminals to retaliate, for example, should shape the perceived trade-offs of various crime responses. Consequentialist arguments have also been at the heart of utilitarian political theory around criminal justice (Bentham, 1996).

Recent research has suggested that engaging in deliberate consequentialist reasoning may decrease support for retaliatory violence, even in high-violence contexts. Several recent studies have found that engaging individuals in high-violence communities in decelerated, more deliberative decision-making can reduce participation in violence (Heller et al., 2017; Blattman, Jamison and

Sheridan, 2017). Surveys and experiments in Mexico show that decision-making in angry affective states, which tends to be less deliberative, is associated with higher support for punitive violence (García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2018). These studies suggest that even in high-violence, high-impunity contexts, consequentialist calculations might be associated with lower support for punitive violence.

Our own interviews illustrate many of the characteristics of consequentialist reasoning. Some participants explicitly weighed the costs and benefits of harsh community punishments, musing that on the one hand vigilante violence could prevent crime but on the other can legitimate the use of violence in general. One participant reasoned that if the community engages in “self-help justice”, then criminals will “say they are united among neighbors. And at the same time if I act and my son is watching, at the end of the day I don’t know if he’ll become a criminal. It makes it easy for him to do things, because he says ‘if my mom is lynching that person and says it’s okay....’ So there are two parts” (11A).

Consequentialist arguments in favor of punitive violence articulated that physical or lethal punishments would deter future crime by 1) eliminating threats, 2) inducing fear of severe consequences, or 3) signalling the likelihood of punishment by the community. In one example from a discussion of rape, the participant argued that “they should simply put them [perpetrators] to sleep, because if they go out again [from prison] they put everyone at risk” (11A). Another argued that after punitive violence, “[perpetrators] are going to think twice” (13A), emphasizing the deterrent effect.

On the other hand, consequentialist arguments against harsh punishments invoked concerns about the possibility of retaliation from perpetrators, punishments from state authorities, and the long-term example set when citizens resort to violence. One participant considered that vigilante violence in her community could lead to her family being victimized. In her words, “I say [no to vigilantism] out of fear, especially one who has a family, maybe not fear for oneself but for their children. One says maybe they aren’t going to do anything to me, but my son, if they grab him, maybe they can even kill him” (7A). These quotes exemplify consequentialist reasoning that weighs a range of short and long term costs and benefits against each other.

2.1.1 Deontological reasoning

Deontological reasoning argues that an action should be taken because it adheres to a moral principle, duty, or rule, not necessarily because it will have desirable consequences. Deontological arguments prioritize what is “right” over what is “beneficial.” The logic of retribution is fundamentally deontological, arguing that perpetrators deserve to be punished in proportion to the severity of the crime they have committed regardless of that punishment’s consequences. For instance, the political theorist Immanuel Kant argued that the moral imperative that criminals deserve to be punished creates an obligation in society that can justify violating the law (Kant, 1887).

A significant body of recent research argues that support for harsh responses to crime are driven by deontological arguments that equal punishment is just or fair (Vidmar and Miller, 1980; Darley, Carlsmith and Robinson, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002). However, most of this research has been done in the U.S., raising questions about whether the findings would extend to contexts with higher crime and more impunity. Nevertheless, several scholars of vigilantism have emphasized the importance of deontological reasoning. Kloppe-Santamaría (2020), for instance, argues that it is not crime levels but “perceptions and representations of wrongdoers as individuals who deserved to be punished by physical, swift, and extralegal means” that drove support for lynchings in post-revolutionary Mexico (5). The view that the state is abusive and incapable of providing appropriate punishment is a key “source of legitimation” for vigilantism (9). Similarly, Smith (2019) argues that vigilantism arises during democratic state formation when citizens view the formal legal system as deviating from their accepted moral code, for instance by overemphasizing the rights of the accused. In these accounts, vigilantism arises not from a comparison of the risks and rewards of punitive violence but rather from a sense that community punishment is just.

Emotions like moral outrage play an important role in many deontological explanations of punitive violence. Individuals have strong emotional reactions to violations of moral codes, particularly anger, contempt, and disgust (Tetlock et al., 2000). These emotions have been linked to deontological thinking and preferences for harsher punishments (Darley and Pittman, 2003; Bastian, Denson and Haslam, 2013; García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2018), as well as participation in collective violence (Atran, Axelrod and Davis, 2007). The social and emotional rewards associated

with upholding the moral code may justify the risks of participation in vigilante acts (Smith, 2019).

Our interviews contain many examples of deontological arguments in favor of punitive violence. Many of these center on the “deservedness” of punishment, and they are especially prevalent in morally outrageous cases such as murder, kidnapping, rape and sexual abuse. Various participants expressed that the infliction of extreme bodily harm should be met with the same, by the state or by other incarcerated individuals while the accused is in the custody of the state.

However, while deontological reasoning has typically been linked to a preference for harsh punishment, it can also be used to justify non-punitive crime responses, and to support legal punishments. Deontological arguments that killing another human under any circumstance is wrong, for instance, have been a cornerstone of opposition to the death penalty (Steiker, 2011). People may also perceive that they have a moral duty to respond to crimes through formal legal processes. Arguments that people cooperate with the formal justice system when it is “procedurally just” can be interpreted as arguing that people use deontological reasoning in support of formal legal processes (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). In procedural justice theory, when citizens perceive authorities as legitimate, compliance is based on a belief that it is the right action rather than a self-interested calculation.

Our interviews show numerous examples of deontological arguments against harsh punishments, or in favor of the formal legal system, despite its ineffectiveness. One participant argued that meting out justice “is not a task that is directly our responsibility as citizens; it is our responsibility indirectly to help and prevent [crime], but not to do justice by our own hand” (15A). Another emphasized an accused person’s right to life based on what they viewed as a universal moral principle: “you don’t have the right to take their life, because you didn’t give it to them” (13B).

2.1.2 Dehumanization

Another dimension of moral reasoning that might drive support for punitive violence is the extent to which individuals dehumanize or empathize with the perpetrators of crimes. Processes of dehumanization enable violence. The act of perceiving or treating others as less than fully human overrides moral considerations against the use of violence and removes inhibitions against

harming others (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016). A growing body of empirical work also finds that dehumanization is associated with retributive violence and aggression (Leidner et al., 2010; Leidner, Castano and Ginges, 2013). However, dehumanizing narratives are often rooted in stereotypes and intergroup relations, and most research on dehumanization and violence has focused on intergroup conflicts.

Do these findings on dehumanization extend to criminal violence perpetrated by co-ethnics? Recent studies suggest that community members who violate social norms, for instance by perpetrating sex crimes, are likely to be dehumanized (Viki et al., 2012). There is also evidence from the U.S. that dehumanization of criminals is associated with support for harsh punishments (Bastian, Denson and Haslam, 2013).

Dehumanization is distinct from our other two forms of moral reasoning, and can occur in conjunction with both of them (Bastian, Denson and Haslam, 2013). Empirical work on dehumanization and support for violence has often focused on forms of “righteous” violence, in line with deontological justifications. However, others have identified a link between dehumanization and consequentialist pro-violence arguments (Bastian, Denson and Haslam, 2013). Haslam and Loughnan (2014, 416) conclude that “[p]unitive treatment of animalistically dehumanized people may reflect a judgment that they are not moral agents: Coercive treatment is required precisely because they are not amenable to reasoning or capable of controlling themselves.”

Several respondents interviewed used dehumanizing metaphors. One argument is that those who treat victims as less than human must be less than human themselves, or people “who do not have feelings” (13A). One participant described community self-defense as a process of “herding” criminals to watch them and track their movements. He viewed constant surveillance as necessary because criminals could not be deterred: “[a] dog that swallows butter, even if its snout burns, swallows it again, right?” (11A). Dehumanization of people as mechanistic processes also appeared in our interviews, such as one interviewee who argued that a murderer could “contaminate or intoxicate other people” (22B).

2.1.3 Empathy

By contrast, empathic moral reasoning should reduce support for punitive violence. Empathic reasoning involves taking the perspective of another person, having emotional reactions to the other's situation, and feeling sympathy or concern for the other (Hoffman, 1984). Several U.S. studies have found that experimental treatments encouraging empathy improved attitudes towards perpetrators and reduced punitiveness (Batson et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2002). Others have found that empathy is negatively related to support for violence and escalation of conflict (Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 1994; Rosler, Cohen-Chen and Halperin, 2017).

Some of our interviewees empathized with accused perpetrators when discussing crime responses. One woman took the perspective of an accused thief's mother before going on to imagine what the accused himself would feel if the community punished him (7C). Another explicitly imagined the pain that punitive violence would cause to its target when discussing why she was opposed to it: "because they are people, they are human beings, and one well... does not have to cause that pain to... to the bodies, because well, every stone, every stick is a pain that they give him, it is a pain he suffers, and even if he is the most criminal in the world, because I think that no, one should not do justice by his own hand" (13E). Another participant emphasized the need for community members to have empathy for theft out of a need to eat, and disapproval of a group of neighbors that had beat up a man for stealing bread. She reflected: "the fact is that sometimes people steal out of hunger, or, I don't know, out of necessity. One does not know what need they have, maybe they have young children... In other words, you cannot know what, what forced you to do that [steal], and the other people arrive and with violence, it's not right"(10E).

In sum, the existing literature provides us with reasons to believe that both deontological and consequentialist moral reasoning may underlie support for punitive violence. However, deontological arguments that criminals "deserve" punishment, and that the community should mete it out if the state has lost its moral authority, have been especially prominent in the literature. By contrast, some recent research has found that interventions that encourage more deliberate consequentialist thought can reduce participation in violence. Dehumanization should clearly be associated with higher support for punitive violence, and empathizing with accused perpetrators

should reduce it.

3 Context: Violence and citizen responses in Michoacán

Latin America ranks first in the world in both violent and common crime (Muggah and Tobón, 2018). With more than 60,000 people disappeared and around 250,000 intentional homicides in the last 13 years, Mexico is one of the most severe cases.¹ Amidst this dramatic intensification of violence, there has been increased support for harsh, extrajudicial punishments. Nearly fifty percent of Mexican citizens support lynching and sixty percent support the self-organization of citizens into community police forces or self-defense groups (Schedler, 2018). In addition to punishments from ordinary citizens, extrajudicial responses to crime by state security forces are pervasive. One national survey of incarcerated individuals found that between 2006 and 2016, an estimated 79% were tortured or mistreated at the hands of authorities (World Justice Project, 26 June 2019). Furthermore, in the legal and political imaginary of Mexico's drug war, criminals are not only branded as enemies of the state or the community, but often dehumanized (Madrazo Lajous, 2016).

Michoacán is particularly relevant to understand the cycle of crime and violence that has been affecting Mexico over the past decade. This region is characterized by high levels of violent crime and rampant impunity, and strong support for harsh and extrajudicial responses. In 2013, rural self-defense militias emerged throughout the state to fight organized crime. The so-called *autodefensas* initially gained popular support and temporarily curbed violence in some localities (Del Rio, 2020). However, despite support from the federal government and additional militarized strategies rolled out by state authorities to tackle organized crime (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2019), violence has worsened in the state, including its capital city.

Our study was conducted in and around the city of Morelia, the capital of Michoacán. In 2018, Morelia registered 26 intentional homicides per 100,000 people and the highest rates of home burglaries and business robberies in the state. Based on the most recent wave of the National Survey on Urban Public Safety, in the summer of 2019, 25% of Morelia residents were victims of extortion, 28% were victims of robbery, and 51% heard or witnessed a shooting occur. This takes place within

a context of pervasive impunity. Michoacán ranks third among the 32 states in Mexico in terms of its degree of impunity for homicides: less than 10% of intentional homicides in the state have resulted in incarceration in recent years ([Le Clercq Ortega and Lara, 2018](#)).

Morelia and the surrounding municipalities are home to a range of citizen efforts to prevent and respond to crime. These efforts respond to perceptions of insecurity in Morelia that are well above the national average. Around 80% of Morelia's residents feel unsafe in their neighborhood and 82% consider that violence levels are likely to increase in the near future. Citizen initiatives to address crime include neighborhood watch groups that cooperate with the police and do not punish criminals themselves, a social media personality and political candidate who encourages citizens to apprehend criminals and film confessions for public consumption, and more formal citizen vigilante authorities with established codes for how accused criminals are dealt with in their neighborhoods.

4 Research Design

4.1 Semi-structured qualitative interviews

We developed a methodology based on multi-session, semi-structured interviews to collect rich information on emotions, beliefs and preferences. This open-ended format has several advantages. First, it enables us to capture a wider range of thought processes and opinions than a close-ended questionnaire, including those that are unanticipated at the outset of the research. Second, open-ended personal narratives allow us to observe how individuals work through normative ambivalence.

One disadvantage of our approach is that it does not enable us to test for causal relationships between types of moral reasoning and preferences. Perhaps most importantly, our interviews capture both justifications and motivations, following the typology developed by [Moncada \(2017\)](#). Nevertheless, we think that this drawback is outweighed by the importance of capturing moral reasoning processes in the words of the people who actually live these decisions. They also provide insight into the justifications for extralegal violence that state and non-state leaders may exploit in

support of pro-punitive policies and practices.

Our interviews were broken into two sessions. The first was a 20-minute session of primarily close-ended questions, and the second was a two-hour session involving open-ended questions following a semi-structured guide. We draw on the first session primarily for measures of individual characteristics. In the second session, we asked participants about recent incidents of violence and crime in their community and their desired responses. Interviewers discussed each event in detail before moving on. Interviewers initially asked participants to volunteer experienced crimes, and then asked about specific types of crime if the interviewee had not already raised them, including extortion, theft, and homicide. This section of the interview forms the basis of our 570 crime events.²

We took steps to minimize the risk that participants would feel pressured to provide particular responses. First, we trained our interviewers to present as neutral, interested, and sympathetic regardless of what the interviewee said. We reinforced these practices during a ten-day training that involved multiple days of field-based practice and feedback. Second, we measured the “meta-data”, such as discomfort or perceived insincerity, that can indicate social desirability bias (Fujii, 2010).³

4.2 Sampling

We used a multi-stage sampling strategy to identify participants who could provide particularly rich data. We sought participants who both had relevant personal experiences and were willing and able to discuss them in detail. In the first stage, we identified five communities affected by violence, but that were also secure enough that interviewers could safely conduct interviews and return to Morelia each night.

Within each community, we recruited 7-12 participants representing a mix of genders and ages. We recruited at least half of participants through a random walk method, and the rest through referrals. At the end of the recruitment questionnaire, interviewers scheduled the longer follow-up interview within a few days. In total we recruited 78 individuals to complete the initial interview and 66 completed the second.⁴

4.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were a principal concern in our research design (Baron and Young, 2020). The main risks associated with this study involved the possibility of emotional distress and retaliation against participants or research staff. The main potential benefits were satisfaction with sharing opinions and experiences. To determine whether the balance between risks and benefits was justifiable, we consulted local Catholic Church staff, security experts, NGOs, and survey firm leadership while planning our fieldwork. During fieldwork we took additional steps to minimize and monitor risks in four areas: prevention of emotional distress, prevention of retribution, prevention of secondary trauma, and implementation of a rigorous consent process.

To mitigate the risk of distress during interviews, we hired a local trauma specialist to train our interviewers on contextually relevant signs of emotional distress, and strategies to prevent distress from escalating. Interviewees were also provided with the contact information of a reliable, free tele-counseling and referral service.

To prevent retaliation, we trained interviewers to recognize and prevent sharing of identifying information during the interviews. To monitor the actual incidence of longer-term potential risks associated with participating in the study, we solicited impressions of the study's afterlife from our local contacts. We kept audio files encrypted and deleted them from devices shortly after each interview.

To prevent secondary trauma of field staff, our trauma specialist provided ongoing support to the interviewers in pre- and post-study group sessions. These sessions involved emotional support and training in identifying and protecting against secondary trauma. The trauma specialist also made herself available to field staff by phone throughout the study.

Ensuring that participation was truly informed and voluntary was another important ethical consideration. Because the interview was carried out in two parts, participants had the chance to opt out of the more intensive follow-up interview after experiencing the interview content. They went through a second abridged consent process before the second interview.

4.4 Coding interview content

For our quantitative analysis we converted our interview transcripts into individual crime events. From these we further coded crime characteristics, types of moral reasoning, and punishment preferences for each crime event. Using the research software Dedoose, research assistants coded transcripts following a codebook.⁵ Appendix Table 5 summarizes our coding categories.

Our outcome variable of interest is whether a participant says that they would prefer an extralegal physical or lethal response to a particular crime event. Lethal responses, whether carried out by state agents or community members, are coded as extralegal lethal.⁶ Other physical responses such as non-lethal beatings or torture are also included in our outcome variable in some specifications. Our coding of a preferred response as legal or extralegal are based on whether the response was legal under Mexican law at the time of the interviews, rather than whether the participant explicitly stated that they wanted to carry out a response legally or extralegally. Non-physical, legal responses are the default category. This includes jail time, community service, rehabilitation, or no response at all. Our outcome variable thus captures a particularly severe subset of what [Bateson \(2020\)](#) defines as vigilantism, by focusing only on violent extralegal punishment of offenses.

Two research assistants independently coded each anonymized transcript. All research assistants were masters or advanced undergraduate students at leading Mexican universities. PIs reviewed the coding of initial transcripts, and held weekly meetings with the coders. Because we had two independent coders score each interview, we can calculate a measure of inter-rater reliability (IRR). Because each coder identified both the excerpt itself, and the tags associated with that excerpt, a first step in calculating the IRR is identifying which excerpts from the two coders identify the same unit. 16% of our crime event excerpts could be exactly matched across the two sets of coders. For this 16%, the IRRs range from .86 to .99. Appendix C.2 presents a complete analysis of the reliability of our coding process.

5 Summary statistics

Before we present our substantive analysis, we describe our sample. We have two levels in our data: 62 individuals who discussed 570 unique crime events. Table 1 presents individual summary statistics for each of the six communities included in our sample.

Table 1: Individual-level summary statistics

	Locality Codes					
	A	B*	C	D	E*	F
Interviewees (N)	11	10	12	10	7	12
% Female	0.73	0.40	0.33	0.40	0.71	0.50
% 18-39 years old	0.55	0.50	0.92	0.30	0.43	0.67
% 40-59 years old	0.45	0.40	0.08	0.50	0.29	0.33
% 60+ years old	0.00	0.10	0.00	0.20	0.29	0.00
% Married	0.82	0.40	0.17	0.70	0.71	0.58
% HS Degree	0.36	0.60	0.17	0.40	0.00	0.42
% Social Aid	0.36	0.20	0.58	0.60	0.57	0.50
% Traumatic Life Event	0.55	0.70	0.42	0.40	1.00	0.58
% PTSD	0.18	0.40	0.42	0.20	0.57	0.50
Confidence in Govt. (Mean)	1.52	1.40	1.66	1.35	1.15	1.24

* Communities B and E are neighborhoods within the capital city of Michoacán. The other four municipalities are largely rural and within a one-hour drive of the capital.

Across our six communities, we conducted full interviews with between 7 and 12 participants. Women made up between 33 and 71% of our participants by community. There was some variation in the age profile of participants, with the sample skewing younger in C and F. A sizable proportion of our sample in every community reported having experienced a traumatic life experience, and between 0 and 1/3 met the standard threshold for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to a traumatic event. Finally, on the attitudinal measures of confidence in government, the average responses across eight government institutions vary from 1.15 to 1.66 (on a four-point scale of 0 to 3, which higher values indicating more confidence) across the six communities.

Table 2 presents summary statistics for the 570 unique crime events in our dataset. On average, our participants discussed just over 11 unique crime events in each interview.

Table 2 shows that on average each of our crime events is about 840 words long. Word counts

Table 2: Crime event summary statistics

	MEAN	SD	MIN	MAX
Number of Words	842.23	685.37	20.00	4820.00
MR: Deontological	0.44	0.50	0.00	1.00
MR: Consequentialist	0.21	0.41	0.00	1.00
MR: Dehumanization	0.06	0.24	0.00	1.00
MR: Empathic	0.04	0.20	0.00	1.00
Relationship: Personal	0.23	0.42	0.00	1.00
Relationship: Heard/Witnessed	0.42	0.49	0.00	1.00
Relationship: Hypothetical	0.35	0.48	0.00	1.00
Crime: Physical Violence	0.58	0.49	0.00	1.00
Preferred Response: Lethal	0.13	0.33	0.00	1.00
Preferred Response: Any Physical	0.24	0.43	0.00	1.00

exclude interviewer speech. There is a significant range, with the shortest crime event excerpt at just 20 words and the longest at almost 5000. Deontological moral reasoning is identified the most frequently, with an average of 0.44 episodes of deontological moral reasoning for each crime event. There are also on average 0.21 episodes of consequentialist moral reasoning, 0.06 episodes of dehumanization, and 0.04 episodes of humanizing or empathetic moral reasoning in the crime excerpts. About one in five of the crime episodes discussed in the interviews were personally experienced (by the participant or an immediate family member), two in five were crimes that occurred in their community, and almost two in five were general or hypothetical crimes. More than half of the crimes discussed involved physical violence. Respondents ultimately said that they preferred a lethal punishment in 13% of the crimes discussed, and a physical punishment (including lethal punishments but also torture or other physical abuse) in 24%. Respondents did not identify a preferred response in about 150 identified crime events. These were often hypothetical crimes mentioned in passing during the interview and are dropped from the dataset.

6 Analysis

6.1 Moral reasoning and punishment preferences

Are certain types of moral reasoning correlated with a preference for harsh punishments, even when those punishments are extralegal? In this section we test for correlations between the type of moral reasoning used in discussions of a crime and whether participants want the crime to be punished with physical violence.

Our outcome variable is an indicator for whether a participant wanted a harsh physical punishment for a particular crime. We construct two versions of this variable and show results for both: one that takes a value of 1 if the respondent prefers a lethal punishment for a particular crime, and a second that takes a value of 1 if the respondent preferred either a lethal or non-lethal physical punishment. The death penalty and other physical punishments are illegal in Mexico, so these variables also indicate support for an extrajudicial response.

Before presenting analyses that take into account when various types of moral reasoning are used, we present a bivariate analysis. Figure 1 breaks our data down into cases where each type of moral reasoning was used, and then calculates the percent of those events in which the interviewee preferred a lethal or any physical response. Starting from the left, the figure shows that when an interviewee uses deontological moral reasoning to discuss a crime response, they prefer a lethal response in 17% of cases, and a physical response (including lethal violence) in 31% of cases. By contrast, when an interviewee uses consequentialist moral reasoning, they prefer a lethal response in 25% of cases, and a non-lethal physical response in 43% of cases. This bivariate analysis therefore suggests that consequentialist reasoning is more predictive of a preference for harsh punishment than deontological reasoning. However, both deontological and consequentialist reasoning are less predictive of a preference for lethal punishment than dehumanization: when an interviewee uses dehumanizing moral reasoning, they prefer a lethal response in 78% of cases, and a generally physical response in a full 92% of cases. Finally, when interviewees express empathy with the perpetrators of crime they are least likely to prefer a harsh response.

Figure 1 suggests that interviewees are most likely to prefer a punitive response when they

Figure 1: Proportion of crime events in which a lethal or physical response was preferred, by type of moral reasoning used

use dehumanizing moral reasoning, and to a lesser extent consequentialist reasoning. Do those correlations hold up to controls for some of the factors that might make different types of moral reasoning and response preferences more likely? Since our outcome variable is binary and we are interested in characteristics that vary both at the individual level and across the specific type of crime, we then use a multilevel logit model (Gelman and Hill, 2006). In our application, the unit level is the crime event and the group level is the respondent. We use a varying-intercept, fixed-slope model to estimate the following specification:

$$Pr(y_i = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(MR_i\beta + X_i\gamma + \alpha_{j[i]}), \text{ for } i = 1, \dots, n,$$

Here, i denotes the specific crime event and $j[i]$ indexes individual j discussing crime i . Our independent variables of interest are MR_i , the four types of moral reasoning used in the discussion of a specific crime event (deontological, consequentialist, dehumanization and empathy). X_i is a

matrix of crime event control variables, including the number of words used by the respondent to discuss a particular crime event. We also incorporate individual-level characteristics to model the intercept α for each participant:

$$\alpha_j \sim N(U_j\gamma, \sigma_\alpha^2), \text{ for } j = 1, \dots, 62$$

where U is a matrix of individual-level characteristics and σ_α is the standard deviation of the individual-level errors. We also include individual-level characteristics and the individual-level means of our event-level variables in some specifications as controls.⁷

Table 3: Types of moral reasoning are correlated with a preference for harsh physical punishments

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>									
	Lethal Punishment					Any Physical Punishment				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
MR: Deontological	0.56 (0.38)	0.32 (0.39)	0.55 (0.45)	0.64 (0.48)	0.81* (0.48)	0.56** (0.26)	0.44* (0.27)	0.55** (0.28)	0.60** (0.29)	0.81*** (0.30)
MR: Consequentialist	1.33*** (0.37)	1.38*** (0.38)	1.41*** (0.41)	1.46*** (0.42)	1.19*** (0.46)	1.20*** (0.27)	1.18*** (0.27)	1.14*** (0.28)	1.16*** (0.28)	1.08*** (0.31)
MR: Dehumanization	4.87*** (0.74)	4.90*** (0.74)	4.77*** (0.79)	4.84*** (0.81)	4.53*** (0.85)	4.00*** (0.67)	4.02*** (0.67)	3.77*** (0.67)	3.79*** (0.67)	3.49*** (0.68)
MR: Empathy	-0.07 (0.87)	0.002 (0.87)	-0.08 (0.94)	-0.04 (0.94)	0.22 (0.98)	0.28 (0.56)	0.22 (0.55)	0.20 (0.56)	0.22 (0.57)	0.64 (0.61)
Individual Controls		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Crime Controls			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Word Count				✓	✓				✓	✓
Group Means					✓					✓
Observations	570	550	550	550	550	570	550	550	550	550
Log Likelihood	-153.47	-143.51	-127.78	-127.60	-121.56	-256.06	-241.46	-233.12	-234.77	-223.37
AIC	318.95	315.02	289.55	291.20	293.13	524.11	510.92	506.24	505.53	496.74
BIC	345.02	375.36	362.82	368.78	400.88	550.19	571.26	592.44	583.11	604.49

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Models estimated using a varying-intercept multilevel logit model. The unit of analysis is the crime event. Continuous variables (age, children, confidence in the state, word count) are standardized.

Table 3 shows that, contrary to recent literature suggesting that deliberate weighing of costs and benefits can reduce violence, consequentialist moral reasoning is strongly associated with both measures of preference for harsh, physical punishment. Averaging across our interviewees, the predicted probabilities from the estimations in Column 4 of Table 3 imply that using consequentialist moral reasoning more than triples the average marginal probability of preferring a lethal punishment from 4% to 13%, holding other variables at their means or modes. Deontological reasoning is also

positively correlated with a preference for harsh punishment, but the relationship is smaller and less consistently significant. The correlation between consequentialist reasoning and a preference for harsh, illegal punishments changes little with the addition of individual- and crime-level controls.

Two main expressions of consequentialist reasoning were associated with preferences for punitive violence in this context. First, a number of participants expressed that harsh punishments, such as castration for rape or capital punishment for a variety of crimes, would incapacitate repeat offenders and thus reduce future crime. Multiple participants cited capital punishment as their preferred response to prevent future crime, particularly for murder and kidnapping. For *sicarios*, “as I told you, they are already *sicarios*, and if you give them jail time, if they leave, they will continue working [as assassins]. Few people can change [...] they are *sicarios* and they are going to be *sicarios*” (11A). Another suggested, “if they have already killed several people, I feel that they deserve to die, because if you give them jail time and they escape, they are going to continue doing the same thing, but to avoid that [...] you reduce a little more [the number of] those people, just like that.” (10C).

Second, many participants indicated a belief that severe punishments are effective deterrents of crime because they induce fear of the consequences of potential transgressions or intimidate perpetrators by signalling collective efficacy to punish criminal behavior. Participants cited both state and non-state punitive violence as deterrents: “[to prevent future crime], for example, uniting among the entire community, so that when one sees a person, a kidnapper or a rapist, if one takes justice into their own hands and then those guys realize that the whole community is united to defend ourselves, well I think that would be good...I think [the community] would be safer, because as the whole community comes together, they see that we are all together and they think about it, with fear, that the same thing will happen to them” (2C). Another participant suggested the community is safer with self-help justice as potential perpetrators become aware of the likelihood of extralegal punishments: “we know which neighbor does indeed help. By taking justice into our own hands, thieves also know that they are not going to get out of here alive, so in that way we do help each other” (1A).

While consequentialist reasoning was generally associated with support for harsh punishments, participants who used consequentialist reasoning but rejected punitive violence tended to focus on

its costs. One participant said that even for a crime like kidnapping, she would not favor punitive violence because of the possibility that it could set off a cycle of violence. In her words, “I would not like [the response] to be with violence, because the truth is violence brings about more violence and more violence, so I don’t know, [the crime should be punished] with jail time.” This participant recognized that violence could have benefits for the victim, but she saw these benefits as outweighed by the risk that “we will never end it, violence brings more violence and more violence” (10E). By contrast, participants who used consequentialist reasoning and favored punitive violence were more likely not to mention any potential costs.

Deontological reasoning was the most common form of moral reasoning in our interviews, occurring in 45% of the excerpts.⁸ Deontological reasoning was used to describe preferences for physical and lethal punishments, on the one hand, and commitments to the rule of law, on the other, including rehabilitation for perpetrators. For example, pro-punitive deontological arguments advanced used the moral imperative of retribution to justify lynching: “I feel that if you have already killed several people, I feel that you also deserve to die as well...” (10C). Other participants using deontological reasoning for harsh punishments emphasized the need for perpetrators to “pay” for what they had done (7A) and to experience themselves the same or similar forms of harm that they had caused others, such as physical abuse in jail, particularly in the case of sexual abuse of children (3C).

Other deontological arguments for punitive violence emphasized the moral imperative to protect the law-abiding “community” or “neighbors” against criminal outsiders when the state does not do so. These arguments revealed a view of the “community” as a kind of identity group. Multiple participants highlighted a duty to protect the community, not only because it would be an effective deterrent, but also because it was right to act in solidarity with neighbors against criminals. Accused criminals themselves were often framed as geographic “outsiders,” although this term seemed to apply to those who found themselves outside the community’s moral instead of physical boundaries. Some participants even recognized that this view of a moralized community introduced a risk that innocent “outsiders” might be misperceived as criminals and targeted with violence (10E).

However, participants also used deontological reasoning to explain their preferences for less punitive responses to crime and for due process. To address house theft, one participant reflected that there should be “several steps” so that the justice system could reform criminals into “productive” members of society. In her words, this should involve training incarcerated individuals in a trade, because “just as they should be punished, they should also have a second chance to join the productive part of life and society, without harming it again, only” (15A). This quote exemplifies a deontological view that those who have served time also deserve the right to participate in society. Similarly, reflecting on self-help justice, one participant described that she is against it despite knowing that the formal justice system is ineffective and believing that lynching might make her community safer because she is committed to the rule of law. She argued that an accused criminal “also has the right, as I said, to be tried in court. You cannot give a verdict to a person, to a criminal; not on my part, for that there are laws, for the laws to act against that person... People get tired and they go to those extremes [lynching], but I do not see that it is correct” (13C). One participant argued that while lynching does indeed seem like an effective deterrent to crime, her moral opposition to lynching overrode any consequentialist reasoning, remarking that “at the same time [it’s] bad because then [lynchers] are going to commit another crime” (9F).

Moral reasoning that dehumanizes the perpetrator is also very strongly associated with a preference for a lethal punishment. When dehumanizing moral reasoning is used, the probability of preferring a lethal punishment implied by the analysis in Column 5 of Table 3 jumps from 4% to 81%. This result is in line with the expectation that dehumanizing moral reasoning would be used to justify extremely harsh punishments. By contrast, expressing empathy for accused perpetrators is not significantly associated with the likelihood of supporting harsh physical punishments.

Dehumanizing justifications accompanied support for lethal punishments by state authorities, other incarcerated perpetrators, and ordinary citizens. Some dehumanization was expressed as a belief that perpetrators of crime could never be reformed. One participant preferred the death penalty for accused rapists and kidnappers, and explained this preference by arguing that they “are irredeemable, to be able to integrate them into society” (18B). Another suggested that those who are members of organized criminal groups committing extortion and murder should be punished with

the death penalty because “there are people who can no longer improve, eh? They no longer have ... there’s no longer a fix, already criminals” (6F). In other cases dehumanization involved explicitly reducing accused perpetrators to animals or to mechanistic processes. One respondent justified capital punishment for accused murders as the appropriate response, likening perpetrators to rabid dogs: “as my grandmother used to say, when the dog dies the rabies ends” (10C). In another case, a respondent argued that a mother accused of infanticide should be killed in jail because when crimes like infanticide occur, “it is always better, it is preferable that such a type of person doesn’t exist, to contaminate or intoxicate other people” (22B). It is notable that individuals using dehumanizing moral reasoning also invoked both deontological and consequentialist reasoning. Many of the previous examples involve the consequentialist logic that violence by dehumanized individuals could be stopped by killing them. However, in other cases such as the discussion of infanticide in interview 22B, dehumanizing reasoning was used in conjunction with deontological arguments that perpetrators should suffer the pain that they had themselves inflicted on others before an eventual lethal punishment.

Other participants explicitly rejected the logic of dehumanization, instead emphasizing perpetrators’ inherent humanity: “because they are, I tell you, they are human beings, and no one is perfect and we all make mistakes, whether it be even the most criminal person in the world or the best person in the world, we all make mistakes. We are nobody to judge them and to let them die at that moment, and if we are there and we can shake hands, we have to shake hands, whomever it is” (13B). Another interviewee emphasized that she worked with the mother of a boy who broke into her house out of empathy to come to an agreement about documenting a “precedent” instead of a harsh punishment. She reflected: “I saw his mother, and I said, well, it feels bad. I consider myself to be a person, human, and I change... maybe if he regretted what he did at that moment, maybe after awhile he will say ‘no well, they did all this for me and it works for me, I am going to dedicate myself to such and such’” (7A).

Overall, the evidence from our interviews suggests that support for punitive violence is often driven by consequentialist calculations that harsh punishments are the best way to prevent future offenses and is strongly related to dehumanization. Deontological moral reasoning is also predictive

of support for harsh punishments, but the relationship is less robust and smaller in magnitude than that with consequentialism. These findings on deontological and consequentialist reasoning cut against recent studies that have argued that more deliberative consequentialist calculations can push people toward non-lethal responses, even in high violence contexts. Our content analysis suggests that common forms of deontological reasoning may underlie both preferences for and against harsh punishments. It also suggests that future research should investigate whether individuals using consequentialist reasoning support punitive violence when they over-estimate the effectiveness of punitive violence or heavily discount the future. The correlation between dehumanizing moral reasoning and a preference for lethal punishments is in line with existing theory that dehumanization enables interviewees to break strong norms against lethal violence. Our findings suggest that dehumanization can facilitate violence even outside of situations of intergroup conflict.

6.2 Interpretation and robustness

Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis we have shown how individuals in a high-crime, low rule-of-law setting use moral reasoning to decide on appropriate punishments for different crimes. This multi-method approach lets participants describe crime and crime responses in their own words, without imposing the frames or categories of a close-ended survey or experiment. It allows us to capture individuals' preferences over violations to which they have personal or second-hand relationships, rather than just hypothetical scenarios or broad categories. Finally, by using both a quantitative analysis of a small number of important variables, and a more traditional qualitative content analysis, we can test hypotheses generated from existing theory and explore unanticipated patterns.

The correlations presented here are not evidence of causal relationships. Additional tests should be done using experimental methods to test whether types of moral reasoning are actually causally related to a preference for harsh punishments. However, there are some reasons to believe that these correlations may be driven by causal relationships. First, in our quantitative analysis, the coefficients on types of moral reasoning are robust and quite stable with the inclusion of individual- and crime-level controls. This suggests that at least the most obvious potential confounding factors

are not driving the observed correlations. One concern might be that exposure to violence is driving both the type of moral reasoning used and the punishment preference. However, the coefficients on moral reasoning types are robust to including a measure of exposure to a traumatic violent event, and whether a respondent is experiencing symptoms associated with PTSD. They are also robust to including an indicator of whether the specific crime being discussed by the respondent involves physical violence. Finally, because we asked all participants about a list of important crime types, there is limited variation in the types of crimes that each individual is discussing. In addition, our qualitative analysis illustrates plausible causal links between types of moral reasoning and crime response preferences.

A second concern is that these results could be driven by social desirability bias. As discussed in Section 4, we used a number of practices to make participants feel comfortable expressing opinions for and against punitive violence. We ultimately think that the social and political context at the time of our interviews provided little pressure to hide or embellish support for harsh punishments. Both citizens and opinion leaders in our context discuss legal and extralegal punishments openly.⁹ Recent surveys also show that it is not taboo for citizens to talk about support for vigilantism (García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2018; Schedler, 2018). We were also concerned that participants might believe that more a dramatic narrative of events would be more desirable in this research and try to please the interviewer by embellishing events. However, even if some participants were keen to invent “untruthful” narratives about crime events, follow up questions asking participants how these events make them feel and preferences about responses can reveal sincere emotional experience and moral convictions (Fujii, 2010).

Finally, the fact that these discussions were captured during interviews raises questions about whether they are deliberation or justification. Psychologists who study moral reasoning are divided over the general role that cognition plays in the formation of moral preferences: some argue that moral reasoning is always used simply to justify a decision made at a more emotional or intuitive level (Haidt, 2001), while others have shown that at least in some circumstances people actually reason through moral decisions (Pizarro and Bloom, 2003; Paxton and Greene, 2010). This is a deeper question about how moral reasoning actually works than we can tackle in this article, and

one that we hope will be studied in the context of support for punitive violence using careful controlled experiments.

7 Elite Rhetoric

Our analysis shows that consequentialist and dehumanizing moral reasoning are associated with preferences for punitive violence in a sample of citizens in and around Morelia. To what extent might these patterns in citizen preferences help us understand policy outcomes or the incidence of punitive violence? We largely leave this question to future research, but one way of beginning to assess the connection to violent events or policy outcomes would be to test whether these patterns travel to an elite sample. In this section we present some analysis of elite social media rhetoric showing that elites, including politicians and an organized pro-vigilante civil society group in Morelia, do indeed use a wide range of moral reasoning types. The main patterns observed in our citizen interviews, including the wide range of arguments made with deontological reasoning, and the association of consequentialism and dehumanization with support for punitive violence, may replicate in some elite rhetoric on Facebook.

To explore how Mexican political elites frame criminal justice we gathered social media data from 2019 from President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) from the MORENA party, and the popular vigilante movement Revolución Social. We chose these two elites because AMLO is arguably the politician with the most control over criminal justice policy in Mexico, and Revolución Social is responsible for a number of citizen efforts to prevent and respond to crime in Morelia, including in some cases violent punishment. In the Appendix we also present data from two other politicians that control criminal justice policy in and around Morelia, Michoacán's Governor, Silvano Aureoles Conejo (PRD), and the Mayor of Morelia, Raúl Morón Orozco (MORENA).

The social media data comes from the official Facebook pages of AMLO and Revolución Social. Using Facebook's CrowdTangle platform, we searched posts that were crime related using key search terms.¹⁰ We collected 601 total posts, of which 87% were confirmed to be crime related. We then coded each post using the same moral reasoning frameworks as the in-depth interviews. The

distribution of moral reasoning in posts by AMLO and Revolución Social are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Elite Rhetoric Moral Reasoning Summary Statistics

	# of Posts	Deont.	Conseq.	Dehuman.	Empathy	Nothing
President AMLO	57	44%	19%	0%	0%	42%
Revolución Social	463	5%	9%	6%	0%	82%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive

A few things are clear from the table. First, there's considerable variation in how much AMLO versus Revolución Social used consequentialist versus deontological reasoning when discussing crime. AMLO was much more likely to use deontological reasoning. Many of his posts emphasized the importance of justice (*justicia*) and humanism (*humanismo*). In contrast, posts by Revolución Social contained similar amounts of deontological, consequentialist, and dehumanizing rhetoric.

These patterns in moral reasoning across AMLO and Revolución Social are coupled with differences in the types of criminal justice policies that AMLO and Revolución Social pursue. Revolución Social sends out alerts for crimes that have happened, advocates for victims of crimes, and supports harsh punishments for criminals and corrupt members of the legal system gives priority to the human rights of criminals. This social movement claims that the justice system gives priority to the protection of criminals' human rights, to the detriment of justice for the victims and public security. In words of Guillermo Valencia, the leader of Revolución Social, "justice for the victims must always be above the law and this is what the movement seeks."¹¹ Revolución Social's tendency to use dehumanizing and consequentialist moral reasoning to call for punitive violence echoes some of the findings in our citizen sample.

By contrast, AMLO's largely deontological rhetoric has emphasized the need of a moral transformation of the state to eradicate corruption and violence (Hanrahan and Aroch Fugellie, 2019). AMLO coined the phrase "abrazos no balazos" (hugs not bullets) to describe his approach towards public security. The presidential rhetoric does not explicitly support or oppose punitive violence. Instead, it underscores the importance of punishing morally wrong acts. In practice, the criminal justice policies adopted during AMLO's administration have contributed to further

militarize Mexico's public security (Felbab-Brown, 2019). This similarly echoes the diversity of ways that deontological reasoning was used to advocate for and against punitive violence in our interviews.

This preliminary analysis shows that there is significant variation in the way that elites employ moral reasoning frames when they talk about crime and punishment. It provides suggestive evidence that the patterns observed in our citizen sample might help explain the positions of elites with more influence over the occurrence of violence events or government criminal justice policy. The diversity of moral reasoning in the rhetoric of popular elites also suggests that citizens receive a wide range of different moral reasoning frames from elites. In the appendix we further show that the moral explanations behind crime and violence are important for driving attention and engagement, suggesting that moral reasoning frames may be used to generate electoral advantages or to build support for violence.

8 Conclusion

In this article we have shown how individuals living in violent contexts make difficult decisions about how to respond to crime. The evidence from our semi-structured interviews supports the view that how people talk about crime responses is associated with their preferences over punishments. Conditional on characteristics of individuals and crime events, the style of moral reasoning that individuals employ when discussing their preferred response to a crime is strongly predictive of whether they favor punitive violence.

The results provide support for some theories in the existing literature, and raise some new questions. As expected based on the existing literature, individuals who dehumanize criminals are much more supportive of harsh, physical punishments. In addition, there is evidence that deontological reasoning is associated with support for harsh punishments, although the correlation is less robust. Our qualitative analysis shows that deontological reasoning is extremely common and takes a variety of forms, including arguments that harsh punishments are morally wrong. Finally, our interviews show little reason to believe that consequentialist moral reasoning can prevent

support for punitive violence. In fact, in this context using consequentialist moral reasoning is actually associated with support for a harsher response to a crime.

Two of our findings are especially worth further discussion. First, our finding that consequentialist reasoning is associated with more support for punitive violence raises questions about how individuals perceive and weigh the costs and benefits of punitive violence. Are individuals' perceptions of the costs and benefits of punitive violence accurate? Why do some people perceive that punitive violence has few costs, while for other the risks of it are too high? It is possible that different individuals face different costs. However, it is also possible that they differ in how much they discount future versus present welfare, or overestimate benefits and underestimate costs of punitive violence. Our findings here echo some past research on the importance of efficacy beliefs in support for torture in the U.S. (Houck et al., 2019). Future research should investigate the accuracy and roots of the beliefs in the efficacy and costs of punitive violence, and whether support for it is related to steeper discounting of future welfare.

Second, our findings show the importance of separately investigating deontological and dehumanizing moral reasoning. Some past research on sacred values has conceptualized deontological reasoning as inextricably connected with dehumanization (Atran, Axelrod and Davis, 2007; Atran and Ginges, 2015). Individuals identify with a group, sacralize their values as moral imperatives, and then dehumanize the outgroup. We find that dehumanization has an independent effect on support for punitive violence, and can play into either deontological or consequentialist arguments in favor of it.

Our findings also shed light on a more methodological point. They suggest that researchers trying to understand support for punitive violence should analyze arguments both for and against violence. Our data suggests that deontological reasoning is more commonly used than consequentialist reasoning in arguments in favor of violence – but since it is also very common in arguments against violence it is actually not highly predictive of support for punitive violence. In this way, our analysis highlights the benefits of combining both qualitative and quantitative text analysis to analyze interview data.

Ultimately, these results contribute to our understanding of cycles of violence—a central ques-

tion in the social sciences, and one that has real-world relevance for millions of people living with crime and impunity. Our findings imply that policymakers who want to interrupt the cycle of violence must address two issues. The first task is to humanize, or at least break the tendency to dehumanize, accused perpetrators of crime. The second policy step is to build and reform state capacity so that perpetrators of crime as well as participants in vigilante acts are held accountable for their actions. Without these changes, we suspect that rough justice will continue to be supported by large proportions of the population.

Notes

¹See Mary Beth Sheridan (2020, December 3) “La búsqueda de los desaparecidos apunta a algunos de los secretos más oscuros de México.” *The Washington Post* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/mexico-losing-control/mexico-desaparecidos-narcotrafico/>

²We also asked introductory questions, and a final set of more general questions about crime and justice.

³See Appendix G for the interviewer observation and debrief questionnaire.

⁴Two female participants could not complete the second interview due to restrictions from male family members. Three second interviews had to be cancelled by field staff due to security concerns in one locality; another second interview was cancelled due to scheduling incompatibilities; four participants declined to complete the second interview; two participants could not be interviewed after multiple attempts. Audio recordings of two interviews were not successful and recruitment questionnaires for two participants were not registered.

⁵See Appendix ?? for the codebook.

⁶Capital punishment was formally abolished in Mexico in 2005.

⁷Varying-intercept models require the assumption that level-1 independent variables be uncorrelated with the random effects term. Violating this assumption can introduce bias into estimates of coefficients and uncertainty. Following (Bafumi and Gelman, 2006) and (Bartels, N.d.), we include individual-level means of event-level variables in some of our specifications to remove the correlation between the individual-level error and event-level predictor.

⁸In 12% of our crime events, participants used both deontological and consequentialist reasoning, supporting the idea that these two modes of reasoning represent two distinct categories on a spectrum of moral reasoning.

⁹For instance, in the most recent presidential election, independent candidate “El Bronco” repeatedly suggested that corrupt officials’ hands should be cut off, and the national Green Party campaigned on the reinstatement of the death penalty.

¹⁰Search terms: crimen, violencia, narcos, policia, inseguridad, corrupcion, justicia, delito, delincuencia, delincuente, seguridad.

¹¹Guillermo Valencia on Facebook Livestream. (2019, July 10). See <https://noticieros.televisa.com/ultimas-noticias/revolucion-social-grupo-civiles-detecta-delincuentes-michoacan/>

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