

LATIN AMERICA

Street crime sends Latins to S. Florida

This report is adapted from the book "Saving the Americas: Latin America's dangerous decline, and what the U.S. must do," by Andrés Oppenheimer (Random House, 2007), on Latin America's chances of competing with China, India and other rapidly grow

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A joke making the rounds in Miami says that the mayor should erect statues to honor the three people who have done the most to turn Miami into the Latin American business center it is today: Cuban ruler Fidel Castro, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Colombian rebel leader Manuel Marulanda.

It's good. But there should be a fourth statue to honor the violent street gangs, kidnapers and muggers terrorizing Latin American cities, and driving hundreds of thousands -- many of them rich -- to abandon their homelands for South Florida.

There is an undeclared civil war raging in Latin America, which is pitting common criminals against the general population. It has turned the region into the world's most violent.

According to the Geneva-based World Health Organization, Latin America has a homicide rate of 27.5 victims for every 100,000 residents, compared with 22 in Africa, 15 in Eastern Europe and 1 in industrialized nations. Other studies show that Latin America, with only 8 percent of the global population, accounts for 75 percent of the world's kidnappings.

It has become a running joke at international conferences to say that one is more likely to be attacked while walking in downtown Mexico City dressed in a business suit than in Baghdad dressed in a U.S. military uniform.

And the likelihood that a criminal will go to jail in Latin America is slim: While the prison population in the United States -- one of the world's highest -- is 686 people per 100,000 inhabitants, in Argentina it's 107, in Colombia 126, in Mexico 156, in Peru 104, and in Venezuela 62.

Crime is changing the face -- and the soul -- of Latin America. In the past, the poor lived on the outskirts of cities and, apart from sporadic outbreaks of political violence, did little to upset the daily life of the upper classes.

Poverty was a tragic phenomenon, but one that was hidden behind the walls that line the roadways.

Those days are over. High poverty rates, along with inequality and the communications revolution that brought the lives of the rich to the humblest homes in the region, are creating a crisis of unfulfilled expectations that spills over into frustration, anger and rising levels of street crime.

In the *villas miseria* of Argentina, the *favelas* of Brazil, the *cerros* of Caracas and the *ciudades perdidas* of Mexico City, legions of the young are growing up, raised outside conventional family structures, on the streets, without hope of decent jobs in the formal economy.

FORTIFIED CASTLES

MIDDLE, UPPER CLASSES

RETREAT BEHIND WALLS

The combination of increasing expectations and diminishing opportunities for the least educated is leading growing numbers of marginalized youths to jump the walls of their hidden cities, often armed, and venture into commercial and residential areas, where they mug or kidnap whoever looks well dressed or is carrying something shiny.

As this army of alienated youth advances on the cities, the middle and upper classes retrench ever deeper into their walled fortresses. Luxury condominiums in most big Latin American cities are no longer built with just bullet-proof security booths at their entrance, where guards armed with shotguns or assault rifles can check on people wanting to get in.

Just as in the Middle Ages, Latin American executives live in fortified castles. They lower their drawbridges when they leave for work early in the morning and raise them again at night.

Latin America has an estimated 2.5 million private guards. Sao Paulo, Brazil, has 400,000 -- three times the number of police officers. Rio de Janeiro is the site of an all-out war: Criminals kill about 133 police officers a year -- more than two a week -- and the police respond with extrajudicial executions of up to 1,000 suspects a year.

Bogotá, which until recently was the world capital of kidnapping, has roughly seven private guards for every police officer. Other security-related businesses are booming, too.

One of Colombia's security entrepreneurs, Miguel Caballero, told me he's making a fortune designing bulletproof fashion.

"We've developed a groundbreaking industry," Caballero said.

His business sells 22,000 fashionable bulletproof clothing items a year, some of them exported to Iraq.

"We already have 192 exclusive models. And we're developing a women's line of apparel, with both underwear and outerwear."

'AN EPIDEMIC'

YOUTHS TAKE DRUGS,

THEN BECOME CRIMINALS

In few places anywhere has the quality of life plummeted as sharply as in the great cities of Latin America. Buenos Aires, until a few years ago one of the safest cities in the world, has become terrorized by crime.

Even before the economic collapse of 2001, slums had spread deep into the city. The shantytown next to the downtown Retiro train station, for instance, grew from 12,500 residents in 1983 to 72,800 in 1998, and its population has grown far more since then.

Within the walls of these shantytowns, just blocks away from the most elegant areas of the city, are tens of thousands of youths who don't attend school. Many start taking drugs at eight or 10 years of age and become criminals soon thereafter.

"We're facing an epidemic," said Juan Alberto Yaria, director of the Institute of Drugs at the University del Salvador and a former top Buenos Aires province drug rehabilitation official.

"We are seeing more and more people with their brains so damaged by drugs that they will never be able to lead normal lives," he said. "All these kids who don't go to school, never met their fathers, never belonged to a church or a sports club, and who live on the streets and consume drugs, are the criminal working class."

STREET GANGS

FROM LOS ANGELES,

GROUPS WENT SOUTH

In Central America, the *maras*, or street gangs, the region's latest vehicle of organized violence, are spreading from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and southern Mexico toward the Mexican capital and into Colombia, Brazil and other South American countries.

The *mareros*, marginalized youths who identify themselves by their tattoos and the hand signs they use to communicate with one another, are believed to number more than 100,000 in Central America alone. Nearly half are younger than 15, police estimate.

The *mareros* originated in Los Angeles, Calif., and spilled into Central America when convicts were shipped back to their homelands by the U.S. government. In Honduras, one such gang stopped a busload of passengers who were traveling to their hometowns to celebrate the 2004 Christmas holiday. Gang members murdered 28 men, women and children in revenge for a police crackdown.

For growing numbers of youths, the *maras* are their only chance for social recognition. The *marero* is a neighborhood hero. Youths compete for the chance to take part in an

initiation rite in which they may be required to commit a variety of crimes, from selling drugs to killing a police officer, and, if they are captured, they pose triumphantly for the TV cameras.

"The *marero* is the new criminal of the 21st century," then-Honduran Security Minister Oscar Alvarez told me. "In the *maras*, there are people dedicated to drug trafficking, murder for hire, robbery, kidnapping, dismemberment. In other words, they're killing machines."

"But unlike other criminals, they don't care about consequences," Alvarez said. "Unlike a traditional bank robber who wears a mask to hide his face when committing a crime, they don't hide. Instead, they crave the publicity they get from the media, which helps them rise within their group's chain of command."

The Mara Salvatrucha has more than 50,000 members in El Salvador. They not only steal, mug and kidnap, but also torture and decapitate their victims as a demonstration of their power. They have become so powerful that growing numbers of Central Americans -- especially in the middle and upper classes -- are demanding heavy-handed measures, even when they involve things that until recently would have been considered legally or morally indefensible.

The expression *mano dura*, or heavy hand, long discredited because of its association with Latin America's military dictatorships of the 1970s, is increasingly taking on positive connotations. So much so that Salvadoran President Tony Saca not only won election in 2004 promising to use a "heavy hand" against the *maras*, but later christened his security program "Super-Heavy Hand."

'LAWLESS ZONES'

THERE IS WORRY ABOUT

SOCIAL BREAKDOWNS

In Washington and major European capitals, there are fears that the crime wave spreading through Latin America might trigger a phenomenon of social disintegration that would further erode governability and create "lawless zones."

In other words, U.S. and European officials fear that there might be a proliferation of areas where governments have no authority, and where drug traffickers or terrorist cartels thrive unmolested.

To my surprise, as I learned in an interview with then-U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Latin America's crime wave and the inability of governments to control their territories worry the Pentagon even more than Venezuela's narcissist-Leninist President Chávez and the anti-U.S. campaign in the region.

When I asked Rumsfeld what his greatest concern in Latin America was, the first thing he mentioned was not Chávez or Fidel Castro or the Colombian guerrillas, or any other political threat.

He talked about crime and the *maras*. Rumsfeld said that "aside from protecting democracy," his main concerns were "the problems of crime, and gangs, and narcotics, and weapons trafficking, and hostage-taking, all of these anti-social activities that we see."

Similarly, a former head of the Southern Command of the U.S. Armed Forces, Gen. James Hill, told me that the gang issue "has all the potential in the next five to 10 years of becoming the [No. 1] problem for the region."

DADE'S CRIME EXILES

LATIN VIOLENCE HAD

ROLE IN PROPERTY BOOM

One of the most visible byproducts of Latin America's crime wave at the start of the new millennium was the real-estate boom in Miami-Dade County. The community, often referred to only half-jokingly as "the capital of Latin America," experienced its biggest construction surge in recent history. Many of the 500 multinationals with Latin American headquarters in Miami-Dade, including Hewlett Packard, Sony, FedEx, Visa and Microsoft, had moved here in recent years from Latin American countries.

In 2005 alone, about 60,000 apartments were under construction in Miami-Dade, compared with 7,000 in the previous 10 years. And who was buying them? Granted, in many cases, it was U.S. speculators taking advantage of low interest rates, and growing numbers of Europeans eager to invest their strong euros in sunny South Florida. But a large number of buyers were Latin American crime victims or potential victims.

Large numbers of businessmen were moving to Miami-Dade to protect themselves and their families from kidnappings, violent robberies and murders. In posh enclaves like Key Biscayne, Colombian businessmen were on the rise. On exclusive Fisher Island, there were more and more Mexicans, and in Bal Harbour, growing numbers of Argentines.

While the conventional wisdom in the media was that Miami-Dade was a community of political and economic exiles, a sizable part of them had moved because of security concerns.

"I decided to leave my country the day when two 14-year-olds pointed their guns at my car as I was leaving work," said Daniel Karpman, a Miami physician who left Argentina in 2002 and revalidated his title here. "I still don't know whether they wanted to rob me, kidnap me or kill me. I slammed the breaks, made a sharp U-turn, and fled as fast as I could. Then, I said, this is it. . . . I'm leaving."