

# Reconfigurations of Urban Violence in Venezuela

## Reconfiguraciones de la violencia urbana en Venezuela

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the dynamics of urban violence in the metropolitan area of Barquisimeto, Lara state (Venezuela), and its implications for the exercise of freedoms and quality of life between the years 2018 and 2024. The research adopts a mixed approach with triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative data, from the Press Observatory (OP) of the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence in the state of Lara, record the type of crimes, their location, the profiles of victims and perpetrators, as well as the frequency of the events. Qualitative data were obtained through ten semi-structured interviews and a focus group with community leaders from popular sectors, conducted between 2018 and 2024. The findings reveal a decrease in violent deaths since the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the involvement of minors in criminal life and an increase in thefts of essential goods, such as food bags, gas cylinders and telecommunications infrastructure. Likewise, there is evidence of an increase in institutional violence manifested forms of crime through extrajudicial and extrajudicial executions. It is concluded that urban violence in Barquisimeto has been reconfigured towards more diffuse and everyday forms. This violence mainly affects the popular sectors, where state coercion has hardened, coexisting with an increasingly structural poverty that makes it difficult to achieve a dignified life.

**Keywords:** violence, homicides, institutions, State, crisis.



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## Abstract

En este estudio se analiza la dinámica de la violencia urbana en el área metropolitana de Barquisimeto, estado Lara (Venezuela), y sus implicaciones para el ejercicio de las libertades y la calidad de vida entre los años 2018 y 2024. La investigación adoptó un enfoque mixto con triangulación de métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos. Los datos cuantitativos, provenientes del Observatorio de Prensa (OP) del Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia en el estado Lara, registran el tipo de delitos, su localización, los perfiles de las víctimas y victimarios, así como la frecuencia y temporalidad de los sucesos. Los datos cualitativos se obtuvieron a través de 10 entrevistas semiestructuradas y un grupo focal con líderes comunitarios de sectores populares, realizados entre 2018 y 2024. Los hallazgos revelan una disminución en las muertes violentas desde los años previos a la pandemia por COVID-19, el involucramiento de menores en la vida delictiva y un incremento en los robos de bienes esenciales, como bolsas de comida, bombonas de gas e infraestructura de telecomunicaciones. Asimismo, se evidencia un aumento de la violencia institucional manifestada formas de criminalidad a través de ejecuciones extrajudiciales y extorsión policial. Se concluye que la violencia urbana en Barquisimeto se ha reconfigurado hacia formas más difusas y cotidianas. Esta violencia afecta principalmente a los sectores populares, donde la coerción estatal se ha endurecido, coexistiendo con una pobreza cada vez más estructural que dificulta el logro de una vida digna.

**Palabras clave:** violencia, homicidios, instituciones, Estado, crisis.

## Introduction

In the new millennium, the combination of poverty and victimization by violence in Venezuela has generated conditions for a life lacking in quality (Briceño-León & Camardiel, 2015b). Homicide rates across the country showed an upward trend, far exceeding regional and global averages (Ávila, 2017) and aligning Venezuela with nations that have histories of civil wars and the permanent presence of transnational criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking.

However, starting in 2017, the social consequences of the Complex Humanitarian Crisis (CHC) began to impact the rising trend of criminality. The (de)spatialization of urban life, the removal of much of the transport system from circulation in crime-concentrated cities, the lack of income and the local currency as a medium of exchange, and the mass migratory processes of Venezuelan youth collectively generated social changes that accelerated during the pandemic. In essence, while our poverty and inequality transitioned from

that of a developing country to that of a nation with humanitarian needs, the forms of violent crime were simultaneously transformed.

As in the rest of the country, crime has adapted to the new socioeconomic and political conditions in Lara state, located in west-central Venezuela. The city of Barquisimeto endured the full impact of the Complex Humanitarian Crisis (CHC), which directly affected livelihoods, leading to the progressive deterioration of wages and vital aspects like the acquisition of medical supplies and pharmaceuticals.

Regarding education, the rate of attendance at an educational center for youths aged 18 to 24 in Lara state is only 16.6% (ENCOVI, 2021). Additionally, public services are suffering profound deterioration; domestic gas has been one of the most precarious services throughout this period. Over ten years, there was an inverse shift in the total number of households cooking with gas cylinders. In 2011,

nine out of ten households in the entity prepared food with gas; by 2021, nine out of ten households lacked frequent access to the service (Ladeshu, 2025). Cylinder prices exceed government-regulated prices, a situation that worsened between 2018 and 2022 due to these types of goods being targeted by criminals. Concerning access to domestic gas in the most popular sectors, its sale has become normalized through community organizations co-opted by the government, which use this as a mechanism for social control.

The scarcity of gasoline, which began to deepen in 2018, extended until the third quarter of 2021. In 2024, purchasing gasoline normally in Barquisimeto, Carora, or Quibor (three of the state's main cities) was only possible at stations where the price was USD \$0.5 per liter. The irregularity of the gasoline service persists, especially in the country's interior, although it is not as marked as it was in 2018 (PNUD, 2024).

This is a humanitarian crisis that has been persistent; we can still observe that the 2024–2025 Response Plan published by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) continues to develop projects aimed at the protection of vulnerable populations and the provision of basic services (OCHA, 2025). The progressive deterioration of the quality of life, the precariousness of wages, and particularly the loss of institutional capacity to respond to the population's needs, are conditions facilitating the expression of violence in Venezuela.

The findings of this investigation address the objective of understanding the dynamics of urban violence in the metropolitan area of Barquisimeto, Lara state, between 2018 and 2024. This includes specifying aspects related to the interactions surrounding delinquent violence and its implications for the development of human freedoms and quality of life, emphasizing the manifestations of violence and their connection to the political-institutional and economic crisis in Lara state.

Following the explanation of the methodological design that allowed the results to be obtained, a

reflection is provided on the social changes observed in urban violence. Finally, several conclusions are presented.

## Methodology

To elucidate the manifestations and dynamics of urban violence in the city of Barquisimeto, a mixed-methods approach was utilized, incorporating triangulation to interpret both quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, secondary quantitative data were drawn from reports published by the Observatory of Violence (OVV), Lara chapter, covering the period from 2018 to 2023. Qualitative information was simultaneously gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten individuals who hold leadership roles in various popular sectors of the city, and one focus group interview with ten women residing in neighborhoods within the same parishes. The following criteria were used to select participants for the interviews and the focus group: Residence in parishes registering a medium to high incidence of violence, according to the Press Observatory (OP) data; Legal adulthood and, Active involvement in a community leadership role.

The integration of methods suggests two paths for approaching the same phenomenon, without the necessity of one preceding or being juxtaposed over the other. Data from the Press Observatory (OP) of the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence (OVV) in Lara state are not intended to define a population for further in-depth study. Likewise, the semi-structured and focus group interviews do not aim to establish causal inference and then examine its possibility for generalization, given that “beyond the differences in causal logic between the quantitative and qualitative traditions, both can share the focus on potential outcomes” (Sánchez, Suárez, 2020 p. 140).

The quantitative component utilized data from the Press Observatory of the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, hereafter referred to as the OP. This observatory systematizes and codes news reports of violent incidents published in print and digital media within Lara state. These data are

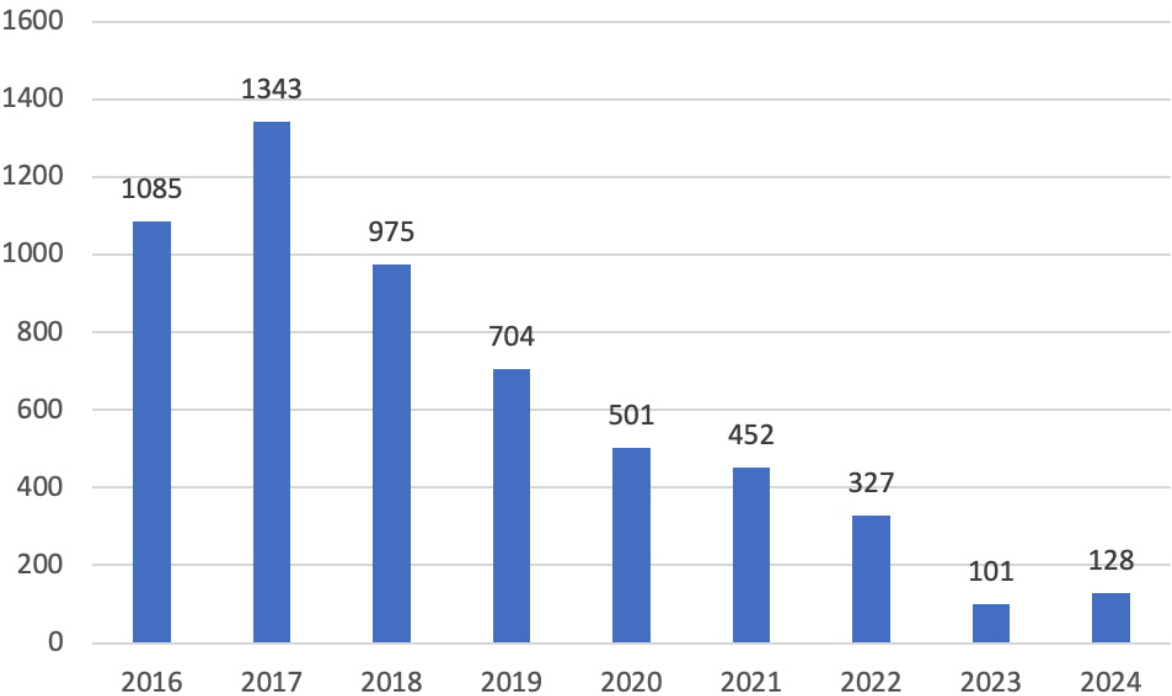
subsequently disaggregated into the following categories: Type of violence (homicide, robbery, deaths by police intervention, etc.), Geographical location, Profile of victims and perpetrators, and Frequency and temporality of the events.

This information allowed us to identify the most frequent types of crimes, the perpetrators who commit them, and the communities with the highest incidence, which in turn guided the collection of qualitative data.

qualitative information was collected through participant testimonies, specifically identifying the shifts in the dynamics of violence.

Manifestations and Shifts in Violence

The changes experienced by Latin American societies during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced the dynamics of violence. In Latin America, the scenario created by the pandemic initially involved severe lockdowns and stringent



Graph 1. Number of news stories on interpersonal violence analyzed between 2018 and 2024.

The qualitative data were derived from semi-structured interviews and one focus group conducted with ten key stakeholders residing in high-crime areas. Data collection occurred in two phases (2018 and 2024). The participants were primarily community leaders and educators who have long-term residence in the localities. In the first phase (2018), the inquiry focused on the manifestations of violence, the roles of community organizations, and aspects related to the deprivation of freedoms. In the second phase (2024),

restrictions on mobility and commerce, which led to a decline in regional criminality (Ríos y Niño, 2021, p. 97). The drastic decrease in human interaction in urban spaces, border closures, and the massive presence of police and military personnel to ensure compliance with confinement measures affected drug trafficking, urban delinquency, and homicide, among other common crimes prevalent in the region.

In Lara state, these shifts were perceived as the deepening of pre-existing conditions. The violent death rate for 2018 was 51 per 100,000 inhabitants, a one-percentage-point decrease from 2017. However, in 2019, the rate significantly reduced by 17 points to 34 per 100,000 inhabitants (OVV, 2020).

The intensified impoverishment since 2013 (Encovi, 2014) severely impacted the transformation of certain crime types and forms. While some declined, others were exacerbated, and the perception of violence among citizens broadened. For instance, poverty began to be perceived not merely as a state of suffering but as a condition of enforced deprivation maintained through mechanisms of coercion.

This means that structural impoverishment is felt as a form of violence (Galtung, 2016), given that the satisfiers needed to fulfill basic needs have been progressively monopolized by the government. This control is exercised through community organizations that respond directly to the executive branch, which in turn discretionally distribute food packages and domestic gas services, without regard for citizens' rights. Operationally, this distribution is, in some cases, channeled through militarized institutions and/or parastate groups known as *colectivos*, which began to form at the beginning of the century under the premise of civil-military power (Meléndez, 2023a).

Since 2018, the excessive use of force by security forces has also increased. In addition to deaths classified as "resistance to authority," popular protests over economic and social rights were violently repressed. The State directly contributed to the rise in homicides through its violent mechanisms, resulting in the consolidation of "authoritarian attitudes that postpone respect for civil liberties and human rights, in an eagerness to privilege order" (Cruz, 2000, p. 140).

Incidents—ranging from the events in the Valle Dorado sector in western Barquisimeto in October to the repression of citizens in Pavia (Iribarren municipality) in December 2018—demonstrated the disproportionate action of security forces against young men and women who decided to demand their rights due to the lack of public services. This was an unprecedented characteristic in the treatment of popular protest for social rights in the entity, as excessive repression had previously been directed only toward protests demanding civil and political rights in middle-class sectors.

During the period analyzed in this investigation, the highest number of deaths due to police violence in recent history was also recorded. Between 2016 and 2017, the Press Observatory (OP) of the OVV, Lara chapter, identified an increase of over 30% in killings categorized as "resistance to authority." The percentage of such cases out of the total processed records rose from 7.6% (2016) to 11.4% (2017). In 2018, "resistance to authority" cases accounted for 14.6% of the total, representing a 20% increase over 2017 and more than 45% over 2016. The deployment of the Special Action Force of the Bolivarian National Police (FAES) starting in July of that year marked a significant turning point regarding persons killed by the police. Crucially, from 2019 to 2021, the rates of deaths due to resistance to authority exceeded the homicide rate (OVV, 2021).

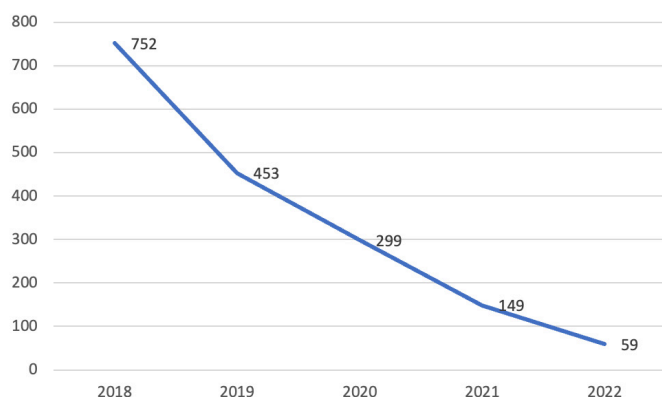
The crisis in urban and extra-urban mobility, staying at home, and the humanitarian vulnerability that existed in Venezuela prior to the pandemic crisis were also directly reflected in changes in domestic violence, which became more common during the pandemic and, in turn, more widely reported by the media. Below, we take a closer look at the perceived changes in the different forms of interpersonal violence in the state.

## Changes in criminal violence

According to the leaders interviewed for this study, there have been at least three changes in the forms of criminal violence in the neighborhoods of Barquisimeto during the period under review. The first has to do with the decline in homicides, the second with the incorporation of children into organizations engaged in micro-trafficking of drugs, and the third with the increase in property crimes. There has been a shift from thefts of luxury goods and burglaries in middle-class neighborhoods to thefts and burglaries inside homes in low-income neighborhoods; thefts of bags of food, gas cylinders, water tanks, other household goods, and telecommunications infrastructure owned by public and private companies.

## Reduction in homicide

In relation to the decrease in homicides, we identified a 98.76% reduction in the OP between 2018 and 2022. From 2018 to 2019, the percentage reduction was 39.7%, and from 2020 to 2021, it was 50.16%. As can be seen, the downward trend had already begun before COVID-19.



**Graph 2.**

Number of violent deaths recorded by the Press Observatory in 2018-2022

The state of Lara has not appeared on the list of federal entities with the highest rates of violent deaths in the country during the study period. In 2022, it ended up as the state with the lowest violent death rate, and between 2021 and 2018, it ranked between 19th and 21st out of the 23 states and the Capital District that together make up Venezuela's political territorial division.

**Table 1.**

National ranking of Lara state according to homicide rates

2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
20	22	21	19	24

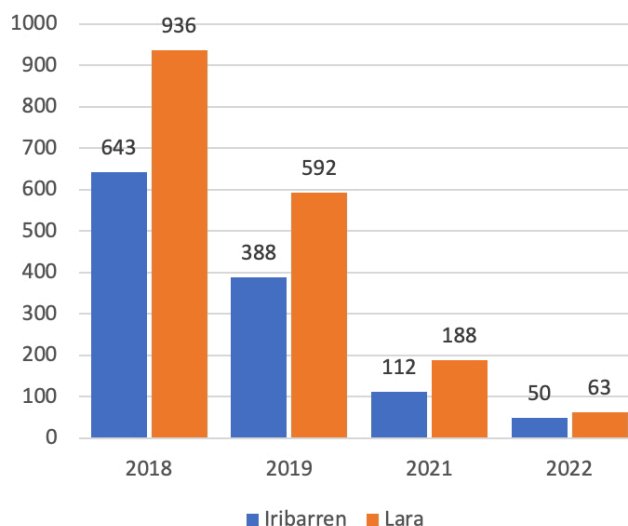
However, the municipality of Iribarren, the state capital, had appeared in the ranking of municipalities with the highest number of murders.

**Table 2.**

Ranking of the municipality of Iribarren among municipalities with the highest number of violent deaths

2019	2021	2022
8	7	27

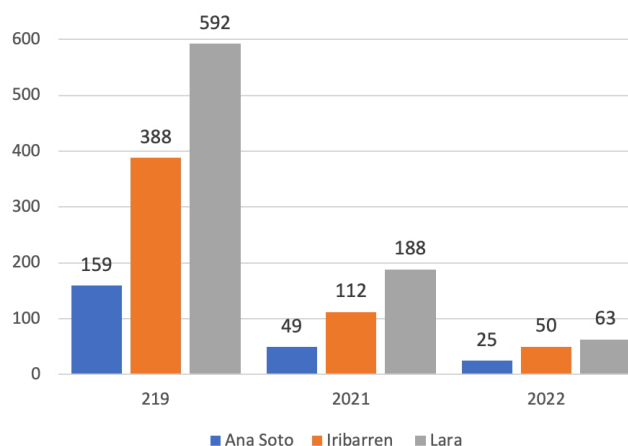
The municipality of Iribarren accounts for 56% of the state's total population and covers an area of 19,800 km<sup>2</sup> (INE, 2012), as well as more than 60% of the violent deaths recorded throughout the state, at least from 2018 to 2022 (OVV, 2022).



**Graph 3.**

Number of violent deaths in Lara and Iribarren 2018-2019-2021-2022

The concentration of urban dynamics in part of its territory, with the characteristics of inequality and population density that define Latin American cities, made this reality possible. As can be seen in the following comparative graph between the state and the municipality with the most unequal parish in the entity, there is a significant concentration of violent deaths in the Ana Soto parish, which has the highest density and inequality in the state.



**Graph 4.**

Number of violent deaths in the Ana Soto parish, Iribarren municipality, and Lara state (2019-2021-2022)



In relation to the macrosocial dimension, inequalities will persist; they will widen between the extremes but will be redefined among the lower-income majority, primarily as a result of the stagflation experienced since 2017. The scarcity of food and medicine, lack of income, and the collapse of public services leveled the state's inhabitants downwards. Within a five-year span, there was pronounced intraclass impoverishment across the popular and middle sectors of the country.

In the neighborhoods, the circulation of cash began to decrease. Furthermore, the lack of fuel reduced the possibility of using motorcycles and cars, which were traditionally employed to commit crimes in the parishes with high robbery rates.

Therefore, the national Gini Index, which had shown a significant reduction in the first 12 years of the century, versus the growing homicide rate that had tended to increase since the start of the new century, required a different focus. This is because the national decrease was not generalized. Consequently, while some families within traditionally high-crime sectors had been able to improve their living conditions through redistributive policies implemented since the beginning of the century, "notable differences emerged between those sectors that achieved higher levels of inclusion, stemming from their entry into the formal economy or access to institutional welfare networks, and those groups and individuals who have been left behind" (Antillano, 2016, p. 47).

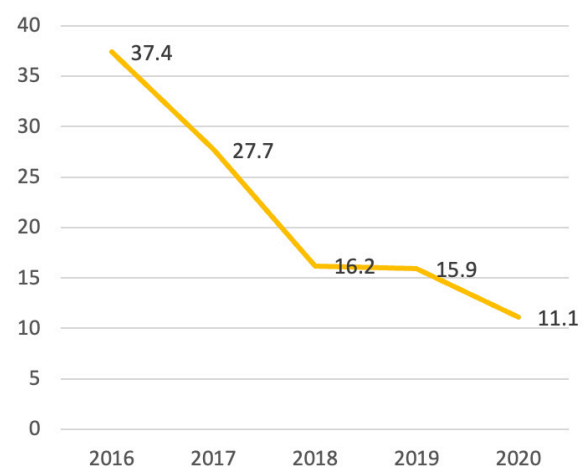
The difference between the employability of young people and adults is observed as another expression of these specific inequities between social groups. While older adults were able to access better sources of employment, young people did not find the same opportunities amidst increasing incomes and significant improvements for other population groups (Antillano, 2016). Therefore, crime had expanded throughout the first and part of the second decade of the 21st century.

However, from 2015 onwards, the urban context, in the sense of differentiation used by moderniza-

tion theories (Germani, Dos Santos, 1969), began to transform. Both migration and impoverishment modified the mesosocial conditions (Briceño-León, 2007). The ecology of population density ceased to be a source of conflict, and regardless of how effective the architecture of poor urbanity was for crime, the sheer degree of impoverishment coupled with the mass departure of hundreds of thousands of young people from the city meant that the violence was bound to change.

When asked about the shifts in violence in the La Carucieña community, one interviewee indicated (E5, personal interview, November 17, 2018): "Now you don't hear any shots because there are no malandros [criminals], they all left for Colombia and others are heading to Peru." During the crisis, young people found no outlet in the neighborhood for fulfilling their aspirations, not even through crime; consequently, they sought migration as the most expeditious way to continue their lives. In a context where inequalities began to be determined by the access, or lack thereof, to basic sustenance, delinquency adopted different characteristics.

Hence, homicide with intent to rob was reduced, and with it, the number of murders occurring in the poor neighborhoods of Iribarren municipality or on the streets and avenues of the city's urban centers, a trend corroborated by the Press Observatory (OP) data (OVV, 2020).



**Graph 5.**  
Percentage of types of criminal violence recorded in the Press Observatory 2016-2020

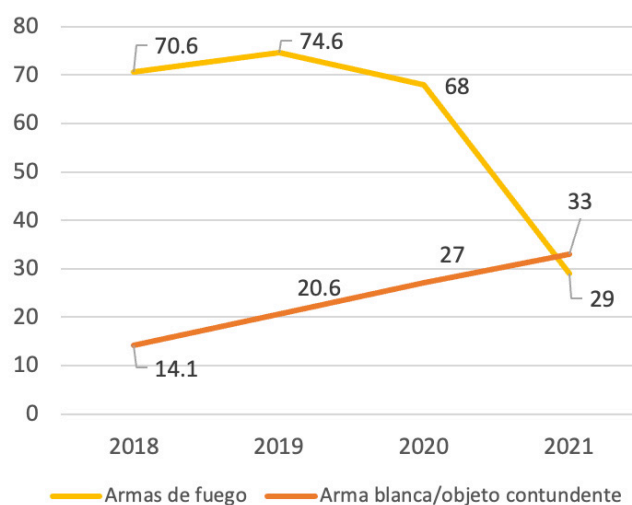
The disintegration of criminal gangs resulting from migration is understood as another factor contributing to the reduction in homicides. A community leader commented (E2, personal interview, November 13, 2018), "On a daily basis, they were retrieving up to three bodies here; the gangs were more dangerous in those days. Now they say most of the young men have gone to Colombia," describing the situation in Lomas de León in western Barquisimeto.

Historically, lethal violence has primarily involved young men from the city's poor neighborhoods as both victims and perpetrators. Faced with this organizational reality of crime, there was a centralized absorption of crime by mafias. The former are understood as organizations dedicated to robbery and extortion, while the latter represent a higher-level organizational type focused on offering protection to individuals and businesses (Briceño-León, 2015a).

Clashes in the popular neighborhoods of western and northern Barquisimeto mostly occurred between gangs composed of young men aged 15 to 29, who began to be affected by forced migration starting in 2015. "According to the first measurement of international emigration reported by households surveyed in ENCOVI 2017, it was estimated that virtually three out of five were aged between 15 and 29 years" (Acnur, Ucab, 2024).

The market for firearms and ammunition, representing a fundamental shift in the microsocial sphere, was also impacted. The overall depression of crime affected the supply of ammunition and weapons. Among the crimes reported by the press, there began to be a noticeable increase in the use of bladed weapons and/or blunt objects. This change proved pivotal in the decrease of fatal victims (Graph 6).

Other changes were observed in the sphere of urban delinquency. Although robbery driven by hunger was first identified in 2015 (OVV, 2016), it persisted through the pandemic years, manifested as robberies inside homes and on the streets of popular sectors. A young community leader



**Graph 6.**

Percentage of types of criminal violence recorded in the Press Observatory 2016-2020

commented (E6, personal interview, November 21, 2018): "For instance, with cable theft, the community here had to put bottles on all the cables. With those bottles, we now have a way to control it, because they had stolen the internet cables; we didn't have service, and we had to redo everything because CANTV [the state telecommunications company] told us to resolve it ourselves, and we had to buy the materials." This situation was widespread in the southwest of Barquisimeto.

The combined effects of inflation and scarcity, which pre-dated COVID-19, accelerated residential robbery and theft. While a decrease was registered in public transport robbery due to reduced pedestrian activity, people confined to their homes during the pandemic years remained prey to crime.

Famine-driven robbery and theft understood as the forceful or non-forceful subtraction of basic necessity goods, developed without any preventive policy response. Another interviewee reported (E2, personal interview, November 13, 2018): "A lady at the market had two kilos of chicken she was carrying stolen just recently."

Following the re-accommodation of crime during 2020, the fluctuation of offenses in 2021 became dependent on two factors: the increase in econo-



mic fluidity during certain months and the mobility of the new Venezuelan criminal profile, which involves displacement both within and outside the national territory.

According to data recorded by the OP, there was a significant increase in robbery and homicide for illicit gain starting in the last quarter of 2021. In the tenth month, 29% of recorded incidents were linked to organized crime, and 100% of the homicides were committed with the intention of robbery. By January, however, 4 out of every 10 homicides were motivated by robbery, and 17% of delinquent acts were linked to organized crime (OVV, 2021).

Another significant example of the correlation between the growth and fluidity of economic activity and the rise in crime is observed in robberies targeting transport systems. During the second semester of 2021, metropolitan Barquisimeto transporters began reporting an increase in robberies against their units, while in the early months of the same year, local press more commonly reported the theft of bicycles.

In addition to the structural violence suffered by older adults due to health neglect, the public service crisis, extreme income poverty, and the hardships faced in obtaining public benefits, lethal events against older adults were alarming in Lara state during the study years. Although they represented 10% of the total victims of violent acts registered in the OP, the high lethality rate evidenced a tragic reality (OVV, 2021b).

This pattern encapsulates a set of variables, one of which is the direct consequence of the Complex Humanitarian Crisis: the forced migration of Venezuelans, which has transformed the family structure in the country. Another variable to consider in explaining this phenomenon stems from the rise in robberies and thefts within residences. These crimes, in which older people are often victimized, are frequently typified as homicide with intent to rob.

## **Recruitment of Minors and Adolescents for Drug Micro-trafficking**

The control exerted by mafias has generated additional problems impacting the sustainability of the factors that perpetuate crime. Interviewees perceived a greater incorporation of children and adolescents into drug micro-trafficking organizations starting in 2018. As one interviewee stated (E3, personal interview, November 15, 2018): “There are people who sell drugs under the table; you see children selling and consuming drugs from a young age. The adults incite the children to consume the drug from small so they can then sell it to them...”

Among the most relevant causes identified by community organization representatives are school dropout, hunger, and the absence of parents who were forced to migrate. (E1, personal interview, November 10, 2018): “Many young people have stopped studying because of the violence, young people who don’t live with their family but live with their grandmother, and these young men have fallen into drugs, just as girls are prostituting themselves.”

Similarly, the pandemic years saw increased activity related to the trafficking, consumption, and micro-cultivation of psychotropic and narcotic substances. In addition to being a transit corridor for drugs, small marijuana fields were identified, alongside a heightened number of arrests of individuals engaged in drug micro-trafficking.

In the agricultural zones of Iribarren, Crespo, Parí, and Torres municipalities, traditionally destined for coffee, corn, or plantain cultivation, the planting of marijuana emerged. As stated in the World Drug Report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the pandemic situation and the impoverishment of people contributed to the cultivation of illegal plants. “The COVID-19 crisis has pushed more than 100 million people into extreme poverty and has greatly exacerbated unemployment and inequalities, as the world lost 255 million jobs in 2020” (UNODC, 2025).

## Shifts in Police Violence

The response provided by the Hugo Chávez government to the exacerbated violent mortality experienced during his years in office was what they termed penal punitivism, operationalized from 2009 through “massive invasions of neighborhoods and the detention of poor young males... Under penal punitivism, the intense increase in the prison population in a short period was noticeable: the number of incarcerated individuals rose from 30,483 to 50,000 between 2009 and 2011” (Zubillaga and Hanson, 2018, p. 61).

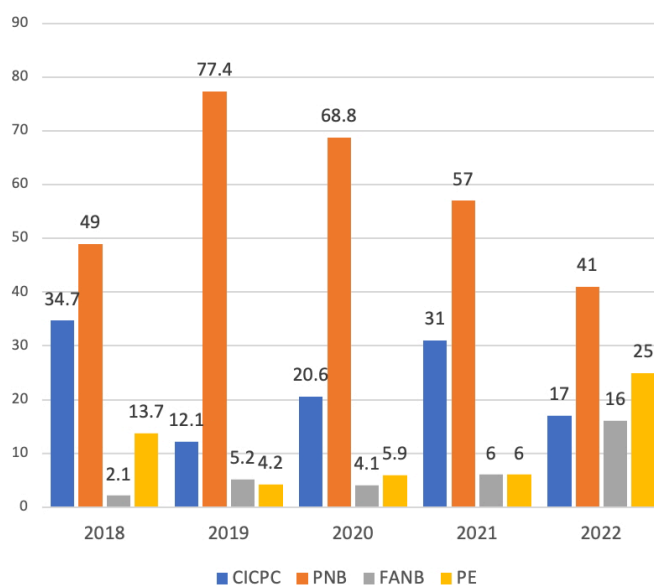
However, beginning in 2015 in the city of Barquisimeto, the Operation for the Liberation of the People (OLP), implemented during Nicolás Maduro’s first government, inaugurated a new phase of governmental anti-crime policy. This policy would evolve into what the same authors call criminal killing which was experienced with greater intensity in this west-central entity between 2018 and 2021.

One interviewee described the realities that were common in 2018 regarding violent relations in Barquisimeto’s popular neighborhoods (E1, personal interview, November 10, 2018): “Right now, the ones on duty are those hooded guys, the FAES [Special Action Force]. That’s why the young men are so afraid of them, because they are only there to kill.”

The rise of extrajudicial executions commenced with the arrival of FAES in 2018 until its temporary decrease in 2020 following demands made by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. During this period, police intervention was lethal, demonstrating cruelty and malice. This specialized unit, belonging to the Bolivarian National Police, carried out the vast majority of the killings and was involved in the violent incidents analyzed.

Although mass deaths categorized as “resistance to authority” decreased during the pandemic years, they remained higher than those committed by other causes. 54% of the fatal victims died at the hands of the police. All reported deaths were “justified” by the official discourse as “resistance to authority.” The official police reports

describe procedures that adhere to the law, but the versions provided by family members describe patterns that were institutionalized in police procedures over the last three years: subjugation, aggression, home invasion, torture, robbery, and subsequent execution (Meléndez and Salazar, 2022). This involves a reclassification of procedures to fit them into other criminal subtypes, as often occurs with torture being categorized under the subtype of injury.



**Graph 7.**

Law enforcement agency involved as perpetrator in the incident (percentage)  
OP 2018-2022

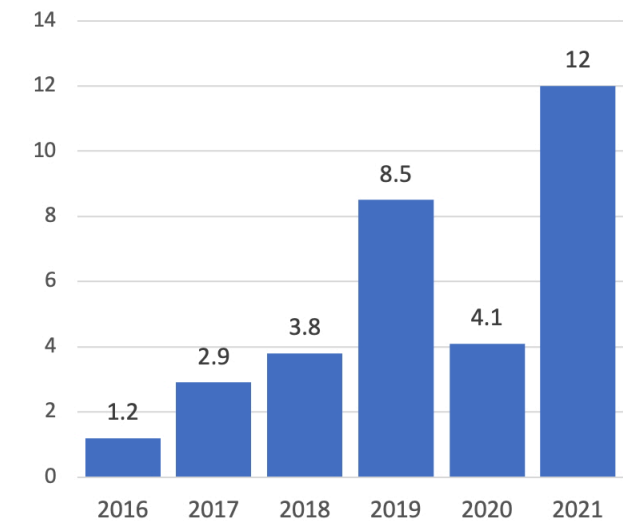
Just as intentional homicides committed by criminals are concentrated to a greater extent in Iribarren, the same is true of alleged deaths due to resistance to authority. The rate for the capital municipality was 6.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, meaning that 64% were carried out within its territory. At the parish level, the same is true, with Ana Soto and Tamaca accounting for 65% of the total.

The state’s capacity to guarantee public order was more violent during this period of the study. As happened in the country, the OLP will be the beginning of a policy of extermination that lasted until 2021, protected by a state of emergency decreed in 2017 and progressively justified by the onset of the pandemic.

In the first year of the coronavirus, the police took on the responsibility of confining people. In that year, there were numerous reports of excessive use of force to carry out this task. But this year, enforcement of the lockdown decreased during the second half of the year due to the increase in movement that we have already described. However, just as crime has adapted to these changes, so too has illegal police action. For example, through the media, associations of producers, traders, and other economic agents have denounced the constant extortion to which they are subjected on urban and extra-urban roads. The security forces also fought for power with armed actors not affiliated with the state.

### Changes in domestic violence

On the other hand, during the pandemic, domestic violence highlighted a problem that had been growing since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis. Socioeconomic factors such as hunger and unemployment, and sociopolitical factors such as the lack of protection for families by the state, and sociocultural factors such as machismo have led to an outbreak of violence against children, adolescents, and women, leaving lives in its wake (Meléndez, 2023b) and, in turn, placing children in a vulnerable position to be recruited into criminal organizations and girls to become part of child prostitution networks.



**Graph 8.**  
Percentage of domestic violence in Lara State, 2016–2021

Over five years, there was a 90% increase in domestic violence incidents. In 2021, 8% of homicides involved children and adolescents as victims. Violence against Children and Adolescents (NNA) in Lara state manifested in various forms during this study period. Insecurity risks varied widely in intensity and damage based on gender, age, parental presence in the home, and school enrollment status. Within the generalized precarity of poor families in the entity's urban sectors, there are inequities in the severity of structural violence.

The increasing incidence of female-headed households has led to an overburdening of care work and, in some cases, reduced parental presence at home due to the imperative need to seek income for food. This context of vulnerability characterizes the popular family, translating into forms of violence against vulnerable populations.

Violence against NNA existed prior to the pandemic; however, its frequency and intensity accelerated during this time. Torture, forced labor, sexual abuse, and induction to suicide were among the most severe forms of physical violence observed. The widespread violence suffered by NNA, including their significant victimization in human trafficking, is creating physical and psychological sequelae that prolong the risk of greater vulnerability and social violence. In the poorest and most unequal families in Lara, conditions are ripe for the generation of violent profiles at risk of being recruited by organized crime, thus sustaining criminality indicators in the medium and long term (Meléndez, 2023b).

By 2021, Children, Adolescents, and young people were ultimately suffering the impact of a prolonged crisis; they "did not even have the promise of a bright future; what they found was a country that subjected them to abandonment, hunger, insalubrity, school dropout, forced labor, and being victims of physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual abuse" (Castellanos, 2024, p. 247).

The State's institutional response in prevention and protection is nearly null, and when provided, it is often neither sustainable nor effective. Proce-

dural delays, the non-existence of social policies specifically targeting NNA, and inadequate reparations for violence cases are evidence of this institutional failure.

## Conclusions

The central objective of this investigation was to understand the dynamics of urban violence in the metropolitan area of Barquisimeto, Lara state, Venezuela, over the period from 2018 to 2024. This period witnessed a reconfiguration of the expression of violence, affecting different populations and, consequently, the quality of life and human freedoms.

The research reveals a direct and bidirectional relationship affecting violence dynamics in Barquisimeto. Violence, as a direct expression, generates the vulnerability of freedoms but is simultaneously a consequence of structural violence, which directly impacts the population's quality of life. Generally, the reconfigured violence in the city has manifested in distinct ways during this period, with the addition of institutional and domestic violence to the existing problematic.

Regarding quality of life, the observed intraclass impoverishment contributed to a reduction in violent deaths in the Iribarren municipality, which had previously concentrated the majority of this crime in the entity. This reflects a forced adaptation to the context shaped by the crisis. While inequalities persist and widen between extremes, they are being redefined among the lower-income majority, primarily due to the stagflation experienced from 2017 to 2021. Although the economy saw changes in the subsequent years until 2024, the structure of poverty and inequality has not been fundamentally altered. Forced migration expelled the population group—comprising both victims and perpetrators—that had previously driven the majority of violent deaths.

Security policy was mounted on the backdrop of this decrease in delinquent violence between 2018 and 2024. Both heavy-handed police actions and outright criminal actions targeting citizens served

to dilute the rule of law and deter through fear. Official authorities often attribute the crime reduction solely to implemented policies, when in reality it is a combination of various factors, and not precisely the result of “iron fist” approaches.

However, some structural elements of crime remain active in the entity: disengaged and unemployed children and youth, and young men within police institutions who are armed and socialized into state-constructed crime. Crime has reorganized into gangs dedicated to extortion, protection rackets, digital scams, and drug micro-trafficking. These organizations demonstrate a more rational use of violence. Since the reduction in crime has not been achieved through a comprehensive policy, its root causes have not been addressed. On the contrary, children and youth who are socialized amid increased family violence find no viable options in education or employment.

The manifestation of violence was reconfigured not only by the prolonged effects of a humanitarian crisis—which produces an increasingly impoverished population, migrating youth, and a deteriorated and dysfunctional public service system—but also by an unmanageable institutional breakdown. This latter element is structural: within security agencies, it is expressed as the minimal or nonexistent respect for human rights, with extrajudicial execution becoming a common phenomenon during the study period. This phenomenon had a particularly severe impact in Lara state, configuring itself as a constant and present element that affects quality of life and categorically restricts the freedoms and rights of citizens.

In relation to the limitations encountered during this study, the opacity of official data is paramount, as figures are not being consistently recorded in the region. Any research conducted must rely on information provided by other sources that collect verifiable data. It is important that future investigations delve deeper into how violence is being expressed within Venezuelan households and the manner in which it is affecting the youngest populations.

## Author contributions

**Carlos Meléndez Pereira:** Initial writing, conceptualization, methodology, analysis of results, final writing.

**Yelena Salazar:** Methodology, initial writing, final writing.

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