

GDPO Situation Analysis

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Vulnerable Youth and Drug Trafficking in Rosario, Argentina: Between Stigmatisation and Social Control

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Subject

The local drug trade and the rising levels of violence in the city of Rosario were forced on to the public agenda on New Years day 2012, when three social activists were killed by members of a gang involved in drug trafficking. Protests followed the murders, as did media and, later, political attention. Since then, the situation for poor and vulnerable young people living in the peripheral neighbourhoods of the city known as the *villas* has become ever more complicated. As elsewhere in Latin America, the teenaged gang member involved in trafficking, the lowest and most visible link in the chain, has become the focus of a general panic over ‘insecurity’. The provincial and national government face a dilemma already familiar to a number of other countries in the region: how to respond to teenage gang members involved in drug trafficking?

Assisted by the media, local politicians have distorted and exaggerated the role of the *soldaditos* (soldiers), the term used to refer to young gang members, and in doing so have neatly deflected attention from their own responsibility. The level of hysteria was epitomised by the comments of one lawyer, quoted in the local press, who compared the problems encountered by “the Latin American countries against an army of poor suicidal kids with nothing to lose” with “the enormous power of the US military against a poor army of suicidal islamists.” While this kind of stigmatisation has dominated public discourse, according to a Federal tribunal young people involved in the trade should be considered victims, given the conditions of exploitation they suffer.

Provincial government officials have publicly expressed the recognition that the violence is rooted in the dire socio-economic conditions in the *villas*. But both the media discourse and the pronouncements of politicians in favour of “tough” and ‘zero tolerance’ policies have created momentum for harsher measures from the institutions in the punitive chain (the police, courts and prisons) and incited a rise in private acts of

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retribution. In April 2014, the decision was taken to deploy the *gendarmerie*, the border forces of the army, to 'pacify' certain zones of Rosario. The immediate results were a reduction in violence in certain areas accompanied by the displacement of criminal activity to other parts of the city. In certain neighbourhoods the subsequent removal of security forces was met by a reemergence of violence acts and a call for their return. A number of abuses have been attributed to these forces since they arrived and their tactics have been criticised as resembling a military occupation. Today they remain in Rosario, the spearhead of the government's largely unsuccessful efforts to reduce crime and violence.

Poverty, Exclusion and Violence

Rosario, located 300 km. north of Buenos Aires in the province of Santa Fe, is a city of contrasts. Over the course of the country's economic recovery, following a disastrous collapse at the turn of the century, enormous amounts of money have been injected into the city, particularly thanks to the 'boom' in soya exports - around 65% of the country's grain exports depart from ports located in Greater Rosario. While the city centre presents the image of a prosperous and flourishing local economy, for many residents the legacy of economic restructuring of the 1990s, which destroyed the region's heavy industry (petrochemical, chemical and steel) and with it the major source of employment, has not been overcome. As the package of reforms took their toll through the 1990s, members of civil society and local church groups tried in vain to raise awareness of the conditions faced by young people living in the *villas*. They spoke to the press of a culture of hopelessness, of rising drug and alcohol use, of children dropping out of school at an early age, and a seething frustration that manifested itself in the quick resort to violence. There was little official concern. Even with the economic rebirth of the past decade or so, the burden is still picked up by the young. A recent report by the Permanent Household Survey (first trimester, 2015) indicated that Greater Rosario is the region with the second highest level of unemployment in the country: 8.8% (the national average is 7.1%). According to the report, 72% of the unemployed are aged between 18 and 36 (the national average is 66%).¹ The highest proportion of the city's unemployed are within the 20-29 age bracket. According to a study by the Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA), and statistics from the provincial government of Santa Fe and municipal government of Rosario, of the 350, 774 young people aged between 0 and 19 in greater Rosario, around 70,000, over 18%, face food insecurity.² Some 140,000 (40,2 %) do not have social security and close to 180,000 (55,5%) live in poor environmental conditions. Approximately 105,000 (31,4%) live in homes classed as 'poor', while close to 25,000 (7,7%) live in 'indigent households'. In 2012, the government released a report showing that in Rosario more than 150,000 people (30,000 families) were living in 'informal settlements'. (The separation in wealth and opportunities is mirrored by a physical separation. People living in settlements close to the centre have been evicted to make way for new developments. The middle and upper classes have created private spaces that simulate the public space: urban segregation is produced via shopping malls and gated communities with private security.)

In the *villas* there is therefore a vast gap between the goals the society imposes on the youth - primarily material consumption - and their ability to achieve them. Disillusionment with the society has been the inevitable result; 8 out of every 10 people in the *villas* reportedly haven't finished secondary school.³ As has occurred throughout the continent, a myriad of socio-economic factors created fertile ground for drug traffickers looking to employ teenagers on salaries they could previously only dream of. The rupture with

1 'Rosario, la segunda región del país más castigada por la desocupación, según la estimación del Indec' (2015), Diario La Capital, 17 de noviembre. <http://www.lacapital.com.ar/economia/Rosario-la-segunda-region-del-pais-mas-castigada-por-la-desocupacion-segun-la-estimacion-del-indec-20141117-0072.html>

2 Fabián Chiaramello (2014), *Preso en mi ciudad. La ocupación federal a 7 meses*, 20 de noviembre. <http://brujulacomunicacion.com/index.php/informes/item/1023-presos-en-mi-ciudad-la-ocupacion-federal-a-7-meses>

3 Carlos del Frade (2015), *Los pibes y las escuelas santafesinas*, Agencia Pelota de Trapo, 2 de junio. <http://www.pelotadetrabo.org.ar/los-pibes-y-las-escuelas-santafesinas.html>

the society has also created a culture in which young, marginalised and excluded people construct an identity around situations of transgression (drug consumption, crime, violence).

Drug use is a serious problem among youth in the *villas*. Cannabis, over the counter pharmaceuticals, cocaine and tobacco are the main substances used, and they are often mixed with alcohol to heighten the effect. According to the new Mental Health Law, the state should treat addiction as a question of public health. Yet in Rosario only private institutions - the majority of them religious - are available to prevent the use of internment and abstinence as the means of treatment. Despite the desperate need, dedicated institutions adopting human-rights based approaches to treating problematic drug use – such as harm reduction interventions - do not exist. According to studies by CIMJPP, a research group based within the Adolescent Recovery Institute of Rosario (IRAR, in its Spanish acronym), a prison for young people between 16 and 18 years of age, almost every one of the inmates are users of at least one psychoactive substance. The penal system, however, does not have an appropriate set policies dedicated to treating inmates struggling with addiction; inmates at the IRAR receive a pill designed to counter the effects of abstinence.

Gangs and Violence

The murder victims are generally young, lacking education, without fixed employment, and are killed by a firearm. What proportion is attributable to gang rivalry is not clear. Officials claim the number is small, perhaps 15-25% of the killings. However, the police have a predilection for classifying all murders in the *villas* as *ajuste de cuentas*, or ‘score settling’, a catch-all term that includes domestic disputes, inter-family feuds and clashes between neighbours, and which implies the presence of guilt on the part of the victim. This reflexive classification means it is impossible to verify how many deaths are directly related to the drug trade. While drug trafficking alone does not explain the violence, it seems likely the figure is higher than the official estimates.

A far cry from their Colombian, Central American and Mexican counterparts, the gangs operating in Rosario reflect the undeveloped nature of trafficking in Argentina. They are generally small-time family affairs. For the youngsters involved membership can be fluid, sometimes lasting for only a short period. Nevertheless, there are one or two powerful groups who are also involved in extortion and laundering. And there have been occasional threats made against activists, journalists, officials and family members of their victims. In recent years the increased use of the ‘Southern Route’, which brings cocaine south from the Andes overland to Argentinean ports, pushed it seems by operations in the Andes, may have increased the income and ambition of certain local groups, leading to expansion and more violent confrontations.

The selling of drugs in the *villas* is done via a method known as *menudeo*, a direct form used elsewhere in Latin America. Drugs are dispensed from ‘bunkers’, small windowless buildings staffed by a member of one of the gangs, often teenaged, and sometimes as young as 10, and defended by an armed ‘*soldado*’ on the payroll of the local trafficker. Violence occurs when gangs compete over territory or there is an attempt to rob one of the bunkers. Local experts also note a rapid resort to violence in response to insults or perceived slights.

Violence and trafficking are facilitated by corruption in the local security forces and historic complicity on the part of the local government and the judiciary. Local experts speak of a ‘double-pact’, an agreement between the police and the government in which the latter allows the former to have a hand in illicit activity, as long as public attention is kept to a minimum. And, paradoxically, one theory suggests the recent surge in violence could have been caused, in part, by a break in this pact following the provincial election of the Socialist party in 2007, following 25 years of Peronist rule. The FPCyS came to power

announcing they would combat drug trafficking, and during their first year a greater quantity of drugs were captured than in the previous four years combined. Although drug trafficking is a federal crime and therefore not part of the provincial jurisdiction, the new government argued their moves were justified given the lack of action on the part of the federal justice system. Still, the steps taken were minor and did not focus on the criminal structures themselves or the laundering of money.

Investigations have uncovered extensive corruption in the provincial police force, from the lowest levels to the former head of the Dangerous Drugs Division. For their part, the federal police forces and the judiciary have shown a reluctance to investigate drug trafficking, a federal crime and therefore technically outside the remit of provincial forces. Around 2012, once trafficking and violence attracted too much attention, the judiciary and the provincial government began to focus on the main players in the drug trade and the individuals who assist them in laundering their illicit gains.

Reactions to Crime; official and private

The rising number of homicides and the lack of confidence in the public security forces impelled a series of legal and institutional reforms - some still in progress. Towards the end of 2012, the Emergency Security Law was approved (later extended until 2016). The Law allowed the provincial government to increase the number of police officers by 4000 (bringing the total to 20,000) and to make investments - especially in new technology - without the control of parliament. After three years of the law being in effect, and for the first time in history, the provincial security budget occupied second place in expenditures, overtaking healthcare. Two new police squadrons were created: the Community Police and the Tactical Action Police. And 600 new cameras were installed in Rosario and the city of Santa Fe. Also, in 2011 a series of reforms were initiated within the police and investigations departments.

Despite these initiatives, in April 2014 federal forces (the gendarmerie and federal police) were called in to occupy areas of the city in order to combat the sale of illicit drugs. In May and October of 2015, there were reinforcements. However, the homicide rate remains high. And in a case of the 'balloon effect' applied to criminal activity, as the crackdown has taken place on the selling of drugs, there has been a concomitant rise in other forms of crime, including home and street robberies.

The stigmatisation of the young gang member or criminal as the source and cause of insecurity, mixed with the inability of the police forces to confront the problem, led inevitably to resentment and anger among the population. This manifested itself in a number of cases of street justice, known as 'lynching'. The most emblematic case was the killing of a teenager in March 2014. Reportedly, he had attempted to rob a pedestrian in the street and then, as he ran away, was caught by residents and beaten to death. After this event, a number of similar cases followed in Rosario and across the country. One illustrative statistic is that the number of private security agents in Rosario has now exceeded the number of police officers in the city. These developments indicate a high level of public fear and a low level of public tolerance, leading to support for the most repressive policy options (iron fist, zero tolerance) and a growing acceptance of so-called street justice.

The attitude now prevalent in society towards youth involved in crime and gangs has long existed within the police forces. Abuse, mistreatment and torture of young detainees by the police are a constant and naturalized phenomenon, eliciting no serious political or judicial response. Actual cases likely exceed those reported, but of those that are, only around 20% end in prosecution.⁴ Santa Fe, however, has no

⁴ <http://www.unr.edu.ar/noticia/8962/rosario-solo-el-22-de-las-causas-de-homicidios-termina-con-condena> In Santa Fe, the Provincial Registry of Torture, Police Abuse and Bad Practice recorded 328 cases (278 committed by police, 12 by national *gendarmes* and 20 by members of the prison services) between 1/11/13 and 15/12/14.

prosecutors specialised in institutional violence. The Adolescent Recovery Institute of Rosario (IRAR, in its Spanish acronym), a prison for young people between 16 and 18 years of age, maintains a registry of cases of juveniles tortured in police detention prior to admission. The estimated proportion is 50% of entrants, which translates to around 100 adolescents per year. In many cases, there has been a denunciation against the agents responsible, but, regardless, the judiciary has not advanced these investigations or taken appropriate policy measures to prevent the continuation of the problem. Around 60 individuals who have served time inside the IRAR between 2010 and 2015 were killed in violent situations after they had left.

Cover-ups of murders by the security forces also occur, and are known in Argentina as *gatillo facil*, or loose trigger. An off-duty officer, for example, might shoot a known young offender, and then report that it was an attempted robbery in which they exercised self-defence. There has been a rise in such cases in recent years. Fifteen people were killed by police bullets in 2015, thirteen of them were minors and all were from the *villas*.⁵

Both the provincial and national governments, who were, until the recent national election, fierce political rivals, have recognised the propaganda value of violence and drug trafficking. Since 2012, drug trafficking and police corruption have been the principal recourse by which the national government has attacked the Socialist party in Santa Fe. For their part, the Socialists have blamed the inaction of the national government in confronting drug trafficking, technically a federal crime and therefore outside of the provincial remit. Despite all the revelations of corruption over the past few years, not one political functionary in the province of Santa Fe has been prosecuted for corruption or complicity with drug trafficking. The Socialists, who despite their name are social democratic and have made alliances with the centre-right, have come in for criticism from broad sectors in regard to levels of corruption, inefficiency of the security forces, the erratic management of security policies and the sustained high-levels of crime and violence. Even with the failure of the chosen methods, the social policies necessary to rectify the issues at the core of the violence have not been enacted. The focus remains on 'insecurity', narrowly defined, which must be confronted with greater numbers of security forces.

What Next?

- The policies based on greater 'security' through police and military force have not significantly reduced homicides or the levels of crime. Instead, criminal activity has been displaced within the city. Such policies are short-sighted and unlikely to resolve the underlying problems. A refocus is needed.
- New initiatives should concentrate on improving the opportunities for youth living in the city's poorest areas. Stigmatising the youth diverts attention away from the issues at the core of the problem, and from the governments inaction in resolving those problems.
- A long-term solution is needed to alleviate the issues at the core of the violence. For too long, the official response has been driven more by electoral considerations than a sincere concern with the problem.
- The discourse promulgated by officials, which stigmatised disenfranchised teenagers as cause of the problem, has diverted attention and facilitated political objectives.
- Along with programmes aimed at improving the *villas*, greater funding should be designated to appropriate facilities for treating problematic drug use.

⁵ <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/rosario/9-52663-2016-01-03.html> According to the local NGO CORREPI, between 1983 and 2012 the security forces killed 3773 unarmed people, 13% of those cases were in the province of Santa Fe, which occupies second place after Buenos Aires with 47%.

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