

[MUSIC PLAYING]

FEMALE SPEAKER: In Mexico, there is an emerging pattern of cities within cities, so-called armored spaces to which the upper class retreat, using not just private security firms, but the resources of the state to enclose and protect them. Sociologist Ana Villarreal spoke recently with Rich Snyder, a political scientist and Faculty Fellow at the Watson Institute, about this phenomenon and how perceptions of the war on drugs differ between Mexico and the United States.

RICH SNYDER: Great to have you here, Ana. I wonder if you could start by telling us a little bit about the research site, Monterrey, Mexico, as some people might not really know much about Monterrey as a city. What's it like as a city?

ANA VILLARREAL: Well, Monterrey is located in Northeastern Mexico in the state of Nuevo Leon. It is the third largest metropolis in Mexico with 4.5 million inhabitants. It is an industrial city. It takes its name, Monterrey, king of mountains, from a series of mountain ranges that encompass Monterrey. And this is my hometown.

RICH SNYDER: Oh.

ANA VILLARREAL: Yeah.

RICH SNYDER: Could you tell us a little bit about how-- how is it that you came to study violence in your hometown, in Monterrey? I know from your talk that you were originally studying a quite different topic. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

ANA VILLARREAL: Yes, of course, I was not originally interested in studying violence. Part of the reason why was because Monterrey was one of the safest cities in Mexico, in a way, with some of the lowest homicide rates in the country. I actually first became interested in studying bus drivers, as you know.

It was a way of getting out of the wealthy suburb that I was raised in. It was way of getting to know my hometown from the inside. I conducted some research in some industrial zones as well, going into the factories. As I said, Monterrey is an industrial zone.

And then I spent five years studying the public transportation system in Monterrey. And I think

that the best way to get to know a city is to take the bus. And in my case, I became a bus driver and drove the bus. And it was through that ethnography that I gained awareness of just the amazingness of Monterrey because I guess I love my hometown.

RICH SNYDER: So what got you off the bus on to a different topic?

ANA VILLARREAL: Yes, absolutely, there was a sudden tidal wave of violence that hit my hometown as I was continuing my study as a graduate student at Berkeley. And at that point, I figured that studying anything else would be avoiding the topic, the most pressing topic on our table. And I figured that I had spent a significant part of my life training myself as a sociologist.

And I wondered whether sociology could not provide some answers to understand why Monterrey was experiencing such an increase in violence, such an increase in gruesome violence as well and how people were coping with it. So it was the fact that violence hit my networks and my families and myself personally that led me to want to study violence, its origins and its consequences.

RICH SNYDER: And one of your, your main findings is that the wealthy and upper class inhabitants of Monterrey have separated, have exited, essentially, from the city of Monterrey and now live what you evocatively call an armored city in a different part of town. Can you tell us a little bit about that process and what the armored city actually is.

ANA VILLARREAL: Yeah, so Monterrey has nine municipalities. It is one of the wealthiest cities in Latin America. It has high levels of urban inequality, of concentration of wealth in one part of the city versus the other. And what we saw in the 1950s was that the upper class moved from downtown Monterrey to the suburb of San Pedro, which is where I was raised.

And this is where-- this was the preferred site, the residential site for the upper class. But what we saw with the increase in violence, what I saw at least, was that the upper class relied on the state and the private and the local state to enclose this municipality as an armored, I call it an armored city, as a means of concentrated not only private, but also public means in order to have a safer city. And this was also prompted by a mayor who, even when running for elections, would talk about armoring, the necessity to armor this one municipality.

And the upper class bought into their rhetoric and was already living in San Pedro. But what was different was the upper class then set up, for example, office buildings, increasing number of office buildings within San Pedro so that they wouldn't need to leave San Pedro. Or nightlife,

in 2012, when I conducted much of my research, nightlife, the nightlife heart of the city, which was downtown, was imploding. And simultaneously, there was an increase in bars within San Pedro. So I looked at how nightlife became, also in a way, something that was an upper class resource, right, not available for everyone.

RICH SNYDER: And you mentioned that the upper class citizens in San Pedro used public services and public resources, as you said, the local state, they drew on that, in a way, to help create this armored city. Could you say a little bit more specifically about how they did it?

ANA VILLARREAL: Yeah, so today, this one municipality has four times more police officers than the average metropolitan-- I mean, the average in the metropolis, right? So there's more police. There is a close surveillance system as well that was implemented during these years of high levels of violence. So this also tells us that when we look at a differentiation in criminal rates and we see that there is less crime in San Pedro than outside of San Pedro and the rest of the metropolitan area, well, this is partially due to the fact that there is an increased number of police within San Pedro that can secure this perimeter that is occupied by the upper class.

RICH SNYDER: Do you see this phenomenon emerging in other cities in Mexico or even in other countries-- armored, an armored city? I mean, we, you know, we know about gated communities. Certainly, they're familiar to people in this country in the US. Is this something that we observe elsewhere, armored cities?

ANA VILLARREAL: Yes, so one of the comparative cases that I am using is the creation of the municipality of Chacao in Caracas, Venezuela in the aftermath of the Caracazo, which was a wave of violent riots that hit Caracas in 1989. And so the upper class relied on a similar mechanism of creating a city where it could concentrate private and public resources to create a city within a city. And I hear from colleagues in Caracas that Chacao is a safe zone in the midst of this even greater crisis.

So this leads me to think that there is actually a parallel and a pattern that is emerging in some Latin American cities where there is high levels of inequality and also high levels of violence and where the upper class can not only-- or rather, their private security is insufficient. Private guards, for example, can do little in the face of organized crime. So private security is insufficient.

And so relying on the state and on state security resources to secure a perimeter is, I think, an emerging pattern of urban seclusion. So going back to the gated communities, yes, we know

that for the last few decades, the upper class, not only Latin America and not only in Mexico, but also in the United States, is relying increasingly on private security to enclose living, work, and leisure spaces. But here I'm looking at how the state can actually be used as well or how the upper class can use it-- can make private use of the state to enclose a city within a metropolitan area.

RICH SNYDER: So even though there is this separation, closing off, and armoring of the space where the upper class is living, what kind of connections, if any, still exist between those behind the walls of the armored city and the rest of the city?

ANA Mm-hmm, well--

VILLARREAL:

RICH SNYDER: Are they totally separate?

ANA They're not totally separate. And I'm also-- I conducted my fieldwork at the height of a wave of violence that has since declined. And as the violence declined, I also saw that the practices that were enclosed within San Pedro began to change.

VILLARREAL:

So the borders became more fluent, if you will, more porous. There was more contact. But at the height of the violence, I did see efforts to enclose that perimeter.

And so in talking about the connections, there are still connections, of course, within and outside the armored city. For example, the upper class still needs a series of services, right, that are provided by those who live outside. And so, of course, San Pedro is also a city that is visited by, I mean, routinely by people who live outside of San Pedro.

So there are still connections. But what I was looking at, what I was focusing on in examining my research was instead how all aspects of upper class life became secluded within this one city. So it was more about the upper class staying inside this one city.

RICH SNYDER: And tell us, if you would, what are some of the broader political, social consequences of having a secluded upper class, secluded in this literal sense, majorly apart from the rest of the city? And related to that, what do citizens who don't have access to the armored city-- middle class, lower class, whatever-- the rest of the population of the city outside of the gate, so to speak, what do we know about how they see this exit of the wealthy?

ANA Well, to your first question, we've talked a lot about-- and there's a lot of research on, for

VILLARREAL: example, second class citizens in Latin America. We talk about how laws benefit some and not others, or how law enforcement is actually unequally applied. And this is not only true in Latin America, right?

I mean, in the United States, of course, the law enforcement is also unequally applied. I mean, Black men, for example, constitutes 6.5% of the population in the United States and, yet, represent 42% of the prison population. So we talk about targeting-- I mean, the unequal targeting of specific population the United States as well.

So when I look at the formation of an upper class city in Latin America-- and I question to what extent this is only true in Latin America-- I see this as the urban culmination of class citizenship. That is, not only certain laws that are unequally applied or law enforcement that is unequally enforced, but that there can be different cities that the upper class can actually live in a different state. And so the repercussions of that are-- the repercussions, sorry, of that are, if you have a concentration of both private and public security resources in one municipality at the expense of the rest, then you are creating conditions of increasing insecurity outside the gates, in a way. You're not distributing, right, the state resources to create a secure city across the metropolis, but actually concentrated in one municipality at the expense of the rest.

RICH SNYDER: What about the option of migration, of leaving rather than staying and living in a walled city? I'm thinking of, again, those with the resources to leave and bring their assets with them. Is that something that one sees? And in your talk today, you mentioned a political figure who-- from Monterrey-- who, as part of his re-election campaign or part of his campaign, had data comparing the decline of crime and other measures of insecurity in Monterrey, Mexico to the rates of crime in several US cities, especially in Texas.

I thought that was very interesting. So what's the international exit option? And how does that play into your study?

ANA
VILLARREAL: So Nuevo Leon borders the state of Texas. And there has been historically a lot of relations between Nuevo Leon and Texas. So it's interesting because at the height of this violence, this wave of violence in 2011, in 2012, a significant number of upper class families relocated to cities in Texas.

We don't know how many. We just know that it's enough that, for example, there is this one neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas called Sonterra that is now called Sonterrey. And there is a little neighborhood--

RICH SNYDER: A play on Monterrey.

ANA --a play on Monterrey, exactly. And there's a neighborhood in Houston is also referred to as
VILLARREAL: Little Monterrey. So we don't know how many families-- or I don't know. I haven't seen any research on this, how many families relocated.

But we do know that it is a phenomenon that was significant enough, as you said, for the mayor of San Pedro to address this concern in his own-- when he was presenting the results saying, "Look, San Pedro is safer, safer when it comes to rape or homicide or car thefts than San Antonio, Austin, Texas, and all these other cities that the upper class was relocating to."

And this was an easy relocation because, I mean, many of these families already have vacation homes there, right, places to move to when there is a vacation, for their shopping sprees in a way. So there was an initial infrastructure to rely on. And at the beginning of my fieldwork, so in 2011, 2012, something I observed as well that I think can be counterintuitive for an American public that might be more familiarized with a Mexican migrant that is lower class, that is either a peasant or a low income worker, is some of these upper class Mexicans who moved to Texas were received as golden migrants, in a way, because they were bringing wealth, because they were investing in real estate.

And so there are these institutions that developed around them. So that is one thing that I observed, this relocation. And then a couple of stories that I gathered were, for example, this family where the male breadwinner stayed in Mexico and put his family in Texas so that the family was safer. So here we have actually an inversion of what we usually see when we talk about migrants sending money home to Mexico. We have a Mexican who is sending money to the United States to be able to keep his family in the United States in a safer place.

This was at one point-- I do want to highlight that there was a period of crisis, 2011, 2012, 2013-- and that ever since, there has been a shift in some of these patterns. And some of the people who had initially left have come back. Because it was expensive to be abroad. And because it was a loss of status, as well, moving to the United States. Their kids were discriminated in school, right, kids that were coming from a privileged background, and they're being highlighted or targeted as unwanted migrants on this side of the border.

RICH SNYDER: One last question, you spoke today about the-- in your talk-- about the more general effects of violence, criminal violence on society. And you mentioned that at the height of the violence in

Monterrey, fireworks would go off and people would be afraid and think it was gunshots. And then people would learn to sort of judge whether a loud sound that may have been gunfire how far away it was from them spatially. You said that pickup trucks, in particular, would instill fear in residents. And I wonder why.

But we're having this conversation just after the event in Manhattan, lower Manhattan yesterday where a rental truck was driven onto the bike path and killed several, killed eight or nine citizens, people. I'm just wondering, are there any insights or lessons about the effects of violence on social fabric and social relations that we can draw from what you know about Monterrey for thinking about what's going on in the US today?

ANA VILLARREAL: Mm-hmm, so one of the things that I want to do in my research is to be able to provide, in the case in Monterrey, an accurate description of the specific things that made people afraid, so to be able to portray this specific landscape of fear that these people inhabit, right? And so one of the things that I was saying is that different sites have different optics that are feared.

So, for example, in the United States, if you're in an airport and you see an abandoned bag, that might trigger a fear response. Well, at the height of this violence in Mexico, and at least in my hometown in Monterrey, it was the site of a pickup truck that people responded to sometimes with adrenaline shock. It's like, [GASP] it's a pickup truck. Is something going to happen to me? So something that, one insight that travels, I mean, beyond Monterrey--

RICH SNYDER: Why a pickup truck?

ANA VILLARREAL: Why a pickup truck, because of its relationship with narco culture. So with drug traffickers driving pickup trucks, having sumptuous lifestyles, spending lots of money in bars, so there's this picture, this picture of the drug trafficker that doesn't necessarily correspond with everyone who participates in the illicit drug trade. But there is this picture that is sometimes present, I mean, that is used in films and is-- in the series that many people watching the United States, like *Narcos*, for example, right, serve to-- they picture, or they depict drug traffickers in a specific light. And so that is, of course, a generalization. But pickup trucks, for that reason, would trigger fear responses among some of the people that I studied.

Well, what another thing that I saw in relation to violence-- and I'm interested very broadly in the impact of violence on the social fabric. And I think that we often focus on how violence tears the social fabric, how it pulls us apart. But violence can also, and fear especially, bring us together. It is because we fear that we must trust others, right?

And so in cases of attacks, what we see is that there's usually a double response. There are those who are afraid. But, I mean, picture, for example, in France when there was the Bataclan incident.

It was very interesting to see that while the state at a national level was trying to close the borders, right, escalating their security responses, citizens in Paris were using the #OpenDoors, right? Open doors, come stay with me if you need a place to stay.

There was a simultaneous response of closing, but also opening doors for people to have a place to stay. And so we see that double response and in all incidents, I think, where there is violence, where there is, yes, violence does tear the social fabric apart. But it also-- it is because we are afraid that we really need each other. So it also provides opportunities for people to come together.

RICH SNYDER: And do we know anything about ways to nurture that coming together response as opposed to the coming apart?

ANA VILLARREAL: Well, I think part of it has to do with institutions, what kind of responses are institutions actually fostering in terms of, you know, there's a, you see something, say something, right? There's these kinds of messages that make us fear each other, right? And maybe to a different extent-- well, I'm not sure if we can institutionalize this.

I don't know if we can institutionalize ways of people coming together. I think, I mean, the way that I've seen it has been spontaneous, right? So I'm not sure if there's a way to nurture that, as you say.

You know, I was on a panel recently. And we were talking about like new forms of fostering solidarity. And I was saying that in the case of the war on drugs, for example, I mean, it is political rhetoric, but with very real impact.

I mean, seeing the different ways in which the war on drugs plays out, for example, in the US versus Mexico. In the US, it's all about mass incarceration, hyper incarceration. Mexico, it's more about violence, right? But all of those who stand against the violence in Mexico, in a way, also stand against mass incarceration in the United States and vice versa. And can we see those-- can we see that common ground, the way in which our movements connect and can we build off each other?

Because, and ultimately, I mean, yes, I stand with everyone who wants to see one out of three Black men out of prison, right, who wants to diminish the ways in which specifically Black men have been targeted. I mean, the war on drugs is a multi-headed problem, right? It looks different here than it does in Mexico.

And I think to the extent that we can build a broader movement to race consciousness, for example, on this side of the border what it looks like on the other side, even that I'm sometimes surprised by just how little people in the United States know about the ravaging effects of drug prohibition in Mexico. I mean, and I teach a class on drugs in the Americas.

And I was telling my students about the fact that more than 30,000 people have gone missing in Mexico. And it was news to them. Like, they had never heard anything about this.

That's a high number. It's a high number. And so when we talk about violence, and they're very concerned with violence, right?

When I began to teach this class, I asked them what they wanted to talk about. And violence was not something that figured among the topics that they wanted to talk about because it's just not part of what they see, right? So they wanted to talk about justice reform. They wanted to talk about, for example, smart drugs, the opiate epidemic.

But violence wasn't part of it. And I thought, why isn't violence part of it? Because it's just not part of their everyday lives.

Whereas for me, if I were to ask this question in Mexico, it's immediately, I mean, the war on drugs is immediately about violence. That is the way that it expresses itself south of the border. And so to the extent that we can raise awareness of the very damaging effects that these policies have south of the border, I think that we can hope that there can be policy reform in that respect.

RICH SNYDER: Thank you. Thank you for being with us for a great conversation.

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