

## NACLA Report on the Americas

ISSN: 1071-4839 (Print) 2471-2620 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rnac20>

# Crime and Revolution in Venezuela

David Smilde

To cite this article: David Smilde (2017) Crime and Revolution in Venezuela, NACLA Report on the Americas, 49:3, 303-308, DOI: [10.1080/10714839.2017.1373956](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2017.1373956)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2017.1373956>



Published online: 14 Sep 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)

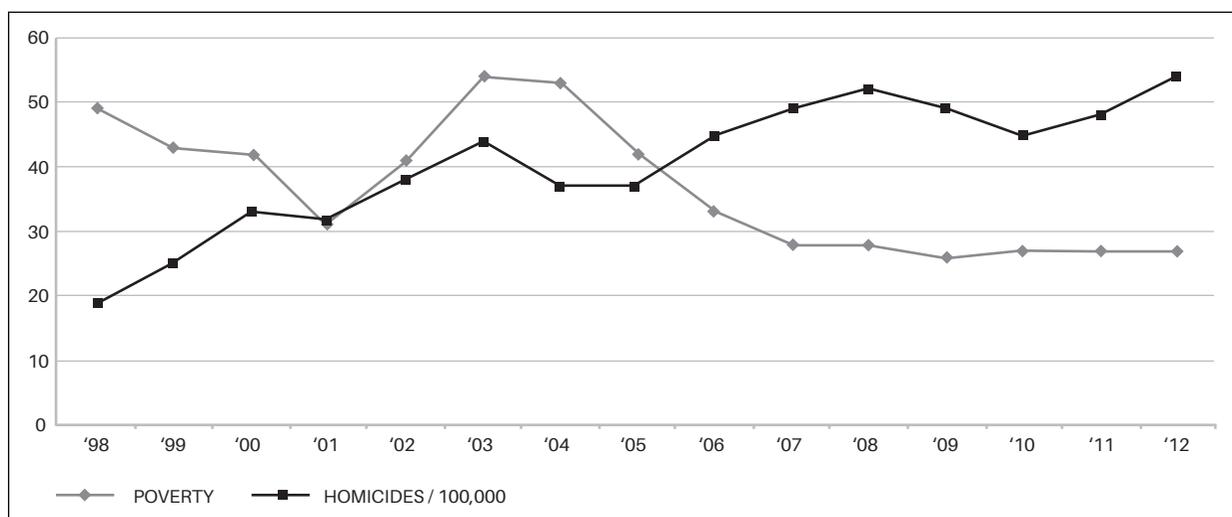


View Crossmark data [↗](#)

DAVID SMILDE

# Crime and Revolution in Venezuela

Leaders of the Bolivarian Revolution thought dramatic drops in poverty and inequality would reduce violent crime in Venezuela. Instead, it skyrocketed, leaving behind a puzzling—and deadly—paradox.



**Figure 1: Paradox of Violence in Venezuela: The Relationship of Poverty and Homicide**

Source: Poverty data from [data.worldbank.org](http://data.worldbank.org); homicide data from the *Ministerio del Poder Popular para Interior y Justicia, Venezuela*.

Explaining violent crime has been central to Venezuela's political struggle from the time Hugo Chávez campaigned for the presidency in the late 1990s. He campaigned and governed with a traditional Marxist perspective that suggested reducing poverty and inequality would reduce crime. Less than a month after taking office in 1999 he famously declared that if his child were dying of starvation, he would become a delinquent too.

The data is clear that Chávez was successful in reducing leading indicators of poverty and inequality. While these gains have been largely reverted in recent

years, through 2012, whether measured in terms of income, calorie consumption or access to education, poverty declined. So did inequality. Nevertheless, during this same period, violence surged. This is what my colleagues Verónica Zubillaga, Rebecca Hanson, and I are calling the “the paradox of violence in Venezuela.” Over the past two years we have led a discussion among scholars examining crime and violence in Venezuela—some of which you can see featured in a roundtable in this issue. This paradox derives from the decline in state capacity caused by extraordinary oil revenues and a particular type of revolutionary governance, as well

as a failed effort at citizen security reform that allowed militarized policing to predominate.

### Explanations for Violence: Poverty, Discourse, Anomie?

As can be seen in the figure above, crime and violence did not increase during the Chávez years *because of an increase* in poverty; they increased *despite a decrease* in poverty. Nevertheless, the rise in crime and violence has rightfully had a central place in opposition critiques of the Chávez and then Maduro governments. It is their explanations that are less convincing.

Opposition commentators have frequently argued that Chávez's combative, polarizing rhetoric caused violence through some sort of unspecified modeling effect. Others suggest that Chavismo generated a decline of norms or even a moral crisis that created a context of "anomie." However, most violence in Venezuela is not political, but rather occurs between young men living in zones of exclusion, like the barrios surrounding Venezuela's major cities. The idea that they somehow have adopted Chávez's combative, violent rhetoric and that this leads them to kill is implausible and unsupported by evidence.

The idea of "anomie" is even more problematic. This is an early-20<sup>th</sup> century sociological term denoting normlessness and absence of a social structure, a vacuum of social relations that presumably leads to a chaotic war of all against all.

Most research on Venezuela shows that there is indeed an absence of desirable and effective state action. But the state is actually quite large, there are more police and soldiers than ever, and they kill and incarcerate people at unprecedented levels. So the problem is not so much an *absence* of state and society as it is a dysfunctional presence.

Another common explanation is that leftist, socialist governments are simply ill-equipped to address crime and violence since they misunderstand the problem. They focus on poverty and inequality and forget about policing. While this may have been true during the first years of the Chávez government, as discussed in more detail below, a quick scan around the region shows there is no necessary link between left governing projects and ineffective crime fighting. Central America is one of the most violent regions in the world.

Yet most of the violence is concentrated in the northern triangle of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Leftist Nicaragua has seemingly been immune, in large part because of the police reform originated by the first Sandinista government. (For more on Nicaragua's role as a security exception in Central America, see Stuart Schrader's article in this issue.)

### Part of the Equation: Disruption and Contestation

One common explanation for the paradox of violence that points us in the right direction—but is not in itself sufficient to explain Venezuela's increase in violence—is the growth of drug trafficking. Plan Colombia successfully diminished drug trafficking from the Caribbean coast of Colombia, forcing it to change routes and move through Venezuela. Also, the Venezuelan government broke relations with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), but continued to rely on the same DEA interdiction model, dubiously effective in the best of circumstances but nearly impossible with-

Disruption gets us closer to understanding the rise of violence in Venezuela, pushing us beyond drug trafficking as the only explanation.

out international collaboration. The map of violence in Venezuela does indeed show that violence has increased most along the routes that drugs travel, as well as border regions in which the drug trade is one of several illicit markets. Drug traffickers often pay local collaborators with drugs, creating new "micro-trafficking" markets which themselves generate violence.

Increased drug trafficking is clearly part of the equation, but is not a sufficient cause for violence. Research in varied contexts shows that illicit markets in themselves do not necessarily cause violence—*contested* illicit markets do. Dennis Rodgers has argued that there is ample drug trafficking through Nicaragua, but little violence in part because it runs through a state that protects and monopolizes it. Likewise, ethnographic research by Veronica Zubillaga and others in Caracas shows that "*micro-tráfico*" is often an integral set of



**National Police officers at a march.** REBECCA HANSON

relations in barrios that have achieved lasting peace.

It is when actors compete for dominance that violence occurs. Mexico is a case in point. It is not drug trafficking per se that has caused the wave of violence there, but the way the government's war on drugs has disrupted those markets, leading criminal actors to use violence to assert their dominance vis-à-vis other illicit actors and the state.

Disruption gets us closer to understanding the rise of violence in Venezuela, pushing us beyond drug trafficking as the only explanation. Josefina Bruni Celli has provided a striking analysis showing a strong correlation between oil income and violence over the 40-year

period from 1971 to 2011. She argues that an influx of resources flowing through the government, far from solidifying the state, can lead to hypertrophic expansion, reducing the state's institutional capacity, which in turn increases impunity. Put differently, with an influx of extraordinary resources, the government also loses its institutional capacity for exerting social control.

This in part explains the surprising inverse relationship between inequality and violence—the fact that when inequality decreases, violence increases. In Venezuela, when oil revenue goes up, inequality goes down as the government spends more money on its people. But this same oil revenue tends to undermine

institutional capacity, which is key to controlling conflict and violence.

However, it is worth mentioning that sociologically, increasing equality is often associated with increasing conflict. When social hierarchies are challenged, social dominance is often resolved with violence. For example, since 2001 the Chávez government has tried to open up organized labor by, on the one hand, obliging unions to hold elections supervised by the National Electoral Council, and on the other hand, by sponsoring parallel Chavista unions. This has clear political motivations as Venezuela's social democratic party has long controlled Venezuela's main labor union, the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV), in fierce opposition to the Chávez government. But it also responded to the fact that the CTV was itself a corrupt autocracy, with a stranglehold over organized labor. Justifiable or not, this disruption resulted in a continuing, shifting collage of new and old unions vying for dominance.

As the economy boomed during the Chávez years in both the public and private sector, union-related violence surged as unions have fought to dominate work sites, especially in the construction sector. While *Sindicariato*, a term combining *sindicato* (union) and *sicariato* (assassination), is not actually a main cause of Venezuela's murder rate, most years accounting for less than a hundred deaths, it illustrates larger dynamics of disruption and violence at play. In the presence of guns, the combination of disruptive change and competition for resources is a volatile cocktail.

### Civilian Police Reform Efforts Under Chávez

The Chávez government's citizen security policies also provided a source of disruption within Venezuelan society. During its first eight years, the Chávez government basically ignored police forces, guided by the idea that the best anti-crime policy is social policy addressing poverty and inequality. The result was steadily increasing rates of crime and violence. The deterioration of the police forces and their increasing involvement in crime came to the fore in 2006 with a high profile kidnapping in which a group including police officers kidnapped and murdered three brothers and their driver. As a result, the Chávez government installed a council to study Venezuela's police forces and recommend reforms. This led to a new police law in 2008 that called for an extensive restructuring of Venezuela's police forces, police training, and oversight.

Human rights activists, under the skeptical eye of

hardline leftists and the military components of the Chávez government, largely carried out the reforms. Hardline leftists saw policing as a right-wing issue, and unnecessary in the construction of socialism, while the military resented a loss of control over police forces that were formerly under control of the National Guard. Over time, the need to gain and maintain the support of the left led the police reform to emphasize the "humanist" elements of their reform over the law enforcement elements. They pushed forward not only with their human rights training, but also through community activities and youth programs emphasizing sports and music.

Using data from opinion polls, Rebecca Hanson and I have shown the difficult situation police reformers found themselves in amid the context of political polarization. Polls show that when police reform was portrayed as a Chavista initiative, it fit as expected into existing political polarization: government supporters praised it and government opponents criticized it. However, when respondents were asked about the actual content of the reforms—for example the progressive and differential use of force—government opponents were more likely to respond positively than government supporters. This lack of support for limiting the use of force is most likely a result of lower educational levels and the fact that government supporters were more likely to live in those areas most affected by the surge in crime. But the upshot is that police reformers had a difficult time convincing the pro-government coalition to support their project.

And indeed, Hugo Chávez was always a somewhat reluctant supporter of civilian police reform, simultaneously supporting the militarized police initiatives that remain popular with average Venezuelans. From the time the police reform started in earnest in 2009, it was accompanied by the Bicentennial Security Force (DIBISE) in early 2010, which had Venezuela's National Guard carrying out heavily armed operations in which they roared into the barrios on motorcycles in the middle of the night, dragging suspects out of their houses without warrants, and declaring success. The National Guard also set up roadblocks to check documents of passersby—a classic military tactic more appropriate for securing control of territory than preventing crime. Roadblocks have long been the very ineffective cornerstone of Venezuelan policing, and contrast with the National Police's emphasis on patrolling, typical of civilian policing models.

Nevertheless, in subsequent years, the Chávez administration created the Bolivarian National Police and founded the Experimental Security University (UNES). It started to look like civilian police reformers had gained the upper hand. In January 2012, President Chávez had consolidated the various reform initiatives into Security Mission, subsequently renamed Great Mission Full Life Venezuela, naming human rights activist Pablo Fernández as its director. However, the tables quickly turned after Hugo Chávez's reelection in 2012. In October of that year, he asked the Minister of Interior and Justice Tarek El Aissami, who had been a main proponent of civilian police reform within the government, to resign his post and run for governor of Aragua state. Without El Aissami in the game and Chávez clearly ill, civilian police reform lost its principal supporters.

### Remilitarization of Policing in Venezuela Under Maduro

When Chávez passed away and Nicolás Maduro won the snap election by a shockingly small percentage—roughly two percentage points, despite Chávez leaving him with an approximately 20-point lead a month earlier—he started his administration in a weak position. Maduro saw the Armed Forces as the key to consolidating his position. One of his first decisions as president was the creation of the Safe Homeland Plan, which again deployed the Armed Forces for citizen security functions, with the usual nefarious results.

Opponents within the government also watered down a significant effort at gun control between its introduction in 2011 and its approval in 2013. Veronica Zubillaga has shown that 90% of murders in Venezuela are carried out with firearms, one of the highest rates in the region. Gun control efforts started boldly. But some government officials, many of whom were either active or retired military officers with financial interests in arms imports or ammunition production, opposed plans to prohibit retail sale of guns, personal defense licenses, and mark ammunition. In January 2014, after public uproar after the murder of a former Miss Venezuela and her husband while on a visit to Venezuela, Maduro put the symbolic nail in the coffin of citizen police reform, removing human rights activist Soraya El Achkar from her position as Rector of UNES and replacing her with a military officer.

In 2015, the Maduro government put forward the most counter-productive and opprobrious citizen security program to date. The Operation Liberation and Protection of the People, (OLP) uses the National Guard and Army to carry out operations, shooting up neighborhoods in broad daylight in a media-savvy display of force. Human rights group Provea reports that over 600 people

Maduro saw the Armed Forces as the key to consolidating his position.

were killed in OLP operations in 2016. Militarized operations like the DIBISE and the OLP are without a doubt capable of killing and arresting members of criminal networks, thereby altering the existing equilibrium within and between criminal groups, and in their relationships to authorities. When operations withdraw after a day or two, violent processes of contestation begin whereby criminal networks seek to reestablish control, organization, and tacit agreements over territory.

### Revolution, the Petro-state, and Violence

So is Chavismo to blame for the surge in violence? Of course it is. How could it be otherwise after 18 years in power? But it is not to blame in the ways that most people think. The surge in crime and violence is not a result of Chávez's aggressive rhetoric. Nor is it due to a generalized moral decline, nor to a context of anomie. Those are politicized explanations government detractors expediently use to more broadly critique a political project they oppose. Rather, Chavismo's particular model of revolution combined with the long-term trends of a petro-state has created a surge in violence.

Our emerging explanation suggests that extraordinary oil income from 2004 through 2013 led to hypertrophic growth that reduced the state's capacity to exercise social control at multiple levels. This hypertrophic growth would stress any state, but revolutionary Venezuela had several characteristics that made it poorly equipped to meet the challenge: For its first seven years, Chávez completely neglected policing and the institutions of justice. In the years that followed he never threw his undivided support behind the construction of a modern civilian police force, but rather tried to balance it with militarized policing. During the Maduro administration even that balance has been lost, and violent, ineffective

militarized policing has prevailed. In addition, a discourse that valued constant transformation and partisan commitment has not led to the type of institutional solidity, transparency, and accountability necessary for successful citizen security policies.

Venezuela's political polarization has also been a factor. Chavista attempts to politicize and gain control over the judicial branch led to abject dysfunction in the penal and corrections systems. And political polarization undermined citizen support for citizen security reform. Reformers had no natural base of support within the Chavista coalition, and plenty of enemies.

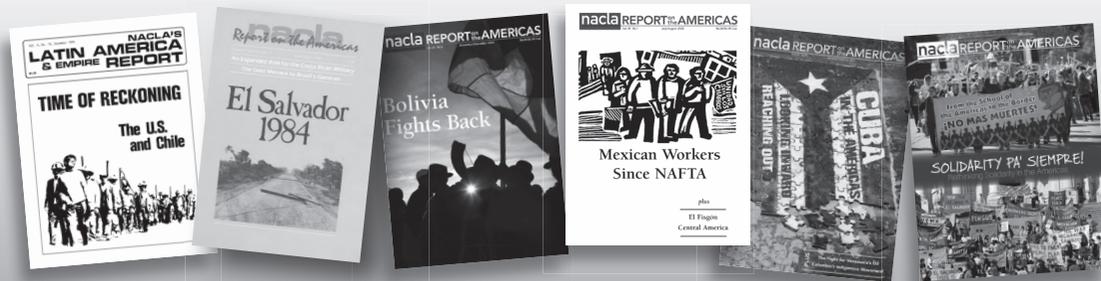
Finally, it is important to realize that the reductions in poverty and inequality during the Chávez years were real, but somewhat superficial. While indicators of income and consumption showed clear progress, the harder-to-change characteristics of structural poverty and inequality, such as the quality of housing, neighborhoods, education, and employment, remained largely unchanged. In effect, increased income and government transfers flowed into physical and social spaces still affected by some of the long-term structural causes of violence. As well, some benefitted from income and consumption increases more than others, creating new inequalities, resentments, and conflicts typical of processes of change.

So what can be done? One of the cruelest characteristics of surges in violence is that even if the original causes recede, high levels of violence can be self-sustaining.

Actors develop violent biographies and become articulated into violent networks, which are inserted into illicit economies. This self-sustaining characteristic makes addressing crime and violence that much harder. It also underlines why the idea of "anomie" is as dangerous as it is inaccurate: It misunderstands the structured nature of violence, thus underestimating the problem of reform, mistakenly believing that simply pushing forward a "tough-on-crime" crackdown will suddenly provide structure to chaos. In reality, any reform will confront the facts that: criminal activity is highly structured, has articulated interests, considerable resources, and will resist violently.

There are no easy answers or short-term fixes to the problem of violence in Venezuela. An end to militarized police initiatives and return to civilian police reform is a good place to start. But this time around, police reform must be autonomous from partisan political actors, and accompanied by broader judicial and corrections reform as well as a renewed effort at gun control. Add in some initiatives that allow neighborhoods to reduce anonymity and develop trust in each other and in the police, and a context of peace and security could emerge, as it has in many other once-violent contexts. ■

*David Smilde is the Charles A. and Leo M. Favrot Professor of Human Relations at Tulane University and a Senior Fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America.*



*Celebrating 50 years of research and analysis on Latin America and the Caribbean*

# nacla.org/archive

Access every issue since 1967. Ask your librarian to subscribe today.

For more information on institutional subscriptions, visit <http://tandfonline.com/pricing/journal/nac20>