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## Uruguay Tries Preventative Policing with a High-tech Twist

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At a time when crime of all types has people across Latin American on edge like never before, Uruguay is setting itself apart with a law-and-order policy centered on dissuasion and prevention.

The country's progressive leadership calls the approach "a unique experiment in the region and in the world." And it appears to be paying dividends, according to reports by international organizations such as the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), a global think tank.

"Other countries are looking to us for advice, or want to send experts to study first-hand what's taking place in Uruguay," said Eduardo Bonomi, the country's interior minister for the past seven years.

Since launching its so-called Programa de Alta Dedicación Operativa (High Operational Engagement Program, PADO) in April 2016, Uruguay has seen an across-the-board drop in crime numbers. Murders are down 13.1%, giving the country a homicide rate of 7.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, well below the average in the Americas as a whole, which is 16.3 per 100,000, according to the 2013 "Global Study on Homicide" (2013) by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Armed robbery is also down (8.12%), as are cases of theft (7.3%), home invasions (61%), coercion (29%), serious injury (19%), rape (17%), domestic violence (6.5%), and personal injury (6%), among others.

The government, led by President Tabaré Vázquez of the leftist Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition, sees the numbers as proof that its approach is working. Nevertheless, Bonomi remains the target of a smear campaign in conservative media outlets and on Twitter. The Spanish news agency EFE noted on Jan. 2 that despite the improved crime figures, "the hashtag 'Bonomi resign' is still one of the most popular in social media" ([NotiSur, Dec. 2, 2016](#)).

Bonomi has been summoned before Congress a record eight times, with lawmakers asking on three occasions that he be censured. But the minister has always weathered the storm, and can now point to the positive results of the PADO initiative, and to the praise Uruguay receives from abroad, to further defend his record.

One of those outside indicators is the latest Global Peace Index (GPI), an annual report issued by the IEP. The GPI ranks countries base on their level of peace and absence of violence, and for its 2016 version, listed Uruguay as the world's 35th safest country. In Latin America, only Chile, in 27th place, scored higher.

### *The poverty factor*

During one of his many appearances before the legislature, in December 2016, Bonomi pointed out that since Uruguay's last civil-military dictatorship (1973-1985), no government has been able to lower crime numbers consistently over the course of a five-year term. In fact, crime numbers have inched up over the years. It was for that reason, he explained, that the Vázquez administration gave itself the "ambitious goal" of reducing armed robberies by 30%. "And we're headed in that

direction, because our police are better equipped, better paid, and trained by the world's best," Bonomi said. "We're committed to making it so that society doesn't have to live in fear, but we aren't under the illusion that crime is going to disappear."

Bonomi cited UN data to show that cases of violent crime have increased throughout Latin America in the past 15 years. "That's why we've all become so scared and insecure," he said. Surprisingly, he also questioned the traditional left-wing view that crime is a consequence of poverty. "We know that poverty can't be used to justify the criminal dynamic," Bonomi said. "That would be naive, and given the available evidence, it means denying reality."

Nicolás Trajtenberg, a Uruguayan criminologist with a doctorate from the University of Oxford in England, echoed the minister's statements in an interview published March 11 with the Montevideo daily *El Observador*. Acknowledging that poor people can certainly be drawn to crime, he pointed out that not all crimes are committed by poor people. "Of all the crimes committed in Uruguay, only a small part is detected," Trajtenberg said. "After that there's the 'cifra negra' [the 'black', or hidden number], which if we knew what it was, would show a ton of crimes, like domestic violence and child abuse, committed by people in the middle and upper classes."

He cited the 2008 collapse of Wall Street as an example. "It's not the people in the Bronx who were responsible," he said. "It's easy to think that the only [crimes] that exist are what we see. It's true that if someone is born into a screwed-up situation, and not just in terms of poverty, there's a greater chance that person will get into trouble and commit crimes. But that doesn't mean they all get involved necessarily in violent acts."

Later in the interview, Trajtenberg pointed to a survey carried out among 15-year-olds showing that there is no link between poverty and crime. "We took into account poverty and social and human development, and found that in 90% of cases, poverty doesn't increase the possibility of someone committing a crime," he said. "You can visit messed up neighborhoods all over the world, and you'll find poor people who don't commit crimes. If the association was really that strong, many more [poor people] would be involved in crimes."

### *'Predictive policing'*

The PADO system, implemented 13 months ago, is a targeted approach to crime that involves identification of certain known hotspots. While the government's overall crime policy may be preventative, the PADO approach involves patrols against drug trafficking, armed robberies, and weapons dealing. Bonomi said it was introduced in the greater Montevideo region in response to a rise in violent crimes in certain critical areas in the capital and outlying communities.

The primary goal is to dissuade people from committing crimes by patrolling the so-called hotspots, either on foot or in vehicles, always duly identified. As a starting point, 1,000 police officers were assigned to the program. In addition, a special crime-analysis unit is tasked with monitoring the results and evolution of the PADO, and producing periodic reports for the police department heads.

The reports are compiled in conjunction with a system called PredPol, short for "predictive policing," a software system that uses a wide range of numbers and statistics to predict when and where crimes are most likely to occur. PredPol began in the US as a research project between the Los Angeles Police Department and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). It is managed by a firm called The Predictive Policing Company.

“Using only three data points—crime type, crime location, and crime date/time— PredPol’s powerful software provides each law enforcement agency with customized crime predictions for the places and times that crimes are most likely to occur,” the company’s website explains. “PredPol pinpoints small areas, depicted in 500 feet by 500 feet boxes on maps, that are automatically generated for each shift of each day,” it adds.

Uruguay pays US\$140 million annually for the software and is the only country outside of the US to use it. Before its introduction in Montevideo, PredPol was only used in Los Angeles and Santa Cruz, in California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Richmond, Virginia. The company says the software’s mathematical formula is unknown even to the governments of the places where it is used. The inventors have kept it a secret, in other words.

The Interior Ministry says it is happy with the results so far but thinks improvements could be made to the program based on input from experts in Uruguay, one of Latin America’s most advanced countries with regards to computer technology.

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