

# Understanding Cycles of Retributive Violence: A Lab in the Field Experiment in Michoacán

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\*Several parts of the format for this pre-analysis plan were inspired by the Blair et al. (2018) pre-analysis plan.

## 1 Introduction

Support for harsh punishments can lead to the miscarriage of justice or even a downward spiral of violence. The death penalty, extralegal police killings, and lynching all undermine civil liberties and do not appear to improve public safety, yet preferences and policies for "rough justice" persist in diverse national contexts. Survey evidence suggests that in many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, large proportions of citizens support *mano dura* (firm hand or iron fist) policies and extralegal harsh punishments (Holland, 2013; Cruz and Kloppe-Santamaría, 2019). Recent elections in the Philippines and elsewhere in Southeast Asia have demonstrated a popular demand for ostensible order at any cost, including mass lethal punishments (Teehankee and Thompson, 2016; Pepinsky, 2017). In the United States, Roberts et al. (2002) coined the term "penal populism" to capture the concept of criminal justice policies – specifically harshly punitive policies such as the three strikes laws – that are chosen based on their popularity rather than because they are effective in reducing crime.

Is punitive justice in the interest of communities affected by crime and violence? Previous research suggests that harsh punishments do not reduce subsequent crime, and may even exacerbate violence. For instance, research on capital punishment in the US finds that there is little or no deterrent effect (Levitt, 2004; Donohue and Wolfers, 2006; Zimring, Fagan and Johnson, 2010; Council et al., 2012). Other research suggests that harsh policing has been largely ineffective against criminal gangs in Latin America (Wolf, 2017), while more community-oriented criminal justice policies are more effective (Arias and Ungar, 2009). Yet on the other hand, it seems obvious that the threat of harsh punishments should have a deterrent effect on crime, particularly economically-motivated crimes like robbery, and thus merit support from crime-affected residents.

This tension raises an important question: why do individuals support harsh punishments? What are the cognitive processes that underlie this support? Are harsh punishments and the candidates who champion them supported because residents of crime-affected communities deeply

believe that they are effective deterrents? Or are they supported because people affected by crime also value retribution, even if it comes at the cost of security or civil liberties? More fundamentally, is support for harsh punishments driven by well-informed and deeply considered decision-making, or is it driven in part by transitory emotions or information gaps that make it harder for people to make decisions that are in line with their long-term interests?

A first and perhaps most obvious explanation is utilitarian: under some conditions, harsh punishments may in fact make people safer. Becker (1968), for instance, theorizes that the probability and severity of punishment deters crime by raising the marginal cost of a potentially lucrative criminal act. In contexts where crime is high and state authorities are absent, informal institutions surrounding harsh community punishments may also contribute to establishing order and lowering certain kinds of violence. However, it is also possible that citizens support harsh punishments even though they do not make them better off. This study is designed to test two mechanisms that could be driving support for harsh punishments, even if they are not effective in providing security or other long-term benefits.

First, citizens might lack the information about the range of possible criminal justice mechanisms, or the preferences of their fellow citizens, that they would need to make informed decisions. Secondary beliefs about what other citizens prefer or would do might be particularly important given that many responses to crime involve collective action. If citizens over-estimate support for harsh punishments within their community, then they may also choose to coordinate on a harsh response to crime, even if they would independently prefer a less punitive option. Relatedly, citizens may not be considering all of the information that is available to them. Common cognitive biases like the availability heuristic could lead citizens to believe that support for harsh punishments is higher than it actually is, or to believe that harsh punishments are more effective than they actually are.

Second, citizens might be influenced by emotions after violent events that make them willing to sacrifice their security in order to mete out a swift and harsh punishment. In previous experimental

and observational research that we have conducted in Western Mexico, we found support for the view that morally outrageous crimes make citizens angry, changing their preferences for different types of criminal justice policies. Specifically, angry citizens seem to reduce the importance they place on the legality of punishment and increase the value that they place on harshly punishing perpetrators of violence. To the extent that these emotional responses lead people to value punishment for its own sake, they could lead to support for harsh punishments even if those punishments do not bring security improvements.

This project tests two different approaches to address these reasons that citizens might support harsh punishments even if they do not increase security. The first intervention aims to correct potentially inaccurate beliefs about crime and criminal justice, particularly beliefs about other citizens' preferences, by inviting citizens to deliberate about community responses to crime in small groups. This "Cognitive Deliberation" (CD) intervention is based on the deliberative polling approach developed by James Fishkin, which involves providing citizens with some accurate information and giving individuals the opportunity to thoroughly discuss an issue with a group fellow citizens (Fishkin, 1991, 2011). Deliberation is supposed to facilitate thoughtful, well-reasoned opinions on questions related to morality and the public good. To the extent that support for harsh punishments is driven by misinformation, or misinterpretation of the information that people hold, the CD intervention should lead to reductions in support for harsh punishments.

However, a large literature on moral reasoning suggests that reasoning is used more to defend positions that are actually decided based on emotional reactions, particularly in social settings (Haidt, 2001). Our second intervention combines the informed discussion of the CD intervention with an explicit discussion of emotional reactions to moral dilemmas and a short training on how to regulate emotions (Gross, 1998*b*). The emotion regulation training helps participants identify and embrace their emotional reactions to crimes, identify the appraisals that underlie those emotions, and then identify alternative ways of viewing the situation. Often, these alternative appraisals involve a focus on structural conditions surrounding crime and violence, rather than speculations

about an accused perpetrator's innate characteristics. We call this second intervention CD + emotion regulation (ER). To the extent that support for harsh punishments is driven by emotional reactions to crime (particularly anger and moral outrage), the CD + ER intervention should lead to additional reductions in support for harsh punishments compared to the CD treatment.

The two treatments will proceed similarly. During recruitment, we will measure a set of pretreatment opinions and skills, including exposure to violence, emotion regulation skills, and attitudes towards criminal justice. The treatments are structured discussion groups with 8-12 members per group. When participants arrive at the discussion center on the morning for which they registered, they will be assigned to either CD, CD + ER, or the control group. Following the treatments, the participants will be presented with hypothetical crimes, and decide individually on how they think the crime should be punished. They will also be presented with a selection of hypothetical candidates who have different platforms on punitive justice. Finally, respondents will be presented with a series of behavioral tasks that also elicit their preferences on punishments. We will compare CD and CD + ER to a control group that will not go through any deliberation process but only take the outcome survey. Participants assigned to the control group will go through all of the same outcome measurements, but will not participate in any deliberation or training.

## **2 Relevant Literature**

### **2.1 Public opinion and justice preferences**

Political theorists and empirical researchers studying public opinion on criminal justice policy have suggested that citizens weigh three different, and sometimes competing values when justifying criminal justice policies: retribution, prevention, and procedural fairness.

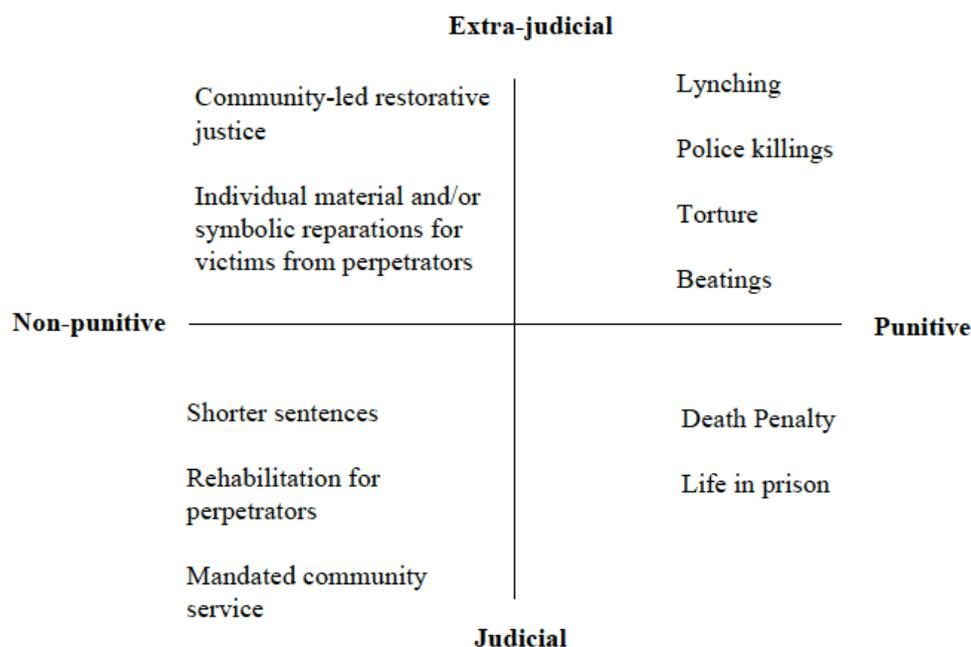
Early political theorists focused primarily on retribution and prevention (Vidmar and Miller, 1980; Darley, Carlsmith and Robinson, 2000). Retribution is retrospective, focusing on the perpetrator's "just deserts" to argue that the punishment should be proportional to the severity of the

crime or how morally outrageous it is (Kant, 1952). If punishments are determined according to this principle, the severity of the harm and the existence of extenuating circumstances that mitigate or exacerbate the moral outrage should be strongly related to the severity of the punishment (Darley, Carlsmith and Robinson, 2000). On the other hand, utilitarian legal scholars have argued that “general prevention ought to be the chief end of punishment, as it is its real justification” (Bentham 1962, qtd. in Carlsmith, Darley and Robinson 2002). More recent research suggests that citizens also have a preference for fairness in the procedures of criminal justice (Lind and Tyler, 1988), perhaps even more than the distributional effects of a policy or how punitive it is. This research suggests that people obey the law and prefer legal punishments for crimes not because of the potential consequences but because they view state justice processes to be fair and legitimate (Tyler, 2006*b*). Procedural fairness also encompasses state or community-led restorative justice processes, which emphasize offenders redressing wrongs, and committing to change and reintegration on terms that victims and communities perceive as fair (Tyler, 2006*a*).

Past public opinion research shows that people often have preferences for punitive criminal justice policies that seem independent of beliefs that these policies are effective or legal. In the U.S., Enns (2014) analyzes questions from hundreds of American public opinion surveys between 1950 and 2010 to show that attitudes towards punitive rather than preventative policies on crime steadily rose from the 1960s to the 1990s. Throughout the time series, consistent majorities of Americans supported the death penalty, reported that the courts were not harsh enough on criminals, and supported more spending on the police (862). Vignette experiments carried out in the US show further support for a logic of retribution (Darley, Carlsmith and Robinson, 2000; Carlsmith, Darley and Robinson, 2002). Research from Latin America has also concluded that harsh criminal justice policy known as *mano dura* (firm hand or iron fist) is popular among large proportions of voters (Holland, 2013). These policies allow police officers discretion in making arrests, constrict due process, and involve the military in policing, and are often justified by politicians as giving criminals the punishments that they deserve.

This project analyzes justice preferences along two main axes: punitiveness (non-punitiveness) and judicial (extra-judicial) status. Extrajudicial refers to punishments that fall outside the law. These can be punitive, such as lynching, or non-punitive, such as community-led restorative justice. We are primarily interested in how attitudes for punitive versus non-punitive criminal justice may shift.

Figure 1: Theoretical characterizations of responses to crime



## 2.2 Violence, anger, information, and punitiveness

Are punitive policies popular because they are effective deterrents, because citizens are misinformed about them, or because citizens seek emotionally satisfying punishments? This question is particularly important when applied to communities that are affected by high levels of violence and crime. Do citizens support punitive policies or groups in places like Western Mexico because they believe these improve community safety, or do they seek to win short-term retribution that may ultimately exacerbate the state and non-state abuse that they face?

While there is certainly enormous variation across cases, much of the literature supports the view that harshly punitive criminal justice policy is popular precisely because it is retributive, not because of its effectiveness or lack thereof. The heavy use of imprisonment, particularly through mandatory sentencing, is often used as an example of a popular but ineffective policy as a large empirical literature has shown that harsher sentencing results in only modest reductions in crime (Von Hirsch et al., 1999; Tonry, 2009).

There is less quantitative evidence on whether vigilante groups or norms of vigilante action make civilians safer. Yet anecdotal and circumstantial evidence suggests that in many contexts they do not. While most vigilante groups claim to be using violence strategically in order to deter crime, vigilante punishments are often disproportionate and “extra-lethal” past the point of rational deterrence (Pratten and Sen, 2007; Kirsch and Grätz, 2010; Fujii, 2013; Gross, 2016). Many vigilante groups invest little in the investigations that are necessary to correctly identify criminals, which also undermines their deterrent effect by reducing the probability that a criminal will actually be caught. Second, vigilante groups are often accused of involvement in the criminal activities that they claim to fight, either because once-legitimate groups cannot resist the temptations to predate or because criminals see the advantages of cloaking themselves in the legitimacy of vigilantism (Lohmuller, 13 Nov 2015). Finally, vigilante groups further weaken the rule of law, by variously engaging in violence against the state, collaborating with state officials to enact extralegal violence, or simply competing with the state as providers of criminal justice.

If vigilantism and *mano dura* policies, for example, do not seem to make civilians safer, then why are these highly punitive practices frequently popular? We see two main ways that decision-making might break down in a way that would lead civilians to support a suboptimal strategy: incorrect perceptions and distorted decision-making.

First, citizens may have incorrect perceptions of the formal justice system, of vigilantism, or of the preferences of other citizens. For example, Chambliss (2001) argues in the context of American criminal justice policies that public misperceptions surrounding crime and the legal

system lead to sub-optimal criminal justice policies. These misperceptions might be exacerbated by “directionally-motivated reasoning,” whereby individuals have incentives to treat information that follows or confirms their prior beliefs as more credible (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler, 2017). Misperceptions could be driven by a number of factors, including preference falsification if citizens feel social pressure to profess support for harsh punishments (Kuran, 1997), sensationalist or biased media coverage (Krause, 2014), or a lack of government transparency.<sup>1</sup>

Second, citizens may have the information that they need to make decisions, but they may be processing that information sub-optimally. Our previous research in Western Mexico finds that violence causes short-term emotional reactions that shift citizens’ preferences in ways that may undermine their security. This view is grounded in theory from psychology about how emotions affect cognition, particularly a view known as appraisal tendency theory (Lerner and Keltner, 2000, 2001). Empirical research in political psychology has shown that emotions felt at the time of a decision strongly affect preferences over policy ranging from counter-terrorism (Lerner et al., 2003) to welfare (Lerner and Small, 2008). Anger in particular has been shown to increase attributions of blame, willingness to take risks, and the desire to punish (Carver and Harmon-Jones, 2009; Bastian, Denson and Haslam, 2013). Building on this literature, we hypothesized that exposure to violence could induce anger that subsequently increases citizens’ willingness to pay for retribution, even at the expense of their own safety or civil rights more generally.

### **2.3 Interventions to reduce retributive violence**

The existing literature suggests two major types of interventions that might enable individuals to make decisions that are more in line with their long-term interests. First, if citizens are supporting harsh punishments because they have uninformed or relatively shallow understandings of their consequences, then giving them the chance to learn and reflect on the issue of criminal justice might enable them to identify collective solutions that are better than the status quo. There is a large

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/29/world/americas/veracruz-mexico-reporters-killed.html>

literature in political science on deliberation that argues that citizens can come to better positions on difficult policy issues through processes of informed community discussion (Fishkin, 1991, 2011; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). Deliberation processes, which typically involve both the provision of information on competing viewpoints and the chance for discussion among a group of citizens, are supposed to facilitate “a cognitive process in which individuals form, alter, or reinforce their opinions as they weigh evidence and arguments from various points of view” (Lindeman, 2002, 199). While deliberation has been said to have numerous benefits, particularly in the political theory literature, in this context we see it as having the potential to slow down decision-making, increase information about policy options, and increase information about others’ opinions.

Research in the behavioral sciences, however, suggests that deliberation might be more effective if coupled with a more realistic view of human decision-making. CD is based on a rationalist style of communication and tends to dismiss discussion of emotions (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001, 2002). Other studies of deliberation find that it can “fan emotions unproductively” such that it “can lead to worse decisions than would have occurred if no deliberation had taken place” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002, 191). However, a large body of research on emotions and decision-making argues that emotions cannot be divorced from judgment, particularly on moral or social issues (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996). Research specifically on moral reasoning suggests that the kind of rational argumentation emphasized in deliberations is rarely used to come to a decision, but often used to justify a position that was initially motivated by an emotional reaction, particularly in social settings (Haidt, 2001; Greene and Haidt, 2002). This research suggests that deliberation on an emotional topic like criminal justice could be more effective if coupled with an intervention that helps individuals recognize and regulate their emotions. Indeed, studies of moral dilemmas in the lab suggest that emotion regulation (ER) can reduce biases in decision-making and make individuals less deontological and less retributive, at least in individual settings (van’t Wout, Chang and Sanfey, 2010; Szekely and Miu, 2015). Several recent studies have taken the ER intervention into real-life settings to look at the effects of repeated trainings on how participants respond to real-life emotional

events. These studies show that repeated trainings in ER techniques like reappraisal and distancing over the course of several weeks can cause increases in positive emotions and even behaviors such as altruistic action (Ng and Diener, 2013; Weng et al., 2013; Denny and Ochsner, 2014). In perhaps the closest studies to what we are proposing, Halperin et al. (2013) and Halperin et al. (2014) have extended this research to a situation of violent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In a series of experiments, they show that short ER trainings and SMS reminders can decrease negative emotions and support for punitive, intolerant policies and that these effects may persist.

### **3 Predictions**

These two interventions – cognitive deliberation and emotion regulation – address our two working hypotheses about why civilians would support punitive justice even if it actually makes them less safe. Thus, assuming that the interventions actually affect the targeted mechanisms, comparing levels of support for punitive justice between these two treatment groups and a control group will allow us to make inferences about the underlying drivers of support for harsh punishments in communities that face insecurity. If we do not find that deliberation or deliberation with emotion regulation reduce support for harsh punishments, then the most likely alternative explanation is that harsh punishments effectively lower the incidence of certain crimes in contexts of weak rule of law.

There are thus three possible interpretations, assuming that our treatments actually address the hypothesized mechanisms. First, if punitive justice is actually the best option that civilians have for security in communities with high violence and low rule of law, then we would not expect these two interventions to reduce support for harsh punishments. Second, if misinformation or misinterpretation of information is leading citizens to support harsh punishments, then the systematic group deliberation in the CD treatment should reduce that support. Finally, if emotional reactions to crime are driving support for harsh punishments, then the CD + ER intervention should reduce support over and above the effect of the CD discussions.

### 3.1 Hypotheses

Our primary outcome of interest is support for harsh punishments. We will measure this with both survey and behavioral measures.

**Primary Outcome Family 1:** Support for **punitive** responses to crime

- 1a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)
- 1b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)
- 1c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Primary Outcome Family 2: Behavioral** support for **punitive** responses to crime

- 2a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)
- 2b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect (relative to control)
- 2c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

Second, we are interested in four mechanisms that our treatments are designed to affect. First, if participants are overestimating the level of support for harsh punishments in their community, then we expect that both the CD and CD + ER interventions will help correct that misperception by exposing participants to the opinions of a wider group of other community members. Second, if participants support harsh punishments largely because of the emotional reactions that they experience after crimes, then we expect that the CD + ER intervention will increase participants' abilities to manage their emotions by changing the way they think about a situation. Finally, both interventions could change participants' perceptions of the benefits of harsh punishments in terms of how just and effective they are perceived to be. The CD + ER intervention might have an additional negative effect on perceived benefits if positive appraisals of harsh punishments are driven in part by justifications of positions that are taken as the result of negative emotions. Finally, because the ER component of the CD + ER treatment focuses in part on thinking through alternative appraisals of crime scenarios that induce negative emotions, the CD + ER treatment might affect the way that

participants attribute blame for crime. Specifically, we think that the CD + ER treatment might make participants less likely to blame individual perpetrators for crimes committed and more likely to blame institutional or structural factors.

**Mechanism Family 1: Perceived level of support** for punitive responses to crime

M2a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)

M2b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)

**Mechanism Family 2: Ability to regulate emotions**

M2a. The CD + ER intervention will have a positive effect (relative to control)

M2b. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional positive effect over the CD intervention

**Mechanism Family 3: Perceived benefits** of punitive responses to crime

M3a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)

M3b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect (relative to the control)

M3c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Mechanism Family 4: Blame attributions** for crime

M4a. The CD + ER intervention will have a positive effect (relative to control)

M4b. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional positive effect over the CD intervention

Third, we are interested in several secondary outcomes. These are areas that could also be affected by the treatments but are not the primary outcomes of interest or are not explicit topics of the discussion. First, if the interventions do reduce support for harsh punishments, they may also reduce support for policies that enable harsh punishments. Similarly, they could reduce support for candidates who propose harsh punishments. Finally, we are interested in whether the discussions might reduce support for extrajudicial punishments, and by contrast, increase support for judicial responses to crime. It is possible that the discussions will also lead participants to update misperceptions and reflect on the value of judicial vs. extrajudicial responses to crime.

**Secondary Outcome Family 1: Support for policies** that enable harsh punishments

S1a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect

S1b. The CD+ER intervention will have a negative effect

S1c. The CD+ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Secondary Outcome Family 2:** Support for **candidates** who propose harsh punishments

S2a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect

S2b. The CD+ER intervention will have a negative effect

S2c. The CD+ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Secondary Outcome Family 3:** Support for **extrajudicial** responses to crime

S3a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect

S3b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect

S3c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Secondary Outcome Family 4:** Perceived benefits of **extrajudicial** responses to crime

S5a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect

S5b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect

S5c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Secondary Outcome Family 5:** Support for policies that allow **extrajudicial** responses to crime

S6a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect

S6b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect

S6c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

**Secondary Outcome Family 6:** Support for candidates who propose **extrajudicial** responses to crime

S7a. The CD intervention will have a negative effect

S7b. The CD + ER intervention will have a negative effect

S7c. The CD + ER intervention will have an additional negative effect over the CD intervention

Finally, we will do subgroup analyses based on two pre-treatment characteristics. First, to the extent that the interventions work through the mechanism of correcting overestimations of how

popular harsh punishments are, we expect that both of the intervention effects will be concentrated among on people who are over-estimating the level of support for harsh punishments at baseline. Second, to the extent that the CD + ER intervention works by giving people new skills to regulate their emotions, we expect that their effects will be concentrated among people who are worse at regulating their emotions at baseline. Finally, because of floor effects we expect that the treatments will be concentrated among people who express at least some pro-punitive preferences at baseline. To the extent that the treatments move people away from supporting harsh punishments, they should not be able to move people who are already strongly opposed to harsh punishments.

**Heterogeneous Effect 1:** Pre-treatment beliefs about the proportion of others who support harsh punishments

H1a. The CD intervention will have a stronger effect among people with high pre-treatment beliefs about the proportion of others who support harsh punishments.

H1b. The CD + ER intervention will have a stronger effect among people with high pre-treatment beliefs about the proportion of others who support harsh punishments.

**Heterogeneous Effect 2:** Pre-treatment ability to regulate emotions

H2a. The CD + ER intervention will have a stronger effect among people with low pre-treatment ability to regulate emotions.

**Heterogeneous Effect 3:** Pre-treatment pro-punishment preferences

H3a. The CD intervention will have a stronger effect among people with some pre-treatment pro-punishment preferences.

H3b. The CD + ER intervention will have a stronger effect among people with some pre-treatment pro-punishment preferences.

## 4 Research design

### 4.1 Research sites and study populations

This study will take place in the city of Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, a state that has had high levels of crime and where citizen support for harsh and extrajudicial responses to crime is also high. Michoacán is famous for the emergence of rural self-defense militias called *autodefensas* to fight organized crime in 2013. Our study, however, is focused on the urban capital of the state of Michoacán, where organized crime is less visibly dominant and where support for harsh and extrajudicial punishments takes different forms.

A historic, touristic city with a population of around 600,000, Morelia is relatively sheltered from the high violence of organized crime that occurs just outside its borders. In 2018, Morelia had a striking rate of home robbery (99 per 100,000 residents, 2.3 times higher than the state average) and of business robbery (74 per 100,000 residents, also the highest in the state). The intentional homicide rate was 26 per 100,000.<sup>2</sup>

There is less granular evidence on support for harsh punishments. However, in qualitative fieldwork during the spring and summer of 2019 we found that support for harsh and extrajudicial punishments is pertinent to many residents and policymakers in Morelia. In Morelia and throughout the country, citizens characterize jails and prisons as "universities for criminals" and biased "revolving doors," where those with money can get out and those without stay in. Additionally, there is a widespread perception that the recent judicial reforms in Mexico protect accused perpetrators at the expense of protecting victims. In qualitative interviews that we carried out with 66 participants in and around Morelia in March 2019, many participants described how they grappled with the desire to punish the perpetrators of crimes that they had experienced. In the summer of 2019, municipal authorities, civil society organizations, and staff of the Archdiocese of Morelia were

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<sup>2</sup>Local crime data come from the Observatorio Ciudadano Michoacán 2018 Annual High Impact Crime Report based on data from the Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública.

designing or running programs to promote peace processes, forgiveness, and/or support survivors of crime in the pursuit of legal justice processes. Finally, Morelia is home to a wide range of citizen efforts to prevent and respond to crime. These include neighborhood watch groups that cooperate with the police and do not attempt to punish criminals themselves, a social media star and former political candidate who apprehends criminals and films confessions for public consumption, and more formal citizen authorities with established codes for how accused criminals are dealt with in their neighborhoods.

#### **4.2 Intervention targeting**

#### **4.3 Recruitment and implementation**

We are recruiting approximately 750 respondents from different neighborhoods in Morelia that have had varied exposure to crime. We are recruiting both in public plazas and markets, and with the help of a range of local partners, including different parts of the municipal government (the municipal president's office, geographically diverse *encargados del orden*, the public security commission, and the Women's Center for Integral Justice), local universities, non-governmental organizations (with a range of focus on violence prevention, women's rights, and LGBTQI+ rights), and programs run by the Archdiocese of Morelia. We aimed to partner with local institutions and organizations with widely different missions and approaches, and also all interested in the topic of cycles of violence.

Recruitment into the study will occur up to two weeks before the intervention. Recruiters will sign participants up for a specific time slot, and they will be randomized into one of the two treatments (CD or CD+ER) or a control group when they arrive at the study center to avoid any non-random attrition between recruitment and the interventions. Participants will only be able to participate in the study once. We are targeting between 15 and 30% of the sample as coming from four different demographic groups - men under 40, men over 40, women under 40, and women over 40.

At the time of recruitment, participants complete a short baseline questionnaire in either a

phone or face-to-face interview using a survey programmed on a tablet. The baseline questionnaire will measure their demographics and psychological characteristics including their positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988), emotion regulation abilities, past exposure to violence, and views of local security providers. We will also take pre-treatment measures of outcomes including preferences over how crimes should be dealt with and criminal justice policy preferences.

Each session will have between 8-12 members, and we will aim to run three concurrent sessions in separate rooms at a single location, a university center near the historical city center.

Participants will be compensated with 300 pesos for showing up at the session. Towards the end of the session, they will be given the chance to donate up to 50 MXN (about \$2.50 USD) to an NGO called *Humanas sin Violencia*. They will also receive some compensation in the form of telephone credit (approximately \$2 USD) for responding to a second follow-up survey by phone.

## **5 Interventions**

This experiment tests two different interventions that target different psychological drivers of citizen support for harsh punishments for crime. The Cognitive Deliberation (CD) intervention will train respondents recognize and challenge their thoughts surrounding interventions. The CD + Emotion Regulation (ER) intervention will include the same information as CD, but rather will train respondents to regulating their emotional reactions after violent events. Both interventions take place during a single interactive, half-day community discussion on how the community should respond to low-level crime.

### **5.1 Cognitive Deliberation**

The CD intervention is premised on the idea that people support extrajudicial violence because of misperceptions of its efficacy or appropriateness relative to other alternatives. They may personally

lack information, or, because violent situations are cognitively demanding, they may not consider all the information that they do have to come to a thoughtful decision about their policy preferences. For example, citizens may support vigilante punishments for crimes because they misperceive how effective it is, or because they simply have not considered the question from alternative viewpoints. The goal of deliberation is “to enable the participants to refine their individual policy preferences and the reasoning behind them, not merely (or necessarily, though we do expect it) to transform their perceptions of others” (Luskin et al., 2014, 5). Deliberation “requires ‘weighing’ competing arguments for policies or candidates in a context of mutually civil and diverse discussion in which people can decide on the merits of arguments with good information” (Fishkin and Mansbridge, 2017).

As part of the CD intervention we ask participants to weigh how the community should handle the problem of violent crime. How severely should perpetrators be punished? Should effort be spent to try to reintegrate or rehabilitate them? Should criminals be reported to the police and brought to trial, or should the community take justice into its own hands? The CD intervention will involve giving a group of Morelia residents the opportunity to weigh both of these options thoroughly and suggest others, and on the basis of more information.

Our deliberation treatment is loosely based off on Fishkin’s Deliberative Polling model, in which participants receive briefing materials, discuss the issue in groups of 8-12, and then have the chance to ask questions of a panel of experts before making individual decisions on an issue. In our case, we have recreated these elements with a few modifications to better fit the context and application.

There are three key elements of the treatment. First, participants receive some basic information about crime, and different arguments for and against harsh and extrajudicial punishments. We prepared a briefing video (which is common for deliberative polls conducted outside advanced industrial democracies) for participants that describe a range of arguments about how crimes should be managed. These arguments came from consultations with local civil society groups and

government offices in Morelia, as well as from qualitative interviews that we conducted in the spring of 2019 in and around Morelia. The 15 minute video is shown at the beginning of the deliberation process. It provides some factual information on crime in Morelia and Michoacan and uses real interview data to present arguments for and against harsh and extrajudicial punishments. It also raises the idea that making decisions about responses to crime is cognitively complex, and that the discussion will ask participants to think very deliberately and thoroughly together about the best responses.

Second, participants go through structured discussions of the pros and cons of different ways to respond to two crime scenarios. First they are then given a simple demonstration of how to do this for a purse-snatching scenario. They are then asked to suggest responses to a crime scenario in which someone gets beat up and robbed, and later a home robbery scenario. These discussions are moderated by a trained member of the research team who will encourage the participants to consider each point and counterpoint in turn, foster norms of mutual respect, and summarize key points. At the end of second scenario, participants are invited to write their preferred response for the rest of the group to see.

Third, participants discuss two higher-level policies related to how crime is punished: whether police should be allowed to use force, and whether citizens should be empowered to punish criminals. Again, participants make lists of pros and cons, and the discussion is facilitated by a moderator who fosters respect and encourages thorough consideration of the points raised.

We designed this treatment to have three main elements. Most importantly, participants receive information about what other Morelia residents think and do about crime. To the extent that citizens have inaccurate secondary beliefs about the preferences of other community members, the deliberate discussion of pros and cons of different types of responses should help correct them. Second, participants are asked to think more methodically than they typically would about how to respond to crime. Slowing down their thinking, and asking them to question their assumptions, is a second element in this treatment. Third, participants receive some information. However, in

our case, because crime responses are often non-institutional and localized data on crime is quite limited, the amount of information that citizens receive from the facilitators is fairly light.

Table 1: Sample Agenda: Cognitive Deliberation

Time	Activity
9:15-9:30AM	Introductions
9:30-9:45AM	Briefing video of arguments for and against harsh justice
9:45-10:15AM	Pro-con analysis training + scenario 1
10:15-11:15AM	Discussion of policy arguments
11:15-11:30AM	Coffee break
11:30-12:15PM	Scenario 2
12:15-1:00PM	Endline measurement + debrief

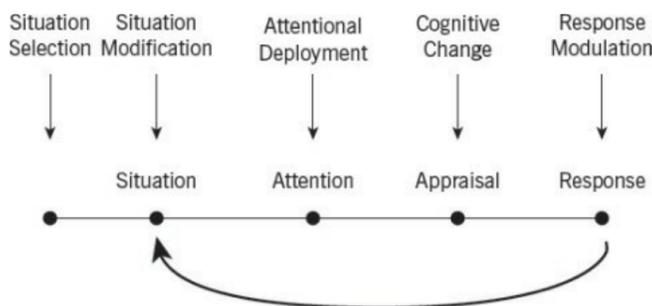
## 5.2 Cognitive Deliberation + Emotion Regulation

The CD + ER version of the intervention will take the same general structure as the CD intervention, but will explicitly discuss the emotional reactions that community members have to violent events and provide training on how to regulate emotions to better direct their actions. This intervention is premised on the theory that individuals know that extrajudicial violence is not in their long-term interest, but may nevertheless support it when in a state of anger (García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2018). Embedding the ER information in the criminal justice community workshop makes the psychological content more natural and applied to the specific context where we want participants to apply their knowledge.

Emotion regulation is defined as “shaping which emotions one has, when one has them, and how one experiences or expresses those emotions” (Gross, 2014, 5). Emotion regulation builds on a view that emotions stem from cognitive appraisals of a particular situation and then shape behavior by affecting how people deploy attention and interpret information (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985; Lazarus and Lazarus, 1991; Lerner and Keltner, 2000). In what Gross calls the “modal model” of emotion, the first step is a situation, either a change in the external environment or an internal thought-process. This situation then causes the individual to deploy attention to relevant

information and make appraisals of what that information means for the individual's current goals. These psychological processes in turn lead to a change in behavior that Gross refers to as a response. Strategies to regulate emotions, therefore, can intervene at multiple points in the causal chain from the initial stimulus to the ultimate behavioral response. Figure 2 diagrams Gross's model of emotion, and the points at which ER can intervene. Our emotion regulation training focuses on modifying participants' appraisals of situations when they believe that their emotions are not helping them respond, which past research has suggested is a particularly effective way of managing emotions (Gross, 1998a).

Figure 2: The process model of emotion regulation, reproduced from Gross (2014, 15)



Participants in the CD + ER workshop will go through all of the steps of the CD workshop, but all sessions will also include an emphasis on identifying and discussing emotional reactions to crime. The biggest difference between the two sessions comes in the “training” section of the workshop. In the CD session, participants are told about “automatic” vs. “deliberate” thinking and given a demonstration of how to suggest responses to crime and list pros and cons. By contrast, in the ER session, participants are walked through a brief discussion of how emotions have important adaptive functions, but can sometimes adversely affect our decision-making. They are then walked through a process of identifying emotions, their functions and potential prejudices, the appraisals that underlie them, and alternative ways of appraising or understanding the situation. The goal of this exercise is to both motivate and enable participants to manage the emotions that they feel in response to crime. The later discussions of crime scenarios and policies also involve making

lists of responses, pros, and cons, but first participants are prompted to identify and consider their emotional reactions and alternative appraisals of the situation.

Table 2: Sample Agenda: CD + Emotion Regulation

Time	Activity
9:15-9:30AM	Introductions
9:30-9:45AM	Briefing video of arguments for and against harsh justice
9:45-10:15AM	Emotion regulation training + scenario 1
10:15-11:15AM	Discussion of policy arguments with ER prompts
11:15-11:30AM	Coffee break
11:30-12:15PM	Scenario 2 with ER prompts
12:15-1:00PM	Endline measurement + debrief

### 5.3 Control Group

The control group will also be invited into the lab for a specific date. Randomization will occur at the lab on the scheduled date among people who have actually shown up. Participants who are assigned to the control group will receive the same payment as participants in the two treatment groups, and will also be exposed to the “lab-in-the-field” environment. However, instead of going through a deliberation process, they will go straight into the measurement of outcomes.

## 6 Outcomes

The first outcome measurement will occur at the end of the workshop. A second round of measurement will be conducted via cell-phone surveys of participants one month after the interventions. We will use the following strategies to measure the outcome families specified in our hypotheses:

### Primary Outcome Family 1: Support for **punitive** responses to crime

- **Scenario Severity Index:** An index of how severe a punishment the respondent would want in a randomly assigned crime scenario.

As a robustness check (but not in the main measure) for people who have experienced robberies, we will also test for effects on:

- **Real Severity Index:** An index of how severe a punishment the respondent would want for an actual robbery that his/her family or close friends has experienced.

**Primary Outcome Family 2: Behavioral support for punitive responses to crime**

- **Donations:** A mean effects index of how much money the participant donated to a program that aims to “guarantee that the punishments for violence are as harsh as the crime committed” and a program to help “non violent ex-delinquents to find alternative employment” (reverse coded)
- **Stickers:** Whether the participant takes a sticker that says “Delinquents deserve punishment”, or a sticker that says “Help victims without vengeance” (reverse coded)

**Mechanism Family 1: Perceived level of support for punitive responses to crime**

- **Beliefs about the proportion of neighbors who would support of harsh punishments in response to hypothetical crimes**

As a robustness check (but not in the main measure) for people who have experienced robberies, we will also test for effects on:

- **Beliefs about the proportion of neighbors who would support of harsh punishments in response to a past robbery that the participant or a friend/family member has experienced**

**Mechanism Family 2: Ability to regulate emotions**

- **Emotion Regulation Index:** Mean effects index of six items measuring use of cognitive reappraisal adapted from Gross and John (2003).
- **Frequency of Negative Emotions:** Mean effects in index measuring the extent to which the participant felt six negative emotions and two positive emotions that morning (immediate post-treat) or in the past week (follow up). *We expect that both treatments will increase the frequency of negative emotions during the workshop itself relative to the control group. This item will not be included in the immediate post-treatment index.*
- **Scenario Anger Index:** Mean effects index of how angry and afraid the respondent reports

that they would be in three randomly assigned crime scenarios.

**Mechanism Family 3: Perceived benefits** of punitive responses to crime

- **Beliefs** about **effectiveness** of harsh punishments in preventing future crime
- **Beliefs** about **justness** of harsh punishments

As a robustness check (but not in the main measure) for people who have experienced robberies, we will also test for effects on:

- **Beliefs** about **effectiveness** of harsh punishments for that robbery in preventing future crime
- **Beliefs** about **justness** of harsh punishments for that robbery

**Mechanism Family 4: Blame attributions** for crime

- **Beliefs** about the reason that perpetrators committed hypothetical crimes

As a robustness check (but not in the main measure) for people who have experienced robberies, we will also test for effects on:

- **Beliefs** about the reason that perpetrators committed actual robberies

**Secondary Outcome Family 1: Support for policies** that enable harsh punishments

- **Punitive Policy Index:** A mean effects index of policy questions that measure support for punitive policies. These policies include support for five policies, and how much budget the respondent would allocate to weapons vs. human rights training and prisons vs. rehabilitation programs:

- Put more NON-VIOLENT offenders into job and education programs instead of prison (reverse coded)
- Do more to make sure criminals are punished as severely as the crimes that they commit
- Do more to support community efforts to promote forgiveness of minor offenses (reverse coded)
- Bring back the death penalty
- Allow the police to use force more easily when pursuing or interrogating suspects

- Budget allocation to weapons vs. human rights training
- Budget allocation to prisons vs. rehabilitation programs

**Secondary Outcome Family 2:** Support for **candidates** who propose harsh punishments

- **Support for Punitive Policy in Candidate Conjoint:** Support for candidates who propose punitive criminal justice policy (allow the police to use more force against violent criminals vs. stop torture in police investigations) in a conjoint experiment.

**Secondary Outcome Family 3:** Support for **extrajudicial** responses to crime

- **Real Vigilante Index:** An index of whether the respondent would support an extrajudicial response for an actual robbery that his/her family or close friends has experienced.
- **Scenario Severity Index:** An index of whether the respondent would support an extrajudicial response in a randomly assigned crime scenario.

**Secondary Outcome Family 4:** **Perceived benefits** of extrajudicial responses to crime

- **Beliefs about effectiveness of extrajudicial punishments in preventing future crime**
- **Beliefs about justness of extrajudicial punishments**

**Secondary Outcome Family 5:** Support for **policies** that enable harsh punishments

- **Extrajudicial Policy Index:** Support for policy that enables extrajudicial responses to crime:
  - Help neighborhood watch groups that are patrolling for crime

**Secondary Outcome Family 6:** Support for **candidates** who propose extrajudicial punishments

- **Support for Extrajudicial Policy in Candidate Conjoint:** Support for candidates who propose that citizens should be allowed to punish criminals (vs being prosecuted for doing so) in a conjoint experiment.

## 6.1 Randomization and power

The interventions will be tested in an individually randomized lab-in-the-field experiment. Participants will be randomly assigned to the control group, CD, or CD + ER workshops when they arrive

at the study site. Initial power calculations suggest that a total sample size of 750 should enable detection of an effect size of 0.25 control group standard deviations 80% of the time at  $\alpha = 0.05$  in comparisons of each of the two treatment arms to the control group and to each other (i.e., an effective  $N \approx 500$  for each pairwise comparison).

We plan to run sessions of 8-12 participants per treatment in Morelia to reach a baseline sample size of about 1,000. Assuming up to 25% attrition we expect to receive approximately 750 respondents for the interventions. Assuming a further attrition of 10% (from the immediate baseline to the one-month follow up), this produces a final sample size of more than 675 for the one-month follow up.

This design depends on the assumption that there are no spillovers between treatment arms. This is not a concern with the first baseline measure because it will be taken before participants have had the chance to interact with anyone from other treatment arms. To assess the risk of spillovers in the one-month follow-up, we will test whether treatment effects differ for participants recruited by friends, by those who know more people in the study, and by those who talked about the study with other participants. We will work to reduce the risk of spillovers by recruiting in many different parts of Morelia, through as many different networks as possible.

## **7 Analysis**

Our main tests of the hypotheses will be based on mean effects indices of all measures in a measure family. To interpret the results, we will disaggregate the measure family indices to test whether the effects are consistent across measures of self-reported past behavior, within-survey behavioral measures, and hypothetical measures. Because our main tests will be based on just one measure per concept, we will not correct for multiple comparisons. Our main write-up will include all primary outcome families, and all mechanism families. Secondary outcome families may be reported in the appendices. We will estimate the intent-to-treat effect based on assignment to treatment using linear

regression with standard errors clustered by session.

Many of these questions and indices were included in our baseline recruitment survey. We will use these measures to reduce noise and variance, and also to construct a measure of attitude change. In all analyses with a multifaceted hypothetical scenario as an outcome variable, we will also include controls to partial out the other elements of the scenario that could increase the variance of the outcome.

## **8 Ethics**

This study takes place in the context of violence perpetrated by a number of different armed groups and individuals. Ethical considerations must play a primary role in the design and implementation of the study. This section outlines the main ethical principles that we have identified as relevant, and how we plan to adhere by them. To make sure we are reducing harm to both subjects and research staff, we have had extensive meetings (pre-pilot) with members of the local government, civil society and the Catholic Church. These have been extremely helpful to both reduce any potential sensitivities present in previous versions of our design, as well as providing advice and contacts to help build confidence and encourage participation in the study. These meetings occurred in March, July, and August of 2019.

### **Reduction of potential harm to human subjects.**

The first principle, which is covered by the Belmont principles, is to not expose research participants to harm. There are two primary harms that could be reasonably expected to affect participants in this research. First, participants could be targeted with retribution by armed groups (neighborhood watch, police, or organized crime) for revealing information about their activities in our surveys or (although we think this is less likely) for participating in the workshops. We plan to minimize this potential harm in several ways. First, we have done preliminary qualitative work and quantitative piloting to ensure that the questions that we ask are not too sensitive. Most

importantly, we focused the study on lower-level forms of crime that do not threaten the interests of narcotraffickers. Second, we will take steps to ensure that confidentiality is not broken (using tablets to collect data, setting up systems with anonymous IDs and pseudonyms, and reinforcing the importance of confidentiality during the survey administration). Third, we will actively monitor for any forms of coercion or retribution during the project. During follow up surveys we will ask whether participants experienced any repercussions or worries for participating in past rounds. We will also set up a security contact within the survey firm that participants can call to report retribution and have a plan in place for how to report any cases that are reported, as well as guidelines for reporting to PIs and modifying the study protocol.

The second reasonably foreseeable harm to participants is the risk of re-traumatization. Again, this is more likely during surveys than during the trainings. To reduce this risk we will re-train surveyors and trainers on what to do in case participants become traumatized, including at what point to exclude them from the study. We will also provide resources to re-traumatized participants on local counseling organizations that can help participants deal with trauma. Two of our facilitators are trained psychologists who work with victims of violence in Morelia.

#### **Reduction of potential harm to research staff.**

The second principle, which is not currently considered under most university ethics reviews, is the protection of the research staff from harm. We assess that staff are at much higher risk than participants, as they may be entering communities as strangers and discussing sensitive topics. While we will develop more specific protocols for different types of staff (intervention implementers, surveyors, foreign research assistants), they will follow several general guidelines. First, we and our local implementers did specific risk assessments before entering neighborhoods. In four neighborhoods of Morelia, based on the advice of the local police, we decided to recruit participants by phone instead of through in-person visits. Second, team members do not travel alone. Third, all of our staff has a list of local emergency contacts including a municipal official and a civil society leader experienced in providing emergency support to victims of violence.

**Informed consent.**

Participants should know that they are part of a research study. Because these interventions are investigator initiated, participants should know at the point of recruitment into the intervention that they are being asked to participate in research. We will also monitor the adequacy of our consent process by asking participants at the end of each survey if they are happy or unhappy that they consented to participate, and who they think the sponsor of the research is. To the extent that they say they are unhappy that they participated, it is a reflection that the consent process did not give them adequate information about the research protocol to make an informed decision.

**Research transparency.**

Analyses will be pre-registered. All replication materials will be publicly available upon publication.

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