

# Citizen Security in Latin America

GINO COSTA [PERU]

30 INTER-AMERICAN  
DIALOGUE  
YEARS  
SHAPING POLICY DEBATE FOR ACTION

Several indicators are used to measure insecurity, violence and crime. In assessing the status of citizen security in Latin America, this study briefly presents and discusses some of them—namely, homicide, which indicates levels of violence; victimization, which is an expression of the intensity of crimes against property; perceptions of insecurity, which refer to the level of fear in the face of criminal activities; confidence in the police agencies responsible for preventing and investigating crime; and the state of the prison system.

## 1. Homicide

In 2010, the Western Hemisphere had the world's second highest number of murders (144,000) after Africa (170,000), far above Europe (25,000) and Oceania (1,200). It also ranked second in per capita terms, with a murder rate of 15.6 per 100,000 inhabitants compared to 17.4 for Africa and a world average of 6.9 (UNODC 2011: 19–21).

In the last decade, homicide grew continuously in Latin America. In 2000 the murder rate stood at 20 per 100,000 inhabitants; by 2008 the rate was 26 per 100,000, with an average of 22 in the period 2000–2008. This rate masks differences among subregions. In Mexico and Central America,<sup>1</sup> as well as in the Andean subregion,<sup>2</sup> the average rate was 27; in the Southern Cone<sup>3</sup> it was just nine (Costa 2011: 7–et seq). In the former two subregions the rate was four times the world average of 6.9, while in the latter it was only slightly higher. The rate in most Latin American countries greatly exceeds 10 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, the point at which the World Health Organization (WHO) considers a country to be facing an epidemic of violence. During the decade the rate

in the Southern Cone remained stable, while in Mexico and Central America it rose from 21 to 32 and in the Andean subregion it fell from 29 to 26 (Costa 2011: 7–et seq).

These aggregate rates conceal significant differences between countries in each subregion. Mexico and Central America comprise three clearly distinct groups of countries. In the last decade, the countries in Central America's northern triangle—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—had average rates of between 40 and 50 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest rates in the region, along with Colombia and Venezuela. At the other extreme is a second group of countries whose rates do not exceed 12: Costa Rica (seven), Nicaragua (12) and Panama (12). Murder rates in these countries rose slowly but continuously between 2000 and 2008, and doubled in Costa Rica and Panama. Between these two groups stands Mexico, where rates paradoxically followed a downward trend, from 32 in 2000 to 24 in 2007, before rising consistently from 2008 onwards against the backdrop of the government's offensive against drug trafficking (Costa 2011: 10).

The five Andean countries can be divided into three groups. The first comprises Colombia (50 murders per 100,000) and Venezuela (41), whose average rates for the decade were among the highest in the region. Ecuador (16) and Bolivia (24) were in an intermediate position. At the other extreme is Peru, whose rate of eight per 100,000 was one of the lowest

<sup>1</sup> Includes Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

<sup>2</sup> Includes Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.

<sup>3</sup> Includes Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil.

# FOREWORD

The Inter-American Dialogue is pleased to publish this working paper by Gino Costa, president of Ciudad Nuestra in Lima, Peru. Costa, one of Latin America's leading specialists on security issues, served as Peru's Minister of Interior during the government of Alejandro Toledo. He previously worked for the United Nations in El Salvador and has been a consultant for many international organizations, including the UN, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the CAF Development Bank for Latin America.

In this working paper, the product of the Dialogue's Latin America working group, Costa offers a rigorous and systematic overview of the region's security situation. Relying on available data on this subject, Costa carefully reviews five discrete critically important indicators: homicide; victimization; perceptions of insecurity; confidence in the police; and the prison system. His nuanced assessment takes into account significant differences among sub-regions and countries and provides a solid basis to address what polls show is the leading concern for the region's citizens.

The Dialogue's aim in publishing these working papers is to stimulate a broad and well-informed public debate on complex issues facing analysts, decision makers, and citizens concerned about Latin America's policy agenda. This working paper seeks to offer a diagnosis of the current situation, with the goal of contributing to an informed dialogue about the appropriate policy prescriptions for dealing more effectively with the region's challenges.

The working paper series is a byproduct of an evolving working group effort launched by the Dialogue in 2001. The group is made up of select and diverse analysts and policymakers from throughout the region, as well as Europe, Canada and the United States. The group essentially serves as a "brain trust," or core of advisors, for the Dialogue on major challenges facing the region. The goal of the group is not necessarily to reach agreement or produce consensus documents. Rather, it is to generate fresh interpretations of the issues driving the region's politics in order to shape thought and encourage constructive responses.

To date, the papers have dealt with a wide range of topics, including the Colombian conflict, political polarization in Venezuela, the situation in Bolivia, civil-military relations in the Andean nations, corruption, petro-politics, and human security. We are confident this paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of a critical situation in the hemisphere that is often treated without the proper perspective or credible data. Costa's conclusions, however, do not necessarily reflect the views of the Latin American working group or the Inter-American Dialogue.

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**Michael Shifter**

President

in Latin America. Peru's rate doubled between 2000 and 2008. Ecuador's rose slightly and Venezuela's increased significantly, from 33 in 2000 to 52. Despite these increases, the fall in the average Andean rate stemmed from the substantial decline in homicides in Colombia, where the rate fell from 64 to 36, and in Bolivia, where it fell from 34 to 12 after an increase to 41 in 2004 (Costa 2011: 12–13).

In the Southern Cone there are two groups of countries. On the one hand are Chile (two per 100,000),<sup>4</sup> Uruguay (six) and Argentina (seven), the lowest rates in Latin America. On the other hand are Paraguay (15) and Brazil (22). Rates have remained stable in Chile, Uruguay and Brazil. Argentina's rates have fallen slightly; and Paraguay, which experienced a significant increase, finished 2008 with the same rate as in 2000 (Costa 2011: 13–14).

Differences within countries are also substantial, an indication that homicide is concentrated in certain cities, municipalities and even districts. An example of this is the high concentration of homicides in the context of the fight against drugs trafficking in Mexico. Between December 2006 and July 2010, some 80 percent of murders were committed in 7 percent of the country's municipalities, mainly located in five of the 32 federal states: Baja California, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Michoacán and Guerrero. The first two are on the northern border. Sinaloa borders Chihuahua and is crossed by the main drug routes to the United States. Michoacán and Guerrero, on the Pacific, serve as maritime disembarkation points for drugs coming from South America and their distribution to the United States (Guerrero 2010).

In Central America, a similar kind of geographic location is evident in El Salvador, Guatemala and Panama. In El Salvador, 68 percent of murders are committed in 30 of the country's 262 municipalities—in other words, 11 percent of them. In eight of them the rate exceeds 100,

giving a national average of 52. Quezaltepeque, which ranks first with a rate of 154, had five times more murders than Santa Tecla, which ranks thirtieth. In Guatemala, murder rates in the 15 most violent municipalities in 2006 fluctuated between 108 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in Guatemala City and 202 in San Benito Petén, giving a national rate of 47. In Panama, provincial rates in 2007 varied between two per 100,000 in Veraguas and 32 in Colón, with a national rate of 13 (PNUD 2009–2010, 87–89).

The Andean subregion has a similar territorial concen-

Youths are especially vulnerable, with a murder rate for children and young people more than double the regional rate, and for low income youths, the rate is triple.

tration of homicides. In 2009, Peru's national rate was 10, but it was three times higher in Arequipa (the second biggest city) and in Huánuco, an area of drug-trafficking activity, there was barely one murder per 100,000 inhabitants (Costa and Romero 2011: 43). In the same year, Colombia, whose national rate is 39, saw rates of 128 in San José del Guaviare, 70 in Cali, 29 in Medellín, 19 in Bogotá and seven in Tunja (CIPC 2010: 19).

Most murder victims in Latin America (90 percent) are men; this is above the world average (82 percent) (UNODC 2011: 63–64). The ratio is 6:1 in Mexico, 7:1 in Chile, and 13:1 in Brazil and Colombia (OEA 2011: 18–19). The ratios are similarly high in Central America, fluctuating between 7:1 in Costa Rica and 15:1 in Panama (PNUD 2009–2010: 129).

Youths are especially vulnerable. Though the regional murder rate is less than 30 per 100,000 inhabitants, the rate for children and youths aged between 15 and 29 is 70 (CIDH 2009: 10), or more than double the regional rate. Disaggregated figures for countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Colombia corroborate this. In 2008, Argentina's national murder rate stood at six per 100,000, but for the 18–24 age group the rate was five times higher at 28. In 2006, the corresponding rates for Brazil were 23 and 61, while those for Colombia in 2007 were 39 and 70 (OEA 2011: 20). Even more vulnerable are young people from low- and middle-income backgrounds, among whom the rate is 90 per 100,000—compared to just 21 among

<sup>4</sup> Official information from Chile's Interior Ministry does not provide a full picture of the issue, since it considers only those deaths defined as murder by the police. Many others are categorized as "body discovered" or simply "dead person" but it is highly likely that these will be deemed to be murders once a judicial investigation begins. A 1999–2001 study by the Law School Foundation of the University of Chile shows that the number of murder cases in the courts is six times higher than the Ministry's official figures (Dammert and Arias 2007).

youths from high-income backgrounds (CIDH 2009: 10). Homicide is also racially concentrated. In Brazil, for example, the murder rate among blacks aged 15–34 was three times the rate among whites in the same age group in 2007.<sup>5</sup>

It is estimated that there are 40–60 million firearms in Latin America. This probably explains the region's very high rate of gun-related homicides: 15.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to only 7.5 in Africa and 3.9 in North America (Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso

## A World Bank study on violence in Central America identified three causes: drug trafficking, youth violence, and the availability of firearms.

Humano 2010: 11). In many countries, murders committed using firearms account for more than three quarters of all homicides. This is true of Honduras (96 percent), El Salvador (88 percent), Guatemala (84 percent), Colombia (80 percent) and Brazil (76 percent). In Paraguay, Costa Rica and Panama, two-thirds of murders were committed using firearms. The countries with lower percentages were Peru (20 percent), Argentina (40 percent) and Uruguay (50 percent) (OEA 2011: 17, 21).<sup>6</sup>

It is not easy to determine the causes of homicidal violence in Latin America: first, because of the vast differences between subregions and countries, and even within countries; and second, because in order to establish causal links we would need well refined analytical models and broader, more complete and more detailed statistical series than those currently available (PNUD 2009–2010: 155–156). What we can do, though, is discuss the incidence of the main risk factors. More in-depth studies will have to determine how these affect homicides in the region.

A recent World Bank study (Banco Mundial 2011: 11–23) on violence in seven Central American countries identified three of the causes: drug trafficking, youth violence, and

the availability of firearms. To establish their relative weight, the study refers to the findings of the econometric model developed by Cuevas and Demombynes in 2009. According to these authors, drug trafficking is a significant contributing factor to homicide, and rates in the trafficking hotspots are double those in areas where trafficking is limited. Areas with higher levels of youth violence have higher murder rates, as do those with a higher share of men aged between 15 and 34. The same is true of areas with large numbers

of female-headed households, probably because there is less supervision of young men. The study also points out that there is no significant link between past armed conflicts and current murder rates. Among the factors identified, drug trafficking is quantitatively the most important.

An increase in trafficking that causes an area to become a hotspot brings about a 111 percent rise in the murder rate. A 10 percent increase in the population aged 15–34 leads to only a 9 percent rise in homicides, while a 10 percent increase in female-headed households lifts the rate by barely 1 percent.

The worldwide ranking of the 50 cities with the highest rates of violent murder confirm the importance of drug trafficking as the most significant causal factor. In 2010, 35 of those 50 cities were in Latin America: 13 in Mexico,<sup>7</sup> seven in Brazil,<sup>8</sup> six in Colombia,<sup>9</sup> five in Central American countries,<sup>10</sup> and four in Venezuela.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Baghdad is ranked at number 50, with a rate of 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Seguridad, Justicia y Paz 2011: 3–4). All these countries except Brazil are on trafficking routes from the Andean subregion to the United States.

<sup>7</sup> Ciudad Juárez (229 murders per 100,000 inhabitants), Chihuahua (113), Mazatlán (89), Culiacán (88), Tepic (80), Durango (78), Torreón (68), Tijuana (53), Acapulco (51), Reynosa (36), Nuevo Laredo (35), Cuernavaca (35) and Matamoros (28).

<sup>8</sup> Vitoria (76 murders per 100,000 inhabitants), Recife (48), Salvador (42), Curitiba (39), Rio de Janeiro (26), Brasilia (26) and Porto Alegre (24).

<sup>9</sup> Medellín (87 murders per 100,000 inhabitants), Cali (80), Pereira (59), Cúcuta (56), Barranquilla (43) and Cartagena (26).

<sup>10</sup> San Pedro Sula and the Central District in Honduras, with 125 and 109 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively, Guatemala City (96), San Salvador, El Salvador (83) and Panama City (32).

<sup>11</sup> Caracas (119 murders per 100,000 inhabitants), Ciudad Guyana (69), Barquisimeto (50) and Maracaibo (30).

<sup>5</sup> Information provided by Julita Lemgruber of the Centro de Estudos de Segurança e Cidadania (CESeC).

<sup>6</sup> The figures are for 2007 except for Paraguay (2008) and Costa Rica (2006).

Of the risk factors analyzed by the United Nations Development Programme (PNUD 2009–2010: 153–et seq) in the seven Central American countries, firearms in the hands of the citizenry is the one most closely related to homicide. The countries of the northern triangle—El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala—have many more guns per inhabitant than Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama in the southern triangle. Moreover, and with the exception of Nicaragua, the countries in the former group have poorer basic social indicators (human development index, per capita GDP and poverty) than those in the latter group. No direct correlation has been found with the other indicators: percentage of the population who are young, youth unemployment, urban population, alcohol consumption and Gini coefficient.

Another World Bank report (2011), the result of five research projects conducted between 2008 and 2009 in violent communities in Fortaleza (Brazil), Port au Prince (Haiti), Johannesburg (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya) and Dili (East Timor), reaches interesting conclusions about urban violence. First, the different forms of violence are more closely interrelated than is often suspected. For example, there are very direct links between domestic violence and street violence. Second, responses to crime are largely individual and tend to have negative effects on social capital—such as opting to remain silent, self-defense, or depending on illegal groups for security. Third, deficiencies in urban infrastructure—inadequate public spaces for people to meet, narrow and unlit streets, and limited services—have a significant impact. Fourth, there is a widespread perception among the public that unemployment, especially among youths, is an engine of violence—though the specialized literature is inconclusive in this respect.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2011), homicide is related to four leading factors. The first is the level of human development, including economic growth and equity. Countries with high development levels tend to have low murder rates, and vice versa. The second is the rule of law. Where this is strong, murder rates are low; where it is weak, they are high. Several Central American countries that experienced an increase in murder rates also saw a weakening of the rule of law. The third factor is the availability of firearms. This is a serious problem in the Americas, as evidenced by the very high proportion of murders committed using guns (74

percent), compared to a world average of 42 percent. The fourth factor is the illicit drugs trade and other forms of transnational organized crime. In the Americas, homicides related to organized crime are five times higher than in Asia and 10 times higher than in Europe.

## 2. Victimization

Between 1995 and 2010, Latinobarómetro measured victimization by households in Latin America using the question: “have you or a relative been robbed, assaulted, or the victim of a crime in the past 12 months?” This indicator shows the extent of crimes against property (robbery and theft) and, to a lesser degree, against the person (assault, rape and kidnapping). The figures rose from 29 percent in 1995 to 43 percent in 2001 and fell thereafter, reaching 32 percent in 2006. From 2007 onwards the figure rose and fell slightly on two occasions, and stood at 31 percent in 2010. A comparison of the three five-year periods (1995–1998, 2001–2005 and 2006–2010) shows that this indicator remained stable between the first two (37 percent and 38 percent) and then fell to 34 percent in the third period.

In contrast to homicides, which increased during the decade, victimization declined, a circumstance that is probably related to economic growth in the region, especially after 2004, and the attendant decline in unemployment, poverty and, in some countries (albeit slightly), inequality.

Household victimization in Latin America, which stood at 31 percent in 2010, is high compared to the average of 16 percent reported in the International Survey on Criminality and Victimization (Enicriv/Enicris) 2004–2005, which was conducted in 30 developed countries in North America, Western Europe and Japan. Among these countries, the highest rates were in New Zealand (22 percent), the United Kingdom (21 percent), the Netherlands (20 percent), Switzerland (18 percent), the United States (18 percent) and Canada (17 percent). The lowest rates were in Spain (9 percent), Japan (10 percent) and Portugal (10 percent). Germany, France and Italy had slightly higher average rates of 12 to 13 percent.

Latinobarómetro only provides data disaggregated by country for 2003, 2007, 2008 and 2010. In those years the Andean countries had the highest average (36 percent), followed closely by Mexico and Central America, and by the Southern Cone (each at 34 percent). Analysis of these

results by year reveals that in 2003 the three subregions had the same rates of victimization (35 to 36 percent). The rate in Mexico and Central America fell to 31 percent in 2008 and thereafter rose again to 35 percent. In the Andean area and the Southern Cone, the rate increased to 41 percent in 2007 and then fell to 31 percent and 27 percent, respectively, in 2010. The Southern Cone recorded the best result in 2010.

In each subregion there are countries with high and low rates of victimization. In Mexico and Central America, three groups are apparent. At one extreme is El Salvador, with the highest average rate in the entire region (47 percent), closely followed by Mexico (43 percent). At the other extreme is Panama (18 percent). The other countries are in the middle, with rates fluctuating between 29 and 35 percent. Broadly speaking, the countries with the highest victimization rates are the same as those with the highest rates of homicidal violence.

In the Andean subregion there are two groups of countries. One comprises Venezuela, with an average of 43 percent; the other consists of the remaining countries, whose rates range between 33 and 37 percent. It is striking that Colombia has the lowest victimization rate (33 percent) despite its high murder rate. Conversely, Peru has a high victimization rate but low levels of murder.

In the Southern Cone there are three different groups. First is Argentina with an average of 41 percent, the fourth-highest rate in Latin America and one that is in contrast to the country's low murder rate. Uruguay is at the other extreme, with Latin America's second-lowest victimization rate (27 percent). Chile, Paraguay and Brazil are in the middle.

The most recent (2010) survey by Barómetro de las Américas provides valuable information on victims. As with homicide, men are significantly more likely than women to be victims of crime. Among those polled, individuals with a university education were twice as likely to be victims as the less educated. Victimization increases slightly in line with the socioeconomic level of the victim: the rate is 17 percent in the lowest levels and 24 percent in the highest. The size of the place of residence also matters. Those who live in metropolitan areas are more vulnerable than those who live in medium-sized or small cities, or in the countryside. Victimization was at 25 percent in bigger places and just 14 percent in small towns or rural areas (Seligson and Smith 2010: 68–69).

### 3. Perceptions of Insecurity

In 2008 and 2010, Barómetro de las Américas for the first time assessed fear in all the countries of the region using the following question: “speaking of the place where you live, and thinking of the possibility that you might be assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?” The fear index is made up of the sum of those who said that they felt somewhat or very unsafe.

The average figure for Latin America was 43 percent, which is high compared to the 23 percent figure for the United States and Canada. The Andean countries have higher indices of more than 45 percent, closely followed by the Southern Cone, where the figure is above 40 percent; the figure for Mexico and Central America is a little lower.

In the subregion comprising Mexico and Central America there are two groups, one with indices of more than 40 percent and another with indices of between 30 and 40 percent. The first group includes Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, which have the highest rates of homicide and victimization in the subregion. In the second are Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, which also have the subregion's lowest rates of homicide and victimization. The case of Honduras is peculiar, since the country's level of fear is low despite its high rates of homicide and victimization.

In the Andean subregion, the level of fear is highest in Peru, whose average of 53 percent is the second highest in Latin America; Colombia has the lowest level of fear (39 percent). In these cases there seems to be no link between fear and homicidal violence, though there is one between fear and victimization, since it is low in Colombia and high in Peru. A probable contributing factor in this regard is the significant improvement in security conditions in Colombia, where there was a substantial decline in the murder rate from 68 to 36 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2001 and 2008.

The high level of fear in the Southern Cone is attributable to the high rate of victimization. Note that the two most fearful countries are Argentina, which has the region's highest victimization rate (55 percent), and Chile (45 percent); in both countries the murder rate is very low. Brazil, by contrast, has the highest murder rate in the Southern Cone but lower fear indices (40 percent)—albeit fairly similar to those of Uruguay and Paraguay.

Another way of measuring the perception of insecurity is to look at the relative importance of crime among national problems. Latinobarómetro has been doing this since 1995, comparing public concerns about crime with concerns about other problems such as unemployment, economic conditions, poverty and corruption. Up to 2007, unemployment was the most important problem, fluctuating between 20 and 30 percent of respondents' answers. The figure for crime, which began at 5 percent, climbed continuously until it supplanted unemployment as the main problem in 2008. In 2010 the figure for crime stood at 27 percent, its highest level yet, far above the 19 percent for unemployment.

In 12 of the 18 Latin American countries surveyed by Latinobarómetro in 2010, crime was seen as the leading problem. Two-thirds of those polled in Venezuela, and more than half of respondents in El Salvador, Panama and Guatemala, saw crime in this way. A similar phenomenon was evident in countries that were performing relatively well, such as Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica.

Crime's leap to first place on the ranking of citizens' concerns illustrates the scale of the security challenges. This does not seem to spring from a sudden increase in crime and violence, because in recent years homicides have risen slightly while victimization has fallen a little. Rather, it is related to the persistence of high levels of both homicide and victimization, as well as a perception of insecurity in a context where other problems—unemployment, economic conditions and poverty—have been attenuated significantly as a result of the economic growth attendant on the favorable prices for Latin American export products.

## 4. Confidence in the Police

Confidence in Latin American police forces is relatively low. Surveys conducted by Latinobarómetro since 1996 show that confidence in the police has fluctuated between 29 and 39 percent, with an annual average of 34 percent. These are very low levels of trust, since about two-thirds of Latin America's population (between 61 and 71 percent) have consistently said that they have little or no confidence in the police. In the European Union, levels of trust in the police

stand at about 65 percent, almost double the level in Latin America (Dammert, Alda and Ruz 2008: 33).

There has been a slight improvement in recent years. Confidence in the police rose from an average of 32 percent in 1996–2000 to 36 percent in the 2006–2010 period. This might be related to the slight fall in household victimization and the efforts that some countries have made, with varying degrees of success, to professionalize their police forces.

On the World Economic Forum's ranking of police credibility, which is based on surveys of business people, Latin American police forces are in the lower quarter of the list. Comparisons with the United States and Canada are particularly unflattering to Latin America. There has been, however, some mild improvement: the countries of the region have moved up from an average position of 106 among 134 countries in 2008 to 100 among 139 countries in 2010.

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Confidence varies among the subregions. In 2010, the police forces of the Southern Cone were ranked at 78, those of Mexico and Central America at 100, and those of the Andean area at 116.

In the subregion comprising Mexico and Central America, the most poorly assessed police forces in 2010 were those of Guatemala (ranked at 133) and Mexico (132), followed by Honduras (106). Costa Rica and Panama were ranked at 49 and 82, respectively. Nicaragua, which had been ranked at 56 in 2008, lost ground and was placed at 101 in 2010. In that year El Salvador was at 99, having been at 77 a year earlier.

The police with the poorest assessments are in the Andean countries. In the past three years, the Venezuelan and Bolivian police have ranked last and next-to-last in the world. Peru and Ecuador do not rank much higher. Colombia moved into the upper half of the ranking, advancing from 77 in 2008 to 64 in 2010.

The police forces of the Southern Cone are by far the best assessed in the region and their ranking improved significantly between 2008 and 2010, thanks to progress by Brazil (which moved from 117 to 74), Uruguay (90 to 56)

and Chile (16 to 5). These improvements more than offset the poor results for Argentina (130 to 121) and Paraguay (133 to 136).

In sum, the highest ranked police forces and those that moved up the most were in Brazil, Uruguay and Chile in the Southern Cone; Colombia in the Andean subregion; and Costa Rica and Panama in Central America. The worst assessed police were in Venezuela and Bolivia in the Andes; Mexico and Guatemala in the north of the continent; and Paraguay in the Southern Cone.

According to *Latinobarómetro 2010*, corruption is the main problem facing the police in their efforts to combat crime: this is the view of 31 percent of those surveyed. Other problems mentioned include lack of personnel (22 percent), inadequate training (17 percent), shortage of resources (13 percent), limited cooperation from the public (8 percent) and obsolete equipment (6 percent). Despite this distrust, Latin

Uruguay (154 in 2001 to 244 in 2008); Ecuador (63 in 2001 to 105 in 2009); and Peru (101 in 2001 to 152 in 2009). In Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela the prison population increased by a third, and in Mexico<sup>12</sup> by a quarter (OEA 2011: 124).

In 2008, Latin America's total prison population stood at a little more than 993,000 but the region's prison capacity was about 637,000, which means that the prisons were overpopulated by 56 percent. The worst overcrowding was in El Salvador (132 percent), Ecuador (128 percent), Peru (86 percent), Brazil (82 percent), Chile (55 percent), Bolivia (55 percent) and Panama (53 percent). The best rates were in Paraguay (9 percent) Guatemala (12 percent), Uruguay (17 percent) and Colombia (25 percent). Considering Guatemala's high murder rate and the 12-percent decline in its prison capacity between 2006 and 2010, the country's modest level of overcrowding is striking (Dammert and Zuñiga 2008: 49–50). Brazil is also a surprising case. Though the country still has a high level of overcrowding, it made notable efforts to increase capacity from 136,000 in 2000 to 282,000 in 2010—an increase of more than 100 percent (OEA 2011: 138).

In Brazil, the percentage of those being detained before sentencing rose from 35 percent in 2000 to 43 percent in 2010. That share declined in Colombia and Peru from 42 percent and 70 percent in 2004 to 32 percent and 60 percent in 2010, respectively (OEA 2011: 133). The reduction in the number of prisoners held in pre-trial detention is one of the benefits of penal reform, as reflected by the aforementioned declines and the low rates in Chile (23 percent), Costa Rica (26 percent), Nicaragua (28 percent) and El Salvador (35 percent) (OEA 2011: 133).

If significant changes are not made to the policies pursued in recent years, the state of Latin America's prison systems will worsen, even if capacity continues to expand. This happened in Chile, where 10 new prisons were built but the problem of the continuous increase in the prison population remained unresolved. In 2010, Colombia finished building seven new prisons that increased capacity

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Confidence in the judiciary is at an even lower ebb, having fluctuated between 20 and 36 percent—with an annual average of 31 percent—in the last decade and a half. Distrust in the justice system thus fluctuated between 64 and 80 percent. In the European Union, levels of confidence in the justice system stand at 46 percent, substantially higher than those in Latin America (Dammert, Alda and Ruz 2008: 33).

## 5. The Prison System

In the last decade, the prison population increased significantly in all Latin American countries. The indicator that best illustrates this is the prison population per 100,000 inhabitants, which grew in every country except Bolivia and Guatemala. The most significant increases were in Brazil, where the prison population rose from 134 per 100,000 in 2000 to 259 in 2010; Chile (216 in 2001 to 315 in 2008);

<sup>12</sup> The rate for Mexico in 2001 is given in Dammert and Zuñiga 2008: 124.



by 13,000. In the same year, the prison population rose by 7,700. At that rate of growth, the new capacity will be overwhelmed in just two years. Currently, Uruguay has a deficit of 2,300 prison places. To address that, work has begun on building a new prison in Montevideo for 2,000 prisoners. In 2014, when it opens and is filled, the deficit of prison places will be the same because the number of new prisoners each year has risen to 650.

## 6. By Way of Summary

Taken together, the above indicators depict a region with high rates of homicide and victimization, a strong perception of insecurity, and low levels of confidence in the institutions responsible for ensuring security and justice. What links can we discern between these indicators?

As regards homicide and victimization, two patterns are evident. In one, there are high rates of both phenomena, as in Mexico, Central America's northern triangle and Venezuela. In the other, there is no link between the two. This is the case in the Southern Cone (especially Argentina, Chile and Uruguay), Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Peru, which have high murder rates and low levels of victimization. The inverse is true in Colombia. This suggests that the two phenomena have different causal factors and they operate in different ways. Homicide seems to be related mainly to drug trafficking and the easy availability of firearms; victimization has more to do with economic and social variables, and with the performance of the institutions responsible for security and justice.

There seems to be no close link between homicide and perceptions of insecurity, though there is indeed a link between the latter and victimization. Fear mainly expresses concerns about vulnerability to property crime, which is how victimization is measured. It is also affected by levels of confidence in institutions, especially the police, since these are the bodies responsible for preventing and investigating crime. If there is little confidence in the capacity of police forces to discharge their duties, there is a marked sense of threat. Since fear is conditioned simultaneously by victimization and confidence in the police, it varies in line with the levels of both of them.

The high levels of prison overcrowding may reflect two entirely different things: either there are insufficient prisons

in Latin America, or the judicial system makes excessive use of imprisonment. Given the swift increase in the prison population, it is clear that any effort to expand capacity is doomed to fail if it is unmatched by measures to lessen the tendency to hold people in pre-trial detention, to foster alternatives to imprisonment, and to soften the harshness of penal legislation. This is all politically difficult given the high levels of fear and public pressure on governments to respond robustly to crime—which is seen as the leading problem in two-thirds of Latin American countries.

Rectifying the negative indicators of insecurity will only be possible if the countries of the region develop institutions that are more efficient and trustworthy. Making them so will require that they become more professional, more modern and more democratic. Such an effort must be matched at the hemispheric level: without more cooperation it will be impossible to curb and combat the transnational criminal activities that, to a large extent, cause many of the problems described above.

The most important of these activities is drug trafficking, one of whose gravest outcomes is the mountain of bodies it leaves in its wake. Several recent studies identify drug trafficking as Latin America's leading cause of homicidal violence. The best illustration of the correlation between drug trafficking and homicide is the list of the world's most violent cities, most of which are located on the drug routes to the hemisphere's leading market. The huge efforts made by Colombia and Mexico to tackle drug trafficking have not been enough to curb the production, traffic and consumption of drugs. The laws of the market seem to be stronger than national and international efforts to put an end to a business that not only leaves death in its wake but that also corrodes, penetrates and destroys democratic institutions in the countries through which it passes. Hence it is unsurprising that presidents Santos and Calderón, whose commitment to the fight against trafficking is beyond question, have suggested that it is imperative to begin a debate at the highest level on the prohibitionist policy pursued to date. In doing so, they echo the Global Commission on Drug Policy, whose members include former presidents Cardoso of Brazil, Zedillo of México and Gaviria of Colombia (the latter was also the secretary general of the Organization of American States), as well as Kofi Annan, former secretary general of the United Nations, George Schultz, former US secretary of state,

Javier Solana, former high representative for foreign affairs of the European Union, and the writers Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru) and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico).

The available evidence, however, also shows that drug trafficking is not the only causal factor. Though the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime finds a very strong correlation between organized crime and murder in the Western Hemisphere (stronger than the correlation in other parts of the world), only a quarter of murders are linked to such

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crime (UNODC 2011: 49). What motivates the others? Common delinquency, interpersonal violence, domestic violence or state abuse? Antanas Mockus and Rodrigo Guerrero, the mayors of two of Colombia's most violent cities in the early 1990s, aver that the chief motive for murder in Bogotá and Cali was not drug trafficking (as they thought when they took office), but interpersonal violence. A recent study on homicide in Lima in the last decade concluded that interpersonal and domestic violence accounted for more murders than common and organized crime combined (Gushiken, Costa, Romero and Privat 2010: 48). Still to be identified are the interfaces between drug trafficking (and other forms of organized crime) and everyday violence, including common delinquency and interpersonal violence.

If drug trafficking alone is held to explain homicide, then it is incomprehensible why Peru—currently the world's leading producer and exporter of cocaine—has one of Latin America's lowest murder rates. Bolivia is a similar case. Why are these countries, which are like Colombia in that they are the first link in the drug chain, so unlike Colombia in having such low murder rates? Is some “mafia peace” at work here? The few available studies on the workings of drug trafficking in Peru show that there are many clans devoted to the production and transport of drugs in each of the more

than 10 coca-growing valleys. Does one big cartel regulate their activities or, as many suspect, are there several cartels and clans that source their product from Peru? If the latter is the case, why do they coexist so peaceably while in Central America and Mexico they are such sworn enemies that they are killing each other?

The strengthening of Colombia's security apparatus, which received a great deal of international support, explains why the country made such progress in reducing violence in the last decade. By contrast, the weakness of Venezuela's institutions is coincident with a very severe deterioration in the country's security conditions. Institutional strengthening, therefore, which is inimical to criminal impunity, seems to be the determining factor. This is also why murder rates in the United States, the world's prime market for illicit drugs, are substantially lower than those in Latin America.

The case of firearms is similar. The easy availability of guns is another key cause of Latin America's high murder rate. The evidence for this has been noted above. Why, though, does the United States—the world's leading weapons market and the country in which it is easiest to buy guns—have lower murder rates than its Latin American neighbors? Again, the answer is because of the strength of the rule of law. The rule of law is particularly vulnerable in Central America's northern triangle, where capacity to investigate crime is exceptionally weak. Indeed, it is so weak that the United Nations Commission against Impunity in Guatemala has been at work for several years in an effort to make up for the deficiencies of the country's justice system. Both Honduras and El Salvador have said they would like a similar commission, but thus far the international community has not responded.

In a context where an in-depth review of US anti-drug policy seems to be difficult in the medium term, and where there are only modest resources and leadership to enhance regional cooperation on security matters, it is unlikely that we will see any significant change to this outlook in the coming years—apart from the leading role being played by new actors such as Colombia and Chile in the area of police cooperation.

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**1211 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 510  
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**PHONE: 202-822-9002 ■ FAX: 202-822-9553  
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