City of Suspects
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CRIME IN MEXICO CITY, 1900–1931

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# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ix

INTRODUCTION 1

I THE CONTEXT 13
1. The Modern City 17
2. The Policed City 34
3. The Construction of Mexican Criminology 50

II THE PRACTICES 73
4. Honor and Violent Crime 77
5. Violence against Women 103
6. Money, Crime, and Social Reactions to Larceny 132

III THE CONSEQUENCES 161
7. The Invention of *Rateros* 163
8. Penal Experience in Mexico City 189
Conclusions: Crime Contested 211

APPENDIX: STATISTICS OF CRIME 221
NOTES 237
BIBLIOGRAPHY 319
INDEX 349
THE CONTEXT

Turn-of-the-century Mexico City contained all the symbols of nationalism and many remarkable examples of colonial architecture. By the end of the first century of national life, it was the locus of progress and the capital of Porfirio Díaz’s long-lasting regime. Railroads, tramways, paved and illuminated streets, broad avenues, parks, new residential areas, and high buildings appeared as distinctive signs of material progress. Improvements in the design and use of urban space were based on the understanding that the rich and poor were not to mingle: a rational division between the safe and beautiful areas of the modern city and the dangerous and unhealthy marginal zones. Urban design also meant social reform: the state and the wealthy classes wanted to translate the city’s physical evolution into a new culture among its inhabitants.

The elites’ idea of renewal faced the challenge of a growing and untamed population. The urban lower classes, so distant from the aspirations of wealth and comfort associated with progress, used the city in their own way, defying the class-structured organization of the capital. As tensions arose around the use of the streets and other public areas, the government relied on the police and penal institutions to instill a sense of appropriate conduct in the people. Criminal behavior (whether a genuine transgression of social norms, or simply a violation of the many laws and regulations gener-
and became an upper-class place of leisure during the nineteenth century. The Paseo de la Reforma’s wide design and execution followed the aesthetic and urbanistic ideas that had transformed Paris and other European capitals since the 1850s. This was the axis of a less visible modification of urban territory that resulted in the displacement of indigenous communities from valuable lands. Of all the cycles of change that Mexico City had experienced after the sixteenth century, the one that peaked during the late Porfiriato was perhaps the most disruptive because it combined population growth, land dispossession, and heightened cultural conflict.

Porfirián urban design corresponded with a drive to reorganize society within the city. Around the Paseo de la Reforma, private companies were licensed by city authorities to develop upper- and middle-class residential areas or colonias, such as Juárez, Cuauhtémoc, Roma, and Condesa. Officials protected the development of these colonias, and often ordered the elimination of undeserving or ill-looking buildings. Designers and builders had a clear idea of the social meaning of modernization: the poor had to be displaced from the elegant quarters, while city services were to be concentrated only in the well-kept districts. This strategy meant a clear departure from the multiclass dwellings in the city center dating back to colonial times. Porfirián investors, often closely associated with city officials, bought and partitioned lands for the wealthiest classes in privileged areas, while reserving other zones for working-class homeowners, thus working together to preserve the spatial separation between classes. Separating customers according to their socioeconomic status would create a stronger real estate market.

Hygiene and security, both symbolically achieved with the inauguration of great drainage works and the San Lázaro penitentiary in 1900, were requisites for the stability of the colonized city. In order to protect the integrity of new upper-class neighborhoods, municipal and health authorities planned the growth of industries and working-class neighborhoods away from upper-class suburbs. The Consejo Superior de Salubridad (Public Health Council) defined in 1897 a “zone which has the goal of maintaining certain types of industries at a distance from the only avenue of the capital,” that is, the Paseo de la Reforma. The residential developments would expand from the axis Zócalo-Alameda-Reforma toward the west and southwest. The east was discarded because of its proximity to the Texcoco lake, its lower ground level, and unfavorable ecological conditions. The designers of the new penitentiary located it on the eastern San Lázaro plains, in order to send the prisoners’ “miasma” away from the center. On the margins of the central city, authorities and developers had to deal with the existence of popular residential areas: lower-class colonias and old barrios. Although barrios had always existed close to the center, their poverty had preserved what Andrés Lira calls a “social distance” from the modern city. For lower-class developments, urbanization did not mean access to drainage, electricity, and pavement as it did for more affluent colonias and the protected environment of the central area.

Life in the wealthiest colonias followed European bourgeois models of privacy and autonomy. City planners and developers shared the tacit prem-
The Policed City

As early twentieth-century urban authorities, merchants, and developers tried to organize the city according to their interests, they turned to the police to punish the public behaviors that did not conform to those goals. The urban poor, on the other hand, developed a skeptical view of order. They used the city in different ways, walking across the social boundaries, challenging the authority of the police, and even subverting the official dictates about street nomenclature.

Conflict was the distinctive feature of the late Porfirián city. Thieves, drunkards, and beggars became the target of several official campaigns to “clean up” the city. Perhaps the harshest campaigns took place in 1908–10 under Porfirio Díaz’s iron hand, and subsequently in 1917–19 when Venustiano Carranza sought to consolidate revolutionary legitimacy using ancien régime methods. These policies were the most aggressive example of official attitudes toward the urban lower classes. They emerged in the context of the dispute between different notions about the use and structure of the city. But it was not a one-sided fight: city inhabitants challenged authorities’ skewed distribution of resources, which favored upper-class colonias and the center over the rest of the city. Issues of health, policing, and street nomenclature reveal contesting perceptions of urban space and illustrate how the unintended consequences of modernization subverted the Porfirián model of a cosmopolitan capital.

BOUNDARIES

The internal and external boundaries of Mexico City became particularly unstable during the Porfiriato. Since the early colonial period, ethnic stratification had defined an area of Spanish population around the political and religious center of the Plaza Mayor. The traza or outline of the central city displaced the indigenous inhabitants of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlán to the edges of the lake that surrounded the city. According to Andrés Lira, from those early moments on, the areas of Spanish and indigenous occupancy moved and overlapped constantly. The tension these movements imposed on the “social distance” reached its peak in the second half of the nineteenth century. Areas of lower-class housing, characterized by overcrowded tenements near the downtown and squatters’ shacks in the outskirts of the city, surrounded the center in a crescent moon whose curve embraced the Zócalo and Alameda, closer east of the National Palace and farther away at its extremes. The moon’s farthest points were the colonia Guerrero in the northwest and the Belem jail in the southwest. Its territory included the colonias Morelos and la Bolsa, located north and northeast of the old barrio Tepito, and the colonia Obrera.

The barrios of older, lower-class housing near the center presented obvious problems. Many of them had been established in pre-Hispanic times, some still preserving indigenous habits and language, but others were the result of the recent increases in population density. According to El Imparcial, real estate speculation, the centralization of services and commerce, and the price of tramway fares forced “our poor classes to cram like canned sardines into the small rooms available.” Many run-down vecindades, pulquerías, and dangerous streets were located just behind the National Palace. American visitor Eaton Smith noted that, as a consequence, the Zócalo “is rather the lounging-place for the lower classes, as the Alameda is for the upper.” After the Revolution, lower-class neighborhoods close to downtown remained a world of poverty and disease. In the early 1920s, sanitary authorities considered the area north of the Plaza de la Constitución as an
tending opinions. All of them claimed the scientific validity of their assertions.

Yet science was only one component of these intersecting observations of crime. The process of importing criminological knowledge prompted resistance from sectors linked with the legal profession, while explanations of social diseases combined theory, ideology, and a morbid fascination with the world of crime. Born from social fears, but also from the desire to be modern, Mexican criminology built a scientific perception of urban society—if one that failed to provide a generally accepted formula for social reform.

PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME AND CRIMINOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

The Porfirián elite believed that turn-of-the-century Mexico had finally achieved peace, if not harmony, thanks to the patent moral superiority of its rulers. Urban society, however, offered a landscape much more complicated than they had wished. The persistence of areas of crime and the urban poor’s “invasion” of respectable places suggested that the majority of Mexicans were not as virtuous and obedient as expected and that the line between good and evil was not so straight and “natural” as the one that divided the wealthy from the poor, or men from women. In order to achieve the necessary authority to inspect “the world of crime” and lower-class life that so fascinated them, educated observers appealed to science. Charles A. Hale has defined one important component of the elite’s sense of superiority as “scientific politics”: a strong government led by Díaz, guided by the methods of science and an interpretation of society that viewed it as an organism. Criminology was thus a useful instrument to preserve old prejudices in the observation of new realities.

Statistics composed the first testimony of modernization, and public opinion found the figures that exhibited national growth very convincing. Starting in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, local, federal, and nongovernmental institutions gathered quantitative information about the economy and population. The Dirección General de Estadística, founded in 1882, the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, and the Consejo Superior de Salubridad were among the main publishers of statistics. Authorities and observers believed crime statistics in particular to be an objective measurement of the behavior of society. This rationale had been present in the mind of public officials and social observers since the last third of the nineteenth century and reemerged after the 1910 Revolution. The compilation and publication of statistical series based on judiciary and police sources sought to demonstrate the state’s adequate handling of the problem. The international promotion of Mexico’s image was also behind the publication of crime statistics. The Dirección General de Estadística compiled and published the 1871–1885 series with the express goal of showing at the International Exposition of Paris “the moral progress that has been achieved” in Mexico.

Testimonies about the reception of these series, however, suggest that they often worked against their goals. They failed to impart an “objective,” moderating counterpoint to contemporaries’ alarmed perceptions of recurring “crime waves.” When public discussions of crime mentioned statistics, it was to attest to the “terrifying” growth of crime. Because of the negative potential of quantitative information, the series chosen to be collected and published were subject to the changing concerns of different authorities and thus lacked continuity. Most series in the first half of the twentieth century resulted from efforts to have them published when they seemed useful, not from routine record-keeping. Authorities could change the criteria of quantification or stop publication altogether when the information revealed negative tendencies. Critics denounced court- and police-based statistics of criminality in the capital, published since 1890, for their lack of consistency. Carlos Roumagnac considered them “useless” because of their inaccuracy. In 1896, pulque traders defended their business against accusations that it caused crime, arguing that the official statistical information, although nicely printed in tables, did not account for the circumstances of arrests, the number of acquittals, and the growth of the population. They concluded that official figures failed to render the exact number of crimes committed and that only specialists could extract meaningful information from them.

Statistical accounts of the city conveyed a growing crime rate. Earlier in the Porfirián, the official report was that criminality was not increasing in Mexico City because jobs were abundant, the population was more educated, the police and the judiciary had improved, and political stability had curbed the demoralization caused by civil war. This idea, however, did not last long. In 1890, Mexico City’s correctional judges complained that arrests were exceeding the capacity of their courts. In 1896, police arrested 29,729
hunger, she “had the thought of taking” the reboso while she was “thinking about my children” (my emphasis).

Like many other offenders, Consuelo conceived of theft as a form of economic exchange mediated by money—an aspect lost to the moralism of criminologists. Cashing in the stolen goods, even if they had small monetary value, made arrest less likely because it replaced the clothes, tools, and any small goods (which the legitimate owner could recognize and reclaim) with anonymous cash. Pawnshops were easily accessible in the city, and many businesses, including pulquerías, accepted goods as payment. 19

Consuelo also knew that the possibility of prosecution was part of such exchanges. Judges could use the attempt to pawn objects as the only evidence of the crime. The police pressed suspects to explain the origin of the objects they were caught pawning, and a weak explanation was enough to justify a guilty verdict. Such was the case of Regino Valdéz, a minor, who in 1914 was arrested and sentenced to six months of imprisonment in a penal colony after he tried to pawn a gun. He confessed that he wanted to sell the gun but no pawnbroker or merchant would accept it because it was a type of gun used exclusively by the army. He sold it for two pesos to an old man who later denounced him. 20

The cost of converting stolen property into cash increased according to the size of the booty. The story of two cows stolen in 1915 illustrates the great variation in the price of stolen properties. Daniel Ocaña, José Cruz, and Federico Rodríguez were accused of stealing the cows, valued at 1,800 pesos, from Ocaña’s boss, José Díaz. According to Cruz, Rodríguez paid him and Ocaña 20 pesos to steal the cows. Rodríguez sold the cows to Rosario N. for 50 pesos. Rosario N. sold the cows to Enrique Sánchez, who insisted that he bought the cows, without knowing they had been stolen, for 275 pesos each. 21 Merchants knew the risks of buying goods of unknown origin, as a resourceful victim could always trace his or her property back and obtain a court order to have it returned or seized. Mechanic Adolfo Barrera told the judge in a theft case that he had not bought stolen tools from suspect José Mejía “because he has the precaution of never buying tools that are offered to him; when he needs tools he goes to the hardware store.” 22

Any monetary transaction, in sum, could be linked to theft. Yet, as it became clear during the Revolution, access to cash was the key to everyday survival.

SCARCITY, DISORDER, AND COUNTERFEITING IN THE MID-1910S

Poverty, instability, and monetarization compounded and concentrated their effects on the urban lower classes during the years of the Revolution. The effects of the civil war began to be felt by the population of Mexico City in February 1913, during the ten days known as Decena Trágica, when an unknown number of civilians were killed amid a military rebellion against President Francisco I. Madero. After the 1914 defeat of Madero’s successor, Victoriano Huerta, the city was handed over to Constitutionalist general Álvaro Obregón and was alternately controlled by Constitutionalists and the Revolutionary Convention’s alliance of Zapatistas from Morelos and Villistas from the north. It was not until it was finally recovered by Venustiano Carranza’s Constitutionalist armies in August 1915 that the municipal government began to return to its customary order. 23 Political labels soon lost their meaning for the urban poor, as they learned the high price of political instability. Hunger became a reality for anyone without savings or goods to pawn. Francisco Ramírez Plancarte vividly described how the upheaval caused great distress among the people, whose hunger became so extreme that, in the lower-class quarters, many people would faint, and many of the dispossessed would pick up fruit skins from the floor and eat them voraciously even though they were covered with dirt; others would dig with a stick in the piles of rubble around markets, looking for any leftovers from poultry, fruits, vegetables, or entrails, even rotten, to placate their hunger. 24

The civil war was a threat coming from outside. Newspapers singled out the Zapatistas for creating communications problems south of the city by attacking trains and roads. When Obregón was approaching the capital from the north, in 1914, a letter signed by fifteen hundred residents asked that interim president Francisco Carvajal have the Federal army relinquish the city, because its presence would expose half a million people to “the horrors of a siege.” The letter argued that the capital had suffered enough already without having to feed a fighting army or face popular revolt. 25 There was no siege, but the transitions between authorities forced city residents
tinuity of all spheres of public administration, and there were recurrent changes in trial procedures, public order policies, and the penal system. Changes in the jurisdiction of courts and police, furthermore, make the comparison between the rate of crime before and after the Revolution imprecise.

Despite these problems, statistics of criminality can be considered as the account of the crimes “purchased” by the state, through its funding of police, prosecutors, judges, and juries. The Pearson correlation between judiciary budgets and the rates of criminality gives a coefficient of 0.91 during the thirteen years before the Revolution: when the state spent more money on judges and prosecutors, the number of arrested and sentenced increased. It is more difficult to establish the relationship after 1916, because political decisions and changes in the organization of the penal system upset the budget for the judiciary. Authorities might have found more criminals when they spent more money chasing them, but it is doubtful that they succeeded in deciding over the long-term trends of criminality.

The first systematic publication of crime statistics for Mexico City and the Federal District is the Dirección General de Estadística’s Estadística del ramo criminal en la República Mexicana que comprende un periodo de quince años, de 1871 a 1885 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Fomento, 1890). The data after 1895 were published in the Anuario Estadístico de la República Mexicana (Mexico City: Secretaría de Fomento, 1894–99). Subsequent publications within the period of this book were: Ministerio Público del Distrito y Territorios Federales, Cuadros estadísticos e informe del Procurador de Justicia concernientes a la criminalidad en el Distrito Federal y territorios (Mexico City: Ministerio Público del Distrito y Territorios Federales, 1900–1909); Procuraduría General de Justicia del Distrito y Territorios Federales, Sección de Estadística, Estadística de la penalidad habida en los juzgados del fuero común del Distrito y territorios federales durante los años de 1916 a 1920 (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1923); Anuario Estadístico de la República Mexicana 1938 and 1940 (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1939 and 1942); and Alfonso Quiroz Cuatrac, Tendencia y ritmo de la criminalidad en México (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estadísticas, 1939), 82–81.

The following tables attempt to establish extended series based on homogeneous counting procedures and sources. I use “Accused” to name those whose cases were considered by judicial authorities as indicted of a crime, usually corresponding with consignados in the sources. “Arrested” refers to those detained by the police, and sometimes counted as arrestados or simply arrestos.
Table 5. Population of Mexico City, Federal District, State Capitals*, and Estados Unidos Mexicanos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mexico City</th>
<th>Federal District</th>
<th>State capitals*</th>
<th>National population</th>
<th>Mexico City as % of national population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>329,774</td>
<td>474,860</td>
<td>732,047</td>
<td>12,632,427</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>344,721</td>
<td>541,516</td>
<td>774,233</td>
<td>13,607,272</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>471,066</td>
<td>720,753</td>
<td>923,755</td>
<td>15,160,369</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>615,327</td>
<td>906,063</td>
<td>926,475</td>
<td>14,334,780</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>1,029,068</td>
<td>1,229,576</td>
<td>1,159,224</td>
<td>16,582,722</td>
<td>6.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1,802,679</td>
<td>1,757,580</td>
<td>1,431,007</td>
<td>19,682,582</td>
<td>9.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes cities of Aguascalientes, Ciudad Victoria, Colima, Cuernavaca, Culiacán, Chihuahua, Chilpancingo, Durango, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Hermosillo, La Paz, Mérida, Monterrey, Morelia, Oaxaca, Pachuca, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Tlaxcala, Toluca, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Veracruz, Villahermosa.

Source: *Estadísticas históricas de México* (Mexico City: INEGI, 1994), based on figures of national censuses.

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Table 6. Indices of Accused per 100,000, by District. Mexico City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Accused 1900</th>
<th>Accused's address</th>
<th>Place of committal</th>
<th>Suspect's address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I District</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II District</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III District</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV District</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V District</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI District</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII District</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII District</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Rates established by dividing arrests by the population of each district. The data from 1900 were normalized to that year's population. The other series were normalized to the 1921 population.

Sources: Databases; *Cuadros estadísticos 1900; Censo general de la República Mexicana verificado el 28 de octubre de 1900* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Fomento, 1901–1907); Departamento de la Estadística Nacional, *Censo general de habitantes: 30 de noviembre de 1921* (Mexico City: Departamento de la Estadística Nacional, 1928).
Notes to Introduction

1 Tables 1 to 4 synthesize the evidence from available statistics. On rates through the twentieth century, see Rafael Ruiz Harrell, Criminalidad y nuevo gobierno (Mexico City: Sansores y Aljure, 1998), 13, and Ira Beltrán and Pablo Piccato, “Crimen en el siglo XX: Fragmentos de análisis sobre la evidencia quantitativa,” in Ariel Rodríguez Kuri and Sergio Tamayo, eds., Ciudad de México: Los últimos cien años, los próximos cien años (Mexico City: UAM, 2001).

2 I will not address, therefore, behaviors that are not predatory and do not face an adverse consensus, such as drunkenness and prostitution. For the role of public opinion in defining crime, see Leslie T. Wilkins, “Offense patterns,” in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, ed. David L. Sills (N.p.: Macmillan Company and Free Press, 1968), 3: 479.


6 Practice (defined as “habitual or customary performance”) will refer in the next pages to those “places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect.” Michel Foucault, “Politics and the Study of Discourse,” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures and Interview with Michel Foucault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 71. For the need to associate the study of everyday practices with that of narratives (such as judicial statements), see Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 78.


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El Ahuizotito
El Bien Social
Boletín Mensual de Estadística del Distrito Federal
Boletín del Departamento de la Estadística Nacional
El Charrito
La Convención
El Demócrata
Don Cucufate
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Executive power: and places of work for convicted, 167, 197

Face. See Wounds

Family and families, 213; as communities, 214; defined, 277n. 2; and heredity, 68; involvement in cases of sexual crimes, 125–27; male control of, 20, 129; and marriages, 113, 115; and theft, 148, 152, 158; violence in, 103–5, 130. See also Honor; Relatives; Transportation, to penal colonies; Urban communities

Famine and hunger, 2, 135, 142; during Revolution, 23, 139. See also Merchants; Revolution

Federal Army, 139–40, 180, 185; incorporation of prisoners, 205

Federal District: circulation of money in, 134; deportation of rateros from, 169; government of, 172, 196, 219; High Court of, 6, 56, 196; and national population, 21; prisons in, 192; Regulation of Penitentiary Institutions of the, 70; South Penitentiary, 7. See also Mexico City

Federal District, Governor of, 149, 153, 156, 173, 193; appointment by president, 41; appointment of police chief, 41; election of, 218; insults to, 171; struggle with city council, 39

Federation of Trade Unions of the Federal District, 206

Feminists, 129

Fernández Ortega, Ignacio, 56

Ferri, Enrico, 61–64, 262n. 59

Fights, 79, 91, 98

First Criminological and Penitentiary Congress, 173, 195

First Judicial Congress, 197

Flogging, 162, 168, 298n. 28

Flores Altarre, José, 143

Food riots, 33, 141, 143–45, 148. See also Famine and hunger

Forced labor colonies, 163, 168

Foreigners: blamed for crime, 26, 177, 301n. 57; investors, 1, 10

Fraud, 156, 165, 179, 206

French intervention, 1, 41

Frias, Heriberto, 22, 61, 199

Friends, 215; of theft suspects, 172; and violent crime, 88–89

Gaceta de Policía (magazine), 54, 56–57, 103, 107, 146, 169–70, 200

Gambling: and alcohol consumption, 30; in Tacubaya, 25. See also Police

Gamboa, Federico, 54, 58, 60–62, 85, 199

García, Genaro, 263n. 57

García Icazbalceta, Joaquín, 199

García Ramírez, Sergio, 190

Garofalo, Rafaelle, 263n. 59, 65, 86

Gasca, Celestino, 195; dispute with police chief, 173–74, 186

Gayol, Roberto, 46

Gendarmes. See Policemen

Gender: divides in urban space, 27; research on, 9; roles, 23, 57–58, 97, 113

González, Pablo, 144, 171, 217

Gossip, 94, 115; in the press, 55

Gray Automobile Gang, 176–81, 183, 188, 217

Guerra, François-Xavier, 22

Guerrero (colonia), 35, 38–39, 46, 214

Guerrero, Francisco (“El Chaléquero”), 90, 107, 118–19, 123, 213

Guerrero, Julio, 65, 72, 118; explanation of theft, 156, 153–55, 165; social classification based on private life, 70, 113; views of crime, 59–60, 69–71; views of rateros, 169

Guns, 36, 96, 99, 164, 187, 217; brought by Revolution, 5, 90, 99–101, 213; used by gang, 183. See also Congress; Pawning and pawnshops; Policemen; Soldiers

Gutiérrez Nájera, Manuel, 25

Guzmán, Martín Luís, 177

Haber, Stephen, 134

Haciendas, 39, 134; upper-class mansions and, 20

Hale, Charles A., 52

Havana, 168

Hegemony, 9

Hidalgo, Lorenzo de la, 193

Highway robbery, 86, 167

Historiography, 8–10; Mexican political, 11; on theft, 133. See also Labor

Homicide: in documentary sample, 7; and highway robbery, 167; increase after Revolution, 99; as a lower-class problem, 133; rates, 54, 58, 79; reactions to, 98; and sexual violence, 119–20. See also Mexico City

Homosexuality: in prison, 202

Honesty, 88, 97; claimed by suspects, 183. See also Honor

Honor, 73, 95, 98, 101, 213; codes of, 81, 83; contradictions of, 105, 128; damage to sexual victims, 123, 125; of families, 110; as honra, 80; implied by suspects, 87, 115, 129; and legislation, 81, 214; for lower classes, 80, 94; male, 57, 82, 107, 109; Mediterranean model, 80–81, 101; as mitigating circumstance, 82; during Porfiriato, 80; as a right, 81; and violence, 3, 101–2, 130. See also Honesty; Masculinity; Urban communities

Horses, 24, 36

Hospitals, 32, 42; Jáurez, 7, 42, 87; White Cross, 42

Hotels, 120; Regis, 46

Housing: deficit, 26–27; rents, 27. See also Tenements (vecindades)

Huerta, Victoriano, 139–44, 170, 179; pardon of prisoners by, 205

Husbands, 103, 128; rights, 106, 108. See also Family and families

Hygiene, 8, 19, 26–28, 39; social, 71. See also Department of Mental Hygiene

Identification methods, 56; Berillon, 56; digital, 260n. 24

Illescas, Carlos, 134

Imitation, 68

Immigration, 8, 10

Impeinta Street, 143

Impunity: of drivers, 24, 100; of soldiers, 142

Incarceration, 98; frequent, 180; threat of in theft cases, 131

Incest, 59, 120, 123

Independence, 1, 4, 80, 168; centennial celebration of, 2, 17

Indians: Aztecs and human sacrifice, 70; criminological perceptions, 56–57, 69–70; defined by clothes, 20; in the press, 56; and street commerce, 31; as thieves, 132. See also Communities

Industrialization, 10, 23; and social ills, 59

Inflation, 134, 140. See also Currency; Revolution

Inspector General de Policía, 152, 153. See also Police chief (Inspector General de Policía)

Inspectors, 31–32, 41; health, 108

Institutions: and identities, 162; judicial, 1, 3, 6; penal, 6, 8–9, 72; and periodization, 5–6; research on, 8; and state project, 191

Insults, 93–94, 103. See also Díaz, Porfirio; Federal District, Governor of Islas Marias penal colony, 166, 169, 171, 173–74; avoided by suspects, 204. See also Pro-Freedom Association; Transportation, to penal colonies

Isolation, 4, 214. See also Incarceration; Stigmatization

Italy. See Criminology

Jamaica (market), 31

Jaurès, Jean Léon, 59

Jealousy, 92, 107, 111, 115–16

Jews, 26