



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on August 24, 2010

Murder Out of Control in Venezuela

Mexico's infamous drug war has claimed fewer lives than murderers in Venezuela, reported Maria Eugenia Diaz from Caracas for the *New York Times* on August 22. Yet experts struggle to explain the reasons. "There have been 43,792 homicides in Venezuela since 2007, according to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, a group that compiles figures based on police files, compared with about 28,000 deaths from drug-related violence in Mexico since that country's assault on cartels began in late 2006." Diaz continued, "Some joke that they might be safer if they lived in Baghdad."



Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott made the same remark about the Texas/Mexico border. But what are the numbers? Iraq has about the same population as Venezuela — according to [Iraq Body Count](#), there were 4,644 civilian deaths from violence in 2009, compared with 16,000 in Venezuela.

Venezuela's [murder rate quadrupled](#) since President Hugo Chavez took power 11 years ago — about 118,541 since 1999, according to the Violence Observatory. The *Times* continued, "The government has stopped publicly releasing its own detailed homicide statistics, but has not disputed the group's numbers, and news reports citing unreleased government figures suggest human rights groups may actually be undercounting murders." Scholars describe the decade's climb in homicides as unprecedented in Venezuelan history; the number of homicides last year was more than three times higher than when Chávez was elected.

Caracas is almost unrivaled among the Americas' largest cities for its murder rate, currently around 200 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to Roberto Briceño-León, sociologist at the Central University of Venezuela who directs the Violence Observatory. The *Times* compared that with recent measures of 22.7 per 100,000 people in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, and 14 per 100,000 in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city. As Chávez's government points out, Venezuela's crime problem didn't emerge overnight, and concern over murders preceded his rise to power.

Venezuelans with means have hidden behind walls and hired security experts to advise them, but rich and poor alike are resigned to living with a murder rate the opposition says remains low on the list of the government's priorities.

Then on August 13, *El Nacional*, an independent opposition newspaper, published a gory front-page photograph showing bodies of homicide victims strewn around Caracas' largest morgue. The photo rekindled public debate over violent crime — many Venezuelans saw it as a sober reminder of their vulnerability and a chance to effect change, but the government took a different stand, [ordering the paper to stop](#) publishing images of violence.

"Forget the hundreds of children who die from stray bullets, or the kids who go through the horror of seeing their parents or older siblings killed before their eyes," said Teodoro Petkoff, editor of another newspaper, mocking the court's decision in a front-page editorial. "Their problem is the photograph."



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The debate over the morgue photo is intensifying, becoming a broader discussion over the government's efforts to clamp down on the news outlets it does not control.

The government's reaction shocked the nation, saying the photograph was meant to undermine it, not inform the public. Authorities are also threatening inquiry into a video by a Venezuelan reggae singer showing an innocent child struck down by a stray bullet. In spite of government protests, the video has spread rapidly across the Internet since its release this month. Many worry the government is shooting the messenger and ignoring the message.

Reasons for the surge in murders are complex and varied, experts say. While many Latin American economies are growing Venezuela's is shrinking. The gap between rich and poor widens, despite spending on anti-poverty programs, fueling resentment. And the nation is awash in millions of illegal firearms. Police salaries remain low, in a country with the highest inflation rate in the hemisphere, more than 30 percent, and some officers have turned to supplementing their incomes with crime.

But some crime specialists say another factor has to be considered: Chavez's government itself. The judicial system is increasingly politicized, losing independent judges and aligning itself with the President's political movement. Many experienced state employees have had to leave public service, or even the country.

Henrique Capriles, governor of Miranda, a state encompassing parts of Caracas, told reporters last week Chavez worsened the problem by cutting funds for state and city governments led by political opponents, then removing thousands of guns from their police forces after losing regional elections.

But, Chavez's government says it's trying to address the problem. It recently created a security force, the Bolivarian National Police, and an Experimental Security University where police recruits get training from Cuban and Nicaraguan advisers, these allies having historically maintained murder rates among the lowest in Latin America.

The national police's overriding priority, said Víctor Díaz, senior official on the force and an administrator at the new university, is "unrestricted respect for human rights." "I'm not saying we'll be weak, but the idea is to use dialogue and dissuasion as methods of verbal control when approaching problems."

Can he be serious?

Senior government officials even say the deployment of national police, numbering fewer than 2,500, has succeeded in reducing homicides in at least one violent area of Caracas where they began patrolling this year.

But human rights groups suggest the new policing efforts are far too timid. Incosec, a research group focusing on security issues, counted 5,962 homicides in just 10 of Venezuela's 23 states in the first half of 2010.

More than 90 percent of murders go [unsolved](#), with no arrests, Briceño-León said. But cases against Chavez's critics — including judges, dissident generals and media executives — are increasingly common.

Hector Olivares, 47, waited outside the morgue earlier this month to recover the body of his son, Hector, 21. His son, attending a party on the outskirts of Caracas when a gunman opened fire, was the second son lost in a senseless murder. Hector said he didn't blame Chávez for the killings, but pleaded with the president to make combating crime a higher priority.



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“We elected him to crack down on the problems we face,” he said. “But there’s no control of criminals on the street, no control of anything.”

Photo: A student lies down on a street beside of fake chalk outlines during a protest against violent crime in Caracas, Venezuela: AP Images



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