

Crime and Social Policies in Latin America: Problems and Solutions

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The growth in violence in the past two decades has been one of the major challenges for Latin America's development. Homicide rates, which are twice the global average (22.9 per one hundred thousand inhabitants versus 10.7), make this region one of the most violent in the world.

While homicides are indeed the more dramatic face of violence, acts against property are a run-of-the-mill, daily occurrence for much of Latin America's population. For individuals walking the streets of the region's large urban centers, the constant threat of being mugged or assaulted is perhaps the most common expression of the urban violence phenomenon. In the case of Peru, a victimization survey found that 62% of all crimes in that country are related to thefts and assaults (Instituto Apoyo 1999). Similar surveys in Brazil, based on data from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, have suggested that 52% of the population has been robbed at gunpoint.

These trends have led to a growing concern over the effects of violence on physical, human, and social capital (Moser and Shrader 1999). In addition to its social dimensions, violence has become increasingly a macroeconomic problem, jeopardizing capital flows to many of the economies in Latin America.

While the varied effects of crime now are more recognized, there is no clear agreement on its sources. A large sector of society shares the view that the region's

serious social and economic shortcomings are the principle sources for the high crime rates, which are principally found in its major urban centers. According to this sector, unemployment, inequality, and the lack of

social welfare policies have led to rampant criminality over the past few decades. However, another school of thought points to the impunity of the penal and judicial systems in Latin America, citing econometric studies that correlate crime and weak institutions for its theoretical support. This divergence of opinion over the sources of criminality has affected the types of public policies that have been selected to combat the escalating violence.

Policymaking also has been impacted by the prevailing myths of the political elite about how to address public safety. Given that such beliefs can act as a "straightjacket" for the region's policymakers, it is crucial to dispel some of them:

1. "Our crime problems are so urgent that I cannot afford to waste time with studies and evaluations."

It is true that crime and violence have grown sharply in the region's major urban centers, but the absence of scientific studies can make this situation even worse.



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2. “Given our serious crime problems, above all we must equip our police forces. Their wages are terrible, they ride in antiquated vehicles, and they have to face criminals which are armed with more powerful weapons.”

This statement is an eloquent example of the failure to properly diagnosis Latin America’s crime problem. An alternative evaluation might argue that the police forces’ lack of administrative and managerial preparedness requires more urgent attention.

3. “Why detailed statistics? Anybody interested in crime can simply read about the problem in the daily newspapers.”

This is probably the most biased and prejudiced argument. It ignores the fact that the press is selective regarding the criminal stories it publishes.

PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEMS AND CRIME: INTERPERSONAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Concerns over public health problems and crime are related to issues of interpersonal and domestic violence. Essentially, there are three distinct types of crime that undermine the public health of a society: (a) gender and domestic violence; (b) juvenile and youth violence; and (c) interpersonal violence, mainly homicides associated with high-risk activities (i.e. alcohol and drug use).

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Table 1: Economic Costs of Social Violence—Latin America
(% of GDP—1997)

	Brazil	Colombia	El Salvador	Mexico	Peru	Venezuela
Losses in health	1.9	5.0	4.3	1.3	1.5	0.3
Material losses	3.6	8.4	5.1	4.9	2.0	9.0
Intangible losses	3.4	6.9	11.5	3.3	1.0	2.2
Losses from transfers of assets	1.6	4.4	4.0	2.8	0.6	0.3

Source: Compiled from data in Buvinic and Morrison, 2000.

Due to the wide-variety of possible interventions to rectify these problems, policies and programs are extremely diffuse, dispersed, and multifaceted, which make their evaluation more difficult. First of all, the impact of these interventions requires a long time horizon for results to materialize. Second, many risk factors associated with the problems are cumulative and context-dependant. Oftentimes what works in one situation, will not work in others. Lastly, it is extremely difficult to measure these types of violence because they are not as predictable as other crimes that are concentrated in specific communities or certain localities.

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS: THE COSTS AND DETERMINANTS OF VIOLENCE

Economic Costs. Crime and violence have an immediate economic impact, to the extent that they have become hurdles for development in the region. The table above (see Table 1) reproduces the influence of violence on the gross domestic product (GDP) of six Latin American economies.

Apart from its negative effect on national income, violence imposes other costs through the erosion of social capital. Social capital is a concept which refers to the set of norms, values, obligations, rules, reciprocity, and bonds of trust established among individuals, that make it possible for them to achieve common objectives (Coleman 1990). Violence destroys social capital to the extent that it undermines these relationships of trust in a community, restricts people’s mobility in violent areas, and, as a result, contributes to fewer interpersonal relationships.

Economic Determinants. In the past few years, increased importance has been accorded to the relationship between economic downturns, rising unemployment rates, and escalating crime (Gunn 1998). However, the interaction between these variables is often weak, inconsistent, and insignificant, and will vary depending upon the analytical techniques and strategies chosen (Land et al. 1995). At best, we can say that there is a "consensus of doubt" (Chiricos 1987) about the correlation between crime and economic determinants.

For example, a study on violent crime and property theft in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, has shown no significant correlation between unemployment rates and crime.

A CASE STUDY OF VIOLENCE: CRIME IN URBAN AREAS

Many people refer to the phenomenon of a "crime explosion" in the major urban centers of Latin America. Implosion might be a better word, for the escalation in crime has occurred within specific communities where both victims and aggressors live.

The study completed on Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, showed that homicide rates in the past five years have ranged between 13 and 23 per one hundred thousand inhabitants, for a population of roughly two-and-a-half million people. Belo Horizonte, like many other major Latin American urban centers, has seen a sharp rise in violent crime rates, particularly during the 1990s. In absolute terms, the number of homicides more than doubled in the last five years, from a total of 326 in 1995 to 685 in 2000. This sharp increase seems to be associated with a rise in drug trafficking activities, mainly related to crack (Beato et al. 2001).

However, this same study on Belo Horizonte showed that urban conglomerations are not necessarily regions with a higher incidence of crime: it depends on the particular socioeconomic characteristics of the locality. The method of analysis used in the study focused on this aspect, reviewing the spatial distribution of crimes between 1996 and 1998 to determine

which localities experienced a rise in violence. Particular emphasis was given to the features of the community where crimes occurred. In this sense, "the incidence of crime" (i.e. the community) was isolated from the "social characteristics of criminals" (i.e. the individual). In theoretical terms, it implied that criminals were no different from non-criminals: both were equally predisposed to crime (Newman et al. 1997). This focus on the specific environment of criminal activity relied upon analyzing the socioeconomic features of the locality to find the motivations and predisposition for delinquency.

In the case of Belo Horizonte, slums associated with higher numbers of homicides had several social welfare and life quality indicators which were considerably inferior to other areas of the city. For example, they had a higher percentage of employment in the informal sector as compared to other parts of Belo Horizonte. Moreover, child mortality was greater and illiteracy was more prevalent. The urban infrastructure index also was significantly more deficient in the localities with higher homicide rates (a five-fold difference).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As seen in the study on Belo Horizonte, important results have been obtained for how to combat violence in Latin America. However, it is important to stress several aspects and limitations of these approaches.

First, there is a noticeable absence of strategies and programs specifically geared to addressing violent urban crime, particularly crimes against property.

Secondly, outstanding econometric efforts are being made by some experts to correlate crime and its sources, but in practical terms the results have not been encouraging.

Thirdly, anti-crime policies in Latin America have had difficulties at the organizational level, namely, with the relations among the agencies involved.

The absence of a tradition of solid empirical studies to evaluate successful crime-control



strategies in Latin America makes us reflect on what should be done to solve this deficiency. Among many possibilities, there are *three* important points to be addressed:

1.) There is little to be gained by the provincial attitude which prevails in the current output of theoretical and empirical studies on Latin America. Obviously there are honorable exceptions, but as a rule there is no systematic tradition of studies on crime, its sources, and preventative policies.

2.) The discussion concerning the determinants of homicides shows how this phenomenon's complexity resides in its many determinants, some of which barely receive any theoretical treatment such as geograph-

ic concentration and the incidence of drug-trafficking.

3.) The interrelationship between the academic world and the universe of public-policy-making and implementation is severely weak. The opposition and open confrontation between universities and research centers, as well as the criminal justice system's agencies (particularly the police) is historical and deeply-rooted in Latin America.

Given this context, it is now necessary, more than ever before, to build a bridge between policy-makers and academic researchers. This is no easy task but it must be done if the multifaceted problem of citizen insecurity is to be rectified.

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