



SITUATIONAL APPROACHES TO CRIME AND VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY OF LATIN AMERICA

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While support for democracy as a governing system remains high in the Americas, heightened insecurity from crime and violence has led to declines in democratic legitimacy, the suspension of democratic rights and freedoms, and the undermining of democratic ideals (Casas-Zamora, 2010) (LAPOP, 2014, p. 193-194). This threat to democratic institutions as a whole parallels one of the *World Economic Forum's* (WEF) top trends of 2015: the weakening of representative democracy (World Economic Forum, 2014). Citizen trust is also being eroded as heightened perceptions of insecurity have led to lower levels of trust in governments (LAPOP, 2014, p. 162). These issues are even more fundamental as the global “war on drugs” (OAS Report on the Drug Problem in the Americas) comes to an end. We now need to review the war on crime, the often forgotten companion. Specifically, there is a need to move to a more ethical and holistic preventative approach rather than repression and reaction as the default option.

While it is hard to come by reliable numbers, crime and violence remains one of the highest global risks, eroding the competitiveness of businesses and credibility of governments. Although there are a number of factors leading to this, two of the most prevalent relate to inequality (one of the WEF’s top ten trends for 2015) and, crime and violence (World Economic Forum, 2014). The irony here is that economically the past decade has been a relatively good one for most of the world with fewer people living in poverty than ever before (Poverty Overview, 2014).

As an example, Latin America and the Caribbean remains both the world’s most violent region and the most unequal in terms of income distribution (Parkinson, 2014) (Tsounta and Osueke, 2014, p. 4). Progress, however, has been made as the number of people in poverty has been reduced, the middle class has grown significantly (Dudley, 2014), and the regions Gini coefficient has decreased to its lowest in 30 years (Gini back in the bottle, 2012). Yet, even the region’s most equitable countries, Argentina and Uruguay, maintain worse inequality scores than any European country (Casas-Zamora, Muñoz-Pogossian, Vidaurri, 2014, p. 50). This rampant inequality is also seemingly

¹ This is one in a series of papers written for the Wilson Center by Adam Blackwell, Secretary for Multidimensional Security of the Organization of American States.

linked to rising rates of crime and violence (Duarte and Blackwell, 2014, p. 109); “countries with higher inequality levels tend to have higher crime levels” (Lopez and Perry, 2008, p. 3). Homicide rates, in particular, those of youth, generally far exceed any other region. While the rest of the world has steadily seen declines in homicide rates, rates in the Americas continue to rise (UNDP, 2013, p. 1). Women in Latin America are also particularly vulnerable and at risk of being victims of crime and violence (UNDP, 2013, p. 7).

Traditional repressive approaches of "tough on crime" policies, filling prisons through minimum sentencing laws, have not been effective and have challenged the ethics of law enforcement (UNDP, 2013, p. 13). U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder stated that “we can’t simply arrest our way out of the problem of violent crime” (Holder, 2010) and a recent report from the *Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law* highlighted that high incarceration rates have almost no effect on reducing crime (Roeder, Eisen, and Bowling, 2015, p. 1). Rather, there is a desperate need for a new narrative on our approach to crime and violence that allows us to understand the root causes and their relationship. The WHO defines a homicide rate which exceeds 10 murders per 100,000 inhabitants to be a violence epidemic (UNDP, 2013, p. 1). A public health approach therefore treats violence as a disease which, if not cured, can spread. For that reason the underlying causal factors of violence need to be targeted in order to prevent its spread. Steps in such an approach focus on defining the problem and why it occurs, preventing it and interrupting its transmission, and implementing effective preventative interventions that target the areas and individuals most affected or vulnerable (WHO, 2015) (Cure Violence, 2015).

In my experience, the issues can also best be displayed in the form of an equation or formula. This would include three factors that taken together are predictors of greater levels of crime and violence, less satisfaction with democracy, and increased distrust between citizens and their governments. The three causal factors that lead to such results are best represented by; *Social Vulnerabilities*, *State and Institutional Fragilities* and *Accelerants*. Identifying what the problem is at its roots, its dire consequences, the causal factors, and their relationships are therefore fundamental for any serious analysis. This allows us to frame the discussion as well as develop a roadmap for future approaches, turning discussion into action.

Social Vulnerabilities

Social vulnerabilities are factors that affect societies unfavorably and unequally, creating challenges for citizens and in particular youth and women. Their presence in an area makes it more susceptible to violence and crime occurring. Increasing violence and crime are intrinsically linked to socioeconomic factors, and so examinations of such factors are an important point of analysis for prevention approaches. Areas affected by social vulnerabilities, or *Pockets of Vulnerability*, can be anything from entire regions to specific neighborhoods within a city.

There are numerous examples of social vulnerabilities, many interconnected, each affecting various aspects of society and individual lives; such as social exclusion, gender inequality, underemployment, large disengaged youth populations and weak education systems. While this list of examples is in no way comprehensive, it does highlight some of the most prevalent and important vulnerabilities that certain societies face. It also helps us to understand their societal impact especially in relation to insecurity, democracy, and trust.

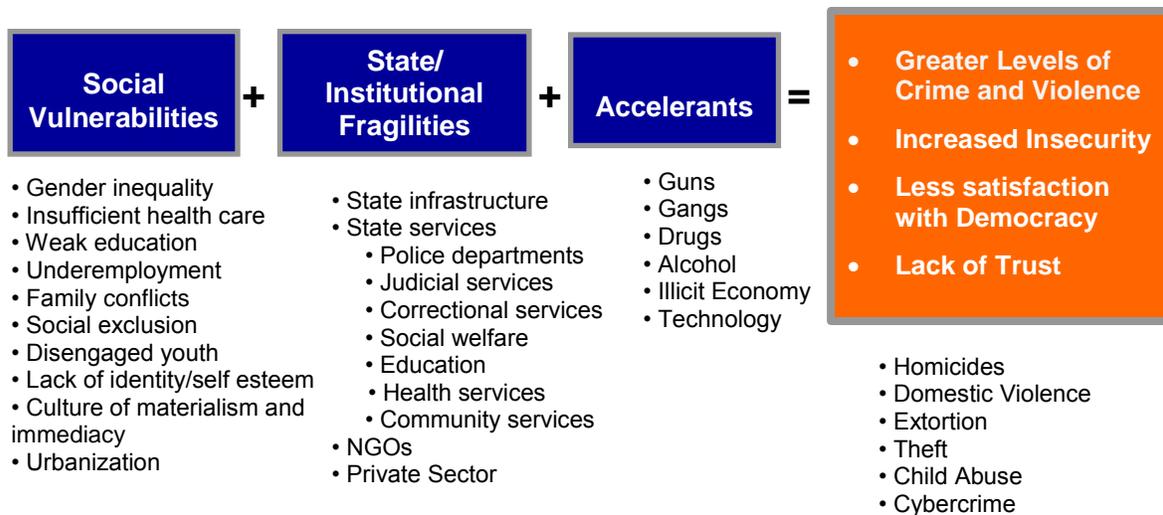
State and Institutional Fragilities

State and institutional fragilities represent ineffective services, institutions and support provided by governments, communities, NGOs and even the private sector. These weak or non-existent services and support mechanisms compound and exacerbate vulnerabilities as individuals and societies living in *Pockets of Vulnerability* have little to no help or chance of escape. State and institutional fragilities also serve to reinforce violence and crime, distrust, and dissatisfaction with democracy through unethical policies. Fragilities not only represent dysfunctional and absent services but the lack of an interconnected system of state infrastructure between such services. Without an integrated infrastructure for services and institutions, individuals are at risk to fall through the cracks or get lost in the ‘system’.

The inability of the state to deliver and coordinate services and protect human security is one of the principal reasons for the growth and continuation of social vulnerabilities. Poor communities depend on state institutions to provide security, education, health services, and employment opportunities. When governments fail to provide such services citizens often turn to illegal or illegitimate alternatives, from participation in the illicit economy to vigilante justice or a dependence on gangs to provide so-called justice and security.

Accelerants

Accelerants, or what some may call triggers, are specific elements that spur crime and violence in *Pockets of Vulnerability* subject to state and institutional fragilities. While vulnerabilities and fragilities place an area on the edge, it is the accelerants that push it over that edge. This ensures a higher probability and susceptibility to increased rates of crime and violence and the ensuing distrust and dissatisfaction with democracy. Examples of accelerants include the presence of gangs, proliferation of firearms, abuse and accessibility of drugs or alcohol, and even the presence of the illicit economy.



Conclusion

The combination of all three causal factors, therefore, results in insecurity through raised crime and violence, weakened democracy, and a lack of trust in government. However, while all three factors must be present, the specific examples of each variable determine the type of crime or violence; anything from increased homicides, theft, domestic abuse, or even cybercrime. It should also be emphasized that this equation is not exclusive to Latin America and the Caribbean, or the developing world. If all three factors are present, the same results will occur no matter the location, from inner-city Toronto to Tegucigalpa.

We are aware of the crime and violence problem facing our region, so the main purpose of the equation is to provide the necessary understanding of the issue, where it stems from, and how each causal factor interrelates with the others. This then allows for new paths for discussion but also action. By understanding the root causes and their relationship to one another new approaches can be formed that strive to deal with the origins of the problem. This essentially relates back to a prevention-focused approach as both social vulnerabilities and state fragilities need to be prevented while accelerants need to be controlled. Understanding the situation proves that the cause is not hopeless. Fragilities can be overcome and vulnerabilities reversed. Social vulnerability is not a permanent condition; it is dynamic in nature and so must be minimized and reversed through social innovation. Preventing state and institutional fragilities means increasing the capacity of state, civil, and private institutions and services and ensuring these institutions act ethically in order to maintain their legitimacy and maintain trust. Accelerants, on the other hand, require law enforcement and legislation.

This new approach should also be supported by a strong and ethical communications strategy. We must not leave the impression that we are advocating some form of impunity, nor can we be overly critical of the police and other enforcement

agencies that have spent decades following a different set of rules. This new approach needs to be inclusive by bringing in a diverse set of actors who can contribute and hopefully take ownership of these new scenarios.

Furthermore, prevention programs must focus on the disproportionate representation of youth and women in the regions crime and violence statistics, as those most vulnerable to such issues need the most help. Therefore, safe spaces need to be created for youths and schools cannot become criminalized. Diversion programs with bite need to be introduced to attract youth, prevent their involvement in crime, and target the social vulnerabilities that most affect them. There also needs to be a renewed focus by Member States on a more balanced approach to addressing the issue, from reactive to preventive. All relevant actors must also become involved as only a multidimensional and multi-sectoral approach, with governments, NGOs, civil society, private enterprises, community organizations, and individuals will succeed.

By recognizing and understanding the causal relationship between the three factors we can prevent and reverse their results. Only through targeting hot spots and the groups most at-risk, preventing vulnerabilities and fragilities, and controlling accelerants can crime and violence be reduced, trust reaffirmed and strong democracies re-established. We need to remain optimistic and continue our struggle to disrupt crime and violence and continue our pursuit of a peaceful, democratic and secure future.

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