

## **Constructing Citizen Security in the Americas**

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Inter-American Dialogue

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### **Summary: Citizen Security at Risk**

Public security is today the issue that most troubles the citizens of nearly every country of Latin America and the Caribbean. According to survey data,<sup>1</sup> some 27 percent of the region's population identified crime as the most important problem confronting their country in 2010—more than any other issue, including the economy and unemployment, which had long been the dominant concerns. Crime and public safety was the top issue in 11 of the 18 countries polled.

These perceptions of ordinary citizens are not surprising. They reflect the growing violence in their nations and the increasing penetration of organized crime across Latin America and the Caribbean. Compared to other regions of the world, homicide rates have long been high in Latin America--but they have surged in the past decade and are now exceeded only by those in war-torn African states. Five nations of Latin America and the Caribbean (El Salvador, Venezuela, Jamaica, Guatemala and Honduras) are among the most violent countries in the world, with murder rates higher than 40 per 100,000 people, compared to an incidence per 100,000 of less than 6 in the US, 3 in Europe, and 2 in China.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Latinobarómetro Annual Report 2010.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Justice, "Crime in the United States 2009.," UNODC International Homicide Data "Intentional homicide, rate per 100,000 population, by sub-region," 2004. And UNODC International homicide data, "International homicide, rate per 100,000 population," 2010.

Crime and violence are costly in many other ways as well. Quantifying those costs is difficult and imprecise, but estimates are above 12 percent of annual GDP for some countries and above 5 percent for most of the region.<sup>3</sup> Direct costs include the burdens injuries and premature death place on health care systems; government spending on police, courts, prisons, and other security measures; and, in the private sector, property losses and added security expenses.

The indirect costs may be even greater. The insecurity associated with high levels of criminal activity makes investors, foreign and domestic, wary and often frightens away tourists. Crime and violence, and the corruption that almost always accompanies it, breeds mistrust among individuals and between citizens and the state—in some places discrediting the political and social institutions essential for effective governance and potentially undercutting support for democracy. Crime and violence tend to place the largest burden on the poor, who lack the resource either to protect themselves or readily recover from losses they suffer.

Citizen security is under threat across Latin America and the Caribbean. It demands urgent attention both within Latin America and from the international community.

### **A Varied and Differentiated Threat**

Elevated levels of crime and violence, are broad, region-wide problems that affect almost every country of Latin America in varying degrees. Safeguarding public security, however, is a challenge that

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<sup>3</sup> The World Bank, *Crime and Violence in Central America: a Development Challenge*, 2011; Soares and Naritomi *Understanding High Crime Rates in Latin America*, 2008; IDB, *Operational Guidelines for Program Design and Execution in the Area of Civic Coexistence and Public Safety*, 2009.

incorporates many diverse elements, which combine in distinct ways in the different nations and regions of Latin America and the Caribbean. Viewing security through specific lenses like homicide rates, the drug trade, organized crime or military violence may be tempting, but is incomplete. An effective strategy to address criminality in Latin America has to deal with these issues, not as a single problem or issue, but as a complicated, multidimensional challenge.

It is particularly important to differentiate the intensity and nature of the varied security threats faced by different countries in Latin America—which can roughly be classified into three broad categories. Most at risk are those nations where crime and violence present a threat to political stability and the authority of the state. These are places where criminal organizations not only challenge the capacity of governments to provide security for their citizens, but also threaten to take control over significant territory and even to effectively capture important state institutions and make them allies of the criminal enterprise. In these cases, the issue is not only one of citizen security, but of national security. (The countries currently most endangered in this way are the three nations of Central America’s Northern Triangle—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador; some would put Mexico into this category.) These countries are in especially difficult circumstances and need urgent responses from their governments and the international community—but they should not be viewed as defeated or failed. In the past dozen years, Colombia has succeeded in resisting this sort of national security challenge, and its experience may contain lessons for other nations.

In a second group of countries, criminal syndicates have emerged from a growing trade in illicit drugs and/ or other highly profitable illegal activities—but they control, at worst, only limited territory and present little immediate danger to the country’s institutions. They can be a grave threat to public safety

in a city or state, but they do not challenge national authority. Several countries (Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil, for example) have managed largely to keep organized crime and drug trafficking relatively contained. Their high rates of violent crime notwithstanding, they have been able so far to avoid the systemic risk that confronts the most imperiled countries of the region. In most of these nations, however, criminal groups appear to be increasingly well organized and powerful, and risk of a rapid escalation of their problems should not be discounted.

A third group of countries, the clear majority in Latin America and the Caribbean, do not face an imminent threat to public security or the rule of law. Their crime rates are relatively low, although in some places they are increasing at an alarming pace. Criminal activity remains a manageable challenge. These nations have time to act, but many of them are failing to take advantage of their comparatively benign situations to halt or reverse disturbing criminal trends, despite the concerns of their populations.

### **Regional Vulnerabilities**

Just as the intensity of the problems and the vulnerability of national institutions vary greatly from country to country, so do the causes behind Latin America's wave of criminal violence. But there are a core set of circumstances that have tended to make Latin American countries particularly at risk to organized crime and other dangers to public security.

Geography plays an important role. Violence and crime have most assaulted those countries that either produce illicit drugs or are situated on pathways that serve the world's major drug markets in the US and Europe. One of the most threatened parts of Latin America today is Central America, which has become

a transit point for nearly 60 percent of all cocaine entering the United States.<sup>4</sup> Either a redirection of trafficking routes or a sharp drop in consumption in the US and Europe, which together generate most of the global demand for illicit drugs, would reduce the revenues flowing to organized crime in many countries of Latin America. But there is little agreement on (1) whether curbing use in the US and Europe, regardless of the policies adopted, is at all a realistic goal or (2) how much, in fact, the revenues and power of the criminal syndicates would diminish, as they shift to other illegal activities. Notwithstanding these uncertainties, Latin America and Caribbean nations can only benefit from a drop in demand for drugs in the US and Europe. To be sure, according to UN data, cocaine use has become a serious public health problem in much of Latin America and has jumped sharply in some countries, but consumption in the region is still a small part of global demand.

The upsurge in crime and violence and the increasing insecurity of ordinary citizens can be mostly attributed to a set of internal challenges confronting many countries of the region, although in greatly varying degrees. Perhaps the most formidable challenges emerge from weak, ineffectual, and often corrupt institutions, including police, courts, and prison systems, which are widely mistrusted by the public. In many nations, these critical institutions have been infiltrated—at the national and local levels—by criminal organizations, virtually assuring their lack of effectiveness. Lack of training, inferior technology, and poor management also contribute to the institutional problems.

Improving law enforcement is crucial. By itself, however, it is not enough to curtail crime and violence. Pervasive poverty, extreme inequalities, constraints on social mobility, and limited employment opportunities also contribute to a context in which social and civic norms are upended and criminal

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<sup>4</sup> International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2011.

activity often flourishes. Youth gangs, sometimes led by forcibly repatriated felons from the US, are a massive problem in some countries.

### **Regional Approaches to Security**

The outcome of the battle against organized crime will mostly be determined by the domestic policies and program carried out in each country of the region. Safeguarding citizen security requires individual governments to undertake needed institutional reforms; deal effectively with relevant social and economic challenges such as employment, education, and equality; and rebuild public trust in political leadership.

These national measures, however, must be complemented by regional initiatives to avoid the so called “balloon effect” where success in any single nation simply drives criminal activity to neighboring countries. Every country must seriously pursue anti-crime and violence efforts and strengthen the security of their citizens; those that do not will end up paying a high price, with the harm spreading to their neighbors as well.

Joint efforts among countries are essential. Multilateral agencies should take a major role in promoting collective actions, which are still impeded in many situations by distrust among Latin American governments. Organized crime has become so powerful and dangerous, in good measure, because it operates without regard to borders. If security responses are limited by national borders, they will never prove successful. Defeating the criminal syndicates requires intensive cooperation among many countries.

In the past several years, the hemisphere's governments have intensified their interest in regional cooperation on issues of citizen security, and stepped up their search for appropriate policy frameworks and institutional arrangements. Just in the past year, several important regional meetings have focused on this theme, generating more international attention than ever before. Still, even as multilateral approaches are gaining increased commitment from governments and have attracted considerable financial support, progress has been slow in developing a significant, large-scale, multi-country security strategy anywhere in the hemisphere.

Citizen security was the central theme of discussion at the most recent OAS General Assembly, held in El Salvador in June 2011. Participants sought consensus on a broad, regional commitment to a common set of citizen security goals, and adopted the "Declaration of San Salvador on Citizen Security in the Americas." Agreement was reached on the vital importance of protecting the safety of individual citizens, building more regional cooperation on security matters, and motivating governments to integrate a citizen security strategy into their larger national security frameworks. Still, little progress was made toward developing concrete proposals for action.

A major stumbling block has been the difficulty of reconciling regional cooperation and national sovereignty—a problem that emerges on many issues, but is particularly hard to resolve when security matters are at stake. Across Latin America, neighboring countries, often with long histories of differences and disputes, lack the necessary trust in their neighbors to share sensitive information and generally cooperate on issues linked to security. Mistrust has long been a challenge to security cooperation. It may be more realistic to encourage governments to first develop their own security

strategies—and then look for opportunities for coordination with neighboring governments rather than attempting to build regional strategies from the outset.

Two recent meetings organized by the OAS Secretariat for Multidimensional Security suggested that cooperation on narrower, technical topics may be more readily achieved than broad-based collaboration. In their original declaration in 2008, Latin America’s public security ministers (MISPA) put forth a set of far-reaching security goals, but the group has since focused on a relatively few specific issues, including police training and management and citizen participation. Similarly, the most recent meeting of ministers of justice and attorneys general (REMJA), seeking to facilitate cooperation among judicial institutions, focused on training and shared online databases. More sweeping cooperation will require extensive legal and institutional reforms in participating countries. Progress will inevitably be slow.

The most important regional security meeting in recent memory, the International Conference in Support of the Central America Security Strategy, took place in Guatemala in late June 2011. The meeting was designed to focus attention on the region’s escalating security problems, mobilize needed international support to combat them, and galvanize security cooperation among the countries of the region. It brought together the heads of state of nearly every Central American government as well as the presidents of Mexico and Colombia, foreign ministers from many other hemispheric countries and Spain (including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton), ample representation generally from Europe, and leaders of the key multilateral organizations – and succeeded in achieving several critical goals.

- It made clear that the problems of organized crime and citizen security were an urgent region-wide concern that required immediate response. Ideally, the situation should have been

recognized some time ago, but the Guatemala meeting was an impressive showing of support for concerted, cooperative efforts by the six countries of Central America (including Panama), their immediate neighbors Mexico and Colombia, the US and European nations, and multilateral financing agencies.

- The critical need for joint, multilateral action was emphasized. The Central American governments acknowledged they had to do more on many dimensions—concrete security measures, broader institutional reforms, and social and economic changes—and that they themselves had to raise much of the revenues required to finance the needed measure. They also recognized the importance of better harmonizing their efforts and reducing the legal and political barriers to regional cooperation. Neighboring Colombia and Mexico made clear their willingness to assist with technical assistance, training, and improved border controls. The US government, along with the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, pledged considerable financial assistance, and Washington reaffirmed its commitment to step up its efforts to curtail drug consumption in the US and curb the flows of arms southward.
- The meeting highlighted the enormous challenges that face Central America and other countries where organized crime has established itself, infiltrated government agencies, and threatens state authority. Law enforcement alone, even when national militaries supplement police forces, is not a sufficient response. Other fundamental requirements are reforming and upgrading all elements of the legal system—including the police, prosecutors, courts, and prison system, expanding educational and employment opportunities, particularly for youth, and fostering trust in national institutions.

The meeting produced a set of solid principles on which to build an effective response to crime and violence in the region, but it also revealed several formidable problems. The first is the profound depth of the challenges ahead. The criminal organizations are extraordinarily powerful. They have large amounts of money, are well-armed, and through fear and corruption, have penetrated key institutions of government. Experience has shown, they will respond with a fierce and brutal resistance to government efforts to bring them under control.

Second, while the principles are right, these have yet to be translated into a coherent strategy—that is a strategy that identifies the priorities for allocating resources, sets a starting point and sequence of actions to address various problems, and develops benchmarks to measure success over time. There remain unanswered many complex questions that each country must address by itself. They include, for example, (1) what has to be done to end the infiltration of organized crime into political institutions, police and judicial systems, legal businesses, etc., (2) what changes are needed in social and economic policies to enhance employment opportunities, improve education and expand access to schooling, and generally bring about greater equality, and (3) how can added taxes be collected to secure the resources needed to sustain the battle against crime and violence.

And finally, although regional cooperation was strongly endorsed by every participant in the Guatemala meeting, the concrete measures needed to achieve that objective were hardly discussed. No mechanisms were established to review the legal or political obstacles to security cooperation or to develop proposals for harmonizing laws and regulations. Plans for even very modest multi-country initiatives (or even

bilateral measures) would have been helpful in beginning to break down the barriers of suspicion and mistrust that make regional collaboration so difficult.

### **The Role of the United States**

Efforts to develop regional approaches to security in Latin America cannot ignore the role of the United States. As discussed above, US demand for drugs plays a central role in shaping the narcotics trade in Latin America, and US policies and programs have played a major role in defining inter-American (and international) approaches to dealing with the illicit drug trade.

Partly in response to growing criticism of US drug policy from Latin American and Caribbean governments, The Obama Administration has declared a shift in the focus of its anti-drug efforts from law enforcement toward demand reduction. The president and his drug czar have rejected the outworn “war on drugs” label for US strategy, and endorsed treating drug use more as a public health issue than a criminal matter.

Still, it will take time for new policies and programs to be designed and put in place. The proposed changes in approach are not yet reflected in budget allocations, which have remained largely unaffected. Moreover, whatever strategy is pursued, any significant decline in the US demand for drugs will take years to achieve, and the ultimate impact in Latin America is uncertain. Latin America needs to develop the capacity to defend its own security against criminal activity, regardless of US policy

Colombia is the one country cited as a success story for US anti-drug policy—less for its effectiveness in reducing the production of coca leaf and cocaine than in helping to vastly improve citizen security. The US-supported Plan Colombia has assisted the Colombian government in extending control over its territory and decisively reducing armed violence against its citizens. The security advances in Colombia are clear.

Indeed the US and Mexican governments drew on the experience of Plan Colombia to design the Merida Initiative to combat the Mexican cartels and end the wave of crime and violence that has battered the country. Subsequently, the Merida Initiative was extended to Central America through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). But the US is no longer financially able to sustain the expenditure levels of Plan Colombia, amounting to some \$8 billion over a decade—which supplemented much larger amounts expended by the Colombian government. Washington can and will continue to contribute, but the bulk of the resources will have to come from the countries themselves—with some loan-based support from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

1. Today, Latin America and the Caribbean is perhaps the most violent region in the world. No other group of countries, outside of war zones, suffers higher rates of homicide and other violent crimes. Organized criminal syndicates are active in many countries of the region, and their power and wealth is increasing in most places. In many countries of Latin America, escalating crime and violence threatens to slow economic and social progress and is putting democratic stability and the rule of law at risk in some. Western Hemisphere nations have no choice but to confront,

individually and collectively, the region-wide challenges of organized crime and citizen security. In most countries, ordinary citizens consider the deterioration of public safety to be the most important problem their nation faces –and they are demanding urgent action. Many people in the region are calling for hardline policies and harsh crackdowns on criminal activity, which may be more divisive than they are effective.

2. The problems associated with organized crime and citizen security vary a great deal from country to country across Latin America and the Caribbean. Although governments can learn from experiences elsewhere in the region, each country must develop its own strategy for confronting criminal organizations and protecting public safety. The choice of strategy will depend on many different factors—including, for example, the nature and intensity of the country’s problems; its strength or vulnerability of its national and local institutions; the reliability of its security forces; the ability to secure needed resource, domestically and internationally; and the degree of consensus that can be mobilized among the population for a particular approach. In those countries where organized crime presents a threat to political stability and the authority of the state, governments need to act with greatest urgency—and will almost surely require external support.
3. Almost everywhere in Latin America, an essential requirement will be to reform and strengthen justice systems, including police, courts, and prisons, and curtail the corruption that debilitates these critical institutions. And all three must be upgraded. A reformed and honest police force cannot do its job if courts and prisons remain corrupted or incompetent. Similarly, courts will be stymied without strong police work and a reliable prison system. In a few countries, police forces will be ineffective in controlling the dangers of organized crime, and governments will be pressed to turn

to the military to assist. But that should be considered only as a last resort; the military are not trained or equipped to take on policing responsibilities, and their involvement in crime control efforts often come a high cost, including increased human rights violations, loss of credibility for both the military and civilian forces, and possible increased violence. There is a danger of corrupting military forces as well.

In a few countries, a particularly debilitated justice system may require special international support. Although early to reach a final assessment of its contribution, the UN-sponsored International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) has helped that nation fight impunity and corruption, and provided some needed training and institutional strengthening.

4. Even the most effective law enforcement institutions, by themselves, cannot succeed in curtailing crime and violence, or containing the power of organized crime. Improving police performance alone will not necessarily do much to reduce criminal activity. Pervasive poverty, extreme inequalities, constraints on social mobility, and limited employment opportunities also contribute to a context in which social and civic norms are upended and delinquency and brutality flourish. Youth gangs, at times led by forcibly repatriated felons from the US, are a massive problem in some countries. Expanding educational and employment opportunities, particularly for youth, and building trust in national institutions are fundamental to sustained and effective anti-crime efforts.
5. Every country in Latin America and the Caribbean must develop a robust effort to control crime and violence and protect the security of their citizens. In addition, joint efforts among countries are essential as well, and multilateral agencies should take a major role in promoting collective

actions, which are still impeded in many situations by distrust and suspicion among Latin American governments.

6. Given the particular geography of Latin America and the Caribbean, a hemispheric approach to problems of organized crime might effectively distinguish between two regional groups of countries. One group includes the countries of Central America, their two largest neighbors, Mexico and Colombia, and the Caribbean islands. The other incorporates all of the countries of South America. (Colombia is the one country in both groups.)

The countries of Mexico and Central America are used as trafficking routes to the US; Colombia is the main source of cocaine for these routes. Moreover, the Mexican drug syndicates are increasingly managing and driving the narcotics trade in all of these countries. The recent Guatemala Conference on Central American Security called for cooperation among this group of countries. All of them currently receive anti-crime assistance from the US and Canada, and the smaller nations can benefit from the technical assistance and cooperation of Mexico and Colombia as well.

The South American countries have become increasing important consumers of cocaine, but their drug trade is largely with European markets. Three producing countries—Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru send cocaine to Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela for both consumption and on-shipment to Europe. Many of the countries have already developed bilateral cooperation on crime and drugs, and all of them participate in a new South American Defense Pact, which should appropriately be assigning major attention to organized crime and drug trafficking .

7. Although it is never easy to compile reliable statistics on illegal activities, much more needs to be done to remedy the incomplete, incomparable, and often contradictory data on crime and violence that is currently available. Homicide rates today are so widely used to compare the levels of violence across countries and regions because comparative statistics on other crimes do not exist or are unreliable. The poor quality of basic data frustrates efforts to assess existing policies and programs, evaluate results across countries, and devise and estimate the impact of new approaches.

Similarly, the development of more effective policies and program also requires far more extensive research and analysis on many basic issues. Too little, for example, is known even about such fundamental questions as the relationship of poverty and crime or the factors that lead so many youths into delinquency. Just as important, there is a need to systematically review, evaluate, and communicate the experiences and programs, successful or not, of many countries in such critical areas as police training, anti-corruption initiatives, judicial reform, rehabilitation of youthful offenders, and use of military in anti-crime campaigns. Some valuable work has been done on all of these themes, but research and analysis on issues of crime, violence, corruption, drug trafficking is still very limited, certainly insufficient to draw hard conclusions and lessons. Universities, research centers, and think tanks should be giving these issues a great deal more attention.

8. National and regional strategies for enhancing citizen security in Latin America should be centrally focused on controlling organized crime and keeping violence and corruption in check. Still, across Latin America, the drug trade remains the largest source of revenue for criminal organizations and cannot be ignored as a major factor in the region's sky high rates of crime and violence. Dealing

with the problems associated with illicit drugs must be part of any anti-crime, public safety strategy.

So far, however, efforts to control drug production, trafficking, or use have not been very successful anywhere in the hemisphere. Illicit drug consumption has been expanding rapidly in many Latin America countries and in the US, where use and abuse of drugs dropped sharply from its high point in the late 1970s and early 1980s, drug supply and consumption have remained essentially constant since 1990.

Some initiatives can be helpful. The US program called HOPE, for example, has shown remarkable success in rehabilitating heavy drug users who are in prison. However, there is no policy option available today that offers a solution to the drug problem. No serious analyst suggests that drug consumption can be eliminated or even reduced very much. Still, among those giving most attention to the issues, a convergence is emerging on the elements of a more effective drug strategy. The essential framework is presented in the 2009 report of the Latin American Commission on Drug Policy and a subsequent, 2011 report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy.

These reports, developed under the leadership of former Latin American presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Ernesto Zedillo, and Cesar Gaviria, deserve serious attention. Some of their most important conclusions are that (1) consumption is just not affected much by government policies or programs, and thus the elimination or even a significant decrease of drug use is not a feasible policy objective in most places; (2) substance abuse is best managed as a long-term health

problem, not as a criminal activity, particularly since harsh penalties may cause more harm to the individual and society than drug use itself; (3) governments should consider treating marijuana, the most used and least addictive drug, differently than other illicit drugs; (4) neither eradication and interdiction nor alternative development schemes have had much success in curbing the supply of illicit drugs; and (5) national governments must to continue to battle against drug criminals to protect their citizens' security and check the influence of organized crime.

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