Social Exclusion and Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean

BY

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Abstract[1]

This paper examines how social exclusion contributes to violence in communities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Residents in socially excluded communities cannot depend on those institutions designed to protect them, and violence becomes an instrument to achieve certain outcomes, such as justice, security, and economic gain. When conventional methods of obtaining and working for increased social status, higher income, and wider influence are limited, as they often are in marginalized areas, some feel compelled to resort to violent acts. This paper discusses how social exclusion and violence interact in a vicious circle that leaves the socially excluded in a very hostile social environment where the borders between legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate are often fuzzy and uncertain. In this environment violence is used by a minority to acquire justice, security, authority and economic gain. The use of violence by this minority, however, affect the lives of the majority of excluded people that do not resort to violence. As youths are particularly vulnerable to this issue, this paper also examines the relationship between violence and the plight of Latin American youth gangs and street children.

"This [violence and robbery] cannot be, we do not respect each other anymore." [2]

"There used to be clear rules: no one would steal in the shantytown. If and when they stole, they would do it outside the shantytown. Now, they rob you in the shantytown and everywhere." [3]

1. Introduction

The past few decades in Latin America and the Caribbean have witnessed a series of economic, social and political transitions that have changed the patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Movements within the region, including migration from rural areas, related rapid urbanization, institutional change, and the characteristics of modern sector growth reinforce the historical reliance of many on informal mechanisms and transactions for survival. The judicial and law enforcement systems have weakly adapted to new challenges and continue to leave large segments of society without adequate access to justice and economic and physical security.

As Figure 1 shows, regional rates of homicide in some Latin American and Caribbean countries reach levels typically only seen in areas ravaged by war. Yet such battles are taking place within socially excluded communities in Latin America, fought not by soldiers and guerillas, but by a minority that uses violence to fulfill their needs. Within such communities, residents cannot depend on those institutions designed to protect them, and violence becomes an instrument to achieve certain outcomes, such as justice, security, and economic gain through means that disrupt the life of the community. Where justice is acquired through revenge, security through violent assertion of authority, and economic gain through robbing, mugging, and intimidation, the vast majority of law-abiding residents are left without options. In such communities, people have come to recognize the person next door not as a neighbor, the policeman not as a protector, the community leader not as a consensus-builder, but as a potential threat. Many studies ranging from anthropological field work in the marginalized areas of shantytowns, *favelas, barrios* and *villas* (Caldeira, 2000; Márquez, 1999; Goldstein 2003), to advanced geo-spatial studies that record incidences of violence (Beato, 2002; Consejo de Seguridad, 2006), report that homicide rates are much higher in these neighborhoods than in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. Violence is common not only on neighborhood streets, but also in other areas where the working classes spend their everyday lives, including the workplace or on public transportation (Caldeira, 2000).

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[2] Auyero (2000).

Social exclusion is a contributing factor to violent outcomes, regardless of whether violence takes place in a developed Western European country or in a burgeoning Central American state. Those who resort to violent acts most often lack access to legitimate economic opportunities and the personal or social contacts required to obtain many of the services and resources available to mainstream society. When conventional methods of obtaining and working for increased social status, higher income, and wider influence are limited, as they often are in marginalized areas, some feel compelled to resort to what the mainstream considers illegitimate means, including violent acts (Reiss and Roth, 1993). Furthermore, the weaknesses and failures on the part of judicial systems and security forces in much of Latin America has left many in socially excluded communities in a complex situation. Either residents accept the lack of justice and security and suffer at the mercy of those who step forward, or they take matters into their own hands. Residents of socially excluded communities are well aware of the lack of options available to them and the consequences of lacking the money to pay off corrupt police and judges, the influence to avoid extortion, or the confidence to decline the invitation to join a gang. For those with few or no prospects for economic advancement, profitable opportunities to be gained through illicit and violent means serve as a deadly magnet. As state institutions fail to provide security and justice, others—such as violent community leaders, gangs, or corrupt police—may step in to mete out alternative forms of justice and revenge.

The issues of security, authority, justice, identity, and economics are tangible in the violent acts used to secure them in socially excluded areas, beyond the influence of state institutions and mainstream paradigms of conflict resolution. The consequences of such violence are severe and further sap scarce resources from Latin American and Caribbean countries that already face serious challenges in economic development and modernization of democratic institutions. Violence eats away at the delicate social fabric that holds communities together through difficult economic, social and political periods and shatters the trust, security, and solidarity that take years to build. This paper aims to discuss how social exclusion and violence interact in a vicious circle that leaves the socially excluded in a very hostile social environment where the borders between legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate are often fuzzy and uncertain. In this environment violence is used by a minority to acquire justice, security, authority and economic gain. The use of violence by this minority, however, affects the lives of

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[3] Auyero (2000).

the majority of excluded people that do not resort to violence. For many reasons youth are particularly vulnerable to this issue, as shown by the growing concern over violent youth gangs throughout Central and South America and the relationship between violence and the plight of Latin American street children.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 will discuss the relationship between social exclusion and violence. Section 3 will discuss the role of violence within excluded segments of the population and how it is used to achieve certain goals. Section 4 will continue by focusing on youth violence and the recent surge of youth gangs in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the final section shall conclude.

2. Violence Defined

Violence is generally described as "an intentional use of force or power with a predetermined end by which one or more persons produce physical, mental (psychological), or sexual injury, injure the freedom of movement, or cause the death of another person or persons (including him or herself) (Concha-Eastman, 2002, taken from Rosenberg and Mercy, 1991). For the purposes of relating violence to social exclusion, we shall focus on violence fueled by the need for power and for economic opportunities. The importance of interpersonal and domestic violence should also be noted, as such conflicts and experiences have indirect and direct external effects that perpetuate violence throughout a community. As shown in Table 1, violence common in Latin America and the Caribbean is most often perpetrated by family members, gangs, common delinquents, assailants unknown to the victim, or familiar acquaintances. Other perpetrators may include corrupt policemen and extrajudicial forces. Their victims—family members, street children, acquaintances, the general population, rival gang members, or at higher levels, government or civil society leaders—are victims of abuse, homicide, injuries, assaults, or robberies (Concha-Eastman 2002).

A prodigious amount of research is available on violence, some of which has focused specifically on Latin America.[4] Those who study violent outcomes generally agree that an large number of factors contribute to the problem. Various structural and cultural characteristics

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[4] Notable examples include Concha-Eastman (2002), Dowdney (2005), Morrison, Buvinic and Shifter (2003), Reiss and Roth (1993), Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza (1998); Londoño, Gaviria and Guerrero (2000); Moser and McIlwaine (2000, 2001), Rotker (2002); Riaño-Alcalá (2006), and Moser, Winton and Moser (2003), among others).

present in a community may interact with both individual and social factors to produce a set of behavioral outcomes, both among individuals and throughout the community. Crowded housing conditions, high levels of migration in and out of a community, increasing numbers of single-parent households, and economic decline may all significantly affect the amount of violence in a community by contributing to the breakdown of social capital (Morrison, Buvinic and Shifter, 2003; Reiss and Roth, 1993). Availability of guns, violence as portrayed in the media, the aftermath of civil war, and cultural norms all play a part in inducing violence in a community (Morrison, Buvinic and Shifter, 2003). Other factors, such as gender, age, socioeconomic level, employment status, drug or alcohol abuse, early exposure to aggressive stimuli or violence, and experience as a victim of or witness to physical or psychological abuse can also predispose individuals towards violent acts (Morrison, Buvinic and Shifter, 2003).

Economic conditions factor into incidence of crime and delinquency, including the average income of communities, the income distribution of a society, and the level of education (Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza, 1998). Gender also has a significant effect on the level of violence. Males may be predisposed to more violence for a number of physiological, cultural or situational reasons, such as higher rates of alcohol and drug usage, and economic pressure to provide for their families.

In socially excluded communities, including some indigenous communities, field work has shown that these areas suffer more from violence than those of higher socioeconomic levels (Caldeira, 2000; Heinemann and Verner, 2006, citing Borjas, 1995; Katzman, 1999, quoted in Buvinic, Morrison and Orlando, 2002). Beato (2002), citing a study in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, reported that a review of the spatial distribution of crimes over a two year period revealed that socially excluded areas such as slums, in which "several social welfare and life quality indicators…were considerably inferior to other of the city," had higher numbers of homicides. These areas had higher percentages of employment in the informal sector, higher child mortality and illiteracy rates, and poorly developed urban infrastructure. Peixoto, Moro and Viegas Andrade (2004) find that homicides in Belo Horizonte are concentrated in less developed areas such as *favelas* and are correlated with ecological factors such as social and physical disorder. Homicide rates are negatively associated with the level of infrastructure development and positively associated with longer police response time. The *Programa de Aprimoramento de Informações de Mortalidade no Município de São Paulo* (Pro-aim), which records death

statistics, reported in 1995 that those districts in Sao Paulo with the highest rates of murder (between 75 to 96 murders per 100,000) were some of the poorest in the region, while those with the lowest rates were located in richer areas (Caldeira and Holston,1999). Surveys of Bogota, Mexico City, and Santiago de Chile show that the poorest and marginalized areas of the cities report the highest homicide rates (Consejo de Seguridad, 2006, Fundación Mexicana para la Salud/Centro de Economía y Salud, 1998; Lira 2000).

3. The Roles of Violence: Justice, Security, Authority and Economic Gain

In socially excluded communities in Latin America, violence emerges with diverse causes and distinct aims. This section will address the aims of violence, including for what and how it is used in these areas. An important note should be made here: while violence is pervasive in many marginalized areas, and has a serious impact on the lives of most of the residents of these communities, the majority of people living in these areas do not resort to and use violence. The media, politicians, and residents of the middle and upper classes often sensationalize reports of violence and label communities as dangerous (in what Moser and McIlwaine, 2000 and 2001, call "area stigma"), leaving the impression that most, if not all, residents in these areas resort to constant aggressive behavior. This is far from the case. Most residents, including young males, try to avoid and ignore violence for fear of the consequences of becoming involved and escalating the dangers present to them. Many residents succumb to the feeling that they have no power to stop violence.

For those who do resort to violence, there are several contributing factors. In the absence of a strong, legitimate and equitable state presence and opportunities available to mainstream society, communities must locally construct alternative means of acquiring their needs and ensuring a sense of order. When crime increases or employment opportunities decline, the population suffers from a lack of physical and economic security. When this is combined with the pressures of globalization, consumerism, and inequality, people may view alternative forms of authority, work, and control as the means to assuage insecurity and may resort to taking matters into their own hands (Caldeira, 2000). In some cases, residents of marginalized communities have been able to work together to ensure public safety and the provision of public services, such as the widely noted case of Villa El Salvador in Lima, Peru (Woolcock, 2005). In other circumstances, however, those who take control do so with intentions or means not in the

best interest of the community. Members of socially excluded communities who employ violence do so in order to achieve one or more of the following aims: asserting authority and visibility, acquiring cultural identity, enforcing security, meting out vigilante justice, or obtaining economic goals. In reaction to such measures, people tend to build literal and figurative walls between themselves and their communities, utilize private forms of security, support vigilante groups, or turn the other cheek with respect to private and illegal acts of extrajudicial vengeance (Caldeira, 2000). Conventional standards of working in formalized labor sectors may be abandoned, as the opportunities available to socially excluded people are substandard, unable to provide a stepping-stone to better opportunities, or non-existent. Within this context, the use of violence may be viewed as a superior method of obtaining certain tangible needs.

3.1 The Informal Privatization of Justice

A key aim of violence in socially excluded communities is the provision of justice, most often through some form of violent punishment or castigation. The failure of the state to adequately provide for a fair and functional judicial system, including adequate legal representation, unbiased rulings, due process of law, and preservation of human rights may force citizens to abandon justice through normative institutional means and instead take the law into their own hands, or to depend on others to resolve conflicts for them (Concha-Eastman, 2002). For many socially excluded members of society, courts, judges, juries and a fair trail are beyond the means of their connections and expectations.

Even among the Latin American population as a whole, there is little confidence in the judicial system. Figure 2 shows the results of the 2005 Latinobarometer report, which found that two-thirds of those people surveyed claimed to have little or no confidence in the judicial system in their country, while only 22 percent reporting having "some" confidence in the judiciary. Only 9 percent of respondents reported having "a lot" of trust in the judicial system. Given that this survey included those of the middle and upper classes, who generally have adequate access to judicial institutions, it may reasonably be hypothesized that the percentage of the population reporting confidence in the judicial system would be even lower in socially excluded communities.

When judicial systems fail to adequately serve certain segments of the population, citizens may be inclined to form their own standards and methods of justice. An international study conducted by Children in Organized Armed Violence (COAV) found that in those areas

characterized by a weak state presence, armed groups tended to oversee and judge disputes within their communities, even among those residents unaffiliated with their groups (Dowdney, 2005). On the basis of her field work in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, Goldstein (2003) describes the use of revenge, homicide, and brutal punishment by various actors—gangs, bandits, police, and individuals—as a substitute for an absent or non-functioning judicial system. When the state fails to provide security and services in the *favelas*, gangs may intervene as a mediating force and provide a form of justice that community members are willing to turn the other cheek to. While these gang members engage in illegal activities and drug-trafficking, they also play the role of the justice system, and this dual role often induces neighboring citizens to tolerate and turn a blind eye to their actions.

Fieldwork in socially excluded and impoverished communities in Colombia also reveals the use of vigilante measures and violence as the means to acquire justice. Through interviews with young men, Moser and McIlwaine (2000) note their frequent utilization of force and violence, often referred to as the "law of the strongest" and the "law of knives." In many cases of violence and force, residents felt that taking the law into individual or group hands was the only means available to them, given the lack of available alternatives, their mistrust of state institutions, and rampant corruption (Moser and McIlwaine, 2000). Statistics collected by authorities in Bogota throughout 2005 reveal that the consistently highest reason behind homicides is revenge, covering murder due to either honor or debt (SUIVD, 2006).

However, the presence of extrajudicial means of conflict resolution may have adverse consequences on others in the community, as well as those actors who resolve conflict through violence. High death rates of young males in socially excluded areas may be explained by "cycles of revenge between gangs, between individuals in a personal conflict, and between any two partners who do not see any other justice system taking over" (Goldstein, 2003). Community residents who want to avoid violence and resolve conflicts through institutional means may be afraid to, as it could put their own safety in jeopardy. One young woman in an Argentine neighborhood expressed her concern about reporting drug dealers on the street to the police for fear that she would suffer retaliation. She explained that she was "scared to talk to the police because [she] could be killed," and while she once thought of recording criminal acts with a

camera, "this would be [her] death or the death of [her family]." Given this fear, she instead remained silent (Jovita, Fundacion SES).[5]/[6]

The lack of institutionalized forms of justice provides an opening for various actors who may provide justice for a select few, provided such action is in their own interest. Those who may be opposed to such actors, or have no or little access to a legitimate judicial system, are left with few options. The failure on the part of the state to adequately provide justice not only affects those who deserve legal rights and actions, but also forces community residents to succumb to the adverse informal institutions created and maintained by vigilante actors.

3.2 Security

Beyond the aims of imparting informal forms of justice, violence is also used in socially excluded communities as a form of acquiring security. The absence of state-provided security and the high degree of mistrust of the police subsequently forces communities to resort to alternative sources of protection in many areas of Latin America and the Caribbean. The use of violence is employed for resistance against competing actors and interests, including corrupt policemen, extrajudicial forces, rival gangs or common vandalism in the community. In some *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, drug lords and gangs involved in organized crime provide security and other services such as money to pay for food, medicine or child care to community members, creating incentives for residents to refrain from reporting their actions to the authorities. Since the state is unable to provide these services—and those state entities responsible for providing such services act as a "corrupt," "repressive," or distrusted force—the participation of those actors is valuable to residents who otherwise would not have adequate services or income (Moser, Winton and Moser, 2003). Widespread mistrust of such institutions, such as the police, is common throughout Latin America. Latinobarometer's annual survey of public opinion in Latin America consistently reveals that large percentages of respondents report that they had little or no confidence in the police (as shown in Figure 3). Only a quarter of the population surveyed responded that it had some faith in this institution, while only 12 percent reported having a great deal of confidence. Interviews with residents of different Colombian

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[5] Author's translation: "Yo tengo miedo de hablar con la policía porque puedo ser boleta de toque, porque yo veo a los patrulleros, pensé en una filmadora, pero eso sería mi muerte o la de mi familia, por eso no denuncio porque incluso yo misma veo a los patrulleros que vienen por el barrio."
[6] Interview with Jovita, Barrio Santa Elena, interviewed by Ana Lourdes Suárez y Carlos, 13 Oct 2006. Fundación SES.

neighborhoods consistently expressed negative feelings towards police forces. Moser and McIlwaine note that the police are the least trusted institution in many Colombian *barrios*, and the police were considered untrustworthy and likely to exacerbate conflict (Moser and McIlwaine, 2000). Fieldwork in Caracas, Venezuela also exposed similar perceptions of the need to acquire security—especially to defend the community from the police forces. One Venezuelan youth who had spent considerable time living on the streets of Caracas explains that while he believed the police used to be less violent, "Now they catch you on the streets and in front of everybody they throw tear gas at your face. They also beat and kick you. They kick you as if you were a dog" (Márquez, 1999).

The lack of faith in and frustration with the police is also evident in a number of interviews conducted in various neighborhoods in Argentina. Interviewed residents often responded that the police rarely or only weakly responded to threats facing their community. One 17 year old male complained that "The police don't come or they come and do nothing. There is so much crime…I want the police to come and do something. Because they come, but they don't do anything."[7] [8] The lack of faith in the police discourages many victims of crime from turning to them for help. Latinobarometer's 2000 survey asked interviewees to whom they turn after a criminal or violent incident; as Figure 4 shows, less than half (44.6 percent) turn to the police, while 40.5 percent do not report their victimization to anyone.

Given such lack of confidence in the police and the absence of institutions that adequately ensure the security and peace within Latin American and Caribbean countries—and more so in socially excluded communities—it is no wonder that there is friction within these areas as others step in. When the police are viewed as no better than the criminals they are responsible for impeding, this leaves citizens in these communities with no options but to either remain silent or take matters into their own hands.

3.3 Authority through Visibility

Violence may also be used to assert authority in situations where it is lacking and to demand the visibility of socially excluded individuals. In areas where state institutions are absent and police are corrupt or perceived as having little authority, members of the community and various social

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[7] Author's translation: "No anda la policía o no hace nada. Hay mucha delincuencia, se viven drogrando y los mismos vecinos te roban...[quiero] "que pase la policía y que haga algo. Porque pasan, pero no hacen nada."
[8] Interview with Jonatan, 17, Barrio Primavera, Interviewed by Graciela Ramirez. 29 Oct 2006. Fundación SES.

groups may step in with the intention of exerting power, influence and control. Caldeira (2000). reported through her field work in Rio's *favelas* that "Crime is a matter of authority. The people…think that the increase in crime is a sign of weak authority, be it of the school, family, mother, church, government, police, or justice system."

The need to vent frustration and to acquire a feeling of authority and visibility through attention—albeit negative attention—may also induce certain individuals to resort to violence. After a former street child from Rio de Janeiro took passengers on a public bus hostage for a number of hours, an incident which eventually ended with his violent death (CNN, 2000; Padilha, 2002), sociologist and former Brazilian Minister of Public Security Eduardo Soares commented:

> A boy with a gun can make us feel… fear… He can recover his visibility and affirm his social and human existence. It is a…process of self-invention mediated by violence, mediated by a gun. It's a pact: the boy exchanges his future, his life, his soul, for an ephemeral and fiery moment of glory. The small glory of being acknowledged, valued, of praising his self-confidence (quoted in Padilha, 2002).

Those who either assert their power in the absence of legitimate institutions, or those who feel the need to externally force themselves upon society to assuage their feelings of invisibility, use violence in order to establish their authority, power and influence. Riaño-Alcalá notes that violence among youth in Colombia is directly related to social exclusion and the invisibility of those who come from poor areas. Such youth have little connection with society and are excluded from those mainstream areas and public spaces where social interaction generally occurs. Instead, these invisible youth begin to engage in "territorial practices of civil protection and policing," which is in their own way a form of expressing their citizenship and establishing a connection to the community. The aim of violence, as employed by youth, is to assert and reinforce their connection to the community, thus becoming visible. In this context, violence is used by excluded youths as a means of communication and participation with a community that otherwise ignores them (Riaño-Alcalá 2006).

When segments of society are ignored, subject to prejudice, and unable to either benefit from or contribute to society, the need for existence and recognition in the face of stigmatization

can have adverse consequences (Padilha, 2002). Socially excluded individuals lack visibility, recognition, and authority within society in the way that they are treated and are able to treat others. For the minority that uses violence, it may be seen as a method of reestablishing control and authority in the face of social exclusion.

3.4 Economics

Beyond the needs to ensure security, mete out justice, and assert authority, the consequences of social exclusion may induce some to use violence for economic gain. In communities where residents have trouble meeting their needs through formal and mainstream mechanisms, the lure of gangs, drug trafficking, or acts of individual violence such as robbery may be stronger. Latin America is one of the most unequal regions in the world (Székely and Hilgert,1999). The inability to acquire needed or wanted goods, and the awareness that hard work will rarely amount to significant improvements in one's quality of life may persuade some that violence through criminal acts presents a more profitable outcome. The proliferation of organized crime and increasing connections between neighborhood *pandillas[9]* or *naciones[10]* is a significant contributor to the spread of criminal and violent activities; in many countries with organized armed groups, crime is the number one form of economic gain, followed by drug dealing (Dowdney, 2005). Violent acts, including armed robberies and kidnappings, are common methods of acquiring economic profit among these groups, and the importance of territory as a space in which to conduct illicit activities and to secure a profit often leads to violent disputes between rival gangs (Dowdney 2005).

The frustration felt by socially excluded individuals towards their lack of opportunities and the wealth enjoyed by those in the upper classes is clearly reflected in a conversation with one young man in a Rio *favela*. The man notes his admiration of figures such as Rambo, a movie character played by Sylvester Stallone who notoriously resorted to violence to achieve his goals:

> *Brother 1*: What I really like is to watch Rambo movies. I could spend the whole day watching Rambo.
> *Caldeira*: Why do you like Rambo?
> *Brother 1*: Because he's a violent guy…his role is to defend, to seek to have rights respected, to…defend the poor and the good, destroy greed. You see that

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[9] *Pandilla (*or *mara)* is a common name for a gang in Honduras and El Salvador.
[10] *Naciones* are gangs common in Ecuador.

he goes after greedy people and ends up well. It would be good if people would get these rich men like that.… all these rich people are greedy" (Caldeira, 2000).

In contrast to the image of strength and action conveyed by Rambo, the economic situation of many in marginalized areas may often be unstable, desperate, and exploited, and economic opportunities are often limited and informal. Without skills or the means to acquire them, many are forced to work in areas such as domestic service, factory line jobs, or street vending. Many young men in Rio de Janeiro who joined gangs described their experiences working on the city's streets as a "degrading" experience. To them, "selling candy on the streets or on a bus, or selling water at intersections…[was] seen as desperation, not as jobs that provided a solid sense of identity and respect. In this context, invitations from gang-involved friends or colleagues became attractive. For some young men, gang involvement was the only stable employment they ever had, or the first or only opportunity to enter the "work" market" (Barker, 2005, Dowdney 2005). In Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, many young males felt "despondent about their prospects for low-paying wage labor" and often felt that joining the local gang would provide them with better alternative activities. Even though the gangs "rule through violence, fear, and terror, they often provide the only economic stimulus available to poor communities" (Goldstein, 2003).

4. Youth and Violence

"Today, under democracy, dwellers of the villas are not so much afraid of the military…as of their own neighbors, mostly of the young ones. Themselves victims of socio-economic exclusion, street corner youth groups contest their vulnerability and redundancy by setting the tone of the shantytown's public life" (Auyero 2000)

Young adult males between the ages of 15 and 25 are generally the most violent group in Latin America and suffer from the highest homicide rates and experiences with violence in the region (Vanderschueren, 1996; UNICEF, 2006). Figure 5 shows the death rates from some form of assault for various age groups within Latin America and the Caribbean. As the figure indicates, individuals between 20 and 29 years experience the highest levels of deadly violence. Various factors influence and foster the use of violence by youth; one study conducted in Honduras revealed that being a victim of a threat, injury, or sexual abuse, being male, knowing other delinquent youth, or living in a neighborhood where gangs operate all contribute to the

probability of committing violent acts. Conversely, those respondents who reported being in school showed less probability of committing violent acts (Rubio, 2007).

The staggering numbers of street children and youth gang members in the region underscore the severity of the problem of violence: the number of youth gang members in Latin America is estimated to be anywhere between 50,000 to over 300,000 in Central America and Mexico alone (USAID, 2006).[11] Statistics on street children also vary widely; UNICEF reports that there are around 100 million street children in the world, half of whom are from Latin America and the Caribbean (World Bank, 2007).

Adolescents and young adults in any society face a number of challenges related to their age and this transitional period of their life: they are finishing up their education and entering the labor market; they are in a process of leaving their own families and support systems; and they are beginning to form and provide for their own families. Youths who must deal with social exclusion may find this transition even more difficult. As violence generally tends to have more severe consequences on the lives of street children and youth gang members, this section will highlight the experiences of these groups.

4.1 Social Exclusion and Youth: Families, Economics, and Institutions

Social exclusion may be perpetuated by the state, by the community, and even by one's own family. The state may fail to provide adequate educational opportunities or incentives to stay in school; communities may use youths as a scapegoat for the area's problems, while interfamilial violence and intergenerational conflict between parents and youth damages the lines of communications between generations. In a reaction to family violence, children may turn away from their parents and seek sources of acceptance and guidance from outside their home. As the connections between generations fail, older generations sometimes begin to blame society's problems on the younger generations, further exacerbating tension and alienation within a community (Moser and McIlwaine, 2000). Intrafamily violence and mistreatment at home was often cited as many Guatemalan youths' reason behind joining a gang (Moser and McIlwaine, 2001), as well as in studies conducted in Ecuador, Colombia, El Salvador, Jamaica, and

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[11] A recent Washington Office on Latin America report disputes these numbers and for example, suggests that in Honduras the official numbers are significantly smaller, to less than 5,000 members (Mencía, 2007). If similar numbers were found in the neighboring countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, this would amount to somewhere around 20,000 members.

Honduras (Dowdney, 2005).   Guatemalan interviewees explained that youths join gangs because they do not receive enough attention from or have trouble communicating with family members, compelling them to look outside the family in search of confidence and a better life. As one interviewee lamented, "Children grow up without love so they stay in the streets and look for love from the *maras*; what their families don't give them, the *maras* do" (Moser and McIlwaine, 2001). Other case studies in communities controlled by gangs revealed numerous instances in which the local *don*[12] or *palabrero*[13] acts as a "substitute parent," "mentor" or "protective figure" responsible for the socialization of young boys (Dowdney, 2005).[14] Conversely, those youths whose parents are aware of whom they interact with and are active in their children's lives are less likely to have friends in gangs (Rubio, 2007).

Whether or not they turn to or from their families, socially excluded youths confront the outside world with the awareness of their lack of access to goods and services available to the middle and upper classes. The acute differences between the "haves" and the "have-nots" can provoke feelings of envy and disenchantment with the inability to acquire certain desirable ends. Many marginalized people in Latin America live in crowded spaces, endure lengthy and uncomfortable commutes to work, and lack access to basic services. As they grow up in this environment, many young men and women find the few options available to them unacceptable and end up leaving their neighborhoods for other *barrios* or the streets in search of other opportunities. Often, these young men and women engage in acts, violent or non-violent, that make sense to them given their limited options and their awareness of the obstacles presented to them (Márquez, 1999). Many youths from socially excluded communities experience intense frustration with obstacles to social mobility, disparities in the quality of education, and lack of job prospects. Younger generations may view the employment opportunities of the older generations not as "honest work" but as "slave labor," which increases the attraction of "easy money" gained through activities outside the formal sector (Goldstein, 2003).

The divide between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" activities and what constitutes crime is often a fuzzy gray area. A street child may resort to "legal" activities such as shining shoes, collecting rags, and selling food on street corners, but other "illegal" activities such as robbing,

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[12] Common name for a gang leader in Jamaica.
[13] Common name for a gang leader in El Salvador.
[14] Dowdney notes that in other countries, such as Colombia or Brazil, interviewees noted a strong affiliation and friendship with their gang, but did not report the sense of having a "surrogate family" through the gang.

selling drugs, or engaging in prostitution are common methods of obtaining money as well. The difference between delinquency and subsistence may not matter to a hungry child out on the street (Márquez, 1999). Often excluded, ignored, or invisible to society, street children may move the line between legality and delinquency given the situation they find themselves in. Márquez (1999) notes that although one street child she interacted with "was aware that theft is illegal, because he was in such need, he did not regard breaking into a store in search of food or clean clothes as wrong." While many street children interviewed in Caracas often understood the arguments behind "honest" work, given the higher profits to be gained through crime and the use of violence, formal sector work offered fewer incentives. For many of these youths, it made little sense to work hard in a formal setting when they could make the same amount, if not more money in a few hours robbing or stealing (Márquez, 1999).

The prevalent and intense abuse and fear generated by the relationship between society and socially excluded Latin American youth colors the way street children and youth gang members interact with their communities and make use of their surroundings. Youths who sleep outside of homes, with no protection from weather or enemies, must attempt to find places of refuge away from intolerant police forces, violent vigilante groups, or other predators. One youth who grew up on the streets of Rio de Janeiro was witness to the Candelária church massacre[15] and described the fear and violence in which he and his friends lived during the nights, noting that "Many of the kids didn't like sleeping here. They'd sleep somewhere more protected. Because at night cowards could come by and throw a stone. They were using stones to kill people. They used cobblestones. They would wait until you were asleep late at night and drop the stone on your head. Your brains would spill out" (Padilha, 2002).

The relationship between police forces, street children and youth gang members is complex and colored by frustration on part of citizens who demand more security in their communities, inadequately trained and corrupt police forces who must work with scarce resources, inefficient judicial systems, and fear on the part of residents who do not know who to fear and who to trust. More often than not, citizens will call for harsher measures and tougher sentences in reaction to waves of violence, resulting in policies such as the *mano dura* law enforcement strategies present in El Salvador and Honduras. In more extreme cases, some

countries have witnessed the emergence of vigilante groups or "death squads" that aim to eliminate the "problem" of street children and youth gang members through murder (Scanlon et al., 1998; Payne 1999).

Hard-line policies of incarcerating suspected youth gang members or street children and pushing them through the judicial system only further stress already struggling judicial systems in Latin America and alienate youth from the rest of society. Removing a street child or a youth with tattoos from the street may temporarily satisfy an observing neighbor tired of violence in his community, but once these youths are caught in the system, the odds are stacked against them. On the streets, youths must deal with police forces or violent death squads; once inside the walls of a jail or a juvenile institution, socially excluded youths must face judicial systems rife with biases and discrimination against them. Their lack of connections, money, and influence leaves them at the mercy of those who seek to extract whatever profit they can get while exercising power over youth. The color of their skin, their access to money, their ability to make deals with policemen or other officials all affect their treatment (Márquez, 1999). As one social worker in Rio de Janeiro explains:

> If a rich daddy's boy gets caught with drugs, he won't be arrested, because daddy is going to pay the officer to let him off. If a poor boy gets arrested…he's going to end up in a reformatory, and nobody is going to get him out of there. This discrepancy is very clear in the minds of poor children. They know that [there are two] sets of laws….one set of laws is applied to the rich kids, and another to them (Padilha, 2002).

Further complicating the problem is the lack of adequate prisons and rehabilitation programs in many Latin American countries. When youths are incarcerated, they often are placed with older and stronger men who are experienced with violence (U.S. State Department, 2007). Incarcerated youths may be subject to abuse from these individuals; or worse, they may learn from them and leave prison as more dangerous felons than they were upon entering. One Argentine social worker explained, "youngsters with little experience end up in the penal circuit…jailed for stealing a bicycle." After spending time in prison, they leave more likely to "rob cars using

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[15] On July 23, 1993, a vigilante group attacked street children residing around the area of the Candelaria district in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Seven children and one adult were killed, while others were injured (Bus 174; Scanlon et al 1998; BBC World Report 2001).

guns."[16] [17]   Evidence from Central American countries with youth gang problems reflects this challenge. With *mano dura* policies that imprison youth for the offense of having a tattoo, many young men and women with little or no history of violence and crime are placed in the same areas as those with brutal criminal records. Many youths who enter jail with little criminal experience leave the institution with knowledge gleaned from hardened criminals and pose a greater threat to society than they did by sporting body art.

4.2 Social Exclusion and Youth Gangs

Youth gangs are prevalent throughout many Latin American and Caribbean countries, and their use of violence and state-sponsored reactions to combating them has sparked attention throughout the region, and a variety of institutions and NGOs[18] have sponsored a number of initiatives, programs and reports focused on dealing with the problem. The heterogeneity of youth gangs should be emphasized, as described in Table 2.   The use of arms, levels of violence, relationships with the community, ties to organized crime, and responses to state-sponsored institutions all differ among and within different countries. The *maras* and *pandillas* of Honduras and El Salvador are different in many ways from the *bandas delincuentes* of Medellín, Colombia, who are likewise distinct from the organized gangs perpetuated by the *Comando Vermelho* in Brazil. Given such differences among gangs, policy responses must be tailored to fit the types of action needed to prevent the spread of gangs and to encourage youths to resist or leave them.

Social exclusion and a number of related factors contribute to the formation of youth gangs. Poverty, drugs, migration and disorganized urbanization, lack of private space, weak educational systems, high levels of unemployment among youths, a widespread informal economy, intrafamily violence, lack of security and low levels of social capital have all been linked to gang formation (Rodgers, 1999; USAID, 2006; Mencía 2007, Mencía, 2007, citing ERIC et al., 2004). Key contributing factors on the part of the state include the failure to provide physical security through adequate police forces, functioning prison systems, and fair judicial

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[16] Author's translation: "La realidad es que cuando los chicos más tempranamente caen en el circuito penal…caen por un robo de bicicleta y salen por robo de automotores, disparo con armas."
[17] Interview with Ramón Pacheco, Subsecretario de niñez, adolescencia y familia. Interviewed by Ana Lourdes Suárez. 12 Oct 2006. Municipalidad de Moreno cede de Acción Social, Argentina. Fundación SES.
[18] Organizations include the IDB, the OAS, the WHO, the U.S. State Department, USAID, the UN, the FBI, the Washington Office on Latin America, Viva Rio, and numerous other local NGOs.

systems (including police corruption and violence, extrajudicial killings, and prison overcrowding), or the endowment of skills and education necessary to succeed and move up the socio-economic ladder.[19] Furthermore, the increasing strength of organized crime rings and drug trafficking, whether operating independently or linked through dubious connections to the state or the private sector, creates a set of parallel incentives and informal markets that attract youth who have few options available to them. The impact of globalization and the influence of a consumer culture, combined with high levels of inequality, also contributes to gang formation. The desire for expensive American brands and the lack of opportunities to acquire them creates economic incentives for youths to band together and resort to violence to acquire coveted goods (Strocka, 2006).

Those who have studied the long history of gangs in areas such as the inner-city areas of Los Angeles and Chicago in the United States note that gangs often serve as a partial replacement for missing crucial social institutions, such as families, schools, and labor markets (Klein, 1995). Gang members often report the need for identity, solidarity, social networks, security, and protection. In Rio de Janeiro, where violent youth gangs are widespread throughout *favelas*, organized crime has reportedly increased among the lower classes due to the disintegration of traditional juvenile socializing mechanisms and local social networks (Adorno, 2002). In El Salvador, gang membership has been linked to migration and population expansion in urban areas, interfamilial violence, the privatization and reduction of public spaces, and lack of positive role models (Guillermo Ramos, 2000). The emergence of Honduran *maras* is related in part to youths in search of alternative family structures, friendship, protection, physical and economic security, and their own youth identity (Mencía, 2007). Honduran youths who have been victims of crime or violence in the past are 94 more likely than others to have some sort of connection with a gang member (Rubio, 2007). U.S. deportation policies of sending convicted felons back to their home country additionally contribute to the spread of gang culture throughout the region; while some have debated the true extent of the effect of deportations, there are undeniable parallels between violent gangs with roots in Los Angeles and the nature of many gangs in Central America (Arana, 2005).

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[19] For example, in Honduras—a country with large numbers of gang members—only 30 percent of the population has a high school education (Mencía, 2007).

Some studies have found that youth gangs provide a sense of community organization and authority. Field work in Nicaragua in the late 1990s revealed that while gangs were "violent organizations that contribute to the general insecurity of life", they also maintained a level of social structure and order (Rodgers, 2006a). In some neighborhoods plagued by insecurity and social breakdown, gangs fostered a form of "collective social organization" that provided a sense of order through "laying down practical and symbolic rules and norms"(Rodgers, 2006a). Similar studies in Peru (Strocka, 2006) and Jamaica (Dowdney, 2005) have also noted strong ties between gangs and the communities they reside in. These findings reflect the absence of authority and power within socially excluded communities, which consequently may induce younger members of society to provide their own alternative means of ensuring justice, security, and social cohesion.

5. Concluding Remarks

Social exclusion inhibits affected citizens in a variety of ways, ranging from paltry economic opportunities to more physical manifestations of violence. The lack of security, access to justice, and economic opportunities in marginalized communities have contributed to the proliferation of violence seen in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years. As formal state structures fail to serve certain segments of the population, other actors step in with the intention of asserting authority and identity, providing non-state-sponsored acts of justice, or establishing informal economic opportunities.

While social exclusion and related violence can have dire consequences for the general population, the effect on youth, both as victims and as perpetrators, is even more severe. The situation of street children and youth gang members, groups both excluded from and persecuted by state institutions and communities, reflects the ease which with they fall victim to the cycle of stigmatization, marginalization, and violence.

In order to combat social exclusion and consequential challenges of violence, policymakers must find a balance between the need for control (including the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, the preservation of citizen rights and security, and the maintenance of law and order) and the need to refrain from exacerbating the situation by threatening human rights and alienating segments of the population. It is essential to tackle the underlying problems, not the symptoms. *Mano dura* policies are such examples of failed state policies that responded

reactively to violence by imposing control in an effort to quench violence—but did so in a way that excluded and threatened more people than created pathways to peace and rehabilitation.

In the short term, policymakers must respond to violence in these communities, which in most cases comes through increased law enforcement and presence in affected communities. Authorities in Belo Horizonte, Bogota, and Buenos Aires have begun using geo-spatial information systems (GIS) to map out areas where most crime occurs and efficiently devote resources to those areas. A number of programs, ranging from increased police presence in high crime areas to monitoring high-risk repeat offenders by specialized police units, have been shown to prevent violence in Latin America (Moser, Winton and Moser, 2005, offer a detailed description of various programs which have been shown to be effective, ineffective, or promising). While increased police presence may work to assuage the fears of those affected by—or who are afraid of—violence, it also increases the potential for human rights abuses, corruption, and increased insecurity as violent groups battle against police or military forces. While concentrating on quick results in the short term, policymakers must also create programs that will resolve the underlying issues fostering social exclusion and violent outcomes.

Such policies should target weaknesses in judicial, law enforcement and educational systems and labor markets to provide access for socially excluded individuals, discourage the use of violent methods to acquire certain needs, and protect members of marginalized communities who are affected by the use of violence by others. With respect to police-community relations and law enforcement, programs such as the "Youth and the Police" project in Belo Horizonte, which sets up workshops and seminars between police and youth groups, have been shown to in some preliminary evaluations to improve local police-community relations (Ramos, 2006). Police forces should also be trained to show more respect to arrested offenders and youth, instead of alienating and stigmatizing them. Parallel to improving law enforcement techniques and relations, communities should be encouraged to set up policing programs coupled with community town-hall meetings to set priorities (Moser, Winton and Moser, 2005). By placing responsibility and power in the hands of community residents, this may work to increase security and reduce feelings of vulnerability in those neighborhoods affected by violence

The weaknesses and disorganization of many Latin American and Caribbean judicial systems must be addressed, especially with respect to providing due process of law and fair treatment to those individuals without connections or money. The capacity and availability of

public defenders must be improved, granting access to socially excluded individuals to adequate legal representation. Crackdowns on corruption within judicial systems is essential to ensure that there is only one system for the population, and not a separate arrangement for those with the money to pay their way out of trouble. The state of prisons and rehabilitation programs must be addressed—some effective programs with respect to rehabilitation include those that train former offenders in vocational skills, while others provide risk-focused treatments to allow these people to successfully reintegrate into society (Moser, Winton and Moser, 2005).

With respect to youth, programs are needed to better equip them with the job and social skills that will allow them to embrace constructive methods of conflict resolution, participate in labor markets, and create positive family structures. The need for an adequate education that will allow youth to embrace employment opportunities and increase their socio-economic status is crucial. Without laws or incentives to encourage youth to stay in school, and without an education that offers technical skills, socially excluded youth will be unable to effectively enter formal labor markets. Parallel to this, policies that promote employment opportunities and encourage formal labor market participation are necessary, for without available job opportunities, there will be little incentive for youth to participate in an educational system that offers skills with no practical purpose. The development of community-youth relations should also be emphasized, and community leaders must take a more active role in including youth through community-based mentoring programs, after-school recreation programs, and by gang monitoring by residents.

The issue of youth gang violence is being tackled by a number of organizations, and priorities should be based on finding and expanding those programs that have been successful while discouraging the use of hard-line policies that incarcerate youth on suspicion of gang activity or for minor offenses. Governments must crack down on vigilante "social cleansing" groups that target youth gang members and street children and only encourage youth to band together to protect themselves.

Policies to combat social exclusion and to integrate all members of society are difficult to target and to implement. However, given the circumstances of exclusion and violence prevalent throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, policymakers must strive to ensure that institutions and policies work to include these vulnerable segments of the population and protect them from the devastating effects of violence.

Table 1.
Classification of Violence by Motive, Type, and Actors in Latin America and the Caribbean

Motivation	Type of Violence	Victimizers	Victims
Interpersonal or social; domination, revenge, control, debts, disagreements, unknown intimidation	Domestic or interfamilial; physical, sexual, verbal, psychological deprivations, neglect	Male partners, fathers, relatives, friends, acquaintances	Female partners, children, seniors, relatives
Economic; crimes with little or no structure	Fights, injuries, homicides Homicides, rapes, robberies	Gangs, acquaintances, unknowns Common delinquents, gang members	Friends, acquaintances, unknowns General population, members of gangs or groups
Economic and power: organized crime	Homicides, injuries, assaults	Drug-traffickers, organized gangs	Leaders, judges, journalists, citizens, gang members
Politics	Homicides, massacres, kidnappings, injuries	Guerillas, paramilitary troops, government forces	Peasants, rural residents, guerrilla fighters, soldiers, police

Source: Concha-Eastman (2002).

Table 2. Youth Gangs Prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean

| Area	Name	Date of origin	Urban/rural	Estimated # members	Level of organization	Category for community relationship	Main economic activities
Brazil (Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo)	Primiero Comando da Capital	1970's	U	10,000 in Rio de Janeiro	L/N	2	D/C/PE/LB
	Comando Vermelho	1970's	U		L/N	2	D/C/PE/LB
	quadrilhas	--	U	--		2	D/C
	Galeras cariocas		U	--		1	
Chile	Pandillas	1980's	U			--	PC
Colombia (Medellín)	Bandas delincuentes	1970's	U	10,000 armed actors from all three types in Medellín	L	2	D/C/PE/LB
	Narcotraficantes	1970's	U		L/N/I	2	D/C/PE/LB
	Paramilitary groups	Post 2000	U		L/N	2	D/C/PE/LB
Costa Rica	Chapulines	1990's	U	---	L	--	PC
Ecuador	Pandillas	1980's	U	65,000 of both types of groups in Guayaquil	L	1	D/C
	Naciones	1990's			N	1	D/C
El Salvador	Pandillas Maras	1980's	U	10,500 estimated MS-13 and 18th St members [a]	L/N/I	1	D/C
Guatemala	Pandillas Maras	1980's	U	14,000 estimated MS-13 and 18th St members [a]		1	
Honduras	Pandillas Maras	1980's	U	36,000 estimated MS-13 and 18th St members [a]	L/N/I	1	D/C
Jamaica	Area gangs	1940's	U	6-10,000 of both gangs in Kingston metropolitan area	L	1	C/PE/PP
	Corner gangs	--	U		L	1	C
Mexico	Chavos bandas Clikas	1970's 1990's	R/U				C
Nicaragua	Pandillas Maras	1990's	U	2,200 estimated MS-13 and 18th St members [a]	L	1	PC/C
Peru	Pandillas	1970's	U/R			--	PC

Key

1: not armed openly	C- crime (more serious than petty)	I- international	LB- legal business	PC- petty crime	PP- political patronage	
2: adverse, may openly show arms, may prey on community	D- drugs	L- local	N- national	PE- protection/ extortion		

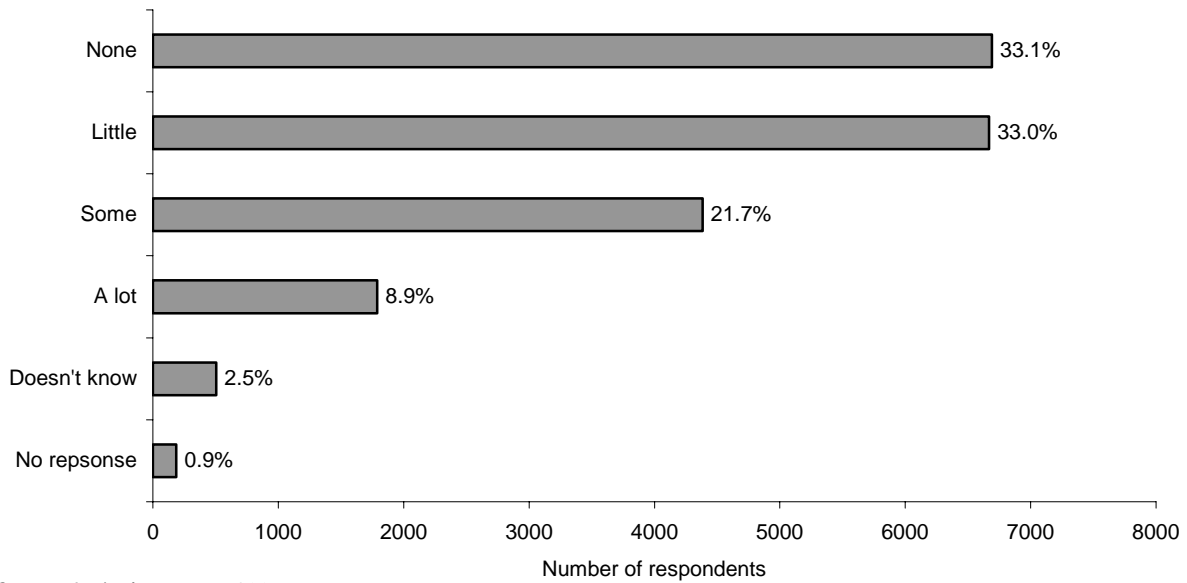*Source:* This table draws extensively from Dowdney (2005), Rodgers (1999) and USAID (2006)

Notes: a. USAID estimates drawing from various sources

Figure 1. Homicide Rates per 100,000, Western Hemisphere, 1995-2002
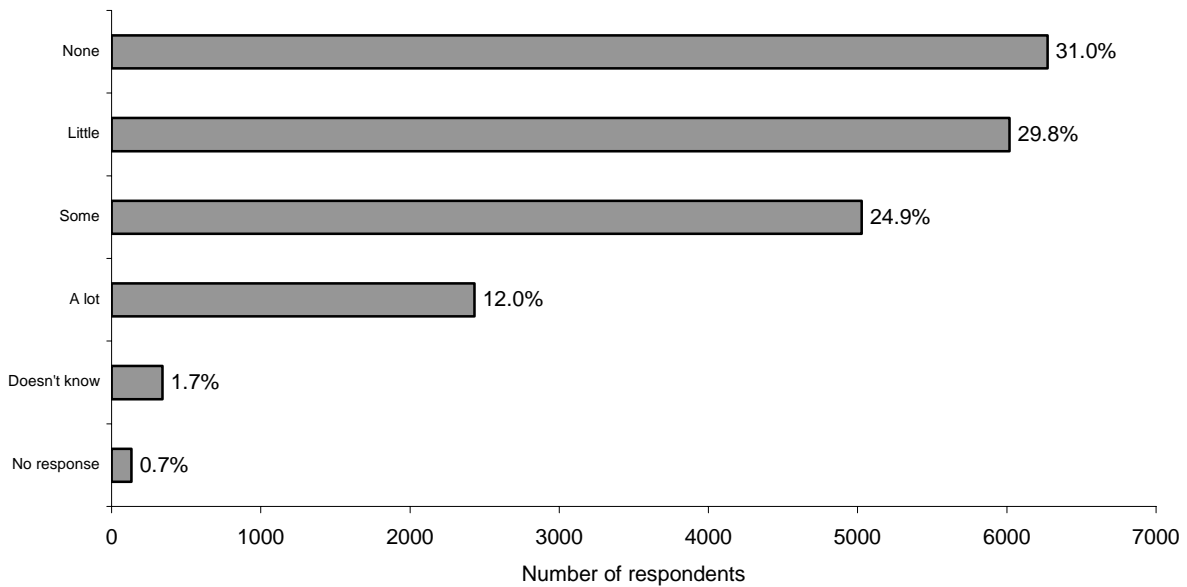
Homicide rate per 100,000 people
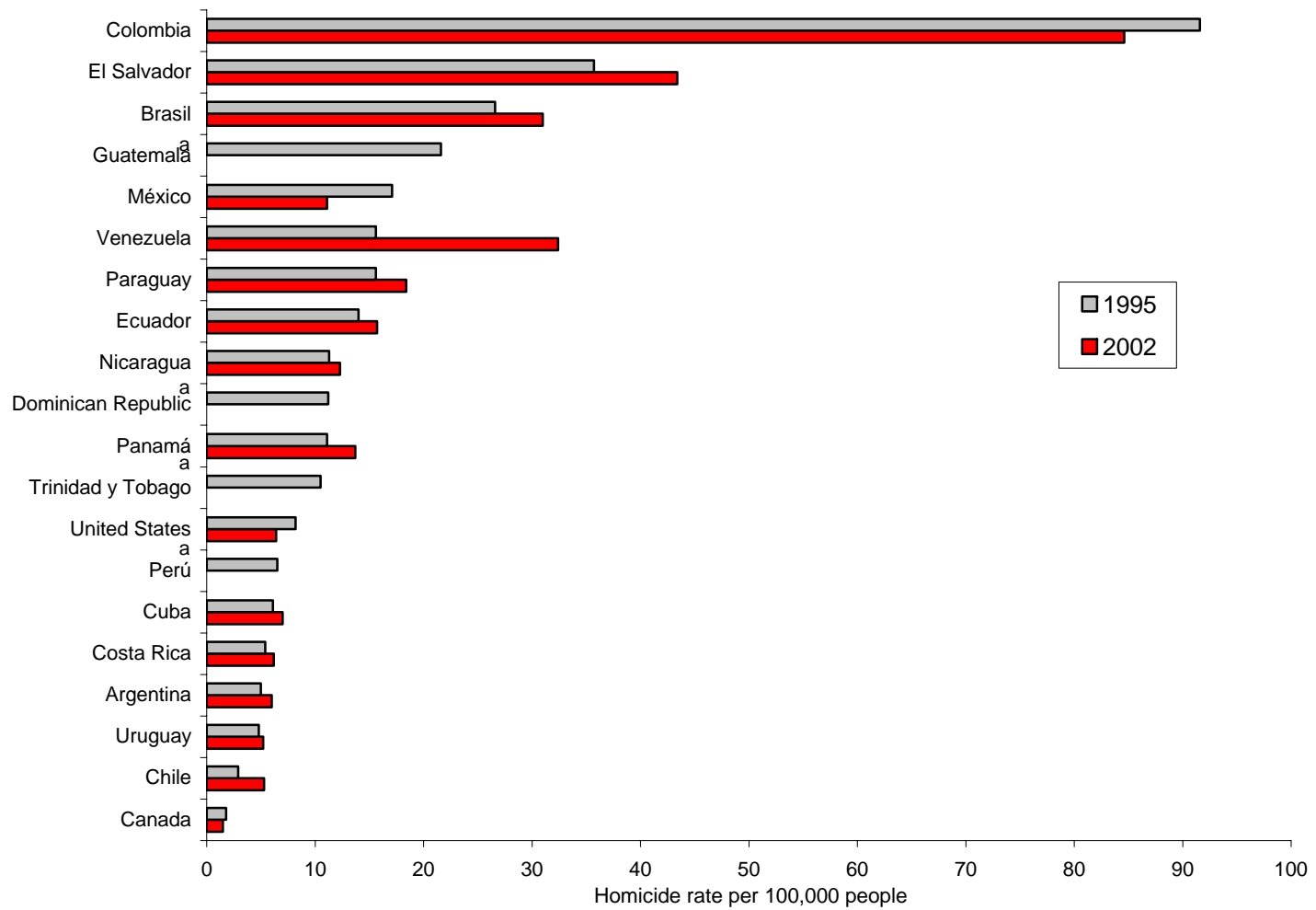
Source: Author's compilation using data from Pan-American Health Organization, and Rubio and Cohen, mimeograph
a. No data available for Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and Peru for 2002
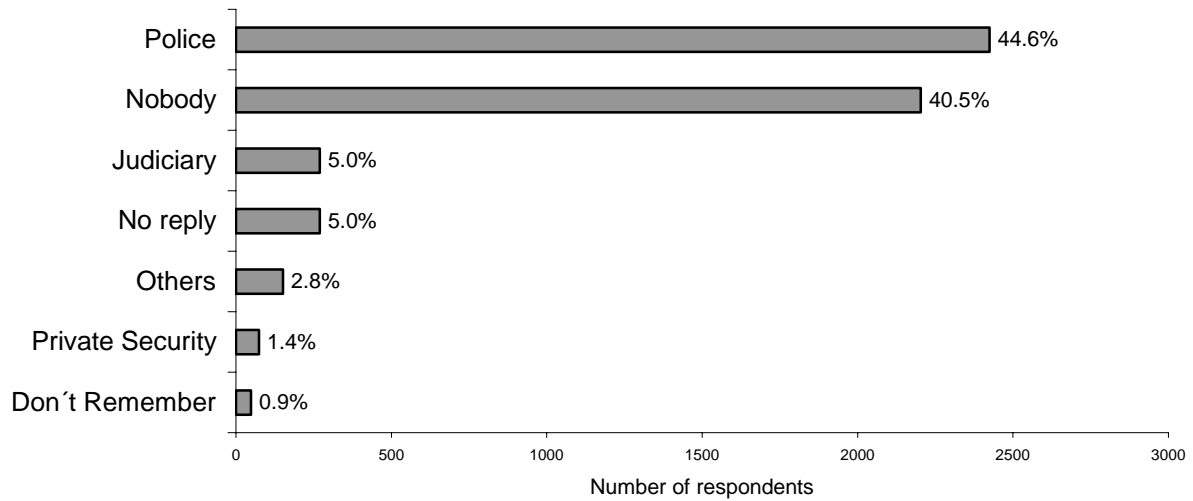
Figure 2. Public Confidence in the Judicial System

	Number of respondents	
None		33.1%
Little		33.0%
Some		21.7%
A lot		8.9%
Doesn't know		2.5%
No repsonse		0.9%

Source: Latinobarometer 2005.

Figure 3. Public Confidence in the Police

	Number of respondents	
None		31.0%
Little		29.8%
Some		24.9%
A lot		12.0%
Doesn't know		1.7%
No response		0.7%

Source: Latinobarometer 2005.

Figure 4. After you have been a victim of crime, who do you turn to?[a]

Category	Percentage
Police	44.6%
Nobody	40.5%
Judiciary	5.0%
No reply	5.0%
Others	2.8%
Private Security	1.4%
Don´t Remember	0.9%

Number of respondents

Source: Authors' compilation using Latinobarometer survey 2000.

[a] Survey of 5,441 who responded with reply other than "Not applicable."

Figure 5. Death Rates by Assault, by Age Group, Latin America and the Caribbean

Source: Author's compilation using data from WHO Mortality Database 2006.
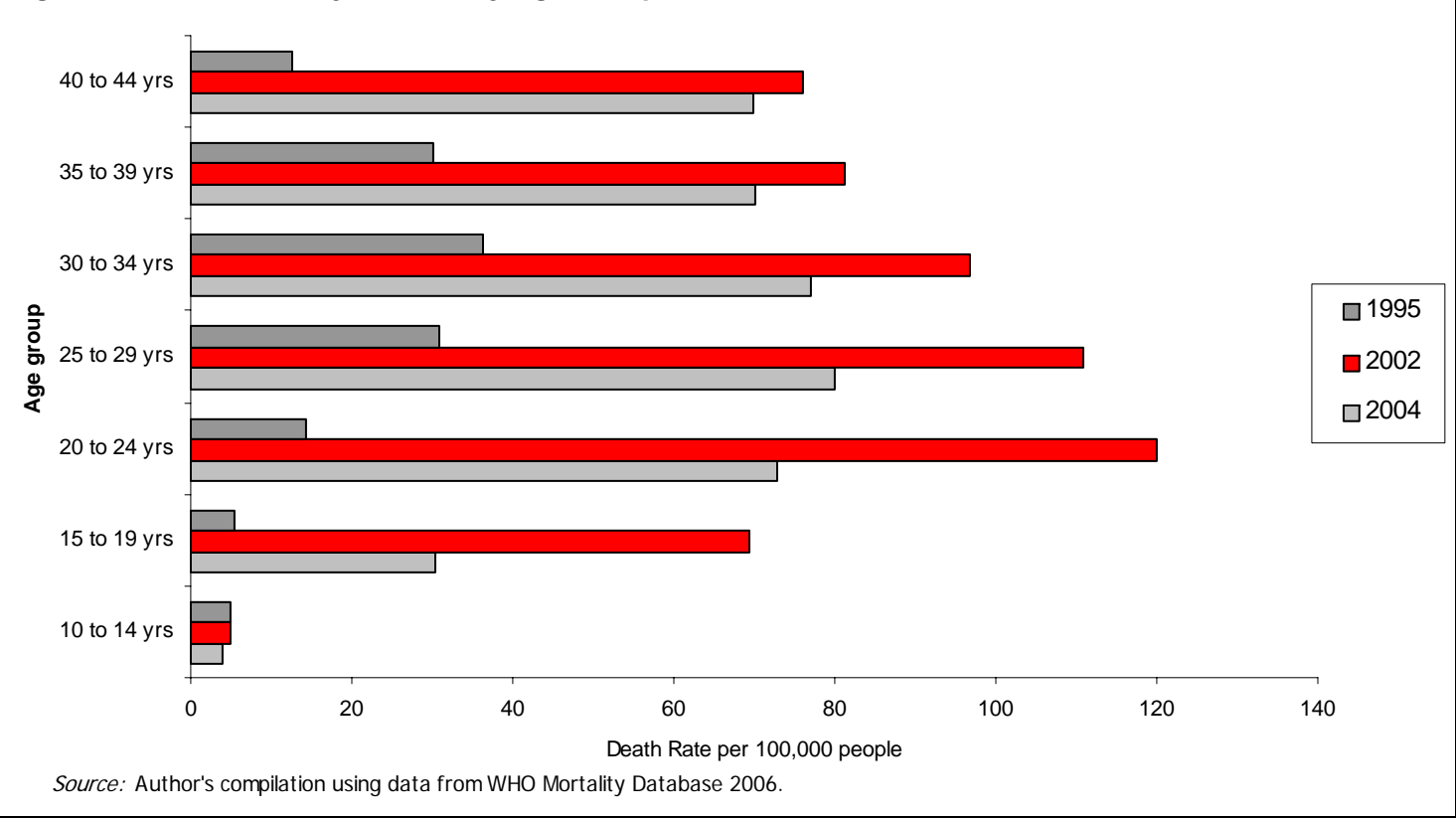
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