



KEVIN CASAS-ZAMORA

## REVERSE THE CRIME EPIDEMIC IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Crime is one of the most pressing issues that countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) face. Criminal violence and the widespread fear that comes with it have become part of daily life throughout the region. While it is true that crime is a global pandemic, it is equally clear that the dimensions of the phenomenon in LAC are as unique as profound are its consequences. In LAC, citizen insecurity has become not just a significant obstacle for the pursuit of human development, but also a clear danger for democracy.

### The Context

Crime levels in LAC are the world's highest. In 2000, the last year for which comparable data exists for all regions, LAC's murder rate was 27.5 per 100,000 people, three times as much as the rate for the world as a whole and well above that of any other region. In the course of the present decade alone, 1.2 million people in LAC have lost their lives as a result of crime.

Homicides are merely the most visible consequence of the region's crime epidemic. Every year, approximately 200 million people in the region—a third of its population—are victims, either directly or through their immediate family, of a criminal deed. In addition to this, the region is host to many other manifestations of vio-

lence whose magnitude can only be guessed. Thus, the number of youth gang members in the northern Central American countries, a significant factor in the terrible violence experienced by the latter, hovers 100,000 according to some estimates. Moreover, it is presumed that more than 50 percent of extortive kidnappings in the world take place in Latin America.

The economic consequences of crime for LAC are staggering. The most rigorous estimate of direct and indirect costs of crime for the region measured them, a few years ago, at 12.1 percent of GDP or \$250 billion annually, a sum larger than Argentina's economy (Londoño, Juan Luis; Gaviria, Alejandro & Guerrero, Rodrigo [2000]; *Asalto al Desarrollo. Violencia en América Latina*; Washington, IADB).

Unsurprisingly, according to *Latinobarometro*, a regional survey, in 2008 17 percent of Latin Americans mentioned crime as the most serious problem facing their countries, second to none, and three times as much as the figure in the mid-1990s. Support for democracy in the region is visibly affected by the citizen's perception of insecurity and of the ability of governments to deal with crime. Nearly half (47.6 percent) of the population in LAC is willing to support a coup d'état if it helps to

solve insecurity problems, a reaction that no other social problem elicits.

While the causes of crime in LAC are multi-fold, four factors deserve to be singled out:

- **High income inequality.** LAC has long had the world's highest levels of income inequality. The region's "original sin" has been routinely linked to crime levels by empirical research all over the world.
- **Precarious opportunities for the youth.** One fourth of the young population in Latin America currently does not study or work, thereby creating a security time bomb.
- **Institutional and social weakness of law enforcement agencies.** In most countries in the region, police forces and courts are ill-trained, underpaid and prone to corruption. They are perceived as ineffective to deal with crime and command low levels of social support (only 39 percent of the population trust the police in Latin America; 30 percent trust the judiciary). One consequence of this is the reluctance of citizens to report crime. In Costa Rica, for example, only a third of crimes are reported to the authorities.
- **Pervasiveness of organized crime, particularly the narcotics trade.** Despite intense efforts to eradicate illicit crops and interdict drugs, LAC is the world's largest cocaine producer and plays a growing role in the production of synthetic drugs and opiates. Whether as producers of illicit crops, trans-shipment countries, entry points to key markets, money laundering locales, or large consumption markets, practically all countries in LAC take part in a drug trade that mobilizes tens of billions of dollars every year. These money flows and the sophistication

of the criminal networks that underpin it not only feed many other illicit activities but have indeed transformed the region's security landscape. An example: in 2008, nearly half of homicides in Mexico were directly linked to the narcotics trade.

## The Challenge

Democracies in LAC must put in place effective and sustainable strategies to deal with high levels of crime. They must do so while resisting loud calls to solve these problems through "iron-fisted" policies and a cavalier attitude towards the rule of law. "Iron-fisted" policies have a poor record of controlling crime in a lasting way and a stellar one of undermining human rights.

If they want to be successful in the fight against crime, governments in LAC must put in place effective social prevention strategies and deepen their commitment to human development-oriented policies. Yet, social prevention policies must be calibrated with a sense of urgency and the acknowledgement that the robust use of state coercion, within the boundaries of the rule of law, is inescapable in the fight against crime, notably organized crime. No matter how effective social prevention policies may prove in the long run, they are glaringly insufficient to confront the acute political challenge that citizen insecurity poses to democratic governments in LAC.

Hence, the challenge, as shown by the best examples in crime level reduction in LAC and elsewhere, consists in balancing "zero tolerance" for crime with "zero tolerance" for social exclusion.

## Hemispheric Opportunity

While security realities in LAC are very heterogeneous, in most countries a successful strategy to tackle crime calls for the following steps:

1. **Recast the discussion.** There is no silver bullet when it comes to fighting crime. The issue requires a comprehensive approach that defies false dichotomies between long term social prevention and short term control of crime. The public's justifiable anxiety in LAC calls for immediate improvements in law enforcement mechanisms. Yet, authorities must prepare the public for a drawn-out struggle. Peddling "iron-fisted" policies as the easy and lasting solution to crime does little to solve the problem and even less to strengthen democracy.
2. **Invest in opportunities for the youth.** Increasing the amount and effectiveness of public investment in education, healthcare, social care provision, and job training opportunities for the youth is vital for security purposes in LAC. More broadly, it also helps to nurture more cohesive societies. If not conclusive, the international evidence is certainly worth noting: the top 30 countries in the UN Human Development Index ranking boast, on average, a homicide rate of just 1.58 per 100,000 people. Only one of them, the U.S., has a homicide rate greater than 3 per 100,000 inhabitants. Human development-oriented public policies are the key to safer societies.
3. **Upgrade law enforcement institutions.** It is vital to persevere with police and judicial reform processes, which so far have had limited success in LAC. While criminal justice statutes have been modernized, other critical aspects such as training of police officers and prosecutors, intelligence and investigation capacities, internal control procedures, and use of modern information systems continue to lag badly behind in most countries, thus resulting in widespread impunity. Equally weak is the formation of civilian capacities in security policies, notably in Congresses but also amongst the region's civil society.
4. **Improve governance of security issues.** A successful strategy demands vertical coordination between levels of government and horizontal coordination between branches of government. Moreover, it requires a hitherto rare articulation of security measures with several kinds of social policies. This calls for streamlined coordination mechanisms throughout the state, and, crucially, for clarity in the functional division between national and sub-national authorities. While the latter can play a vital role in preventing and controlling common forms of crime, fighting organized crime requires a level of sophistication that goes beyond even national governments. Finally, given the widespread presence of private security forces throughout LAC, which is probably irreversible at this point, it is urgent to improve public regulation and oversight of them.
5. **Improve police-community links.** Social distrust of law enforcement agencies is a major obstacle in the fight against crime in LAC. It is also a driving force behind the privatization of public security in the region. One of the keys of any strategy to reduce impunity in LAC is to get citizens to report offences. Increasing societal oversight of the police and introducing different models of community policing is essential in most countries in LAC.
6. **Regulate firearms.** More than 60 percent of homicides in LAC are committed using firearms. While the region has made significant strides to regulate transfers of small weapons across borders, national laws regarding gun possession are generally permissive and/or poorly enforced. A more restrictive approach towards handguns has been instrumental

in reducing crime in several cities in the region, notably in Colombia.

#### 7. Promote a hemisphere-wide dialogue on drugs.

Narcotics are at the center of the security situation in many countries in LAC. The problem requires a multi-fold response at the national level. However, since it clearly transcends national jurisdictions, it also demands a hemisphere-wide dialogue. This dialogue should convey the urgency for LAC of profoundly revising the counternarcotics strategy of the single largest drug-consuming country in the world, the U.S. The current set of policies, strongly geared towards the control of the drug supply by means of eradication of illicit crops and interdiction of trafficking, has generated myriad negative consequences for LAC, including increases in crime and opportunities for corruption.

#### Want to Know more?

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