

# AS CRIME SOARS FOR VENEZUELA, CHÁVEZ COASTS

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Dec. 1 — Walk into an emergency room in many poor parts of this booming, oil-rich nation on a weekend night and you will be overwhelmed — victims of gunshot wounds and drunken clashes line the corridors. Homicides are up 67 percent since 1999, and violent crime is the top concern of Venezuela's voters as they head to the polls on Sunday.

Yet the man in charge since then, President Hugo Chávez, rarely addresses the problem publicly and is sailing toward an easy election for a third time. Analysts say Mr. Chávez is able to ignore the issue by governing through a system of extensive handouts that eases the purchase of basic goods but does little to ensure public order.

“Chávez has shielded himself from the issue because people see his government as an important arbiter in their daily life,” said Miguel Tinker-Salas, an expert on Venezuelan history at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. “Chávez's policies have made a difference among the poor, and that's what is recognized.” He pointed to subsidized groceries, health care and literacy, in particular.

Crime analysts say part of the problem is that the government and its allies have politicized police forces throughout the country, marginalizing officers viewed as disagreeing with Mr. Chávez's “Bolivarian Revolution,” which uses militaristic and nationalistic rhetoric in an attempt to reconfigure society with vague socialist ideals.

A similar process has taken place in government ministries, the national oil company and the armed forces after the coup that briefly removed Mr. Chávez from the presidency in 2002.

Analysts say police forces have also largely been urged to tread lightly in poor neighborhoods, turning a blind eye to small demonstrations and petty crime like burning tires. Critics say it is part of Mr. Chávez's efforts to maintain support in poor neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, crime has exploded. According to human rights groups and a [Unesco](#) study, Venezuela has the highest rate of gun-related deaths of 57 countries surveyed — far surpassing Brazil, one of the most violent nations in Latin America.

“Venezuela has undeniably become one of the most violent countries in the world,” said Julio Jacobo Waiselfisz, the researcher who conducted the Unesco study.

Though he trails badly in most polls, Mr. Chávez’s opponent, Manuel Rosales, 53, governor of Zulia State in western Venezuela, has been pounding the crime issue, questioning why murders have surged since Mr. Chávez entered office in 1999, to 9,962 in 2005 from 5,974 in 1999, according to figures from the Criminal Investigations Police.

Officials in the Justice Ministry did not respond to repeated requests for comment on the government’s crime policies. The National Assembly, controlled by supporters of Mr. Chávez, is considering legislation to diminish police corruption by centralizing more authority in a national police force.

Mr. Rosales, the candidate of a coalition of opposition parties, laid the blame squarely at the feet of the president, saying his confrontational style and tendency to turn the courts, military and the police into tools of his own power, are feeding the crime epidemic.

“Chávez nourishes the anarchic forces that are tearing Venezuela apart with a discourse advocating aggression on all fronts,” the candidate has said. Polls show Mr. Rosales trailing Mr. Chávez, though his approval ratings have inched up since the start of the campaign several months ago.

Concern over crime has jumped this year after a series of brutal episodes pierced even the relatively sheltered existence of the upper middle class and the diplomatic and international business communities. Street protests broke out in April after three brothers with Canadian citizenship, John Faddoul, 17, Kevin Faddoul, 13, and Jason Faddoul, 12, were kidnapped and found executed.

Around the same time, burglars shot Walter Rehberger, a consul at the Austrian Embassy here, during a break-in. Diplomats were singled out again this month, when thieves broke into the trade office for the Chinese Embassy and stole \$14,000.

The highway from the international airport in Maiquetía to Caracas has also proved particularly dangerous, with armed gangs rear-ending cars and robbing passengers of their belongings. Carlos Colina, a consultant for Hewlett-Packard, was shot to death on the route in July, one of several incidents that led the United States Embassy in Caracas to issue a warning against traveling on the road after nightfall.

While much of the recent attention has focused on killings among the privileged, the vast majority of homicides in Venezuela occur in the country's poorest communities — Mr. Chávez's strongest base.

Killings tend to spike during weekends and around paydays in the middle and end of the month, when robberies are also common, according to criminologists. The large majority of incidents involve boys and men ages 15 to 25.

Mr. Waiselfisz, the Unesco researcher, found that gun-related deaths in Venezuela were surging, to 41.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2002, the last year for which figures are available, from 34.3 in 2000.

One of the most unsettling aspects of the spike in killings is that it has developed as Venezuela's economy has boomed — thanks to high oil prices. Gross domestic product climbed 10.2 percent last quarter, making Venezuela the fastest-growing economy in Latin America.

Previous economic booms helped Venezuela avoid the crippling violence and social conflict that plagued neighboring Andean countries like Colombia and Peru.

Though the accuracy of official statistics is sometimes questioned by the government's opponents, the channeling of oil revenues seems to have alleviated poverty somewhat in recent years. The proportion of Venezuelans living in poverty has fallen to 34 percent from 44 percent in 1998, the year before Mr. Chávez took office, according to government figures.

Some of that decline has clearly happened as Mr. Chávez has used oil revenues to finance a broad range of social welfare programs, like adult literacy programs,

subsidized basic foodstuffs and medical care in poor areas provided by Cuban doctors.

“We’re witnessing a reduction in infant mortality rates only to see our boys killed when they turn 16,” said Ana María Sanjuán, a sociologist at Central University in Caracas and an official with Provea, a nongovernmental organization that monitors human rights issues.

Citing figures from the Criminal Investigations Police, Ms. Sanjuán said the number of homicides in Venezuela climbed 23 percent from January to August of this year, to 7,616. “The politicization and decrepitude of our policing structures may have more to do with our culture of violence than just poverty,” Ms. Sanjuán said.

Pedro Ure, chief inspector for the municipal police in Sucre, a sprawling district of Caracas, led a visitor on a nighttime patrol of slum streets and said tolerant policing methods were part of an attempt to instill respect among his officers for human rights.

“This means a citizen can enjoy his rum on the street if he wishes, even though this could be an infraction,” he said, though he acknowledged that many homicides occurred when suspects were drinking.

Meanwhile, however, a history of far graver abuses by the police has gone unchecked, some crime analysts note. Last year, the attorney general’s office said it was investigating 5,520 presumed executions by the police between 2000 and 2005, involving 6,127 victims. Of the police officials implicated, prosecutors have filed charges against 517, and fewer than 100 had been convicted, according to [Human Rights Watch](#).

“We’re experiencing the worst crime wave in modern Venezuelan history,” said Marcos Tarre Briceño, director of the nongovernmental organization Secure Venezuela, “and the government barely acknowledges its inability to control its own police forces.”