

## NACLA Report on the Americas

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

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To cite this article: Rebecca Hanson, Andrés Antillano, Keymer Ávila & Verónica Zubillaga (2017) Protecting the Right to Life in Venezuela, NACLA Report on the Americas, 49:3, 309-314, DOI: [10.1080/10714839.2017.1373957](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2017.1373957)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2017.1373957>



Published online: 14 Sep 2017.



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REBECCA HANSON, ANDRÉS ANTILLANO, KEYMER ÁVILA, AND VERÓNICA ZUBILLAGA

# Protecting the Right to Life in Venezuela

In this roundtable interview, experts on crime and security in Venezuela discuss the country's spiral of violence, its origins, escalation, and potential solutions.

Despite gains in social and economic rights in Venezuela, both Hugo Chávez's government and that of current president Nicolás Maduro have been unable to protect perhaps the most basic right associated with the state—the right to life. Homicide rates in the country began to rise in the 1990s, but have increased dramatically since Chávez took office: from 25 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1999 to 70 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016.

In June I led a roundtable via Skype with three experts on crime and citizen security in Venezuela to talk about the current state of violence in the country and how politics and security policies have exacerbated insecurity. Contributors to the roundtable include Andrés Antillano, Keymer Ávila, and Verónica Zubillaga.

State regulation and control of the market was a hallmark of Hugo Chávez's government. But, as Zubillaga notes, both the Chávez and Maduro governments failed to effectively intervene in the gun market, which has had a profound impact on life quality and expectancy in the country. Venezuela now has the second highest number of gun-related deaths on the continent. Despite this, the government has increased its gun imports since the early 2000s—many of which have found their way into the black market.

The contributors discuss how increasing incarceration and repressive security operations have backfired, exacerbating the country's security problems. Increasing incarceration has generated a thriving illicit economy within prisons, where prisoners depend on state actors—like the National Guard—for weapons they can use to construct their own forms of governance. State

actors, then, facilitate a violent order within the prison, enforced by prisoners themselves.

Current state interventions resemble the criminalization of poverty that contributors remember Hugo Chávez criticizing. Today, state-led security force violence has increased, not decreased, though these rates vary amongst different forces. And, as David Smilde writes in this issue, policing has become increasingly remilitarized since the death of Hugo Chávez. The Operation Liberation and Protection of the People (OLP), discussed during the interview, is the government's most recent security initiative that involves military and police raids in poor neighborhoods. In the roundtable, Antillano talks about how this repression by security forces has altered gangs and organized crime.

Indeed, institutional and criminal violence feed each other. Security forces are responsible for a significant percentage of violent deaths in the country. However, security forces are only one of many armed actors in the country. As Zubillaga points out, the variation in and rotation of diverse armed actors, who compete for control over extortion rackets, has produced a drastic spike in violence in states on or near the Colombian border. What becomes clear through the roundtable is how different types of violence that have increased in Venezuela—state, interpersonal, and criminal—are intertwined.

*This conversation was translated the Spanish by Brendan Fields and edited for clarity.*

**Rebecca Hanson (RH):** Venezuela has been listed as one of the most dangerous countries in the world and one of the top three most dangerous countries in Latin America. How can we understand this increase in violence? And what kinds of geographic variations are there?

**Verónica Zubillaga (VZ):** In the last two decades it has become clear that violence has become heterogeneous throughout the country. While in Caracas homicides increased 30% between 1999 and 2009, this growth occurred in a different way in the interior of the country. For example, along the border [with Colombia], during this same time period, violent deaths increased by 421%.

One of the states where violence has increased significantly is the state of Táchira and in the state of Barinas [states that are on or close to the Venezuela-Colombia border]. My hypothesis is that there are diverse armed actors, who are connected to the displacement of armed actors into Venezuela from Colombia, linked to Plan Colombia. Qualitative research and reports from Táchira have reported the presence of actors such as the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia], and ELN [National Liberation Army], or [paramilitary] gangs like the Urabeños or the Rastrojos. And research conducted over the past year shows that group members are not only Colombians. Part of the particularity

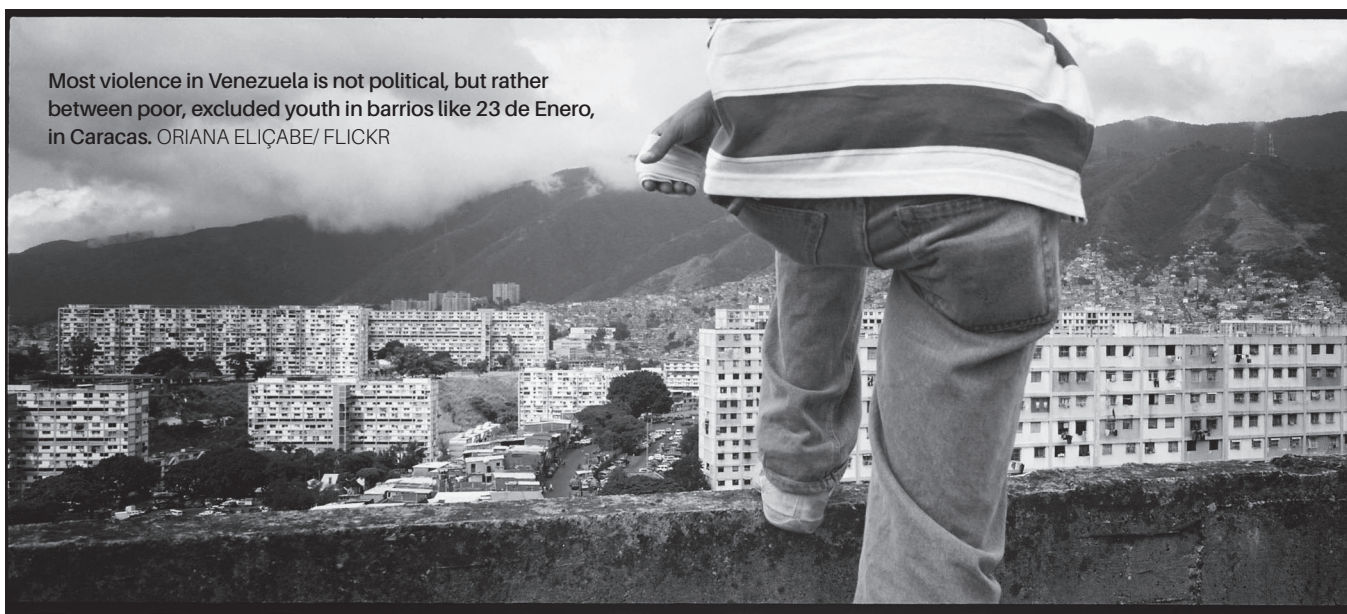
of these groups is their “border character:” they are made up of youth from both Venezuela and Colombia.

And there is a sort of rotation of armed actors who, at different points in time, control the extortion system. For example, one rancher, who my colleagues at the University of Táchira interviewed, said that once or twice a year, conversations are held to agree on *vacunas* (payment of bribes). He referred specifically to the FARC, the ELN, and the Bolivarian Forces of Liberation, a Venezuelan guerilla group. These groups basically come and go into the territory. One member of our research team, Francisco Javier Sánchez, has found that the police, particularly the CICPC [the police responsible for criminal investigations] and the National Police are involved in extortion. They formed a network of extortion that geared up about three years ago. This is connected to the “*gasolineros*.” The police follow trucks that illegally smuggle gasoline across the border, detain the drivers, threaten them, and offer them a way out if they pay a *vacuna* (bribe).

Additionally, it worries me that gun violence has been overlooked. After Puerto Rico, Venezuela is the country in the region with the highest proportion of gun-related deaths.

**Keymer Ávila (KA):** I was reviewing some figures from the annual report from the Justice Department last year. It

Most violence in Venezuela is not political, but rather between poor, excluded youth in barrios like 23 de Enero, in Caracas. ORIANA ELIÇABE/ FLICKR



is true that violence is not distributed in a homogeneous manner across the country. But I can also say that it is increasing in general. For example, the state of Miranda has the highest murder rate in the country at 120 per 100,000 inhabitants, and Nueva Esparta has the lowest rate at 30. The state with the lowest murder rate in the country is 30. The World Health Organization has declared rates above 10 [per 100,000] to be an epidemic level.

Bolívar state has the highest national average of violent crimes, such as homicides, robberies, rape, and resistance to authority [a category that designates people killed by the police while ostensibly resisting police authority]. In 2015, when the OLP launched, Bolívar had the second highest number of OLP victims. All of this was a breeding ground for the deaths that occurred last year in Tumeremo: In March 2016, twenty miners were reported missing in Bolívar. A few weeks later, 17 bodies were found in a mass grave. There are various hypotheses about this case, all centering on the “mineral mafias” that could not exist without the support of state security forces. Six months before this tragedy occurred the national government had implemented an operation to supposedly target these mafias. So what purpose do these operations serve? Has this institutional violence made Bolívar safer?

It is important to reflect on the impact of institutional violence and how it may contribute to the increase of criminal violence. This is not just about the OLP, but the logic of a policy of this nature, in which state security forces have been given an unlimited power to do as they wish.

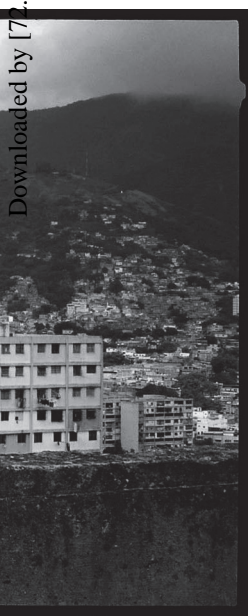
**RH: Speaking of the OLP, the government has rolled out a number of policing initiatives over the years. What impact have these initiatives had on violence and poor communities in particular? Have they impacted the organization of gangs and the distribution of violence in the barrios?**

**Andrés Antillano (AA):** What we have found, and what the official figures verify, is that far from violence diminishing, these policies have increased it... significantly in terms of homicides, and even more so in

terms of other violent crime, such as kidnapping, extortion, et cetera... In our work, Keymer and I have advanced a few theories, one being that the loss of state legitimacy through this exercise of violence paradoxically ends up legitimizing criminal violence. But another is what you mentioned: that this has contributed to the creation of new reconfigurations of criminal violence. Gangs of excluded youths who faced off with each other to gain reputation and honor through the use of violence now, facing the scale of police violence, connect with each other, create alliances, and increase their firepower, oftentimes buying guns and ammunition from the police. [Therefore] less violent, less harmful activities—like selling drugs in the barrio, or small-scale robbery—morph into activities that are more violent, more lethal, because the costs of these less violent activities are very high when facing increased police repression. So in conclusion, police violence seems to have contributed significantly, as much to the articulation and organization of criminal groups as to the scale of criminal groups and criminal violence.

**VZ:** I want to emphasize that in addition to this persistent exclusion, what I would call the militarization of citizen security—where institutions like the police are captured by warlike logic—seems to be a fundamental factor in understanding the increase in violence in Venezuela. The Attorney General’s office revealed last year that there were 21,752 deaths, and police caused 4,667 of them. This means that if the state itself stopped killing, we would have at least 22% fewer violent deaths.

**AA:** But the state’s violent response is not disconnected from conditions of exclusion. State violence is not distributed uniformly across all social groups. Essentially, it is concentrated on the most excluded groups. These are dimensions of the same continuum of institutional violence that respond to the same profile: excluded youth in popular urban sectors. That is to say, repression is connected to the problem of exclusion; institutional violence is a means of control over the “surplus” population. The[se groups] are doubly criminalized as victims of the state as well as being victims of criminal violence. So, institutional violence is not another factor to add to exclusion, but rather, they are tied together... Because of course, [if] a kid goes to prison, their possibilities, their options for inclusion are fewer; it will be very hard for a young guy harassed by the police to find a good job. For me, exclusion continues to be the key figure in also explaining institutional violence.





**RH:** Alongside police militarization, prison populations have increased under the Chavista governments. There is quite a bit of information about the relationship between prisons and organized crime in countries like Brazil and El Salvador, where gangs originally organized within prisons. Is there a similar relationship between prisons, organized gangs, and violence in Venezuela?

**AA:** It is hard to give a simple answer to this... What we can say is that there is a clear relationship in Venezuela, in Latin America, between the increase in the prison population and the rise in violent crime. It is a paradoxical effect, but this increase ends with a loss of state control over the prison population. Prison groups appear that dispute the control of the state—groups that are able to organize, articulate, and exercise power to control imprisoned populations.

One of the hypotheses is that this control is carried outside of the prison and becomes a form of organization in excluded barrios, generating an even greater level of organized crime. I have a few doubts about this theory. I believe that there are relationships but they are not so mechanical, I think they are more functional. That is to say, they persist in overpopulated prisons where the state has lost its capacity to effectively control, and in barrios where serious levels of exclusion persist and the state is not able to effectively regulate conflict. There are structural conditions, functional conditions that make similar violences appear. So, there is a relationship but it is not a simple causal mechanical relationship.

**KA:** Also, it is important to emphasize that all of this chaos is also a large business for state actors who take charge of controlling and regulating these spaces.

**VZ:** Along those same lines, I was going to note that lethal prison violence cannot be understood without also considering state agents' collaboration in the flow of weapons into prisons.

**RH:** Do you think we have perhaps seen more militarization of security under the Chávez and Maduro governments?

**AA:** In the era of Chavismo, we can clearly distinguish two chapters as far as official discourse and the government's

crime policy are concerned. The first starts with the triumph of President Chávez up until his death, where social causes characterized discourse, there was a predominantly preventative approach and a questioning of police repression. This logic ceases when President Chávez dies and President Nicolás Maduro comes to power, when we can start to see a radical change not only in the discourse but also in terms of punitive policies.

The Bolivarian government's initial discourse on security is one that I have called "leftist functionalism." I remember Chávez saying once in an interview, "The response to security is not more repression. We must put an end to repression of the poor. There have to be jobs, education, opportunities. Social justice is the response to insecurity." This discourse is at its heart a bit naïve, but he at least talked about a structural interpretation of security problems as about the reduction of police repression. So, from this structural discourse of leftist

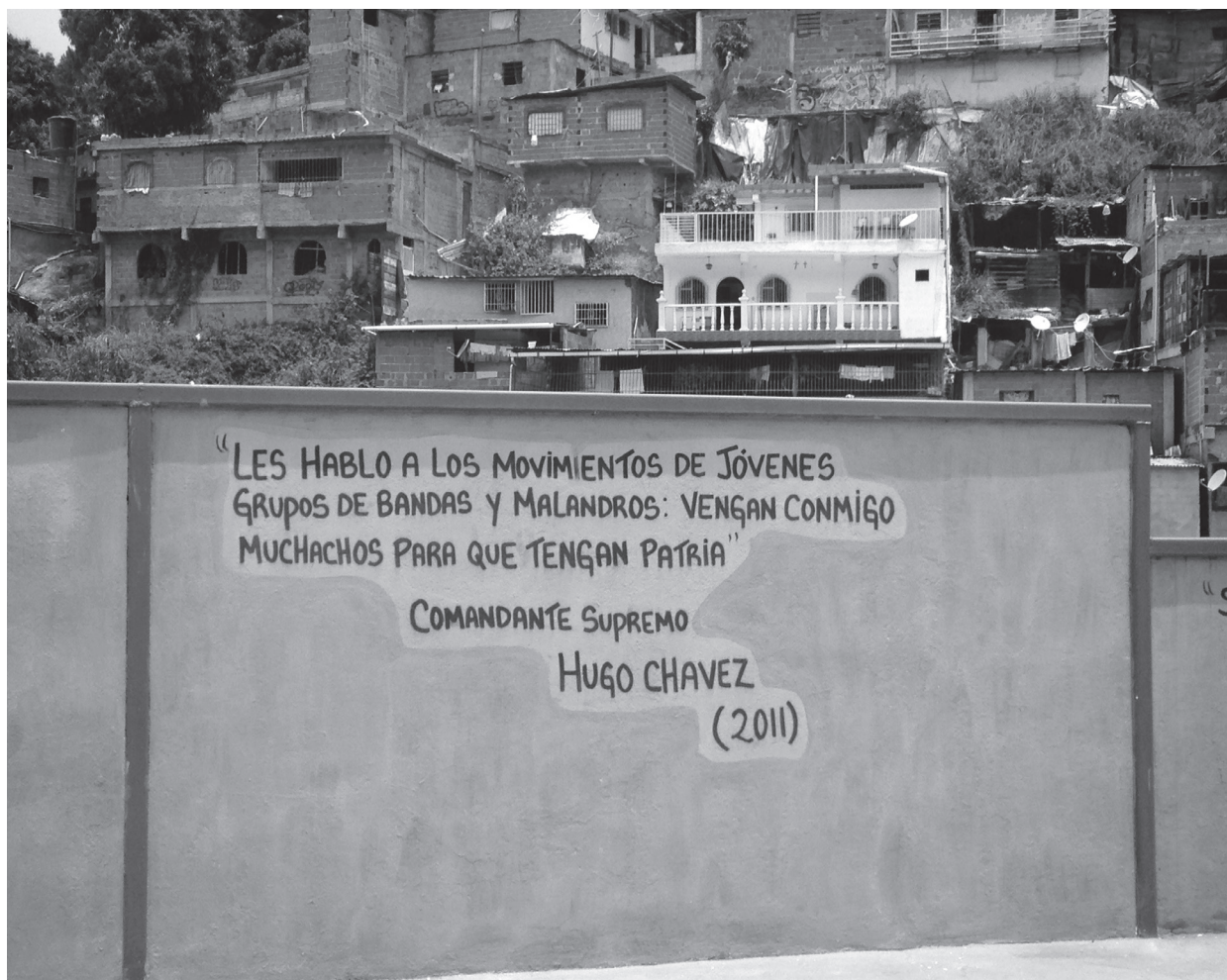
## Heavy-handed security policies gain strength as the policies of social inclusion face limitations.

functionalist security, we move to a moral discourse of security that resembles punitive discourses and of course the neoliberal discourse about crime—

**KA:** Connected to the right—

**AA:** Connected the right and to the discourses of neoliberal governments—that crime is not a structural problem, it is a problem that has to do with moral values. But in this case it has to do with capitalism—the delinquent is no longer a victim of systems, but is instead an accomplice of the capitalist system. So the delinquent is an "enemy of the people," or an "enemy of the revolution."

**VZ:** During the Chávez presidency you could see a certain tension within the Justice Department between the civil sector and the military sector. And what you are seeing now is that the military sector has imposed itself on the civil sector and displaced all these very progressive policies that could have carved out space in the area of citizen security. I want to emphasize that policies like efforts at gun control were supplanted very early on, before Maduro.



"I speak to the movements of youth gangs and thugs: come with me, children, so you may have a nation." A Chávez quote from 2011 painted on the wall of a community center in a barrio. REBECCA HANSON

**KA:** I don't fully agree with the hypothesis that militarization has to do with an increasingly powerful military. Military officers directing the Justice Department and security policies, this is part of a more or less ongoing tendency in Venezuela. Police stations have always been in the hands of active military officers. There was a brief period where efforts were made to reverse this, but only during a few years at the beginning of police reform, and these were quickly suspended. Generally, it is active duty or retired military who are the face of the police. Ministers of the Justice Department have traditionally been soldiers.

**AA:** It is very paradoxical that Chávez, having been in the military in his time, took a stance, at least formally

through laws, on the civilian character of the police. In contrast with the current president, who is a civilian, where the tension with military logic, if anything, is more dominant.

There has always been tension, as Veronica mentioned, between harsh security policies and progressive security policies. Heavy-handed security policies gain strength as the policies of social inclusion face limitations. That is to say that the poor are managed through inclusion and punishment. Social policies fail to include those who become the clients of punitive and prison expansion, or institutional and police violence.

I want to point out that this is a problem of progressive governments. The majority of progressive governments start out with a discourse that intends

to dismantle punitive logics that criminalize poverty, that were typical of neoliberal governments of the past. However, little by little, the expanding penal system becomes reestablished, the incarcerated population increases, the police become harsher, et cetera. This has happened in Ecuador, Bolivia, even in a certain way in Argentina. And so I think the greatest problem is that these post-neoliberal projects, the projects of the left in general, have not known how to build a coherent security policy. This has to do with the fact that they have not been able to understand new popular configurations that no longer have to do with included workers, but sectors of society who are consistently and dramatically excluded from the social world.


**VZ:** It is not simply punitivism that can arise in countries that took the “progressive” path, to use that word. Because it is not just any punitivism—they are not simply jailing young men here, they are exterminating them. So this punitivism takes on a military aspect that is very important to note. We have a discourse that has accumulated among high-level police officials that justifies systematic killing. For example, when the former Minister of Justice Rodríguez Chacín said that people do not need to worry because around 70% of violent deaths are criminals’ deaths, what he was saying is that their deaths should not be considered a problem of crime or insecurity. In other words, their deaths do not count. So I do think that it is important to differentiate. It is not just punitivism, it is a punitivism that has to do with a militarized logic that is linked to extermination. In this sense, it is a “machinery of atrocity,” to use Martha Huggins’ term.

**KA:** In comparison with Chavismo itself, what we can see now is police recruitment, punitive policies, and military logic. Whether its authors are in the military or not, this warlike logic has expanded. Secondly, in a certain way there is a new polarization; it is no longer a progression from left to right. It is not a polarization or position of the government, but rather a transformation of the figure of the enemy. And the enemy is not empire or capitalism; instead, the enemy is the criminal, a kind of “lumpen” underclass that is against the government.

**AA:** I remember in 2013, just a few days after the death of President Chávez, Maduro was being sworn in as president and gave a speech. He said, “As we have

decided to give our lives in defense of our homeland against the aggression of imperialism, I want you all to commit to give your lives if it is necessary to confront a danger similar to imperialism: Those who sell drugs to our children in the barrios.”

This means that the imperialist danger is the same as the danger of crime, embodied by those who sell drugs on the corner in poor barrios. This is an important turn from a discursive point of view. As Keymer said, polarization is no longer Chavismo and opposition, but a polarization of class. There is a consensus that the poor should be disciplined violently, meaning their extermination, for being “violent,” being “criminals,” et cetera.

**KA:** We have to keep in mind the current political crisis, the legitimacy crisis, the economic crisis, which are incredibly difficult to tackle. Facing all this, the fight against crime is the most immediate option that government actors have—the symbolic fight against crime to distract the public from other problems. So, we have the economic issue of no longer having as much money to support redistributive policies, the social policies that Andrés and other authors have pointed out. The only policy left is political, related to crime, policing, and repression. 

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