



Photo by Asa Perry.

ARGENTINA

A sign reading “enough insecurity” hangs from a tall fence.

The Politics of Insecurity

by Hernán Flom

Argentina is by no means the most dangerous country in Latin America. Its homicide rate, 5.5 per 100,000, is among the lowest in the region according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. By comparison, the rates in Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela are much higher at 21, 22.7, and 45.1 per 100,000 respectively. So why talk about violent crime in Argentina at all?

Despite the favorable statistics, violent crime is a recurring reality in the lives of Argentine citizens. According to various surveys, including the Latin America Public Opinion Project and Latinobarómetro, respondents from Argentina mention crime as their greatest concern. Indeed, Argentina’s self-reported victimization rates, which mainly refer to property crimes (e.g. theft, burglary, etc.), are among the highest in Latin America, and the vast majority of citizens express a fear of being the victim of violent crime. Naturally, this subjective insecurity is fueled by the sensationalistic coverage of criminal events,

especially in the current context of overt confrontation between the government and the country’s most powerful media groups. Since 2009, when the administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner passed a law that negatively affected the interests of the main media corporations and took over specific high-revenue projects, such as the broadcasting of soccer, the media has had an added incentive to play up coverage of violent crime — both to boost revenues and to aggravate the administration. However, the excesses of the yellow press do not completely explain the population’s persistent anxiety, as the national government often claims. More importantly, news headlines only provide a superficial description of the country’s main security issues.

This article delves into the deeply embedded problems of Argentina’s security system. These deficits are a far greater cause for concern than the periodic tales of murder and violence that appear in the news, although

they cannot be considered separate phenomena. Three interconnected aspects of the security system are most worrisome: first, the advance of organized crime and the reticence in confronting it; second, the lack of political control over the police force; and third, conditions in the penitentiary system. Permeating all three is an increasing politicization of security issues, often reflected in tensions between the national government and the country's most populous province, Buenos Aires. While there have been some positive initiatives undertaken in all of these areas, after a decade of continuous economic growth under the progressive, center-left governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-present), there have been few significant improvements.

Progressives Take Charge... Or Do They?

After years of hesitation and neglect, the Fernández de Kirchner administration recognized the need to actively intervene in security policy. The signing of the 2009 Democratic Security Agreement by representatives from all parties as well as by non-governmental organizations was an important first step. The agreement stressed the need for political oversight of security policy and was intended to break the national and provincial governments' habit of delegating crime control to the police. Traditionally, there has been an implicit — and sometimes explicit — pact between politicians and the police in which the latter could maintain their illegal protection rackets and organizational autonomy, as long as crime was maintained at tolerable levels.

The next step was the creation of a separate Security Ministry in December 2010. Former Minister of Defense Nilda Garré, who is known for her firm stance on human rights, was appointed head of the new agency. Her appointment not only had symbolic impact by placing a woman in charge of the federal police force but also showed the Fernández de Kirchner administration's commitment to making significant changes in the governance of security, especially in the Greater Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA). However, the appointment of former military officer Sergio Berni as Secretary of Security — the second-ranking post in the Ministry — chilled hopes for reform. Berni is seen by many as representing the “old way” of managing security politics in Argentina.

The Nation, the Province, and the Police

Despite having some of the lowest crime rates in the country, the province of Buenos Aires holds a central place in the national security controversy. With more than 15

million of Argentina's 40 million inhabitants, the province is the country's political, economic, and cultural hub, as well as the Fernández de Kirchner administration's primary electoral stronghold. The current tension between the president and Buenos Aires Governor Daniel Scioli, a potential contender within the Peronist party for the 2015 elections, makes insecurity in the province a key area in which to gain (or lose) political advantage. The national government has increasingly deployed the Gendarmería Nacional (National Police) to the province, displacing the provincial police forces, particularly in impoverished neighborhoods and access points connecting the province to the City of Buenos Aires. According to some analysts and members of the province's judiciary, this initiative has decreased the level of violence in vulnerable areas. It is extremely hard to corroborate this claim, however, since the relevant crime statistics, which are quite dubious to begin with, are not publically available. Even for researchers, it is nearly impossible to obtain this data through official channels, because it is routinely classified as “sensitive information” in order to refuse requests. Moreover, the province of Buenos Aires implemented a new methodology for counting reported crimes in 2009, which has impeded the construction of a national index.

Those supporting the Security Ministry's initiative claim that the National Police are less corrupt than the provincial police, at least in part due to the fact that they have historically been in less contact with potential sources of corruption. Critics of the policy point to the numerous illegal exchanges that occur along the national borders that the Gendarmería is in charge of patrolling, including the smuggling of drugs, humans, and other contraband. Moreover, they argue that militarizing urban security is a palliative for deeper structural problems and is unsustainable over the long term, citing it as just another example of crime policy that is attributable to political expedience rather than a comprehensive strategy.

Markets for Crime

Internationally smuggled goods make up a large proportion of the informal and illicit markets in the AMBA. However, these markets are also supplied with internally stolen goods as well as with products from clandestine sweatshops that make use of forced labor. To the extent that the criminal justice system works in Argentina — as in most countries — it is dedicated to “removing” the bottom-tier operators in these illicit networks, typically poor, young men who often resort to violence to acquire illegal goods. These episodes are what typically make the headlines. However, there seems to be little concern

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Photo by Kala Moreno Parra

March against insecurity, Buenos Aires.

responses based on specific episodes rather than general patterns. Buenos Aires, for instance, has the highest turnover rate among all the provinces for both police chiefs and security ministers. The central place that the media holds in the current political scenario means that public officials are often more worried about responding to, or preempting, media crime reports than about designing and implementing more substantial polices. Given this context, it is not surprising that Argentina's security problems are persistent and recurring.

Prisoners: Too Few or Too Many?

Despite the lack of strong action against organized crime, there has been a persistent increase in the number of incarcerated individuals in the country. Argentina's penitentiary system more than doubled in size between 1996 and 2010. The absolute prison population has increased from around 25,000 to 60,000 over the same period, and the imprisonment rate per 100,000 has jumped from 71.5 to 165. More than half of these prisoners, not counting those detained in police stations, are locked up in the province of Buenos Aires. What is most alarming about this increase in incarceration is how little it has done to prevent crime.

Those imprisoned — predominantly young, lower-class men without jobs or secondary education — generally occupy the lowest tiers of the criminal hierarchy, making them easily replaceable. Individuals with more power and resources, on the other hand, are able to exploit the corruption and legal loopholes in the judicial and penitentiary systems in order to receive short sentences when they do get caught. This bias towards locking up “amateur criminals”

for tracking down the kingpins or breaking up the illicit markets, which triggers suspicion about the connections that these higher-level “entrepreneurs” are likely to possess.

In the last few years, Argentina has sporadically witnessed different types of crimes — from mafia-style executions to seizures of gargantuan amounts of drugs — that did not exist before or that were mainly attributable to rogue police death squads. These and other signs point to a transition away from Argentina's traditional role as a drug-transit country for contraband headed to Europe by way of Africa. Increasingly, Argentina has also become a drug consuming country, especially of cocaine residue by the poor, and even a drug producer, as evidenced by the large number of synthetic drug labs discovered in recent years. However, it is extremely difficult to establish any pattern in relation to this phenomenon, as one cannot infer, for instance, the total volume of illicit materials introduced into the country from the size of seizures. On a similar note, convictions for major drug-related offenses, human trafficking, and money laundering remain few and far between.

It seems extremely unlikely that expanding criminal networks can be neutralized with the existing police apparatus, especially in the province of Buenos Aires. Unfortunately, the provincial police have themselves been one of the main unresolved security problems in Argentina, as evidenced by the numerous corruption scandals and horrendous crimes perpetrated by police officers that have come to light over the last 15 years. While no government can establish a crime control strategy that does not involve the police, especially in a province as large as Buenos Aires, political authorities have tended to neglect police corruption and abuses in exchange for relatively low or tolerable levels of crime — as well as a share in the proceeds from protection rackets. This “crime governance” logic is becoming increasingly exhausted, as criminal activity increases beyond what the police are able to handle.

At the same time, civil society's demands for security are becoming more pressing and frequent. While citizen participation is desirable in terms of holding leaders accountable, it can often lead to the undesirable outcome of politicians formulating

largely accounts for the judicial system's saturation. Also, more than half of the prisoners in Buenos Aires are jailed without having been convicted.

Upon release, it is extremely hard for these individuals to avoid being drawn back into criminal life. Rehabilitation of criminals is, at best, a marginal concept in Argentine prisons, which are characterized by abhorrent living conditions stemming from overcrowding and neglect. Guards are few, unprepared, and underpaid, so the prisoners themselves set the rules of coexistence inside the prison. This reality means that all inmates, but especially first-time offenders and the young, have no choice but to submit to the mandates of tougher criminals. Over time, they tend to absorb the prison's norms and codes of behavior. In this sense, jails are increasingly "schools of crime." In this system, prisoners are only removed temporarily from society, and in most cases, they are extremely damaged in the process, while the networks that employ them persist unaffected.

Meanwhile, one of the main crime-fighting initiatives, at least in the province of Buenos Aires, has been to build more jails. No politician will jeopardize his or her popularity by championing the cause of the most objectionable elements of society, especially given

the ardent punitive sentiment that emerges after each "shocking" criminal episode.

In conclusion, Argentina's security situation is increasingly problematic due to several factors: first, the gradual proliferation of complex criminal organizations; second, a large "available" population to supply these networks; third, an anachronistic security apparatus; fourth, a fervent civil society given to dramatic demands; fifth, media groups that will exploit the business of crime news as much as possible; and, finally and perhaps most dramatically, a political class that lacks either the know-how, resources, or willingness to tackle this situation in depth. Despite the seemingly favorable statistics, these factors undoubtedly reveal a worrisome state of affairs.

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Jail cell, Campana Prison, Argentina.

