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Improving Citizen Security in the Americas: Why Taking an Urban Approach Is Warranted

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND: URBAN VIOLENCE AS A GROWING CONCERN IN THE AMERICAS

The urbanization of the world's population has been underway for many decades. In Latin America, over 75 percent of the population lives in cities, and this number is expected to reach approximately 90 percent by 2050 (Muggah 2014, 351). With urbanization has come a wide variety of challenges, including water and sanitation; urban planning and transportation; housing, education, and healthcare; and environmental concerns. It is not surprising, then, that cities and metropolitan areas also experience special challenges with crime and public security. This is especially the case in Latin America, a region that faces some of the highest rates of urban violence in the world (Muggah 2014, 351). According to one analysis, Latin America contains 43 of the world's 50 most violent cities (CCSPJP 2015).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) produces one of the most widely cited sources of information on homicides worldwide. While the UNODC offers data about urban homicide rates, most of the public debate centers around national-level figures expressed in terms of deaths per 100,000. In 2016, for example, El Salvador was reported as the country with the highest homicide rate—an alarming 81.2 homicides per 100,000 (Gagne 2017). At the regional level, Latin America also fared poorly: a UNODC report on global homicide stated that the Central and South American sub-regions experienced the second and third highest homicide levels, preceded only by Southern Africa (UNODC 2013, 23). According to a criminality index generated by security consulting firm Verisk Maplecroft, five of the ten countries with the highest risk for criminal violence are in Latin America:

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Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Venezuela, and El Salvador. National and regional levels of homicide and crime, however, can actually paint a misleading picture of security at the local level. Many specific areas in the region, especially urban areas, experience rates of violence much higher (or lower) than average.

For this reason, stemming urban violence at the local level and addressing the underlying factors driving this phenomenon has been an increasingly important policy concern for Latin American governments, the international donor community, and U.S. policymakers in particular. Security is a main concern for the public as well: in 2014, one out of every three adults in the Americas reported that crime, insecurity, or violence was the main problem facing their country (Zeichmeister 2014, 3).

In this paper, we seek to summarize some of the principal characteristics and drivers of urban violence in order to develop more targeted

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and effective policies to address it. First, we discuss how major structural problems like youth unemployment and inequality are related to common crime, organized crime, and violence. We emphasize the importance of understanding the local nature of urban violence and its tendency to occur and persist in specific geographic locations. Next, we look at some examples from the region that shed light on, and in some cases, confirm these ideas. Finally, we offer a series of policy options for addressing one of the region's most persistent and vexing challenges.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEX INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE CAUSES AND DRIVERS OF URBAN VIOLENCE

Much has been written about the causes and origins of social and criminal violence in urban settings. For many criminologists and sociologists, violence emerges in a context of “social disorganization.” In the 1940s, Henry McKay and Clifford Shaw, the creators of social organization theory, argued that violence increases with the absence or loss of formal or informal mechanisms of social structure or social control in a community (Shaw and McKay 1942). Their pioneering work has been supported by later studies. Factors contributing to social disorganization include resource deprivation, high migration levels, and the mobility of residents or disruption of families caused by population growth or concentration (Land, McCall, and Cohen 1990; Ingram and Curtis 2015, 261). This theory is particularly relevant in Latin America given the high levels of human mobility in the region, whether stemming from rural political and armed conflicts; the pursuit of economic opportunities; or forced displacement due to natural disasters or environmental degradation. The result of this mobility has been rapid urbanization and limited social connection and resilience in fragile, unplanned, and impoverished urban communities.



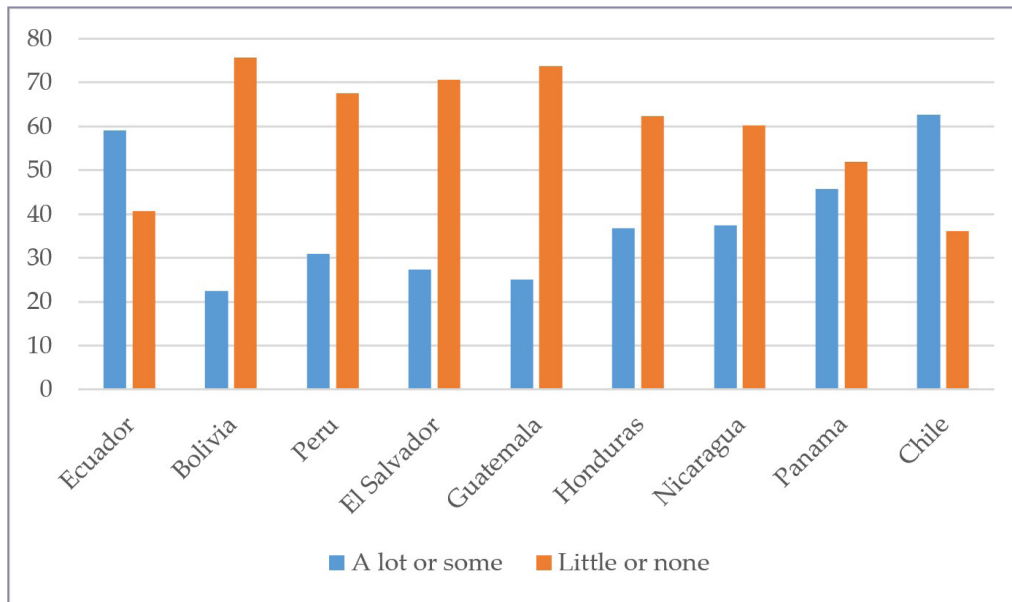
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Other explanations for violence include structural factors such as inequality, poverty, and youth unemployment (particularly among young men). While these are undoubtedly contributing factors, the evidence concerning the relationships between these variables and violence is not always clear. Inequality appears to contribute to crime, but primarily on a local level as experienced by individuals; national-level inequality rates appear to be a poor predictor of national crime levels (Chioda 2016, 10). For example, Chile is a highly unequal country, but its homicide rates are well below the regional average.

Poverty also has a complex relationship with violence. While poverty has been correlated with higher levels of violence (Pridemore 2011), poverty in and of itself may not cause violence. Nor does economic opportunity guarantee peace. A recent World Bank report estimated that violence increased in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2003 and 2011, at a time when the region saw significant economic growth (5%), extreme poverty was cut in half (to 11.5%), and inequality fell 7 percent in the Gini coefficient (Familiar 2017, xi). Ironically, economic development and increased personal interactions that result from income growth can actually increase violence levels, especially if development excludes a significant portion of the population or occurs too slowly (Chioda 2016, 9).

While there is no direct causal link between violence and institutional weaknesses, the latter can, at a minimum, serve as an accelerant for violence in Latin America. Elevated levels of impunity and low public confidence in law enforcement agencies contribute directly and indirectly to greater crime and insecurity. Public trust of policing institutions tends to be low in the region, and the perception of police involvement in criminal activity tends to be high. These sentiments have important negative consequences for the effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions, especially in terms of data collection (UNDP 2013, 9). That is, the public often fails to report crimes to authorities they distrust. As shown in Figure 1 (following page), trust in police institutions is especially low in Central America and the Andean countries of Peru and Bolivia, although Ecuador is a notable exception. Chile is a regional outlier for its consistently high level of public trust in police institutions.

Figure 1. Trust in Police in Selected Latin American Countries, 2015



Source: Latinobarometro, 2015.

Another important institutional factor that contributes to violence is the state of judicial and prison systems in the region, which do not rehabilitate offenders. Widespread incarceration of young people for simply being gang members or engaging in non-violent drug activities has actually increased criminal activity, not reduced it. Non-violent offenders, or those who commit minor offenses, are often placed in severely overcrowded prisons where they have no immediate expectation of a speedy prosecution or resolution of their cases. They are often compelled to join prison gangs simply to survive, which ensures their direct involvement with criminal organizations they might have avoided outside of prison. Furthermore, as documented by Benjamin Lessing in his study on prison gangs in Brazil and El Salvador, high recidivism rates and policies of mass incarceration can actually increase the power of incarcerated gang leaders over other members. As Lessing explains:

Why do people on the streets obey the orders of imprisoned gang leaders, many of whom may spend the rest of their lives behind bars? A former drug boss I interviewed in Rio de Janeiro put it simply: “Whatever you do on the outside, on the inside you’ll have to answer for it.” Packed into this statement are two key assumptions: “You” are likely to return to prison at some point, and when you do, you’ll be at the mercy of gang leaders (Lessing 2016, 5).

Finally, there is significant empirical evidence that some of the immediate triggers of violence are related to alcohol abuse and the availability of firearms. According to the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP), the availability of weapons has a strong relationship to higher incidences of crime and violence. In 2012, the Organization of American States (OAS) found that, in Central and South America, 78 and 83 percent of homicides, respectively, are committed with firearms (OAS 2012, 28). Alcohol abuse is also associated with crime and violence, including domestic violence. Interestingly, while evidence supports the relationship between alcohol and increased crime and violence, it does not show a relationship with illicit drug use (UNDP 2013, 2).

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIOLENCE

Research on violence increasingly shows that violence is not a random phenomenon, but rather tends to concentrate in specific geographic locations. Citizen security expert Thomas Abt, for example, has characterized violence as “sticky,” that is, it tends to be associated with a small number of locations, individuals, and behaviors (Abt and Winship 2016, 19). Findings by the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) supports this theory: a 2014 study of several major Latin American cities showed that 50 percent of homicides were committed in only 1.6 percent of city blocks (CAF 2014, 106–109; Jaitman and Ajzenman 2016, 6).

Moreover, other data shows that these geographical “hot spots” tend to persist over time. As such, national-level data on violence and homicides can be a helpful tool, but can also be misleading for determining the specific nature and drivers of local violence.

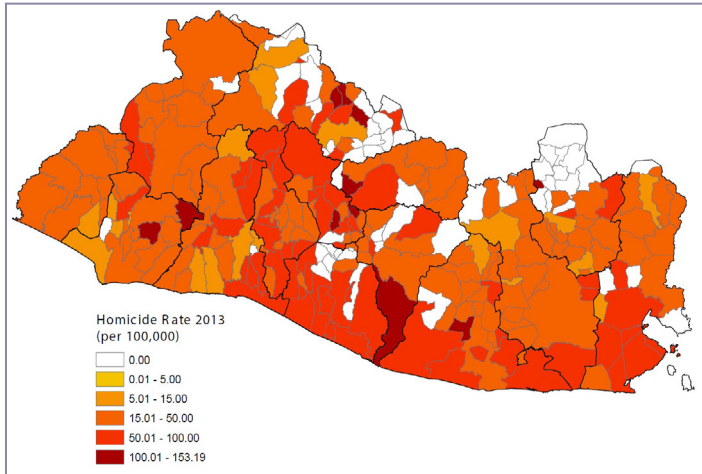
This is well illustrated by criminal justice experts and political scientists Matt Ingram and Karise Curtis in their study on homicide levels in El Salvador.¹ The authors look at homicide levels at national, departmental, and municipal levels. The national-level data in particular seem to suggest that homicide is a homogenous phenomenon throughout El Salvador, whereas the municipal-level data reveal that some areas within the country have no reported homicides and that others experience homicides at a much higher rate than the national average. The latter finding is significant for policymakers looking to design crime prevention plans: to identify where investing in these plans will bring about maximum impact, lawmakers should examine local-level data (Ingram and Curtis, 2015, 256–58, 279).

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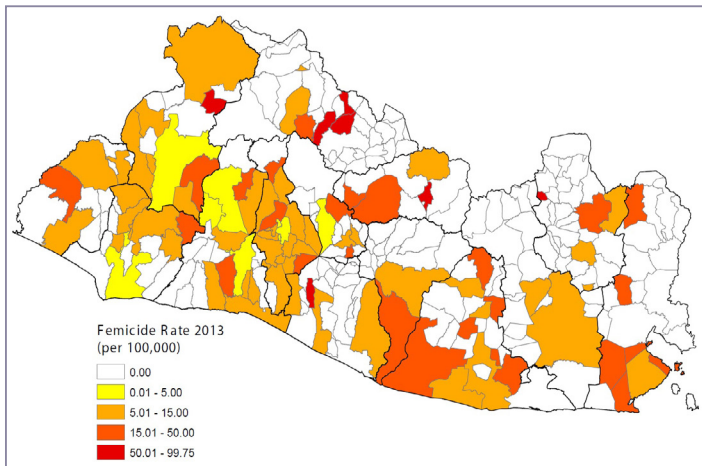
Ingram and Curtis find similar results when they focus on types of homicide. Different kinds of homicide—such as femicide (the intentional killing of women because of their gender), youth killings, and firearm-related violence—also tend to concentrate in specific geographic areas. For example, Maps 1–3 on the following page compare overall homicide rates with those that specifically target female and youth victims; the latter two phenomena (Maps 2 and 3) demonstrate distinct patterns.

¹ The full report on “Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle” is available for free download at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>.

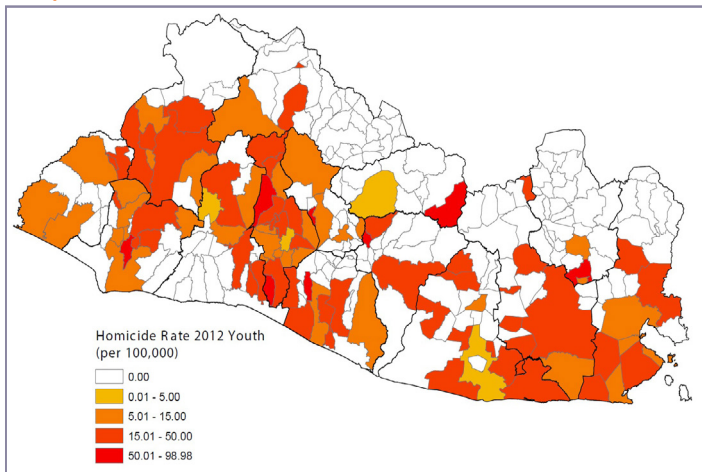
Map 1. Overall Homicides in El Salvador, 2013



Map 2. Femicides in El Salvador, 2013



Map 3. Youth Homicides in El Salvador, 2012



Source: Ingram and Curtis, 2015.

How might geographic knowledge of specific types of violence affect the policies prescribed to specific areas? The UNODC reports that homicides against women tend to be committed by family members or intimate partners, while men are more often killed by strangers (UNODC 2013, 14).² Thus, in an area where levels of femicide are higher than those of violence against men, policymakers might focus their efforts on preventing domestic abuse. In contrast, in areas plagued with high levels of juvenile homicide, they could emphasize youth intervention programs.

While geography is an important factor in understanding violence, demographic explanations can also be highly relevant. For example, perpetrators of violence tend to be adolescent males. Even within this demographic, violence tends to be concentrated in a relatively small number of perpetrators. Evidence from multiple studies shows that about 75 percent of crimes and aggressive behavior is committed by between 5 and 15 percent of offenders (Chioda 2016, 21). This concentration in violent behavior indicates that intervention programs would be best focused on these individuals.

Finally, there is also a body of literature that characterizes violence as a public health problem. Within this framework, it is understood that violence clusters in geographic areas much like an epidemic, spreading through social networks and through individual experiences of violence not unlike the way in which a disease can spread through physical contact. In other words, individuals exposed to violence, either through personal experience or witnessing it in a family situation, are more likely to perpetrate violence and thus continue its spread. As such, intervention strategies at the individual level are crucial interrupters of the transmission and spread of violence (Slutkin 2015, 3–8).

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The public health approach has seen some success

in Latin America. In 2014, Dr. Rodrigo Guerrero—the current mayor of Cali, Colombia and a trained epidemiologist—was honored with the Roux Prize for his success in lowering the city’s homicide level using a public health approach. During his first tenure as mayor beginning in 1994, Guerrero used data to find the actual sources of violence, much like the way doctors look for the source of diseases during major outbreaks. He found that the correlation between alcohol abuse, firearm availability, and acts of violence was higher than that between drug trafficking and acts of violence. Consequently, he designed policies to limit the availability of firearms and alcohol, which resulted in a 30 percent decline in murders between 1994 and 1998 (Akpan 2014).

The public health approach also highlights the importance of addressing domestic violence, since experiencing violence in the home at a young age can contribute to violent behavior

² The UNODC’s Global Homicide Book estimated that, in 2012, 47 percent of female homicide victims were killed by family members or intimate partners, while this statistic only held true for 6 percent of male homicide victims.

later in life. A 2013 report from the Pan-American Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control found that, in all 12 Latin American countries surveyed, high numbers of women had experienced intimate partner violence. The numbers ranged from 17 percent in the Dominican Republic to just over half in Bolivia (Bott et al. 2013, 6).

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE FROM THE REGION

Evidence from the region supports many of the above assertions. Important common themes have emerged from recent Wilson Center research projects and conferences (carried out with support from CAF) in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru.³ Together, these conclusions can help policymakers design citizen security strategies rooted in the urban context.

First, successful anti-crime strategies should prioritize the specific crimes that generate the most violence. While organized crime networks are present in all three of the countries studied, in general the effect of common crime⁴ and the violence associated with it is much more significant.

In Lima, for example, organized crime has been growing in the metropolitan area, and in general is an issue that should be addressed. However, there is no evidence of a significant increase in violence directly associated with organized crime (Mujica and Zevallos 2017, 11). Studies of Bolivia show a similar pattern. While violence from organized crime activities has increased recently—especially linked to human trafficking—most violence is actually related to common crime. As Gabriela Reyes Rodas notes in a recent report on Bolivia, “... the levels of violence in the three principle cities [that form] the backbone of the country show us that, according to available information, insecurity in these places is principally related to the incidence of common crime and not closely linked with organized crime” (Reyes Rodas 2017, 7).⁵

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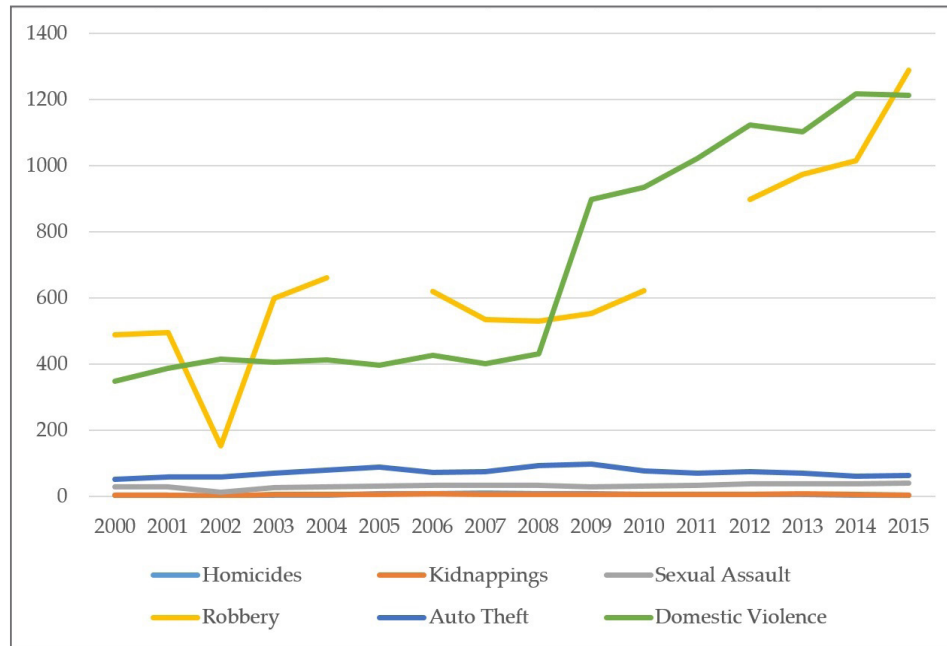
While Quito experienced a two-fold increase in violence between 1990 and 2010, levels have since dropped off. Since then there has been a troubling rise of discriminatory violence against specific groups such as women, immigrants, and people in the LGBT community (Carrión and Pinto 2017, 3). Evidence from Bolivia also suggests that domestic and gender-based violence is a significant problem, with incidences especially concentrated in the country’s urban areas. In fact, 67 percent of the reported cases of gender-based violence occurred in the country’s nine capital cities (Reyes Rodas 2017, 13). Domestic violence has

³ These studies are available for free download at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/violence-and-crime-major-andean-cities-characteristics-and-public-policies>.

⁴ The authors understand “common crime” to refer to crimes that pertain to a local jurisdiction, as opposed to those pertaining to a federal jurisdiction. In general, organized criminal activity—an ongoing criminal conspiracy among three or more actors over an extended period—is considered a federal, and thus not common, crime. Homicides, which are usually handled by a local jurisdiction, can become a federal offense if they are committed as part of organized crime activity.

⁵ Author translation.

Figure 2. Crimes Reported to the National Police in Metropolitan Lima per 100,000, 2000–2015



Source: PNP 2015 and INEI 2015.

also increased substantially in Lima within the past 15 years, especially relative to other crimes, as shown in Figure 2.

Despite the fact that organized crime receives more international attention, this evidence suggests the relative importance of addressing common crime in addition to organized crime. Furthermore, it underscores the need for more careful analysis of the types of crimes being committed and the way that they impact citizens on a day-to-day basis.

These case studies also provide interesting evidence about the relationship between drugs and crime. As noted above, drug use and drug trafficking are not necessarily associated with higher levels of violence. In the capital cities of Bolivia, levels of small-scale drug trafficking have increased, but violence resulting from competition over drug markets has not emerged. This could be explained because both consumption and sale in the countryside remain low (Reyes Rodas 2017, 10, 21). It also suggests that policies that avoid harsh penalties for drug use and low-level trafficking are not incompatible with the violence-reduction agenda.

A second common theme in the Andean region, which is often repeated throughout the hemisphere, is the absence of reliable crime data. This is a significant problem in all three countries examined and thus the analytical capacity to better understand crime and design strategies to disrupt it is quite limited.

Data collection problems are further compounded by the poor relationship between citizens and law enforcement agencies, especially in high-crime areas. Since citizens do not trust law enforcement institutions enough to report crimes, data on types and levels of crime generally underreport (sometimes significantly) the actual crime rate. As Mujica and Zevallos explain in their case study of Lima, “the percentage of reporting is very low (relative to the amount of crime that actually occurs), which is due in part to the scarcity of police and justice systems throughout various parts of the city, and to the lack of confidence in these institutions” (Mujica y Zevallos 2017, 5–6).⁶ This pattern holds true in Bolivia, too, where seven out of ten victims do not report acts of crime to the authorities (Reyes Rodas 2017, 16). The lack of reliable crime data is thus a significant problem in all three countries, undermining the analytical capacity of law enforcement institutions to better understand the nature and drivers of crime and to design strategies to disrupt it.

The lack of reliable crime data is a significant problem in all three countries.

NEW POLICY APPROACHES TO GREATER CITIZEN SECURITY IN THE REGION

Improvements in citizen security have been a longtime citizen demand throughout Latin America, where crime and violence afflict the populace across the political and economic spectrum. Traditional approaches for addressing these challenges have had mixed results, at best, leading many citizens to distrust authorities and question their commitment to solving the problem. Promises of greater punitive action and aggressive campaigns against criminals and transnational organized crime have enjoyed temporary success in some cases, but problems persist and security improvements, where they exist, have not been sustainable.

Growing evidence suggests that new approaches to these problems may hold promise and, if properly implemented, citizens may begin to enjoy the safety and security they have sought and deserve. The following policy approaches suggest some priorities to pursue based on recent research and evaluations.

1. **Prioritize an urban and local focus on fighting crime and reducing violence.** Urban settings experience the highest levels of violence in Latin America, and a narrower focus allows for a more specific understanding of the particular dynamics that surround violence. Strategies for combatting violence need to take into account that violence tends to be concentrated and persistent, carried out in very specific areas and by specific demographic groups.
2. **Prioritize addressing violence caused by common crime.** Many experts believe that the majority of violence is caused by common crime rather than organized crime. Evidence from regional studies also supports this view, given that a large number of

⁶ Author translation.

citizens experience common crime on a daily basis. Effectively addressing the crime and violence most experienced by the public can improve public trust levels in law enforcement and improve police–community relations. Addressing organized crime is also important, but it should not sideline efforts to address common criminal violence.

3. **Improve data collection on crime and violence to improve understanding of the nature of crime.** Important obstacles, such as public distrust in police and judicial systems, complicate crime reporting and data collection. Effective collection of good crime data is essential to understand the kinds of crime being perpetrated, its geographic concentration, and its diffusion.
4. **Use data analysis to inform policymaking and the design of intervention programs.** While data collection is important, it is only useful if it is used to effectively target and deploy scarce law enforcement resources. As we have argued, violence in the region is concentrated in urban areas and tends to be associated with specific places, people, and behaviors. As such, solutions that target these factors, and address them on a local level, give the best results and make for the best use of limited resources.
5. **Address the structural causes that lead to elevated crime levels in the region,** including poverty, inequality, and a lack of social support and networks.



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