Carceral community in the time of COVID-19: Isolation, adaption, and predation

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Abstract
State failures to protect prisoners from COVID-19 have made prisons key “hotspots” of infection, particularly in the “new mass carceral zone” of Latin America. In Guatemala, which has the 3rd most overcrowded prison system in the world, such failure was a tragedy foretold. Longstanding hostility towards criminalized populations ensured that prisoners would be left to fend for themselves. This does not mean, however, that we should cast the prison as merely another “zone of abandonment” nor prisoners as helpless victims. Instead, drawing on the concept of “carceral community” and prison ethnography, this article maps how prisoner-leaders, entrepreneurs, extortionists, visitors, and officials navigate the absurd contradictions exposed in the collision between pandemic protection protocols and prison realities. This article explores a disavowed carceral community’s efforts to make sense of, adapt to, and leverage the pandemic’s constraints in the never-ending struggle to survive, profit from, and project power over and beyond prison life. The informal and the illicit articulate with government pandemic policies to create a volatile but deeply resilient modus vivendi, albeit with dire consequences for the most vulnerable on both sides of prison walls.

Keywords
prisons, carceral community, Central America, COVID-19, ethnography, carceral geography

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Pavón Prison, Guatemala. April 2020

“If the virus gets in,” wrote Rosario, “We all die.”¹

Rosario has been incarcerated in Pavón Prison—a “prison farm” in Guatemala—for over two decades. He was a teenager when he was sentenced to serve 50 years for murder. He has survived countless riots that have left dozens dead, dismembered, burned, or blown to pieces. In 2007 he lived through the “Retaking of Pavón” and witnessed state agents tie up seven prisoner leaders who were later executed (Amnesty International, 2010). In 2016 a stray bullet grazed his ear 20 feet from where assassins gunned down Pavón kingpin Byron Lima. His lungs are scarred from several bouts of tuberculosis. During his tenure, Pavón’s population grew from around 1200 to more than 4000 (Andrew, 2021). For the last several years he has served as a Segundo—second in command for his sector of 200-odd men. After COVID-19 prompted a prison system-wide lockdown, Rosario helped to organize sanitation procedures, refurbish his sector to reduce overcrowding, and identify prisoner extortionists. He will formally qualify for parole in 2023. Every night he prays that he will survive to see that day.

With his TB-scarred lungs, Rosario has reason to fear. In this time of “unprecedented global vulnerability” (Yancy, 2020), prisons have emerged as key “hotspots” where governments have been unable or unwilling—or both—to halt the spread of COVID-19 (Burki, 2020). In Central America, and across the “new mass carceral zone” of Latin America, mass incarceration in extremely underfunded and degraded facilities has created profound levels of overcrowding, leaving prisoners particularly vulnerable to disease (Darke and Garces, 2017; Hathazy and Müller, 2016; Klaufus and Weegels, 2022; Woods, 2016). Now, much ink has been spilled analyzing states’ failures to protect imprisoned populations from the COVID-19 pandemic (Byrne et al., 2021; Fernández, 2021; Marmolejo et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2021).² Since early 2020, international dictums and prescriptions for protecting vulnerable prisoners have proliferated and spread throughout the world (Amnesty International, 2021; Dutheil et al., 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). However, putting such advice into practice is quite another matter. In Central America—and to varying degrees across the Western Hemisphere—responses to COVID-19’s threat in prisons have followed a familiar and frustrating script: public health experts warn of massive outbreaks behind bars; governments respond with “plans” to protect the most vulnerable inmates; the plans are only partially executed, or as in Guatemala, not at all (Alvarez, 2020; Cuevas, 2020).³

In Central America, these abject failures of humanitarian “call-to-arms”—importuning state institutions to live up to biopolitical ideals of modern liberalism—stem from tired, tragic fantasies (Wilkinson, 2020). Namely, that Central American penal states in fact exercise sovereign control within their overcrowded and underfunded prisons, and that Central American publics would ever be willing to aid vulnerable prisoners in moments of shared peril. Governments across the region are erstwhile partners in managing prison life, oftentimes abdicating daily governance entirely to prisoners themselves (Darke and Garces, 2017; Fontes and O’Neill, 2019; Weegels, 2020). Meanwhile, popular frustration with high levels of insecurity—alongside cycles of spectacularized
violence inside prisons—has helped frame prisons and prisoners as veritable petri dishes of out-of-control criminality (Fontes, 2018). With “the delinquent” collectively figured as root cause of societal disfunction, prisoners like Rosario have found themselves struggling against social and civil death long before COVID-19 came along (Agamben, 1998). Thus, there is something tragically absurd about narrow, state-centric critiques of anti-COVID policy failures in penal institutions like Guatemala’s. Clearly, in the face of the pandemic, the question is not “Why did the state abandon its prisoners?” but rather, “What are prisoners doing about it?”

Ethnographic work on Latin American “carceral communities” has provided valuable insights into how prisoners understand, navigate, and even leverage collective desperation in the name of survival, solidarity, power, profit, or pleasure (Darke et al., 2021). Darke and Garces et al. argue that the collective effort to survive has made prisons “community-generating machines” with “novel and typically misunderstood varieties of communitas operating inside as well as at maximal remove from ‘the state’…” (2021: 5). This does not mean, however, that we should imagine the prison as merely another “zone of abandonment” (Biehl, 2013), nor cast prisoners as helpless victims. Carceral communities are indeed made and reproduced beyond official oversight in the shadow of state power, and are dependent upon the informal, the illicit, and the strategic use of violence. But they also flourish within and across prison walls and incorporate a wide range of actors and spaces beyond prisoners and prisons themselves. Focusing on carceral community sheds light on how prisoners and their networks make sense of and grapple with the deep-seated contradictions of institutional practices that perpetually fail to provide for prisoners’ most basic needs. Indeed, as I explore below, the dynamics of collective survival in Pavón prison during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight how the informal and the illicit articulate with and reshape government (pandemic) policies to create a volatile but deeply resilient modus vivendi, albeit with dire consequences for the most vulnerable on both sides of prison walls.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Guatemalan prisons since 2010—and correspondence with imprisoned interlocutors in 2020–2021 after visiting privileges were revoked —this article chronicles how a disavowed and demonized carceral community in one of the world’s most overcrowded prison systems is surviving, adapting to, and even leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic. I map the absurd contradictions exposed in the collision between pandemic protection protocols and the realities of prison life, and trace how prison leaders, entrepreneurs, extortionists, visitors, and officials navigate and make sense of these contradictions through the longest prison lockdown in the country’s history. Though COVID-19 initially seemed to transform prisoners’ relationships with one another and with the outside world, I show how the carceral community ultimately incorporated the pandemic’s constraints and opportunities into the never-ending struggle to survive, profit from, and project power over and beyond prison life.

Prisons and punishment in twenty-first century Guatemala

Prisons are powerful “heterotopias”—“third spaces” that, while collectively imagined as removed and even isolated from the “law-abiding” world, in fact distill the dominant
ideological, economic and social forces that structure society as a whole (Foucault, 1994, 2007). In Guatemala, this means that past and present crises behind bars can be traced through histories of authoritarian violence and democratic decay, and, in the twenty-first century, deep fusion between the state and its underworld (Benson et al., 2008; Green, 1995; Nelson, 2009). During, Guatemala’s genocidal civil war (1960–1996) state forces disappeared and murdered people en masse, throwing bodies into clandestine gravesites: 150,000 murdered; 50,000 disappeared; 1 million displaced (Nelson, 2009; ODHA, 1998). The state did not invest in its prison system, perhaps because it was not the preferred solution for imposing order. State authorities were far more likely to execute or disappear suspected criminals and political subversives than incarcerate them (Manz, 2005). Decades of militarized authoritarian rule left the country’s judiciary system in tatters and a prison system entirely unprepared to contain and care for the massive influx of inmates that peacetime would bring (Godoy, 2002).

Within a decade after the 1996 Peace Accords ended Central America’s bloodiest civil war, Guatemala’s peacetime violent death rates rose to outpace its wartime numbers (Burrell, 2013). A confluence of organized crime, transnational gangs, and drug cartels created chaos for the country and its postwar judiciary system (Levenson, 2013). The rise of extreme insecurity inspired frustrated citizens to support militarized, heavy-handed, and altogether ineffective responses to crime known as “mano dura” (iron fist). Such policies took hold across northern Central America in the early 2000s, pushed by savvy politicians leveraging “punitive populism” (Bonner, 2019; Huhn, 2017), and drawing heavily on nostalgia for the authoritarian past and its supposedly “ordered” violence (Fontes, 2018). These policies targeted the post-war era’s most visible bogeyman—the marero, or transnational gangster. Transnational gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) became pivotal figures in social imaginaries of crime (Carter, 2022), and dragged prisons and their profound failures into the public eye. As the state packed prisons full of gang-associated young men, gang leaders made prisons their base of operations, and Guatemalans watched the gangs consolidate control of urban neighborhoods by coordinating behind bars (Cruz, 2015). Through the 2000s, high-profile gang clashes in prison contributed to a growing sense that the state could not control the imprisoned (Luis Sanz and Martínez, 2012). Meanwhile, fear became embedded in urban landscapes, gated communities proliferated, and the private security industry boomed as those who could afford the costs built “fortified enclaves” against the specter of crime haunting city streets (Caldeira, 1998; O’Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2013). All of this inured the Guatemalan public to high levels of violent death behind bars, any sympathy for prisoners was squashed by the out-of-control insecurity overwhelming daily life.

These trends also had deep structural impacts on incarceration. The crisis of prison overcrowding was looming in the mid-2000s, but proposals to shore up the prison system were dead on arrival. As a former prison system director (2007–2009) said, “Given the choice between funding schools, the health system, or prisons, what will elected officials choose?” (Personal Communication, Guatemala City, August 15, 2021). The answer is altogether too obvious. “For most Guatemalans,” said Julie Lopez, an investigative journalist, “The general sentiment regarding prisoners has
always been, ‘Let them die, let them be killed. And to hell with human rights, they only protect delinquents’” (Personal Communication, Guatemala City, August 14 2021). Such hostility towards the incarcerated, coupled with perennially underfunded institutions, has made Guatemala’s prisons a “ticking time bomb” (Amaya and Razo, 2021). “The amount of spaces have been the same for 15 years, but with 10% population growth every year,” said prison analyst Corinne Dedik, “This is a structural problem that spells disaster” (Author interview, Guatemala City, May 15 2020). Today, more than 26,000 prisoners are held in facilities built to hold 6500. More than half of the imprisoned have not been sentenced, and some prisons housing pre-trial detainees are overpopulated by more than 500% (O’Neill and Fontes, 2017). The Guatemalan prison system is the third most overcrowded in the world (World Prison Brief, 2020).

These conditions mean that, like the vast majority of Guatemala’s working poor, prisoners rely upon informal markets and networks to survive. Here, prison visitors (la visita) play an essential role. La visita—drawn from prisoners’ family and/or business networks—sustain the prison’s material and affective economies, binding the carceral community together in relations of mutual profit and trust (Ahmed, 2004), and effectively triage prisoners and the prison system itself (Fontes and O’Neill, 2019). Regular visits from family, spouses, and lovers help blunt the psychological torture of imprisonment in such overcrowded and violent environs. Prisoners also rely on visitors for medicine, supplemental food, and a lengthy catalogue of goods and materials essential to prison-based businesses like restaurants, bakeries, barbershops, gyms, laundromats, shoe repair shops, painting studios, hammock weaving factories and carpentry shops. La visita also enables the flow of drugs and other illicit commodities into prisons, which a large proportion of prison staff also depend upon to pad their paltry salaries. According to prison administrators, more than 30% of prison staff take part in illicit trafficking rackets that ensure a constant flow of drugs, cellphones, and weapons into prisons (ibid). Prison directors and other bureaucratic elite take advantage of these conditions in the name of profit. In return for allowing and facilitating illicit ventures, they collect informal “taxes” from the imprisoned, with prisoner leaders negotiating and collecting prisoner tithes (Fontes, 2018). These varied networks of illicit aid and profit, and the interdependencies between prisoners, prison officials, and visitors they reflect, blur any hard and fast distinctions dividing the state from its underworld (Taussig, 2005).

At the same time, some inmates are able to project their power and extract profits from far beyond the prison. This is most visible with the phenomenon of extortion, Central America’s most feared and despised criminal racket (Cruz, 2015; Fontes, 2016). The extortion strategies pioneered by gangs in the early 2000s have been taken up by prisoner “imitators” masquerading as gangsters and leveraging public fear and lack of faith in the government’s ability to protect. In 2019, Guatemalan officials estimated that more than 70% of extortion calls were made from prisons (López, 2019).

Thus, long before the state abandoned its prisoners to the whims of the novel virus, the image of the predatory prisoner, “feeding off” the blood, sweat, and fears of “hardworking” citizens helped crystalize a collective sense that prisoners deserve death. In the “epidemic of signification” that shadowed the pandemic’s spread, such sentiments structured how Guatemalans made sense of prisoners’ vulnerability (Brown et al., 2021; Treichler,
“Better if they all catch it and die once and for all,’ that was the answer,” said Oswaldo Samayoa, a human rights lawyer who attempted to speak up for prisoners in court in a series of failed amicae curiae. “When they started doing tests in prison? ‘How can you spend money on those people?!’ That was what you saw in respectable media sources, in opinion columns, on social media and in news stories” (Author interview, Guatemala City, August 20 2021).

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, the Guatemalan state fell back on its strongest skillset, honed through decades of authoritarian rule and militarized security strategies: repression. By March 20th, the government had suspended all prison visiting privileges, banned all public or religious gatherings, halted all commercial air travel and declared martial law to enforce a nationwide nightly curfew that remained in place through the last quarter of 2020 (Pitts and Inkpen, 2020). From March to August 2020, the police detained more than 40,000 for curfew violations—threatening to imprison far more people than public health services were able to test for COVID-19 during the same period (Freedom House, 2021). “Luckily,” said Samayoa, with not a little irony, “Judges sent almost all of them back to their homes. Otherwise, the entire system would have collapsed” (Author interview, Guatemala City, August 15 2021).

All of this effectively locked down movement into and within Guatemala, while also shutting off the constant flow of visitors in and out of prisons. The energetic security response belied the government’s near complete inability to provide any other kind of support. As lockdown extended into 2021, the struggle to survive on both sides of Guatemala’s prison walls increased. Proposals made at the beginning of the pandemic—to expand prison living spaces and to “decarcerate” the most vulnerable—were never implemented (Fundesa, 2020). Instead, prison administrators mandated “social distancing” and masking protocols inside prisons, extended isolation policies, and transferred infected prisoners to a maximum security prison. By July 2020, however, COVID-19 was spreading inside all prisons. That month, the prison system officially recognized 70 active COVID-19 cases. But this was only a small fraction of the total. Lacking sufficient COVID-19 tests to even know how the disease was spreading among the public, and cognizant that stopping COVID-19’s spread behind bars was utterly impossible, prison officials quietly ceased testing except for prisoners in dire states. Trompas, a Pavón inmate, said he witnessed this firsthand. “I was in the hospitalito (in July 2020) getting treatment for TB, and they did like 40 COVID-19 tests for other prisoners,” he said. “25 came back positive, and then there were no more tests” (Personal communication, August 13, 2021).

Social distancing is absurd

Pavón Prison, July 2018

In Calavera’s sector, 200 men are crammed into a repurposed carpentry shed. Clapboard walls and Disney themed sheets divide and re-divide men’s quarters. Some have stereos, and a lucky few their own television sets, along with shelves and clever storage spaces to
keep foodstuffs, or to hide cellphones, SIM cards, drugs or weapons. But most barely have room to stretch their legs. A narrow labyrinth weaves between makeshift cells and sleeping spaces stacked five high. There are two tiny barred windows. “It’s not so bad during the day, when everyone is outside,” Calavera, a prisoner I have known for a decade, said as we sat on his thin mattress. “But in the nighttime after count, when we lay down, it is suffocating. You can hear men breathing and coughing, or screaming in their dreams. You can smell their sweat, every fart.” Even during the rainy season, so many bodies in such a small enclosed space make for stifling heat. “You don’t so much go to sleep at night as just pass out from exhaustion. And then you wake up gasping for air” (Author interview, July 13 2018).

Such conditions are typical for the vast majority of the incarcerated, making the mandate to remain socially distanced from one another, in Rosario’s words, “ridiculous.” Guatemalan prisoners are, however, well-versed in navigating and making sense of the stark contradictions between official prison protocols and the de facto dynamics that govern everyday life. Between the 6:30am and 5pm counts, voceros (sector leaders) directed inmates to remain outdoors. However, as Calavera so viscerally narrated, keeping a safe distance from others during the long night is a privilege that very few can afford. Just as on the street, where security against the contagion of crime is the privilege of the relatively wealthy, privacy and protection belong solely to prisoners who can pay for it. The COVID-19 pandemic showed how the “structural vulnerability” built into Pavón’s carceral community and prison infrastructure ensured that few prisoners could avoid constant exposure to infection (Team and Manderson, 2020). Prisoners’ level of exposure was determined by a thriving—if chaotic—real estate market where prices are driven by a variety of socio-economic and spatial factors: turnover in the prison population, increasingly scarce space, the particular sector conditions, etc. In Pavón prison, a 1 × 2 meter private sleeping space can cost between Q1500–6000 [200–800 US$], depending on the cellblock and the seller’s desperation. Larger spaces are priced far higher. “My cell is valued at around Q15,000,” said Esgar, another sector leader in Pavón. “… Spaces that have running water, television outlets, and matrimonial bed can be worth up to Q35–40,000 [4500–5200 US$]. But he that doesn’t have money… sleeps on the floor” (Personal communication, February 13 2020). The cells of the wealthiest prisoners resemble low-rent hotel rooms, with TVs, stereos, mini-fridges, and, most importantly for survival in these times, they have doors that can be locked against the crowd. Meanwhile, with a mere 1200 beds for over 4000 prisoners, most must spoon in the corridors. “I slept there, right there under the window, before I bought my cell,” said a prisoner named Nelson, waving towards a dirty mat beneath a barred window. “I’d wake up in a puddle of rainwater each morning, and got sick all the time” (Personal communication, February 4 2020).

Over time, the glaring absurdities of government protection protocols and the prison’s rising COVID-19 infections provoked a collective fatalism among Pavón’s prisoners. “Some wear masks, others don’t give a shit,” Rosario reported in late July 2020, the same month he became ill with what he suspected was COVID-19. “But we have our own medicine here…Verbena, ginger, limes, aspirin, everyday. I was pretty sick. What else can we do?” Such self-help was the norm. Other Pavón residents echoed Rosario’s
sense of anxiety, and did their best to ignore the virus’ threat altogether, because “knowing” would do little good anyway. While infection spread, relatively few prisoners died, and the initial terror of disease that had encouraged at least some prisoners to follow state directives faded. In fact, prisoners came to regard reporting their symptoms as utterly nonsensical. In September 2020, Calavera wrote, “I lost my sense of smell! But I’m better now.” I asked him if he had gotten tested. “No way. And get myself put in isolation?” He replied. “The whole world has it here, but no one says anything. Anyway, there are many ways to die in prison. Better to let it pass.”

**Isolation and exchange**

“Isolation” is arguably the prison’s *raison d’etre*; if nothing else, incarceration physically and symbolically excises the prisoner from the outside world in the name of quarantining society from the contagion of crime (Fleisher, 1989; Simon, 2000; Wacquant, 2009). In Pavón prison, pandemic-provoked isolation measures crossed this punishment with farcical promises to protect prisoners from disease. This exposed and sharpened a central contradiction that has long organized prison life in Guatemala: prisoners and the penal system itself cannot survive without constant exchange between the incarcerated and the free. In the pre-pandemic past, prison officials would cut off visiting privileges *en masse* only as a tool of last resort to punish recalcitrant prisoners, and to coerce prisoners into policing one another. Guatemalan prisoners have reacted violently against such measures through riots, attacks on prison staff, and even acts of public terror (Barrientos, 2017; Fontes, 2018). Thus, when administrators prohibited all prison visits in March 2020, how prisoners would react was an open question. Initially, a critical mass seemed to accept the threat narratives about COVID-19’s potential lethality. “People are calm here,” Rosario wrote in April 2020, “Even without visits, because they know that if someone comes in with this it will kill all of us. Nobody wants to die.”

Early on, this uneasy calm became alloyed with a novel sense of privilege as anti-COVID policies forced much of the world’s population into isolation. In late March 2020, Rosario wrote, “Now you all know what it’s like to be prisoners!” Guatemala’s nation-wide lockdown caused immediate and acute suffering for millions without any hope of state relief (Pitts and Inkpen, 2020). Guaranteed shelter and daily meals, prisoners found themselves in the unfamiliar position of feeling better off than people on the outside who were struggling to put food on the table. “I’m not asking my family for anything these days,” Calavera shouted across the prison fence to me in April 2020. “I told them I’m fine and they should look to themselves.” The news—piped in on televisions, through social media, and in newspapers shared amongst inmates—brought daily images of desperation from the outside. Droves of poor Guatemalans took to the streets waving homemade “white flags”—bits of old sheets and ragged t-shirts—signaling hunger and begging for handouts (Rentería and Menchu, 2020). For prisoners I communicated with in the early months of the pandemic, their suffering appeared insignificant compared to such spectacles and their families’ struggles. This reversal of pre-pandemic dynamics, though temporary, contributed to prisoners remaining relatively quiescent when faced with their unprecedented isolation.
As lockdown dragged into the second half of 2020, however, isolation’s material and psychological deprivations took their toll. Daily visitor lines that had once stretched a hundred meters or more from the prison gates diminished to an uneven trickle. After leaving packages of food and other licit goods at the front gate, some visitors would linger to shout conversations across the prison fence (See figure 1). Physically cut off from their visitors, Pavón’s prisoners had to adapt their strategies of exchange that remained essential to the carceral community’s survival.

Adapt they did, as some carceral entrepreneurs were agile enough to take advantage of the pandemic’s transformations in a species of “disaster capitalism” molded to prison life (Davis, 2020; Klein, 2008). Just as on the street, the pandemic lockdown initially impacted the prison’s “service industry” the hardest. Within a week, dozens of prisoner-run restaurants, bakeries, and tortilla makers shut down for lack of supplies and customers. This left most prisoners dependent upon food provided by the prison system, known colloquially as “el rancho.” Universally maligned by prisoners for its inferior quality, el rancho kept the imprisoned population from starving during the extended lockdown. “Yeah, el rancho will keep the body fed,” commented a prisoner named Trompas, “But it does not feed the spirit” (Personal communication, May 4 2020). Prisoners that were able to stockpile basic foodstuffs and provide alternatives to el rancho made considerable profits. While supplies lasted, for example, Rosario operated a makeshift bakery. “We sold Q800 ($110 US$) of bread a day. We sold out each day within 30 minutes” (Personal communication, September 2 2020).

However, the most strikingly successful adaptations took place in the black markets that have long flourished in and around Guatemalan prisons—perhaps unsurprising, given that illicit commodity chains tend to be extremely flexible (Basu, 2013). Pavón’s
prison walls have always been porous, and through pandemic lockdown prisoners, guards and visitors tweaked tried-and-true mechanisms to continue smuggling essential illicit commodities. To smuggle cellphones and drugs, for example, some female visitors would first sneak them inside their bodies past inspection at the outer gate. Then they would make use of “the tube”: a 30-foot length of flexible plastic tubing that prisoners snake along a well-worn path, beneath the outer fencing, to a waiting visitor. In broad daylight, dexterous, savvy visitors would transfer the cellphone or drugs to the tube during guard changes—or sometimes in cahoots with cooperative prison staff. “These ladies are brash!” Rosario wrote. “They move fast in passing the phones to the tube. Also ounces of cocaine and even half pounds of marijuana, but in those cases we pass money to the guards. We all have needs, and hunger as well, and their pain these days is also high” (Personal communication, August 12 2021).

Pavón’s drug market proved particularly resilient—perhaps because, as Rosario observed, “Narcotrafficking will always be an option cuz there is always someone ready to get fucked up.” He and others were able to continue selling marijuana—widely considered an “essential” commodity by prisoners and prison officials alike (Fontes, 2018)—even as supplies diminished. As the prospect of lockdown loomed in early March 2020, prisoners buried caches of marijuana, and made supplies last by reducing joint size. But marijuana shortages fueled demand for less common, more dangerous drugs. “For a while there was money around but nothing to spend it on,” Rosario wrote in September 2020. “But we have found other ways. … Right now, the infamous pollos are in season. That’s marijuana with H[eroin]. Preparing some pollos!”

Before the pandemic lockdown, heroin was among the least common of illicit drugs behind bars. It was more expensive than marijuana and crack and not as popular (Fontes and O’Neill, 2019). But with the generalized economic and emotional depression that took hold through months of isolation, heroin temporarily flooded Pavón prison. By February 2021, however, dozens of cases of prisoners vomiting blood and several prisoner overdose deaths caught the attention of prison officials. In response, prisoner leaders categorically banned its sale.

Rosario confessed that his decision to smuggle and sell this dangerous drug was about survival. Soon after the pandemic took hold, his girlfriend lost her job at a chain restaurant, leaving him with no outside support. In late December 2020, having already survived what he was sure was COVID-19 infection, Rosario fell ill once again. He recognized the symptoms as tuberculosis—this would be his fourth bout in 15 years. “See I’ve been sick but I’m still alive. I think things are happening to me because it’s my final hour, God willing, in this place,” he wrote in January 2021. “But no way was I going to turn myself in [to the prison hospital]. I don’t want to get isolated.” Quite literally, Rosario could not afford to go into isolation to heal from tuberculosis. Doing so would have risked losing the privileges he has accrued as second-in-command of his sector. “I know the guy who gives out the medication and I went to buy it with the money I made selling H[eroin]. Money makes everything move here and since he’s a prisoner in need I took advantage.” This is but one example—and as I explore in the next section, perhaps a relatively benign one—of how the pandemic and isolation policies became woven into relations of predation and exploitation that both compose and rend the carceral community.
Pandemic predation

Guatemala’s carceral communities have always been dependent upon illicit exchange among prisoners and between prisoners, authorities, and their networks on the outside. Thus, Pavón’s prisoners have for decades paid a weekly “tax” to sector leaders and prison administrators to maintain certain illicit privileges, and consider such arrangements basic features of life behind bars. However, the exploitation and predation that govern so much of prison life cannot be contained by prison walls, inevitably spilling over into wider society. In Guatemala, this dynamic is most visible in the phenomenon of extortion. By all accounts, pandemic lockdown presented an “unprecedented opportunity” to rein in prison-based extortion rackets, reducing the number of cellphones in circulation behind bars and restricting prisoners’ capacity to coordinate with networks on the outside. Nevertheless, through months of isolation, prisoner extortionists continued to operate, adapting messaging tactics to the pandemic. Trompas reported that Pavón’s extortionists had restyled their “gangster masquerade” by “...pretending to be MS-13 members asking for money to buy coffins to bury the homeboys, or help the families of those who had died from COVID. They were all imitators... and were just taking advantage of the fear” (Personal communication, September 12 2021). The problem, as investigative journalist Julie Lopez observed, was that there are “…too many people making money out of this system” (Author interview, Guatemala City, August 14 2021). In this final section, I map how prison officials (using their allies among the imprisoned) leveraged the state’s anti-COVID-19 and anti-extortion policies to extort Pavón’s prisoners, and how these strategies ground up against prisoners’ resistance and formal prison policies to ensure that prison-based extortion would survive the pandemic unscathed. In these officials’ hands, the pandemic’s threat to prisoners became a lever used to pry apart the carceral community and feed upon prisoners’ desperation for an end to isolation.

In September 2020, to salvage spiraling economic losses, the Guatemalan government rolled back pandemic restrictions, and on October 6th the prison system officially declared an end to isolation. However, just as prisoner extortionists had adapted to pandemic conditions, so too did prison officials and prison leaders in their practice of siphoning illicit profit from the imprisoned. Before allowing visitors to return to Pavón, officials demanded a “quota” that substantially increased the imprisoned population’s weekly tithe. “Everything is a shakedown with this government,” Rosario wrote, “Now the cuota is Q20,000 [2600 US$] a week, about Q1500 [200US$] per sector.” It was up to sector leaders like Rosario to assess and collect each prisoner’s contribution based on their black market profits. “Today is collection,” he continued. “The collaboration is Q5 [.65 US$] every prisoner... Those who sell crack pay 100 [13 US$]. Those who sell wifi and [phone] minutes 50 [6.5 US$. Those who have cellular phones pay 30 [4 US$. That’s how we make it work” (Personal communication, October 6 2020).

In the following months, as Guatemala went through spasmodic “openings” and “closings,” Pavón’s officials leveraged the threat of renewed lockdown to force prisoners to hand over the extortionists in their midst. Sector leaders like Rosario, accustomed to surveilling their fellow prisoners, had no trouble identifying the most obvious perpetrators. “My sector has 200 guys,” Rosario said. “I know who’s who, who’s extorting, who’s sick, what
they ate for dinner, who’s flatulent, who’s got a visit, who’s doing drugs, who’s selling drugs. You cannot hide.” However, when it came to turning in suspected extortionists, sector leaders dragged their feet. In response, administrators once again held la visita hostage. In March 2021—four months after reopening Pavón to visitors—prison administrators cut off visiting privileges, and engaged in a search and seizure campaign that was reportedly aimed at turning prisoners violently against the extortionists in their midst “It’s hot here compa,” Rosario wrote. “The people are already angry, with the desire to kill the extortionists cuz of the losses.”

With the general population seething over losing the visiting privileges for which they had sacrificed so much, Pavón’s sector leaders eventually handed over a list of alleged extortionists to the prison director. Calavera was on the list. For several days, his name blared out from prison loudspeakers with orders to present himself at the front gate. He, like many others, initially resisted, acquiescing only after his sector leader threatened him. “So … they locked us up, 30 of us in a space about 20 feet across. They told us we were there for our own protection. It was all bullshit!” Calavera wrote in August 2021, claiming that prisoner leaders and officials targeted him and others simply because they were the most vulnerable. “They told the population, ‘Turn in the extortionists to get la visita back.’ So the voceros made lists of people who couldn’t or wouldn’t pay them, or people they owed money to, or people like me [former gang members] who had no allies in the population. Maybe one or two actually were involved in extortion.”

Calavera’s proclamations of innocence may be dubious, but they also typify prisoner resistance to what they call the “charade” (casaca) of state efforts to impose law and order when so many prison officials also participate in illicit prison activities. In any case, his critique of the anti-extortion campaign was shared by Guatemala’s Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH). Soon after their abrupt isolation, family members of the alleged extortionists presented complaints to the PDH about this violation of prisoners’ rights. Human rights lawyer Samayoa summed up the PDH’s perspective: “It’s true that these prisoners could have committed something, but for this there is a disciplinary regime, and at no point does that disciplinary regime put men in that situation” (Author interview, August 15 2021). Lacking any evidence beyond the accusations of one group of prisoners against another, and with no lawful place to isolate the accused, Pavón’s administrators were legally required to release them (López, 2021).

But prison officials had one last trick to play; they gave the alleged extortionists a choice—pay Q5000 [650 US$] for release, or get transferred to another isolation unit, which at the time was occupied by recently transferred 18th Street gang members. Terrified of being trapped with gang members, most of the 60 odd men paid their way out. Back among the general population, the alleged extortionists had to pay a new quota to their sector leaders to continue their activities. And so, the state’s efforts to leverage COVID-19 isolation to rein in imprisoned extortionists ended with government officials and prisoner leaders carving out a cut of the alleged extortionists’ profits.

**Conclusion**

This chronicle of carceral community in the time of COVID-19 began as tragedy. Guatemalan state efforts to protect prisoners against the pandemic were destined to
fail, undermined by fatal institutional and infrastructural flaws. The collision of formal prison policies, public hostility towards the imprisoned, and illicit networks embedded in prison governance left prisoners and their networks to muddle through, resigned to COVID infection but struggling to adapt to their escalated isolation. Faced with the spectacular contradictions between the ideals of pandemic protection and the realities of daily survival, the carceral community adapted, and in adapting rewrote tragedy into farce. Pandemic protocols meant to defend vulnerable Guatemalans from disease became woven into prisoners’ and prison officials’ predation strategies, ensuring that the most vulnerable on both sides of prison walls would bear the brunt of state failures to care for the incarcerated. And yet, from the perspective of Pavón’s prisoners, the crucible of COVID-19 has not been so much an abrupt departure from the norm but rather a continuation and intensification of the basic conditions through which the carceral community forges itself day in and day out. Thus, as unruly and chaotic as these modes of survival, politics and profit-generation might appear from the outside, they proved astonishingly resilient in the face of a world-changing pandemic.

This resilience speaks to just how essential informal and illicit strategies of prison governance, economic exchange, and conflict-management can be in structuring life behind bars during the COVID-19 pandemic (as well as before and “after”). Such dynamics, however, remain deeply understudied, particularly in the Global North where gaining meaningful access to the imprisoned can be difficult (see Cunha, 2014; Wacquant, 2002). COVID-19 lockdowns exacerbated this state of affairs, forcing prison researchers to rely even more heavily on government data that cannot capture the complex nature of carceral community, making prisoners’ lived realities even more invisible (Berg et al., 2022). This is unfortunate, since we now know that most prison systems were “in no way equipped” to protect prisoners from the pandemic (Burki, 2020), and calls to “decarcerate” or otherwise protect vulnerable prisoners went virtually unheeded in most countries (particularly in the United States (Widra, 2022)). Thus, while the conditions of coping with COVID-19 in Guatemalan prisons may appear extreme, carceral communities around the world have navigated comparable contradictions. How have prisoners and their networks responded to pandemic isolation? How have prisoners’ informal, even prohibited networks and communication systems adapted to survive and maintain carceral communities? What role have systems of illicit exchange—between prisoners, officials, and street networks—played in preserving prisoners’ lives and prison power structures? Communal well-being behind bars is defined by such questions, and prison researchers must seek the answers.

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Notes

1. A note on methodology: Data for this article were generated from fieldwork in several Guatemalan male prisons conducted since 2010, as well as from correspondence via email, text, and WhatsApp messaging (noted as “personal communication” in the text) with networks of prisoners, prison officials, prison visitors, journalists, lawyers, and analysts since March 2020 (or in a few cases with non-prisoners, via Zoom). Through more than a decade of ethnographic engagement with Guatemalan carceral communities, I have developed relationships of mutual trust with community members occupying various strata of prison social hierarchies. In this article I draw on these connections to map and convey the distinct perspectives of a wide variety of prisoners, administrators, and outside observers about communal dynamics under COVID-19, including: relatively powerful prisoners (i.e. sector leaders and successful illicit entrepreneurs) playing key intermediary roles negotiating between prisoners and prison authorities; the families of dozens of imprisoned men; more vulnerable and less empowered prisoners like ex-gang members, drug addicts, and those occupying isolation blocks; former and active prison officials (guards, administrators and directors); and Guatemalan journalists, prison analysts, and lawyers working on issues of crime and incarceration. I have also culled official statements from the Guatemalan government. Here I triangulate between all of these sources, selecting a sample of interlocutors’ quotes and observations that reflect, as much as possible, an accurate account of prison dynamics before and during COVID-19. All prisoners’ names, as well as some ethnographic details (insignificant to the analysis), have been changed or removed to preserve informants’ anonymity and security.

2. By August 2020, approximately 140,000 prisoners in Latin America had tested positive for Covid-19 and at least 1,500 had died (Romero et al., 2021).

3. This pattern is also evident in the United States (Widra and Wagner, 2020).

4. Parallel trends are evident in Honduras (Carter, 2022) and El Salvador (Zilberg, 2011).

5. In 2019, 79% of Guatemalan workers were informally employed (ILOSTAT, 2021).

6. A wide variety of businesses operating around the prisons also adapted: kiosks outside the gates that once sold skirts and sandals to female visitors began selling cloth face masks, hand sanitizer and clear plastic bags. Some wholesalers who had supplied prison shops with sodas and snacks took to hauling goods for others along the long dirt roads linking various prison complexes to the main gate.

7. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, TB was widely considered (by both prisoners and prison officials) to be the most dangerous disease behind bars (Medinilla, 2017).

8. Scholars have identified similar dynamics in the US (Skarbek, 2014), Brazil (Stegeman and de Almeida 2020; Dieter and Freitas Jr, 2020), Honduras (Carter, 2022), and Venezuela (Antillano, 2022).

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