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Trying to Make Sense of Nicaragua’s Low Crime Numbers

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Transparency questions are taking some of the shine off the relatively low violent crime statistics that have made Nicaragua—Central America’s poorest country—an unlikely safe haven in what is otherwise one of the most dangerous regions in the world.

The most recent numbers, released in September by the Policía Nacional (PN), estimate Nicaragua’s intentional homicide rate at 8.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, lower than anywhere else in Central America, including Costa Rica and Panama, which had murder rates of 11.4 per 100,000 and 11.1 per 100,000 in 2015, according to InSight Crime, a news site and research foundation. The area’s most dangerous country is El Salvador, with a ghastly 103 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants last year, followed by Honduras (56.7 per 100,000) and Guatemala (29.5 per 100,000), InSight Crime reported in its 2015 round-up of homicides in Latin America, published last month. The world average, as calculated in 2012 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), is 6.2 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

In presenting the September 2014–August 2015 crime figures, the long-serving head of the PN, Aminta Elena Granera, hailed the new homicide rate as a 14-year low for Nicaragua. She also said that the overall number of reported crimes fell for a fifth straight year, this time by 16%, and that rapes and armed robberies were also down, by 22% and 9% respectively. “We’re continuing to strike at the economic and logistical base of drug trafficking,” Granera said. “We neutralized nine cells that wanted to settle in our territory to carry out their illegal activities. Five-and-a-half tons of cocaine were seized, along with US$3 million, 183 firearms, 223 vehicles, 39 means of aquatic transport, 2,072 communication devices, and 111 properties.”

The numbers certainly paint a positive picture, especially in light of the dismal security situation in the nearby Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, where more than 16,000 people were murdered last year. Some analysts, however, question just how accurate Granera’s assessment is. Part of the problem, say people like Roberto Orozco, an independent crime researcher, is that starting in 2013, the PN stopped making its annual crime reports public. Critics also lament what they see as increasing political partisanship by the police force, which is now under the direct control of President Daniel Ortega following changes he made two years ago to the Ley Orgánica de la Policía Nacional (NotiCen, July 24, 2014). “All you’re going to get there are the positive results,” Orozco said of the PN crime numbers in a January interview with the news site Confidencial.

The security expert is particularly skeptical of the supposed drop in reported crimes, suggesting it may have more to do with diminishing confidence in the police and justice system than it does with any quantifiable public security improvement. “In surveys, the answer people give when asked why they don’t report crimes is, ‘It doesn’t do any good,’” Orozco said.

There is also a significant discrepancy, he and other analysts point out, between the PN numbers and the results of various citizen polls, which suggest, at least in terms of the public’s perception, that Nicaragua is becoming less safe. Feeding that impression are news reports on cases such as the

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massacre last August of five police officers in the Caribbean municipality of Bluefields. A month earlier, three innocent people, including two children, were gunned down—in a botched ambush (NotiCen, Aug. 6, 2015). There are reports as well of ongoing violence in northeastern Nicaragua, where indigenous inhabitants, mostly of Miskito ethnicity, have taken up arms to fend off colonos, the mestizo settlers who are encroaching on the territory to exploit its valuable hardwoods, clear forest space for cattle ranching, and in some cases, set up clandestine drug-trafficking outposts (NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2015).

“There is a contradiction between the official numbers and perceptions of violent crimes,” said Elvira Cuadra, executive director of the Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP), a Nicaraguan non-profit that studies public policy. “Fear of robberies and homicides has grown considerably. With regards to murders, it’s gone from 2% to 30% in two years,” she explained in a recent interview with the television program Esta Noche.

Exception to the rule
Even if there is some truth to those perceptions—and to suspicions that the PN numbers are inaccurate, or at least incomplete—Nicaragua still has reason to count its blessings. Compared to neighboring Honduras, Guatemala, and especially El Salvador (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2016), where homicide numbers jumped 70% last year, from 3,912 in 2014 to 6,657, it remains a relatively safe place to live and visit, remarkably so given the widespread poverty and the limited resources available to pay and equip the PN.

Some analysts say Nicaragua has actually benefited from its weak economy, which has a GDP of roughly US$11.8 billion, the smallest in Central America, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). El Salvador’s GDP is more than US$25 billion. “Our economy represents a mere 6% of Central America’s GDP, and this is not of strategic interest for organized crime, which is used to moving money around in strong economies where they can camouflage money laundering and weapons purchases,” security consultant and former Nicaraguan police official Francisco Bautista told the Inter Press Service (IPS) in 2011.

Others point to migration patterns to explain Nicaragua’s lower crime numbers. Military repression in Guatemala and El Salvador, for example, produced a large exodus of undocumented migrants in the 1980s. Many found their way to California, where they formed street gangs (maras) that were later exported back to Central America by way of deportations. The revolutionary Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua, in contrast, made an effort to embrace impoverished youth. Those who did flee the country, for political reasons, were relatively well received in places like the United States and Costa Rica and thus able to stay for extended periods, authors Stephen Johnson, Samuel Kareff and Siremorn Asvapromtada explained in a 2012 report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). “In 1985, when gangs were first beginning to appear in El Salvador, most Nicaraguan youth who stayed behind were involved in state-organized projects,” they wrote.

The 1979 Sandinista revolution also led to a community-oriented model of policing, another widely cited factor that sets Nicaragua apart. The approach survived even after the Sandinistas were voted out of office in 1990. Daniel Ortega, who chaired the party’s post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985) before being elected president in 1984, and who returned to power in 2007, is likely to seek what would be this third consecutive term (and fourth overall) in elections scheduled for November (NotiCen, Jan. 28, 2016).
“The three countries of the Northern Triangle are influenced by the United States, and the police have played a supporting role to the Army, protecting the state by means of repression,” Helen Mack, the head of the Myrna Mack Foundation, a Guatemala-based rights group, told IPS. “Meanwhile, the Nicaraguans, after the revolution, based their police forces on the Cuban model, which is focused on the community.”

Wary witnesses

Nicaraguan authorities should be careful, nevertheless, not to rest on their proverbial laurels, say analysts like Orozco and Cuadra. The country is not immune to the problems plaguing Central America as a whole, and ought to protect its safe-haven status, they insist, by addressing the issue in a frank and open manner. “This is public information,” Cuadra told Confidencial last September in reference to the PN’s carefully guarded crime numbers. “The most appropriate thing is that it be available to the citizenry in general.”

Framing the matter only as a case of Nicaraguan exceptionalism, furthermore, has the effect of downplaying or even ignoring the serious crimes that do occur there. In a January article titled “Muertos por un celular,” (dead for a cell phone), Confidencial looked at a number of recent murder or attempted murder cases in Managua to suggest that crimes like armed robbery are taking an increasingly violent turn. One of the victims, Elián García, 14, was shot twice in the head last April by two men bent on stealing his telephone. The boy, an avid baseball player, survived but is bedridden and unable to speak.

Mónica Zalaquett, director of an organization called the Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (Center for Violence Prevention, CEPREV), blames drugs and easier access to guns for the apparent uptick in violence. “There are a lot of homemade weapons, but there is also a lot of trafficking of guns,” she said. “The young people themselves tell us it’s much easier now to get a gun.”

The Confidencial piece also highlighted shortcomings in Nicaragua’s legal system, which handles less than a third of the cases reported to police, according to the IEEPP, and offers victims and witnesses of violent crime nothing in the way of protection. “Most of the witnesses didn’t show up [for the trial] out of fear,” said Maricela Urbina, whose brother, José Gregorio, was murdered a year ago in Managua. As in the Elián García case, the assailants were after the victim’s cellular phone.

“Three days before the trial, we went to find the mother of one of the witnesses, and she said that her son couldn’t give his testimony because, that Sunday, he’d seen a man on a motorcycle with a gun tucked in his waistband,” Urbana explained. “She said [her son] was scared that someone would show up at his house and shoot everybody.”

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