

Urban Violence: A Challenge to Institutional Strengthening The Case of Latin America



Laura Tedesco

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Rising violence has become a constant feature in Latin America. Mexico, in particular, has seen a dramatic increase in violence: 943 deaths related to drug trafficking were recorded in November 2008. It is a staggering figure, all the more so when compared to the death toll in Iraq, where 317 civilians lost their lives in the same month. But Mexico is unfortunately not the only case: drug mafia-led uprisings in Rio de Janeiro, police corruption in Buenos Aires, mob lynchings in Guatemala and rising crime in Caracas are just some examples of a phenomenon closely linked to the incapacity of the state, its failure to provide for basic economic needs, the breakdown of social and family networks, and a lack of appropriate political responses.

The phenomenon of violence has been linked to the increase in economic, political and social exclusion which a large part of the population endures in the region. The institutional weaknesses of the state and the poor quality of the democratic regimes of the region can also be considered causes of the problem. It might be expected, then, that economic growth and the strengthening of institutions would be sufficient to lay the foundations for a solution to the problem of urban violence. However, the matter is considerably more complicated and seems almost irresolvable, since urban violence itself undermines development and weakens the state's institutions.

Over the course of history, the state has been conceptualised in various different ways. The definition by Max Weber, according to which a state is constituted *only* when a community within a given territory *successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force*, has been widely credited as defining the essence of the state as an institution. If a community does not enjoy a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force, historians, sociologists, political analysts and politicians find it difficult to award it the rights, obligations and category of a state. The use of violence by non-state actors weakens the state by highlighting its total or partial inability to maintain that monopoly of force. These are the typical characteristics of so-called

failed states.¹ However, this paper argues that Latin America is not composed of failed states;² instead, the problems caused by urban violence indicate that there are *stateless territories* within Latin American states.

In this regard, the issue of urban violence ought to be a priority on the institutional strengthening agenda, especially at local level. Few people can be unaware of the advantages that strengthening institutions brings, though it should be emphasised that such an undertaking is both costly and long term in nature. While the reinforcement of institutions is being implemented, programmes aimed at countering urban violence at local level should play a key role, as they also contribute to strengthening local institutions. Regional programmes should also be promoted, especially those aimed at coordinating policies and exchanging information, in order to maintain reducing violence as a priority issue. Controlling and lessening urban violence is crucial to successful institutional strengthening, improving democracy, and boosting economic growth - objectives which cannot be realised when *stateless territories* persist within the state.³

Generally, the state reacts to violence with more violence, often with legal irregularities and little or no attempt to analyse the causes or resolve conflicts in a democratic and lawful manner. The use of violence by non-state actors and the state's often dubious

¹ Most of the definitions of failed states make reference to the workings of the state and its capacities, analysing its ability to provide the political goods fundamentally associated with it, such as physical security, legitimate political institutions, the running of the economy and social welfare. In consequence, a state fails and can be considered a failed state if it shows manifest shortcomings in areas such as security, its political system, the rule of law, its administrative capacities and social welfare. In such cases, the state is incapable of establishing a legitimate monopoly on the use of force and protecting its citizens from violence. Failed states have been looked at in various FRIDE papers. See, for example, Tedesco, L. (2007) "Under Pressure: States in the Global Era", *FRIDE Conference Report*, and Tedesco, L. (2007), "The Latin American State: 'Failed' or Evolving?", *FRIDE Working Paper 37*.

² Tedesco, L. (2007), *FRIDE Working paper 37*.

³ José Mariano Beltrame, Rio de Janeiro Secretary for Security, recently argued that the violence which blights the city has its origins in the absence of the state. See Mirkin, J (2008) *Como luchar contra la inseguridad ciudadana en América Latina*. Safe Democracy Foundation, www.spanish.safe-democracy.org

responses, democratically and legally speaking, are without any doubt a legacy of the region's authoritarian history.

This working paper will analyse the following questions, starting from the notion that *the essence of the state lies in its capacity to successfully claim the monopoly of use of legitimate force*:

- How can a situation in which a state is unable to defeat a violent non-state actor, and yet still maintains its category as a state both internally and internationally, be understood?
- Is it possible to distinguish between the kind of violence which incapacitates the state and the violence that merely weakens it?
- Does the state have "black holes", areas where the state is absent, not only in terms of geographical areas but also functional ones?
- Is drug trafficking, for example, undermining the capacities of the Mexican state in general?
- Or can a state survive despite the existence of stateless areas?
- How does violence affect state formation and institutional strengthening?

Finally, this study offers some recommendations and raises the possibility of cooperation between the European Union and Latin America on urban violence and the security of citizens. In a period of peace for both regions, threats remain in the shape of international terrorism and urban violence. A European-Latin American agenda should establish mechanisms to ensure systems of cooperation and an exchange of information, as well as a political dialogue on ideas and models to tackle these challenges.

The causes of urban violence

Over the last 30 years, the world's urban population has grown from 1.6 billion to 3.3 billion people and it is estimated that in the next 30 years, Third World cities will grow by another two billion people.⁴ The growth of cities is seen to promote development, but also increases pockets of poverty, inequality and disenfranchisement. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, recently stated that by the year 2030, two billion people could be living in areas of urban poverty, and that urban areas consume more energy and produce a huge amount of refuse and waste of all kinds.

The World Bank has just published its *World Development Report*, which, in comparison, paints a more optimistic picture. According to the report, cities grow quickly because they create economic opportunities for people; their integration into the world economy is fundamental and, consequently, it would be a mistake to hold back urbanisation. The transition from a primarily agricultural economy to a primarily industrial one entails mass migration from the countryside to urban regions, the transformation of a country's economic structure, and integration into the regional or global economy. The World Bank report states that many cities grow rapidly during the transition towards an industrial and service-based economy. This has been the case for cities like Santiago de Chile, Seoul, Lisbon and Sao Paulo, all of which grew rapidly until they accounted for 25 percent of the population of the countries in question, only later to stabilise when they reached a GDP per capita of 5000 dollars.⁵ This transition process benefits migrants because salaries are generally 40 or 50 percent higher in the cities for skilled workers, which encourages education for the wider population. This concentration

⁴ See *The Economist* (2008) "Lump together and like it", 8-14 November, pp. 64-65.

⁵ Ibid.

of skilled labour and economic dynamism acts as a magnet for new investment. Key to successful growth is the ability to create different economic urban centres equipped with the infrastructure necessary to link up different regions, nations and domestic economies with world markets.

However, urban and economic development entail a number of negative effects such as urban marginalisation, social exclusion, poverty, inequality, violence and poor living conditions.⁶ The presence of violence in cities cannot be explained by one single cause. Some studies have identified certain factors linked to the presence of urban violence, showing that the size, density and age of populations influence rates of violence. In this regard, some of the main factors useful in interpreting violence are of a demographic nature.

According to some studies, if more than 40 percent of the population is aged between 15 and 30, the chance of an outbreak of urban violence increases. In the 1990s, a third of countries with an especially high number of young people became embroiled in violence.⁷ The overly rapid growth of cities may also lead to an increase in violence.

The relationship between urban violence and poverty is another crucial factor in understanding how conflict is engendered. The poor are the segment of the population which is generally worst affected by violence and urban

conflict, and they can be considered as both victims and perpetrators. It is therefore important to mention that any analysis must be careful to avoid criminalising the poor. The vast majority of the poor and disenfranchised strive to make a living for themselves with great dignity. But it is when poverty and marginalisation are consolidated that the problem really becomes overwhelming. This is the case in Latin America, where persistent social exclusion, physical marginalisation and territorial concentration all feature.

Persistent social exclusion can lead to the creation of a different class of citizens, if they can be described as such, for while the poor and disenfranchised may have political and civil rights, they lack the means to use them, and have been unable to secure for themselves either social or economic rights. These subjects create a different culture, one bound up with their day-to-day existence in the shanty towns - favelas, *poblaciones*, or *villas miseria* as they are variously known - where they live. This culture, which in previous years could have been defined as a culture of poverty, is increasingly linked to violence, marginalisation and hostility. A marginalised social class is thus formed that does not make seeking change one of its political objectives and merely tries to survive in an environment predominantly hostile to its existence. In this culture, street gangs and their violent social networks soon emerge.

Some analysts have sought to identify the factors that transform a conflict into violence.⁸ While violence has been divided into economic, political and social categories, the argument here is that a whole array of factors has contributed to the increase in urban violence in Latin America. The nature of this violence is not the same as the political violence seen in the 1950s, 60s or 70s, when urban and rural armed movements tried to impose their economic, political and social models on society. The kind of violence that began in Latin America's main cities from the political and economic transitions of the 1970s onwards is more

⁶ The role of violence in the formation and transformation of the state has been studied at length. Charles Tilly analysed the role of violence and coercion in state formation and his work has inspired many studies. Likewise, he looked at the role cities play in order to interpret wider transformations in states. Conflict in his work is considered as a potential creator of order and development. Recently, the Crisis States Research Centre at the London School of Economics (LSE) has completed work aimed at understanding the different factors at play in state crises, the path to becoming a failed state, and the resistance which some states encounter in the fragmentation and debilitation process. See, for example, Tedesco, L. (2007) "The Latin American State: 'Failed' or Evolving?", *FRIDE Working Paper 37*; and the work produced by the above-mentioned *Crisis States Research Centre*, especially that carried out by Jo Beall & James Putzel, www.crisisstates.com.

⁷ Beall, J. (2008) "Cities, State Fragility/Resilience and Development: Frameworks, Findings and Thoughts Afloat", Crisis States Research Centre of the London School of Economics (LSE) www.crisisstates.com. See also *Cities in Fragile States* www.crisisstates.com

⁸ Agostini, J et al, *Understanding the Processes of Urban Violence: an analytical framework*, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, no date.

related to the social, political and economic exclusion that a large part of society suffers, which the advent of liberal democracy has not served to change. In this regard, the risk factors that contribute to the degeneration of social conflict into violence are closely linked to the permanent economic, political and social inequality that has largely remained the same since the return to democracy.

Between 1990 and 2006, the poverty rate dropped by 11.8 points and the indigence rate by 9.1 points in Latin America. For the first time since 1990, the number of people living in poverty is below 200 million.⁹ The figures for 2007 show that the number living in poverty comes to 190 million, and the number of those who are classed as indigent comes to 69 million people. The countries which stand out for the reduction of their poverty rate are Argentina, especially since 2002 when it began to recover from the 2001 recession; Venezuela, thanks to a high growth in its productivity and the implementation of social programmes; Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico and Brazil. Thus, by 2015, Latin America – including South and Central America – will be close to meeting one of the Millennium Goals, that of reducing the poverty levels of 1990 by half.

While these statistics are undoubtedly positive, it is important to highlight that after the economic and state reforms of the 1990s, 230 million people are still classified as poor or indigent. Poverty does not only affect these 230 million people, but also jeopardises and limits the future of their descendents. People from poor households tend to receive insufficient training for the workplace, and are generally only able to secure precarious employment. Children and young people who grow up in poor homes do not have a lot of opportunities to receive the education or training they require to join the labour market; they tend to get precarious jobs and their social capital is built around other poor people, often with links to crime, drug trafficking and street gangs.

Poverty and deprivation create vicious circles: the geographical concentration of the poor increasingly isolates them from the rest of society, leading to “the worsening of poverty and its reproduction over generations.”¹⁰ This undermines social cohesion, as territorial segregation reduces the chance to open up opportunities to learn to live together with inequality and creates psycho-social gaps. According to CEPAL’s Social Panorama 2007 report, a big gap exists between the different social classes with respect to their expectations for themselves and their families on matters such as social mobility, confidence in state institutions, participation and discrimination. The poor feel discriminated against and denied the opportunities they need to improve their quality of life, their education or their social capital because of their economic status.

Although the level and distribution of public expenditure in the region is still only sufficient to alleviate the most extreme poverty and inequality, there has been important progress in the field of education. According to the CEPAL report, 97 percent of children of school age attend primary school in Latin America. The figures for secondary school attendance were 69 percent for the first cycle of secondary education, 47 percent for the second and 19 percent for post secondary education.¹¹ These figures show that the limited number who make it to higher education contribute to making 5.73 the average number of years that Latin Americans under the age of 25 receive school education. In Asia the average is 6.5 years, whilst in the developed world it is 10 years.¹²

⁹ CEPAL (2007) *Panorama Social América Latina 2007* (Santiago: United Nations).

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 36.

¹² Abente Brun (2008) *Poverty, Inequality and Democracy in Latin America* (Report).

“One common problem in educational systems is the socioeconomic and geographic segmentation of quality in the provision of education. Wealthier parents prefer to send their children to schools with more resources, and those schools usually favour the entry of pupils from families with access to a better standard of living. Those from lower-income backgrounds, on the other hand, often have a very limited number of education options. The schools that take low income pupils tend to have shortcomings in terms of infrastructure, education inputs, the number of teachers and their level of training. These are almost always state schools in low-income parts of the city or rural areas, where they are practically the only schools available.”

CEPAL (2007) *Panorama Social 2007* (Santiago: United Nations), p. 40.

A process of self-exclusion thus exists (CEPAL describes it as self-selection), through which schools can transform themselves into ghettos distinguishing between social classes and reflecting regional inequalities. Poor students are therefore separated from wealthier ones and are concentrated in state schools, which are also lacking in financial resources and often have infrastructure problems. Parents with greater resources turn to private education, and are able to express their demands in an organised manner, thus furthering the advance of private education. Demands for the modification of the state education system are much more difficult for poor families to make. This process of self-exclusion is to be found in education, health, security, housing and consumption; its effect is to increase differences in society and widen the existing economic and psycho-social gap. Those who have more in society are increasingly able to access consumer goods of better quality, giving rise to the notion of “relative deprivation”, especially for the youngest in society. The gap gets wider as the wealthy isolate themselves, living in fenced off neighbourhoods, turning to private schools, private healthcare and private security services, as well as enjoying free and easy access to state-of-the-art consumer goods which are practically prohibited for the rest of the

population. This world of luxury makes the poor feel even poorer still.

Alongside this process of self-exclusion there emerges a “dissident conscience”, a term that refers to the different culture which develops among the marginalised population and tends to be expressed through violence. The dissident conscience emerges when people start to question what they gain by obeying the law. Reality demonstrates that obeying the law does not alter the economic, political or social situation of the poor and excluded; they will carry on being poor, carry on being hounded by the police as criminal suspects, ignored by governments and despised by their fellow countrymen.¹³ This realisation is crucial to understanding the way marginalised communities interpret illegal activities. Recently, a group of youths including minors carried out three robberies in a northern residential suburb of Buenos Aires, killing a father in front of his wife and children. When the police caught them, they said that that day they had gone out to work.

What is legal, what is right and what is wrong, are also interpreted in different ways depending on where you live in Latin America. For a business man, there is nothing wrong with tax evasion; for a politician, there is nothing wrong with buying votes, abusing the public position entrusted to you by distributing jobs to friends and family, or using public funds for self-gain. In the same vein, an unemployed youth, or a minor addicted to drugs with no education and no future on the horizon, sees nothing wrong with doing a day’s shift by robbing in residential areas. In this respect, violence cannot solely be explained by social marginalisation. Poverty is only one of the reasons why people steal.

¹³ Tedesco, L. (2000) “La ñata contra el vidrio: urban violence and democratic governability in Argentina”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19: 527-545.

Table 1
Income distribution by household
National total

		40% poorest	Next 30%	20% before richest 10%	10% richest
Argentina	2006	16.9	23.6	25.4	34.1
Bolivia	2002	9.5	21.3	28.3	41.0
Brazil	2006	12.2	18.8	25.2	44.0
Chile	2006	14.6	21.5	26.7	37.2
Colombia	2005	12.2	21.4	25.4	41.0
Ecuador	2006	14.5	23.7	25.9	36.0
Mexico	2006	16.9	24.1	26.1	32.9
Paraguay	2005	15.0	23.9	26.5	34.7
Peru	2003	14.9	23.7	27.9	33.6
Uruguay	2005	21.6	25.0	25.6	27.8
Venezuela	2006	17.4	27.0	28.3	27.4

Source: Table compiled by author from statistics sourced in CEPAL (2007) *Panorama Social de América Latina 2007*. CEPAL draws up these tables based on the data collected from their special surveys of households in the respective countries.

With the exception of Uruguay and Venezuela, all of the countries included in Table 1 show very unequal income distribution patterns, with the poorest 40 percent receiving less than 20 percent of national wealth. The Gini coefficient measures income distribution: when equality is absolute, the co-efficient is equal to 0, and the co-efficient rises upwards towards 1 as distribution becomes more unequal. Table 2 indicates the inequality affecting some of the countries in the region.

Table 2
Gini Coefficient for national total

Argentina	2006	0.510
Bolivia	2002	0.614
Brazil	2006	0.602
Chile	2006	0.522
Colombia	2005	0.584
Ecuador	2006	0.526
Mexico	2006	0.506
Paraguay	2005	0.536
Peru	2004	0.505
Uruguay	2005	0.452
Venezuela	2006	0.441

Source: Table compiled by author from statistics sourced in CEPAL (2007) *Panorama Social de América Latina 2007*. CEPAL compiles these tables based on data collected from their special surveys of households in the respective countries

Uruguay and Venezuela are once again the exception, with co-efficients below 0.5. This economic and social pattern is the main risk factor for turning social conflict into violence. Another risk factor is if the state abandons security provision at local or provincial level. In many cases, the police force and the justice system are highly inefficient or lack the resources to adequately fight crime. In some cases, the security forces form part of the problem of violence; in others, they take measures which indirectly incite violence. For example, banning street vendors in Bogota left many men and women from the fringes of society without a source of income. Instead of legalising and controlling an activity which provides a living to poor and excluded families, the ban may actually push many of these desperate and marginalised people into crime and violence.¹⁴

Drug trafficking is another risk factor that contributes to increasing violence. The drug mafias buy off judges, policemen, soldiers and politicians. Mexico is a country currently suffering a process of *colombianisation*. The prominence of the narcotics industry and the military power it possesses imposes a culture of silence, helping perpetuate its power. In many cases, the drug mafias collaborate with local community organisations, such as in the case of some *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, where different mafias look after security or support community projects in exchange for the silence of the local population.¹⁵

¹⁴ Agostini, J et al *Understanding the Processes of Urban Violence: an analytical framework*, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, no date provided.

¹⁵ Winton, A (2004) "Urban violence: a guide to the literature", *Environment and Urbanization*, 16: 165-184.

Risk factors & the vicious circle of violence

- Lack of state legitimacy.
- Monopolisation of access to economic activities.
- Economic reforms or crises which lead to a rapid rise in unemployment and a further widening of inequality levels.
- The marginalisation of a large part of the population understood as physical marginalisation, economic and social exclusion, and the inability to exercise civil, political economic and social rights effectively.
- Inability to access basic public services.
- Illegal drug trade - the conception of what is legal begins to be felt in different ways by different social classes.
- Persistent inequality in income distribution.
- Psycho-social gaps widen, different expectations are held by different social classes, opportunities are denied, discrimination felt, and the emergence of a dissident conscience and a feeling of relative deprivation take hold.

The impact of urban violence

Between the 1980s and mid 1990s, the homicide rate in the region rose by more than 80 percent.¹⁶ Between 2000 and 2005, violent deaths continued to rise in El Salvador, increasing from 37 to 55 murders per 100,000 people, and in Guatemala from 25.8 to 42 per 100,000. Conversely, it dropped in Colombia, from 62.7 to 39.3 per 100,000; in Honduras, from 49.9 to 35 per 100,000; and in Argentina, from 7.2 to 5.8 per 100,000.¹⁷ In Venezuela, the number of murders rose by 11 percent between 2007 and 2008. According to figures from the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, murders have risen threefold there since 1998.¹⁸

The homicide rates in Latin America are double those of Africa and much higher than European or North American equivalents. A recent study carried out by the Information Technology Network of Latin America (Red

de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana) revealed that among 83 countries studied, the four countries registering the highest total numbers of murders were Colombia, El Salvador, Venezuela and Guatemala.¹⁹ The report makes the point that the figures in the study only reflect murder rates and do not include the unknown numbers of survivors affected by violence who live with physical injury or psychological damage.

Table 3
Homicide rate by continent
per 100,000 inhabitants

Africa	10.1
North America	5.6
Latin America	19.9
Asia	2.1
Caribbean	16.3
Europe	1.2
Oceania	1.3

Source: Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana (2008) *Mapa de la Violencia: Los jóvenes de América Latina 2008, Sumario ejecutivo* (Brazil: Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana).

Table 4
Number of homicides (Recent years available)

	Year	Young ²⁰	Not Young	Total
Argentina	2004	624	1,620	2,244
Brazil	2005	17,944	29,775	45,578
Chile	2004	211	642	853
Colombia	2005	5,587	13,288	18,875
Costa Rica	2005	72	229	301
Cuba	2005	124	558	682
Ecuador	2005	689	1,718	2,407
El Salvador	2005	1,241	2,036	3,278
Guatemala	2004	1,359	2,044	3,403
Mexico	2005	2,108	7,744	9,852
Nicaragua	2005	199	372	571
Panama	2004	100	222	322
Paraguay	2004	256	508	764
R. Dom.	2004	154	344	498
Uruguay	2004	36	116	152
Venezuela	2004	2,965	4,383	7,348

Source: Compiled by the author from statistics taken from Waiselfisz, J. J. (2008) *Mapa de la Violencia: los Jóvenes en América Latina*, (Brazil: Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana).

¹⁹ Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana (2008) *Mapa de la Violencia: Los jóvenes de América Latina 2008, Sumario Ejecutivo* (Brazil: Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana).

²⁰ Between 15 and 24 years old.

¹⁶ Buvinic, M. (2008) "Un balance de la violencia en América Latina: los costos y las acciones para la prevención", in *Pensamiento Iberoamericano* (2008), *Seguridad y violencia en América Latina* (Madrid: AECID y Fundación Carolina), pp. 37-54.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 40.

¹⁸ Lecumberri, B. (2009) "Magia contra Delincuencia", *Foreign Policy Spanish edition*, February-March 2009.

Of the 83 countries analysed, the 15 with the highest total murder rate are found in Latin America and, in the case of the murder of young people, the five countries that head the list are also in that region. The figures suggest that the homicide rate rose in El Salvador, reaching 55.3 for every 100,000 inhabitants, and 45.2 for every 100,000 in Guatemala by the year 2006. Honduras also saw an increase, moving from 35.1 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2005 to 42.2 in 2006 and 49.9 in 2007. Colombia maintained the downward trend of its murder figures, dropping from 43.8 per 100,000 in 2005 to 37.3 in 2006 and subsequently to 37 in 2007. Brazil, for its part, remained more or less unchanged with a rate of around 25.5 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants both in 2005 and in 2006.²¹ As per the 2008 report by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), the murder rate in Central America as a whole was 29.3 per cent, while in South America it was 25.9 per cent.

Urban violence expresses itself in different ways in the region: in Central America, street gangs or *maras* are the main problem; in Mexico the crime related to drug trafficking increases; while in South America the type of violence that predominates is murders, kidnappings and robbery.

The Central American reality was radically altered with the arrival of a number of young people expelled from the United States dating back to the year 1992. After the Los Angeles riots of the same year, the police came to the conclusion that the majority of the looting and violence had been carried out by a group known as the *Mara Salvatrucha* made up of young Salvadorians. The state of California imposed draconian measures with respect to the gangs as a consequence of the riots, with sentences handed down to minors as if they were adults and hundreds of young *latinos* ending up in jail.²² In 1996, Congress passed a law stipulating that foreigners sentenced to prison for more than a year were to be repatriated to their countries of origin, and that those

possessing US nationality were to be stripped of it and repatriated on completing their sentences.

Around 20,000 young people were repatriated to their countries of origin between the year 2000 and 2004 as a result of this law, despite many having lived in the US for most of their lives, having fled Central America's civil wars with their families back in the 1980s. Deportations continued, ultimately increasing the number of *maras* in El Salvador by 20,000 and in Honduras by 40,000. These youngsters have reproduced the social organisation of the gangs and helped to introduce drugs such as crack and cocaine in their new countries.

One of the social costs of violence is the paradoxical creation of social capital. This would normally be considered positive, but social capital created around crime and violence is perverse. The *maras* or gangs of violent youths help integrate young people into groups and communities who have their own codes, creating a sense of identity for them that they have never experienced before either at school or in the family. The *maras* emanate something almost mystical, giving young people a "raison d'être". The gangs create a feeling of power in members, giving them a purpose and a role that neither the state through its institutions nor the family have been able to provide. The *maras* organise themselves in almost familial structures, with strictly demarcated and respected hierarchies. Likewise, the illegal activities they carry out are an important source of economic revenue.²³

From the year 2002 onwards, the Central American governments began to implement programmes against violence such as *Mano Dura* in El Salvador, *Puño de Acero* in Honduras and *Escoba* in Guatemala. These programmes were repressive and have not helped to decrease violence, as can be seen by the rising homicide rate in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala in recent years.

²¹ Waiselfisz, J. J. (2008) *Mapa de la Violencia: los Jóvenes en América Latina* (Brasil: Red de Información Tecnológica Latinoamericana), p. 118.

²² Arana, A. (2005) "How the street gangs took Central America", *Foreign Affairs*, May-June, www.foreignaffairs.org.

²³ For an analysis of the situation in Central America, see Fruhling, P. (2008) "Violencia, Corrupción Judicial y Democracias Frágiles. Reflexiones sobre la situación en Centroamérica" in Solís, L y Rojas Aravena, F (eds) (2008) *Crimen organizado en América Latina y el Caribe* (FLACSO/ Catalonia: Santiago de Chile).

Central American countries combine fundamentally weak democratic systems, the incapacity of states to guarantee fundamental citizen rights, a corrupt, repressive, and generally deficient legal system, and economic deprivation. In the case of Guatemala, for example, crimes are rarely solved, which means offenders run little risk of being caught and punished. This situation is due to a lack of coordination between the police and the judiciary, the result being that criminal investigations as such are almost non-existent.²⁴ While at first sight this may look like a problem merely for the police or the judiciary, in fact, what it reveals are grave deficiencies or even the absence of the rule of law. The incapacity to provide its citizens security, access to justice and equality before the law reveal the difficulties inherent in the emergence of democracy. Such states thus co-exist with territories – which in some cases involve institutions or sectors – where the state is absent.²⁵

Buenos Aires has also experienced an increase in violence, especially with regard to the participation of youngsters under the age of 18. According to figures from the Justice Department, proceedings were initiated against 23,105 minors in the year 2000, and by 2007 that figure had risen to 29,371. A survey of minors carried out by the University of Cordoba between 2006 and 2007 revealed that 34 percent consume alcohol, 21 percent marijuana, 18 percent pills mixed with alcohol, 14 percent glue and 7 percent cocaine.²⁶ One of the most frequently used substances is the *paco*, a low cost drug made from cocaine residuals with kerosene and sulphuric acid. In Argentina, the increase in urban violence has not been accompanied by a reform of the security forces. Recently, a neighbourhood in Buenos Aires known as Fuerte Apache was the scene of clashes between police and inhabitants after the murder of a policeman. The

combination of the consequences of the economic reforms of the 1990s and the crisis of 2001 has increased poverty, inequality and violence.

In this context, 63 percent of Latin Americans feel less secure than they used to, according to the most recent data from *Latinobarómetro*.²⁷ Only 9 percent of the population believe the country where they live is getting safer. While in Nicaragua 21 percent of the population feels the security situation is getting better, in Argentina only 2 percent think their country is safer. 73 percent of Latin Americans are afraid of becoming victims of violence. Between 1995 and 2007, the number of people who claimed to have been a victim of crime rose by 9 percent. In 2007, 38 percent of Latin Americans stated they had been victims of crime. Argentina and Venezuela have the highest percentages, with almost 50 percent of inhabitants (47 and 49 percent respectively) claiming to have been on the receiving end of crime in the previous twelve months. For its part, Panama has the lowest figures, with only 14 percent of those surveyed having suffered a crime.

According to the *Latinobarómetro* report, 75 percent of the inhabitants of the region say the conflict between rich and poor is the biggest conflict the region faces. A region that does not represent a global threat suffers a threat at the domestic level, making it one of the most insecure parts of the world. The threat continues to be inequality, inequity, the gap between the few rich people and the many poor. In the face of this threat, state capacity has weakened, most notably in the development of mechanisms to prevent and to solve social conflicts and in relation to organised crime. With the state's capacity to effectively provide security in jeopardy, private security firms have increased; this process, which has been described as the privatisation of security, serves to further highlight the above-mentioned process of self-exclusion. Inhabitants with high levels of income turn to private security firms, thus leaving the demand for improved security in the hands of the poor and socially excluded, whose chances of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ These situations are not unique to Central America, see Tedesco, L. (2005) "The Democratic State and Human Rights in Argentina and Brazil", in Assies, W., Calderón, M y Salman, Ton (eds) (2005) *Citizenship, Political Culture and State Transformation in Latin America* (Dutch University Press and El Colegio de Michoacán).

²⁶ Lanata, J. (2008) ADN del pibe chorro, *Crítica de Argentina*, 16-11-2008.

²⁷ See the 2008 report by *Latinobarómetro* at: www.latinobarometro.org

successfully articulating social and political demands are practically non-existent.

These are the scenarios brought about by an absent state replaced by private organisations, whether businesses or NGOs. As the use of private security grows in rich neighbourhoods, in the poor ones across the city, in the *favelas* or *villas miserias*, new armed actors appear on the scene, such as the drugs mafias who control security for the inhabitants and cooperate by giving subsidies to civilian projects in exchange for the complicity and silence of those living there. In a context like this, the state is further and further away from providing security for its citizens. However, these processes can be transformed when the state, and most of all local government, implement certain measures.

State capacity

The states of the region have tried applying various measures to reduce the phenomenon of urban violence. Historically, Colombia has been one of the most violent countries in Latin America. In 1988, 21,129 murders were recorded in the country; in 1991, the figure was 28,284; in 2002, 27,837; while in 2007 it had fallen back to 15,748.²⁸ Some initiatives at regional level helped reduce the number of homicides. The three most violent cities in Colombia were Bogota, Medellin and Cali. In the case of Bogota, the homicide rate began to fall from 1994 onwards following the death of Pablo Escobar the previous year. A multi-disciplinary and multi-causal approach saw different programmes aimed at strengthening institutions and creating a consensus implemented by the City Council, along with an increase in security resources. Likewise, education programmes were established in order to change the

²⁸ Vargas Velásquez, A. y García Pinzón, V. (2008) "Violencia urbana, seguridad ciudadana y políticas públicas: la reducción de la violencia en las ciudades de Bogotá y Medellín (Colombia) 1991-2007", in *Pensamiento Iberoamericano* (2008), *Seguridad y violencia en América Latina* (Madrid: AECID y Fundación Carolina), pp. 249-270.

perception that violence was a respectable option or a normal part of life.

From 1995 measures were introduced to restrict carrying weapons at weekends and holidays, along with disarmament programmes which ran between 1995-1997 and 2000-2003. During the Christmas period of 1996, the *regalos por armas* campaign, supported by the private sector and the Catholic Church, was especially successful. The results saw the homicide rate plummet by as much as 26.7 percent in comparison with the Christmas period of 1995.²⁹ Restrictions on the consumption of alcohol were also applied; in 1995 the so called *hora zanahoria* was imposed, meaning bars and off-licenses should be closed by 1.00 am. In 2002 the time was extended until 3.00 am. Various local institutions were also created in order to analyse the matter of violence, such as the *Subsecretaría para Asuntos de Convivencia y Seguridad Ciudadana* (Undersecretary for Coexistence and Citizen Security) or the *Consejo Distrital de Seguridad* (District Council for Security)

Another success story involves the programmes *ventana rota* and *tolerancia cero*, which are related to the reaction from the local government and community to acts of urban violence. The philosophy here is that if a smashed window in a building is not quickly repaired, then there will be other broken windows, rubbish will gather inside the building, and it will become a place ripe for crime. So a quick response is required to avoid the deterioration of infrastructure. What is important to note here is that three mayors put these various policies to work, creating continuity and consensus in the community, which in the long run contributed to controlling and decreasing the levels of violence on the streets of Bogota. Attacking urban violence from a multi-causal perspective would seem to be one of the keys to reducing violence.

Local government in Sao Paulo has also been successful, with the state homicide rate dropping by 29

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 258.

percent between 1999 and 2004, and the city rate falling by as much as 41 percent. This drop is partly owing to an integrated information system that has facilitated police action with improvements in public transport, social programmes and job centres in areas with a high level of violence, the participation of communities in prevention programmes and restrictions on the sale of alcohol.³⁰ In Diadema, a city in the state of Sao Paulo, the restriction on the sale of alcohol after 10 pm helped bring about a decrease in the homicide rate, which fell from 76 per 100,000 in 2000 to 35 per 100,000 in 2004.³¹ In Venezuela, a project on Youth and Children's Orchestras aimed at 265,000 children and young people from poor households was launched. Training young people and providing them with education by means of an apprenticeship can also help keep them away from drugs, truancy, street gangs and delinquency in general.

The case of Mexico

While some countries in the region are implementing programmes to tackle violence, the case of Mexico is surprising because of its rapid fall into a spiral of drug-related violence. Figures for 2008 show that up to 9th December there were 5,376 murders related to organised crime and drug trafficking. In 2007, the figure was 2,477. November 2008 was the most violent month of the year with 943 murders.³² President Felipe Calderón established the fight against organised crime and drug trafficking as one of his main priorities. One of the issues Calderón has sought to tackle is the expulsion of corrupt police officers from the Mexican police forces. The president recently confessed that almost half of the nation's serving municipal and national police officers have been described as "not recommended".³³

In addition, Calderón has involved the army in the fight against the drug mafia, making it increasingly difficult to smuggle drugs across Mexican territory and into the United States. This has had a negative effect on Mexico, because the result is that large quantities of cocaine never get out of the country and end up on the Mexican market instead. The price of drugs has come down as the cartels try to make the drug accessible to Mexico's young people, and the different cartels are currently locked in a fight for the control of Mexico's states and cities. This has led to an increase of violence as the Mexican cartels fight to establish their power on the market and control politicians and the local security forces. The state of Michoacán has witnessed an increase in violence by a group called "La Familia", which is believed to operate in 83 of the 113 state municipalities, controlling gambling, piracy, the sale of firearms and the illegal sawmills. "La Familia" offers protection by providing an *obligatory* service to local businesses for between 2,500 and 25,000 dollars.³⁴

Paradoxically, since 2006 when President Calderón involved the army in the fight against drug dealers, the total number of deaths has risen.³⁵ Kidnappings have increased too: 650 people were illegally abducted up until November 2008 and 130 of them continue to be held in captivity. Only weeks before he died in an aeroplane crash, Home Affairs Secretary Juan Camilo Mouriño (Secretario de Gobernación del Gobierno) accepted that the Mexican state could not guarantee security and that the police forces were infiltrated from top to bottom by organised crime.³⁶ The president himself has acknowledged that certain basic state functions, such as the monopoly on the use of legitimate force or tax collecting, are now contested by criminal mafias in some northern border areas.³⁷ The federal district, along with states such as Michoacán and Chihuahua and cities like Sinaloa, Morelia, Tijuana

³⁴ *El País*, 1-10-2008.

³⁵ From January 1st 2006 when Calderón assumed the Presidency, 69,7 tons of cocaine have been seized; 3,655 tons of marijuana; 12,0550 cars; 209 boats; 315 airplanes; more than 27,000 weapons; 2,000 grenades; and 3 million rounds of ammunition. There were 38,247 people arrested with ties to the drugs industry in the same period. *El País*, 23-11-2008.

³⁶ *El País*, 1-10-2008.

³⁷ *El País*, 23-11-2008.

³⁰ Buvinic, M. (2008) "Un balance de la violencia en América Latina: los costos y las acciones para la prevención", in *Pensamiento Iberoamericano* (2008), *Seguridad y violencia en América Latina* (Madrid: AECID y Fundación Carolina), pp. 48.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 49.

³² *El País*, 9-12-2008.

³³ *El País*, 28-11-2008.

and Ciudad Juárez, have all been terribly affected by organised crime.

Located close to the US border, and by now sadly notorious for the almost 400 unsolved cases of murdered women since 1993, Ciudad Juárez witnessed more than 1,000 of the 5,376 murders attributed to the drug wars in the year 2008. Tijuana, for its part, was the scene of the recent murder of a high ranking policeman from the Mexican National Police force, and also of a notable case of repression in the city's prison, where a large number of inmates with mafia and drug trafficking links are held. One of the prisoners was recently beaten to death by prison guards, sparking a riot that culminated in the deaths of a total of 19 inmates. The police ultimately accepted responsibility for the disturbances and the loss of life.

One of the main problems that law and order faces in Mexico is the highly fragmented nature of the police force. Institutional arrangements in Mexico mean that every city council and municipality has the right to set up its own police force, which results in around 1,640 official police bodies.

The geographic location of Mexico is also somewhat problematic. While the northern US border has historically been a focal point for contraband activities, the southern Central America frontier is an obligatory transit area for those fleeing from a region living under the threat of poverty, revolution, armed conflict, violence and natural disasters. The flow of people, arms and goods takes place almost without interruption and, since the 1980s, has been accompanied by a rise in drug trafficking.³⁸ According to figures from the US government, an average of 275 tons of cocaine enter across the Mexican border.³⁹ Drugs, human and arms traffic have become a matter of national and transnational security, leading the United States to launch the Merida Initiative, a

³⁸ Benítez Manaus, R y Sánchez, G (2008) "Las fronteras de México y el crimen organizado" in Solís, L y Rojas Aravena, F (eds) (2008) *Crimen organizado en América Latina y el Caribe* (FLACSO Catalonia: Santiago de Chile).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

programme to help Mexico to fight crime with a budget of 1.4 billion dollars over a three-year period.

As Mexico has started to look more and more like Colombia, the latter has recorded a notable drop in its murder rate. The figures for 2006 were the lowest recorded in two decades. This can be explained by the demobilisation of some paramilitary groups, and negotiations with other guerrilla groups. In spite of these efforts, kidnapping is still a critical problem; at present there are still more than 4,200 people kidnapped in Colombia.⁴⁰ In addition, there are approximately another 30,000 people whose whereabouts are unknown. In recent years, around 1,729 dead bodies have been recovered, of which only 507 have been identified.⁴¹ Despite the efforts undertaken by Alvaro Uribe's government, Colombia still has one of the highest homicide rates in the region, easily surpassing the figures for Mexico.

A regional approach

The consequences and the costs of urban violence are obstacles to economic development, yet a lack of economic development and the unequal distribution of wealth are risk factors leading to violence. The institutional weakness of states leaves the door open to violence, and is one of the causes of the incapacity of institutions to resolve conflicts and prevent violence. A spiral thus takes shape, a vicious circle whereby urban violence becomes both cause and consequence of the incapacity of the state and the absence of economic development. As long as there is no shift in the unequal distribution of wealth, it will be almost impossible to root out violence. However, local programmes have also shown that alternatives do exist which are able to keep young people away from violence.

Regional initiatives should be promoted, because they tend to create permanent discussion forums through

⁴⁰ See "Las voces del secuestro", www.lasvocesdelsecuestro.com

⁴¹ *El Mundo*, 28-11-2008.

which the profile of violence as a domestic policy priority can be maintained. In 2003, the Declaration on Security in the Americas was signed, highlighting the main threats to continental security - terrorism, organised transnational crime, drugs, corruption, money laundering and arms trafficking.⁴² In Mexico, in October 2008, the Organization of American States called the first Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Public Security in the Americas. The aim of this meeting was to create a permanent regional space for discussion and the exchange of information, with a view to coordinated action in the future. Although this is a recent initiative, it should help to establish a regional agenda with coordinated policies and the exchange of successful initiatives.⁴³

The costs of violence

- Hinders economic development.
- Normalises violence.
- Reduces the formation of a country's human capital as some citizens become involved in crime instead of exploring their intellectual capacities.
- Creates perverse social capital.
- Creates fear in civil society, limiting and diminishing the quality of life of citizens.
- Leaves long lasting effects on the victims of violence.
- Reduces foreign investment.
- Leads to an increase in law and order enforcement spending, diverting resources away from productive areas.
- Increases mortality.
- Widens the gap between rich and poor.
- Produces an intergenerational transmission of violence.
- Increases the consumption of drugs and alcohol, creating dependencies in young people involved in violence.
- Negatively impacts on the healthcare system by increasing mortality rates; in addition, alcohol and drug consumption can lead to mental health problems.

⁴² Benítez Manus, R y Sánchez, G (2008) "Las fronteras de México y el crimen organizado", in Solís, L and Rojas Aravena, F (eds) (2008) *Crimen organizado en América Latina y el Caribe* (FLACSO/ Catalonia: Santiago de Chile), p. 177.

⁴³ See Tedesco, L. (2008) "Violencia Urbana: Soluciones Locales y Regionales", *FRIDE Policy Brief*.

Conclusions and recommendations: Is there a need for a European-Latin American agenda?

The causes of urban violence in Latin America are a combination of poverty and persistent inequality in wealth distribution together with the establishment of liberal democracy that saw all hopes of modifying and narrowing the gap between rich and poor frustrated. While in previous decades "the majority of those politically excluded were workers fighting to be granted the status of citizens, nowadays, the majority of the socially excluded are the unemployed or those employed in precarious jobs who concentrate their energies on trying to survive."⁴⁴ The political equality which democracy established has not led to an end of economic inequality.

The authoritarian legacies that survive after the arrival of democracy, such as the working practices, habits and uses of the security forces and the institutional weakness of the state, accentuate the inability of governments to resolve conflicts and prevent violence. Yet this incapacity to provide citizens with security does not mean that Latin American states are failed states, nor does it call into question their essence as states, not even in those examples where the homicide rate is very high or where organised crime and drug trafficking pose particular threats.

While it may be true that these states do not guarantee security, they can be considered states where the rule of law is discontinuous, where part of the territory or

⁴⁴ Nun, J. (2000) *Democracia ¿Gobierno del pueblo o gobierno de los políticos?* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica), p. 10.

the functions of the state are threatened - with a certain degree of success - by armed groups. But the other capacities of these states remain intact and in working order and the rest of their national territory is free from the threat of violence; thus these states continue to function internally and internationally as states. This is the case of Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, where the *maras* and the drug warlords threaten and diminish the capacities of the state without reaching the point at which institutions break down completely. In this regard, it could be said there are *stateless territories* within the state. The case of Colombia has demonstrated that states can survive historic processes like these and that ultimately a state can only be strengthened by the reconstruction of its institutions.

Violence can form part of a historical process of state formation; however, urban violence and the cases presented here are not clearly related to the formation of states since violence is not accompanied by successfully articulated political, economic or social demands. In other words, if the main cause of urban violence is the combination of poverty and an unequal distribution of wealth, it could be said that, ultimately, violence is a demand for the transformation of social relations, the social contract and the state. However, in practice this type of violence weakens the state since it does not intend to transform and transcend an inefficient state, but instead is a weapon used for short-term gain and to guarantee survival. In the case of organised crime and drug trafficking, both produce sufficient violence to weaken the state. Not even when they play an administrative role by providing help in the shanty towns or poor neighbourhoods can they be considered to have replaced the state, because their ultimate objective is the illegal reproduction of wealth.

Despite these considerations, nobody can fail to recognise that illegal groups, the *maras* or street gangs, often help to integrate young people, creating an identity for them which neither the state nor their families have been able to provide. The social exclusion, drugs, police persecution, widespread discrimination and wealth which surround these young people leave

them without any sense of value for their own lives, a disregard widely shared by the rest of society and the state towards them.

Institutional strengthening is crucial: not only the strengthening and the democratisation of the state's repressive apparatus, but also of those institutions which form part of the lives of these marginalised populations through education, training and prevention programmes. As institutional strengthening programmes are costly and lengthy, in the short term local initiatives should be promoted. Regional organisations, donor governments, the European Union and international bodies should include the fight against violence in their agendas, identifying it as a key factor in aiding the strengthening of institutions. The vicious circle of social exclusion-poverty-disenfranchisement and violence, which weakens the state and holds back development, can be broken in this way.

The key to resolving urban violence is to reintegrate young people by strengthening institutions, creating consensus and increasing the resources dedicated to education, training, prevention and security. As has been highlighted here, local programmes can be successful. Local governments have to reach cross-party consensus in relation to prevention and security policies in order to ensure that changes in the electoral fortunes of one party do not lead to a wider negative effect for the issue of urban violence.

Two types of programmes would seem to be the most appropriate: those which restrict the carrying of weapons and alcohol consumption, and training and prevention programmes backed up by help in accessing the labour market through job centres, trade apprenticeships, improvement of neighbourhoods and communities. Adapting the education system to the skills demanded by the labour market is also worth serious consideration. Another kind of programme aimed at the wider population should emphasise the causes and consequences of social differences and seek to decriminalise poverty and build a consensus on the need to modify social structures for the benefit of all. For all the self-exclusion the higher earners in society

try to bring about, the poverty, marginalisation and fear that form part of the landscape beyond the locked gates of their private neighbourhoods do not change. One of the threats which the normalisation of violence brings is that it inevitably leads to an increase in authoritarianism and the abuse of power by the security forces, affecting the quality of life of all in the long term.

The European Union is not completely free from the problem of urban violence which, while associated with poverty and marginalisation in Latin America, usually has an ethnic or religious dimension and often involves immigrants in Europe. In Latin America, the status of immigrant or minority is less clear cut, but not any less certain for that reason. It is not difficult to imagine a more conflict-ridden social scenario in most European countries in the wake of the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the high levels of unemployment to which it has led. For example, British workers recently showed their determination to be first in line for scarce new jobs by protesting against the hiring of foreign workers.

Both regions could draft a bilateral cooperation agenda in the fight against urban violence and marginalisation. In Latin America, local integration programmes have had considerable success, such as the case of Bogota, which has managed to bring down its homicide rate. This cooperation would be based mainly on exchanging information and diagnosing the most pressing inner city realities of the day, as well as exchanging programmes aimed at fighting violence under the rule of law and in a democratic state. A bi-regional scheme could be based on the OAS regional initiative and the Euro-Latin-American Peace and Security Charter, an instrument which does not specifically include citizen security, despite that being a pillar of security.

A shared agenda for both regions could involve exchanging local government initiatives and ideas, the drafting of a bilateral agenda of inter-continental cooperation in the fight against urban violence and marginalisation, the promotion and exchange of information on education programmes, and sharing

know-how on reliably and consistently obtaining information on the criminal realities of the day. It could also include establishing modernisation and transparency programmes for the security forces, an increase in police training based on the exchange of successful experiences, and finally, the promotion and strengthening of citizen participation in public security plans and programmes.

If the key to solving the problem lies at local level, based on a mixture of training, prevention and security, then the key to getting these programmes up and running may lie in the degree of violence and exclusion a society is prepared to tolerate. For how much longer, and by what means, can a democracy with high levels of social exclusion and violence expect to sustain itself? In such a context, the state is weakened and democracy ultimately breaks down.

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FRIDE

This Working Paper is a continuation of previous FRIDE studies by the same author on state formation in the developing world. Here, Laura Tedesco offers an analysis of the impact of urban violence on institutional strengthening in Latin American countries. Under the assumption that *the essence of the state lies in its capacity to successfully claim a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical violence*, this study analyses the increase in violence in Central America, Mexico and South American cities such as Buenos Aires or Caracas. The conclusion drawn is that the most successful programmes are those that have been designed and implemented locally. The study also seeks to promote an agenda for citizen security between Europe and Latin America that would emphasise the importance of the exchange of ideas and local prevention programmes.

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