

## In this issue

Report on Economics and Development  
Towards a safer Latin America:  
A new perspective for crime prevention and control 1

Perceptions regarding insecurity and wellbeing:  
credible information could help 2

¿How can crime be prevented through  
people-focused policies? 4

Criminology of place and prevention of crime 5

Illegal markets, violence, and State regulation 8

The effectiveness of prisons in Latin America 9

When does the State react against insecurity? 11

## Report on Economics and Development: Towards a safer Latin America: A new perspective for crime prevention and control

Latin America is going through a crisis of epidemic proportions in terms of the incidence of crime and violence. These high levels of insecurity are the result of a significant number of factors, among which can be highlighted the population's socio-economic conditions, the fragility of institutions and State control mechanisms, or the effect of social norms. All these explanations are valid to a certain extent. However, they are frequently introduced as opposing alternatives which compete among each other for recognition as the true reason for insecurity. In order to go beyond that debate, RED 2014 sets out a comprehensive conceptual framework which helps to place the social and institutional sphere into perspective and favors a fair and productive discussion regarding each relevant actor's possibilities for intervention.



The approach adopted begins by recognizing that criminal events result from decisions made by individuals in specific situational contexts. It is true that education, beliefs, perceptions, capacity for self-control, and other personality traits – which determine criminal propensity and exposure – can lead an individual toward crime. However, physical and social realms, incentives provided by the existence of illegal markets (i.e., drug markets), and the credibility and efficiency of the criminal justice system are also important. All of those elements determine the opportunities for committing crime.

RED 2014 analyzes each part of this mechanism that underlies the carrying out of a criminal event and promotes a discussion about which public policies can be most effective to promote citizen security in Latin America. ■

# Perceptions regarding insecurity and wellbeing: credible information could help

The costs of crime on development and wellbeing do not only depend on the direct effects of crime on victims' health and assets, but also on the decisions made by families based on their perception of the probability of being affected by this problem even when they have not directly experienced it. This is why it becomes important to measure and evaluate the determinants of these perceptions or the fear of crime.

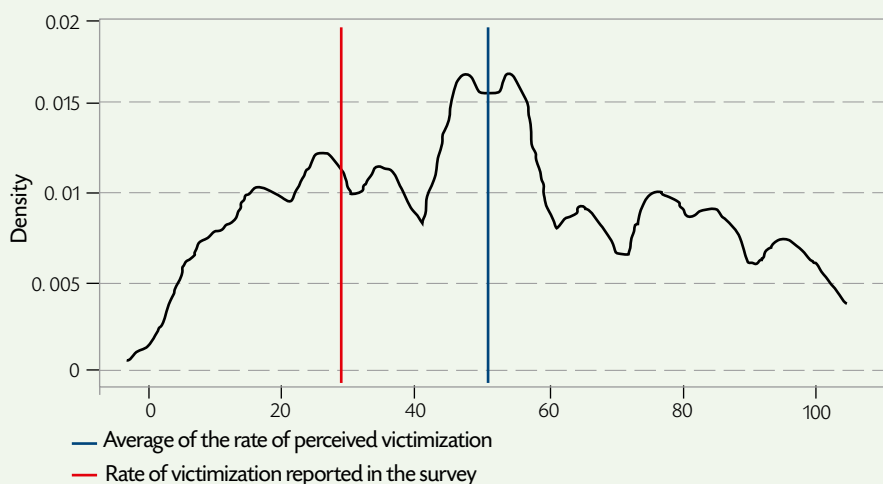
The perception of insecurity can be measured as a percentage of the population for whom crime is the primary concern. According to the 2013 CAF survey, this is around 24%, higher than the percentage of those surveyed who indicated their prime concern as being poverty (13.0%), deficient health services (12.5%), and unemployment (9.2%).

While one important determinant of the perception of insecurity is whether the person him/herself or someone around him/her has been victimized, there is no perfect correlation between both variables. In the 2013 CAF survey, for example, those surveyed on average estimated that the percentage of homes in their city that have been victims of some crime was 47%, while the rate of actual victimization was, on average, much lower (27%)<sup>1</sup> (Graph 1).

The perception of insecurity can be related to factors that are distant from the crime that actually occurs, such as the degree of coverage in the media, the trust people have in police institutions, and the availability of credible statistical information. If that is the case, the security policy must also consider those factors.

Are these other determinants of the perception of insecurity quantitatively relevant? In this note we want to empirically

Graph 1. Distribution of the rate (%) of perceived victimization. Comparison with the real rates of victimization (2013)<sup>a/</sup>



a/ Cities: Buenos Aires, La Paz, Santa Cruz, San Pablo, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Medellin, Quito, Guayaquil, Montevideo, Panama City and Caracas  
Source: Chapter 1, RED 2014.

assess the hypothesis that informational deficiencies could lead to magnifying perceptions regarding the reach of crime, since the population could develop its perceptions based on partial or biased information like the news coverage given to certain criminal acts.

In order to evaluate the degree to which providing trustworthy statistical information on crime could modify perceptions regarding insecurity in the cities of Latin America, we carried out an experimental exercise as a part of the 2013 CAF survey consisting of providing information on the level and evolution of crime to a subset of homes selected randomly in each city where the survey was administered. In particular, we divided the sample of households into three groups: one-third of those surveyed received information regarding the rate of victi-

mization in their city, extracted from the previous year's CAF survey; another third received information not only regarding the level but also the evolution of victimization over the last five years (all of the information provided came from previous years' CAF surveys); and the remaining third (the control group) did not receive any information at all.

At the outset of the survey, those surveyed were asked what they thought the rate of victimization was in their city, and if that rate had been rising or falling over the last few years. Next, all of those surveyed who had received information on victimization (the treatment groups) were also asked if the information provided appeared to be not at all, a little, or very trustworthy. Lastly, we asked about their perceptions of insecurity and the actions that each one was planning to take to deal with the problem.

<sup>1</sup> However, upon being consulted regarding the percentage of homes that have been victims of crime "in their area or neighborhood," the average response was 28%, very close to the average real level of victimization for the city.

Given the fact that the groups chosen to receive the information (treatment) were selected through a random process, we can trust that any correlation between the receipt of information and the subsequent responses regarding their perceptions of insecurity and other variables would reflect a causal relationship.

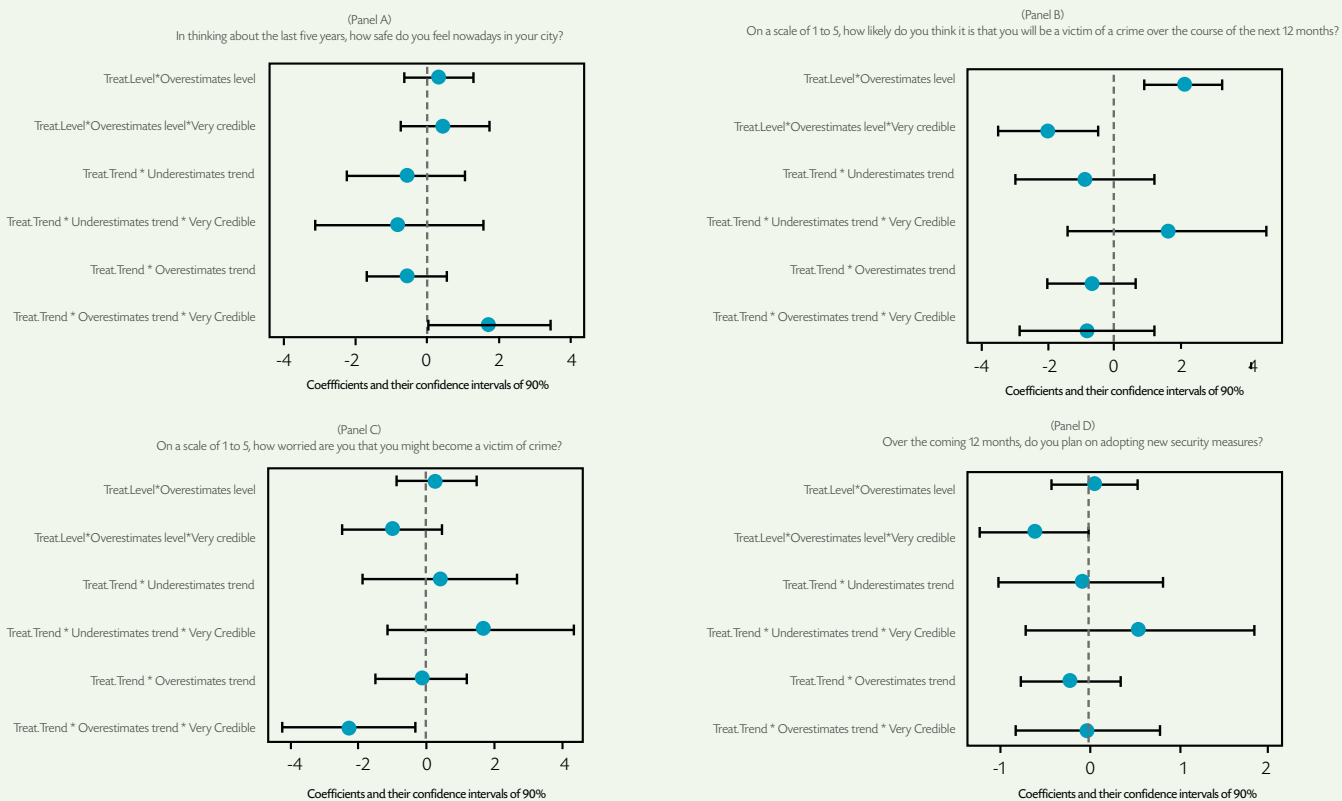
Graph 2 shows the results of the experiment regarding four questions (outcomes) designed to measure the perception of insecurity and its immediate consequences: 1) How safe do you feel in your city today, as compared with five years ago (Panel A)?; 2) What do you feel is the likelihood of being victimized in the next 12 months (Panel B)?; 3) How concerned are you regarding the possibility of being victimized in the next 12

months (Panel C)?; and 4) Do you plan on adopting any measures during the next 12 months to protect yourself (Panel D)? The results suggest that the individuals in the treatment groups who initially overestimated the level or growth of the rate of victimization, and who additionally considered the information they received to be trustworthy, tend to report a lower perception in comparison with the individuals who did not receive the information. This can be seen by the sign and statistical significance of the coefficient associated with the multiplicative variables of “overestimates level” or “overestimates tendency” and “very trustworthy.” These individuals, after experiencing the information-related shock (receiving statistical information regarding the incidence of crime), reported feeling safer (Panel

A), felt there was less of a chance of being victimized (Panel B), and reported less concern regarding that possibility (Panel C). They also reported a lower inclination toward adopting new measures in the future to protect themselves from insecurity (Panel D).

The results suggest, then, that producing credible, easily accessible statistical information on a periodic basis regarding the incidence of crime is a central element in a strategy that seeks to moderate expectations regarding insecurity. Failure to do so could stimulate the fear of crime beyond what is justified by the actual incidence of the phenomenon, generating behaviors that would negatively affect the wellbeing of the population. ■

Graph 2. Impact of information on perceptions of insecurity in Latin American cities (2013)<sup>a/ b/</sup>



a/ The graphs illustrate the coefficients and their confidence intervals to 90% estimated by ordinary least squares (OLS). The variable “Treat.Level” assigns the value of 1 for those persons who received the information regarding the rate of victimization in their city, and 0 for those who did not. The variable “Overestimates level” assigns a value of 1 for those persons who overestimate the true rate of victimization reported in the survey, and 0 for those who do not. The variable “Very credible” assigns a value of 1 for those persons who stated that the information they had received during the experiment seemed very credible to them, and 0 for those who did not. The variable “Treat. Trend” assigns a value of 1 for those persons who received the information on the level and evolution of the rate of victimization over the last five years from previous years’ CAF survey, and 0 for those who did not. The variable “Underestimate Trend” assigns a value of 1 to persons who underestimate the evolution of the rate of victimization, and 0 for those who do not. The variable “Overestimate Trend” assigned a value of 1 for those persons who overestimate the evolution of the rate of victimization, and 0 for those who do not. We controlled for age, gender, educational level, if the person was a victim of a crime during the last year, if the official information seemed credible to them, and by city.

b/ Cities: Buenos Aires, La Paz, Santa Cruz, San Pablo, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Medellin, Quito, Guayaquil, Montevideo, Panama City and Caracas.

Source: Chapter 1, RED 2014.

# ¿How can crime be prevented through people-focused policies?

**B**eing a criminal is not a permanent human trait, as many individuals who committed a crime once do not do it again afterwards. In other words, there are policies that can help people leave this life behind as well as prevent them to enter into it in the first place.

The majority of crimes are committed by young people: the typical age-crime rate profile shows that the peak of criminal participation occurs prior to 20 years of age, growing rapidly

during adolescence and decreasing a bit more gradually as they move toward adulthood. “Circumstantial” criminals are those who commit crimes but then stop doing so, whereas those who continue to pursue a life of crime are known as “career” criminals. The evidence shows that there are many circumstantial criminals but a relatively small number of career criminals; however, the last ones are those who commit the greatest amount of crimes, which are more serious and escalate as time passes.

According to the approach adopted by RED 2014, a crime arises from the interaction of certain individual factors with others coming from the environment. These individual factors help to understand the trajectories of both circumstantial and career criminals, and can be summed up by each person’s criminal propensity and exposure.

We can define criminal propensity as the tendency to recognize the chance to break a rule, and in the event of re-

**Table 1. Interventions for preventing crime in different stages of individuals’ development**

Stage of Life	Examples of Effective Crime-Prevention Programs	What Would It Reduce?	
		Criminal Propensity	Criminal Exposure
From pregnancy through the first years of life	Promoting adequate nutrition	X	
	Early-childhood stimulation	X	
	Training parents in childraising styles that are assertive, containing, non-violent	X	
	Attention in the home so as to reduce domestic violence	X	X
Childhood and adolescence	Attention in the home so as to reduce domestic violence	X	X
	Development of non-cognitive skills through cognitive-behavioral therapies	X	
	Longer school day		X
	Programs to reduce school dropout rates and other forms of violence in schools	X	X
	Socially-incorporated extra-curricular activities (music, sports)	X	X
	Prevention of sexual violence among adolescents	X	X
	Development of social capital (social cohesion)	X	X
	Reduction of gang operations		X
Transition to adulthood	Better job opportunities for youth	X	X
	Better recruitment conditions for prisoners	X	X

Source: Chapter 2, RED 2014.

cognizing it, to actually break it. This behavioral trait is intimately linked to the capacity for self-control and the greater use of habit or impulse as the mechanism to make decisions, as opposed to the rational mechanism wherein expected costs and benefits are compared.

The formation of criminal propensity is a process similar to the development of people's cognitive and non-cognitive abilities which begins early in life; it has windows of opportunity (critical and sensitive periods) in which certain investments can be made that limit its growth. In particular, the empirical evidence shows that the most worthwhile investments are those that focus on the first stages of life (early childhood) and place great emphasis on the role of the family, for example, in ensuring adequate nutrition, assertive and containing styles of upbringing; and an environment free from domestic violence (Table 1).

On the other side, criminal exposure can be defined as the frequency with which people are surrounded by risky

environments. An important source of this exposure is the social interactions that characterize the daily life of an individual. For example, environments where social disorder reigns or where there are fewer opportunities for making material progress through legal activities. There exists empirical evidence (compiled in RED 2014; see examples in Table 1) which supports the effectiveness of certain interventions in controlling environments that determines a high rate of criminal exposure. In these interventions a key role is played by schools, the community or neighborhoods.

In summary, the evidence presented by RED 2014 discusses the certain possibility of implementing people-focused interventions that can successfully reduce the number of criminal situations by encouraging the formation of protective factors and discouraging the factors that promote the entrance and maintenance of criminal activity. Nonetheless, the positive impacts of such interventions can take time to materialize. For example, in the case of criminal

propensity, while it is essential to act during the first years of a child's life, the benefits in terms of fewer criminal actions on the part of youth and adults can only be seen over the medium and long terms.

Lastly, it is important to note that the best empirical evidence of the effectiveness of person-focused prevention interventions comes from countries outside Latin America, and more understanding is needed as to how they would function in the specific context of the countries in the region. In particular, it is critical to understand which interventions can be adapted to the local availability of public resources and capacities for implementing quality programs. Knowing more about the effectiveness of these policies requires, as a first step, improving the systems of statistical information on citizen security. A second step is to implement a monitoring system that provides information about the effective application of the programs. Finally, reliable impact evaluation methods must be followed to measure the effects of the policies. ■

## Criminology of place and prevention of crime

The neighborhood of La Capuchina is one of the oldest in Bogota. There, 262 robberies and thefts were reported between 2011 and 2012. Just one of its street segments accounts for 25% of them. The situation of La Capuchina illustrates one of the most dominant traits of crime: the marked concentration of crime in a few places, known as 'hot spots'.

Access to geo-referenced data confirms the generalization of this phenomenon. This is illustrated in Table 2, which pre-

sents information for four cities in Colombia and for the municipality of Sucre in the Metropolitan District of Caracas. For each city and type of crime, the table shows the number of victims, percentage of street segments without victims during the entire period, and percentages of street segments where 50% and 100% of victims are concentrated. As a contrasting reference, the table also shows the percentage of street segments that would concentrate 100% of the crimes, if they were to be distributed randomly in space.

Table 2. Concentration of crime in cities in Colombia and the municipality of Sucre in Caracas, Venezuela (2011-2012)<sup>a/</sup>

Type of Crime	City	Number of Victims	Percentage of Segments w/ out Victims	Percentage of Segments Concentrating 50% of the Victims	Percentage of segments concentrating 100% of the victims		Percentage Difference between Random and Observed Concentration
					Observed	Random Assignment	
Common Homicides	Barranquilla	559	98.69	0.73	1.31	1.42	8.46
	Bogota	2,399	98.54	0.80	1.46	1.59	8.72
	Cali	2,732	96.10	2.48	3.90	4.85	24.30
	Medellin	2,103	97.03	1.90	2.97	3.72	25.31
	Sucre (Caracas)	1,253	90.51	2.04	9.49	19.52	105.67
<b>Total/average</b>		<b>9,046</b>	<b>96.17</b>	<b>1.59</b>	<b>3.83</b>	<b>6.22</b>	<b>62.55</b>
Personal Aggression	Barranquilla	3,833	93.41	4.77	6.59	9.32	41.32
	Bogota	18,541	91.76	6.01	8.24	11.66	41.53
	Cali	7,510	90.92	6.63	9.08	12.76	40.40
	Medellin	1,423	98.19	1.28	1.81	2.53	40.13
<b>Total/average</b>		<b>31,307</b>	<b>93.57</b>	<b>4.67</b>	<b>6.43</b>	<b>9.07</b>	<b>40.98</b>
Thefts Committed against Persons	Barranquilla	7,176	90.48	7.67	9.52	16.73	75.71
	Bogota	31,267	88.49	9.22	11.51	18.86	63.85
	Cali	12,179	88.43	9.34	11.57	19.86	71.67
	Medellin	2,634	97.22	2.19	2.78	4.64	66.57
<b>Total/average</b>		<b>53,256</b>	<b>91.15</b>	<b>7.10</b>	<b>8.85</b>	<b>15.02</b>	<b>69.82</b>
Thefts of Vehicles (Cars and Motorcycles)	Barranquilla	1,680	96.60	2.20	3.40	4.20	23.37
	Bogota	7,597	96.00	2.54	4.00	4.95	23.88
	Cali	7,595	91.05	6.69	8.95	12.89	43.99
	Medellin	8,600	91.74	6.47	8.26	14.37	73.92
<b>Total/average</b>		<b>25,472</b>	<b>93.85</b>	<b>4.47</b>	<b>6.15</b>	<b>9.10</b>	<b>47.92</b>
Home Robberies	Barranquilla	770	98.24	1.01	1.76	1.95	10.59
	Bogota	8,500	95.52	2.84	4.48	5.52	23.20
	Cali	1,707	97.34	1.55	2.66	3.06	15.04
	Medellin	147	99.75	0.13	0.25	0.26	4.86
<b>Total/average</b>		<b>11,124</b>	<b>97.71</b>	<b>1.38</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>2.70</b>	<b>13.43</b>

a/ Barranquilla consists of 38,193 street segments; Bogota of 149,586; Cali of 55,015; Medellin of 55,458; and Sucre of 5,776.

Source: Mejía, Ortega, and Ortiz (2014) and Kronick and Ortega (2014).

The concentration of crime in such few street segments is noteworthy. On average, 50% of the robberies or thefts occurs in only 7.1% of the street segments, while 50% of the common homicides occurs in 1.59% of all of the street segments. This concentration is not a mechanical result of the low number of crimes in relation to the number of street segments: if the crimes were to be allocated at random among them, 100% of the robberies and thefts committed against people in Barranquilla, for example, would occur on 16.7% of the street segments, a difference of more than 75% with respect to the actual distribution.

Along with that concentration, there exists – within the blocks and neighborhoods – ‘hot spots’ that are adjacent to streets segment with low levels of criminality. In effect, in the Colombian cities included in Table 2, 17% (30%) of the street segments identified as hot spots of thievery (injuries) has a surrounding area – defined as the set of 10 street segments closest to the hot spot – that are completely free of crime. In addition, we see that street segments that are very dangerous one year, tend also to be very dangerous in subsequent years, which suggests that the reasons favoring crime in micro-spaces are deep and not circumstantial.

Crime is also concentrated in particular hours and days. For example, homicides tend to be more frequent during nighttime hours, while robberies are more common during the day. The case of Bogota illustrates this situation: 61.7% of the homicides occur between 6 PM and 6 AM, while only 34.5% of the thefts committed against persons occur during that timeframe. Homicides peak on Sundays, primarily

between 3:00 and 4:00 AM (early Saturday morning through Sunday morning). By contrast, Sunday turns out to be the day with the least propensity toward robberies committed against persons. The peak times of this crime occur on weekdays around lunchtime and between 7:00 and 8:00 PM.

How to explain that a specific street segment has much more criminal activity than neighboring ones? Each space-time cell has a very particular configuration which determines its inclination toward crime. The elements that lend criminal potential to a place (at a given time) are very diverse. A space can be particularly dangerous due to its topographic characteristics, the police presence, or because it lacks appropriate lighting. The commercial activity and flow of passersby on a given corner can also attract criminals. Weak social cohesion among neighbors, as well as certain migratory patterns, can weaken collective efficacy and reduce informal surveillance. Lastly, the presence of physical disorder – for example, the accumulation of trash, or presence of vacant lots – can send the signal that crime reigns in that exact spot and can affect both the citizenry’s perception of insecurity as well as the sensation of impunity felt by potential assailants.

Recognizing the spatial dimension of crime has clear implications for public policy: if certain factors intrinsic to geographic spaces are determinants of the occurrence of crime, a spatially-focused prevention policy should be able to reduce the incidence of crime. The design of a strategy based on the spatial dimension of crime begins with the collection and maintenance of geo-referenced information which serves as the basis for identifying ‘hot

spots’. This identification should make use not only of statistical methods but also the opinions and suggestions of police authorities or residents of that area.

Identifying patterns, and in particular hot spots and hot moments, is only a point of departure, not the goal itself. The next step is to understand which factors make these spaces and moments more criminogenic than others; this would in turn enable the identification of which interventions would be most effective in each case. Among the options for interventions are police patrols based on hot spots, interventions aimed at underpinning social cohesion, and interventions for improving public spaces, such as better lighting or improvements made to parks.

Spatially focusing the interventions could generate concerns about crime displacement, that is, it is possible that as a result of the focal intervention, the crime simply relocates from one street or corner to another. Nevertheless, the evaluations of these types of spatially-focused interventions are encouraging in the following sense: in addition to achieving a considerable reduction in crime in the treated areas, criminal activity appears not to relocate to contiguous areas but rather, to the contrary, the benefits appear to spread to other areas, although modestly so.

It would be ingenuous to think that in order to end crime, all that would be required would be lighting, quality public spaces, bonds between neighbors, or police placement. It would be absurd, however, to fail to recognize these findings and not to incorporate the spatial and time dimension of crime into a comprehensive strategy for crime prevention.

# Illegal markets, violence, and State regulation

There are good reasons why governments prohibit illegal drug markets. They are potentially addictive substances that can hurt the health of those who consume them and can affect the social environment. Also, their pharmacological effects – such as aggressive or irresponsible behavior – can be a cause of violence.

Individuals who operate within this illegal market cannot turn to the justice system to solve disputes in their economic transactions, enforce contracts, or ensure ownership rights; this is why they turn to violence as a mechanism to substitute the role of the State.

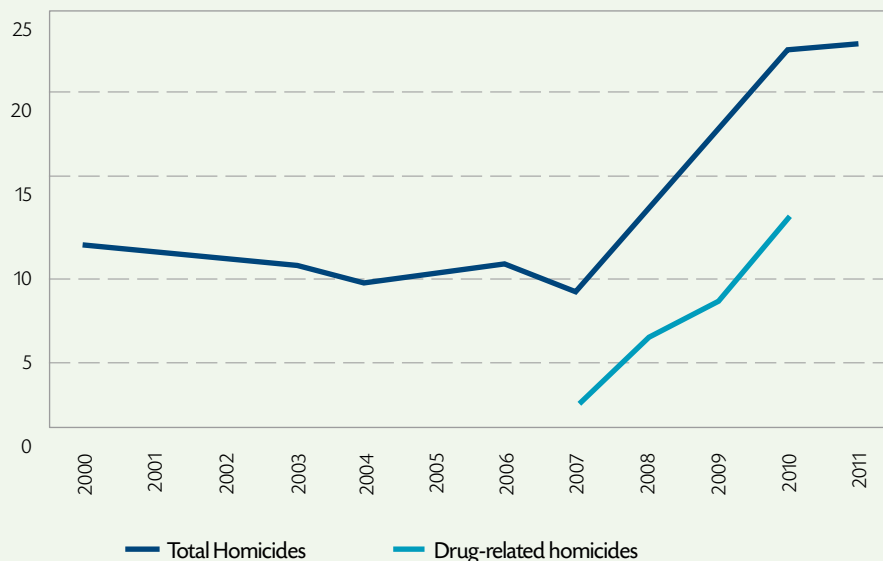
The use of violence to solve disputes in the drug market is more common than in other illegal markets, in part because the associated earnings are so much greater, and because the costs of entry are much higher. The illegal drug market requires costly logistics to ensure territorial control over the cultivation, production, and trafficking zones. The violence, then, is a form of ‘competing’ for the market, which should have a certain scale and magnitude in order to repay them for their costs. Likewise, the violence (or credible threat of its use) provides a certain ‘contractual stability’ throughout the various stages of the business.

Controlling and prohibiting the production, trafficking, and selling of drugs can increase crime and violence due to the fact that it would displace already-established cartels and generate disputes among new groups that wish to monopolize the empty spaces. In addition, the repressive action of the State, without reducing the demand, could increase the price of these substances, thereby increasing the potential earnings and encouraging greater disputes for market control.

In this manner, these policies to reduce the supply of these substances would seem to confront States with a difficult choice between two objectives which cannot be achieved simultaneously: decreasing the costs associated with the existence of illegal markets such

as violence and corruption, on the one hand, and reducing the direct costs of drug use on health and disruption of social behavior, on the other. However, some authors insist that these two are not necessarily contradictory objectives if the right policies are implemented. The tension between these two objectives appears when the government places as a goal the complete eradication of the illegal markets, despite the fact that on many occasions it has been shown that this goal is not only difficult to reach, but can also generate marked cycles of violence. This

Graph 3. Rates of total and drug-related homicides in Mexico (2000-2011).



Source: Chapter 4, RED 2014.

is what happened in Mexico after the declaration of the ‘war against drug trafficking’ at the end of 2006, when the homicide rate tripled between 2007 and 2010 (see Graph 3).

One alternative to these prohibition policies begins with accepting that drug trafficking and illegal markets cannot be fully eradicated, and that attempts to reduce them should ge-

nerate the smallest number of collateral costs as possible. The most debated proposal today regarding drug trafficking is to utilize ‘selective enforcement strategies’ consisting of directing State control efforts to the most violent drug-trafficking organizations, such that the use of violence become too costly for the drug-trafficers to employ. Under these types of strategies, the government prioritizes



the reduction of violence above the total eradication of the market.

As a complement to the policies for controlling supply, States can also design policies that act against the demand, aimed at preventing and controlling consumption, as well as providing treatment and reducing the harm it causes on health. To that end, the first decision the State must make on the side of drug demand is whether to permit or prohibit its consumption.

The countries that have opted not to prohibit it, but rather to regulate drug consumption using public health tools to prevent patterns of troublesome consumption and treat and

rehabilitate dependent consumers, have produced very positive results, not only in terms of lesser harms associated with drug consumption, but also lower rates of prevalence of troublesome consumption and lower rates of criminality associated with illegal drug markets. This is the case of Portugal, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

There are several reasons why the policies aimed at regulation can reduce the levels of violence and criminality associated with drug markets. Firstly, policies that confront drug consumption as a public health issue reduce demand and prices. In that way, they reduce the income obtained by illegal armed groups and the violence they

practice in operating in these markets. On the contrary, the policies that only concentrate on reducing supply in producing and transit countries could result in an increase in the prices of drugs and associated income, and thereby lead to a greater level of criminality and violence. That is why policies at national (and regional) level should combine aspects that affect those segments of the productive chain that are most associated with violence (for example, the most active and violent cartels), with initiatives that discourage consumption. These demand-reduction policies achieve the triple goal of reducing consumption, income received by illegal armed groups, and the violence they practice. ■

## The effectiveness of prisons in Latin America

The incarcerated population in Latin America and the Caribbean exceeds 1.3 million persons, which means that there are 229 inmates for every 100,000 residents, more than the world average (144 inmates per 100,000 residents). In addition, in the majority of the region's countries, the incarcerated population is growing. Over the past two decades it has increased by an average of 163%: it tripled in countries such as Peru (193%), Costa Rica (193%), and Colombia (214%), and increased an even greater amount in countries such as Brazil (270%) and El Salvador (335%).

This increased demand for prison services, together with budgetary constraints to rise the available infrastructure, have produced significant overcrowding. The occupancy rate in prisons in virtually the entire region is above 100%. El Salvador, Venezuela, and Bolivia, for example, have between two and three

times the incarcerated population that their infrastructure permits. Only in Argentina prison occupancy is maintained in accordance with the available prison infrastructure.

How effective is imprisonment as a mechanism for controlling crime? Imprisonment can contribute to reducing crime in three ways: incapacitating the criminals (imprisoned people are mechanically prevented from committing crimes)<sup>2</sup>, deterring criminal conduct (due to the fear of being imprisoned), and rehabilitating the offenders (so as to reduce their propensity to commit crimes and favor their reinsertion into society).

**The effect of incapacitation.** How many crimes are prevented as a result of having a criminal behind bars in Latin America? The answer depends in part on how active and dangerous the imprisoned criminals are. The data from

surveys of inmates in four countries in the region (Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, and Peru) regarding criminal activity prior to incarceration and its recurrence suggest that this varies from one country to another. Prisons in Argentina and Brazil have a high share of prisoners who had committed crimes prior to being detained – 38% and 33% of them, respectively, had committed a crime in the six months prior to incarceration – while in Peru and El Salvador this percentage is significantly lower – 18% and 9%, respectively. As regards recidivism, Brazil has the greatest proportion of repeat offenders in its jails (49%), followed closely by Argentina (42%), while this number is again significantly lower in Peru and El Salvador (16% and 11%, respectively).

<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it cannot be ruled out that some crimes are organized or committed from within the walls of the jails.

This evidence, however, is descriptive. One way of estimating the causal effect of incapacitation on crime is to analyze the likelihood of recidivism of those prisoners who committed their first crime at around the time they became of legal age. That is, if an individual commits a crime right before becoming of legal age, he/she shall be tried in a juvenile court and receive a lighter sentence than another individual who commits the same crime but is of legal age and is tried in a common criminal court. If the former takes less time to reoffend, this difference could be attributed to the fact that he/she has spent less time in prison and can therefore provide a measure of the effect of incapacitation.

A study carried out in Colombia following this method compared the amount of time that transpires from detention through re-offense of two groups: those who committed a crime just before turning 18 years of age (legal age) and those committing crimes after that age<sup>3</sup>. The results demonstrate that those who committed a crime right after turning 18 took an average of 300 days longer to reoffend, an effect that can be attributed to incapacitation.

**The power of deterrence of the sentences.**

Increasing the severity of punishment by way of longer sentences or some other measure that entails a greater degree of incarceration could reduce crime not only by incapacitating criminals, but also by discouraging criminal behavior. This route would be more efficient than the previous one: a cell incapacitates one criminal (or several) but can dissuade many more. What do we know about the effectiveness of jails as a deterrent?

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5 of RED 2014 for a more complete review of this and other related studies.

Studies in developed countries do not provide conclusive results: while some studies find that longer sentences do not have a significant deterrent effect, others conclude the opposite. In general, the studies that find a dissuasive effect of increasing the length of sentences show that the magnitude of the impact is relatively modest. This could be due to an apparent discrepancy between the perception and reality of the toughness of sentences.

Do Latin American prisons deter crime? Is it possible to prevent crime by increasing the severity of sentences? The above-mentioned study with data on Colombia did not find a dissuasive effect of longer sentences on total crime, violent crime, or property crimes, and only found a significant impact in the case of drug trafficking and consumption related crimes. In other words, for the severity of punishment to be capable of discouraging criminal activity, it is essential that the harshness of the sentences correspond with the perception of the criminals, something which appears to not always transpire.

**The elusive aspiration of rehabilitation.**

One of the purposes for imprisoning people who have committed a crime is to facilitate their reinsertion into society and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Penitentiary institutions offer diverse rehabilitation programs, but their effectiveness is limited not only for budgetary reasons but also due to bad living conditions therein. Data on living conditions, levels of insecurity, and availability of programs that would favor the reinsertion of rehabilitated criminals into society from jails in the region confirm that each of these dimensions is at a minimum precarious.

The poor living conditions in the jails not only have generated skepticism regarding their potential for reforming prisoners, but have also favored the development of environments that can aggravate criminal conduct. The criminal environment in many jails in Latin America can foster the development of skills or contact networks related to crime within prisons, thereby increasing the risk of prisoners becoming future repeat offenders.

Some studies compare the rates of repeat offenses among individuals who have been incarcerated and individuals who have been subject to alternative custody mechanisms, such as electronic monitoring, community labor, and receiving treatment in freedom. The results indicate that these alternative mechanisms tend to favor a lesser probability of recidivism and additionally allow for significant fiscal savings.

In short, the increase in crime and growing demands for greater repression and control have contributed to a significant increase in the levels of imprisonment in the region. This increase, together with the budgetary constraints on expanding jail infrastructure, have led to alarming levels of overcrowding. This not only serves to worsen the living conditions within the penitentiaries, but also limits the potential of these institutions to reform the criminals and even favors the development of criminogenic environments that increase the risk of future offenses. If one adds to this the fact that the potential of incarceration as a dissuasive mechanism appears to be quite modest, the alternative sentencing mechanisms, such as for example electronic monitoring without imprisonment, emerge as options that are worthy of consideration. ■

# When does the State react against insecurity?

The political and institutional context is a deciding factor in citizen security policy. The authorities may or may not have electoral incentives to prioritize it; they can also face difficulties in implementing initiatives that are planned, and in the event they are ineffective, can lose the trust of the citizenry.

The last chapter of RED 2014 explores the relationship between political authorities, the public apparatus in charge of providing security services, and the citizenry. The first question addressed is the circumstances in which it is most likely for a political leader in a position of authority to truly wish to deal with the problem of insecurity. That is, when an increasing level of crime becomes politically costly? The conclusion is that it is not only necessary that insecurity be viewed as an

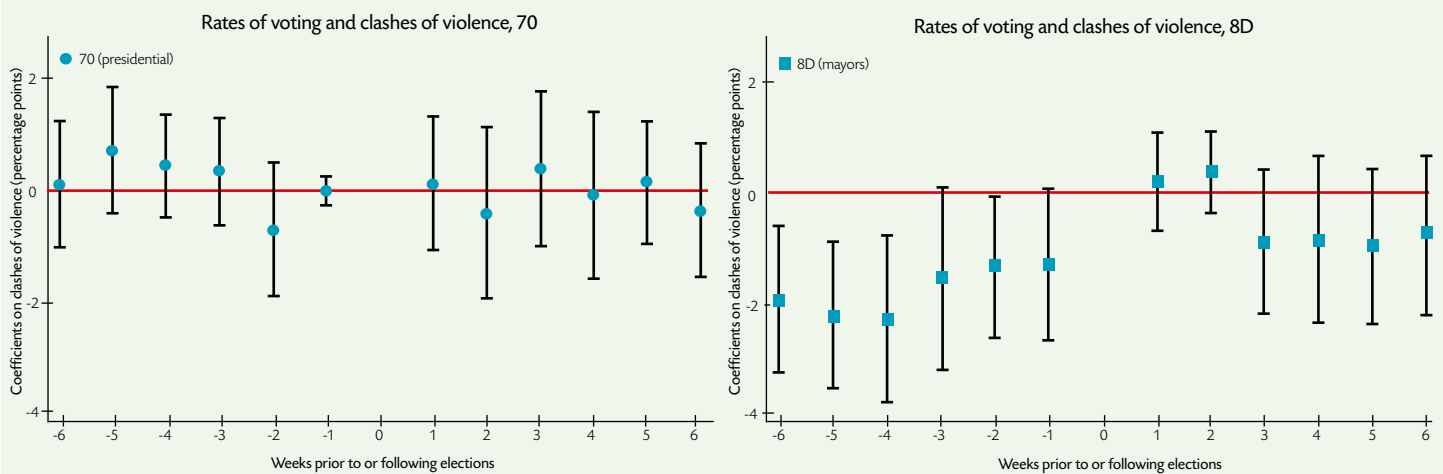
important issue by the electorate, but that citizens must also attribute part of the responsibility in the fight against crime to their political leaders.

Graph 4 shows the impact of sharp increases in violence on the electoral support for the governing party's candidate in the case of two elections in the state of Miranda in Venezuela. This relationship was calculated in terms of very small geographic areas and changes in the level of violence starting six months before through six months after the date of the elections. The left-hand panel illustrates the effects on the presidential elections of October 2013 and the right-hand panel shows the same but for the mayoral elections on that same state (December 2013). One can see that in the presidential elections

there were no electoral consequences of increases in crime prior to the date of the elections, whereas in the municipalities there were. This was due to the fact that in the presidential elections both candidates were responsible for the provision of security (the opponent was the governor of the state of Miranda at that time). In the municipalities, however, the opposing candidates were not responsible for security, whereas the incumbent mayors were, as they are in charge of municipal policies.

Another issue addressed is the State's capacity to provide security. To what degree does a decision to combat insecurity really become action? For example, the President could decide to increase the police presence in high-crime areas (such as is recommended in the discussion of Chapter 3), only to find later on that that decision cannot be executed due to restrictions in terms of personnel, equipment, or even information regarding the geographic location of the crime.

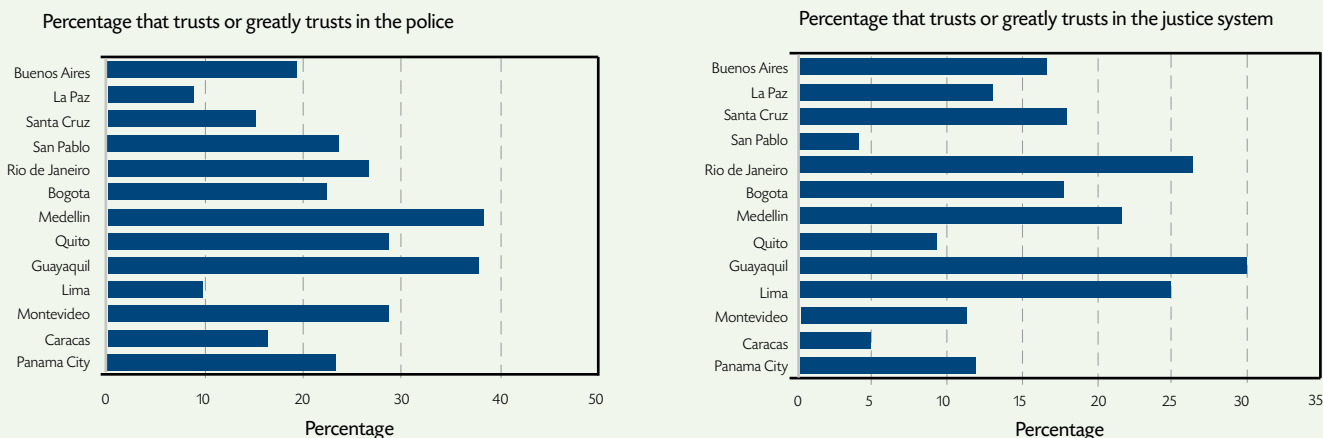
Graph 4. Clashes of violence weeks before presidential and municipal elections in the state of Miranda, Venezuela (2013)<sup>a/</sup>



a/ The panel on the left of the graph shows the coefficients and confidence intervals of 95% regarding the effect of a sharp increase in violence before or after the presidential elections held on October 7, 2012, regarding the electoral win of the governing party in percentage points with regard to the previous presidential election (held on December 3, 2006). The panel on the right presents the coefficients and confidence intervals of 95% regarding the effect of a sharp increase of violence before or after the regional elections held on December 8, 2013, about the electoral win of the incumbent mayors in the state of Miranda with regard to the previous municipal election (held on November 23, 2008).

Source: Chapter 6, RED 2014.

Graph 5. Measures of trust in the police and judicial system in Latin American cities (2013)



Source: Chapter 6, RED 2014.

The smooth functioning of a bureaucracy – that is, its ability to effectively promote society’s goods and services in a timely manner – is conditioned by the characteristics of its human capital, their incentives, and the legal and budgetary restrictions to which they are subject. The conjunction of these elements can permit the bureaucracy to effectively provide security to the citizenry by identifying the problems that most trouble the citizenry and addressing them in a proactive fashion, or it could also cause the bureaucracy to get bogged down in activities which only serve to nourish its own traditions, neglecting citizen demands and only responding in a reactive manner to emergency situations.

The third part of the chapter analyzes the relationship between the citizenry and the State as a guarantor of citizen security. Do Latin American citizens trust in the State? What happens if they do not? If the State is unable to offer security, or does so in an unequal fashion, the citizens will cease to trust in the criminal justice system and may neglect their role in public policy, cease reporting the occurrence of crimes, and take individual actions to protect themselves, such as hiring private security or restricting the hours and places where they circulate. These actions entail restrictions to individual freedom while at the same time limi-

ting the capacity of the State to provide good security services.

Both the police as well as the judicial system inspire little confidence in the citizenry (Graph 5). Even in the best of cases (Medellin and Guayaquil), the percentage of those surveyed who say they trust or greatly trust in the police does not reach 40%, and in some cases not even 10%. The degree of trust in the judicial system is even lower: with the exception of Guayaquil, Medellin, San Pablo, and Rio de Janeiro, the percentage of those surveyed who say they trust or greatly trust in the judicial system does not reach 20%. This means that the majority of Latin American citizens feel that in the event they need the services of the criminal justice system, there is a very high chance that the results will not be satisfactory in terms of being able to protect their rights.

The distrust in the institutions, which depresses the citizenry’s oversight role vis-à-vis the authorities, weakens the capacity of the State to provide effective security services, which creates a vicious circle of little security and a low level of trust. In order to escape this insecurity trap in which Latin America finds itself, it is necessary to heal the injured relationship between public servants and the citizenry. ■



To receive Focus Latin America in your email, please send an email to [investigacion@caf.com](mailto:investigacion@caf.com)

This bulletin is elaborated by CAF’s Socioeconomic Research Department.

This publication was edited by Lucila Berniell with the collaboration of Carlos Catanho and Julieta Vera.

Designed and printed by: Gatos Gemelos Communication

© 2014 CAF. All rights reserved.

*The results, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are exclusive responsibility of the authors, and cannot be attributed to CAF or to the members of its Executive Directory or to the countries they represent. CAF do not guarantee the exactitude of the data included in this publication and will not be responsible of any aspect regarding the consequences of its use.*