

# Crime and Violence in Latin America: encouraging achievements in Bogotá

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Governments and citizens are worried as never before regarding public safety. It displaced unemployment and poverty, which were the greatest worries in the 80s. In the cities, the sense of insecurity amongst citizens is on the increase. According to Latinbarometro, by 1995 the percentage of citizens in Latin America that believed that the rate of crime had increased was slightly lower than 80%; by the end of 2001, this percentage had increased to more than 95% of the population

But what worries people even more than the sense of insecurity is the drastic increase in violence and crime in the region that has taken place in the last two decades, in particular in the big urban concentrations. While at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s the rate of homicides (homicides per year per 100,000 inhabitants) in Latin America was 16.7.<sup>21</sup>, at the end of the 90s, according to the WHO<sup>22</sup>, it has risen to 27.5, which is three times higher than the world average (8.8 per 100,000 people) and twenty seven times higher than the EU average. According to the IDB, the figure is as high as 30 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants per year. In terms of homicides, violence in Latin American has doubled.

If we compare Latin American countries, we may rate as the most violent El Salvador and Colombia, and as the least violent Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay. According to Latinbarometro and considering all crimes as a whole, in the majority of the countries more than 30% of the citizens had been victims to some type of crime.

## RATE OF HOMICIDES AND CRIME VICTIMS IN LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

(Homicides per year per 100,000 inhabitants. Data corresponding to several years)

RATE OF HOMICIDES		CRIME VICTIMS	
Countries	Rate	Survey only done in cities	% of homes
El Salvador	97	Guatemala	54
Colombia	78	El Salvador	46
Honduras	41	Venezuela	46
Guatemala	35	Mexico	43
Jamaica	35	Ecuador	41
Venezuela	33	Argentina	38
Brazil	20	Peru	38
Mexico	18	Brazil	38
Ecuador	15	Costa Rica	38
Domin Rep.	12	Honduras	38
Panama	11	Nicaragua	37
Nicaragua	10	Colombia	36
Cuba	6	Bolivia	34
Costa Rica	6	Paraguay	33
Argentina	5	Chile	31
Peru	5	Panama	26
Uruguay	4	Uruguay	25
Paraguay	4		
Chile	3		

<sup>21</sup> PAHO, United Nations. World Health Statistics. 1991.

<sup>22</sup> WHO in "Word Report on Violence and Health". 1997.

**Source:** Inter American Development Bank  
1999 - 2003.

**Source:** Rubio 2002. Latinobarometro taken from  
Gaviria and Pagés (1999)

This violence has a clear gender bias that varies greatly from country to country. In Venezuela, El Salvador and Colombia, and in turn in Bogotá, homicides of men are 13 times more likely than homicides of women. The proportion decreases to less than 4 in the case of Cuba or Uruguay.

According to the IDB, the total cost of violence in the region is between 5% and 25% of GDP and the cost taken on by the citizens to assure their safety through private security is between 8% and 25% of GDP<sup>23</sup>. Also, Douglass North has estimated that in countries such as Colombia or Venezuela the divergence between official and unofficial rules is responsible for more than half of the GDP being spent in transaction costs (the costs of entering and satisfying agreements).

Violence and crime are mostly urban. The bigger cities in Latin America have a higher crime rate than the country's average, with the exception of Bogotá where the rate is 3 times lower than that of Colombia's. In Latin America we may highlight the cities of Recife in Brazil, Medellín in Colombia and Ciudad de Guatemala as having rates higher than 100 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. On the lower end we have Miami, Santiago de Chile and Buenos Aires.

#### *HOMICIDE RATE IN SOME CITIES IN AMERICA*

Several years (annual rate per 100,000 inhabitants)

<b>Cities</b>	<b>Most recent annual homicide rate</b>
Recife	158
Medellín	104
Guatemala City	103
San Salvador	95
San Pedro Sula	90
Cali	91
Washington	62
Sao Paulo	55
Rio de Janeiro	53
Tegucigalpa	48
Brasilia	38
Salvador (Bahía)	36
Porto Alegre	24
Bogotá, D.C.	23
Lima	22
Curitiba	20
Mexico City	18
Quito	16
Panama City	11
Miami	9
Santiago de Chile	6
Buenos Aires	5

Source: InterAmerican Development Bank, years 1999 - 2003

There are no Government policies that target the increasing violence and crime situation taking place in most Latin American countries. Ten years after the end of the "cold war" the countries in the region are still arguing, without reaching any agreements, over which is the appropriate model to achieve territorial or continental safety. They are still arguing over State and Economic Security or Citizen

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<sup>23</sup> IDB, Modernization of the State and Civil Society Division. Regional Operations Department 2, "Situación de violencia en Centroamérica", 2003.

Security, without realizing that, in an international front, both of them have evolved in benefit of the general interest.

The concern reflected in their political speech or their political campaign, or their reaction towards a regrettable event of wide social repercussion is not translated into a systematic management of these problems. Presidents, Majors and Governors seem unable to draw up plans, programs, projects or resources or to create administrative infrastructures to institutionalise security management.

On the other hand, there is no reliable data on violence and crime, and decisions are therefore taken without an objective analysis of the problem and without the necessary follow up procedures. The institutions in charge of security and justice work on their own, without any central coordination. Thus, their work is becoming less efficient by the minute, and less effective in controlling the many sources of crime.

This in turn makes the citizens have less and less faith in the effectiveness of these institutions. It's worth mentioning that a survey from Latinobarómetro showed that between 60% and 80% of the citizens in Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Panama, Guatemala and Mexico have no faith in their police force, while the police department in Chile and Colombia manage to achieve a level of confidence of 50%<sup>24</sup>. With regards to trusting the judicial power, the confidence level went from 35% in 1996 to 25% in 2001<sup>25</sup>. The citizens have been regarded more as a part of the problem (indifference and lack of solidarity) than as a way to solve it. This makes the security models restrictive instead of participating.

On the other hand, when security problems are identified they are seen as specific problems restricted to local areas, failing to realize that criminal activities have no frontiers and that they are becoming increasingly global and trans-national. Such is the case for car robberies, drug trafficking and the illegal trade of weapons, crimes that are run by big international mafias. Moreover, in the cities where they take place, these important illegal businesses promote and encourage violent relationships amongst criminals and aggressive ones with the rest of the citizens. As proof, one only has to notice that in the cities where there is an extended drug trafficking activity, impunity is on the rise, security is deteriorating and violence is on the increase. As examples, we could name Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad de Guatemala, Medellín or Cali.

Where should we go from here? To answer this question, we should draw upon the experience lived in Bogotá – Colombia, which is quoted in the international arena as an example to follow in relation to its achievements in the reduction of violence and crime over the last ten years.

### **Bogotá's achievements**

Bogotá went from a rate of 80 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1993 to 23 in 2003, a decrease of 63% over the last ten years. The decrease in other crimes was 35% since 1998. There was also a reduction in the number of deaths due to traffic accidents, from a rate of 25 to a rate of 9.8 per 100,000 inhabitants (from 1995 to 2003). These results were mainly due to the institutionalisation of the management of security and citizen coexistence, and to the progressive determination of a public policy covering this area. The following are the most relevant characteristics of the process undergone in Bogotá:

- **Institutional management headed by the City's higher administrative authority (politician in charge of the policy).** Although the responsibility with regard to security areas is shared among several security, justice and administrative authorities, in Bogotá, the Great Mayor (Alcalde Mayor) became the leader and coordinator of the City's public policy of citizen coexistence and public safety. This allowed giving maximum priority to the protection of human life and drove innovations and coordination amongst the various institutions.

- **Reliable information.** Since there was a need for data regarding violence and crimes in the City in order to analyse it and assess the best action plan, the SUIVD (Unified System of Information on Violence and Crime) was designed and implemented, and it fed from the Metropolitan Police and the National Institute of Legal Medicine.

- **Security and Coexistence Plan.** Starting in 1995, the Plan on Security and Coexistence was designed and implemented, with projects and programmes oriented towards improving police work and judicial behaviour, and towards preventing violence and crime incidents that were having a direct

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<sup>24</sup> Revista Semana, 24 February 2003. Colombia.

<sup>25</sup> Latinobarómetro 1996-2001. In Lamas Jorge. *Violencia Urbana en América latina*. InterAmerican Development Bank. IDB

impact of the citizens security and coexistence. Without neglecting constraining or justice actions, this Plan hopes to strengthen the citizens culture and to encourage the resolution of any conflict that may arise in a peaceful and agreeable manner.

- **Creation of an administrative infrastructure and allocation of human, technical and financial resources.** In 1997 the Subsecretariat of Coexistence and Public Safety was created as part of the Secretary of State with the role of managing citizen's security and coexistence from a restraining and prevention standpoint. From its creation, this department has specialized administrative personnel who manage projects, programmes and resources that go from the strengthening of the security and justice bodies, both dependant and independent from the Major's office, to the support needed for the resolution of family and community conflicts.

- **Reporting, assessment and follow up.** Based on the analysis of the information collected by SUIVD and on studies and periodical meetings between all the institutions there is an assessment and follow up procedure in place. The results are assessed on a monthly basis by the District Council of Security (Consejo Distrital de Seguridad), which is presided by the Great Major and 20 local Councillors in security.

- **External assessment.** The Programme "Bogotá Como Vamos" ("Bogota, How are we doing") sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce in Bogotá, the main newspaper in the country and a well known NGO, does follow up and control of the results achieved by the Security Plan and also conducts surveys on victimization and sense of security.

- **Citizen participation and qualification in security and coexistence policies.** With the belief that the citizens are part of the means to solving the security and coexistence problems, the Government and the Metropolitan Police decide, in 1995, to promote sightings, and they organize the communities in the neighbourhoods, qualifying the community leaders.

### Some innovations

These results were achieved through close cooperation with other institutions, introducing the meaning of *corresponsability* to the institutions and citizens. It was started with the transport sector: 350,000 citizenship cards were distributed among drivers. The cards had a red face with thumbs down on the one side, and a white face with thumbs up on the other. They managed to make many of the drivers react with disapproval when they witnessed someone breaking traffic rules and with approval when they saw adequate behaviour or when they saw that the individuals concerned quickly corrected their conduct before being reprimanded. On the subject of disarmament, the collective response translated into 2,300 arms being voluntarily turned over. This was motivated by the Church and the Mayor's office in response to the negativity at some point of the Defence Ministry to the suspension of safe-conducts on the week-ends. The control of another risk factor, namely alcohol, was managed by the adoption of a restricted time window for its sale and public consumption which was implemented in the entire city as a crucial experiment

Also, to achieve obedience to the rules without having to resort to the threat of legal sanctions, a *pedagogical perspective* was undertaken: mimes in 1995-7 and civic guides from the following year made people respect the laws through pure communication. As Francisco Gutiérrez, an independent evaluator, pointed out at the end of 2003, they were able to capture the imagination of the citizens and the media in order to generate "a strategic innovative alliance between the Mayor's Office and the media".

The citizen culture policies are led towards "*changing certain specific behaviours while trying to promote the idea of respecting the law and the norms*". Although some of these policies are questionable on their foundation, they tend to give very effective results: "the legality is reinforced, the violation of the laws is considered increasingly more unacceptable and the agreements are considered more and more as legally binding".

According to Gutierrez, the Administration was able to increase the capacity of the citizens to act as a community. It did so by extending the time assessment horizon and by increasing the awareness of the consequences, like, for example, by broadcasting that gunpowder was guilty of burning over 200 people every Christmas (in the last years the number has been between 40 and 70). It did so by managing to make its citizens overcome the mutually pessimistic expectations which lead to a preventive disappointment ( I break the law because I think you will break the law). It did so by managing to overcome the mistrust associated within any type of regulation. And it achieved it when, as it is necessary for life in the City, it managed a specific respect towards shared conventions, such as a pedestrian crossing or a traffic light.

Through the citizen's culture survey taken on 2001 and 2003 it was proven that the number of citizens pro-norm and anti-"justice taken into their own hand" had increased. For example, the ratio of citizens that justify the disobedience of the law when it is the only way to achieve the objectives decreased from 24% (2001) to 17% (2003). The ratio of citizens that agree with the carrying of arms for self-defence decreased from 25% to 10%. "Over 80% of the population reject the use of violence, even as a response to it."