

Comparative Trends in Violent Crime: the Latin American Context

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According to a study made by Mauricio Rubio, there has been a significant increase in the total number of violent crimes committed in Latin America during the past decade. Rubio also suggested that the degree of violence used to commit crimes in this region is much higher than in other areas of the world. In his own words:

‘a diferencia de otros continentes, el crimen latinoamericano es particularmente violentino: mientras que, por ejemplo, en Colombia o México cerca de la mitad de los ataques a la propiedad se hacen con recurso a la violencia en Francia tal fracción apenas alcanza el 3 por ciento’¹.

Although the reasons behind this degree of violence still remain largely unexplained, this factor has certainly helped to generalise a common perception of insecurity around the region. Even outside Latin America, the region is generally perceived to be a high-risk area for visitors and foreigners. Violent crime has often been linked to the existence of other illegal activities that are highly competitive and financially rewarding, such as money laundering, drug trafficking and the arms trade.

To draw comparisons between different communities at a given period of time, criminologists usually calculate the number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants². This is the most commonly used measure to judge the level of violence of a particular community regardless of the number of inhabitants. Cross-country comparisons nevertheless, are difficult to make and available data have to be used with caution.

Small populations may show large rates of homicide, while large populations may indicate smaller rates, even if homicides are concentrated within a few nuclei of violence. Rates may provide indicative estimates but may also hide disparities within regions or cities where they were calculated. This is the case with Colombia, a country with one of the highest rates in homicides in the world, but where 40 percent of homicides are committed in the ten largest cities. Within these cities themselves, homicides are also concentrated within a few and well-defined areas. It is thus necessary to consider the analysis of homicide rates at a local

¹ M. Rubio, “Los costos de la violencia en América Latina: una crítica al enfoque económico en boga” (San Salvador, 1998): p. 9.

² This measure, however, can sometimes be a misleading indicator of absolute violence because less-than-fatal crimes are often unaccounted for. The frequency of other non-fatal crimes, like kidnapping, extortion with threat of violence and violent robbery cannot be accounted if unreported.

level, such as in different sectors or neighbourhoods of a city, to see if there are significant areas where violence is concentrated.

Focus on the local level—that is, the municipality—is essential because that is where the administrative and police authorities collect crime data and attempt to understand the local determinants of crime. It is at the local level that steps need to be taken to develop epidemiological surveillance systems that respond to each community’s particular situation, making it possible to identify specific types of violence affecting the community’s inhabitants and the ways in which this violence is expressed. This does not diminish the importance of the regional or national levels, with which these efforts must be linked and coordinated³.

Table 1. Homicide rates in Latin America

PAHO 1997		IADB 2000	
	Rate		Rate
Colombia	69.15	Guatemala	150.0
El Salvador	24.70	El Salvador	150.0
Brazil	20.84	Colombia	89.5
Mexico	16.80	Jamaica	35.0
Venezuela	12.83	Brazil	19.7
Ecuador	12.07	Nicaragua	18.3
Paraguay	9.02	Mexico	17.8
Cuba	7.70	Venezuela	15.2
Nicaragua	5.54	Dominican Republic	11.9
Costa Rica	5.15	Peru	11.5
Panama	4.52	Panama	10.9
Argentina	4.31	Ecuador	10.3
Uruguay	4.22	Honduras	9.4
Dominican Republic	3.83	Costa Rica	5.6
Peru	3.25	Argentina	4.8
Chile	2.80	Uruguay	4.4
Guatemala	2.28	Paraguay	4.0
Jamaica	1.27	Chile	3.0

* Rates per 100,000 inhabitants

Sources: Pan-American Health Organisation and Inter-American Development Bank.

When comparing violent crime it is also necessary to understand the way crimes are defined. Homicides and kidnappings provide good examples of this. Statistics on homicide may hide disparities if international killings are not separated from accidental violent deaths, such as manslaughter and car accidents. Some statistics on homicide also include suicides. Definitions across countries also vary depending on the institutions in charge of collecting and classifying data. They are often subject to the influence of, and pressure from, governments.

³ Pan-American Health Organisation, *Guidelines for epidemiological surveillance systems on violence and injuries* (Washington, D.C., 2001): p. 1.

Official data may consequently include figures that cannot be verified by the public or by independent organisations⁴. Some countries, like Brazil or Peru, do not treat state-sponsored deaths as homicides. There, the police can justify their use of violence by using different classifications for homicides⁵.

Table 1 above, give an example of how the figures can change depending on the data that institutions use for their statistics. This table shows the homicide rates for most Latin American countries as calculated by the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) in 1997 and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) in 2000. Despite the three-year difference, these statistics show that there are major inconsistencies in some of the data. The most significant cases are Guatemala and El Salvador. While the PAHO calculated that the rates for these countries were 2.28 and 24.70 respectively, the IADB published data in which they reached a rate of 150 for both countries. The IADB also found rates that were significantly higher for Colombia, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Peru and Panama. This could suggest that the IADB used broader definitions of the crime, perhaps even including other violent deaths like suicides and car accidents. Since data vary so much across local institutions and are frequently subject errors and repetitions, it is extremely difficult to find homogeneous databases.

To illuminate the above considerations about doing across-country comparisons, the following example is useful: authorities in El Salvador registered almost 6,800 homicides during 1996. Because its population is less than 6 millions, the homicide rate is higher than 120 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. Brazil, on the other hand, registered more than 42,000 homicides in 1998 and has a population close to 150 millions. The homicide rate was close to 28 per 100,000⁶. The rate of homicide for Brazil is five times less than in El Salvador. Yet homicides are not evenly spread around the country. The city of São Paulo by itself had an annual number of homicides that doubles the total number of homicides committed in the entire country of El Salvador. The rate, however, is 50 percent smaller due to the large

⁴ The authorities may sometimes be interested in under-registering the number of homicides to suggest an improvement in their security strategies. However, an increase in the number of cases can also suggest that the authorities need more resources to bring crime down. Data from forensic institutes generally also show higher numbers of homicides than data from the police. As suggested above, this may be caused by different classifications, but may also be caused by people who die from their injuries after being brought to hospital. See M. Rubio, *Crimen e impunidad: precisiones sobre la violencia* (Bogotá, 1999), pp. 229-240.

⁵ This is also the case of the United States, where deaths caused by actions of the police are registered under other categories, such as 'deaths caused under investigation'. Police forces have often been found guilty of carrying out extra-judicial killings.

⁶ L. Piquet Carneiro, "Violent crime in Latin American cities: Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo" (Washington, D.C., 2000): p. 26.

population of the city, even if most of the homicides are concentrated within a few sectors, like the adjacent suburb of Diadema.

In spite of this, recent advances in crime research promoted by academics throughout the region have permitted to give some estimates on the levels of homicide. In 1990, the average homicide rate for Latin America was 22.9, more than the double of the world's rate of 10.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. By 1994 the rate reached 53.2 for the region⁷. According to Rubio, the proportion of homicides compared to other non-fatal crimes is much higher in Latin America than in other regions of the world⁸. Among the most affected countries is Colombia, with one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Only El Salvador, Guatemala and Jamaica have comparable rates. However, Colombia's record is particularly important given that the country is the third most populated in Latin America and it has the second highest number of homicides after Brazil⁹.

During the 1990s, more than 260,000 homicide cases were recorded and the average number of homicides per day during the beginning of the twentieth-first century was still around 71. The national rate was of 74 per 100,000 inhabitants. Homicides, which were on the increase since the mid-1970s, reached an unprecedented growth rate after the mid-1980s. This trend continued until the peak year of 1991 when the number of homicides approached 30,000. Since then, the figures have been declining. In 1999, the number of homicides was similar to the number recorded by the authorities ten years before, and the rate of homicide per 100,000 inhabitants was the same as it was during the years 1987-1988¹⁰. The reasons for this reduction of violence are still little understood.

Compared with other Latin American countries, available figures show that the Colombian rate has remained significantly higher for more than two decades. The country's homicide rate is only comparable to the countries in Central America where civil conflicts of high intensity dramatically increased the number of homicides during the 1980s and 1990s. During the late 1990s, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, homicide rates reached 'alarming proportions', much higher than almost every country in the world. Increases in murder, kidnapping, armed robbery and car theft have come to symbolise the disintegration of

⁷ M. Buvinic, A. Morrison and M. Shifter, "Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: a framework for action" (Washington, D.C., 1999): p. 2 and endnotes 1 and 2, p. 52.

⁸ M. Rubio, *Crimen e impunidad*, pp. 38-39.

⁹ With almost 45 million inhabitants, Colombia occupies the third place in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico. In terms of the absolute number of homicides, Colombia with 26,000 cases per year occupies the second place after Brazil, where approximately 42,000 cases are committed annually.

¹⁰ G. Martin, "Crime and violence in Cali (Colombia): a diagnosis and policy propositions" (Washington, D.C., 2000): p. 5.

public security after the end of regional wars, even though all violent crimes did not rise in every country. However, there are large discrepancies in the statistics in this region. Sources are often unreliable and definitions of crime are interpreted in different ways by data-gathering agencies. The most striking examples are found in El Salvador, where official statistics differ immensely from the analysis made by international agencies. Call finds that homicide rates for El Salvador are extremely high, approaching 140 homicides per 100,000 in 1996 alone. In a similar study carried out by the Public Opinion Institute of the Universidad Centroamericana, researchers estimated the figures to be around 7,673 homicides for 1994 and 6,792 for 1996. This represented annual rates of homicide of 138.2 and 117 respectively. Data from the Pan-American Health Organisation, however, put the figure much lower, close to 40 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants and the *UN Human Development Report* suggests that the homicide rate for El Salvador in 1996 was 27.4¹¹.

Some other Latin American countries have much lower homicide rates. Chile and Argentina are among the only Latin American countries with homicide rates similar to those in advanced industrialised societies¹². While Venezuela's authorities maintain that the rate is close to 11, independent studies suggest that there are grave inconsistencies with local databases and set the figure much higher¹³. One of the countries that have seen a significant

¹¹ Call uses the following sources: *UN Human Development Report for Guatemala 1999*, Guatemala City, based on Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (1991-1995) and PNC (1996-1998). For El Salvador figures from Fiscalía General (1994-1998) were compiled by the Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD). There is a large difference between the data presented by Call and the data from the Pan-American Health Organisation. This might suggest that the sources used by Call include cases of disappeared people that are currently being investigated, rather than counting only homicides where corpses were found. Homicide rates in Guatemala for the period 1992-1998 indicate similar differences. While Call found that average rates of homicide for Guatemala were close to 68.9 per 100,000 inhabitants, data available from the Pan-American Health Organisation give average rates that seem excessively low when comparing them with other countries. However, the authors also compare these figures with the data from local municipalities and with the legal medical institute. If one uses these data, the rate of homicide for the country would be between 80 and 100 per 100,000 inhabitants, depending on the figures used. The Legal Medicine Institute's data on homicides that were committed in the capital and local municipalities tend to over-represent the numbers of deaths caused by manslaughter and other accidents. Data from the prosecutor's office also seem to over-represent the number of homicides at the national level. See J.L. Londoño and R. Guerrero, "Violencia en América Latina: epidemiología y costos" (Washington, D.C., 1999): table 1.3, p. 14; C.T. Call, "Sustainable development in Central America: the challenges of violence, injustice and insecurity" (Hamburg, 2000): table 1, p. 1 and p. 9; Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, "La violencia en El Salvador en los años noventa: magnitud, costo y factores posibilitadores" (San Salvador, 1998): table 1.2, p. 6.

¹² Chile's rate of homicide is close to 3 and Argentina's rate is around 4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. The rates of industrialised nations vary between 1 and 5 homicides per 100,000 people. In France, the rate is 1.4 per 100,000 people, and it is 0.9 in Japan. The United States currently has a homicide rate of 11.5 per 100,000 people. See Pan-American Health Organisation at <http://www.paho.org/>. See also República Argentina, Ministerio de Justicia, *Hacia un plan nacional de política criminal III* (Buenos Aires, 1999).

¹³ The official rate of homicide as given by the authorities is 11.2. The Pan-American Health Organisation published a rate between 12 and 13, the IADB puts it at 15 and the study by Londoño and Guerrero argue that the rate is in reality much higher, close to 35 per 100,000. See J.L. Londoño and R. Guerrero, "Violencia en América Latina", p. 14.

increase in the number of violent crimes, and notably homicides, is Mexico. In the Federal District, the homicide rate increased from 10.2 to 19.6 between 1981 and 1995. By the end of the 1990s, the figure had reached 20. The majority of the country's homicides and kidnappings were committed in the outskirts of the metropolitan area¹⁴.

Homicide rates for Brazil, which were similar to those of the United States in the early 1980s, around 10 per 100,000, were more than twice the American rates by the late 1990s. In 1988 the total number of homicides was close to 21,000. Since 1979 a total number close to 500,000 has been attained in Brazil. In 2000, the official number of cases had reached 42,000. This 100 percent rise can be linked to a possible increase in violent crime and to a more transparent and accountable public force that has improved the quality of crime databases. Piquet Carneiro argues that the critical period of increase in Brazilian violence occurred in the second half of the 1980s, coinciding with the re-establishing of democracy¹⁵. Another author, Teresa Caldeira, goes further:

*'The increase of violence is the result of a complex cycle that involves such factors as the violent pattern of reaction of the police, disbelief in the justice system as a public and legitimate mediator of conflict and provider of just reprisal; private and violent responses to crime; resistance to democratisation; and the population's feeble perception of individual rights and its support for violent forms of chastisement'*¹⁶.

Her view coincides with those of other experts who have argued that homicides in Brazil are essentially urban problems that have recently reached epidemic proportions in some deprived sectors of the largest metropolitan centres. In most of the largest cities, rates are much higher than the national average¹⁷. In 1996 this rate was 47.29 per 100,000 inhabitants. Inside the cities, some sectors reach rates that are 3 to 5 times the national average. Among the principal cities affected by this increase in violent crime are São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, with homicide rates of 55.8 and 52.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants respectively¹⁸. Inside the metropolitan areas of these cities, there were localities with rates of significant importance,

¹⁴ Inside the city there was a concentration of homicides within the delegations of Cuauhtémoc, Gustavo A. Madero, Iztapalapa and Benito Juárez. There, rates surpassing 70 cases per 100,000 were common until the mid-1990s. See A. Alvarado, "La cuestión de la seguridad pública" in G. Garza, et al. (eds.), *Atlas de la Ciudad de México* (México D.F., 2000): p. 411; A. Baratta, "Política criminal: entre la política de seguridad y la política social" in E. Carranza (coord.), *Delito y seguridad de los habitantes* (México D.F., 1997); see also Fundación Mexicana para la Salud, "Trends and empirical causes of violent crime in Mexico", final report presented to the World Bank (Washington, D.C., 1999).

¹⁵ L. Piquet Carneiro, "Violent crime in Latin American cities", p. 7.

¹⁶ T.P.R. Caldeira, *City of walls: crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo* (London, 2000): p. 105.

¹⁷ L. Piquet Carneiro, "Violent crime in Latin American cities", pp. 27-28; T.P.R. Caldeira, *City of walls*, pp. 119-127.

¹⁸ L. Piquet Carneiro, "Violent crime in Latin American cities", pp. 8 and 21.

such as Diadema near São Paulo and Belford Roxo near Rio de Janeiro. These two localities had rates of 146 and 76 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1997.

Although the data from death registration from the national forensic office consistently indicate more murders than the data from the civil police, both show a similar pattern of growth between 1981 and 1996. Murders caused by the civil police are not accounted as homicides. In Brazil, many homicides are classified under different categories, such as ‘resistance followed by death’, ‘robbery followed by death’ or even ‘rape followed by death’. This last category does not appear in ‘crimes against the person’ but under ‘other crimes’. Besides, the police classify only the number of occurrences, and therefore under-register the number of homicides, as sometimes one occurrence may have several deaths.

Table 2. Homicide rates in selected Latin American cities

City	Country	Year	Rates*
Medellín	Colombia	1995	248.0
Cali	Colombia	1995	112.0
Guatemala City	Guatemala	1996	101.5
San Salvador	El Salvador	1995	95.4
Caracas	Venezuela	1995	76.0
Bogotá	Colombia	1995	60.0
São Paulo	Brazil	1998	55.8
Rio de Janeiro	Brazil	1998	52.8
Lima	Peru	1995	25.0
Mexico City	Mexico	1995	19.6
Santiago	Chile	1995	8.0
Buenos Aires	Argentina	1998	6.4

* Rates per 100,000 inhabitants

Sources: L. Piquet Carneiro, “Violent crime in Latin American cities”, p. 8; M.V. Llorente (ed.), “Caracterización de la violencia homicida en Bogotá” (Bogotá, 2000).

Comparisons across Latin American cities also reveal large differences in rates of homicide. Available data show how Colombian cities have predominantly higher rates than most other cities in the region¹⁹. In the late 1990s, Medellín and Cali present the highest rates

¹⁹ As a comparison, rates for U.S. cities also indicate great differences between cities: New Orleans (80.34), Washington (78.54), Detroit (56.76), Atlanta (50.38), Miami (34.09), Los Angeles (30.52) and New York (26.48). These rates seem to be significantly high when taking into account that the national rate is around 11.5 homicides per 100,000. This fact would suggest that homicides in the U.S. are predominantly urban. The perception that Latin American cities are much more violent than U.S. cities is only confirmed by the fact that country rates in Latin America are higher than the U.S. national rate. At an urban level, however, Latin American cities do not seem to be significantly more violent than U.S. cities in terms of homicides. The above data comes from the *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*, based on police reports and published by the FBI. See T.P.R. Caldeira, *City of walls*, pp. 125-126 and endnote 25, p. 393; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report* (Oxford, 1994).

followed by Guatemala and San Salvador²⁰. It is significant to note that 10 out of 12 cities mentioned in **table 2** show rates of homicide that are much higher than the average Latin American rate, which was around 30 homicides per 100,000 in the late 1990s²¹.

Despite the fact that urban rates of homicide in Latin America are still significantly higher than national rates, since the mid-1990s cases of homicides have been decreasing in most cities. This tendency has been perceived in most of the larger cities with problems of violence, including Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Medellín, Cali, Bogotá and Caracas. In all these cities, rates showed a constant increase until the early 1990s and then started to decrease progressively²². Although researchers on the topic have tried to explain this phenomenon by looking at possible hypotheses, none of them have convincingly managed to explain all the variables at a regional level.

These are the main hypotheses that have been suggested to explain this reduction in crime:

1) A change of determinants of crime. Latin American crime remains very violent, but it is less fatal. This could explain why other violent crimes, such as kidnapping and extortion have increased while homicides have gone down.

2) An improvement of judicial policies aimed at strengthening human rights. Better accountability and transparency within local police forces have accompanied an increase in crime prevention/conflict resolution strategies that could have brought the levels of homicides down. This hypothesis does not suggest that all levels of violence have improved.

3) The implementation of public policies aimed at changing social habits that are correlated to crime, such as alcohol consumption, the existence or behaviour of youth bands, drug cartels and others. These policies have produced attempts to reduce homicides by tackling other social problems affecting local communities. However, homicides tend to be localised around some nuclei of violence and the global impact of these measures has been very difficult to assess.

Despite this slow decrease in the numbers of homicides, other violent crimes seem to have simultaneously increased, and notably economic crimes committed against people, such as kidnappings, violent assaults and robberies. Because of the levels of violence used against

²⁰ Because the quality of data across countries varies significantly, it may be possible that some cities may have higher rates than those presented in this table. This may be the case for Central American cities, Guatemala City or San Salvador. As mentioned above, rates for these cities may vary considerably depending on the sources used.

²¹ J.M. Cruz, *Victimisation from urban violence: levels and related factors in selected cities of Latin America and Spain* (Washington, D.C., 1999): p. 1. Figures from the World Bank give a rate of 22.9 homicides per 100,000 for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 28.4 for Latin America alone. See M. Buvinic, A. Morrison and M. Shifter, "Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean", p. 2.

²² L. Piquet Carneiro, "Violent crime in Latin American cities", p. 117.

victims, and the economic costs generated by loss of income and payment of ransoms, these crimes have become a focus of attention throughout the region.

Table 3. Countries most affected by kidnappings

1991	1999
1. Colombia	1. Colombia
2. Pakistan	2. Mexico
3. Brazil	3. Brazil
4. USA	4. The Philippines
5. Mexico	5. Venezuela
6. India	6. Ecuador
7. The Philippines	7. Former Soviet Union
8. Venezuela	8. Nigeria
9. Italy	9. India
10. Bolivia	10. South Africa

Source: R. Briggs, *The kidnapping business* (London, 2001) based on data provided by Control Risks Group.

Until 1987, Italy was the country most affected by ransom kidnappings²³. Registered number of cases hovered between 600 and 800 a year. Data from Control Risks show that in 1991, the country had slipped to the ninth position. In 1991, the United States also ranked among the most affected countries. This was mainly due to the large number of parental and family-related kidnappings. In 1999, this situation had changed: most of kidnappings involved the payment of ransoms and the most affected countries have been those with public order problems and political conflicts.

Latin American countries have been particularly affected. Colombia has persistently been the most affected country. At present, there are more than 3,000 registered cases per year most of which are attributed to guerrilla organisations. Mexico has also seen a major increase in the number of annual kidnappings. In less than a decade, the country has evolved from being the fifth country in the world in terms of registered cases to become the second²⁴. Other figures given by the Rand Corporation indicate that the number of kidnappings in Mexico varies

²³ U. Santino, "Law enforcement in Italy and Europe against mafia and organised crime" in W.F. McDonald (ed.), *Crime and law enforcement in the global village* (Cincinnati, 1997): pp. 151-166.

The chapter is also available at the Centro Siciliano di Documentazione Giuseppe Impastato's website at <http://www.centroimpastato.it/publ/online/mcdonald.htm/>.

²⁴ The most affected zones in the country are Sinaloa, Guerrero, Morelos, Jalisco and the Federal District. In the Federal District, the most affected zones are Lindavista, Tlalpan, Coyoacán, Calzada del Hueso, Periférico Sur and Norte. Mexico's rapid increase in the number of kidnappings has mainly been attributed to the appearance of organised crime related to drug trafficking.

between 500 and 600 a year, putting this country in the third place after Colombia and Brazil²⁵. Some Mexican analysts have stated that during the Salinas administration (1988-1994) there were around 5,000 recorded kidnappings and during the Zedillo administration (1994-2000), this figure rose to approximately 15,000 cases²⁶. These numbers seem excessive because most databases include the *express kidnappings*. More reliable statistics put the number of cases around 400²⁷. The official figure for 2000 puts the number of abductions around 260.

Problems also arise when comparing kidnappings across Latin America. The terminology used to describe kidnappings varies throughout the continent, especially when abductions of victims last for short periods of time. In Colombia, '*express kidnappings*' or '*paseos millonarios*', are most of the time classified as violent robberies, because the primary objective is not to kidnap the victim but to rob personal belongings and money. These crimes are only classified as kidnappings when ransoms are demanded from the family of the victim or when this one is not freed after a certain number of hours²⁸. In some other countries, the same crime is classified as a kidnapping, because there is a privation of liberty of the victim. Such subtleties may lead to significant statistical disparities when doing cross-country examinations.

These differences suggest that in Mexico there are serious problems both of under-reporting and of exaggeration. This adds to inconsistencies in crime definitions. Few crimes are reported to the police because officers are frequently suspected to collude with criminals²⁹. According to a U.S. source, most citizens view the police as corrupt and unhelpful: 64 percent of crime victims in Mexico City did not report incidents to law enforcement authorities. The government has also created the *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos* to promote the accountability of the authorities. In some instances, citizens have become victims of harassment, mistreatment and extortion by Mexican law enforcement and other officials. There have been cases where police officers dismissed in one state found law enforcement employment in another. The government-funded *National Human Rights Commission* (CNDH) discovered that even when the authorities censured some officers in one law enforcement job, they moved on

²⁵ *Revista Milenio*, no. 174 (Mexico D.F., 2001): p. 35. According to Control Risks Group, Mexico had more cases than Brazil. In any case, both organisations report that Colombia, Mexico and Brazil are the three countries with the worse kidnapping problems. See R. Briggs, *The kidnapping business* (London, 2001): p. 15.

²⁶ See Roberto Martínez Iglesias in *Revista Milenio*, no. 174 (Mexico D.F., 2001): p. 33.

²⁷ See *Revista Milenio*, no. 174, pp. 28-35.

²⁸ The following testimony claims that the main objective of an '*express kidnapping*' is to rob the victim. Only when the robbers believe that they can get a ransom do they decide to keep the victim. See *Revista Milenio*, no. 174, p. 35.

²⁹ In Mexico the police maintain internal security. The army is responsible for external security but also has domestic security responsibilities. The security forces, including the federal and state judicial police, federal highway police, and local police, are under the control of elected civilian officials. However, corruption is rife within police ranks.

to other positions and were subsequently charged again with human rights abuses. In an effort to remedy this situation, the CNDH publishes lists of censured public servants in its annual report and monthly newsletters. In addition, the Mexican government has established a national security register to keep track of censured police officers and address this problem. A poll carried out in 1995 showed that 75 percent of those surveyed felt that the judicial system was riddled with corruption³⁰. Attempts to improve police services have included the dismissal of more than 1,250 corrupt officials; a programme with more efficient procedures, aimed at recruiting and training candidates; and a closer supervision of the federal police and prosecutors.

Brazilian authorities developed similar projects where violent crime, police inefficiency and corruption were widespread. In São Paulo, there is approximately one kidnapping a day³¹. Available evidence also suggests a grave problem of under-reporting to the authorities. As in the case of Mexico, the Brazilian police is often considered inefficient, corrupt and, in some cases, closely related to organised crime. In this respect, Caldeira argues that:

*'If police performance is important in explaining levels of violence, it has less to do with the number of officers and their equipment and more with their patterns of behaviour, patterns that seem to have become increasingly illegal and violent in the past few years. The police, far from guaranteeing rights and preventing violence, are in fact contributing to the erosion of people's rights and the increase of violence'*³².

Caldeira's argument coincides with the views of other experts who have linked the increase of crime with the democratisation process of the 1980s. Police forces are often accused of human rights violations as well as institutional corruption. Besides, members of the police have often been found guilty of participating in organised crime. In 2000, agents of the military police of São Paulo were accused of committing several kidnappings, including kidnappings of children.

Although Mexico and Brazil have seen significant increase in the numbers of kidnappings and ransoms, recorded cases in these countries have only reached a fraction of the cases declared in Colombia, where the 'industry of kidnapping' has provided a major source of income for criminals and guerrilla organisations. Colombian guerrillas are also known to kidnap people in neighbouring countries and take them to Colombia for safe keeping while the

³⁰ See U.S. Department of State, Report on Mexico by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour.

³¹ National and regional data from the Ministry of Justice are available at http://www.mj.gov.br/Senasp/senasp/estat_extorsao.htm/.

³² See T.P.R. Caldeira, *City of walls*, p. 105.

negotiations for their liberation last. This is the case of Venezuela and Ecuador where kidnappings have increased significantly in recent years. In these countries, Colombian guerrilla factions of the ELN and the FARC have been known to kidnap people. Sometimes these groups work closely with local criminal groups. There have been several cases of landowners and oil engineers kidnapped in Ecuador or Venezuela by groups that seem to cooperate with Colombian guerrillas. However, the authorities have not been able to define whether these groups must be considered as full-time members of Colombian guerrillas or as criminal groups that sometimes, but not always, cooperate with the guerrillas. This difficulty in separating organised crime from political insurgency has been a major debate, especially in Venezuela where guerrilla groups, and notably the FARC, have been politically active. Ironically, some people have described this situation as a system of franchises in which common criminals can use the name and support of others to commit crimes in exchange of a participation in the benefits of these activities³³.

The main problem when dealing with extortion crimes has been the lack of proper quantification due to the general under-reporting by the victims. Unlike homicides, kidnapping and extortion crimes are often considered as '*invisible crimes*' because unless reported to the authorities, they often go unnoticed by the authorities. When the victim of a kidnapping is liberated, there is no physical evidence of the crime, as opposed to victims of homicide, which can be discovered years after the crime was committed. Yet these crimes have a much more significant impact on the population as a whole because they affect large communities of people who suddenly feel at risk of being victimised in their turn³⁴.

Most of the kidnappings in Colombia differ from kidnappings in other countries. Most of the cases are carried out by guerrilla groups who control large extensions of the territory, and who are not driven by racial, cultural or religious motives. This differentiates Colombia with other countries where kidnappings are also committed by guerrilla groups, like the Philippines, Pakistan or recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. The case of Colombia is also different from most other Latin American countries, since no other country has a similar combination of armed groups who victimise the population, participate in illegal activities and conduct an armed struggle against the State. Victims of kidnapping are often kept in areas of the country where the authorities cannot enter because of peace negotiations with guerrillas or because the risk of

³³ See R. Briggs, *The kidnapping business* (London, 2001): p. 13.

³⁴ In Colombia, surveys show that after a major kidnapping, 50 percent of the people feel that this crime could happen to them or to someone close. This '*amplification of fear*' does not seem to happen to that degree with other crimes.

killing the victim in an open confrontation with the kidnappers is too high. In Colombia, large organisations such as guerrillas, paramilitary groups and drug cartels often have the control over the territory where they keep the victims. Kidnappers do not have the pressure to negotiate rapidly an economic ransom or a political concession in exchange of their victims. Because of this reason, a majority of victims tend to spend more time in captivity than in other countries³⁵. This differs greatly from the kidnappings committed by other criminal groups where the abductions are usually solved in shorter periods of time. However, statistically there is no way to differentiate a kidnapping that lasts 12 hours from one that lasts 12 months. For the victim there is an enormous difference though. Statistical databases should also take this into consideration.

These levels of insecurity have increased the fear of crime among the population and have had a negative influence of the country's governance. Because citizens become distrustful towards each other, social and economic relations within communities are also affected. Economic incentives are lost and investments decrease. This leads to increased unemployment, migration and further inequality. All these factors pose serious obstacles for the long-term economic and social development of the country. In spite of this, there has been a clear effort to improve and modernise the institutions responsible for the investigation, prosecution and penalisation of crime. Although this is a positive start, much more remains to be done. Lessons learnt during the last decade can help to improve the future of citizen security.

³⁵ The recent example is the kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt, a candidate in Colombia's presidential elections on 23 February 2002 by the FARC as she traveled into a former rebel safe haven. Since then, she has been more than 1,000 days in captivity.