

Venezuela's raging homicide epidemic is going unrecorded

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Venezuela's violent crime epidemic appears to be escalating into a full-blown humanitarian crisis. The precise dimensions are hard to know, however, because along with the collapse of the economy and widespread hunger has come a near blackout of reliable government crime statistics.

The Venezuelan government stopped publishing comprehensive crime data more than a decade ago, and the discrepancies between what authorities say and data released by independent organizations are extreme.

For instance, local officials announced that [17,778 Venezuelans](#) were victims of homicide in 2015. But the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, a nongovernmental group, estimated that there were [27,875 murders](#) that year, which would make Venezuela's homicide rate one of the [highest in the world](#), at 90 killings per 100,000 residents. The group found that the rate climbed higher in 2016, to [92 per 100,000](#).

Venezuela's capital, Caracas, was proclaimed the [most violent city in the world](#) last year by the Citizens' Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, a Mexican research group that tallies an annual index of the world's most violent cities. The homicide rate supposedly topped 119 per 100,000 residents, the group said. But there are [no official statistics](#) to support the claim and, predictably, the Venezuelan government has [denied it](#).

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One reason for the data discrepancies is that the Venezuelan government has excluded extrajudicial killings from its homicide count, while human rights groups such as violence observatory do not. Also, the government has traditionally relied on statistics gathered by the Ministry of Health, while the observatory combines this health data with unofficial information about so-called resistance deaths attributed to state security forces and other deaths being investigated by independent forensics agencies.

In the absence of concrete and comprehensive statistics, some groups are attempting to gather oblique data on Venezuela's crime wave. Our organization commissioned a study on perceptions of violence from the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University. Early data indicate that 6 out of 10 Venezuelans reported at least one murder in their neighborhood over the previous 12 months. By way of comparison, only 3.5 out of 10 respondents said the same in El Salvador and Honduras, considered the two [most violent countries](#) in the world.

The public opinion project survey also found that 80% of Venezuelans are "very" or "partly" afraid of being murdered in the coming year. This fear of violence is fueling a [migration crisis](#) as Venezuelans flee to Brazil and Colombia.

There are many causes of the spiraling homicide problem in Venezuela. Political and economic crises have undermined the legitimacy of institutions. The military and police have been largely discredited. State security agencies are said to both [commit and ignore](#) lethal violence. Impunity is rife and the cost of murder low, with an estimated [92% of homicides](#) not resulting in a conviction. And gang violence has [soared in the capital city](#).

But without solid statistics, Venezuela has little chance of slowing the crime wave anytime soon. It is next to impossible to make effective public policy without reliable data. Over the last decade, Venezuela has implemented no less than a dozen [anti-crime initiatives](#), with no visible results to show for them. In fact, there are signs that these operations actually worsened the situation by militarizing public security and stigmatizing poor communities.

Curiously, Venezuelans appear to be hopeful that the government can reduce violent crime. According to the

Vanderbilt survey, 70% of citizens feel that public authorities should take the lead in preventing homicide, though most rejected “iron fist” measures involving repressive police action and stiffer penalties. More than 50% of Venezuelans reject the death penalty for people convicted of murder, and 63% said that prevention measures, particularly education and employment, would be the most effective way to curtail crime.

Reducing homicide is difficult, but not impossible. Many countries and cities [across Latin America](#) have successfully lowered their homicide rates after setting targets, introducing data-driven policies, and sticking to a long-term plan. Colombia has nearly cut its [homicide rate](#) in half since 2004, for instance.

Venezuela can do the same, but not without diagnosing the true scale of the problem.

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