



# Citizen security in Latin America

by Michele Dos Ramos

Over the past two decades, new policies were implemented in various Latin American countries leading to positive impacts in terms of poverty and inequality reduction. In 2008, the region achieved the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving the number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day. Nevertheless, Latin America is still the most violent region in the world: while it is home to only 8% of the world's population, it accounts for 38% of homicides. Moreover, among the 10 countries with the highest rates of lethal violence against women in the world, 8 are in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). On average, 144,000 people a year are killed in the region, which has 44 of the 50 most homicidal countries and 23 of the 25 most murderous cities in the world.

Besides immeasurable human and social costs, the direct annual economic cost of crime and violence in LAC is estimated at \$261 billion, which represents 3.55% of the region's GDP and is equivalent to the total income of the 30% poorest people. This amount is also roughly equivalent to what LAC countries invest in infrastructure and double the average cost for developed countries, illustrating the devastating impact of violence in the region.

The high incidence of lethal violence in LAC can be ascribed to various factors. Addressing these challenges is of paramount importance for the design and implementation of comprehensive evidence-based policies aimed at reducing violent crime. Given that roughly 2.5 million homicides were committed

between 2000 and 2016, the reduction of lethal violence and other forms of victimisation is a precondition for ensuring inclusive and sustainable development in the region.

## Repressive policies and the war on drugs

One of the key factors that contribute to the citizen security crisis in LAC is the legacy of decades of dictatorship in various countries, where highly repressive state security apparatuses have emerged, undermining comprehensive justice and security capacities.

Another factor that has a major impact is the war on drugs, which affects both the dynamics of violence in the region and the policies adopted to mitigate it. In fact, a significant correlation has been observed in different countries between more robust drug law enforcement and increased levels of violence. In Mexico, for example, a military crackdown on drug trafficking announced by Felipe Calderón in 2006 resulted in an estimated 160,000 homicides between 2006 and 2014.

What is more, the focus on drug prohibition and supply-reduction measures has limited the implementation of comprehensive and efficient security policies: in spite of massive spending on the region's security sectors, policing, judicial and penal institutions are underperforming. Efficient, focused preventive policies have also been neglected, including the strengthening of health and social services as part of the drug policy agenda.

The combination of strongarm policies and the war on drugs has also contributed to abusive and corrupt security and judicial institutions in the region. Police forces are particularly distrusted, with the lowest levels of confidence recorded among Latin America's youth. In Brazil, 3,345 homicides were committed by police officers in 2015. Mistrust also impacts on crime statistics and, consequently, limits evidence-informed policies – especially concerning sexual and gender-based violence. It is estimated that roughly 95% of adult victims of sexual violence do not report those crimes to the police.

Another factor behind the citizen security crisis is the high level of impunity in the region. Despite the sharp increase in the prison population in Latin America since 2000 – especially in Brazil (150%), Colombia (125%) and Mexico (53%) – homicide conviction rates are extremely low, close to 20%. This percentage indicates an important dissonance between inmate profiling and the necessary focus on lethal violence reduction.

Furthermore, Latin America's massively overcrowded prison system exacerbates the way in which prisons have become prime incubators for criminal activities. In many prisons, criminal groups can organise, recruit, control and train members. High rates of recidivism also show the limits of mass incarceration as a sustainable and efficient policy. It is also a costly system: between 2010 and 2014, \$6.5 billion per year were spent on prison building and maintenance, and \$7.3 billion on inmates. Altogether, these costs represent 0.39% of regional GDP, more than the budget allocated for conditional cash transfer programmes.

Besides impunity, the lack of solid investigation of homicides undermines information on specific dynamics, contexts and profiles of victims and perpetrators, as well as a better comprehension of the continuum of violence. In this sense, although recognised as important risk factors, addressing domestic and gender-based violence along with the trauma of early exposure to violence, for example, is not necessarily understood and prioritised as essential to Latin American violence reduction policies.

A final challenge is the lack of monitoring and evaluation of initiatives. Out of 1,350 citizen security initiatives mapped in the region between 1998 and 2014, only 7% had a robust evaluation indicating a positive impact. More than 57% had no evaluation.

## Citizen security challenges

The high cost of violence in the region calls for governments and civil society to strengthen capacities

concerning the elaboration, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of citizen security policies. Different Latin American countries and cities have already experienced positive results in preventing and reducing lethal violence and other forms of victimisation. With roughly 400 homicides a day, addressing this issue and strengthening successful evidence-based initiatives is imperative.

The correlation between higher levels of homicide and low levels of human and economic development is often evoked. According to the UNODC 2011 Global Study on Homicide, countries with high levels of income inequality are affected by homicide rates almost four times higher than more egalitarian societies. In this sense, the reduction of inequality still stands out as a priority for the LAC region which is home to 10 of the 15 most unequal countries in the world.

Building a robust knowledge base through the strengthening of data collection and systematisation is essential – along with the monitoring and evaluation of adopted crime prevention and control initiatives – for the strengthening of efficient evidence-based citizen security policies. Adopting prevention programmes designed to reduce the main risk factors of groups and places disproportionately affected by violence in either domestic or public spaces is also crucial. Criminal justice reforms aiming to alleviate the crisis in the penal system and programmes designed to promote the social and economic reintegration of individuals with criminal records should be reinforced in order to reduce recidivism and break entrenched cycles of exclusion and violence.

Finally, addressing gender-based violence is of the utmost importance for comprehensive safety and security improvements in LAC. Even if it is largely acknowledged that it remains a tragically pervasive reality in the region, underreporting and limited data preclude a comprehensive diagnosis of the problem.

Understanding the prevalence, dynamics and root causes of gender-based violence can contribute to the design and implementation of effective prevention and response laws and policies. Addressing the human rights violations experienced by many Latin American and Caribbean women and girls is certainly a major step to interrupt the continuum of violence that contributes to the unacceptably high rates of lethal violence in the region.

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