

PROSEGUR RESEARCH

Dimensions and perspectives on violence in Latin America

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Introduction

For the last three decades, Latin America has been designated as the most violent region in the world and it is on an upward trend. During the 1990-2016 period, the region's average homicide rate remained between 14.5 and 16.7 per 100 000 inhabitants, or about two to three times the global average, before rising to 17.2 in 2017. In other words, the Americas account for 37% of homicides worldwide, with only 8% of the world's population, according to the United Nations.

The aim of this analysis is to ask why these levels of violence exist; the answer is not easy.

Very precise diagnoses are needed for security policies to be effective. In addition, the level of consolidation of good governance based on implementation, without exceptions to the rule and transparency, should not be set aside. Good governance is the most effective antidote to corruption and impunity, which in turn are crucial for understanding crime levels reached in the region and the development and power achieved by organized crime.

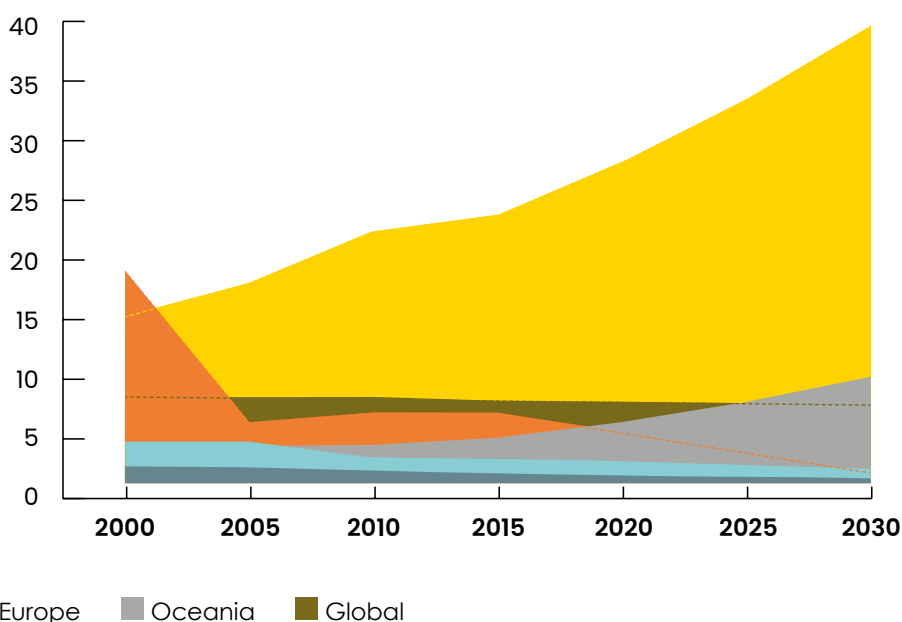


1. Criminal violence in Latin America

Before diving into the causes of criminal violence, we should quantitatively and qualitatively characterize the problem to evaluate its dimensions and complexity. To this end, we must look at the Latin American position in relation to the rest of the world in the number of

homicides. The following graph reflects that it is the region with the most homicides, and to what extent. The difference with the other regions is noteworthy.

Homicide rate projected at regional level between 2000 and 2030



Source: own elaboration based on Muggah y Aguirre (2018).

The Igarapé Institute provides very significant data. The region has a rate of 21.5 homicides, per 100 000 inhabitants, more than three times the global average (7 murders per 100 000 inhabitants). Over the past 10 years, Latin America's regional homicide rate has increased 3.7% a year, three times the population growth rate of 1.1%.

The compiled data indicates that 17 of the 20 most violent countries in the world are in Latin America. The prospects for the future are not encouraging, quite the contrary. According to UNODC data from 2015, the Igarapé Institute foresees the continuity of the growth in the number of homicides: In 2030, this rate will increase to 36.9 murders per 100 000 inhabitants.

“ It cannot be assumed that violence is uniform and equally intense: quite the contrary, there is a great diversity. ”

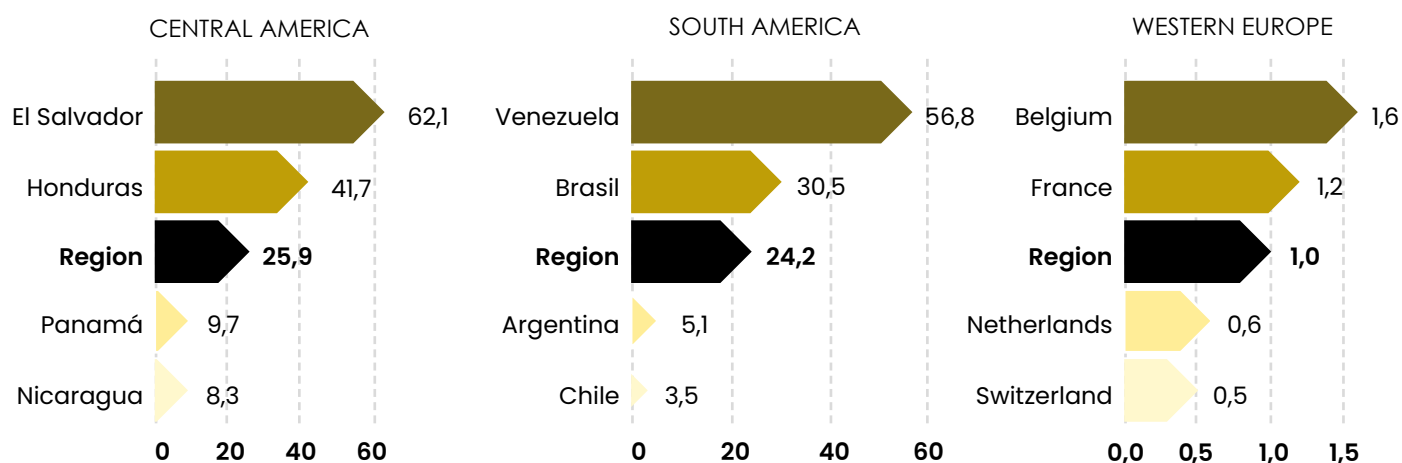
However, it cannot be assumed that violence is uniform and equally intense: quite the contrary, there is a great diversity. Not only between countries, but in each of them. In any case, there is a general upward trend of the number of homicides in the region, which looks to grow over the next decade, at least.

This violence has certain peculiarities. The truth is that, although violence is not only concentrated in cities, in 2016 and 2017, 43 of the 50 cities with the most homicides in the world were in Latin America. More than 141 of Latin American cities (52%) have homicide rates higher than the regional average (21.5 per 100 000 inhabitants). These exorbitant data coincide with the ranking of the 50 most violent cities in the world.

Thus, Central America is the most violent region, although in recent years the difference between one subregion and another has been decreasing. The reasons are both the decrease in Central America and the rise in homicides in South America. Considering the rates by country, both in one subregion and in another, the extraordinary margin between the most extreme cases (with more and less homicides) is striking. However, despite this, when comparing the data difference with Europe, the levels of violence are always considerably higher, even in the case of countries with fewer homicides.



Countries with the highest and lowest homicide rates of selected regions

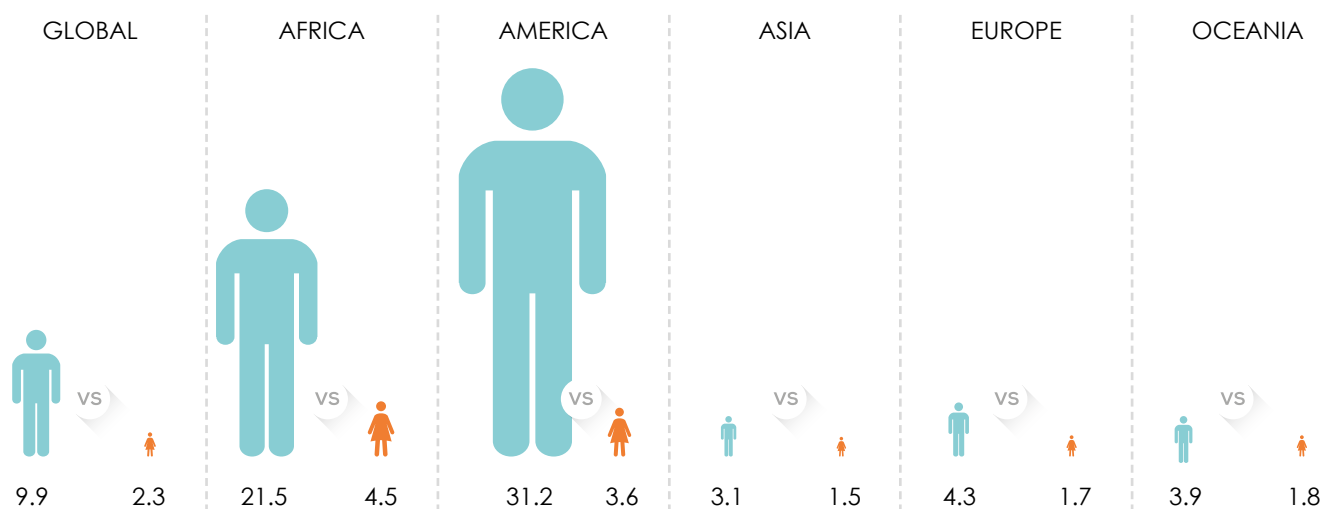


Source: Own elaboration based on UNODC (2019).

The average number of homicides in Europe is 1 homicide per 100 000, compared to 24.2 for the Latin American average. Moreover, the countries with the lowest number of homicides in Latin America are between 3 and even more than 9 times higher than the national cases with the highest number of homicides in Europe.

Homicides also reveal that criminal violence affects much more men. This phenomenon also occurs in the rest of the world, however, in the case of Latin America the proportion of men is much higher, exceeding 10 times that of women.

Homicide rate of men per 100,000

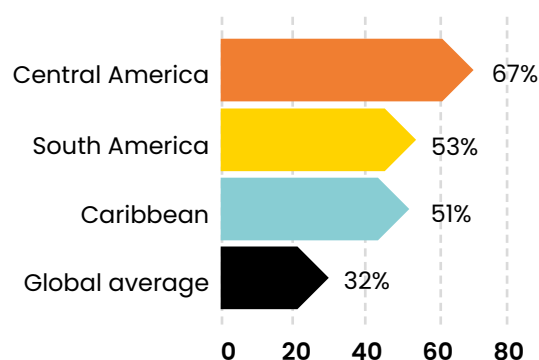


Source: own elaboration based on UNODC (2019).

In addition, these victims and perpetrators are young; the most affected age group is between 15 and 29 years old, constituting 50% of those killed.

Likewise, it should also be noted that firearms are the weapon of choice for committing murder and Latin America is the region with most homicides by firearm in the world.

Homicide rate with a firearm



Source: own elaboration based on Instituto Igarapé (2018).

¹In Spain it is 0.7 homicides/100,000 homicides.

The criminals that cause violence

It is still seemingly paradoxical that, being the most violent region in the world in the intrastate context, it is also an exemplary region in interstate relations. This is demonstrated by their peaceful neighborhood coexistence during the 20th and 21st century.

Intrastate violence has been changing along with historical transformations. During the Cold War, when the internal wars of each country took place, the fight against communism from the governments, mostly military, also generated high levels of violence, in this case, political. With democratic transitions between mid-eighties and mid-nineties, violence ceased to be exercised by ideological clashes and criminal violence began.

In this new scenario of insecurity, common crime reached very high rates, but without a doubt, the development of organized crime, motivated by the substantial profits of illegal trafficking, became the main threat in the region. The power of these criminal networks even allowed them to exercise territorial control of large areas and replace the State in its functions by providing justice, security, building infrastructure and/or providing services to the population.

“ It is still seemingly paradoxical that, being the most violent region in the world in intrastate context, it is also an exemplary region in interstate relations. ”



²While Europe suffered two world wars, in the twentieth century, in Latin America, there were clashes such as the six days, Cenepa War.

The graph shows the magnitude of organized crime, since (unlike others) it is the main threat. However, this data, although indicative, cannot be considered as definitive. Not all countries use the same criteria to classify the crimes of these organizations. This is a complex phenomenon that cannot be analyzed solely by quantitative data, such as homicides. On the other hand, the existence of organized crime does not necessarily generate high levels of homicides, and other forms of violence other than murder can be carried out and not be quantified. The existence of criminal violence depends on many factors and conjunctures, among many others, the degree of coexistence between different organizations or state pressure. In Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia, both issues have a greater or lesser impact on the levels of violence in these countries.

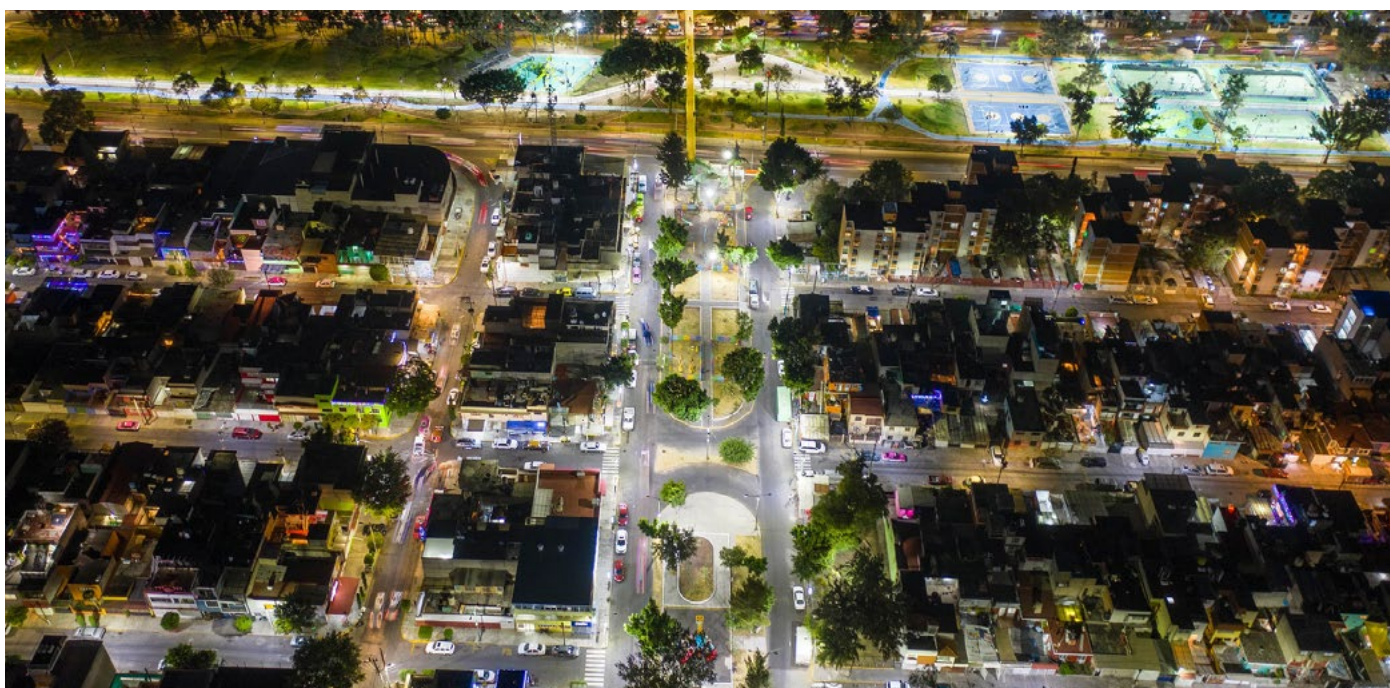
The case of Bolivia is very significant. For some years now, this country has been considered a platform for the redistribution and production of coca and cocaine, likewise for Peru and Colombia. However, it is not among the national cases with the highest number of homicides, but rather among the lowest. Keep in mind that these three countries are the world's largest producers of coca.

However, while Colombia maintains high homicide rates, though certainly not the highest, Peru and Bolivia have

remained among the countries with the fewest homicides. Peru has long had between 6 and 8 victims for every 100 000. In the case of Bolivia, the peak of number of homicides was 12.7 and 12.1 per 100 000 inhabitants (2010 and 2011), according to UNODC, until it dropped to 6.2 in 2020. These figures are still dramatic, but considering those of the rest of the region, it is not among the worst.

Still, it must be emphasized that organized crime is another type of crime with extraordinary social and political influence that has managed to integrate into society. This presence in the economy, society, and State's structures is what makes its power possible and it feeds back, as it happens, very particularly, in certain countries of the region, such as Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela.

The two great powers of the region, Mexico and Brazil, are affected by the establishment of powerful criminal organizations, in which, in these cases, as in the other countries mentioned, organized crime manifests itself very violently and leads to many fatalities, as can be seen in their respective homicide rates.



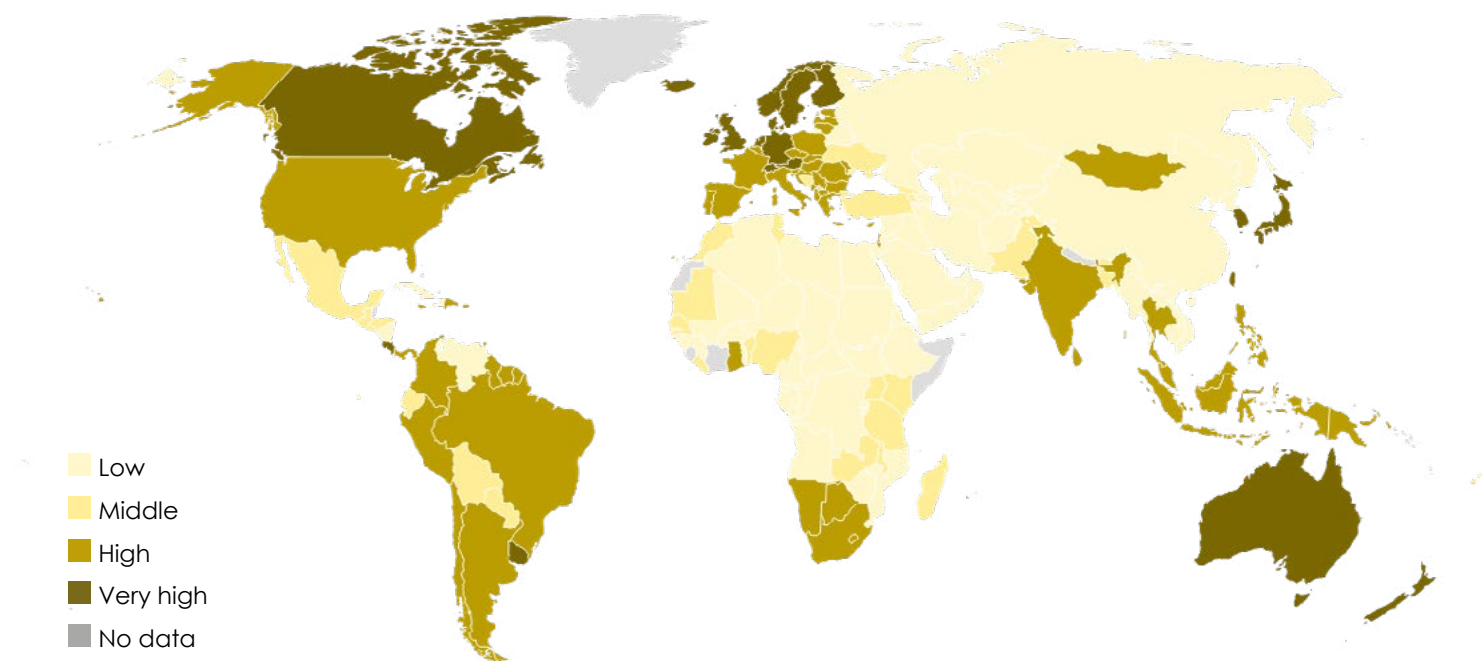
2. Dimensions and perspectives on violence in Latin America

Having analyzed the landscape of insecurity and the dimension of regional violence, this question is particularly important to be able to seek solutions. Hence, it is crucial to elaborate a good diagnosis.

The evaluation of reality requires a multidimensional perspective to understand the complexity of the problem. As such, we will examine the Latin American reality from different areas to detect factors that explain the levels of violence reached in the region. To this end, following a pattern applied to contemplate homicide rates, since it helps to measure the problem, a comparative perspective with other regions of the world has been adopted.

To do so, we will consider international databases that report on the level of democracy, development, and institutional strength. Regarding the first aspect, the intelligence unit of *The Economist* regularly publishes a democracy index that includes numerous variables to evaluate democracy in the countries of the world. It then creates an index which uses to classify four categories: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes.

Democracy Index



Note: The very high level corresponds to full democracies, the high level to unconsolidated democracies, the medium level to hybrid regimes and the low level to authoritarian regimes, as established the Democracy Index.

Source: own elaboration based on *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (2021).

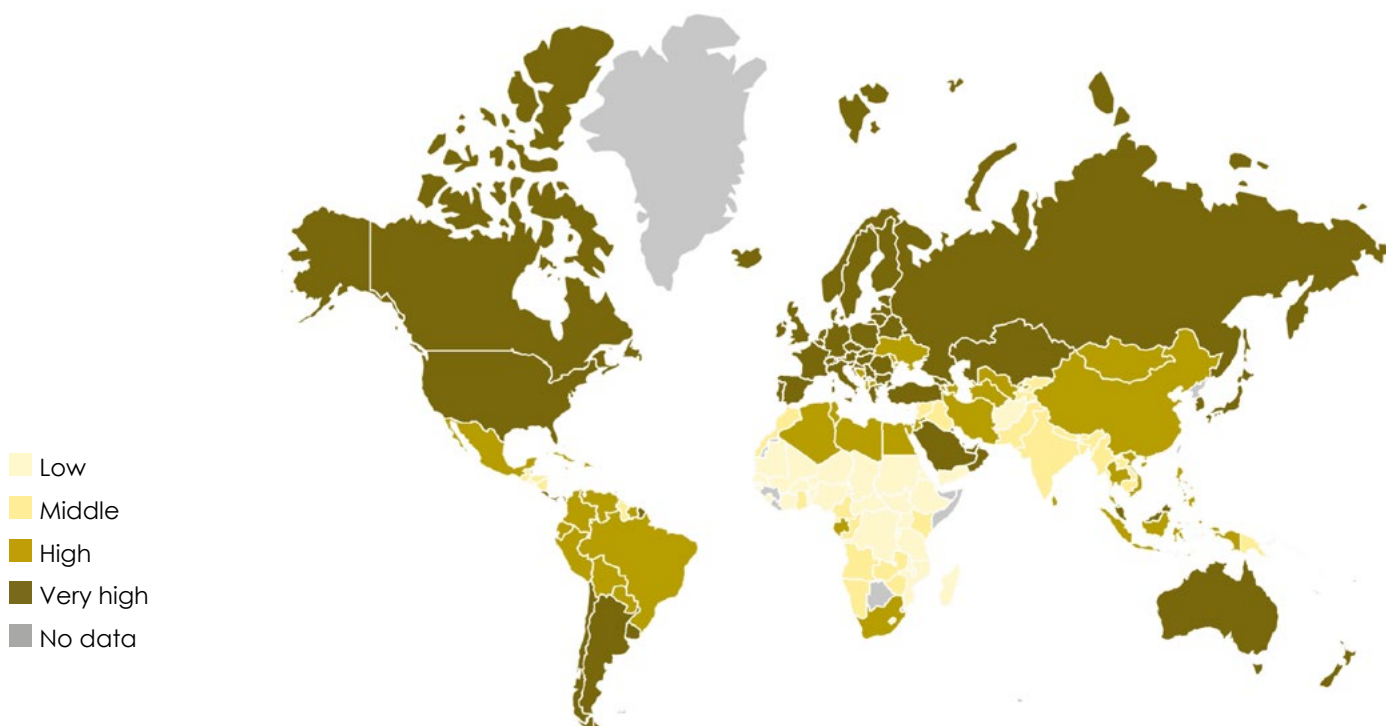
³This index builds with 60 indicators that are grouped into five different categories: Electoral process and pluralism, Civil liberties, Functioning of government, Political participation and Political culture.

According to this index, Latin America is in the second range. Costa Rica and Uruguay are in the first group. The Economist equates Latin America with the democracies of Eastern Europe, although it considers that the positioning of Latin American democracies is better and their democracies more solid, even if they share common problems.

The first finding is that, although there are no fully consolidated democracies in the region, their position is intermediate. It could be concluded that, although these are not consolidated democracies, they do not explain the level of criminal violence, since there is no reference of gravity proportional to the level of violence.

In relation to development, the human development index, which considers factors such as education, health and wealth or gross domestic product (GDP). This is considered the most complete indicator, as it deals with not only quantitative data, but also qualitative variables. According to this indicator, the situation in Latin America with respect to the rest of the world is not in a position of extreme precariousness either.

Human Development Index



Source: own elaboration based on United Nations Development Programme (2021).

⁴ 1 Health: measured according to life expectancy at birth.

2 Education: measured by adult literacy rate and combined gross enrolment rate in primary, secondary and higher education, as well as the years of compulsory education.

3 Wealth: measured by GDP per capita PPP in international dollars.

Contemplating the spectrum of human development, the region is once again in an intermediate position, in this case intermediate-high. However, if the inequality adjusted human development index (IHDI) is applied, the situation changes indicating a lower human development index and a high average position, relocating it to a low average position. UNDP considers that “the IHDI is the actual level of human development (representing inequality), while the HDI can be seen as a ‘potential’ human development index (or the maximum level of HDI) that could be achieved if there were no inequality.”

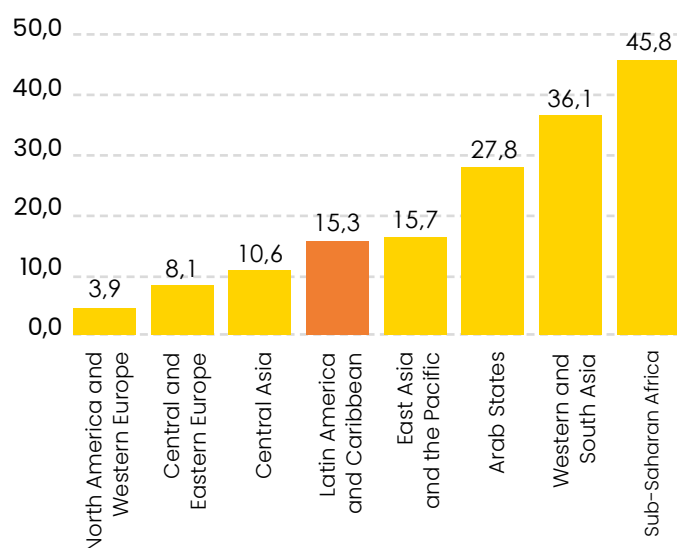
Without intending to downplay the structural problem of inequality of the region which hinders its development, it does not seem that this is a factor, at least on its own, that explains the level of violence. In fact, in other regions there are countries with similar levels of development that do not have these levels of crime. If we assume a direct and mechanical relationship between insecurity and level of development, the African case dismantles this linkage.

To the extent that the development situation in Africa is the worst in the world, so should its rates of violence,

however, this does not seem to be the main challenge for the region. There is not enough statistical data to make claims in any regard, but experts in the region have not proposed that insecurity is as decisive or serious in the continent as in Latin America.

Among the factors that are usually given particular importance and that are widely associated with insecurity are the levels of education of the population. This is a transcendental factor for the United Nations, with higher levels of education resulting in fewer homicides. Latin America is a virtually literate region. The current challenge is secondary education that would favor the integration of the young population into the labor market. However, once again, the data do not mechanically explain the relationship with insecurity. If we look at the following data, we can see that, although secondary education is a challenge, Latin America is not the region with the greatest deficiencies in this aspect.

Rate of young population in secondary



Source: own elaboration based on UNESCO (2015).

⁵ Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/IHDI>

As such, acknowledging the importance of this factor, it is necessary to relativize its weight. There are other regions in a worse situation than Latin America, such as Asia and Arab countries that, despite having many more young people not in school, do not have the same levels of violence as the region. Particularly striking is the case of West and South Asia, where the number of young people, compared to Latin America, who do not attend secondary education is doubled. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that, given the complexity of

the current business of transnational criminal networks, it is increasingly important to have highly qualified collaborators. The legal and illegal businesses of organized crime demand an enlightened elite, which is usually trained in Europe and the United States in prestigious business and senior management centers. It is no longer possible to contemplate the criminal world, made up only of socially marginalized and untrained sectors.

Discussion on perspectives and approaches

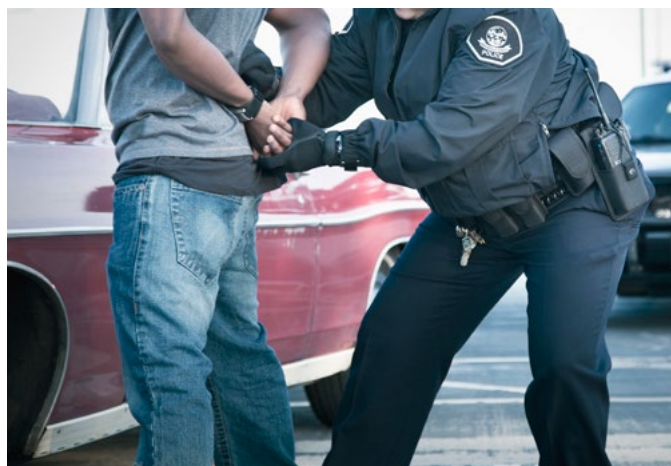
According to the data that has been examined, it has not been possible to find data of a political, economic, and social nature that could explain the level of criminal violence in the region. According to the official sources of different international organizations, Latin America is in an intermediate position with respect to other regions. In other words, no aspects of extreme gravity have been detected that could explain the seriousness of the homicide rates that affect it. This forces us to continue looking for other factors that can help to understand the level of violence and criminal activity. The discussion about the causes that could explain the high rates of criminal violence in Latin America has been dragging on for many years, without having reached a consensus.

Economist determinism dominated for many years, insisting on inequality and poverty as the causes of this violence. However, at the time of greatest economic expansion and reduction of poverty and inequality (2013), violence did not decrease, but continued to increase. UNDP is very expressive in highlighting both dynamics for the decade indicated: "Latin America has been the scene of two major expansions: economic and criminal".

Subsequently, a multidimensional approach has been opened and more factors such as institutional weakness, corruption, impunity and the lack of comprehensive policies and professionalism in State agents have been included, along with political, social, and economic factors. Indeed, in recent years the institutional matter has begun to be considered, including the absence of the State as one of the factors that contribute decisively to the implementation of organized crime. Corruption is another issue that has gained importance to explain this

type of criminality. However, there is not much precision in determining the importance of these factors that are considered separately as well as in isolation from each other. There are even factors that are barely being considered in the field of security, such as perceptions and cultural conceptions of societies that, however, have a direct impact on this area.

Firstly, it is necessary to separate the causes from the consequences and, secondly, they need to be arranged and ranked. This will make it possible to understand not only why there is insecurity, but very particularly, why it reaches such high levels. Economic factors could explain a certain degree of insecurity, but not the current ones, especially when the region has been growing at the same time as crime levels. As such, in addition to economic causes, we must find others of a different nature.



The transcendence of good or bad governance to provide security

In the following pages it will be argued that good governance and the culture of legality is a transcendental factor in providing security. According to the strength of both factors, the State is more likely to control crime and the expansion of organized crime. Conversely, bad governance and the culture of privilege would explain the extraordinary level of criminal activity and the power of criminal networks.

Good governance means a non-corrupt and transparent government based on impartiality and rigorous implementation and enforcement of the rule of law without exceptions. It feeds and consolidates the culture of legality, meaning that citizens do not accept corruption and abide by the law. On the contrary, bad governance is when the State does not always apply the law and does not require certain citizens to comply with it. This is because, in certain circumstances, the law is not applied objectively and universally (good governance), but under particular and subjective criteria. As such, it is possible to negotiate compliance with the law or ignore it to protect certain sectors, which can provide compensation in order to have the law waived in their favor. For this system to be replicated, certain levels of tolerance towards corruption

and impunity are necessary. In this reality and under the influence of the culture of privilege, in the face of equality before the law, aspiration is privilege as a way of progressing.

Bad governance and the culture of privilege is the ideal environment for criminal activity where the weakness of the rule of law and corruption ensure impunity. For networks and criminals, in general, it is particularly important to capture, through corruption, institutions that guarantee them the highest possible degree of impunity to ensure the maximization of their illicit profit, without the penalty or punishment that corresponds to that illegal activity. For this reason, the complicity, through corruption, of the security forces and bodies of the State, the judicial and penitentiary system is transcendental. "No one needs more protection than a criminal and no one is more likely to grant it than a state agent" (Dewey, 2011).

Impunity is a privilege that encourages criminal activity and illegal actions. To corroborate that this is the Latin American reality, let's look at the indices of the rule of law, corruption, and impunity.

“ Impunity is a privilege that incentivizes criminal and illegal activities ”

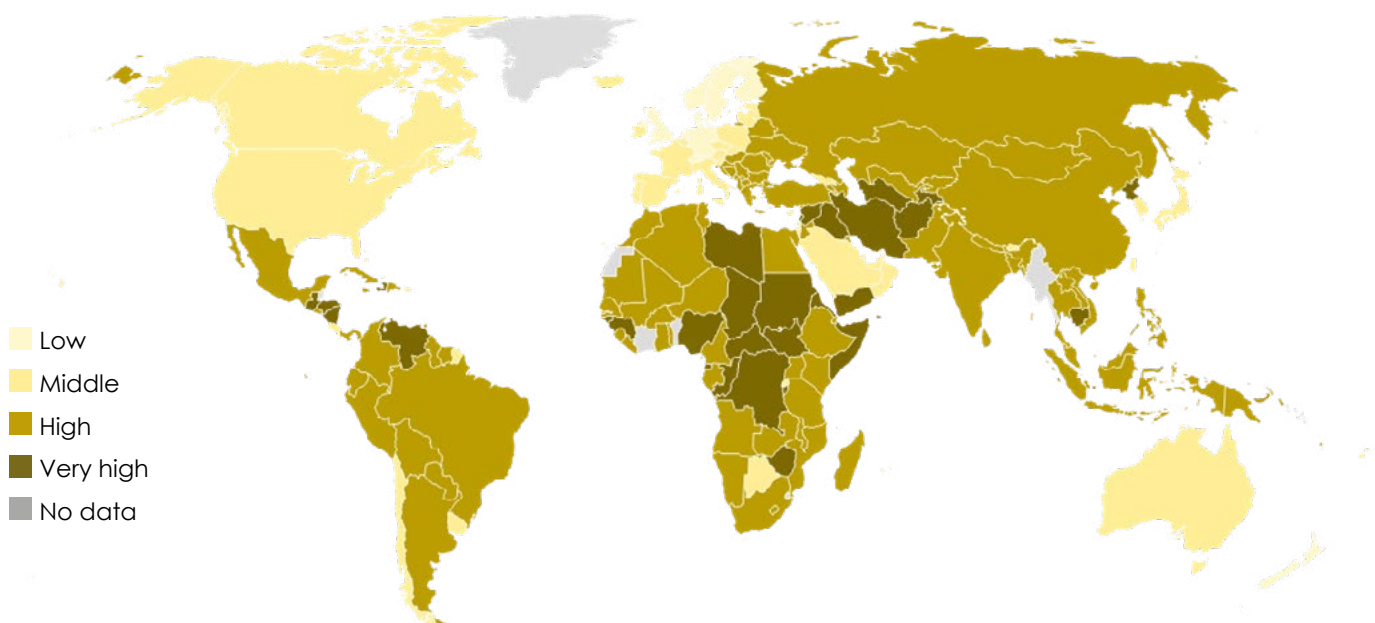
The rule of law, corruption and impunity

The values of the indicators of the rule of law, containment of corruption and impunity become much more unfavorable than the political and economic data examined above. Here, the intermediate position is abandoned, and the low or very low values are passed. This is the case with the rule of law.

This concept is expressed from 0 to 100, where 100 represents the best score of the low values that

characterize the rule of law. Apart from Chile, Uruguay and Costa Rica, with 82, 74 and 70, respectively, no other countries reach 50, except for Panama with 50.48. Brazil is the closest (47.60). Most countries are in the range of 33 to 9. Venezuela is the most extreme case with 0.487.

Corruption Perception Index



Note: The Corruption Perception Index establishes a scale of values between 0 and 100, so that the very high level corresponds to those scores between 0 and 25, the high level to the scores between 26 and 50, the average level to the scores between 51 and 75 and, finally, the low level between the scores 76 and 100.

Source: own elaboration based on Transparency International (2022).

⁶ "Source: <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports>". There need not necessarily be a contradiction between the weakness of the rule of law in the region, with the intermediate and high scores contained in the Democratic Index in *The Economist*, examined pages ago. The values of this index refer to the democratic foundations referred to the democratic functioning related to normalization in the alternation in power, the fulfillment of basic individual rights. But it does not address variables directly related to state institutions.

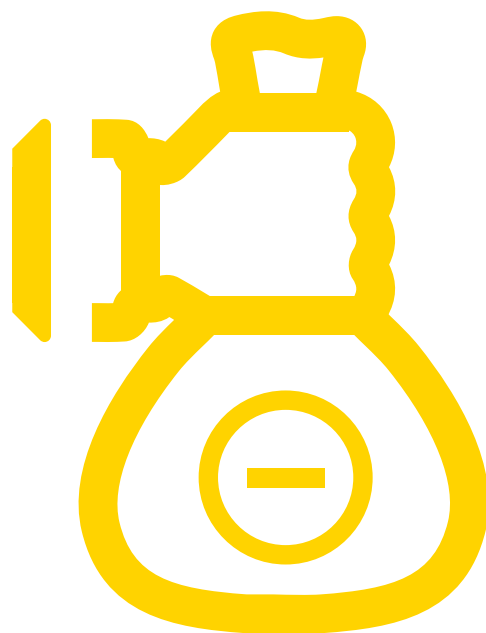
⁷ In the 30th range is Colombia (38), Argentina (37), Peru (33). In the 20 is Ecuador with 29, Mexico with 27.40 and El Salvador, 23.56. In the penultimate section there are Honduras (15), Guatemala (13.94) and Bolivia (11.6). Finally, Nicaragua would have a score of 9.62. The most extreme case is Venezuela, already cited.

This connection explains why there is an almost identical correlation between the strength or weakness of the rule of law and the ability to control corruption. The less strength of the rule of law, the more room for negotiation to exempt compliance with it and, consequently, the less control of corruption, and on the contrary.

It should be noted that the countries on both opposites of the spectrum present, among themselves, one more characteristic: Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay, in addition to having the strongest rule of law and, consequently, greater capacity to control corruption, are also among the countries in the region with the fewest homicides. Quite the opposite happens in the countries of the Central American Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) and in Venezuela. These countries, in addition to having very low levels of rule of law and the containment of corruption, present the highest homicide data in the region and in the world. However, it does not necessarily entail a mechanical relationship between the rule of law and corruption, with high homicides. As already mentioned, illegal and criminal activity does not always manifest itself violently, but a scenario with these characteristics are undoubtedly ideal for the unpunished growth of illegal activities.

The high levels of impunity correspond to the high levels of corruption we have just seen. The UPLAD's 2020 Global Impunity Index highlights the serious and high levels of impunity in the region. In fact, the high levels of impunity existing in Latin America among people who have been arrested, tried, and convicted, are evident.

This impunity is what makes criminals privileged, since, they are able to evade an arrest, or a trial or a conviction. Moreover, even if these criminals are unable to avoid arrest and a trial that condemns them, their privileged capacity means that they will be able to continue participating in their illegal activities from the penitentiary center. Nor is it ruled out that, through such complicity, a leader or gang can take control of the prison and its resources to the point of establishing the rules of penitentiary coexistence and directing the life of the center.



3. Is Latin American society anomic?

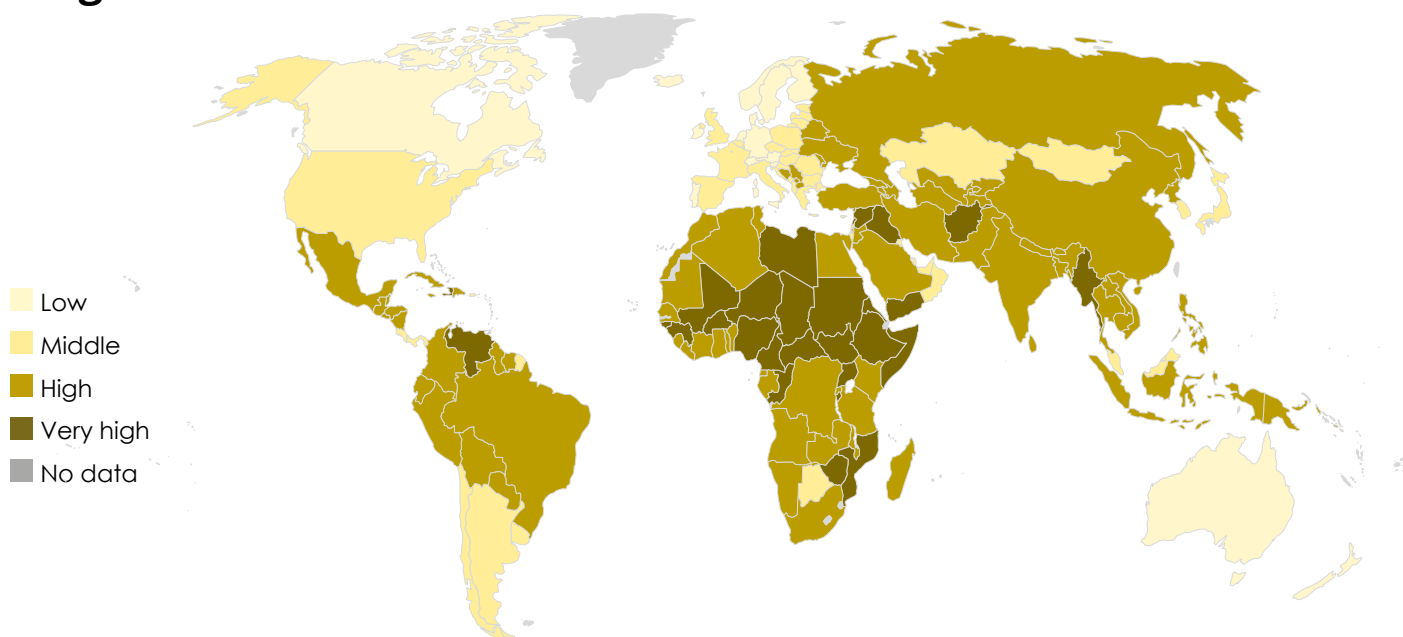
Under examining the strength of the rule of law, the levels of corruption and impunity, it is possible to understand the levels of violence and criminality of the region. However, it could be assumed that the problem of criminality could come from the anomie of these societies. Indeed, the importance of these variables lies in the possibility of the State and citizens ignoring the law. A situation that would respond to that of failed States.

It has become commonplace to claim that one of the main threats to international security is failed States. The anomic situation that characterizes these States could then explain the rates of violence that the region suffers. Supposedly, these States meet the ideal conditions to be a refuge and field of operations for international terrorists and criminals linked to organized crime. However, as can be seen in the Fragile State Index, there are no failed states in Latin America, except Haiti. The case of Venezuelan is striking, which, despite starting to enter the alert section, has not

yet reached the worst possible situation. According to the following map, the failed States are mostly concentrated in Africa.

“ The situation of anomie that characterizes these States could then explain the rates of violence of the region. ”

Fragile States Index



Note: The low level corresponds to sustainable countries, the medium level to stable countries, the high level to countries in danger and the very high level to countries on alert, as established by the Fragile States Index.

Source: own elaboration based on *The Fund for Peace* (2022).

In fact, Latin American States are not failed and are generally described as weak. The difference could be understood in terms of degree. On the one hand, would be the situation closest to the integral breach of legality and consequently to absolute anomie. On the other hand, in a weak State there would be a regulatory-legal system, where there is a considerable level of compliance with this system in society; although there is always the possibility of not complying with it, of negotiating it or of ignoring it to protect certain sectors, which can provide compensation to achieve special treatment before the law. In this informal space is where corruption and impunity grow, making the excessive growth of criminality possible.

In fact, this flaw does not imply presupposing the non-existence of any social regulation, as in a failed State, because in reality it generates a specific degree of anomie in which a set of rules of the opposite nature

coexists: formal, which is the majority order, and informal, which is not the norm and works in certain situations and contexts.

This fragility foments an informal order which is crucial for the expansion of illegal activities

“ This fragility foments an informal order which is crucial for the expansion of illegal activities ”



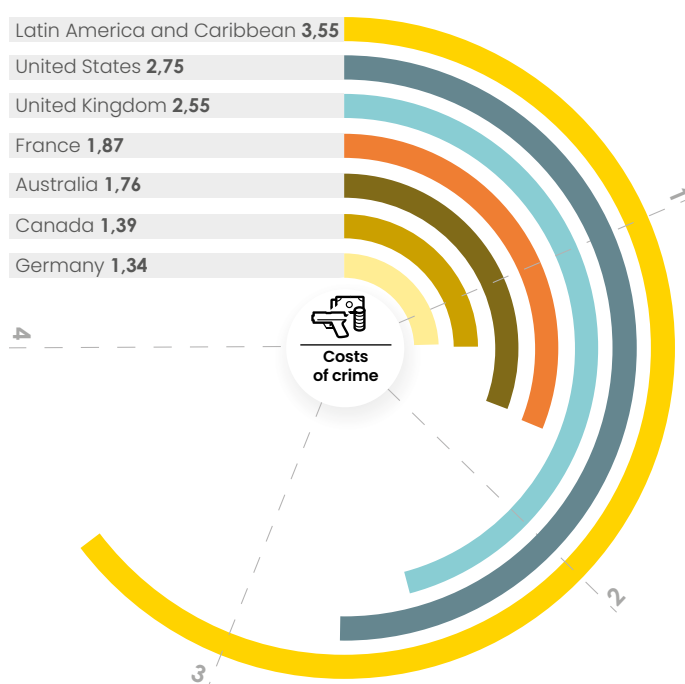
4. The failure of security public policies

In addition to the violence level, Latin America spends a record amount of money on security. An item which both in the public and private sectors, far exceeds that dedicated in Europe and the United States on the same sector. This data highlights not only the limitations or failures of the policies formulated, but that their failure is largely due to the lack of an adequate diagnosis of security behind them.

The Inter-American Development Bank has estimated the costs generated by crime, considering governmental, family and business spending, and costs for victims and

criminals. Only public security spending, in relation to total spending in Latin America and the Caribbean, is almost double the average of developed countries, as shown in this graph. This data shows that security is a priority for governments in the region, but also that the efficiency of this spending is questionable, because despite the volume of spending it is not possible to reduce crime (Jaitman, 2017).

International comparison of average cost of crime



Source: own elaboration based on Jaitman (2017).



This evidence indicates that public policies are not focusing on the factors behind criminal violence and organized crime. The academic world has also insisted on the limits of these policies and a debate has been opened around their designs.

Since its first report, the Global Commission on Drug Policy (2011) has been insisting on the failure of policies of a purely repressive nature, although they continue to be the main policies applied in the region (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2016). The limited results of these policies certainly do not compensate for the human and economic effort that has been made.

This failure, in addition to invalidating merely repressive policies, demonstrates that security problems do not depend solely on resources, but on the way they are used. The effectiveness and efficiency in security depends on having an accurate diagnosis that is contemplated to design comprehensive security policies.

According to the examination of Latin America's reality and the factors that may affect security problems, a multidimensional vision has been proposed, but ordered under a hierarchical scheme. This intends to give greater relevance to certain factors above others. In particular, the need to strengthen good governance, to reduce corruption and consequently impunity. The latter will allow control over the development of crime.

From here, numerous lines of research in relation to the transcendence of security are opened, and not

only as a field of analysis, but also for its implications and structural relationship with development and governance.



“ Security problems do not uniquely depend on resources, rather the way they are employed. Efficiency in security requires a precise diagnosis to design comprehensive security policies. ”

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