Who is to blame? Youth crime and attribution of responsibility in urban Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Crime and violence threaten people's safety and overall well-being around the globe. Youths represent a large fraction of the victims and perpetrators of violent crime. Understanding how youths make judgments about criminal acts and attribute blame has important implications, as these patterns are associated with perceptions of the acceptability of criminal behavior. Drawing on standard theories of blame attribution, we investigate the causal attributions of responsibility for criminal behavior among youths in urban Mexico, distinguishing between *internal* blame (attributed to the perpetrator) and *external* blame (attributed to the government and society). Using a novel, face-to-face survey experiment with nearly 3000 Mexicans aged 16–29 and seven focus groups, we examine how the perpetrator's socioeconomic background, role within a gang, victim type, and crime severity influence assessments of blame attribution. Our results provide compelling evidence that the socioeconomic status of the perpetrator and the type of gang involvement significantly influence assessments of internal and external blame. We also find that blame allocation differs based on respondents' characteristics and community environment. These findings shed light on how youths rationalize criminal behavior and have clear implications for policy-relevant research concerning crime and violence among youths.

1. Introduction

Criminal violence is a global security threat (Barnes, 2017; UNODC, 2019; van Dijk, Nieuwbeerta, & Joudo Larsen, 2022) and a major public health issue across the Americas (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009; Hyder, Ambrosio, García-Ponce, & Barberia, 2022). Youths represent a large fraction of the victims and perpetrators of violent crime worldwide (Hazen & Rodgers, 2014; Sweeten, Piquero, & Steinberg, 2013). In low-capacity states affected by organized crime, youths from disadvantaged backgrounds comprise a highly vulnerable population—they are often targets of violence and recruitment by criminal organizations (Chioda, 2017; Rizzo, 2003). How do young people justify crime, and who do they hold accountable for their peers' criminal conduct? Addressing this question has significant implications for mitigating violence and fostering peace in today's world. In this study, we explore how young individuals attribute responsibility for criminal acts in Mexico, one of many countries in Latin America confronting unparalleled levels of organized criminal violence (Lessing, 2017; Rivera, 2016; Yashar, 2018).

Understanding patterns of attribution of responsibility can help us unpack how youths contextualize their peers' involvement in crime and how they may justify their own crime engagement (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Lenzi et al., 2015; Wood, 2014). Causal attributions of blame or responsibility (often used as interchangeable terms in the literature) are associated with beliefs about the acceptability of criminal behavior. Whether youths deflect blame for crime to external actors, such as the government and society, or consider peer perpetrators to be internally responsible for their conduct can impact their willingness to engage in criminal activities (DeLisi et al., 2014). Furthermore, understanding the perceived responsibility of external actors is crucial to design better sanctioning frameworks and crime prevention policies (Howell, 2003).

We specifically investigate patterns of blame attribution concerning youth crime and violence in urban settings, situated in the context of Mexico's drug war. Our research design seeks to answer the following pivotal questions: Is crime acceptable in some situations? Are certain actors more blameworthy than others? Who is responsible for youth criminal behavior? Following standard theories of blame attribution (Heider, 1958; McGraw, 1991), we use a mixed-method research design

to elicit causal attributions of blame for criminal behavior. We draw a conceptual distinction between individual agency (Barnes, 2000) and collective forms of responsibility attributed to the government and society (Murphy, 2017; Wringe, 2016), which we refer to as *internal* versus *external* blame, respectively, based on Heider (1958)'s seminal work.

Building upon the prior literature, we propose that the assessment of blame attribution is influenced by context-specific factors, such as socioeconomic status, the type of crime, and gang involvement status. We anticipate that perpetrators from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds will receive greater blame, as disadvantaged individuals are perceived to acquire criminogenic tendencies, thereby restricting the extent to which they can be held accountable for transgressing the law (Lewis, 2016; Tadros, 2009). The perpetrator's role or status within a gang (whether they are a leader or simply following orders) is also likely to impact blame attribution since there is a critical distinction between what a person did and what they were obligated to do (Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992; Rowe, Vonasch, & Turp, 2021). Within this theoretical framework, perpetrators are expected to be judged as more blameworthy when victims of crimes are perceived to be innocent (García-Ponce, Young, & Zeitzoff, 2022) and when the crimes committed are more severe (Bastian, Denson, & Haslam, 2013). To disentangle who, in youths' minds, holds the brunt of the blame, we also investigate the extent to which external actors—the government and society—are perceived as responsible for youth crime. Prior research has shown that individuals often blame external actors (e.g., the government) for violent crime (Iyengar, 1989; Ley, 2017; Romero, Magaloni, & Díaz-Cayeros, 2016).

Our research design consists of two main components. First, we fielded an in-person survey experiment on a representative sample of nearly 3000 youths in urban Mexico. We employed a sophisticated sampling strategy to ensure our sample is not only representative of this population across typical sociodemographic characteristics, but also reflects the heterogeneous crime realities of the country. To test our hypotheses, we include a vignette experiment in which respondents were exposed to a hypothetical story about a recent crime in their municipality. We randomized the perpetrator's socioeconomic upbringing, the type of criminal involvement (leader vs. gang member), the severity of the crime, and the type of victim to understand how youths attribute internal vs external blame, and under which circumstances they might consider it "justifiable" to engage in criminal behavior. Second, we conducted seven focus groups with at-risk youths across urban Mexico. These groups sequentially discussed similar hypothetical scenarios of a peer committing a crime. We gathered qualitative evidence from these deliberations to further understand the mechanisms underlying blame attribution patterns.

We find compelling evidence of two logics of blame attribution, showing that the socioeconomic status of the perpetrator and their role within a gang significantly influence assessments of attribution of responsibility. First, respondents see lower-class perpetrators as less deserving of blame compared to more privileged individuals. Second, if the perpetrator is the leader of a gang instead of following orders from a gang leader, respondents assign more internal blame. In such scenarios, the perpetrator is consistently viewed as more accountable than the state and society. We also find that respondents assign blame differently based on their own personal characteristics and living conditions. For instance, respondents in low-violence communities are more prone to blame the perpetrator for severely violent acts compared to those in high-violence communities. The degree to which respondents attribute external blame based on the perpetrator's socioeconomic status also varies in insecure versus secure communities. These findings indicate that individual exposure to violence in the community influences the attribution of blame, and provide evidence of the normalization of violence in highly insecure areas.

Overall, our study contributes to a better understanding of how youths make sense of criminal behavior. Our findings add to a vast body of research that investigates individuals' attitudes towards the acceptability of crime, which is critical for identifying the factors that contribute to juvenile crime and gang involvement. Several studies provide evidence that material incentives influence crime engagement (Becker, 1996; Draca & Machin, 2015; Ehrlich, 1973; Levitt & Lochner, 2001), while others emphasize the role of non-material motivations (e. g., status or respect in society) and one's social and peer networks (Billings, Deming, & Ross, 2019; Bruce, 2007; Krakowski, 2022; Lindquist & Zenou, 2019; Rodgers, 2017). However, there is still limited understanding as to how youths *rationalize* criminal behavior. This understanding is crucial, as the rationalization of crime is a key predictor of juvenile delinquency (Dembo, Turner, & Jainchill, 2007; Rebellon, Manasse, Van Gundy, & Cohn, 2014; Sutherland, 1972).[1] Our research also underscores important phenomena related to the role of one's own security context, and how individual experiences with crime and insecurity may affect justifications for crime involvement. We show under which circumstances youths are more likely to condemn or justify different crimes, thereby contributing to our understanding of possible motivating factors behind this phenomenon.

More broadly, our study contributes to the growing literature in social sciences that looks at the political and socioeconomic roots of organized criminal groups (OCGs), as well as the mechanisms underlying the production of organized criminal violence (Barnes, 2017). Much of this literature has emphasized the role of political transformations and policy changes as determinants of the escalation of violence, particularly in Latin America (Trejo & Ley, 2020; Yashar, 2018), but there is no evidence about how young individuals (i.e., the population group most susceptible to violence) perceive, and are affected by, their participation in criminal organizations. Our work also sheds light on policy-relevant research in public health concerning youth violence (Jeong, Bhatia, Skeen and Adhia, 2021; Kondo, Andreyeva, South, MacDonald, & Branas, 2018) and adolescent risk factors for criminal behavior (Herrenkohl et al., 2000; Santana-Arias et al., 2021).

2. Attribution of blame for criminal acts

2.1. Why does it matter?

Blame attribution refers to how individuals assign responsibility for a particular action, event, or outcome (Arceneaux, 2003; Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). In the context of criminal acts, blame attribution influences how individuals perceive the causes of crime, who they hold responsible for the crime, and what kinds of punishments or interventions they believe are appropriate. Understanding how youths attribute blame, both to the offender and external actors, can shed light on their perceptions of their peers' involvement in crime. This can help to identify the circumstances under which criminal acts are perceived as permissible and possible rationalizations for self-involvement (Alleyne & Wood, 2010). By examining the mechanisms of blame attribution, we can gain valuable insight into how youths contextualize criminal behavior. Such mechanisms may be associated with narratives of necessity (Sheley & Wright, 1993), economic motivations (Becker, 1996; Ehrlich, 1973), peer or organizational pressure (Glaeser, Sacerdote, & Scheinkman, 1996), or normalization of crime and violence (Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, & Rose-Junius, 2005; Ng-Mak, Stueve, Salzinger, & Feldman, 2002), among others.

The way individuals assign blame for crimes is closely linked to their understanding of societal factors that contribute to criminal involvement, as well as their perceptions of the government's ability to combat crime. Despite its importance, this subject remains understudied. Several studies explicitly interrogate the motives of youth offenders (Craig et al., 2018; Sheley & Wright, 1993), but few have examined how individuals may understand and justify the motivations of their peers. Understanding this process can result in more nuanced considerations

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that are less susceptible to social desirability bias, a factor that often affects assessments of offenders (Tan & Grace, 2008). In addition, understanding how newly eligible and soon-to-be voters assign blame to their government is significant because it impacts several political processes, including voting preferences (Bellucci, 2014; Marsh & Tilley, 2010) and accountability mechanisms across levels of government (Gelineau & Remmer, 2006).

Thus, gaining a deeper understanding of blame attributions—and the motivations behind them— is not only a matter of theoretical interest but also of practical significance. From a policy perspective, understanding how individuals attribute blame for criminal acts can help inform the design and implementation of criminal justice policies in several ways. For example, by understanding how individuals attribute blame for criminal acts, policymakers can identify the underlying causes of crime, the prevalenceofdiscriminatorypracticeswithinthecriminaljusticesystem, and the need for social interventions or institutional reforms. This can lead to more effective, fair, and just criminal justice policies.

2.2. Internal vs external attributions of blame

To investigate patterns of blame attribution among youths, we build upon classical attribution theory, concerned with how individuals explain behaviors and events. The seminal work of Heider (1958) distinguishes between *internal* and *external* attributions. The former refers to causal judgments attributed to an individual, while the latter explains behavior as a result of social and environmental factors. We apply this framework to distinguish between blame placed on the offender and blame attributed to the government and society for criminal acts. In contexts of high crime and violence, external attributions of blame are often linked to governmental and societal responsibility (Subotic, 2011). This is especially applicable in settings that suffer from corruption and impunity, where state institutions often lack legitimacy, and citizens may not always see compliance with the rule as the right thing to do or in their best interest (Jackson, Asif, Bradford, & Zakar, 2014).[2]

The attribution of blame for criminal acts is influenced by a range of contextual and individual-level factors (Gudjonsson, 1984; Gudjonsson & Pétursson, 1991). We draw attention to the identity of the offender, their position within the criminal world, the identity of the victim, and the severity of the crime. Previous research indicates that the offender's socioeconomic status, race, and gender can impact how blame is assigned (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Gibson & Gouws, 1999). Following Lewis (2016), disadvantaged individuals may have incentives to engage in criminal behavior and develop criminogenic tendencies, which can reduce the extent to which their fellow citizens assign blame to them for their actions (as their criminal behavior may be driven by economic necessity). The notion that offenders' motives affect internal blame attribution is supported by Gibson and Gouws (1999), who investigate the willingness of ordinary citizens to blame an individual for violent actions under apartheid in South Africa.[3]

Other scholars have shown that the offender's identity is also tied to external blame attribution mechanisms. In the context of court officials in the United States, more blame is attributed to external forces when perpetrators are white. Officials are more likely to believe white individuals commit crimes because of their circumstances, whereas crimes committed by Black individuals are seen as a result of personal traits

(Bridges & Steen, 1998). Little scholarship appears to investigate the impact of an offender's socioeconomic status on the attribution of external blame. However, related research has found that citizens hold external actors, such as society and the government, responsible for poverty (Iyengar, 1990). This suggests that the offender's identity may also be relevant when assigning external blame.

In addition to the offender's identity, their role in the commission of a crime also impacts how blame is attributed. Shaver (2012) argues that accountability mechanisms, including assessments of causality and responsibility, may affect internal and external blame. The role of the actor (whether they are a leader or taking orders) and the delegation of decision-making, are significant factors as there is a distinction between what a person chose to do and what they were obligated to do (Bartling & Fischbacher, 2012; Gibson & Gouws, 1999; Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992). These considerations are important to understand patterns of attribution of responsibility in cases like Mexico, where crime is often driven by hierarchical criminal organizations.

The type of crime committed also influences blame attribution. Several studies have examined blame assessments made by the offenders themselves. For example, Gudjonsson and Pétursson (1991) find that offenders typically attribute more internal blame to themselves in cases of sexual violence vs. property crime. But there is significant variation in the degree to which they blame external factors. Similarly, the severity of a crime has been studied in relation to victim blaming, with less blame being assigned to the victim for more serious offenses (Felson & Palmore, 2018; Gudjonsson & Pétursson, 1991). This body of work suggests that crime severity may affect both internal and external assessments of blame among observers.

Finally, previous research suggests that the identity of the victim is an important factor in the attribution of responsibility for criminal acts. Many of these studies have looked at victim blaming. For example, in contexts of sexual abuse, research has found that victim age, attractiveness, and history of abuse influence blame attributed to the victim (Rogers, Josey, & Davies, 2007). But such factors are also likely to affect the attribution of blame to the perpetrator (Gibson & Gouws, 1999; Rogers, Hirst, & Davies, 2011). Within this general framework, more blame is expected to be attributed when victims of crimes are perceived to be innocent (García-Ponce et al., 2022). There has been limited research on whether individuals believe that the government and society share responsibility for safeguarding particular types of victims from crime. However, several studies have emphasized the government's responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in various policy areas (Straehle, 2012; Williams, 2008).

3. Hypotheses

Our study aims to explore how youths assign blame not only to their peers but also to the government and society. A diverse range of literature suggests that the assessments individuals make when assigning blame, whether to the offender or external actors, are strongly influenced by contextual factors. Building on this work, we anticipate that judgments of blame attribution will be causally affected by the perpetrator's socioeconomic status, their position within a gang, the identity of the victim, and the severity of the crime.

3.1. Internal blame

Our core set of hypotheses examines the attribution of blame for the offender in question (internal blame). These hypotheses were pre-registered and reflect our original considerations in understanding blame attribution patterns.[4] Drawing on the reviewed literature, we

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[2] Evidence from Mexico suggests that citizens often punish politicians for high levels of crime (Ley, 2017; Romero et al., 2016) and that exposure to crime and violence undermines trust in institutions (Blanco, 2013; García-Ponce and Laterzo, 2023.

[3] In the case of Mexico's drug war, violent crime is causally linked to income inequality (Enamorado, López-Calva, Rodríguez-Castelán, & Winkler, 2016), and it has been found that there is a strong relationship between crime and unemployment rates among youths (Loría and Salas, 2019).

[4] This set of the hypotheses, and our research design of the vignette experiment, was pre-registered in advance of analysis with the Open Science Framework (OSF).

present four factors that we believe will impact internal blame attributions among youths. The hypotheses to be tested are as follows:

Hypothesis 1. More internal blame will be attributed if the perpetrator is from a middle-class socioeconomic background versus a disadvantaged background.

Hypothesis 2. More internal blame will be attributed if the perpetrator holds a leadership role within a gang, versus if he is following orders from a gang.

Hypothesis 3. More internal blame will be attributed if the victim of the crime is more innocent.

Hypothesis 4. More internal blame will be attributed if the perpetrator commits a more severe crime.

3.2. External blame

In addition to internal blame, we examine external blame attribution, specifically for the society and government. Similar to our above hypotheses, we consider how four factors may affect external blame attribution. These hypotheses were not pre-registered. Building on the theoretical foundations outlined before, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5. More external blame will be attributed if the perpetrator is from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, versus a middle-class background.

Hypothesis 6. More external blame will be attributed if the perpetrator is following orders from a criminal gang, versus if he is holds a leadership role within a gang.

Hypothesis 7. More external blame will be attributed if the victim of the crime is more innocent.

Hypothesis 8. More external blame will be attributed if a perpetrator commits a more severe crime.

3.3. Additional considerations

We undertake two nuanced examinations of the hypotheses mentioned above.[5] First, we analyze the extent to which the allocation of internal blame varies in relation to external blame. We test whether the key factors within our analysis (perpetrator's socioeconomic status, perpetrator's status within a gang, victim's identity, and the severity of the crime) affect the amount of blame assigned to the perpetrator relative to the state and society. Second, we investigate whether respondents' characteristics affect blame attribution. Individuals residing in less secure areas may have different perceptions of crime, which may influence their rationale for assigning blame (Ng-Mak et al., 2002). We may observe a higher tendency to assign external blame for crimes committed by lower-class individuals among respondents in insecure environments due to the overlap between the respondent's physical and economic security. If respondents come from more violent environments, they may be less inclined to assign blame to perpetrators, especially if they perceive violence as normalized. Furthermore, we consider the extent to which a respondent's socioeconomic status or marginalization could impact blame attribution. This aligns with previous research on the rationalization of criminal behavior and the effect of situational circumstances (Thomas, 2019). More marginalized individuals may rationalize crime as fundamentally driven by economic necessity, resulting in lower levels of internal blame attribution.

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[5] This section of the analysis was not pre-registered but may elucidate important causal mechanisms. In our pre-registration, we propose a split-sample study, do not specify hypotheses.

4. Youths, crime, and violence in urban Mexico

Over the past decade and a half, various regions of Mexico have been devastated by a wave of organized criminal violence. Approximately 100,000 people have disappeared and >400,000 have been murdered since the start of the so-called Drug War in December 2006. The homicide rate increased from approximately eight homicides per 100,000 people in 2007 to 29 in 2020. Based on data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI by its name in Spanish), 21% of the victims of intentional homicide in 2020 were 24 years old or younger—more than half were under 34 years old. As a result of this, life expectancy has deteriorated among males and it has stagnated among females (Aburto, Beltran-Sánchez, García-Guerrero, & Canudas-Romo, 2016; Canudas-Romo, Aburto, García-Guerrero, & Beltrán-Sánchez, 2017). Mexican cities rank among the most violent ones for youths and young adults in Latin America (de Lima Friche et al., 2023).

The escalation of violence in Mexico offers a pertinent case to scrutinize the mechanisms of blame attribution. Youth crime is readily visible, and citizens link the government's actions to the outcomes in this area (Ley, 2017). Our understanding of how this wave of criminal violence has impacted the life choices of young people is still incomplete. This is largely attributable to the heterogeneity of criminal activity and socioeconomic conditions across the country, which affect the behavior and decision-making of young individuals. Nonetheless, youth account for an overwhelmingly high percentage of perpetrators (and victims) of organized criminal violence. Recent estimates suggest that approximately 30,000 children and adolescents in Mexico are actively participating in criminal organizations (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2016). Based on the most recent wave of Mexico's National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Safety (ENVIPE), nearly one-quarter of all crimes committed in 2021 were perpetrated by individuals under the age of 25. There is also growing evidence that the proportion of youth who are neither working nor in school is strongly correlated with violent crime, particularly in low-education strata (Juárez, Urdal, & Vadlamannati, 2022; De Hoyos Navarro, Gutierrez-Fierros, & Vargas, 2016; De Hoyos Navarro, Popova, & Rogers, 2016).

Gangs are often the starting point of criminal life paths, but for many youths, gangs also represent spaces and opportunities not provided by their families, communities, or governments (Jones, 2013; OAS, 2007; Volkmann et al., 2013). The scant literature on youth gangs in Mexico suggests that socioeconomic and psychological factors are the main drivers of gang involvement. Unemployment, limited access to the education system, lack of parental involvement, and poverty are strongly associated with a higher likelihood of criminal behavior among children and adolescents (Azaola, 2015; CIDAC, 2016). To understand youth participation in crime, it is crucial to underscore the considerable variation in the organization of criminal activity throughout Mexico. The structure of Mexican gangs, for instance, varies regionally. Central American gangs have a significant presence in the Southern Mexican states, while Northern Mexican gangs are strongly influenced by U.S. gangs. (Jones, 2013).

With regards to addressing crime, the Mexican government has prioritized a law enforcement approach that emphasizes the militarization of public security. During his tenure (2006–2012), President Felipe Calderón declared a "war on drugs" and dedicated significant resources to military deployment to combat organized crime. Subsequently, President Enrique Peña Nieto reinforced the militarization of public security, and this approach has been maintained by President Andres Manuel López Obrador, who deployed a new National Guard to combat violence. However, the continuity of this strategy has attracted criticism. Citizens have, and continue to, penalize incumbents for their poor handling of crime (Ley, 2017). Critics often argue that a law-enforcement centered strategy ignores the root causes of crime and violence, such as inequality, unemployment, and poverty. Furthermore, there is also evidence that the government's security strategy—heavily

focused on the beheading of criminal organizations— has contributed to the fragmentation of the criminal world and the escalation of violence (Calderón, Robles, Díaz-Cayeros, & Magaloni, 2015; Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; Phillips, 2015).

5. Research design

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an original survey experiment aimed at youths and young adults across urban Mexico to evaluate the factors that impact the attribution of blame to the perpetrator, government, and society for a specific crime. Additionally, we held seven focus groups across urban Mexico, exposing participants to comparable questions and vignettes to explore in more detail potential causal mechanisms.

It is important to mention that ethical considerations were a principal concern in our research design. We ensured that participation was informed, voluntary, and confidential. Parental consent was not required, as we did not interview youths under the age of 16. The research posed no more than a minimal risk to subjects, the investigators, and the research staff, except for the possibility of discomfort while responding to certain questions. Participants were informed of this risk, and the consent process emphasized their right to terminate their participation at any time if they desired. A more comprehensive account of participant recruitment and how our research design adheres to the principles of ethical human subjects research is available in Section 1 of the Online Appendix.

5.1. Sampling strategy and recruitment

In June, 2021, we administered an in-person survey of 2880 individuals in partnership with Buendía & Márquez, a leading survey firm in Mexico. The survey is representative of individuals age 16–29 across urban Mexico. Our sampling design ensured our sample is not only representative across common sociodemographic categories for this age group, but also by level of violence. To do so, we consider three variables which capture violence at the municipal level: homicide rates, reported non-homicidal crime, and perceived levels of violence.

Homicide rates are typically used by the academic community to measure prevalence of crime. They are considered the most accurate official statistics in comparison with non-homicidal crimes. This is because homicides are reported more frequently by the general population and are recorded precisely as they are definitionally specific and often processed by the health system (UNODC, 2019). However, this measure does not capture the full reality of insecurity. For this reason, we also estimate measures from Mexico's National Survey of Urban Public Security (ENSU) (INEGI, 2020) to capture non-homicidal violence and insecurity at the municipal level.

Using ENSU and Mexico's 2015 intercensus, we generate municipal estimates using multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) (Gelman & Little, 1997; Park, Gelman, & Bafumi, 2004, 2006), a method of small-area estimation used to estimate public opinion across geographic areas below a survey's level of representativity.[6] We extend this method beyond issue opinions to measure perceptions of violence and reported victimization from a large-N survey. The ENSU survey ($n = 22,448$) is representative at the city and urban-state level. With ENSU and the intercensus, we create measures for the preponderance of non-homicidal crime (victimization) and perceived community insecurity

at the municipal level across the 157 municipalities covered by ENSU. We create these measures as a function of respondent's location (state and municipality), age, gender, occupation, and education.

With these estimates and homicide rates collected from the Executive Secretariat of the National System of Public Security (SESNSP, 2020), we then order municipalities based on levels of insecurity and sample via seriation. Our strategy generates a sample which is reflective of the ENSU survey and municipal-level homicide statistics in terms of violence levels across all three categories. Please see Appendices 2 and 3 for further technical information, including the proportion of the sample in each strata category compared to the sampling frame.

5.2. Experimental vignette approach

Using this sample, we then fielded a survey to each identified participant, including questions regarding sociodemographic characteristics, education, age, and gender. To test our hypotheses, we included a vignette experiment. This experiment allowed us to determine the degree to which a hypothetical perpetrator's socioeconomic background, his position within a gang, the severity of a crime, and the innocence of the victim affect the degree to which respondents attribute blame for the crime to the perpetrator (internal blame) and to the government and society (external blame). To consider the innocence of the victim, we argue that the victim's social status plays a significant role in how they are perceived. Specifically, we propose that a lower-class worker will be viewed as more innocent than a businessman, and a local politician will be viewed as less innocent than the former two. This is because citizens often perceive criminal violence as being linked to corruption (García-Ponce, Zeitzoff, & Wantchekon, 2021), particularly among politicians colluding with organized crime at the local level. As such, local politicians are often seen as being complicit in criminal activities and are therefore viewed as less innocent than other types of victims.

The following vignette was presented to all respondents. All options presented in bold are fully randomized, generating 48 experimental combinations.[7] The experiment has been translated from Spanish:

> "Now I will tell you a story of a situation that often happens in many places in our country. When I have finished reading, I will ask you your opinion about the situation.
> Rodrigo is a young Mexican man who grew up in a **[lower class family / middle class family]**.
> From a very young age, he was involved in crime and recently he was arrested for.
> **[robbing a cellphone from / extorting / kidnapping / killing]** a **[lower class worker / a businessman / a local politician]**.
> Rodrigo confessed to the authorities that he committed this crime **[and is the leader of a gang / and said he was following orders from the leader of a gang]**."

Our outcome of interest can be conceptualized as the attribution of blame or responsibility, which is implicitly related to the justification of engagement in crime (McGraw, 1991). To operationalize this concept, we then ask respondents to assess their assignment of blame to Rodrigo, the government, and society (separately) on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is equivalent to no blame at all and 7 is equivalent to total blame. With these variables, we first assess internal and external blame separately. We assess internal blame by using the 1–7 scale of blame for the perpetrator.

To assess external blame, we calculated an average of the blame assigned by each respondent to both the government and society. Given our theoretical interest in distinguishing between internal and external blame, we combined government and society blame attributions. This

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[6] Mexico is divided into 2458 municipalities and the majority of the population is concentrated in a few municipalities, particularly those in metropolitan areas. The National Population Council (CONAPO) defines metropolitan areas as municipalities or clusters of municipalities around a core city with at least 200,000 inhabitants. According to the 2020 Census of Population and Housing, the largest metropolitan areas are Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, which together account for over 30 million people.

[7] See Online Appendix, Section 4, for robustness checks demonstrating successful randomization.

combination also facilitated our analysis of relative blame patterns, specifically the amount of internal blame attributed in relation to external blame. To capture this asymmetrical distribution of internal versus external blame, we created an index. This index did not measure the magnitude of blame assigned to either entity, but rather reflected whether more blame was allocated to one over the other. To construct the index, we computed the average value of blame attributed to the government and society and then subtracted this from the amount of blame attributed to the perpetrator. We then normalized this variable on a scale of 0 to 1. Values below 0.5 indicate greater internal blame relative to external blame, while values above 0.5 indicate the opposite.

We run ordinary least squares models (OLS) to isolate the main effect of each experimental attribute on the assignment of blame. We treat the type of crime as a continuous variable of crime severity (where robbing a cellphone is least severe, followed by extortion, kidnapping, and killing).[8] We examine victim identity as a categorical variable but, as previously explained, consider a lower-class worker to be most innocent, a businessman as neutral, and a local politician as more deserving of crime in the eyes of respondents. Because this analysis is experimental in nature, we do not include respondent-level controls, with the exception of a respondent's community-level marginalization and socioeconomic status.[9] We include these variables to explore how blame attribution patterns differ by respondents based on their own socioeconomic well-being. Further, we divide our sample into subgroups based on community level and respondent characteristics, and assess differing effects across these groups.

5.3. Focus groups

In addition to the collection of quantitative information, we conducted seven focus groups with participants of youth development programs in four major urban areas between July and September of 2021: Chihuahua City, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico City, and the Guadalupe-Monterrey-Escobedo metropolitan´ area. These programs target youths at risk of participation in local gangs and of low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were contacted through local civil society organizations which 1) intervene at the community level in insecure areas, 2) provide services for alternative justice measures for young offenders, or 3) perform interventions and provide services for at-risk youth (e.g., therapy, education, jobs training). Focus groups convened both female and male participants with a range of 4–10 participants per group. Details of focus group organizations and composition can be seen in Table 1. Gender balance was not achieved, but rather is reflective of the gender breakdown of organization participants. Focus groups were held following the fielding of our survey to follow-up on conclusions and more deeply isolate causal mechanisms. One focus group was held per organization.

The focus groups were presented with a vignette to assess blame attribution, similar to the one used in our survey. The vignette was presented as an evolving story where variables of interest were introduced (e.g., perpetrator's socioeconomic background, type of victim, the severity of crime, the role of perpetrator) as the discussion progressed. With each addition of new variables of interest, participants were asked to reassess and discuss the degree to which they blamed the perpetrator for his actions, along with the degree to which they blamed the government and/or society for the crime. The focus group protocol is

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[8] Model specifications where crime is treated as a categorical variable are included in the Online Appendix, Section 8. Results do not vary substantially – while significance varies at times, relationships echo those shown in the main results. They echo the different results seen for low vs. high homicide communities.

[9] To determine SES, we rely upon a series of questions which determine the possession of a variety of assets. We then create a singular SES index using principal component analysis (PCA).

Table 1
Focus group organizations and composition

Organization	Program description	Women	Men	Total
Centro de Asesoría y Promoción Juvenil, A.C. (CASA)	Alternative measures programs/ Community intervention	3	7	10
Consejo Ciudadano Seguridad Justicia A.C.	Alternative measures programs	3	4	7
La Tienda de Cristo A.C.	Alternative measures programs/ Community intervention	2	4	6
Puntos de Innovación, Libertad, Arte y Educación (PILARES)	Community centers	4	4	8
Reinserta a un Mexicano A.C.	Alternative measures programs	1	6	7
Renace – Solidaridad y Justicia	Alternative measures programs	1	3	4
Supera A.C.	Alternative measures programs/ Community intervention	2	5	7

included in the Online Appendix (Section 10). It is important to note that focus group participants typically come from low-SES backgrounds and insecure neighborhoods, have been victimized, and in most cases have been perpetrators of violence.

6. Findings

In the following sections, we present our findings from our quantitative and qualitative analyses. We first begin with findings regarding internal blame, then move to considerations about external blame.

We conclude with an analysis of the relative blame between these two factors.

6.1. Internal blame

Table 2 shows results from OLS models evaluating blame for the individual perpetrator for our pooled sample of respondents. Results indicate that two of our hypotheses are supported. First, when the perpetrator is middle class, respondents assign more blame for the crime

Table 2
Internal blame (pooled results)

	Dependent Variable: Internal Blame (Blame for the Perpetrator)		
Class: Middle	0.215***	0.221***	0.224***
	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Crime Severity	0.024	0.023	0.024
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Victim: Worker	0.068	0.066	0.057
	(0.071)	(0.071)	(0.071)
Local Politician	−0.041	−0.045	−0.050
	(0.071)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Perpetrator: Gang Leader	0.390***	0.387***	0.389***
	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Marginalization		−0.396***	
		(0.100)	
SES			0.314***
			(0.052)
Constant	4.936***	4.310***	4.328***
	(0.091)	(0.182)	(0.135)
Observations	2864	2864	2864
R²	0.022	0.027	0.034
Adjusted R²	0.020	0.025	0.032
Residual Std. Error	1.548 (df = 2858)	1.544 (df = 2857)	1.539 (df = 2857)
F Statistic	12.582*** (df = 5; 2858)	13.173*** (df = 6; 2857)	16.740*** (df = 6; 2857)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

to him (internal blame). A shift in perpetrator identity from lower to middle class results in 0.14 standard deviations more blame attributed to him. This indicates that respondents see lower-class perpetrators as less deserving of blame compared to middle class individuals.

We also find interesting results when dividing our sample of survey respondents into different subgroups, principally on the basis of community security and socioeconomic status. Within this analysis of subgroups, we discover interesting patterns. These results indicate that those in high homicide areas attribute more blame to the perpetrator if he is of the middle class (0.19 standard deviations more blame); this effect is weaker among those in low homicide communities (0.09 standard deviations more blame). The difference between these two coefficients is significant.[10] This relationship varies slightly when dividing respondents into subgroups based on municipal victimization rates and insecurity, as can be seen in the Online Appendix (Section 9).[11]

We also examine the effect of two related variables: the level of marginalization of a respondent's municipality and the respondent's SES. Results in Table 2 and predicted values plotted in Fig. 1 show that those who are of lower SES or belong to communities that are more marginalized tend to attribute less blame overall to the perpetrator, regardless of all attributes explored.

Data collected from focus group sessions reinforce and provide nuanced context to this finding regarding internal blame and the socioeconomic status of the perpetrator. Generally, focus group participants were more forgiving of perpetrators from a lower socioeconomic background. Participants associated a lower-class individual's choice to participate in crime with economic necessity, while they found little excusable reason for a middle-class individual to commit such a crime. For example, one participant noted:

"I will obviously tell you this is wrong [to get involved in crime], but I have done it when I was younger. Now I do not do that anymore. When you look and look and look and cannot find [a job], the need calls you. If you have this option you will say yes. You have to 'atorarle para sacar la papa' [work to bring potatoes to the table]."

Others directly connected the lower-class perpetrator's choice to commit a crime to the lack of opportunities presented by society. For example, one stated:

"… he [the middle class man] wanted to do it [the crime], because before he had a necessity [as a lower class man] and had to do it, it was a snowball effect. They are both at fault, but it is not as much now his fault because society didn't give him what he needed."

However, some note that even in cases of economic need, they might not have committed the crime themselves. As many participants are past offenders and have participated in programs to reduce the incidence of re-offending, this reflection is of note. These individuals recognize the necessity of committing a crime, but consider that taking on additional jobs, or possibly debt, in times of economic need may be more worthwhile. However, respondents still expressed high levels of empathy and forgiveness for the perpetrator when he was of a lower class.

Our quantitative findings also support our hypothesis regarding gang leadership. If the perpetrator is the leader of a gang, versus following orders from a gang leader, respondents assign more blame to him (0.25

standard deviations more blame). This implies that the amount of blame placed on a gang leader from a middle-class background is about 14% higher than the average level of individual blame. Interestingly, in neither model is the severity of crime nor the type of victim a significant predictor of blame attribution.

This result was once again echoed by focus group participants. Participants often discussed themes such as a loss of one's freedom or the lack of a voluntary decision when considering gang involvement. Some commented on the youth of the perpetrator, and how this may also influence his inability to resist orders of a gang leader. Such considerations suggest youth may consider not only the circumstances of the crime, but the nature of the immaturity of their peers which contributes to their vulnerability. Some also commented that the consequences of *not* committing the crime when ordered to do so may be quite dire. One participant notes:

"…he was the murder weapon but he was also induced, it was not of his own free will, if he had been conscious or more mature he would have decided differently, he is like a puppet." Another noted:

"It is not about whether you want it or not, 'es a huevo' [it is obligatory], they are telling you that you have to do it. If you say no, most likely they will tell you, 'So then don't do it and 'tambien le vamos a dar suelo' [we will also kill you]. It is more about what you are mandated to do rather than want to do."

These findings relate to youths' own risk assessments of becoming involved in crime and violence. To many, joining a criminal organization is justified as it is perceived as a means of securing protection, income, andavoidingcoercion. These benefits outweigh the risksand costs of membership in a criminal organization. One participant commented:

"There are two options: whether you join or not. If you don't, there's a risk that they will retaliate, that they say, 'This dude didn't want to join us, I should kill him, so there's less of an asshole to bother me.' As they say, if you join, it's going to benefit you and your boss."

With regard to our third and fourth hypotheses, we see mixed results. With regard to H3 (crime severity) results are insignificant within our pooled sample. However, within our analysis of subgroups divided by type of insecurity, we find some interesting patterns. This analysis reveals varying patterns of attribution previously obscured by the pooled sample. Table 3 reports results from OLS models but with our sample divided into two groups based on the homicide rate of their municipality (divided by median homicide rate per 100 k individuals). Across these two subgroups, we find divergent effects with respect to the severity of crime. In high homicide areas, if the perpetrator commits a more severe crime, less blame is assigned. In low homicide areas, more extreme crimes are met with more blame attribution.[12]

These results are substantiated by additional subgroups based on municipal victimization rates and insecurity (see Online Appendix, Section 8). This pattern points to possible differences in the normalization of extreme violence in high vs. low homicide communities. Figs. 2 and 3 plot the predicted values for statistically significant coefficients from the first two models in Table 3.[13] These results suggest that the way in which individuals attribute blame to criminals varies based on community context. Increased exposure to violence at the community level may affect the degree to which more extreme crimes are seen as justifiable or worthy of blame. The normalization of violence may lead youths to attribute less blame to offenders who commit more serious crimes due to desensitization in highly violent environments, causing them to view such crimes as less severe than they actually are. As a

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[10] As per Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, and Piquero (1998), an unbiased Z score is calculated between these two coefficients, resulting in a Z score of 3.07)

[11] As can be seen in the Online Appendix (Section 9), it is actually those in high victimization communities that attribute lower blame to the perpetrator, vs. those in lower victimization communities. When dividing communities by reported insecurity level, the coefficients are more comparable. This difference is interesting, as homicide, victimization, and perceived insecurity all represent different types of perceived and real community insecurity. Although homicide is the most violent crime, it does not directly translate to a community that may experience high victimization generally speaking. Further, residents within communities may report higher levels of perceived insecurity, regardless of whether or not victimization and homicide rates in their community are truly high.

[12] The differences in these coefficients are significant, with a - 4.0 Z score, as calculated per the equation proposed by Paternoster et al. (1998)

[13] For these figures, when not varied, variables are held constant at the following values: type of crime at extortion, victim at businessman, class at lower, and position at leader.
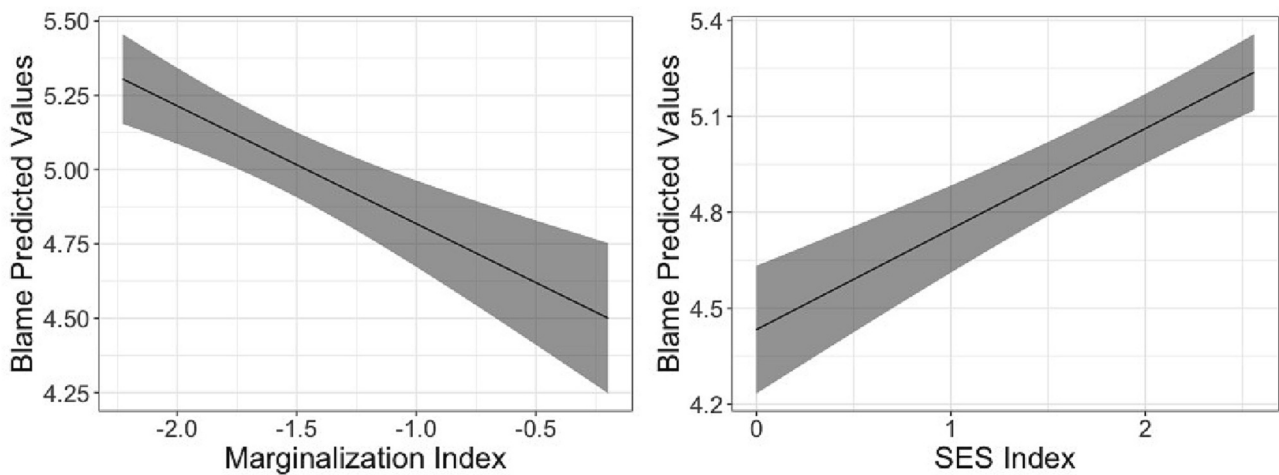
Fig. 1. Predicted value of internal blame by respondent marginalization & SES.

Table 3
Internal blame (divided by community homicide level)

|	Dependent Variable: Internal Blame (Blame for the Perpetrator)					
	High Homicide	Low Homicide	High Homicide	Low Homicide	High Homicide	Low Homicide
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Class: Middle	0.294***	0.136*	0.294***	0.145*	0.317***	0.137*
	(0.085)	(0.078)	(0.085)	(0.079)	(0.084)	(0.078)
Crime Severity	−0.077**	0.128***	−0.078**	0.127***	−0.076**	0.128***
	(0.037)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.035)
Victim: Worker	0.122	0.025	0.113	0.028	0.092	0.027
	(0.104)	(0.097)	(0.104)	(0.097)	(0.104)	(0.096)
Local Politician	−0.016	−0.063	−0.014	−0.068	−0.041	−0.060
	(0.104)	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.095)
Perpetrator: Gang Leader	0.435***	0.335***	0.440***	0.329***	0.436***	0.333***
	(0.085)	(0.079)	(0.085)	(0.079)	(0.084)	(0.079)
Marginalization Index			−0.510***	−0.272*		
			(0.142)	(0.142)		
SES					0.383***	0.244***
					(0.074)	(0.072)
Constant	5.101***	4.767***	4.312***	4.330***	4.375***	4.286***
	(0.134)	(0.123)	(0.258)	(0.259)	(0.194)	(0.188)
Observations	1410	1454	1410	1454	1410	1454
R^2	0.030	0.025	0.039	0.028	0.048	0.033
Adjusted R^2	0.027	0.022	0.035	0.024	0.044	0.029
Residual Std. Error	1.594 (df = 1404)	1.495 (df = 1448)	1.588 (df = 1403)	1.494 (df = 1447)	1.580 (df = 1403)	1.490 (df = 1447)
F Statistic	8.776*** (df = 5; 1404)	7.549*** (df = 5; 1448)	9.516*** (df = 6; 1403)	6.915*** (df = 6; 1447)	11.858*** (df = 6; 1403)	8.237*** (df = 6; 1447)

Note: *$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$
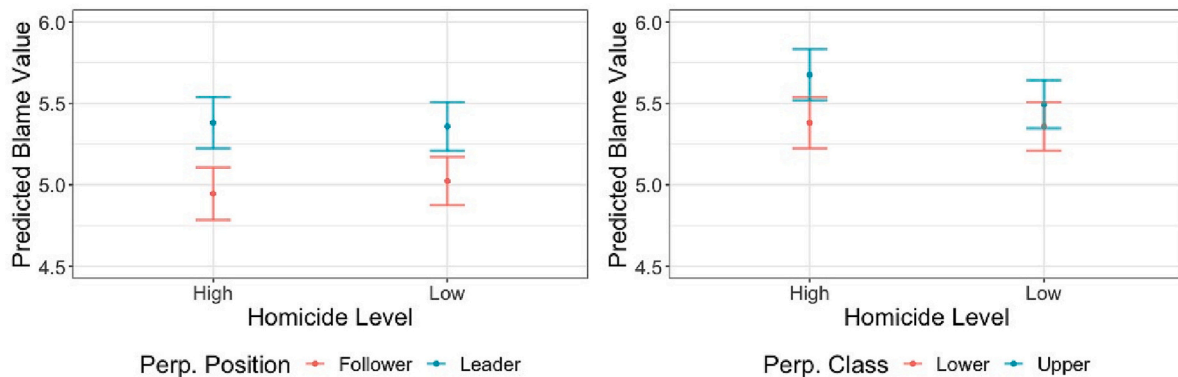
Fig. 2. Predicted values of internal blame by perpetrator position & class (high vs. low homicide).
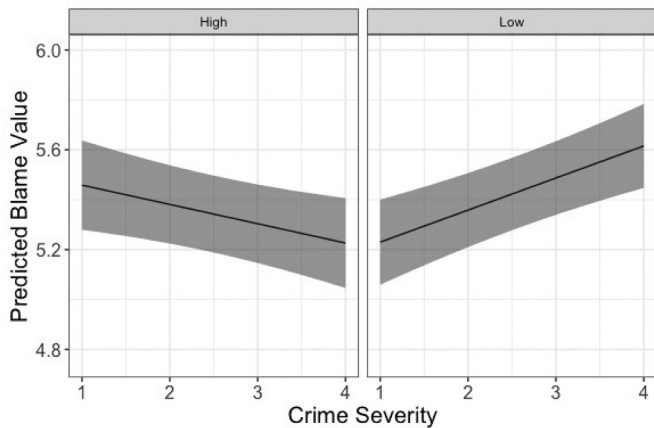
Fig. 3. Predicted value of internal blame by crime severity (high vs. low homicide).

result, youths may be more likely to assign blame to external factors, such as socioeconomic status, government support, or the coercive nature of criminal gangs, rather than to the individual offender, as they may see the offender's actions as a product of their environment rather than a personal choice.

Furthermore, information from focus groups also provides an interesting perspective here. Given our respondents are predominantly from insecure communities, their reactions to the story of Rodrigo engaging in theft, versus more serious crimes, are illuminating. Some note that engaging in low-level theft is seen as unintelligent. This was for two reasons: first, there is a high level of uncertainty around whether or not the individual would be able to successfully resell the stolen goods, and second, the risk of being caught by your community or the police is too high. One notes, reacting to the story of Rodrigo:

"Go to work, why are you stealing? As if you work just for fun… I went out once trying to steal, but it's not right, everything is returned. Because they take [steal] gas tanks or bicycles… whatever is outside. Then at the end, they [the community] realize it and they lynch you… I remember that once a guy was caught taking an air conditioner, and they took him down and tied him to a pole… 'lo agarraron a chingadazos' [they beat him badly] until they talked to the police."

Another participant states::

"It is not assured that you can sell the property the next day. Or, on that same day you may end up in jail. You have been caught stealing, and now it would be at the expense of your mother."

When examining H4 (innocence of the victim) we find mixed results. Quantitative findings suggest no strong relationship between the identity of the victim and patterns of internal blame attribution. However, data from focus groups does suggest a potential relationship. In most cases, participants expressed empathy for the blue-collar worker as they connected his background with their own. Participants expressed less empathy for the businessman or politician victim. Among some participants, animosity was expressed towards politicians leading them to consider such crimes as fair. One related this crime to an old Mexican saying: "a thief steals from a thief." These comments related as well to considerations regarding blame for the government, indicating feelings of being mistreated or ignored by officials. Some participants expressed discomfort towards police activity in their neighborhoods, either by their slow response and ineffectiveness or by pointing out to officers' corruption.

6.2. External blame

OLS results evaluating external blame attribution (to the government

and society) for our pooled sample can be seen in Table 4. Overall, our hypotheses received mixed support. We find that the perpetrator's role within the gang significantly affects external blame attribution, while the class of the perpetrator, severity of the crime, and the identity of the victim do not. However, when examining differential effects among respondents in high vs. low homicide communities, we find nuanced patterns across certain experimental attributes. (See Table 5.)

With regard to socioeconomic status, in high homicide communities, if the perpetrator is of the middle class, less external blame is allocated. Perpetrator class has no significant relationship among those in low-homicide communities.[14] This result indicates that those in more insecure communities see the government and society more at fault for the actions of lower-class perpetrators. We also see that an increase in individual SES results in overall lower blame attribution to external forces. However, we see no results for respondent's community marginalization.

Results from focus group discussions regarding the link between socioeconomics and external actors (society and the government) largely focused on the lack of opportunities available to youth and young adults in Mexico. Some indicated that the government was to blame particularly because of its inaction in protecting them or providing opportunities; one participant commented that they did not receive services or goods from the government unless it was campaign season:

Participant 1: "I think the government is the origin of this … Sometimes you want to study, but there's no benefit for it here, there's no money."
Participant 3: "I have never had scholarships or anything like that [from the government].
The only thing was a jacket, and that's because they were campaigning."

Others similarly echoed it was the government's fault due to lack of opportunities provided, such as jobs:

Table 4
External blame (pooled results)

	Dependent Variable: External Blame (Blame for Government & Society)		
Class: Middle	−0.040	−0.041	−0.046
	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)
Crime Severity	0.019	0.019	0.019
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Victim: Worker	−0.041	−0.041	−0.034
	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.069)
Local Politician	0.100	0.100	0.106
	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.069)
Perpetrator: Gang Leader	−0.257***	−0.257***	−0.256***
	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)
Marginalization		0.054	
		(0.097)	
SES			−0.202***
			(0.051)
Constant	4.735***	4.821***	5.124***
	(0.088)	(0.177)	(0.132)
Observations	2860	2860	2860
R^2	0.009	0.009	0.015
Adjusted R^2	0.007	0.007	0.013
Residual Std. Error	1.505 (df = 2854)	1.505 (df = 2853)	1.501 (df = 2853)
F Statistic	5.247*** (df = 5; 2854)	4.424*** (df = 6; 2853)	7.044*** (df = 6; 2853)

Note:$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

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[14] The difference between these coefficients is significant, with a Z score of −5.84 calculated per Paternoster et al. (1998)'s formula.

Table 5

Blame for external actors (divided by community homicide levels)

	Dependent Variable: External Blame (Blame for Government & Society)					
	High Homicide	Low Homicide	High Homicide	Low Homicide	High Homicide	Low Homicide
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Class: Middle	−0.191**	0.102	−0.190**	0.105	−0.201**	0.101
	(0.079)	(0.080)	(0.079)	(0.080)	(0.079)	(0.080)
Crime Severity	−0.039	0.074**	−0.039	0.074**	−0.039	0.075**
	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.036)
Victim: Worker	−0.034	−0.044	−0.031	−0.042	−0.019	−0.045
	(0.097)	(0.099)	(0.097)	(0.099)	(0.096)	(0.099)
Local Politician	0.057	0.141	0.056	0.140	0.070	0.139
	(0.096)	(0.098)	(0.096)	(0.098)	(0.096)	(0.098)
Perpetrator: Gang Leader	−0.288***	−0.235***	−0.290***	−0.237***	−0.288***	−0.234***
	(0.079)	(0.081)	(0.079)	(0.081)	(0.079)	(0.080)
Marginalization Index			0.150	−0.079		
			(0.132)	(0.144)		
SES					−0.198***	−0.209***
					(0.069)	(0.074)
Constant	5.010***	4.476***	5.243***	4.348***	5.384***	4.887***
	(0.124)	(0.125)	(0.240)	(0.263)	(0.181)	(0.191)
Observations	1403	1457	1403	1457	1403	1457
R^2	0.015	0.012	0.016	0.012	0.021	0.017
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.009	0.012	0.008	0.017	0.013
Residual Std. Error	1.473 (df = 1397)	1.530 (df = 1451)	1.473 (df = 1396)	1.530 (df = 1450)	1.470 (df = 1396)	1.526 (df = 1450)
F Statistic	4.264*** (df = 5; 1397)	3.503*** (df = 5; 1451)	3.770*** (df = 6; 1396)	2.968*** (df = 6; 1450)	4.921*** (df = 6; 1396)	4.275*** (df = 6; 1450)

Note: *$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

"The government [is to blame], because they didn't give him opportunities, if he had had a steady job he wouldn't have got where he did, and if they had helped him he would have been someone else, they didn't give him that opportunity".

With regard to crime severity, although we did not find results among our pooled sample, we find that crime severity matters among respondents in low-homicide communities. These respondents allocate more blame to external actors for more severe crimes.[15] These relationships can be seen in Figs. 4 and 5.

More broadly, focus group participants blamed society for reinforcing violent behaviors, as prevalent social norms in their communities make violence necessary to gain respect and avoid victimization. In all focus groups, youth pointed to families as responsible for these behaviors, as they are the primary means of socialization. In the words of two participants:

"It is also society's blame. I came to that point because of the environment in which I developed. It begins with society ... I started getting along with certain people, to know certain things, I started doing things and that was it."

"I think sometimes it is not so much about society's blame, but I think it is in some cases. We are all guilty, but no one is at the same time. We are not guilty in the sense that our parents taught us how to behave, maybe they taught us incorrectly. But they are not to blame because they were taught the same... it's what you learned, what you were taught at home where you saw that it was normal to be involved in robbery and killings..."

Finally, with regard to gang involvement, individuals typically allocate more blame to the government or society when the perpetrator was following the orders of a gang leader (0.17 standard deviations more blame). This was reinforced by sentiments expressed during focus group discussions, as well. Many tied gang violence and activity to the government's inaction. One noted, for example, that "the government lets the gangs do it..." and that government corruption was to blame. Others specifically blamed the government for participants needing to join gangs, as the government makes it quite difficult for previously incarcerated individuals to access "stable" or "decent" jobs. One participant reflected on this, commenting on the difficulties faced after being incarcerated:

"I say that society and the government [are to blame] ... we cannot have INE [voter identification], they take away your political rights, I went five years without a voter's credential and I could not work or anything because in all jobs, or at least in a half decent job they do ask for identification and I did not have it, and I tell them 'hey, they took away my political rights because I was in jail' and they treated me worse..."

6.3. Relative blame

Table 6 presents OLS results from pooled models where the blame index – a measure of (a)symmetric distribution of blame between the individual perpetrator vs. government and society– is the dependent variable. Positive coefficients in this case indicate characteristics that lead respondents to attribute more internal versus external blame. Negative coefficients indicate the opposite.

Results from pooled models suggest that if the perpetrator is from the middle class, respondents attribute more internal vs. external blame. The converse is also true: if he is of lower class, respondents on average attribute more external vs. internal blame. Further, if the individual is a gang leader, respondents will attribute more internal vs. external blame. In turn, if he is following orders, respondents blame the government and society more for his actions. Finally, an examination of the marginalization of a respondent's community and a respondent's SES suggests that those who are more well off tend to place more blame on the individual. Those who are economically worse off shift blame more to external actors.

Table 7 again examines the effect of vignette attributes on relative blame divided by community homicide level. From these models, we can

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[15] The difference in these coefficients is significant, with a Z score of −2.24 calculated per Paternoster et al. (1998)'s formula.
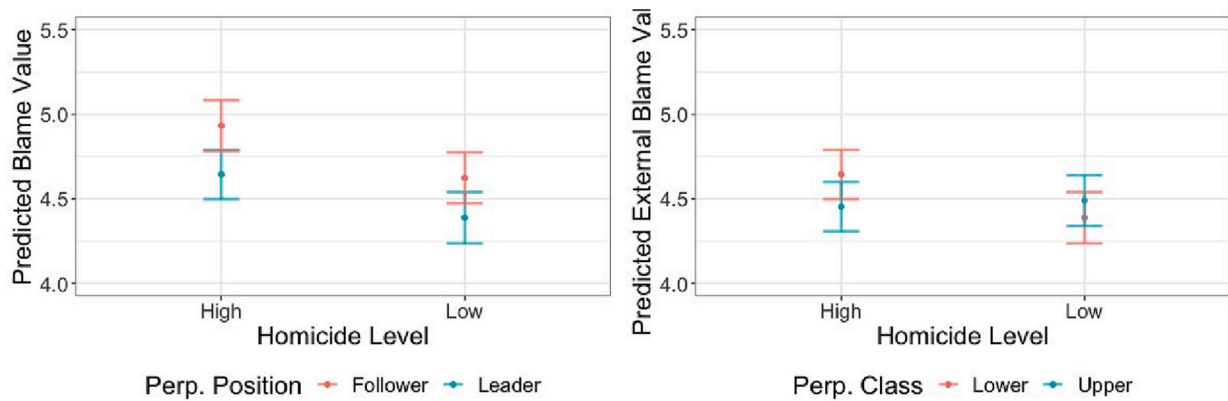
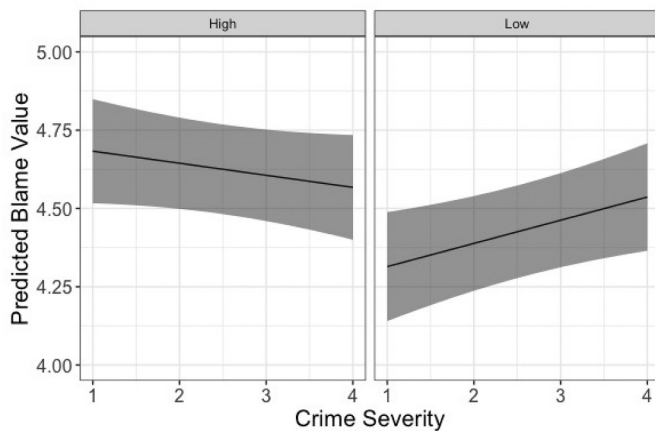**Fig. 4.** Predicted values of external blame by perpetrator position & class (high vs. low homicide).

Fig. 5. Predicted value of external blame by crime severity (high vs. low homicide).

Table 6
Relative blame – internal vs. external blame (pooled)

	Dependent Variable: Relative Blame		
Class: Middle	0.021***	0.022***	0.023***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Crime Severity	0.001	0.001	0.001
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Victim: Worker	0.010	0.010	0.008
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Local Politician	−0.011	−0.011	−0.012
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Perpetrator: Gang Leader	0.053***	0.053***	0.053***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Marginalization		−0.038***	
		(0.012)	
SES			0.044***
			(0.006)
Constant	0.516***	0.456***	0.431***
	(0.011)	(0.022)	(0.016)
Observations	2849	2849	2849
R^2	0.026	0.029	0.043
Adjusted R^2	0.024	0.027	0.041
Residual Std. Error	0.184 (df = 2843)	0.184 (df = 2842)	0.182 (df = 2842)
F Statistic	15.150*** (df = 5; 2843)	14.383*** (df = 6; 2842)	21.213*** (df = 6; 2842)

Note:$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

see that respondents from high homicide municipalities attribute more internal vs. external blame if the perpetrator is middle class.[16] This result does not hold among respondents from low homicide municipalities. In such municipalities, respondents attribute similar levels of blame regardless of the perpetrator's class.

We again see the influence of the perpetrator's position within a gang, however this result does not differ from the pooled sample. Results also do not show any notable influence of crime severity on relative blame allocations. Of note, we see that the marginalization index is only significant and negative in the case of high-homicide communities. The positive influence of SES on increased internal vs. external blame attribution remains across subsamples.

Overall, discussions regarding internal vs. external blame attributions substantiated our original hypotheses. Although blame would often be allocated to both entities, the equilibrium of blame was often tilted towards the government in certain scenarios. This seemed particularly to be the case when considering the government's lack of provision of necessary resources, jobs, and educational opportunities for its citizens. Participants directly connected this poor performance to the occurrence of crime and justified the offender's actions via a connection to government inaction.

7. Conclusion

Our study contributes to a better understanding of how youths make sense of the involvement of their peers and themselves in crime. It also sheds light on the extent to which the state and society are seen as co-responsible actors in youth crime. Our key findings warrant further discussion. First, drawing on experimental evidence, we corroborate that youths perceive the socioeconomic status of those who commit crimes as a potential justification. They are more likely to morally justify criminal behavior if the perpetrator comes from a lower-class background. More socioeconomically disadvantaged youths seem to be more forgiving of crimes committed by a peer perpetrator. We also find that youths in violent communities are more likely to blame external actors for crimes committed by lower-class individuals, suggesting that familiarity with crime and violence shapes their understanding of the interaction between economic upbringing and criminal behavior. The evidence from the focus groups substantiates the notion that the government's inaction and the lack of opportunities—particularly the lack of legitimate income generation—drive young individuals to criminal life paths.

Second, our findings indicate that youths see involvement in criminal gangs as a risky endeavor in which they are usually not asked but forced

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[16] With a Z score of 5.94, indicating a significant difference between these two groups' coefficients. Calculated per Paternoster et al. (1998)'s formula.

Table 7
Relative blame – internal vs. external blame (divided by homicide levels)

	Dependent Variable: Relative Blame					
	High Homicide	Low Homicide	High Homicide	Low Homicide	High Homicide	Low Homicide
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Class: Middle	0.040***	0.004	0.040***	0.004	0.043***	0.004
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Crime Severity	−0.003	0.005	−0.003	0.005	−0.003	0.005
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Victim: Worker	0.014	0.006	0.013	0.007	0.010	0.007
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Local Politician	−0.006	−0.016	−0.006	−0.016	−0.009	−0.015
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Perpetrator: Gang Leader	0.059***	0.047***	0.060***	0.047***	0.059***	0.047***
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Marginalization Index			−0.056***	−0.016		
			(0.016)	(0.018)		
SES					0.049***	0.039***
					(0.009)	(0.009)
Constant	0.508***	0.522***	0.422***	0.496***	0.416***	0.445***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.030)	(0.032)	(0.022)	(0.023)
Observations	1397	1452	1397	1452	1397	1452
R^2	0.039	0.020	0.047	0.021	0.061	0.033
Adjusted R^2	0.035	0.017	0.043	0.016	0.057	0.029
Residual Std. Error	0.182	0.185	0.182	0.185	0.180	0.184
	(df = 1391)	(df = 1446)	(df = 1390)	(df = 1445)	(df = 1390)	(df = 1445)
F Statistic	11.255***	5.883***	11.406***	5.044***	15.000***	8.140***
	(df = 5; 1391)	(df = 5; 1446)	(df = 6; 1390)	(df = 6; 1445)	(df = 6; 1390)	(df = 6; 1445)

Note: *$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

to commit crimes. Consistently, our experimental findings show that significantly more blame is placed on perpetrators who are gang leaders. Youths also tend to allocate more responsibility to external actors if the perpetrator is following orders. In conjunction with the evidence obtained from focus groups, our study reveals that socioeconomically disadvantaged youths display a nuanced understanding of crime dynamics within the organizational structure of gangs. They do not necessarily view their peers as solely responsible for their criminal actions, a viewpoint that may also apply to themselves if pressured to engage in crimes by gang leaders.

Additionally, we uncover important patterns of blame attribution concerning the severity of crimes committed. Although more severe crimes are seen as less permissible (more internal blame), we find that this is highly dependent on the respondent's context. That is, youths in insecure communities allocate less internal blame for severe crimes, while those in secure communities allocate more internal blame. The differential effects observed among participants who hail from insecure versus secure communities reveal a particularly grim reality: youth who have experienced higher levels of violence in their communities are less likely to perceive severe acts of crime and violence as morally reprehensible. This points to the possible normalization of violence among youths who grow up in violent urban areas.

Taken together, these findings have important implications. Socioeconomic drivers and narratives are of paramount importance for youths to make sense of criminal behavior, even in areas where crime is often considered to be driven by gangs or criminal organizations. Youths exhibit a significant degree of empathy in considering the circumstances and the environment within which criminal behavior takes place. From a policy perspective, this also indicates, as suggested by the significant amount of external blame attribution, that governmental and societal actors are insufficiently addressing the root causes of crime across the board. Such ineffectiveness is clearly felt among this vulnerable young population.

Finally, our study offers actionable insights for policy practitioners. Specifically, our findings suggest that policy makers should prioritize investments in community-based interventions that target youth at-risk for gang involvement. Such interventions could include mentoring

programs, vocational training, and extracurricular activities, as well as efforts to improve access to jobs and identification cards. There is evidence that incentivizing youth engagement in extracurricular activities (such as sports and arts) can help to reduce their opportunity to be recruited (Higginson et al., 2015). Similarly, strengthening the broader community can help to reduce gangs' coercive potential to recruit youths (Higginson et al., 2015). The case of Mexico demands special attention towards implementing interventions that aim at reducing the normalization of violence—particularly in high-insecurity areas—coupled with policies that combat the stigma associated with prior incarceration. This is crucial to shift societal norms and attitudes towards violent behavior, as youths are more likely to engage in violent behavior when it is seen as acceptable or even expected.

Ethical statement

This research went under full review and was approved by The George Washington University Committee on Human Research, Institutional Review Board (IRB), FWA00005945.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare none.

Data availability

The data collection materials and replication package can be found at https://omargarciaponce.com/.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2023.102064.

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