



## From hard vigilantism to soft vigilantism in Latin America: the case of Santiago and Puebla

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**Abstract** *In Chile and Mexico there are neighborhood surveillance policies—imported from the global North—which are inserted in control dynamics decentralized from the State, eventually leading to hard and soft forms of vigilantism. However, the vigilantism to which these policies lead presents relevant differences between the two countries, an issue that can be explained by the different configuration of both states.*

**Keywords:** *Vigilantism, Violence, Insecurity, Coproduction of Security*

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## Do vigilantismo duro ao vigilantismo suave na América Latina: o caso de Santiago e Puebla

**Resumo** No Chile e no México existem políticas de vizinhança vigiada -importadas do Norte global- que se inserem em dinâmicas descentralizadas de controle do Estado, que acabam levando a formas duras e suaves de vigilantismo. No entanto, o vigilantismo em que decantam essas políticas apresenta diferenças relevantes entre os dois países, questão que se explica pela diferente configuração de ambos os Estados.

**Palavras-chave:** Vigilantismo, Violência, Insegurança, Coprodução de segurança

## Del vigilantismo duro al vigilantismo blando en Latinoamérica: el caso de Santiago y Puebla

**Resumen** En Chile y México existen políticas de vigilancia vecinal -importadas del norte global- que se insertan en dinámicas de control descentradas del Estado, que eventualmente desembocan en *formas duras y blandas* del vigilantismo. Sin embargo, el vigilantismo en el que decantan estas políticas presenta diferencias relevantes entre ambos países, cuestión que se explica por la diferente configuración de ambos Estados.

**Palabras clave:** Vigilantismo, Violencia, Inseguridad, Coproducción de la seguridad

## Introduction

The concept of vigilantism originates from English-speaking academia and describes repertoires of punitive actions committed by civilians who place themselves outside the institutional and legal framework to regulate situations of uncertainty in their surroundings (Favarel-Garrigues and Gayer, 2016). This phenomenon is on the rise and is gaining social and political relevance in Latin America, having undergone a process of conceptual adaptation and appropriation to provide an analytical performance that is relevant given the particularities of the region (Huggins, 1991; Fuentes Díaz, Gamallo and Quiroz, 2022).

According to the report of *Latinobarómetro* (2021), security is perceived as one of the less consolidated democratic guarantees in the subcontinent due to the impact of crime and is a central issue in the region's contemporary political discourse.

The research we present in what follows investigated the variability of neighborhood surveillance groups and their drifting towards patterns of vigilantism in the

region, on the basis of two poles described as *hard vigilantism* and *soft vigilantism*<sup>5</sup> (Fuentes Díaz, Gamallo and Quiroz, 2022). To this end, we studied two cases: one in Mexico and one in Chile. The two countries have different systems of government – centralized (Chile) and decentralized (Mexico) – a fact that impacts on the organization of neighborhood security operations. Two axes of comparative analysis were established. The first refers to the *level of dialogue* with the state or to the distance the surveillance groups keep from it. The second has to do with the levels of *internal coordination* and *permanence* in time of the surveillance collectives or groups.

## From concern about crime to neighborhood surveillance

The transitions to democracy that took place in the 1980s and 1990s – in some countries of the region following authoritarian regimes and dictatorships – witnessed a generalized rise in violence (Hernández, 2021) and its mutation in what refers to forms and actors. According to the *Latinobarómetro* (2021) survey conducted in 2020, street violence became the form of violence most frequently felt in the place of residence, representing 43% of the answers: 56% in the case of Chile and 48% in Mexico. Violence has spread across a variety of state and non-state actors who use it to attain different goals, creating numerous sources of insecurity. In some cases, non-state violent actors overlap or operate in parallel to those of the state, creating zones of governance<sup>6</sup> (Arias, 2017).

The concern caused by insecurity has urged various actors to seek mechanisms of self-protection. These mechanisms vary with regard to the actor and the type of resources this actor has access to. Thus, for example, one reaction to the fear of crime, led mostly by the region's middle and upper classes, has been the reorganization of public space through the so-called fortified enclaves, residential or commercial zones protected by walls, private security agents and guarded and restricted points of access (Caldeira, 2001). Other modalities of security consist in direct actions, in the sense that they involve the use of one's own body as the primary resource (Rebón and Pérez, 2012); these are usually conducted with others and present different levels of organization: such is the case of lynch mobs (Martins, 2015).

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5 Conceptualized on the basis of the collective discussions that took place in the *Vigilantism and Collective Violence* CLACSO working group (2019-2022).

6 The concept of *governance* emerges following changes in the public and private sector in public administration (Stoker, 1998). Its goal is to account for a complex of institutions and actors from the private sphere that participate in the elaboration of public policies and in government. The notion is now used to also refer to the involvement of non-state agents in the creation of social control and the production of order in collaboration with the State (Arias, 2017).

In the context of neoliberal political rationality, which redefines the responsibilities and roles assigned to different actors in the public and private sphere, the administration of security has turned towards the preventive model, a set of methods characterized by the participation of citizens in actions aiming to contain crime (Crawford and Evans, 2016; Edwards and Hughes, 2002). One of the configurations that are gaining more popularity is that of *neighborhood surveillance* that emerged in the US in the 1960s and 1970s under the name of “Neighborhood Watch” and then spread to Europe and Latin America towards the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s respectively (Tufro, 2008). The goals of such programs in the US are synthesized in one of their slogans, that communities must be “the eyes and ears of the police” (Cohen, 1991), participating in the coproduction of security.

The pairing of society and state actors in neighborhood surveillance has given rise to different experiences in Latin America which can be understood as forms of vigilantism of different degrees. So much so, that different specialists on this matter have warned against possible authoritarian veers of this program, including the stigmatization of impoverished sectors or the increase of social punitism (Dammert, 2002). Rico and Chinchilla (2002) point out that their adoption has not taken into account the specific context and reality of each region, such as the repressive tendencies of the police and of certain social sectors which can be traced back in time (Nugent, 2010). The same authors warn against the limited planning and evaluation of these programs, as well as the lack of additional measures to look into the structural causes of crime.

The institutional experiences of neighborhood surveillance in Mexico and Chile are marked by both their political and administrative differences and the social configuration of their respective states. Chile is a unitary and strongly centralized country, while Mexico is a federal republic. As a result, neighborhood participation in Chile originates in programs implemented by the national government; such is the case of “*Comuna Segura*”, which improved and reshaped public space but also developed neighborhood surveillance mechanisms (Dammert, 2002). Neighborhood surveillance in this country has become consolidated as a central axis of public policies at the national level, leading to the creation of different programs of security in the community, including the “neighborhood surveillance and protection committees” or the “community security councils” (Luneke and Varela, 2020). In the case of Mexico, neighborhood surveillance has been implemented in a disorganized way, without a central public security authority designing the groups or evaluating their results. Thus, the administration of this program is in the hands of state or municipal authorities, with varying results. The first experiences of neighborhood

surveillance emerged in Mexico City in 1997, with the arrival to power of an alternation government represented by the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, PRD). This government promoted the creation of Neighborhood Committees in the different city areas (Müller, 2012). Likewise, programs of neighborhood surveillance were replicated in other states of the country on the basis of the implementation of different reforms, such as the *Federal Law for the Promotion of Activities Performed by Civil Society Organizations*, enacted in 2000, or the Merida Initiative,<sup>7</sup> promoted in 2008-2010, whose goals included supporting citizen participation in crime prevention.

### The situated state and neighborhood surveillance

That said, the relation between the state and society is considered to go beyond the form of political-administrative organization. Reflecting on the sociological and situated nature of states brings us closer to understanding social practices which, while linked to these programs, overflow their original proposals.

Referring to Latin America, Lechner observes that the region's states did not spring from a nation as a unitary mechanism of collective identity (2006). The dominant classes – embedded in the external logic of total capital – were unable to assume the direction of the social process (Lechner, 2006). These differences are likely rooted in the social composition of national states, the ethnic diversity of their population and the negotiations with regional power groups, among others (Escalona, 2011). This gave way, in certain cases, to mediations pertaining to each state form, linked to bureaucratic institutionality and with a subjective internalization that remains more attached to legal correlations. In other cases, through institutional operations that mediated and adapted the state's theoretical assumptions to local forms of government, practices emerged that were far from the ideal models as perceived by the legal-bureaucratic centrality.

In the Southern Cone, therefore Chile, civil society appears to be relatively more homogeneous than in the rest of Latin America (Lechner, 2006), which meant these states were more likely to establish an internal hegemony (Lechner, 2006). This situation coincides with the way in which people relate to authority in Chile: in this country, authority – and not only state authority – is pronounced, celebrated, needed and respected (Araujo, 2016). This points towards the assumption that it is less likely for people to challenge the forms in which the state expresses its power in Chile.

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7 This was a program of regional security established in 2008 by the governments of Mexico, Central America and the United States to combat drug-trafficking and organized crime.

As for Mexico, the formation of the state in the 20th century involved ethnically differentiated societies originating from an old colonialist and agrarian society. This process aimed at transitioning from patrimonialist forms of government, characterized by differentiated citizenships and privileges such as the ones ruling during the colonial period and the first years of independence, towards a centralized rational bureaucracy of a universal citizenship following the model of the modern state (Weber, 2005; Agudo, 2011). However, in the process of establishing local governability in different periods that followed this process, the governing groups established agreements with local private powers, negotiating legality in their favor in sustaining this state as an imaginary of order (Escalona, 2011). This increased the relevance of political negotiation and mediation in supporting the government in different territories, laying the foundation for the establishment of federalism. Thus, the process of state formation can be perceived through the lens of discontinuous forms relating to the establishment of a central political order, on the one hand, and the influence of regional powers, on the other.

We are also interested in showing that this briefly outlined historical context, with its social subjectivities and relations, explains the deviations in the implementation of the different neighborhood surveillance programs. In both territories we observe a participation of private actors in the administration of security which goes beyond official neighborhood surveillance programs but is not completely disharmonized with this paradigm. Our theoretical hypothesis regarding neighborhood surveillance groups and state formation in Chile and Mexico is that, in Chile, the influence of the state in the country's social life is channeled mostly through formal institutional mechanisms; as a result, neighborhood surveillance groups are more submitted to the state and have a limited self-management capacity. Unlike Mexico, where neighborhood surveillance groups tend towards more informal configurations with limited state regulation; this leads to a certain degree of self-sufficiency and the need for a stronger internal structure. That said, this relative self-sufficiency does not necessarily mean that the state is absent in territorial or symbolic terms; their relation rather assumes the form of a coexistence in which state and non-state actors occasionally overlap, complement each other, or come into tension.

In this sense, we consider that the participation that these neighborhood surveillance programs promote is not fixed and can assume different forms: from practices akin to the model of abstract citizenship on which this preventive model is based, to practices that overflow it and emphasize punitive violence, supported by forms of citizen participation that correspond to other imaginaries of order that are closer to vigilantism (Fuentes Díaz, 2017). We argue that the transition from the coproduction of security to vigilantism does not only have to do with the level of violence that these groups confront or their articulation with other economic

and political actors (Moncada, 2021), but also with the level of dialogue with the state and their degree of internal coordination. Both organizational expressions are rooted in the relation that these groups have had with the state throughout history.

### From neighborhood surveillance to vigilantism

As we have already pointed out, the historical and contextual differences of the region's territories lead to a differentiated use and incorporation of these practices of vigilantism, which differ from the model of coproduction at different levels. We argue that the variability of these actions in the region leads to *hard* and *soft* forms of vigilantism. On one hand, certain vigilante actions are ephemeral and spontaneous and do not, in certain cases, exceed legality; on the contrary, they tend towards the reinforcement of democratic citizen participation and the social management of conflicts, leading to a *soft vigilantism*.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, certain actions tend – beyond their rituals of physical violence – towards their incorporation as actions in dialogue with the public domain which fuel repertoires of contention (Tilly, 2003), initiating political negotiations with spheres of the state and pursuing the legitimization of their actions, in what could be characterized as *hard vigilantism*.

Based on the field work conducted, in which we compare neighborhood surveillance groups dealing with common crime, we consider that the *soft* and *hard* forms of vigilantism can be empirically determined based on two axes. Firstly, their *level of dialogue* with the state, the *distance* these groups keep from the state. Secondly, their *level of internal coordination and permanence* in time.

The neighborhood surveillance groups with a higher degree of submission to state authorities (police, public prosecutors) and, therefore, a closer operational connection to them – as in instances where state law enforcement bodies create and train the neighbors in prevention activities – express a *soft vigilantism*. In these cases, due to their proximity with the state, they do not have security agendas which are independent from state crime prevention programs.

On the other hand, we find surveillance groups whose relationship with state security forces is distant and contentious, marked by distrust and with very few channels of dialogue due to the absence of spokespersons close to these groups and legitimized to articulate their demands, or because their actions openly dispute the state's punitive power. These groups deploy security agendas that are independent from state prevention programs, constituting expressions of *hard vigilantism*. As we shall see in what follows, the levels and forms of dialogue depend on the state forms and their corresponding political culture.

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8 From this perspective, the coproduction of security corresponds to a *soft vigilantism*.

In turn, this characteristic of proximity – social distance – will have an impact on the level of coordination of these groups. The groups that pertain to the category of *soft vigilantism* and are highly articulated with state agencies tend to have a fragile internal coordination marked by a low division of security functions among the members, a meager capacity for autonomous decision making, few members and limited territorial influence. Considering the formation of these groups is mediated by municipal agents linked to the management of security, they are usually ephemeral given that their duration does not, to a certain extent, depend on their own agency.

In the cases of *hard vigilantism* there is less dialogue with state authorities due to broken negotiations, political disputes, or persecutions. As a result, the groups act autonomously, designing and applying their own security-related activities, recruiting members, dividing the work in a differentiated way, and incorporating other sectors in this agenda, as well as expanding their influence across larger territories. The groups that are thus constituted have a duration that does not depend on the temporality of municipal authorities and can therefore consolidate their presence in time (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Surveillance collective and levels of dialogue and coordination/permanence

		Level of dialogue with the state	
		High	Low
Neighborhood surveillance collective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Subordination to state security forces</li> <li>-Reinforcement of citizen participation</li> <li>-Coproducton of security</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Soft vigilantism</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Distrust</li> <li>-No legitimate spokesperson</li> <li>-Criminalization</li> <li>-Broken negotiations</li> <li>-Autonomy in the administration of security</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Hard vigilantism</i></p>
	Level of internal coordination/permanence		
		High	Low
Neighborhood surveillance collective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Decision-making capacity</li> <li>-Division of activities</li> <li>-Numerous members</li> <li>-Broad territorial expansion</li> <li>-Permanence in time</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Hard vigilantism</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Low decision-making capacity</li> <li>-Meagre division of activities</li> <li>-Few members</li> <li>-Limited territorial coverage</li> <li>-Ephemeral</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Soft vigilantism</i></p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors



## Methodology

In the case of Chile, the information was obtained through ethnographic observations during 2 field trips – accompanied by the area's neighbors – and 16 semi-structured interviews. Field work was conducted between October and December 2022.

In the case of Mexico, the information was obtained through ethnographic observations during 6 field trips – accompanied by members of the collective on which the research focuses – between August 2022 and March 2023. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with various leaders of neighborhood surveillance groups, and the researchers were also able to attend some of their assemblies.

Ethnography, by visualizing the structures, networks, and people who shape how the group works, brings us closer to the implied complexity of the internal configuration of these groups and their relations outwards. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews consist of asking open and relatively free questions that allow us to notice the interviewees' observation structure, without losing sight of the analysis axes defined by the researchers (Gainza, 2006).

The analyzed cases were chosen on the basis of two criteria: i) The involvement of a collective in events that belong to the repertoire of vigilante actions. ii) The cases had to be located within Latin American states whose historical configurations presented certain nuances. Given that the research touches upon sensitive issues, the interviewees and the places remain anonymous.

## The case of Chile: neighborhood surveillance, vigilantism, and lynching

The Chilean case was selected following a deadly lynching incident that occurred at the end of 2020. The neighborhood where this took place belongs to a larger territorial unit, referred to as either commune or municipality.<sup>9</sup> The statistic data of the 2017 census<sup>10</sup> reveal that the commune in which the incident occurred is one of the five most densely populated in the country. The data also reveal a socio-economic level nearing the national average in terms of housing, education and employment. According to data available on the Office of the Crime Prevention

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9 Communes are the main unit in the territorial administration of the state of Chile. The administration of each commune or group of communes belongs to the municipality, constituted by the mayor, its supreme authority, and by a Municipal Council. It corresponds to what in other countries is known as the Municipality. There are a total of 346 communes in Chile. A set of communes make up a province and a set of provinces make up a region. A total of 16 regions make up the state of Chile.

10 Available at the websites of the National Statistics Institute, <ine.gob.cl> and <censo2017.cl>.

Undersecretary website,<sup>11</sup> this commune ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> in the country in police cases and reports linked to high social connotation crimes<sup>12</sup> from 2019 to 2022.

The commune in which the lynching took place is located in the southern periphery of Santiago, the country's capital city. However, this municipality belongs to what is known as "El Gran Santiago".<sup>13</sup> The commune is located at approximately 30 km from La Moneda, the seat of Chile's political power *par excellence*. The municipality of the neighborhood in which field work was conducted – as most of the country's municipalities – has deployed strategies of security coproduction inspired by the "Neighborhood Watch" model. This becomes apparent when visiting the entity's website: for example, the public is informed that the municipality, along with the Office of the Crime Prevention Undersecretary through the "National Public Security Fund", has given more than 12000 community alarms to sectors of the commune from 2013 until today. The website adds that "The main objective of this project is to prevent and improve security in the different neighborhoods (...), creating an active communication among neighbors so that they can live in society, raising awareness in future generations with civic education and respect for others. In this context, the municipality has granted economic support and technical assistance for the implementation of the program 'Community Alarms' (*Alarmas Comunitarias*)".

### A collective characterized by limited internal differentiation and instability

The field work conducted allowed us to observe the overlapping of different organizations deploying actions of neighborhood surveillance: the Neighborhood Councils (*Juntas de Vecinos*); groups that are organized at a micro-neighborhood – or block-based – scale; and a group of neighbors focusing mostly on surveillance. These collectives replicated the ideas behind the Neighborhood Watch models, at different scales and with different nuances.

The "Neighborhood Councils" are territorial organizations created by Law N° 19.418 which represent those residing in the same neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> Accord-

11 Portal CEAD: <spd.gov.cl>.

12 Generally including all types of theft.

13 El Gran Santiago is constituted by 31 municipalities belonging to the Province of Santiago, as well as the by the urban centers of the communes of Puente Alto, Pirque, San José de Maipo, Colina, Lampa, San Bernardo, Padre Hurtado and Peñaflores.

14 This is the territory that is determined in accordance to law n. 19.418 on Neighborhood Councils and other community organizations and in which the communes are subdivided to the effect of the decentralization of communal affairs and the promotion of citizen participation and community administration. Each neighborhood can have one or more neighborhood councils.

ding to article 2 of the law, their goal is to promote the development of the community, defend the interests and rights of neighbors and collaborate with state and municipal authorities. The president of the neighborhood council in whose territory the lynching took place informed us that this entity has been stable and long-lived, and she pointed out that it collaborates with the municipality for the attainment of the goals described by the law. Its activities of surveillance and control are committed to pursuing said objectives, and it does so in different ways. It performs administration tasks with both state agencies and neighbors, articulating the two levels.

The territorial leader describes having direct contact with both the municipal workers in charge of the commune's security and the police in charge of said sector. She also mentions activating these networks to disseminate the concerns of neighbors, which she receives mostly through different WhatsApp groups, some of which spread beyond the territory of the neighborhood council. According to what was revealed during the interviews, it is in the context of these processes that the neighborhood was given certain surveillance devices, such as alarms and cameras, almost twenty years ago. The accounts of the leader and of the sector's neighbors indicate that the council is projected inwards, towards the neighborhood itself, through the form of a one-person leadership.

On the other hand, we find that the residents of the neighborhood, including the leader of the council herself, also belong to other groups that are almost exclusively articulated through messaging apps. In many cases, these groups deal not only with issues of security but also with matters such as pets that have gone missing or the advertising of articles traded by members of the group. These other groups, just like the neighborhood council, are organized on territorial grounds – although they cover smaller areas, namely one or two blocks within the neighborhood – and exchange information obtained through direct observation or mostly private security devices, purchased by the neighbors themselves. This articulation of organizations has produced information on alleged risks and even congregated members of the group to threaten or assault individuals who have been caught committing a crime against private property or are considered to constitute a threat to neighborhood security.

Membership in these groups is quite malleable, and the roles of members are scarcely differentiated. The accounts present different levels of participation and variations with regards to the time each individual can devote to surveillance tasks. For example, many interviewees pointed out that higher levels of participation in surveillance tasks were observed during the cycle of protests

that began in Chile in October 2019 – known as the “*estallido*” or “outburst”<sup>15</sup> – and also during the first year of the pandemic, as well as higher levels of group coordination, expressed in the organization of shifts and the use of rudimentary weapons, such as sticks. This suggests that the different expressions of the neighborhood surveillance model are marked by contextual factors affecting their implementation. During the outburst and the pandemic, the state security forces focused more on operations of repression in the sphere of public order and health security, allowing different groups to perform surveillance tasks without a close collaboration with said forces along the coproduction model. It is hard to imagine that such a deployment would have been possible without the interiorization on behalf of the neighbors of previously established surveillance programs and practices.

A few days after the beginning of the cycle of protests in October 2019, a collective emerged whose members at times refer to as “Zello”, named after the application they use to communicate. Unlike other groups, it includes residents from different sectors of the neighborhood concerned exclusively with security. It also displays an emerging differentiation of tasks: some interviewees mention, for example, the mapping of red points within the neighborhood, undertaken by one of the group’s members on the basis of information exchanged in the different WhatsApp groups of the area; others speak of the organization of shifts to patrol the neighborhood and of internal arguments caused by the lack of commitment with these tasks. However, membership in this group is malleable; in fact, the group—whose members even included the president of the neighborhood council at some point—was dissolved after the lethal lynching that occurred in the neighborhood in 2020. A relevant factor behind the dissolution of the group was the launching of investigations by the public prosecutor into the participation of various neighbors in this incident. Interviewees clearly avoided mentioning whether all participants in the beating were members of “Zello”; however, it is clear that at least some of them were. According to the accounts, the lynching was triggered by an attempted robbery of a cable television service provider. The occurrence took place right outside the house of a “Zello” group member in the evening. It was recorded by the sector’s cameras and these images were used as evidence during the process launched on the murder of the alleged criminal.

The described organizational context leads us to the conclusion that the overlapping of the studied groups arguably produces a repertoire of actions involving

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15 In October 2019, a cycle of intense protests began in Chile which challenged an order seen as reproducing inequalities, abuse and unfulfilled promises (Merino, 2021)

a *continuum* that spans from actions pertaining to the models of neighborhood surveillance to practices that are more akin to vigilantism. In the case of Chile, it is possible to assert that vigilantism is articulated through a setup that involves many different levels; however, in all cases, the internal structure of the security administration collectives is elementary. None present a significant internal differentiation, and they are rather ephemeral. Furthermore, with the exception of “Zello”, they are malleable groups that do not only focus on security issues; rather than vigilante collectives, they could be characterized as collectives which at times deploy repertoires pertaining to the sphere of vigilantism. However, the characteristics of the “Zello” group and the increased levels of internal coordination observed in other groups during the *outburst* and the first year of the pandemic suggest that these levels of coordination can arguably vary; they can veer towards more structured, and eventually more permanent, forms, as a result of situational factors that intertwine with interiorized models of surveillance.

### Surveillance groups and state agents: a structure of collectives subordinated to the state

The lynching episode that took place in 2020 changed the relation between state agencies and surveillance collectives. According to the interviewees, before the lynching the residents of the neighborhood related to the different state agencies in charge of security administration in an institutional and subordinated way. The municipality assisted in the purchase of surveillance devices and in the training for their use, and organized meetings with the police officers in charge of the neighborhood. In these meetings, the police informed on issues such as the telephone number that neighbors should call if they were informed of a crime that had been committed, the possibility to restrain the offender, as well as the location of the police station. Many interviewees claimed that, outside these meetings, certain police officers would recommend the use of violence against the person breaking the law, but not of deadly force. Beyond the truthfulness of these accounts, they can at least be considered a reflection of the way in which the neighbors perceive their actions in relation to the deployment of state agents.

After the lynching incident, interaction with state agents intensified: the presence of the police increased – at the request of the neighbors themselves – and meetings with the Mayor and with police officers were organized to discuss the legal powers of the neighbors to restrain persons suspected of committing a crime, as well as the illegality of punishing those accused. In this sense, the

police officers assumed the role of educators. The deployment of state agents thus seemed to be rechanneling a course of actions that got out of hand, trying to frame the – vigilante – practices of the neighbors within the neighborhood watch model.

The lynching incident led to the arrest of 11 people. Some residents called the press to complain about what they considered to be an injustice. However, they believe the media narrative on the facts stigmatizes them and perpetuates the injustice. The dynamics unleashed after the 2020 lynching incident reveal the absence of group networks to confront the repressive power of the state, the lack of a political reading of their subordinated situation and, even more so and oddly enough, their need of state assistance.

These precedents reveal that, although the overall structure of collectives deploys actions that are directly linked to the repertoire of vigilantism, they remain subordinated to state agencies and are closely linked to them.<sup>16</sup>

### The case of Mexico: surveillance, vigilantism, and the organization of security

In the case of Mexico, we studied a neighborhood surveillance collective that we will call “*Vigías Residentes*” (“Resident Lookout”), located in San Martín Texmelucan, a municipality of the State of Puebla.<sup>17</sup> According to data of Mexico’s National Statistics and Geography Institute (INEGI, 2020), this municipality is among the 100 most populated in the country<sup>18</sup> and the third most populated in the State of Puebla, with more than 200,000 residents. Economically speaking, Texmelucan has maintained an industrial-urban profile since the 1980s, following the construction of the Quetzalcoatl industrial corridor which triggered an increase in the region’s population (Méndez, Hernández and Ramírez, 2017). Likewise, trade is another significant activity, particularly the sale of clothes and textiles; this municipality is home to one of the country’s largest street vendor markets. Furthermore, the municipality is located on one side of the Mexico-Puebla freeway and therefore constitutes a strategic place, given that this freeway connects Puebla’s Metropolitan Area to Mexico City and is used by many vehicles, especially cargo transport.

16 Following his death, the relatives of the person who had been lynched drove around the neighborhood insulting and threatening its residents. The neighbors requested police presence, a demand that was met.

17 Municipalities are the main unit of Mexico’s political and territorial division. They are part of the federal entities – 31 states and Mexico City – which constitute sovereign political-territorial units. They, in turn, constitute the Mexican State.

18 The country has a total of 2469 municipalities (INEGI, 2020).

Until 2010, Texmelucan had relatively low crime rates compared to other urban zones in Puebla and the rest of the country. However, the past years have witnessed a significant increase in gun homicides, violent robberies, extorsions, cargo thefts and petty drug-trafficking. Likewise, common crime also increased, including robberies against passersby, cars, and car parts, breaking into houses and businesses, etc. This crime wave can be linked to the appearance and fast rise of illicit activities perpetrated by organized crime groups, both national and local. Reporter's investigations in recent years reveal the appearance of organizations such as *Cártel Jalisco*, *Nueva Generación* or *Sangre Nueva Zeta* and gangs such as *El Loco Téllez*, *Los Pericos*, *Los Tlaxca*, *Los Otones*, *El Bukanas*, among others (Gonzalez, 2021). These groups have claimed responsibility for fuel theft from Pemex (Petróleos Mexicanos) ducts, petty drug-trafficking, extortion, public transport and highway robberies. Furthermore, the municipality where the studied collective operates presents a high prevalence of cases of punitive violence, with a total of 61 lynching episodes between 2012 and 2021, ranking third in the State of Puebla (Fuentes Díaz and González, 2021); a state which, in turn, ranks first in the country in this type of incidents.

This case was chosen after the tracing of lynching events in the State of Puebla performed in the context of a previous study (Fuentes Díaz and González, 2021). Said work was used as a starting point to look for references in the press to surveillance groups or organizations in the municipality. We identified *Vigías Residentes*, a collective that was gaining increased visibility in the media. We used the information at hand to contact one of the group leaders, who became one of our key informers and allowed us access to the field.

As most of the country's municipalities, the one where the collective is located has deployed strategies of security coproduction inspired by the "Neighborhood Watch" model. From 2014 to 2018, 170 neighborhood surveillance committees were created under the auspices of the municipal governments as part of the program "Vigilant Neighbor" (*Vecino Vigilante*).<sup>19</sup> However, it must be noted that *Vigías Residentes* was not promoted by a municipal authority but was constituted independently and operated for 13 years without having any official link to municipal security coproduction programs. In fact, the official neighborhood surveillance programs have had very low penetration in the population of San Martín; *Vigías Residentes* has been the most active and stable organization in terms of duration and internal structure.

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19 The data was obtained following a request for information from the Secretary of Public Security and Road Management, sheet SA1054/2018.

## A long-lasting and internally differentiated collective

The field work conducted allowed us to observe that *Vigías Residentes* operates on the basis of hubs that connect neighborhoods through leaders. Each leader is a link that undertakes the administration and coordination of the smaller organizational units called *neighborhood surveillance committees*. According to the interviews conducted with members of the organization, they are present in most of their municipality's auxiliary councils (*junta auxiliar*)<sup>20</sup> and have an estimated 535 *surveillance committees* and over 1000 members.

An important part of their surveillance repertoire is to identify certain actions or persons as sources of insecurity and control them through repressive actions. According to various interviewees, women and children are mostly in charge of street surveillance during the day, while they conduct their everyday activities; at night-time, men patrol the area on foot or motorbike, sometimes armed with sticks and carrying flashlights.<sup>21</sup> These patrols are called “*rondines*”<sup>22</sup> and are conducted in small groups that walk through the *colonias*<sup>23</sup>; they are the most common form of night-time surveillance. We were invited to participate in a night-time *rondín* organized by the neighborhood committee of a *colonia*, and we observed the following: when coming across parked cars, the neighbors participating in the patrol classified them to find out if they belonged to someone they knew. If they did not, they became a risk factor, and the inhabitants of the surrounding houses were questioned in relation to the vehicle. Areas with no passersby or dark streets were also patrolled, as well as vacant lots. The *rondines* focused mostly on the entry and exit points of the neighborhood. Furthermore, group members also paid attention to people they came across in the streets to see if they were known to them. According to the members of the collective, the *rondines* have managed to decrease insecurity rates; they claim that in previous years they would often catch people committing crimes on the street or breaking and entering homes, a situation that has since then changed. We also observed the use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram for the coordination of the surveillance committees. The smaller groups that

20 The Auxiliary Councils are decentralized public administration bodies operating under their respective Municipality. They coordinate with the municipal public administration departments and entities for the performance of their administrative duties.

21 Another space in which gender-based role differentiations were observed was in a meeting of the leaders of the various groups; on that occasion, women were in charge of preparing the food, while the men described to us the way the organization worked and its goals.

22 Informal patrols conducted in teams to dissuade individuals or groups from committing crimes.

23 The word *colonia* is used in Mexico to refer to neighborhoods, especially those located in urban areas.



operate through these applications convene the neighbors living in the same block or *colonia* to share information on issues such as suspicious persons or news on crimes committed in their area, coordinate neighborhood meetings or ask neighbors for help in case of an emergency.

The use of force is relevant in the organization, for it is the main means to tackle what the collective believes to be a security risk. When interviewed, the members of the surveillance committees mentioned having participated in beatings of alleged criminals. However, they added that the use of violence is internally regulated by the group itself, so that the damage caused will not get out of hand. For example, they mentioned they avoid the death of an offender so that the municipal government will not have the grounds to accuse them of homicide. They argue that the lack of organization during the deployment of violent actions would lead to political persecution and risk the very existence of the organization. Besides, our interviewees mentioned that the violence deployed in their actions “appeases the anger” of the victims and, therefore, to injure and cause suffering to an alleged criminal with causing death accomplishes this goal.

According to the interviews, physical punishment is intended to be as discreet as possible; it takes place on the street, without however calling too much attention. Nevertheless, they spoke of a *social division of punishment* of sorts, in which various members are involved. The first action following the “capture” of the alleged criminal is to blindfold the person to avoid the identification of the executioners. Right after—according to the narration—a specific group within the patrol takes charge of the beating. Then other neighbors, mostly women, come into play to hand the lynched person over to the police. Finally, the leaders of the organization step in to negotiate or manage any possible disagreements with the police officers with regards to the lynching. However, according to the testimonies of the people we interviewed, this is not always the course of events; in some cases, the group leaders allow the escalation and excess of violence to attract the attention of the authorities and open up a dialogue where demands will be negotiated. It is worth mentioning that the interviewees avoid referring to deadly lynching episodes that have occurred in their territory and/or are evasive in reference to these facts.

The repertoire of actions performed by the collective is not limited to surveillance; they also provide public services such as street lighting or tree trimming, they install surveillance cameras, hang up tarps<sup>24</sup> and paint walls warning of the presence of the surveillance group; they also raise funds to support

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24 Displaying warnings and threats to possible criminals.

members or to buy construction materials for houses or schools. Likewise, the group members solve family or neighborhood differences and mediate in cases of domestic violence or disputes linked to inheritances or money loans. A way of participating in the organization for those who do not or cannot participate in night-time patrols is to pay another neighbor who is unemployed or faces economic hardship to participate on their behalf. It is likely that the performance of said tasks along with the surveillance operations play a significant role in the legitimization of the group and, therefore, in the development of the mechanisms of replacement in the surveillance tasks and in remaining in the organization, despite certain members eventually leaving. Another factor that has allowed the permanence of the group is the structure of leaderships and of networks created with other actors. Through the ethnographic work conducted we were able to observe the links created with journalists and the media, who have disseminated the actions or demands of the group.

Surveillance group members (*vigilantes*) and state agents. An organization steering towards self-sufficiency

The interviewees make it very clear that the group leans toward no party and that they have no interest in institutional politics. According to their narration, they have been invited to officially join the municipality's crime prevention scheme, an invitation they turned down. However, the ethnographic work conducted allowed us to observe a series of – formal and informal – interactions at different levels with different government actors.

Two of the current presidents in the municipality's auxiliary councils had been members and leaders of this group before taking office, and they continue to belong to the group. This makes it easier, for example, to gain access to council spaces for the group to conduct its meetings. It is reasonable to assume that said presidents of the auxiliary councils managed to win the respective elections partly due to the political and social capital of the organization. In this sense, interactions with the municipality were observed in different sectors, such as in placing demands for an increase in police presence or the installation of alarms and security cameras; or proposals of participation, such as the one brought forward by *Vigías Residentes* in collaboration with a group of lawyers and criminologists in 2022 to negotiate with the municipality the creation of a Citizen Observatory,<sup>25</sup> which would focus on the issue of security and would operate under their coordination. Contact with the municipal authorities takes

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25 This form of participation is enshrined in articles 35, 36 and 71 of the Mexican Constitution which lays out the binding mechanisms of participation with the different levels of state authorities, in this case the municipality.

place mostly through the police, and the relationship is tense. The interviewees usually describe the police officers as “incompetent” and “corrupt”. Particularly the traffic police are accused of blackmailing foreign drivers and cargo drivers circulating on the freeway, concocting offences to then commute them for bribes. However, other accounts reveal a level of coordination with the police; such is the case of *Vigías Residentes* handing over alleged criminals to the police after capturing and beating them, or when the police inform of an ongoing undercover operation so that it will not be disturbed.

In this collective we observe a higher level of coordination with differentiated roles, a broad territorial expansion and permanence in time. Specifically in what refers to the use of coercion, we find what we have called the *social division of punishment*. This coercion requires high levels of coordination and a regulation of violence to avoid arrests. In practice, the collective interacts with the state at different levels, even occupying spaces such as the auxiliary councils and coordinating with the police; however, there is no systematic or organic articulation with the state. The use of violent repertoires to negotiate specific demands with the municipality implies the use of the institutional game as a resource, not as a goal or an act of subordination. This allows them to maintain a self-sufficient environment. Although, to a certain extent, the deployment of the collective is aligned with the model of security coproduction, in no case is it organically articulated with this model or subordinate to it; what we observe is an overflowing of this mechanism and an increased tendency towards vigilantism.

## Final considerations

The compared analysis reveals expressions of neighborhood surveillance – reactions in the face of common crime – which combine with or deviate towards vigilantism, overflowing the programs of citizen participation. The studied cases present differentiated dynamics in terms of their internal organization, durability, and articulation with the state.

The suggested observation axes – dialogue and coordination/permanence – allow us to advance in the naming of two forms of vigilantism that are placed within a continuum. On one extreme of the continuum we find the case of Chile, where groups appear to be closer and subordinated to state security programs and authorities, with limited internal structuring and a permanence in time that is adaptable and fragile. On the other extreme of this continuum, we find the Mexican collective, relatively self-sufficient vis-à-vis the state, with a higher

internal coordination and permanence in time, creating repertoires of actions ranging from punitive to public protest. In the cases studied we did not find collectives covering the other two theoretical possibilities of this scheme: a higher internal coordination and broad dialogue with the state, or the opposite, namely limited dialogue and a low level of coordination.

Our findings allow us to suggest an analytical model to describe the variability and complexity of vigilantism in Latin America. It involves a continuum that spans from a soft to a hard form of vigilantism on the basis of two axes: the level of dialogue that a collective has with the state and its internal coordination and permanence in time. The soft forms of vigilantism refer to loosely coordinated collectives, characterized by non-differentiation, low hierarchization and transitoriness. These are small collectives with a limited territory of action and the tendency to subject to the state. Their repertoire seldom involves large-scale actions, and these are very rarely lethal. These are groups which undertake surveillance operations and sporadically turn to actions of vigilantism.

The hard forms of vigilantism, on the other hand, are found in collectives with a higher degree of coordination, internal structure, and permanence, which allows them to attract more members and spread their operations and influence across a broader territory. As a result, they have more political resources and better possibilities for the reproduction of the collective. This leads to a more distant relationship with state agencies and, at the same time, explains the fact that their repertoire of actions is more often violent. They are vigilante groups which sporadically deploy surveillance actions.

The empirical work we conducted allowed us to overcome the normative approach that differentiates neighborhood surveillance and vigilantism and shed light to the social particularities impacting on the continuities between surveillance and vigilantism in the region. The study of citizen participation and official institutionalization through time, as well as of the political and social context in which the studied collectives emerge, allows us to understand their turn to soft or hard forms of vigilantism.

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