

VIOLENCE UNSEEN

Inside the mysterious crime wave challenging New Bedford PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARY BETH MEEHAN

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, in the city of New Bedford, community volunteers started noticing that members of the city's newest immigrant group were being attacked. The victims were Mayan Guatemalans, violently assaulted and often robbed by hooded assailants.

The attacks have continued, and, though no specific group has been blamed, many community leaders see a pattern. The Mayans are seen as soft targets: They're employed, they cash their paychecks and carry the money home, and, since many are undocumented, they don't feel comfortable going to the police.

Providence-based photojournalist Mary Beth Meehan learned about the problem from a community group and

began to track down victims who might be willing to talk about their experience. She spent time at community centers, walked through neighborhoods, and attended church services to connect to victims or their friends. Many refused to tell their stories, or cooperated only if they were certain they wouldn't be recognized. Some did allow their faces to appear in pictures.

The interviews were conducted with a translator present, or conducted in Spanish by the author and translated later. The details are self-reported, although often corroborated by either police reports or eyewitness accounts. Some names have been changed at the subjects' request.

As a photographer, Meehan has spent much of her career

trying to capture the lives and experiences of people we might otherwise not see. A feature on her "Undocumented" project, depicting undocumented immigrants' rooms without the occupants present, ran in Ideas in 2010. Here, her portraits draw out a set of people whose problems are only now beginning to be revealed publicly.

The photographer would like to thank Corinn Williams and the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts, without whose support and advice this project would not have been possible. Full versions of all these profiles, and more photos, are available at marybethmeehan.tumblr.com. Mary Beth Meehan can be reached at marybethmeehan@cox.net.



MARTA

Marta was holding her sleeping son inside her doorway one morning last spring when a man pushed into the entryway and pressed a knife to her neck. "He asked me for money and took my keys. It was a very sad moment—I thought he was going to kill me or my son. He touched me everywhere—I didn't know what he was going to do."

Her previous apartment had been broken into and ransacked twice, which is why she moved to this new building. She says she spends her days, and especially her nights, afraid: that someone will break in

while she's sleeping, that she will be hurt in the street and her son will be left alone, that she'll get in trouble at her job at a fish company for not having the right papers. These new fears, particular to her life in New Bedford, have mingled with a deep and abiding sadness that she has felt since the war in Guatemala, three decades ago.

"There is no peace anywhere—not in Guatemala, and not here in the United States. We were persecuted in Guatemala, during the war. My father died; my three uncles were assassinated by soldiers. My dad's house was burned. Since I was little, I can say that I haven't had a peaceful life."

RUBEN

Rubén has worked for 11 straight years in New Bedford—moving blocks of cement, hauling loads of fish—hard physical labor that he says he enjoys. He had only been at his new job on a lobster boat for about a month, last April, when he was attacked. He had just paid his phone bill and was riding his bicycle back home when he heard someone say: "Give me some money!" Before he knew it, he was on the ground. "I didn't understand," he says, "he didn't rob me, he didn't take anything. He just stabbed me and ran." When the police arrived, they found his shirt, lower body, and the sidewalk where he lay covered in blood.

The wound severely damaged the nerves in his back, and since then he has lived in a cloud of pain. Recently he received a call from his boss to go back on the boat, but because of the pain, he had to decline. He frets about his mounting debts, his family in Guatemala, and especially about his grandson, whose pending surgery for a deformity of the leg depends on his financial contribution. Without his work, they are all stranded. "I came here to work to support my family," he says, "and since that boy attacked me I can't work at all." *Yo no sé qué voy hacer*, he repeats, over and over: "I don't know what I'm going to do."



ADRIAN

Adrian Ventura is gripped by an anger older than he is. He is furious about the CIA's overthrow of Guatemala's democratically elected president in 1954. And about the genocide committed by President Efraín Ríos Montt, in the 1980s, that destroyed the village where he grew up.

"We came to this country because of the war," he says, "because we had a genocidal president who went after me, my friends, my family. And now we're here and they're attacking us."

Ventura is an organizer, a community leader, the director of the Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores. He was first attacked in 2012. It was 1 in the afternoon, and he was running to pick up his son at school. Two men with black masks crossed the street and hit him in the back of the head. One had a pistol, the other a knife. He fell and heard one of the men say "Kill him!" He had \$300 in cash and a cellphone, but the men fled without robbing him. The second time, in January of last year, he was lashed along with his son.

Ventura knows scores of people, including his brother, mostly Mayan and other Central American immigrants, who have also been attacked. "It is a type of racism, of stereotyping," he says. "They are only looking for us."



LEONIDAS

Leonidas works at one of the many scallop processing plants in the city, progressing over the last three years from floor worker to manager. It was just before Christmas, in 2011, when Leonidas was attacked. He had worked all morning and walked home for lunch. When he

entered his first-floor apartment he could see that the bathroom window had been broken, and that the place was in disarray. He heard footsteps upstairs, and realized that a thief was in the building.

He pulled a machete from his roommate's closet and ran outside, catching up with the man, who refused to drop the bags of stolen

things. Leonidas hit him with the blunt end of the machete. What he didn't know was that the man was carrying a long knife, serrated on both sides. The man pushed Leonidas to the ground and began stabbing him: in the chest, the shoulder, the abdomen, the back—seven times in all. The worst stab wound was inside his mouth, under his tongue.

Leonidas reported that, in Spanish, the thief had yelled: Let me go, I have a family! Leonidas had replied: If you want to support your family, why don't you get a job?

His assailant was put in jail for attempted murder, but Leonidas doesn't know if he's since been released. He says he's afraid to run into him again.

ANTOLIN

It was on this block of New Bedford that Antolin was attacked by five or six guys with hoods pulled over their hats. "One of them had a bat, and he hit me in the back of the head. I fell on the ground—it was like a fire in my head," he says. They beat him until a neighbor screamed that he'd called the police. They took everything he had—about \$80, his bank card, his Guatemalan passport, his cellphone, even his lunchbox. The only thing they left in his pocket were his keys.

For two months he was in pain, unable to work—"I lost my mind," he says. He lost his job in fish processing and was afraid to go out of the house. Playing with his kids made him forget his pain, made him feel better. But the peace didn't last. Since then he has found work in another fish processing house, but he still feels very shaky—*tembloroso*, traumatized, even. His head still swims, his back still seizes with pain, people tell him things and he forgets them. He hasn't had any follow-up medical care. And he says he is still frightened—afraid to leave the house, afraid to do his errands.



DAVID PROVENCHER

New Bedford Chief of Police

Q: How do you see the situation?

A: We've worked with at least four different groups representing the Mayan community, going back as far as 2000. I have to be honest, it's a very difficult community to integrate into—understanding the cultural issues, and pervasive fear of government and institutions, and immigration status...our biggest hurdle is that they refuse to report the crimes.

Q: I am hearing from victims and those working with them that people do report the crimes, and that it still isn't working.

A: I don't agree with that statement, and I'll tell you why. Nobody's waiting for something to happen before we do anything. We have officers out there specifically targeting these areas, doing high-energy patrols, stopping and questioning anybody who's in that area who doesn't look to have a purpose.

Q: Victims tell me that they think their attackers are African-American or Puerto Rican kids. Do you know if this is true? How big is this group?

A: First of all, it's not a group and it's not a gang. It's just individuals with one shared value, and that shared value is:

I'm gonna get mine, and if it means taking it from you, that's what I'm going to do....They are predators, and they feast on the weak and the vulnerable.

Q: The victims are suffering severe wounds—multiple stab wounds, baseball bats to the head, lost eyes. If the robbers are just about the money, why are they so violent?

A: I don't have the answer to that one. I think that it has to do with the offender profile. And you know, one of the things I've seen over the years is that the weaker and more submissive the victim, oftentimes the more vicious the attack.

Q: Some victims think the attacks should be seen as hate crimes, specifically targeting Guatemalans.

A: That's always a question and a dilemma we face, and it's not easy to answer. Should we say that any time we have this type of attack on an individual from this group, that we automatically charge a hate crime, even though all the elements aren't present, and take our chances that the DA will substantiate their charge and allow the complaints to follow? It's a very delicate balance and a difficult call for the line officers to make.

Condensed and excerpted from two conversations.

