

The Impact of Researchers' Perceptions of Insecurity and Organized Crime on Fieldwork in Central America and Mexico

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This article explores field researchers' perceptions of field site security and causes of fieldwork disruption. We seek to quantify what phenomena are decisive in perceiving a field site insecure and to gauge whether researchers find rural or urban areas to be more secure from organized criminal violence. We also identify the conditions that best predict scholars' willingness to abandon research in any given region. To do so, we use a regression analysis of the results of a survey administered to anthropologists working in Mexico and Central America. The article reveals that anthropologists view urban areas as being less secure and that they are most likely to consider a field site insecure and abandon field research when manifestations of organized violence such as the discovery of clandestine mass graves and the gruesome displays of victims become too obvious. Our survey results are intended to supply applied anthropologists with information that may be helpful when planning their own safety precautions and to spur discussion of the effects that the violence has on development practice.

Key words: insecurity, urbanization, violence, field research

This article reports on the perceptions of anthropologists regarding organized crime and violence in Mexico and Central America. While in some respects this study falls within the category of works devoted to managing danger during fieldwork (e.g., Nordstrom and Robben 1996; Sluka 1990), we depart from these richly qualitative studies by providing a rigorous quantitative analysis. In particular, we use regression analysis to clarify anthropologists' perceptions on these phenomena within their field sites: (1) organized crime, (2) violence, (3) socioeconomic conditions, including corruption, and (4) urbanization. This last point, which allows us to explore the relationship between urbanization and organized criminal violence, deserves our attention as

applied anthropologists. The humanitarian aid group, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), is developing special protocols for working in violent urban areas (IRIN News 2013). Likewise, the United States Army (2014) recently released a video discussing the need to rethink military operations in the teeming slums and megacities of the 21st century. We interpret these altered security practices of aid workers and military personnel as a cautionary tale for applied anthropologists: other organizations are already rethinking "best practices." Furthermore, our survey results indicate that university-based anthropologists do indeed perceive higher levels of criminality and violence in urban areas of Mexico and Central America. Given these developments undertaken by MSF and the United States Army, and now the feedback presented in this article from our colleagues in the academy, there is ample reason to believe that applied anthropologists should initiate sustained discussion about the possibilities for analogous shifts in strategy and practice.

Early in the 20th century, in the era when anthropologists such as Manuel Gamio first began studying Mexico, 70 percent of the population lived in rural communities (Easterling 2011). Today, approximately 23 percent of the population is rural (Meré 2007). A similar urbanization process is playing out in Mexico's southern neighbors of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama (Agustin et al. 2016). The centrality of the small-scale, closed corporate peasant community, so memorably described by Eric Wolf (1955, 1957) is rapidly shrinking. Although anthropologists may retreat temporarily to their traditional

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bastions—the highland indigenous peasant villages—these are rapidly being displaced by globalization. The expanding scope of the Latin American megacity has practical consequences for anthropological studies. In particular, security threats have evolved in an urban environment that is now particularly conducive to kidnapping and extortion.

It is not easy to summarize or document all the forms of everyday violence encountered in Latin America. Veteran researchers may well recall firsthand experiences of the Cold War era insurgencies, while those who began fieldwork in the 1990s may be most familiar with the rise of the criminal gang *Mara Salvatrucha* (aka MS-13) in the wake of returning gang members from Los Angeles. Twenty-first century scholars will likely cite the anti-cartel military campaign initiated by the Mexican government in 2006 and the rise of right-wing militias in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Fieldworkers from all generations will have experience confronting street gangs (*pandillas* or *maras*). We will simply note that the previous generation of transnational drug trafficking organizations primarily made profits by shipping drugs to the United States (Hope 2015). A corollary of this was that exploitation of the local population was not a primary economic activity. Researchers and the local residents could continue their routine activities without any heightened risks. However, this began to change for several reasons. First, as the cartels grew in power, they became more visible, which drew unwanted attention from the United States as it pressured foreign governments to join the “war on drugs” to fight the cartels. Second, groups like the Gulf Cartel began creating even more specialized enforcement units like *Los Zetas* that complicated the organizational and military situation. Opportunities for conflicts of interest among these groups multiplied as various heavily armed factions found they could make profits by way of extorting and kidnapping local residents. Finally, the anti-cartel strategy adopted by governments like Mexico featured campaigns that still further fragmented criminal groups (Hope 2015; Kyle 2015; Villalobos 2010a, 2010b).

The urbanizing environment is also conducive to the growth of relative deprivation within the local population and reduced opportunity costs for engaging in violence (Acharya 2011; Brennan 1999; Gurr 1970), which leaves us where we are at today: some zones of Mexico and Central America have become notoriously dangerous for field research. For example, extortion and kidnapping rings have spread in Mexico due to the proliferation of heavily armed enforcer cells, the fragmentation of cartels, and the recognition among criminal gang members that the local population is highly vulnerable under current conditions (Hope 2015). Whereas in the past, kidnappings in Mexico were targeted at the wealthy classes, now it is a working class phenomena as well, especially among members of the informal economy (Partlow 2014). Meanwhile, in the past seven years, over 2,000 clandestine mass graves have been discovered in Mexico (Hernandez and Hernandez 2016). Gruesome displays of victims are a hallmark of this struggle, as terror tactics are now widely employed, with decapitated bodies or human heads displayed in public areas (Grayson 2014). The situation is much the

same in Central America, with Honduras and El Salvador vying for first place in the number of homicides committed per capita annually worldwide (Partlow 2016).

In the following sections, we unpack the perceptions of fieldworkers concerning these evolving threats in the field. We document that they perceive urban areas to be less secure than rural areas and that the perception of a field site being violent best predicts whether or not an anthropologist discontinues research in that location. We provide maps that illustrate the geographic distribution of field sites considered to be insecure by our respondents. Our article is intended to provide baseline data for applied anthropologists as they prepare security arrangements for their own endeavors and to spark discussion about the region’s unique threats and the challenges these herald for the completion of effective applied anthropology.

Method and Instrument

We chose to study Mexico and Central America for personal reasons. One of the co-authors (Yaworsky) of this paper had been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Mexican state of Guerrero since the 1990s and had earlier worked in Central America. The central market town, Chilapa de Alvarez, at that time had a population of 22,511 (INEGI 2001), about the size of a typical American university campus. The notable growth of shantytowns around the town, built by a stream of rural migrants (see Yaworsky and Kickham 2009), has contributed to a population that is now above 33,000 (INEGI 2010). Our home institution at the time, the University of Texas at Brownsville, suddenly banned researchers from entering Mexico in 2009.¹ Alarmed by this development and its disruption of the annual summer research season in Guerrero, we sought to survey our anthropologist colleagues to quantify the extent to which the wave of criminal violence was affecting their own field sites.

The study focused on a relatively uniform group of field researchers: anthropologists—from all of anthropology’s subfields—who are faculty members at universities in the United States and Canada that award doctorates in anthropology. Our analysis revealed 317 individuals who qualified for inclusion in this survey. These anthropologists were likely to be required to carry on long-term foreign fieldwork and thus constitute a satisfactory study group. The response rate was 40 percent, with 128 responses garnered overall.² Seventy-four percent had conducted research in Mexico, and 71 percent carried out fieldwork in Central America. Ninety-four percent were engaged in fieldwork in the region sometime in the last fifteen years. An initial data analysis indicated, however, that out of 128 questionnaires only ninety-three were fully completed (constituting a 29% response rate) and therefore could be included in the statistical analysis. Those responses provided insight into about 110 field sites.

A short questionnaire containing twenty-seven questions was emailed to the participants. The respondents were asked to answer if any of their field sites were affected by security threats and (if appropriate) answer a series of questions

regarding the most recently affected field site. They were also asked to answer if any of their field sites were considered secure and (if appropriate) answer a series of questions regarding the most recent secure field site. Our survey was arranged in a manner so that the responses were anonymous. Among the questions asked were the items that described the security threats and sociopolitical conditions faced in the field sites. The items included responders' observations of: police protection and corruption; government effectiveness and corruption; military presence and corruption; the occurrences of kidnapping, extortion, homicide, public displays of homicide victims, clandestine graves for homicide victims, as well as phenomena of migration and poverty and the rural/urban character of the field site population. Additionally, the questionnaire included a demographic rubric. To provide a better context, where available, the below provided excerpts from the participants' answers are accompanied by a basic professional profile of the participant, in particular: number of years of experience in Academia, number of field sites in Mexico, and number of field sites in Central America.

Hypotheses

The responses to our survey were analyzed in a fashion that allowed us to test three hypotheses. The first, H_1 , tests *the likelihood that particular state condition symptoms and violent displays observed by researchers are related to the field site being considered insecure*. What H_1 means is that we are measuring how state condition symptoms and violent displays are perceived by anthropologists to be affecting the security of their field sites. By "state condition symptoms," we mean that we asked respondents to report on the following phenomena within their field sites: whether or not police protection is sufficient for law and order, whether or not corruption among the police is a problem, if government institutions are effectively governing, if corruption among government officials is a problem, if the military has a significant presence, if corruption among military personnel is a problem, if migration to the United States is a significant phenomenon, and if poverty is a significant phenomenon. In short, these questions try to gauge anthropologists' perceptions of governance and socioeconomic conditions within their field sites. By "violent displays," we mean that we asked respondents which of the following phenomena are significant problems within their field sites: kidnapping, extortion, homicide, public displays of homicide victims, and clandestine graves. H_1 allows us to examine the extent to which these phenomena are related to whether or not an anthropologist views the field site as secure.

Our second hypothesis, H_2 , deals with urbanization and insecurity. Forty-seven of the world's most violent cities are in Latin America (Szabo de Carvalho 2016), and if smaller urban centers were counted, the numbers may be higher still. Eight of the eleven most violent cities in the world are located in Mexico and Central America.³ Rapidly urbanizing El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, collectively known as "The Northern Triangle," now constitute the most violent place on

earth (Hope 2015). Yet, according to Kim and Zangerling (2016), spatially disaggregated data on crime and violence within municipalities is not available in Mexico, and we have been unable to find such data on Central America as well. Therefore, it is difficult to assess to what extent organized criminal violence and urbanization go hand in hand. Mexico and Central America have a long history of rural banditry and rural guerrilla movements (Kay 2001) that presented distinctive forms of violence. Furthermore, the largely rural Mexican state of Guerrero has had one of the highest homicide rates for decades, and rural areas of El Salvador and Guatemala likewise have been engulfed in land conflicts (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrion 2011). So, while some reports indicate a shift of violence from rural to urban areas of Latin America (e.g., Moser and McIlwaine 2006), there is still much to explore concerning the rural and urban dimensions of organized crime. Therefore H_2 tests *the likelihood that the rural population presence is related to the field site being considered secure*. In other words, our H_2 hypothesis explores to what extent organized criminal violence in Mexico and Central America is perceived to be a rural or urban phenomenon and, in particular, analyzes whether researchers perceive rural areas to be safer.

H_3 tests whether *the likelihood of fieldwork abandonment is related to state conditions and the level of security threats observed*. Here, we return to the state conditions and manifestations of violence described in the H_1 section to see if they are related to fieldwork abandonment. The term "fieldwork abandonment" refers to when one of our respondents reports that they have cancelled fieldwork plans in any given year from 2005 through 2015 due to safety considerations. Our results are based on regression analysis discussed below. We also provide verbal responses from participants that shed light on contemporary research in the region.

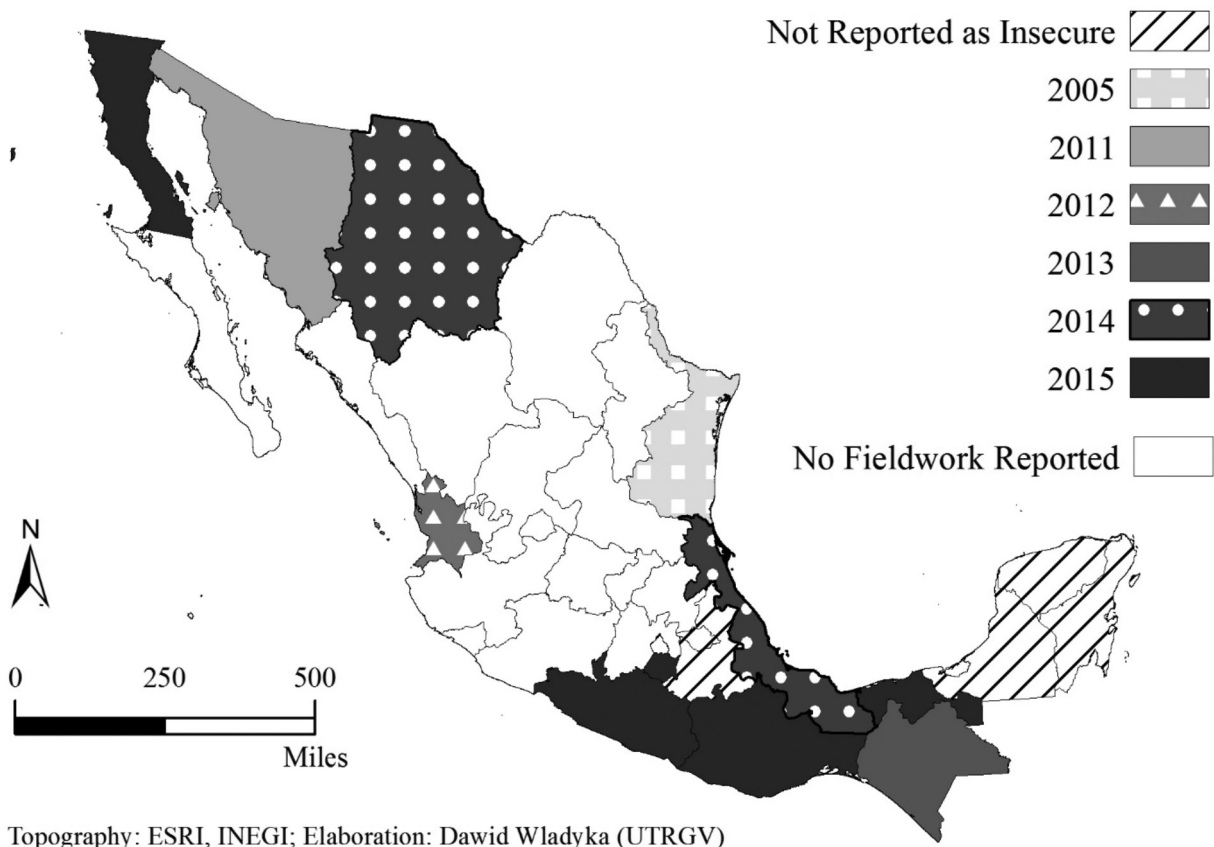
Limitations

One of the goals of the study is to point out current patterns as to the researchers' perceptions of the field sites and their decisions regarding fieldwork abandonment. However, in some cases, decisions can be attributed to personal circumstances not captured by this study. The willingness to participate in the survey could also be triggered by the experiences of insecurity, which could possibly result in over-representation of those cases. Also, the locations selected for the analysis as well as the populations researched might be characterized by traits that are not necessarily present in other cases. Finally, one should also consider that field researchers from other countries (especially Mexico and Central America) could perceive and experience the analyzed threats in ways distinct from those experienced by their United States colleagues.

Results

In order to provide basic insight into the spatial configuration of the data, we begin this section providing two maps containing the distribution of field sites in Mexico and Central

Figure 1. Year a Field Site in a Mexican State was Last Reported as Insecure

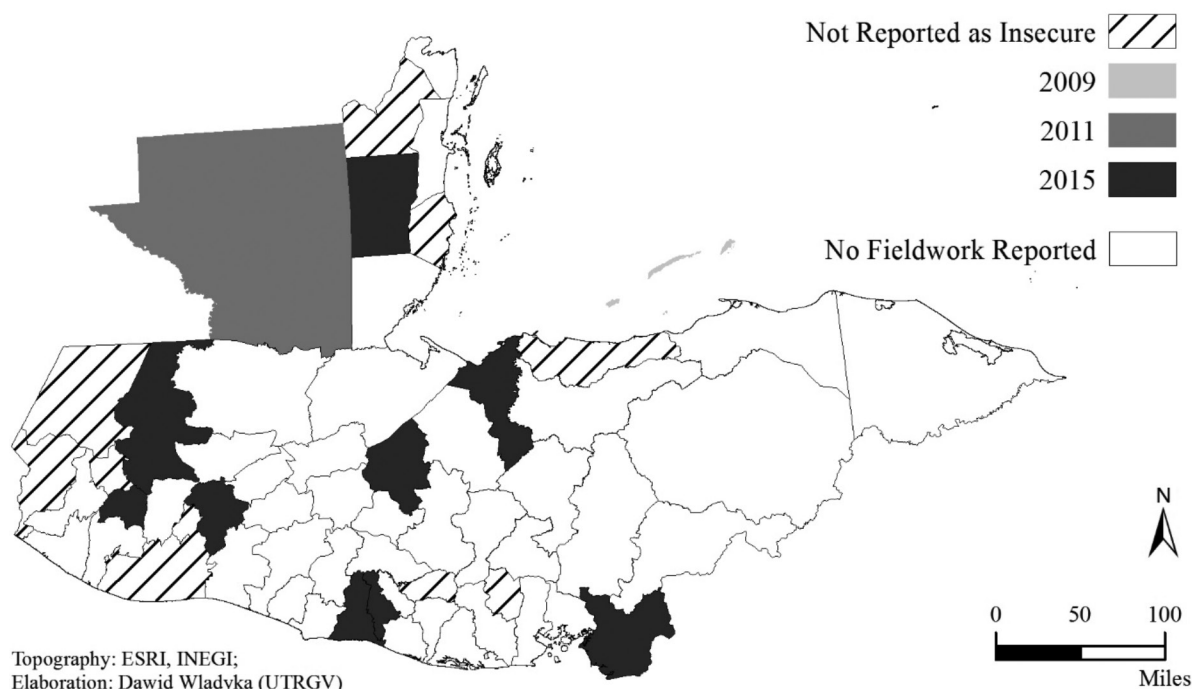


America. The goal of these maps is twofold. First of all, they present the geographical extent of the data gathered in our survey (and especially, the lack of reported data). That should allow the reader to realize the potential and limitations of the results presented in the next paragraphs. On the other hand, the maps enrich the quantitative and qualitative discussion by introducing the basic spatial-temporal relationships when it comes to field site security reflected in our data. Figure 1 (above) provides a visual representation of Mexican states reported as containing insecure field sites. Figure 2 provides a map of the situation in Central America.

In order to test H_1 that *the likelihood of particular state condition symptoms and violence displays observed by researchers is related to the field site being considered insecure*, thirteen Binary Logistic Regressions (BLR) were performed. In particular, the thirteen BLR analyses were performed to ascertain the likelihood that respondents disagreed or agreed with the presence of the following phenomena (binary outcome⁴) within the field site status described as insecure or secure (binary factor). The detailed results of the BLR models are displayed in Table 1 and Table 2. In particular, the models with the field site status (secure/insecure) factor and the outcomes listed below were statistically significant. The

researchers working in the *field sites considered as insecure* compared to researchers working in *secure field sites* are more likely to observe: significant military presence (over 4x more likely, $p < .05$), corruption among military personnel that constitutes a problem (almost 4.5x more likely, $p < .05$), migration to the United States being a significant phenomenon (over 6.5x more likely, $p < .05$), kidnapping being a significant problem (almost 8.5x more likely, $p < .001$), extortion being a significant problem (almost 40x more likely, $p < .001$), homicide being a significant problem (over 13.5x more likely, $p < .001$), gruesome, public displays of homicide victims that commonly occur (almost 11x more likely, $p < .001$), and clandestine graves for homicide victims that commonly occur (almost 46x more likely, $p < .001$). Additionally, the researchers working in the field sites considered as insecure comparing to researchers working in secure field sites are less likely to observe: police protection that is sufficient for law and order (for the insecure field sites, the odds decrease from one to 0.138, $p < .05$) and government institutions that are effectively governing (for the insecure field sites, the odds decrease from one to 0.086, $p < .001$). The BLR models applied with corruption among the police [$\chi^2(1) = 2.211, p = .137$], and government officials being the

Figure 2. Year a Field Site in Central America was Last Reported as Insecure



significant problems [$\chi^2(1) = 2.020, p = .155$] as outcomes were not statistically significant.⁵

Untangling the complex webs of cause and effect found among political, socioeconomic, and security variables is daunting under any circumstances. Our regression analysis only goes so far. To help make better sense of the situation on the ground, we provide the below qualitative assessments from our respondents. To begin, the following comment by a participant who conducts research in Honduras helps frame the complexities of disentangling state condition symptoms and violence:

Smuggling and money laundering interfere with legitimate attempts to make a living among many agriculturalists. These difficulties draw more people into activities indirectly or directly linked to organized crime. I have not studied this phenomenon extensively but have witnessed it incidentally. Organized crime also leads to a breakdown of government institutions needed to guarantee the effective functioning of legitimate activities, for example, basic security, enforcement of contracts, etc. (*25 years of experience in Academia, 1 field site in Mexico, 4 field sites in Central America*)

Also illuminating was this comment from another respondent:

Poverty and migration are growing significantly. Tracing international linkages has been helpful. Paying attention to the long-term effects of violence and security issues means that questions of whether the state functions or not are considerably complex. (*10 years of experience in Academia, 2 field sites in Mexico, 3 field sites in Central America*)

Some scholars (e.g., Correa-Cabrera 2017) focus on competition for resources in their discussions of regional insecurity, while others (e.g., Yaworsky and Wladyka n.d.) more narrowly examine the role of ineffective governance in facilitating insecurity. A full-scale dissection of the issue is beyond the scope of this article, but we refer the reader to the two publications cited above as starting points for further discussion.

To explore H_2 that *the likelihood that the rural population presence is related to the field site being considered secure*, we analyzed the relationship between field site status and the observed rural population presence in the field site area. This was also assessed with use of BLR. The BLR model (see Table 3) was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 5.067, p = .024$. The model explained 6.2 percent (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in field site status as secure or insecure and correctly classified 65.4 percent of cases. The model indicated that, as the presence of rural population increases, the field site is less likely to be considered as insecure (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 4.902, p = .027$).

Overall, the comments made by respondents regarding the relationship between urbanization and insecurity corroborated the quantitative analysis. That is to say, anthropologists commented on crime as a heightened concern in urban areas. Below is a respondent's observation on rural and urban dimensions of insecurity in El Salvador:

Some remote rural towns are only marginally affected locally by drug and gang and security force corruption, but virtually all state (*departamento*) capitals and even most or all municipal capitals are seriously insecure because

Table 1. Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting the Observation of the Following Phenomena: (1) Police Protection is Sufficient for Law and Order, (2) Corruption among the Police is a Problem, (3) Government Institutions are Effectively Governing, (4) Corruption among Government Officials is a Problem, (5) The Military has a Significant Presence, (6) Corruption among Military Personnel is a Problem, (7) Migration to the United States is a Significant Phenomenon from the Field Site Status

Factor	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	91% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
(1) Field Site Status	-1.978	0.674	8.626	1	0.003	0.138	0.037	0.518
Constant	-0.534	0.305	3.057	1	0.080	0.586		
Model $\chi^2 = 11.371^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .187$, N = 86, correctly classified = 76.7%								
(2) Field Site Status	0.894	0.601	2.211	1	0.137	2.444	0.753	7.940
Constant	0.898	0.358	6.302	1	0.012	2.455		
Model $\chi^2 = 2.341$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .048$, N = 73, correctly classified = 78.1%								
(3) Field Site Status	-2.451	0.573	18.302	1	0.000	0.086	0.028	0.265
Constant	0.693	0.306	5.125	1	0.024	2.000		
Model $\chi^2 = 23.394^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .332$, N = 82, correctly classified = 74.4%								
(4) Field Site Status	1.177	0.828	2.020	1	0.155	3.243	0.640	16.431
Constant	1.531	0.390	15.428	1	0.000	4.625		
Model $\chi^2 = 2.382$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .057$, N = 77, correctly classified = 87.0%								
(5) Field Site Status	1.444	0.433	11.111	1	0.001	4.238	1.813	9.908
Constant	-0.642	0.276	5.398	1	0.020	0.526		
Model $\chi^2 = 11.891^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .150$, N = 100, correctly classified = 67.0%								
(6) Field Site Status	1.489	0.625	5.676	1	0.017	4.433	1.302	15.094
Constant	-0.642	0.391	2.699	1	0.100	0.526		
Model $\chi^2 = 6.111^*$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .156$, N = 49, correctly classified = 67.3%								
(7) Field Site Status	1.879	0.783	5.758	1	0.016	6.545	1.411	30.366
Constant	1.012	0.292	12.007	1	0.001	2.750		
Model $\chi^2 = 8.216^*$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .131$, N = 98, correctly classified = 81.6%								

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. The outcomes in those analyses are coded so that 0 = disagree with presence of the phenomenon, and 1 = agree with presence of the phenomenon. The factor in those analyses is coded so that 0 = secure field site and 1 = insecure field site.

of drug, gang, and security force corruption. This is also completely true of my fieldwork in Guatemala and Honduras and mostly true of my fieldwork in rural and urban Nicaragua and mildly true of my field site in rural Costa Rica. (30 years of experience in Academia, 1 field site in Mexico, 4 field sites in Central America)

A respondent working in rural Belize provided us with the following commentary:

We had an incident last year that involved drug runners stumbling onto our site. They shot and killed a military guard located at the site. Fortunately, myself and students were not there at the time of the shooting. ... In the eight years of working at this site, I have never felt threatened or worried, although our men have told me stories of their encounters with *chicleros*

that are a bit unsettling. (6 years of experience in Academia, 1 field site in Mexico, 3 field sites in Central America)

Two other respondents working in Belize chimed in:

It [violence] has been a game changer. It is worst in the city, but it is everywhere throughout the country. (12 years of experience in Academia, 2 field sites in Mexico, 3 field sites in Central America)

And:

My site is situated on 25,000 acres of private land with controlled access. Fortunately, the issues raised by your study have not affected us yet. (8 years of experience in Academia, 8 field sites in Central America)

Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting the Observation of the Following Phenomena: (8) Kidnapping is a Significant Problem, (9) Extortion is a Significant Problem, (10) Homicide is a Significant Problem, (11) Gruesome, Public Displays of Homicide Victims Commonly Occur, (12) Clandestine Graves for Homicide Victims Commonly Occur from the Field Site Status

Factor	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	91% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
(8) Field Site Status	2.135	0.505	17.884	1	.000	8.453	3.143	22.733
Constant	-1.564	0.367	18.204	1	.000	0.209		
Model $\chi^2 = 20.357^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .283$, N = 88, correctly classified = 75.0%								
(9) Field Site Status	3.670	0.791	21.546	1	.000	39.267	8.336	184.964
Constant	-0.930	0.305	9.292	1	.002	0.395		
Model $\chi^2 = 40.560^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .502$, N = 86, correctly classified = 80.2%								
(10) Field Site Status	2.618	0.545	23.075	1	.000	13.714	4.712	39.917
Constant	-0.944	0.315	8.991	1	.003	0.389		
Model $\chi^2 = 29.368^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .379$, N = 88, correctly classified = 77.3%								
(11) Field Site Status	2.394	0.683	12.278	1	.000	10.957	2.872	41.803
Constant	-2.890	0.593	23.744	1	.000	0.056		
Model $\chi^2 = 16.277^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .260$, N = 94, correctly classified = 81.9%								
(12) Field Site Status	3.826	1.070	12.788	1	.000	45.882	5.635	373.560
Constant	-3.951	1.010	15.318	1	.000	.019		
Model $\chi^2 = 28.063^{**}$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .454$, N = 85, correctly classified = 81.2%								

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. The outcomes in those analyses are coded so that 0 = disagree with presence of the phenomenon, and 1 = agree with presence of the phenomenon. The factor in those analyses is coded so that 0 = secure field site and 1 = insecure field site.

A respondent who works in rural Oaxaca, Mexico, left us with this observation:

I travel to different Chatino communities, each community is different, some are safer than others.... Extortion is not a problem in San Juan, but it is common in other communities, for example, in San Miguel Panixtlahuaca and many other communities. (3 years of experience in Academia)

A respondent working in Costa Rica had this to say:

Other neighborhoods in the capital city in which I have collected data before have become too dangerous due to gang violence, and I would not work there right now. (5 years of experience in Academia, 1 field site in Mexico, 2 field sites in Central America)

And finally, this from a respondent working in Guatemala:

The city of Guatemala where I work also has a different profile than the one I tried to express here—much worse, actually. (25 years of experience in Academia, 2 field sites in Mexico, 2 field sites in Central America)

Clearly, anthropologists hold a heightened perception of insecurity in urban areas.

In order to further analyze the insecure field sites and test H_3 that *the likelihood of fieldwork abandonment is related to state conditions and the level of security threats observed*, we examined the observed *security threats* measured with a Security Threats Scale (STS) and the observed *state condition* measured with the State Condition Scale (SCS) in the field sites that are associated with the abandonment of fieldwork. In particular, the STS was composed from the following Likert items: kidnapping is a significant problem; extortion is a significant problem; homicide is a significant problem; gruesome, public displays of homicide victims commonly occur; and clandestine graves for homicide victims commonly occur. The SCS was composed from the following Likert items: police protection is sufficient for law and order, corruption among the police is a problem, government institutions are effectively governing, corruption among government officials is a problem, corruption among military personnel is a problem, migration to the United States is a significant phenomenon, and poverty is a significant phenomenon. A BLR was conducted in order to examine the relationship between the STS (the five Likert items indicated a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.896) and SCS (the seven Likert items indicated a high level

Table 3. Binary Logistic Regression Model Predicting the Field Site Status as Secure or Insecure from the Presence of the Rural Population

Factor	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	91% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
Presence of Rural Population	-0.411	0.186	4.902	1	0.027	0.663	0.461	0.954
Constant	0.863	0.601	2.061	1	0.151	2.371		

Model $\chi^2 = 5.067$, $p = .024$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .062$, $N = 107$

Note: the outcome in this analysis is coded so that 0 = secure field site and 1 = insecure field site.

of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.779) as two factors, and a binary outcome representing whether the field site was *not abandoned* or *abandoned* (with *not abandoned* as a reference category). The BLR model (see Table 4) was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 7.642$, $p = .022$. The model explained 20.9 percent (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in field site abandonment and correctly classified 62.2 percent of cases. The model indicated that, as the observed security threats increase, the researchers are more likely to abandon the fieldwork.

In particular, the STS was a significant coefficient (Wald $\chi^2(1) = 5.286$, $p = .021$), and for each point increase in the STS, the odds of abandoning the fieldwork increased roughly 1.3 times. On the other hand, the SCS was a non-significant coefficient ($\chi^2(1) = .414$, $p = .520$), indicating that the observed state conditions were not related with fieldwork abandonment (see Table 4).

We report some of the more insightful comments on violence below. First, a respondent working in Oaxaca, Mexico, provides this perspective on violence:

The place where most people confront issues of violence is while migrating when they are vulnerable to kidnapping

for extortion and murder at the hands of criminal groups. This is largely because during migration, kin members are not always certain of precisely where they are and often don't have reliable ways of getting in contact so that their fears can be easily manipulated or taken advantage of by kidnappers or con artists pretending to have kidnapped their family members. (30 years of experience in Academia, 2 field sites in Mexico, 3 field sites in Central America)

A respondent who works in Honduras had this to say:

Violence due to organized crime seems extremely regionally specific within and between field sites. It's important to talk to people who live locally prior to starting any project for realistic vision of current and projected future safety. (12 years of experience in Academia, 1 field site in Mexico, 4 field sites in Central America)

A respondent who works in Panama provided this comment:

Kidnapping of children occurs among the indigenous group at my field site and is a serious concern which causes substantial distrust of non-indigenous. Working scientists remain fairly safe. (12 years of experience in Academia, 1 field site in Mexico, 4 field sites in Central America)

Table 4. Binary Logistic Regression Model Predicting the Abandonment of the Fieldwork from the Security Threats Scale and the State Condition Scale

Factor	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	91% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
STS	0.267	0.116	5.286	1.000	0.021	1.306	1.040	1.639
SCS	-0.064	0.100	0.414	1.000	0.520	0.938	0.771	1.141
Constant	-2.867	2.427	1.396	1.000	0.237	0.057		

Model $\chi^2 = 7.642$, $p = .022$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .209$, $N = 45$

Note: the outcome in this analyses is coded so that 0 = fieldwork not abandoned and 1 = abandoned fieldwork. The factors in those analyses constitutes scales, accordingly STS constitutes a 5–35 scale where 5 indicated best observed state condition, and 35 indicated worst observed state condition, and SCS constitutes a 5–25 scale where 5 indicated lack of observed security threats, and 25 indicated the highest observed level of security threats.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results presented mostly support H_1 , that *the likelihood of particular state condition symptoms and violent displays observed by researchers is related to the field site being considered insecure*, and H_2 , that *the likelihood that the rural population presence is related to the field site being considered secure*. The analysis of coefficients suggests that two unique factors not related to a field site being considered secure or not are the *corruption among the police* and *corruption among government officials*. Also, it is important to note that the analysis of the coefficients showed that the likelihood of the observation of various security threats shows a higher increase for insecure field sites than the likelihood of the observation of various “state condition” related phenomena. Additionally, the results partially support H_3 , that *the likelihood of fieldwork abandonment is related to state conditions and the level of security threats observed*. In particular, the analysis of coefficients suggests that the likelihood of abandoning fieldwork increases with the increase in the observed security threats level. On the other hand, the observed state condition was not significantly related to fieldwork abandonment. In summary, the analysis shows that there are significant differences regarding the levels of urbanization as well as various state conditions and security threats between the field sites considered insecure and those perceived to be safe. The evidence additionally suggests that field site abandonments are related to the security threat demonstrations but not to the other state condition symptoms observed in the field site.

In the face of the corruption and feudal political structures commonly encountered in Mexico and Central America, clients (including anthropologists) traditionally achieved a degree of protection by identifying powerful figures in the local *red de copulas* (patron-client network) and paying them off (Kyle and Yaworsky 2008; Smith 2003). This practice is problematic in zones contested by warring factions, as they target each other’s supporters, and the action on the ground these days is quite dynamic. A site that may appear to be safe today may not be six weeks from now. Some field sites are too dangerous for long-term participant observation: they now require short-term “shoot and scoot” ethnography. Our field practices are adapting to heightened security threats.

Anthropologists constitute only a fraction of the professionals who may flee insecure environments. In particular, further quantitative and qualitative research should focus on non-governmental organization aid workers, as their role involves the recovery and development of communities. In the 21st century, the risk of being an aid worker has particularly increased. The number killed, kidnapped, and injured has risen drastically as they have emerged as preferred victims (Stoddard 2007). These attacks, as well as other violent strategies like suicide bombings and ambushes, are currently most problematic in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan; therefore, those countries should become locations of interest for similar research in the future (Stoddard 2007; Stoddard, Harmer, and Didomenico 2009).

If it’s time for personal confessions, we will reveal them here. When our home institution banned research in Mexico back in 2009, Yaworsky was angered at first. However, by 2011, a return seemed increasingly unwise. In 2014, personal friends in the field site were being “disappeared” and killed, and others were terrorized and fleeing the state. A simple project done by Yaworsky in 2006, conducting door-to-door surveys in the *colonias*, now seemed like a good way to get kidnapped or worse. Traveling into the countryside would mean crossing lines of control between the municipality’s two warring cartels, which is dangerous and had already led to the demise of some of our friends and informants. Conducting a roadside traffic survey, a simple task done during the Yaworsky’s dissertation fieldwork, would now draw more attention than is wise. In short, even if an ethnographer was to return to the municipality (with the plaza under constant surveillance), just exactly what would they do? Perhaps, part of the answer is that in violent social contexts, the ethnographers should generally be members of the local population who are more familiar with the risks and how to handle them and less attractive as targets for kidnapping and violence. Ideally, a survey of anthropologists working at Mexican and Central American universities who are regional specialists could explore this idea further. We wish to point out that we indeed sent a separate, Spanish language survey to our colleagues in those countries, but the response rate was dismal, and we received little in the way of useful feedback. We can only speculate, but perhaps fear was silencing some of these anthropologists, as they must be aware of the numerous journalists assassinated in Mexico because they reported on cartel violence.

Hannah Gill (2004) and David Goldstein (2014) analyze the problems faced by researchers in insecure zones, and they both touch on experiences familiar to our respondents: the mistrust of strangers, the witnessing of activities that one should not see, and the inadvertent breaking of unwritten codes that govern social life in violent zones. While we refrain from offering safety precautions ourselves, we are happy to forward the recommendation of a respondent who is a veteran fieldworker:

The key for productive fieldwork is to build relationships of trust and respect with people in the research site. Then the researcher will be informed of risks, people, and places to avoid (or when) by trusted local collaborators. It takes time to build trust and to realize who is reliable. Ultimately, doing good ethnography means being willing to take on the security risks faced by the people with whom you work, and in that process, becoming vulnerable and open—then you have a chance to understand their realities. At the same time, the risks must be constantly reevaluated, and if your own presence places the people with whom you work at risk, you must leave. In other cases, your presence may provide some protection, and that is also a delicate tightrope to walk given that your eventual departure could place them at later risk. However, risks are difficult to comprehend. I worked in Peru during the *Sendero Luminoso* insurgency prior to my Ph.D. work. I lived in a village that was under constant threat of attack

by Sendero—you learn who you can trust, get an inside tip as to when you should take a trip out of town, and become hyperaware of subtle shifts around you. And perhaps at some level, if you decide to work in the eye of the storm, you become accustomed to it and make your peace with the risk because you believe in the work that you're doing. (*19 years of experience in Academia, 4 field sites in Mexico, 5 field sites in Central America*)

We conclude by raising these issues and directing them squarely at applied anthropologists should they be deterred from the field for safety considerations. First, how can a community targeted for planned change be meaningfully included in the formulation of development policy if applied anthropologists cannot (or will not) enter the field site? The violence also interferes with careful, empirical feedback concerning the effects of development and with ever really knowing if the local population supports any proposed intervention. The very real local, cultural, social, and psychological barriers that may hinder acceptance of beneficial projects will be left unknown, along with the identities of key communicators, leaders, and other *patrones* in the field site. (It was hard enough trying to figure out who were members of the local red de copulas in the old days). Meanwhile, forensic anthropology, sadly, could well be one of the few growth areas for applied anthropology in Mexico and Central America. Perhaps while reflecting on these topics, applied anthropologists can also strategize to, among other things, effect beneficial changes in United States policies towards “the war on drugs” and refugees fleeing violence in the region. We hope that this article contributes to the initiation of discussion of these issues.

Notes

¹The United States is seemingly becoming a much more litigious society. This too, we believe, is having the effect of limiting both faculty and student opportunities for foreign fieldwork. Empirically documenting the scope of this problem is beyond the purview of our paper, but we identify the topic as one worthy of further research.

²Among participants: 53 percent were male and 47 percent female. Seventy-nine percent were married. Ninety-one percent were United States residents, and 96 percent held doctoral degrees.

³The list of the world's eleven most violent cities includes San Salvador and Soyapango in El Salvador, San Pedro Sula and District Central in Honduras, Acapulco and Chilpancingo in Mexico, Belmopan in Belize, and Guatemala City in Guatemala (Szabo de Carvalho 2016).

⁴The outcomes were classified as binary, based on original data gathered on Likert items and further reclassified into Disagree/Agree dichotomous variables after dropping the Undecided category.

⁵The variable *poverty is a significant phenomenon* was dropped from the analysis since the split of ninety-six field sites where *poverty was observed as a significant phenomenon* to six where *the poverty was not observed as a significant phenomenon* violated the assumptions of the analysis.

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