



FELIX/CARLOS DIAZ

Restoring institutions for safe and inclusive cities

Despite advances in income equality, violent crime has flourished in urban Venezuela. Research led by the Social Science Laboratory (LACSO) shows how respect for the rule of law has eroded, leaving citizens to rely on informal institutions — such as family and faith or criminal networks and paramilitaries — for security.

Poverty and income inequality are often cited as drivers of violent crime. Yet in its years as an oil-rich nation that increased wealth across the board, Venezuela actually saw crime rates increase. Between 1999 and 2010, while poverty rates fell by nearly half, homicides rose from 25 per 100,000 people to 57. By 2015, the rate had soared to 90. What could account for this rise in violence, even as inequality reached the lowest levels in Latin America?

The challenge: What role do institutions play in making cities safe?

While researchers have explored infrastructure and other aspects of physical wellbeing as factors driving violence and insecurity, since 2013, researchers with Venezuela's Social Science Laboratory have looked instead at social norms and the formal and informal rules and institutions that make up the fabric of society. Using a mix of research methods — including case studies, interviews, and a national survey — they examined these institutions in relation to levels of crime, security, and social cohesion in four cities: Caracas, Ciudad Guayana, San Cristóbal, and San Antonio del Táchira. The aim was to identify solutions that can make Venezuelan cities safer and more inclusive.

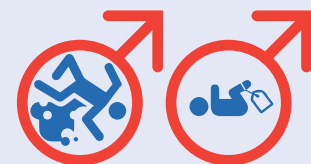
Rule of law and violence in Caracas



Income has risen but violent crime has increased



Poverty declined from 49% in 1999 to 28% in 2010 while homicide rates more than doubled



82% of homicide victims and 74% of kidnapping victims are male



85% of survey respondents consider the country less secure than a decade ago



68% trust their neighbours for protection vs 26% who trust police



Women play a leading role as peacekeepers in communities

When the rule of law breaks down

Findings reveal a breakdown of respect for formal institutions across social classes that has left the state unable to enforce the rule of law, protect citizens, or resolve conflicts. In a 2015 national survey, more than 82% of middle class respondents and almost 90% of shanty town residents did not believe that respect for the rule of law had increased in the past decade. In that same year, Venezuela ranked last in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index.

The rule of law has been eroded by inefficiency, corruption, and impunity, generating public distrust in the state. Ten percent or less of survey respondents expressed confidence in the police, courts, judges, and prisons. Police, meanwhile, feel shunned by the population and abandoned by authorities — even as they face a wave of violence in the streets. In 2015, nearly three police officers were killed in Caracas each week.

In this context, shanty town residents have developed their own norms and rules to regulate social ties and deal with land tenure disputes and tensions over the chronic shortage of housing, public services, and public space. These informal institutions manifest in two different forms of social capital: a 'virtuous' form expressed as increased trust in traditional institutions such as the family, religion, and neighbours; and a 'perverse' form that entrusts paramilitary groups and criminal gangs with enforcing justice through violence.

The role of women in reducing violence

Researchers found significant gender differences in both the incidence of violence and efforts to contain it. While men are overwhelmingly the targets and perpetrators of violent crimes, women wield moral authority as non-threatening figures. This has enabled them to play a leading role — as mothers, teachers, or nuns — in helping to reduce violence and rebuild trust in Venezuelan neighbourhoods.

In schools, for example, women teachers are able to discipline violent students with less risk of reprisal than their male counterparts. In Caracas, mothers have helped negotiate truces between opposing youth gangs. And nuns have successfully used religious imagery to reclaim public spaces overrun by drug dealers.

Mainstreaming non-violence

Even as Venezuela remains in crisis, there are opportunities to strengthen citizen security by working with schools and universities, research centres, social movements, and even industry to mainstream non-violent forms of social cohesion.

Since the 2015 elections, researchers have been actively sharing research findings through mass media, and by publishing, offering training, and engaging with policymakers. They have presented

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Empower women in their peacemaking role and promote conflict resolution within male culture and identity.
- Reinforce norms that reduce violence and promote healthy social relations in both private and public spaces.
- Promote stable education and work programs for youth to expose them to a rules-based environment.
- Use the state apparatus to strengthen the role of 'virtuous' informal institutions (neighbourhood and church groups) in maintaining security and social order.

recommendations to Parliament and trained over 30 Deputies and staff members of the National Assembly on citizen security and the national criminal legal system. They have helped form regional violence observatories in different areas of the country and carried out workshops for university researchers, students, and a range of professionals — including sociologists, psychologists, lawyers, and journalists.

MULTI-FUNDER INITIATIVE



Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.

Safe and Inclusive Cities

International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON
Canada K1G 3H9
Phone: +1 613-236-6163
Fax: +1 613-238-7230
Email: cities@idrc.ca | www.idrc.ca/cities

idrc.ca