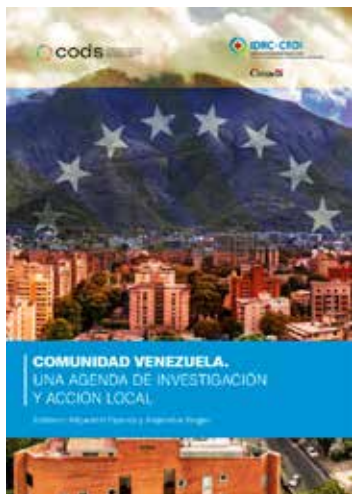


Citizen security in Venezuela: An action-research agenda



About this briefing note

This briefing note summarizes the conclusions of the chapter “Citizen security in Venezuela” by Roberto Patiño from the book *Community Venezuela: An Agenda for Research and Local Action*, edited by Alejandro Fajardo and Alejandra Vargas. The book features contributions from various researchers working on Venezuelan issues and is informed by a series of discussions that took place between July and September 2020. This initiative was coordinated by the Center for Sustainable Development Goals for Latin America at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Introduction

Venezuela has long lacked effective policies for violence prevention and citizen security. Now, amid its deep social, economic, and political crises, Venezuela has become one of the most violent countries in the world. Crimes are committed on a daily basis by criminal organizations, state security forces, and ordinary citizens. The driving forces of violence grow deeper and more complex as the country experiences an unprecedented humanitarian emergency. At the root of the problem, however, is a lack of trust in institutions, which inhibits the collaboration between communities and citizen security structures necessary to mitigate the problem. This briefing note presents an overview of

citizen security in Venezuela, with a focus on the relationships among key security institutions and between these institutions and citizens. The briefing also touches upon the justice system and concludes with recommendations for an action and research agenda aimed at building upon the remaining foundations of trust at the community level.

Context

In Venezuela, violence is one of the greatest threats to well-being. The murder rate in the country is among the highest in the world. In 2019, the estimated homicide rate was 60.3 per 100,000 residents (Insight Crime, 2019). Homicides are concentrated in some urban “hot spots”; about half of the homicides occur in just 20 percent of the municipalities (García et al., 2020). In recent years, however, criminal activity has also increased significantly in rural areas near borders, where illegal economies have flourished. For example, the homicide rate in municipalities located in border states was between two and four times higher than the national average, according to the last official report (in 2016).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the police, the army, and the justice system—all of which have been involved in human rights violations—are part of the problem, rather than the solution. In Caracas alone, 38 percent of violent deaths were committed by security forces, according to the observatory Monitor de Víctimas (2019). To be sure, members of the security forces are themselves frequent victims of violence. Venezuela is the Latin American country with the highest rate of police fatality (Foro Penal, 2020).

Meanwhile, impunity for these criminal acts is widespread: More than 95 percent of serious crimes are not punished (HRW, 2019). Prisons and pre-trial detention centres significantly exceed their capacities, with an overcrowding rate over 125 percent. These institutions have become epicentres for criminal activity and sites of human rights violations against inmates (OVP, 2018). Prevention programs—such as those that help reduce recidivism, focus on at-risk populations, and create good relations between communities and the police—have been absent for years (Zubillaga & Hanson, 2018).

Citizen distrust of formal authorities is a fundamental part of the problem. This is particularly evident when the country is compared with the rest of the world: Venezuela ranks last (out of 128 countries) in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index, which means that the majority of the population does not trust the judicial system or state security forces (WJP, 2020).

Diagnosis of institutions

From a historical perspective, the citizen security policies implemented in Venezuela in the last 20 years have been characterized by the absence of violence prevention strategies, and the lack of a transparent and effective justice system that works to reduce impunity and raise the professionalism of the state’s security forces. When the state acts, it often does with excessive use of force against the most vulnerable communities. So far, the public sector has not used consistent measures to implement evidence-based programs and prevent crime (Rosas & Herrera-Núñez, 2018). Added to this, there is little rigorously collected data about violent behaviour in the country. Furthermore, there is no way of knowing why these institutions are failing to be able to design coherent solutions. Only a few nonprofit organizations and research centres investigate the nature of urban violence in Caracas.

Police behaviour toward citizens is a reflection of how the state treats its inhabitants. In Venezuela, this behaviour is characterized by ineffectiveness and abuse. In 2019, the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV, 2019) recorded 5,200 deaths at the hands of the police, along with many more acts of extortion and corruption (Ávila et al., 2019).

Police institutions are still characterized by illegality and lack of transparency. The Venezuelan police are widely known among citizens for participating in various illegal activities, including extrajudicial executions. Between 2015 and 2017, more than 12,000 deaths were perpetrated by police institutions (OVV, 2019).

According to Laura Louza, director of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Acceso a la Justicia (Access to Justice), the police have abandoned their public service responsibilities to instead function as a repressive body guaranteeing the permanence of the current government in exchange for impunity from corrupt practices. Likewise, the Public Ministry, an institution of civilian governance, has lost its independence and is greatly hindered in its ability to fulfil its responsibilities. According to Acceso a la Justicia (2019), the ministry's total budget in real terms decreased each year between 2012 and 2017.

The loss of independence and decline in operational capacity of police forces in Venezuela has occurred gradually over the last 20 years. A growing number of human rights violations have been documented during this time, including excessive use of force by state security forces, arbitrary detentions, violations of due process, torture, ill-treatment, and poor detention conditions, among others. In this sense, Louza argues, the legal basis of the rule of law and the separation of powers in Venezuela have been lost.

Recommendations and research agenda

The fundamental solution to Venezuela's immense problem of a lack of citizen security is to rebuild the institutions so that they can regain public trust and carry out violence-prevention policies. This would require some kind of resolution to the country's current political crisis. From an action-research agenda, however, one can start by evaluating violence prevention policies in other comparable Latin American countries to elucidate a viable path for the restoration of institutions.

For her part, Verónica Zubillaga, associate professor at Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, proposes a sociological research agenda to provide a nuanced and contextualized understanding of the challenge. She recommends examining the broad historical trends that determine social identities and community structures in Venezuela. At the same time, she proposes understanding local subjectivities and practices to identify how communities are strengthened through collective strategies with a view to dealing with violence in their territories. These studies could be integrated with research of a more diagnostic nature.

With regard to the research agenda for the police system, a rigorous analysis of the available human capital and the state of the physical equipment and a detailed evaluation of the consequences of heavy-handed policies are needed. Based on the review, a national debate should be held about the needed transformations within the police system on issues such as the centralization or decentralization of police functions and the role of the police in the pacification of criminal gangs. In this context, discussion roundtables with the actors involved should be held to build politically viable strategies for making important changes in the Venezuelan police system.

Regarding the investigative research agenda for the judicial system, an evaluation should be conducted of the state and current capacity of the justice system's personnel, budget, and tools. Likewise, a comparative analysis should be done of the transitional justice mechanisms, which will surely be relevant in the future.

Before advancing the proposed research agendas, we must recognize some of the challenges that have hindered the development of violence prevention programs in the past:

- The current government's security approach is based on heavy-handed policies and the militarization of the police.
- The disintegration of social capital and the adaptation of populations to welfare and government handouts.
- In sufficient financial resources at the national level.
- Social polarization.
- The presence of consolidated criminal gangs.
- Social discrimination against low-income youth.

Despite the challenges faced by universities, NGOs, and other civil society groups in Venezuela, there are several working on a research-action agenda regarding citizen security issues. The chapter provides a complete list of institutions and organizations working in this area, among which the following stand out: on issues related to the gathering of information, the Monitor de Víctimas and the Venezuelan Violence Observatory; on issues related to the police system, Amnesty International and the Monitor on the Use of Lethal Force in America; on issues of the judicial system, Acceso a la Justicia, Provea, and the Human Rights Centre at Andrés Bello Catholic University; and lastly, on issues related to the prevention of violence, Fe y Alegría, the Santa Teresa Foundation, and Caracas Mi Convive.



Conclusion

The citizen security system in Venezuela, made up of the police system, the justice system, and organizations focused on preventing violence, is far from fulfilling its function. There are important knowledge gaps in areas vital to generating strategies, public policies, and programs to solve this problem. The crisis is of such magnitude that it is not enough to simply pursue isolated research agendas, proposals, or actions; a concerted effort is needed. Many of the problems in citizen security require complex decision-making regarding various issues, from the pacification of armed groups to transitional justice processes and internal reforms. It is necessary to debate these topics in the public sphere to generate consensus among the most important actors in society on how to face these problems. Beyond the political discussion, a focus on and inclusion of the local communities in policy debates will bring about progress in the short term.

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