

PERRY CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPER

FEBRUARY 2024

Results of the Perry Center Threats Survey

By Patrick Paterson



**WILLIAM J.
PERRY CENTER**
FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES

National Defense University

Caption Cover Photo: Chilean Army firefighters, such as these deployed in February 2021, are frequently deployed internally as part of the Army’s Forest Fire Reinforcement Brigades (Brigadas de Refuerzo de Incendios Forestales del Ejército or BRIFE in Spanish) to assist the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) during fire seasons each summer. It is a non-traditional role of the Chilean armed forces, similar to what many other Latin American and Caribbean nations must address in a rapidly changing threat environment.

Photo credit: Chilean Army

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Introduction

Latin America is a paradox; the region hasn't had an inter-state conflict since the brief border skirmish between Ecuador and Peru in 1995, but it faces myriad complex security challenges that have turned Latin America into the most violent region of the world because of drug-fueled gangs, deeply entrenched levels of corruption, and rampant poverty.

Identifying the top threats in the region is challenging. There are a dizzying number of problems that require attention from Latin American and Caribbean governments that suffer from limited resources and restricted budgets. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, took the lives of over a million inhabitants in the region. The collapse of the Venezuelan society has forced seven million Venezuelans to flee the country, creating intense socio-economic pressure on neighboring nations. Cartel violence in Mexico has challenged state sovereignty in parts of the country. Crime waves in Brazil, Colombia, parts of Central America – and most recently Ecuador - require the governments to expend an immense amount of money to counter criminal activity, money that could better be spent on social and economic initiatives. Haiti continues to be a failed state, and security conditions are worsening in the wake of the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July 2022. Global warming is wreaking havoc across the region, generating drought conditions in Central and South America, causing forest fires, and producing more powerful Atlantic hurricanes.

These security challenges create difficult decisions for cash-strapped Latin American and Caribbean nations. Where do they put their limited resources in order to have the most effective impact on countering crime or other problems? What government agency should lead the effort to stop irregular threats such as cybercrime, corruption, and illegal immigration? How does the government optimize security responses across the interagency?

This article shares the results of the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies threats survey conducted in late 2022. The survey generated almost 650 responses from Perry Center graduates who selected from 35 threats in the Americas. The results illuminate how leading Latin American and Caribbean scholars – particularly those who work in the security and defense field – see the conditions in the Americas and can help inform policy makers and scholars who follow events in the Americas.

The article begins by examining what are *not* considered major problems in the region. It also lists the responses that were surprising in light of what some may consider conventional thought on security challenges. The report concludes with a detailed examination of the top five security threats in Latin America and the Caribbean according to those surveyed.

Survey Design and Methodology

The 2022 survey was launched in October 2022, distributed online via Perry Center mailing groups,

and ran for 30 days.¹ Over 650 participants from 26 countries responded to the question, “What are the most dangerous security threats in the Western Hemisphere?” Respondents were asked to select no more than three threats that they believed represented the most serious security concerns in the region. The list of 35 threats was developed by the author with inputs provided by Perry Center faculty and other regional and global threat surveys. The threats were listed alphabetically in Spanish. The survey was distributed through the Perry Center alumni networks managed by the Perry Center Outreach office. The full report with the number of responses and percentage of respondents for all 35 options is provided in Appendix 1 at the back of this report.

What is not considered a security threat?

Inter-state conflicts (1%)

There has not been an inter-state conflict in the Western Hemisphere since the brief 1995 Cenepa War between Peru and Ecuador. In fact, from a perspective of international humanitarian law, Latin America presents a conundrum: there hasn’t been an international armed conflict since the Cenepa War, and only one country has an ongoing non-international armed conflict (Colombia). Despite that, the militaries are used widely across the hemisphere in domestic security operations and law enforcement because of the levels of crime and violence in many communities. The differences between military and police use of force rules are different in important ways, creating a blurred battlefield in which soldiers have to know police tactics and police forces are often militarized.²



Caption: Latin America hasn’t had an inter-state conflict between two countries since the 1995 Cenepa War between Peru and Ecuador yet the region remains the deadliest in the world. In this photo, military forces from Ecuador are armed and ready for confrontations with their Peruvian opponents.

Credit: Centro Andino de Estudios Estratégicos (CENAE)

Many of the recent territorial disputes have been resolved through international organizations such as the World Court, which has arbitrated thorny cases between Nicaragua and Colombia, Peru and Chile, and Bolivia and Chile. In a by-gone time, these confrontations had a good chance of causing an armed conflict between the parties. Many observers are watching the dispute between Venezuela and Guyana

¹ Perry Center’s Sydney Knapp and Raul Neine were instrumental in designing and implementing the 2022 Threats Survey.

² Patrick Paterson, *The Blurred Battlefield: The Perplexing Conflation of Humanitarian and Criminal Law in Contemporary Conflicts*, Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), Tampa, FL. March 2021. ISBN 978-1-941715-50-5.

with anxiety; a World Court decision that may cede half of Guyanese national territory to Venezuela is expected in 2025.³

The United States (0%)

According to the 2022 threats survey, the United States is not seen as a threat to most Latin American countries. Only two of the nearly 650 respondents indicated that the United States was a problem for security in the region. This may be because of a combination of factors. United States soft power is a strong attraction to other countries who admire the quality of life and security in the States and appreciate the immense amount of foreign assistance doled out through United States benevolent programs. That said, the role of the United States as a regional hegemon deserves careful scrutiny so policy makers understand the historical legacy of U.S. assistance (or interference) in Latin American and Caribbean nations.⁴

Relations between Mexico and the United States continue to be tense over fentanyl trafficking and the Mexican drug war, not necessarily surprising considering that the two countries share the most heavily trafficked border in the world and have a long history of enmity that dates back to the 19th century.⁵ Much of this depends on who is in the White House, of course.⁶ The executive branch of the U.S. government enjoys a disproportionate amount of influence on U.S. foreign policy and U.S. military strategy despite the system of separation of powers baked into the U.S. Constitution.⁷

³ Ivelaw Lloyd Griffith, “The Guyana-Venezuela Waiting Game,” William J. Perry Center Regional Insights, October 2022.

⁴ From 2016 to 2022, the U.S. fell nearly 20 positions on the Fragile States Index; see <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>. The U.S. also fell in rankings in the “Freedom in the World” report from Freedom House (see <https://freedomhouse.org/>) and in the Corruption Perceptions Index from Transparency International (see <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/usa>). For more on the internal problems in the United States, see Patrick Paterson (2023), “La Más Grande Amenaza De Seguridad Interna Para Estados Unidos,” *Revista Política y Estrategia*, National Academy of Strategic and Political Studies (ANEPE).

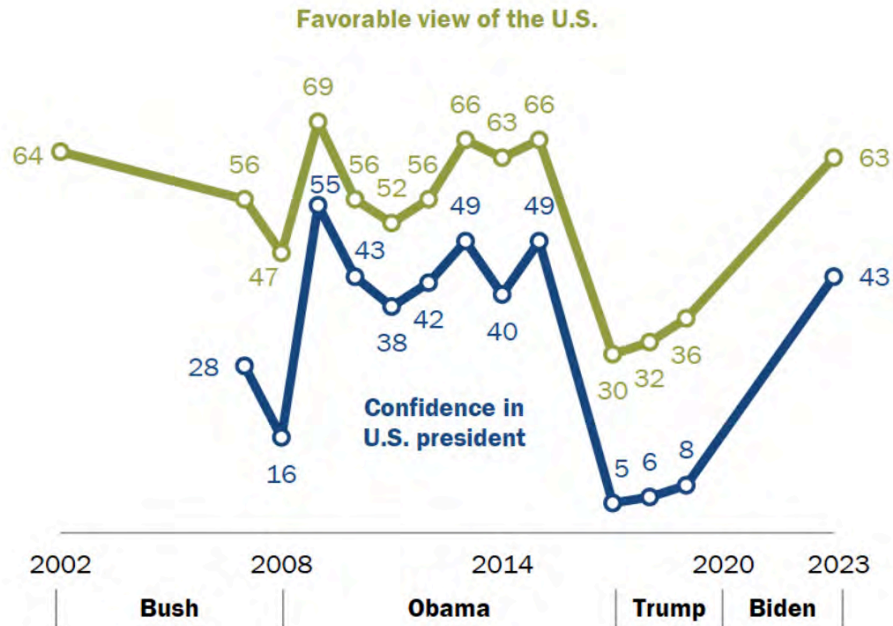
⁵ Niha Masih and Mary Beth Sheridan, “Mexico’s president rebukes GOP push to use U.S. military against cartels,” *Washington Post*, March 10, 2023.

⁶ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, Moira Fagan, Sarah Austin and Jordan Lippert, “International Views of Biden and U.S. Largely Positive,” *Pew Research Center*, June 27, 2023; Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, “America’s Image Abroad Rebounds With Transition From Trump to Biden,” *Pew Research Center*, June 10, 2021; Joe Davidson, “U.S. international image rebounds with Biden reversing Trump policies,” *Washington Post*, August 11, 2023.

⁷ Patrick Paterson, *Orígenes de la Política Exterior de EEUU*, Editorial Académica Española (October 3, 2018), ISBN: 6202167602, 24-26.

Ratings of U.S. and its president rebound in Mexico

% in Mexico who have (a) ...



Source: Spring 2023 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3a & Q15a.
 "International Views of Biden and U.S. Largely Positive"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Caption: Mexican public opinion approval rates of U.S. Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden.
Credit: Pew Research Center

Weapons of Mass Destruction (4%)

Nuclear weapons are not a concern for most Latin Americans or Caribbeans since the Treaty of Tlatelolco, an international treaty that denuclearized the region, was ratified in 1968. All 34 Latin American and Caribbean nations have ratified and complied with the treaty. Nonetheless, it is on the radar of some Perry Center graduates because four percent of them marked it as a security concern.

Scholars and diplomats who track nuclear arms are watching Antarctica with some trepidation. The 1961 Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) banned military activity in the region but is set to expire in 2048. The continent has plenty of vital minerals that might trigger a conflict among nuclear powers hungry for natural resources. The proximity of Antarctica to the South American continent may result in changes to nuclear arms policy in the governments of the hemisphere.



Caption: Presidents Obama and Raul Castro shake hands during the Summit of the Americas in Panama City, Panama in April 2015, part of a broader effort to normalize relations between the two Western Hemisphere countries.

Credit: White House and photographer Pete Souza

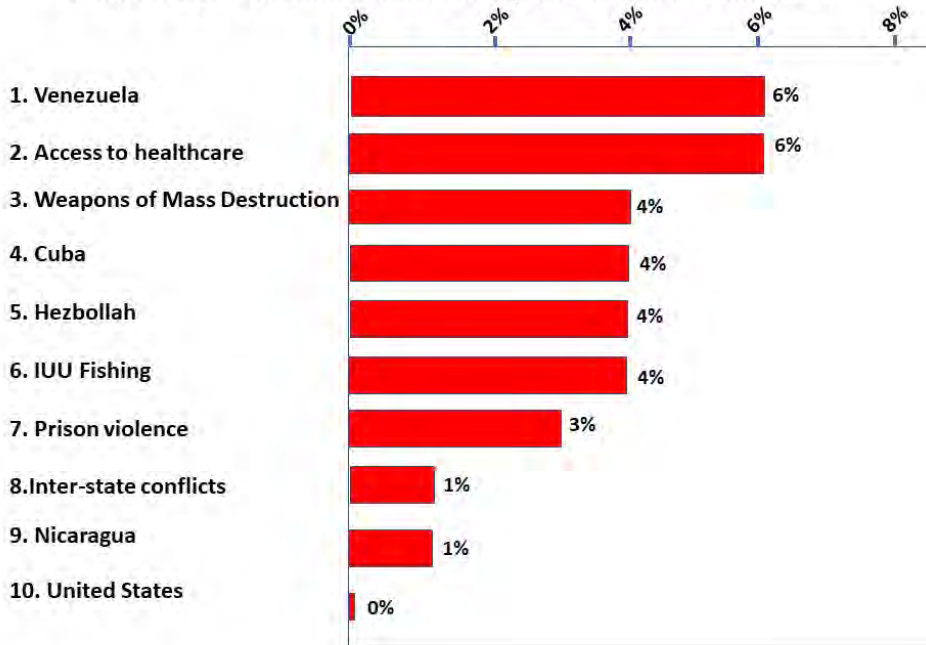
Cuba (4%)

The largest Caribbean nation is generally not perceived as a threat in the region; only four percent of survey respondents marked it as a source of danger. This may be a surprise to some in light of Cuba’s sponsorship of authoritarian factions in other countries and its history of supporting Fidel Castro’s *foco* strategy to encourage rural insurgencies that could foment communist uprisings and overthrow the right-wing leaders of Latin American governments. On March 1, 1982, Cuba was declared a “State Sponsor of Terrorism,” a designation overseen by the U.S. Department of State.⁸ Only Syria, North Korea, and Iran have received that notorious title.

The reason why Cuba is not currently perceived as a danger could be for two reasons: first, the island nation is in tough economic conditions with high inflation rates, shortages of basic goods, and sluggish economic performance and has little discretionary funds to be a threat to anyone. Second, the era of Fidel and Raul Castro has passed and hardline leftists such as Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales have also passed on or been disenfranchised. This assessment may be an underestimation of Havana’s ability to sow discord in the Americas, particularly in light of its support for the Maduro regime in Venezuela.

⁸ When the Obama administration sought to normalize relations with Cuba in 2015, and as part of a lengthy review process, Cuba was removed from the list on May 29, 2015. However, on January 12, 2021, under the Trump administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo placed Cuba back on the list, citing the country’s long support of terrorist and insurgent groups. Cuba is the only Latin American country to ever be on the United States’ State Sponsors of Terrorism list. See <https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/>

What is NOT considered a security threat in the Americas



Graph caption: Ten problems that were not considered security threats according to survey respondents.

Credit: created by author

What surprised us?

Natural disasters (11%)

The threat of natural disasters did not seem to register for many Latin Americans or Caribbeans who responded to the survey. Only eleven percent considered the frequent natural catastrophes that afflict the area to be a major security threat. This was a surprise in that the death toll from the top ten earthquake, volcano, and hurricane events in the 19th and 20th century took in excess of 638,000 lives, more than all the armed conflicts in the region combined.⁹

Threats from natural disasters in the Americas come in many different forms. Earthquakes strike many of the Pacific nations situated on fault lines by the “ring of fire,” the circle of active seismic and volcanic areas that encircle the world’s largest ocean. Readers may be surprised to learn that some of the deadliest volcanic eruptions have not occurred in Guatemala, Ecuador, or Peru but in islands in the Caribbean.¹⁰ Chile, however, retains the record of the largest earthquake ever recorded, a massive 9.5 quake on the Richter scale that hit the country in 1960.

It is possible that the survey respondents ranked natural disasters low because of so many other serious security issues that take higher priority. But eleven percent of responses place natural disasters in company with illegal migration, socioeconomic exclusion, water insecurity, and critical infrastructure, serious threats for sure but ones that normally don’t have the social or economic consequences that natural disasters deliver.

⁹ The deadliest armed conflict between two countries in Latin American history is the Chaco War (1932-35) between Paraguay and Bolivia that cost 100,000 lives.

¹⁰ The Mount Pelée volcanic eruption in Martinique in 1902 took 28,000 lives. The La Soufrière volcano in St. Vincent and Grenadines erupted as recently as 2021.

Pandemics (12%)

Coming in the wake of the three-year COVID-19 pandemic that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants in Latin America and the Caribbean, the low response rate to pandemics as a threat (12 percent) was surprising. Latin America and the Caribbean registered more than one million deaths from COVID-19, 26 percent of the world total despite having only eight percent of the world's population. The hardest hit countries were Peru, which had the highest rate per capita of COVID deaths in the Western Hemisphere, followed closely by Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina.¹¹

The disproportionate amount of suffering in the Americas is representative of the underlying social and economic problems in the region. As measured by the Gini coefficient, Latin America and the Caribbean are the most economically unequal regions in the world with vast gaps between the rich and the poor. The pandemic also exposed institutional weaknesses among Latin American health and economic programs. Wealthy Latin Americans, of course, had more financial resiliency to withstand the economic shock that came with business shutdowns whereas others in the region who had little to no savings were forced into a daily struggle to survive.

COVID-19 is, of course, not the only pandemic to strike the Americas in the past few decades. The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV), the Zika virus, and the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) also have caused dramatic consequences to the region. However, COVID-19 was the worst in the past 100 years.¹² Governments throughout the hemisphere should take the lessons accrued from the past three years to repair the gaps they identified in their responses.

China (13%) and Russia (8%)

Following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin and Russian forces, many of the European and North Atlantic observers saw the conflict as more than just an armed conflict between two nations but as a test for the international liberal order. Recall that Putin's aggression follows a series of attacks against other sovereign territory, part of an ambitious expansion effort to restore the glory of the former Soviet Union.¹³

The United States sees China and Russia as much bigger threats than most Latin American or Caribbean nations. Among the survey participants, only thirteen percent said China and eight percent said Russia were serious security threats. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) which guides military, economic, and diplomatic action in the United States describes a strategic competition with China and Russia that will determine the future of the international system. The NSS describes the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the "only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international

¹¹ Mark P. Sullivan and Peter J. Meyer, "Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19," Congressional Research Service (CRS), December 06, 2022. Link: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11581.pdf>, accessed March 14, 2023.

¹² The Spanish influenza in 1918 was estimated to have killed 17 million to 50 million people around the world.

¹³ Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, seized the Crimean peninsula in 2014, and invaded the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine in 2019. Both Crimea and the Donbas region are part of the sovereign territory of Ukraine.

order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.” As the Commander of the U.S. Southern Command stated during Congressional testimony in March 2023, the main priority of the joint headquarters that oversees military cooperation with Latin American and Caribbean partners is to “expose and mitigate PRC malign activity.”¹⁴ Russia, on the other hand, does not have the geopolitical reach as the PRC but serves “an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability.”¹⁵ Another former commander of the U.S. Southern Command stated that Putin uses propaganda, military arms, and equipment sales to contest U.S. influence in the region.¹⁶

Within the Americas, the competition for the world order depends on what countries will support each of the three aspiring world powers. The United States, the world’s largest economy and military, depends on its global network of alliances to check the aggression of both China and Russia. Each of the 34 countries in the Western Hemisphere are increasingly pressured to decide if they will support authoritarian forces that show little respect for the human rights of individuals or if they prefer to support the liberal democratic order. China has cracked down on civil and political liberties, limited internet services that are critical of PRC action, stolen intellectual property, and established a police state to prevent the development of individual human rights. Putin has been accused of murdering Russian dissidents, imprisoning political opponents after sham trials, and colluding with rogue nations such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria.



Caption: China’s President Xi Jinping, his wife Peng Liyuan, Panama’s President Juan Carlos Varela and first lady Lorena Castillo pose for a picture at the Cocoli locks during a visit to the expanded Panama Canal, in Panama City, Panama, December 3, 2018.

Credit: REUTERS/Carlos Jasso

¹⁴ Commander, U.S. Southern Command General Laura Richardson, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, March 8, 2023. Link: https://democrats-armedservices.house.gov/?a=Files.Serve&File_id=94371221-738B-45D3-AE23-A967ECBE8087

¹⁵ U.S. National Security Strategy, October 2022. Link: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

¹⁶ Julia Gurganus, “John Kelly: Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America”, May 03, 2018, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Link: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>

Extraregional actors have found prominent allies in Latin America and the Caribbean. President Daniel Ortega, for example, in the midst of his own authoritarian power grab in Nicaragua, voted against condemning Putin’s aggression in the United Nations General Assembly on February 23, 2023. Ortega joined other pariah states (e.g., Belarus, Syria, and North Korea) in condoning Putin’s aggression.¹⁷ Likewise, the number of Latin American states that support Taiwan political autonomy over Beijing’s aggressive attempts to subvert Taiwan’s independence has dropped. Taiwan has lost five allies in the last few years: Panama (2017), El Salvador (2018), the Dominican Republic (2018), Nicaragua (2021), and Honduras (2023). Only about seven of 34 nations in the Western Hemisphere follow Washington’s policy of supporting Taiwan’s right to self-government: Paraguay, Guatemala, Haiti, Belize, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Lucia (as of September 2023).

In Beijing, Chinese authorities are watching the war in Ukraine closely as they calculate the potential costs of a military seizure of Taiwan. If Russian actions are broadly condemned by the international community of nations and international institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) are able to bring Putin to justice for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, it will send a clear signal to the Chinese capital. On the other hand, countries that don’t support the economic sanctions or arms and technology embargoes against Russia dilute the effectiveness of the international community’s response.

Climate change (31%)

Almost one in every three respondents (31%) considered climate change one of the top security threats in the region. But concern for the rapidly worsening meteorological conditions around the planet was expected to be higher. Climate change represents the greatest challenge humankind has ever faced.¹⁸ The U.S. National Security Strategy of October 2022, for example, warns, “Of all the shared threats that we face, climate change may be the most dangerous and potentially existential.”¹⁹

Global average temperatures have already surged more than 1.1 degrees Celsius since the pre-Industrial Revolution period in the 19th century. Worsening conditions seem to have accelerated in the past 50 years as the world population surges toward 11 billion by 2100. 2023 was the hottest in human history and the World Meteorological Organization predicts the next five years will be even hotter, in part because of the return of El Niño in the Pacific Ocean.²⁰

¹⁷ Jared Gans, “These 6 countries sided with Russia in UN vote on Ukraine war,” The Hill, February 23, 2023. Link: <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3871761-these-6-countries-sided-with-russia-in-un-vote-on-ukraine-war/>. Accessed March 13, 2023.

¹⁸ The World Economic Forum’s Global Risks 2023 lists the top four long-term (10 years) threats to all be climate change-induced: (1) failure to mitigate climate change, (2) failure of climate-change adaption, (3) natural disasters and extreme weather events; and (4) biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse. Source: Global Risks 2023, World Economic Forum, Link: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf

¹⁹ U.S. National Security Strategy, October 2022. Link: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

²⁰ World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 17 May 2023. Source: <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/global-temperatures-set-reach-new-records-next-five-years>

Scientists have warned of the cascading effects of temperatures for decades, each tenth of a degree of warming triggering other climatological or meteorological events.²¹ At the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) in Paris, December 2015, IPCC scientists warned that humanity should do everything in its power to prevent the planet from crossing 1.5 degrees Celsius. In 2018, the IPCC scientists warned in a special report that conditions were worsening and insufficient action had been taken by most countries in the world. In October 2022, in its latest assessment report, the IPCC warned the planet had already reached 1.1 degrees Celsius and was on track to cross the dangerous red line of 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030. In an extremely dire assessment, scientists warned humanity that it was also on track to hit 3.2 degrees Celsius by 2100, conditions that would probably lead to an extinction level event for the human race.

Latin America and the Caribbean are no strangers to natural disasters. Most parts of the Caribbean and Central America are threatened by Atlantic Ocean hurricanes that appear from May to November each year. Climate change is forecast to make major hurricanes (category 3, 4, and 5) more common in the area, but not more frequent. That is, hurricanes will not occur more often but those that do will be larger and more destructive.²² Since 90 percent of increased global temperatures are absorbed by the oceans, the waters of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico have increased to record temperatures. Warmer water can carry more water vapor and subsequently hurricanes in the future will drop an average of 10-15 percent more rain.²³ Storms are also predicted to rapidly intensify as a result of higher water temperatures. In October 2023, for example, Tropical Storm Otis exploded from a tropical storm to a category 5 hurricane in 12 hours, just before it made landfall near Acapulco, Mexico.²⁴

²¹ Other types of natural disasters could be geophysical (earthquakes, volcanoes), biological (pandemics or insect infestations), or anthropogenic (man-made accidents such as chemical spills, industrial accidents, and plane or ship accidents).

²² IPCC 6th Assessment Report (AR6), 2021, link: https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg1/IPCC_AR6_WGI_FullReport.pdf; see also U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), <https://www.gfdl.noaa.gov/global-warming-and-hurricanes/#global-warming-and-atlantic-hurricanes>

²³ IPCC 6th Assessment Report (AR6), 2021, link: https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg1/IPCC_AR6_WGI_FullReport.pdf; see also U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), <https://www.gfdl.noaa.gov/global-warming-and-hurricanes/#global-warming-and-atlantic-hurricanes>

²⁴ Matthew Cappucci and Jason Samenow, “How Hurricane Otis stunned forecasters with its leap to a Category 5,” *Washington Post*, 25 October 2023; For more on this theme, see Patrick Paterson, “Caribbean Sub-Regional HADR Response Efforts in Hurricane Season 2017,” William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies Regional Insights, April 2020.



Caption: Hurricane Otis in October 2023 became the largest Pacific Cyclone to make landfall in Mexico. It demonstrated a classic climate change effect when it rapidly intensified from a tropical storm to a category 5 major hurricane in just 12 hours.

Credit: Al Dialogo, Mexico

According to the World Bank, 17 million people could be forced to abandon their homes because of climate change problems such as hurricanes, droughts, and floods. Nearly 5.8 million Latin American and Caribbean citizens could fall into extreme poverty by 2030, as climate change reduces access to safe drinking water and increases vulnerability to excessive heat and flooding.²⁵

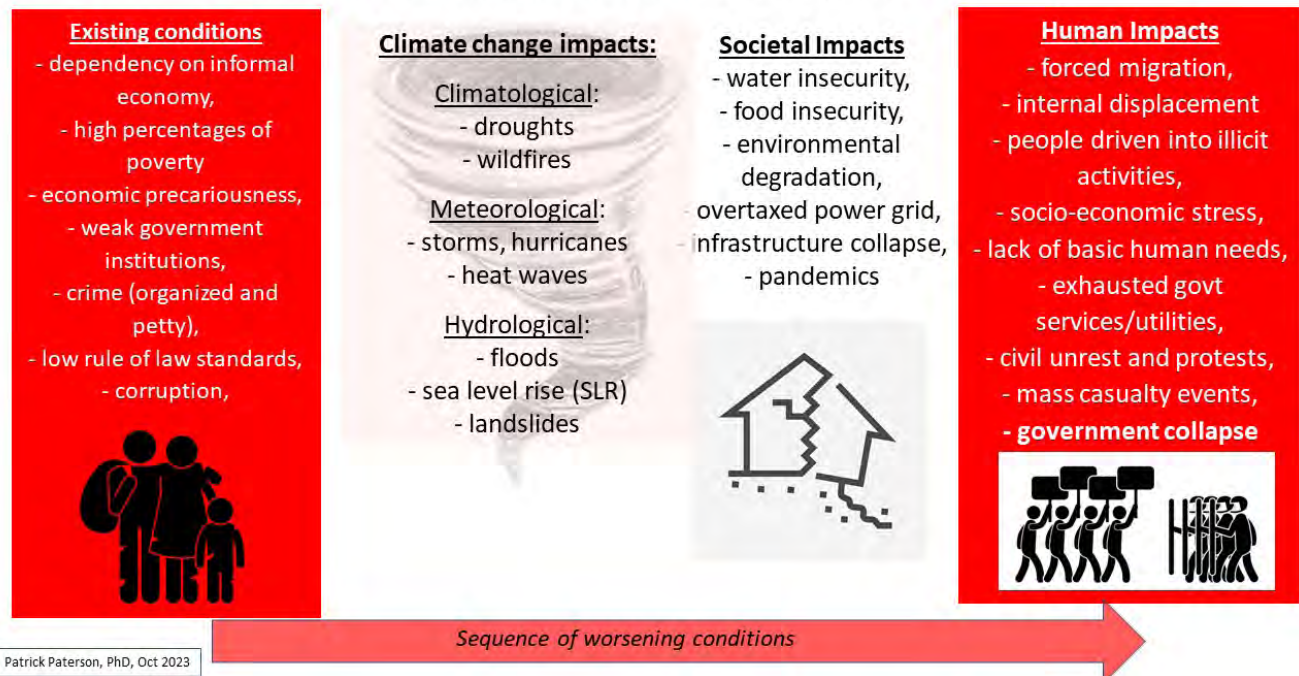
Rapidly warming temperatures produce climatological disasters. Forest fires have recently ravaged areas of Chile, Brazil, and Canada. Fishing stocks and biodiversity losses may trigger food security problems. Andean glaciers, the source of fresh water for thousands of South Americans, are rapidly disappearing. Ice caps in the North and South Poles are melting and may contribute to 1.0 meter of sea level rise by 2100. It's a slow motion, but dangerous condition that threatens coastal communities, government installations, and infrastructure. Unfortunately, sea level rise will continue for centuries because of the amount of heat absorbed the world's oceans.²⁶

However, of all the natural disasters linked to climate change, droughts impact the largest number of victims. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), droughts affect 53 million inhabitants of Latin America and the Caribbean each year. Nations in Central America and the Southern Cone of South America, in particular, are suffering extensively from mega-droughts. A 13-year drought in Central America has driven tens of thousands of farmers to abandon their farms. In the cities of Montevideo, Uruguay and Santiago, Chile, low levels of rain and fresh water supplies have forced governments to declare states of emergency and institute water rationing. Sao Paulo, Brazil, the most populated city in the hemisphere with 25 million inhabitants, almost ran out of water in 2014 and 2015.

²⁵ The World Bank in Latin America and the Caribbean. Link: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/lac/overview>

²⁶ IPCC AR6 Synthesis report (19 March 2023), section B.3.1. Also see NOAA Climate.gov graph, adapted from Sweet et al., 2022.

How climate change causes insecurity and instability



Graph caption: How climate change causes insecurity and instability

Credit: Created by author

The top five security threats in the Americas

The next section addresses the top five security threats in the Americas according to the nearly 650 participants in the public poll.

5. The 5th biggest threat - democratic backsliding (41%)

After remarkable democratic progress in the 1990s, Latin America and Caribbean nations are experiencing backsliding in which civil and political liberties are reduced in their countries. The region is suffering through a crisis of confidence in democracy. In most countries, according to Americas Barometer, less than half of the population trusts elections.²⁷

According to democracy literature, there are numerous factors that make up a healthy, representative democracy: the freedom to join and form organizations; the freedom of expression; the right to vote; all citizens are eligible for public office; voters have access to alternative sources of information; free and fair elections; and, last, that government institutions make policies dependent on public votes and other expressions of preference.²⁸ According to Robert Dahl, those are the fundamental elements of a democratic system though there are many other important factors such as judicial independence, an active civil society, accountability, transparency, and a system of separation of powers so that the executive, legislative, and judicial branches do not have unilateral decision making authority.²⁹

²⁷ Mark Grujic, “Spotlight on Trust in Elections in the Latin America and Caribbean region,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, September 2022.

²⁸ Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 233.

²⁹ Dahl, *Ibid.*

Within the Americas, representative democracy has retreated most notably in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega has jailed political opponents, attacked democratic protesters, refused to implement election reforms proposed by the Organization of American States (OAS), and shuttered civil society groups. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele followed a similar playbook but in this case used the supermajority that his political party enjoyed in the Salvadoran Congress to pack the courts with loyalists, declare states of emergency to crack down on gang violence, block initiatives that would have illuminated corruption and government abuses, and lift limits on presidential terms, the latter a blatant attempt to remain in power in perpetuity.³⁰

Understanding public support for democracy in Latin America is a test of nuances. In a majority of countries, citizens believe that democracy is the best form of government. At the same time, according to Latinobarometro, there is a broad frustration with representative democracy. In over half of the countries surveyed, 75 percent of the respondents were dissatisfied, particularly in Peru and Ecuador which have suffered through multiple disruptions of governments in the past few years. That is to say, Latin Americans are not happy with the quality of democracy and the civil services it is expected to provide. Basic political liberties were considered well provided – freedom of speech, voting processes, and property rights, for example – but economic opportunity, personal security, and equitable wealth distribution were not regularly delivered, according to respondents to the public opinion polls.³¹ In the words of Americas Barometer, Latin Americans are committed to democracy but may not believe their country is living up to democratic ideals.³²

Long-time Latin American scholars Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán contend there are three main reasons that democratic improvements – referred to as the “liberalization” of democracy – have remain under-developed in Latin America. First, powerful interest groups such as authoritarian factions and organized crime have prevented political improvements from occurring. This shields executive authorities from scrutiny and from having their privileges curtailed. It can also inhibit accountability mechanisms for corrupt officials. Second, dissatisfaction with democracy permits populists to get elected often times through undemocratic practices such as rigged elections or corrupt judicial bodies who vote to support unscrupulous political practices. Third, the undeveloped government institutions that suffer from inadequate resources often result in “hybrid states,” a mix of bureaucratic efficiency and authoritarianism that can be manipulated to benefit illegitimate leaders. The result, as Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán put it, is democratic stagnation in Latin American countries.³³

³⁰ According to public opinion polls, Bukele is leading all candidates for the February 4, 2024 presidential elections. In October 2023, he announced that he would run for re-election even though the Salvadoran constitution prohibits consecutive terms. The top court in the country, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, has ruled that he is able to run for a second term.

³¹ U.S. Department of State, office of Opinion Research, “Latin Americans Committed to Democracy Despite Flaws,” Sept 20, 2023.

³² Mark Grujic, “Spotlight on Support for Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, July 2022. Also see Americas Barometer, “LAPOP’s Americas Barometer takes the Pulse of Democracy,” 2021. Link: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2021/2021_LAPOP_AmericasBarometer_2021_Pulse_of_Democracy.pdf

³³ Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, “Why Latin America’s Democracies are Stuck,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol 34, no. 1, January 2023, 157.

The democratic backsliding seen in many Latin American countries is not a phenomenon unique only to the Western Hemisphere. The U.S.-based thinktank Freedom House reports that democracy has retreated for 17 consecutive years across the globe.³⁴ Military coups in Africa, the Saudi Arabian government murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Russia's naked aggression in Ukraine, and China's threats to curtail Taiwan's political autonomy illustrate how autocrats have sought to roll back democratic practices in many countries. Even the United States, to some countries the model of civil and political rights for individuals, almost experienced a self-coup when former President Trump cajoled followers to attack the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 and disrupt the certification of states' votes during the 2020 presidential cycle.³⁵ In the opinions of some U.S. citizens, the political divisions in the United States between Republicans and Democrats brought the country to the brink of civil war.³⁶



Photo caption: Impoverished families in Mexico struggle to make ends meet in a country that is the world's 12th largest economy (by GDP) but in which almost 42 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

Credit: Borgen Magazine

4. The 4th biggest threat: Poverty and Inequality (47%)

According to nearly half the respondents, one of the top threats to Latin America and the Caribbean is poverty and inequality. The recent economic downturns attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic that raged through the area from 2020 to 2022 have destroyed years of economic achievements. As Latin

³⁴ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2023," Link: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf

³⁵ The election results were challenged in more than 60 lawsuits but federal judges (many of them appointed by Trump) rejected the allegations of election fraud. The U.S. Attorney General, William Barr, told Trump there were no irregularities. The top leadership in the Department of Justice refused to publicly denounce the election integrity without evidence of any problems and then threatened to resign en masse if the president placed a pliant follower in the top spot at Justice. A week after the election, Trump's Cybersecurity Chief at the Department of Homeland Security, Chris Krebs, publicly announced that the elections were the safest ever conducted in the country. He was promptly fired. The National Intelligence Council, comprised of the top intelligence organizations in the country, determined that there were no technical interference with the 2020 elections though Russian President Putin attempted to conduct "information operations" that would help Donald Trump and undermine Joe Biden. On February 22, 2021, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the chance to hear challenges from Trump's lawyers on election fraud, indicating that there were not sufficient grounds to contest the vote.

³⁶ Meryl Kornfield and Mariana Alfaro, "1 in 3 Americans say violence against government can be justified, citing fears of political schism, pandemic," Washington Post, 01 January 2022; Philip Bump, "Most Trump voters see civil war as somewhat likely within a decade," Washington Post, August 29, 2022.

Americans went into quarantine, millions also fell into poverty. Economies in the region contracted on average 6 to 7 percent.³⁷ The global pandemic killed more than one million Latin Americans, more per capita than any other region of the world. Scholars estimate that the crisis undid more than two decades of development in the region.³⁸

The pandemic destroyed significant economic progress that had been made in the past twenty years. According to the UN, 42 percent of the population (214 million) lived in poverty in 2002. By 2013, this percentage had fallen to 24 percent (142 million); 72 million people in the region escaped living in poverty. The rise of the middle class increased from 108 million people in 2002 (21 percent of the population) to 202 million people in 2013. Better and more consistent income associated with middle class wages represents better access to healthcare, better education, less economic marginalization, better upward mobility, lower unemployment rates, and more skilled workers.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (*La Comisión Económica para América Latina* (CEPAL) in Spanish) reported that by the end of 2022, poverty stood at 32.1 percent of the population (a percentage equivalent to 201 million people) and extreme poverty at 13.1 percent (82 million), which points to a slight decline in overall poverty and a slight increase in extreme poverty versus 2021, due to the combined effects of economic growth, labor market dynamics, and inflation. These figures mean that there will be 12 million more people in extreme poverty than there were in 2019. One of every three Latin Americans struggle to survive economically, have very little financial resilience, and are extremely vulnerable to economic shocks such as COVID-19.

Inequality in the Americas

Latin America continues to be the most unequal region in the world. The income disparity and occupational mobility skew benefits toward the wealthy and elite. The poorest 50 percent of the population earns just 10 percent of total income, while the wealthiest 10 percent earns 55 percent, according to the World Inequality Report.³⁹ Income disparity is so bad in the Americas that it is even worse than sub-Saharan Africa, often the region of the world that is considered the most economically and politically unstable.

Inequality is often measured by the World Bank's Gini Coefficient which represents a summary of different indicators. But that is only a sampling of several factors. Family income, education levels, occupational mobility, social safety nets, and maternal mortality rates also indicate whether the socio-economic playing field is equitably distributed in a country.

There is some good news about inequality in the Americas. During the 1990s, conditions were

³⁷ World Bank, GDP growth (annual percent) in Latin America and Caribbean, accessed 19 Nov 2023. Link: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2022&locations=ZJ&most_recent_year_desc=true&start=1961&view=chart

³⁸ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), "ECLAC Presents a Selection of Key Statistics on Development in the Region's Countries," Press Release, 22 Feb 2023. Link: <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-presents-selection-key-statistics-development-regions-countries>

³⁹ World Inequality Report. Also see Adriana Arreaza Coll, "Latin America's Inequality Is Taking a Toll on Governance," *Americas Quarterly*, 08 February 2023, link: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/latin-americas-inequality-is-taking-a-toll-on-governance/>

worsening across most Latin American and Caribbean countries. But in the 2000s, the levels of inequality rapidly fell by almost 0.60 points on the Gini Coefficient. Economic conditions were improving so dramatically that this period was called, “the golden decade.” By 2010, however, the improvements started to decelerate and since then conditions have become stagnant, neither improving nor worsening.⁴⁰

3. The 3rd biggest threat - corruption/impunity (53%)



Photo caption: The rich and the poor live in close proximity but have significantly different qualities of living in Mexico and other nations in the Americas, the most unequal region of the world. This photo is of Bosque Real country club adjacent to low-income housing in Mexico City.

Credit: Unequal Scenes

Latin America has long been plagued by corruption by public officials who seek personal profit from public service.⁴¹ In fact, 53 percent of the surveyed public think it is the third biggest security threat in the Americas. There is so much frustration with corruption in the Americas, that almost half the citizens of a dozen countries are willing to tolerate a military takeover if it will rid the country of deep-seated corruption, according to public opinion surveys conducted in the region.⁴²

In the 2022 Corruptions Perception Index, only three countries in Central or South America were in the top half of the 180 countries assessed: Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica. Worse, several countries were in the lowest quartile for the levels of corruption in their country: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Venezuela. The government in Caracas is considered one of the most corrupt in the world, ranking 177 out of 180 countries.⁴³

The World Justice Project (WJP) measures the rule of law in the Americas by examining eight

⁴⁰ Leonardo Gasparini and Guillermo Cruces, “The Changing Picture of Inequality in Latin America,” United Nations Development Programme Working Paper 01, March 2021, p. 4.

⁴¹ Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of public power for private benefit.”

⁴² Mark Grujic, “Spotlight on Tolerance for Military Coups in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, September 2022; see also Latinobarómetro Informe 2023: La Recesión Democrática de América Latina, 21 July 2023, p. 45.

⁴³ Transparency International, “Corruptions Perception Index, 2022,” Link: https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/Report_CPI2022_English.pdf

factors, one of which is corruption.⁴⁴ More specifically, it examines three forms of corruption: (1) bribery, (2) improper influence by public or private interests, and (3) misappropriation of public funds or other resources. It assesses these factors in all three branches of government (executive, judiciary, and legislature) in addition to the military and police. Since the rule of law and democracy are closely linked, it is no surprise that, similar to democratic standards, the rule of law standards from 2016 to 2022 have fallen in more than three-quarters (77 percent) of the Latin American and Caribbean nations assessed in the 2022 Rule of Law Index (23 of 30 countries).⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, trust in democratic processes (e.g., elections) is highest in countries that rank at the top of the rule of law index.⁴⁶

There are several factors that may explain why the region is so vulnerable to this corrosive practice: weak government institutions without adequate resources to enforce the law; a practice of patronage in which elected officials distribute public goods to their sponsors in return for political support; the seductive power of immense amounts of public funds that can be used for political leverage in an impoverished region; or low levels of government accountability in which the law is created by and serves the interests of the political powerbrokers with little input from other demographics.

Corruption comes in many forms: nepotism; reducing the independence of the judiciary; shuttering the free press which serves as a watchdog on public officials; rewriting the Constitution to consolidate power in the executive branch thereby reducing the system of checks and balances; or sub-contracting out public development projects while skimming profits each time it is assigned to a different company. Much of the blame is directed at politicians. In 18 of 20 countries surveyed by Americas Barometer, the majority of the respondents believed that “half or all politicians are corrupt.” Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, and Chile were the highest; more than three of every four polled in the public opinion survey believe the majority of politicians in their country are corrupt.⁴⁷ Dishonest law enforcement officials also are a big part the corruption problem. In eleven countries surveyed by Americas Barometer, more than one in every ten citizens had been asked to pay a bribe by police officers. Mexico was the worst; one in every four surveyed individuals reported being asked for a bribe by Mexican police.⁴⁸

There are numerous recent examples of corruption that have been exposed in the past few years: the 2005 Mensalão scandal, the 2009 Odebrecht case; and the 2014 Lava Jato (Car Wash) scandals, all originating in Brazil. The 2016 Panama Papers scandal also involved several Latin American leaders who used offshore bank accounts to hide corruption money and avoid paying taxes. These are the scandals of which the public is aware. There are undoubtedly lots of other corruption schemes that have yet to be

⁴⁴ In addition to corruption, the WJP Rule of Law Index also examines (1) constraints on government powers, (2) open government, (3) fundamental rights, (4) order and security, (5) regulatory enforcement, (6) civil justice, and (7) criminal justice.

⁴⁵ World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2022, link: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>

⁴⁶ Mark Grujic, “Spotlight on Trust in Elections in the Latin America and Caribbean region,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, September 2022.

⁴⁷ Ehab Alhosaini, “Spotlight on the Perception of Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, August 2022.

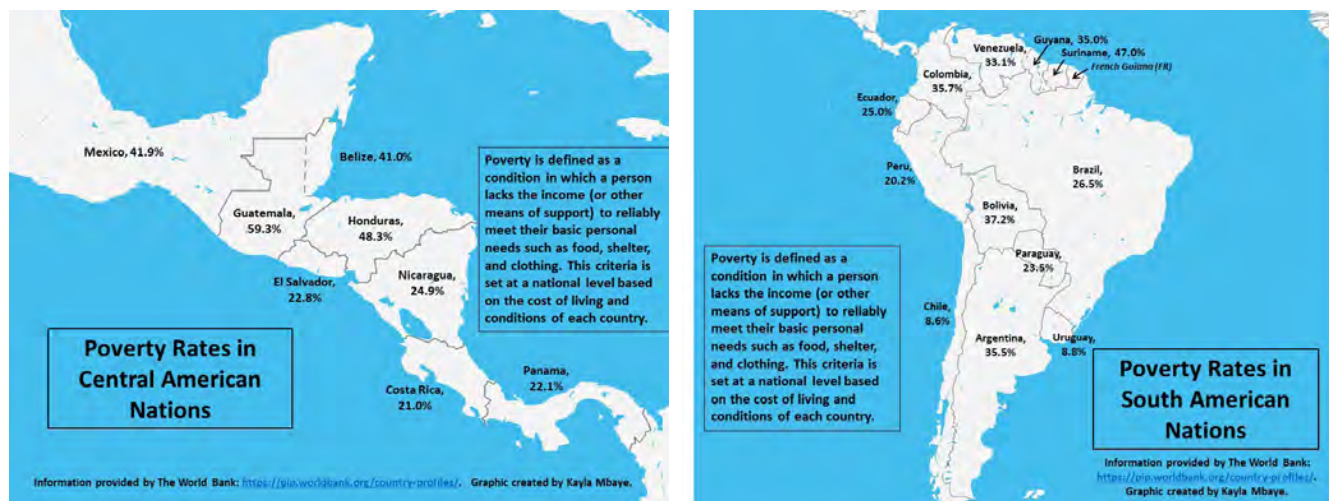
⁴⁸ Alexandra Rounds, “Spotlight on Police Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, August 2022.

exposed.

Despite the deep levels of political profiteering in most Latin American nations, there is some good news associated with these corruption scandals. Anti-corruption organizations and the free press played a big role in exposing the scandals and holding the culprits accountable for their crimes. In September 2015, Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina, for example, was exposed by lawyers in his country for using public funds for his reelection campaign. Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernandez was extradited to the U.S. to face drug trafficking charges. In Peru, six consecutive presidents spanning the past 30 years have been jailed or are awaiting resolution of court cases on corruption charges.⁴⁹

Brazil, the largest and most populated nation in Latin America, has severe corruption problems. Starting in the early 2000s, a lengthy series of trials were conducted to expose corruption among elected officials. Five former presidents, nearly one of every three presidential cabinet ministers, the heads of both houses of congress, two dozen senators, and 42 congressional deputies were accused of corruption, money laundering, and fraud. President Michel Temer, who took over after Dilma Rouseff, was accused of taking bribes. The former governor of Rio de Janeiro state was sentenced to 14 years in prison for taking \$67 million in bribes. Even the lead prosecutor who leveled corruption charges against hundreds of officials now faces his own ethics scandal.⁵⁰ Civil society and government investigators, with backing from the international community, will continue to try to hold corruption in Latin American nations in check.

2. The 2nd biggest threat - economic problems (59%)



Caption: Poverty rates in Central American and South American nations (according to The World Bank).

Credit: Information gathered from The World Bank; Graphic created by Kayla Mbaye, Perry Center

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed some of the institutional frailties of the economies and reversed the gains that the region had made economically. Nearly three of every five participants (59 percent) in the threats survey indicated their concern for the economy in their countries. The region's economies

⁴⁹ Latinobarómetro Informe 2023: La Recesión Democrática de América Latina, 21 July 2023, p. 9.

⁵⁰ See Blurred Battlefield, p. 90-91; Also see Marina Lopes, "Brazil's political class is in crisis as over 100 are investigated for corruption," *Washington Post*, 12 April 2017; Terrence McCoy, "He's the 'hero' judge who oversaw Brazil's vast Car Wash corruption probe. Now he's facing his own scandal," *Washington Post*, 7 June 2019.

contracted 6.5 percent during the worst year of COVID-19.⁵¹ However, deep-seated social and economic problems – namely a heavy dependence on the informal economy in which citizens must “work to live” – exacerbated the societal response.⁵² The Executive Director of ECLAC warned of the long-term effects of the pandemic. “The cascade of external shocks, the deceleration of economic growth, the weak recovery in employment and rising inflation are deepening and prolonging the social crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean,” José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs, ECLAC’s Executive Secretary, stressed, “We have not been able to reverse the pandemic’s effects on poverty and extreme poverty, and countries face a silent crisis in education that is affecting the new generations’ future,” he added.⁵³

The short term forecast for the region is modest at best. South America grew by 1.2 percent in 2023 as compared to 2.7 percent in 2022. Central America and Mexico have only grown by 3.0 percent as compared to the year previous when the sub-region saw 3.4 percent growth. The Caribbean has slowed to 4.2 percent as compared to 6.3 percent in 2022.⁵⁴

The “youth bulge” and the “*ni-ni*’s” of many Latin American and Caribbean nations contribute to the problem. *Youth bulge* refers to the 15 to 24 year old demographic, an abundance of young men and women who ideally would be contributing members of the community with regular employment and a well-paying salary that lifts them into the middle class. Given the chance, these individuals would enjoy the benefits of a better quality of life with discretionary income, access to healthcare, and better unemployment opportunities.

However, the unfortunate reality is that 25 to 30 percent of some Latin American communities consist of young adults ages 15 to 24 who are unemployed and uneducated, or “*ni educación, ni empleo*,” as the saying goes in Spanish.⁵⁵ Without the hope and opportunity that comes with a solid economic and social base, these youth are vulnerable to gang recruitment and involvement in illicit activities for prestige and employment.

⁵¹ World Bank, GDP growth (annual percent) in Latin America and Caribbean, accessed 19 Nov 2023. Link: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2022&locations=ZJ&most_recent_year_desc=true&start=1961&view=chart

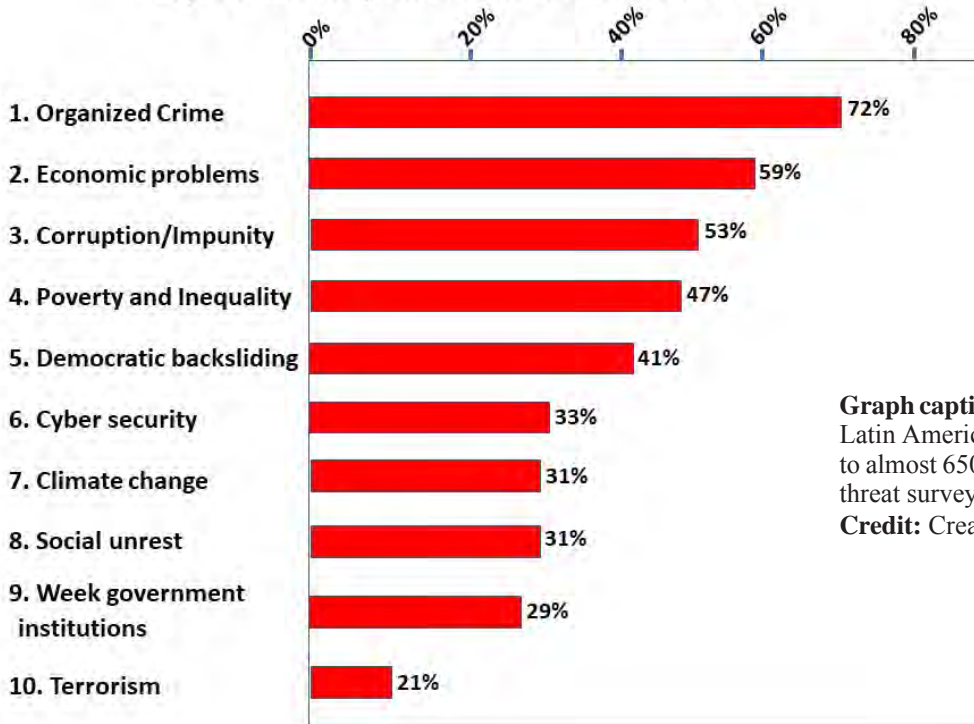
⁵² An estimated 60 percent of the population survives economically through informal employment. See The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “COVID 19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Regional socio-economic implications and policy priorities.” (2020); The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: An overview of government responses to the crisis.” November 11, 2020. Link: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-an-overview-of-government-responses-to-the-crisis-0a2dee41/>

⁵³ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), “Latin American and Caribbean Economies Will Maintain Low Growth Levels in 2023 and 2024.” Link: <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/latin-american-and-caribbean-economies-will-maintain-low-growth-levels-2023-and-2024>

⁵⁴ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), “Latin American and Caribbean Economies Will Maintain Low Growth Levels in 2023 and 2024.” Link: <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/latin-american-and-caribbean-economies-will-maintain-low-growth-levels-2023-and-2024>

⁵⁵ Julia Zinkina and Alexey Andreev, “The Demographic History and Current Age Structure in Latin America: The Youth Bulge and Implications for Sociopolitical Stability,” *Journal of Globalization Studies*, vol 11, no. 2, November 2020.

Top 10 security threats in the Americas



Graph caption: The top 10 security threats in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to almost 650 participants in the Perry Center threat survey.

Credit: Created by author

1. The top security threat in the Americas? Organized crime (72%)

The top security threat in Latin America and the Caribbean, one that generated a response from 72 percent or 472 of the nearly 650 participants of the Perry Center threat survey, is organized crime. In a region with deep poverty, relatively weak government institutions, and significant governance and corruption problems, illicit activities can flourish with impunity.

Criminal victimization is a common occurrence for citizens in Latin American and Caribbean countries. In 12 out of 20 countries surveyed by Americas Barometer, more than one of every five people reported being a victim of a crime in the past year. Mexico and Nicaragua were the worst countries for crime; about one of every three citizens in those countries reported being a victim of criminal activity.⁵⁶

Organized crime groups pursue a wide variety of illicit activities, for example: arms trafficking, human trafficking, illegal mining and logging, money laundering, smuggling, bribes of government officials, extortion, and kidnapping for profit. But the principal source of revenue for organized crime groups comes from drug trafficking, estimated to be a \$300 billion to \$400 billion global industry.

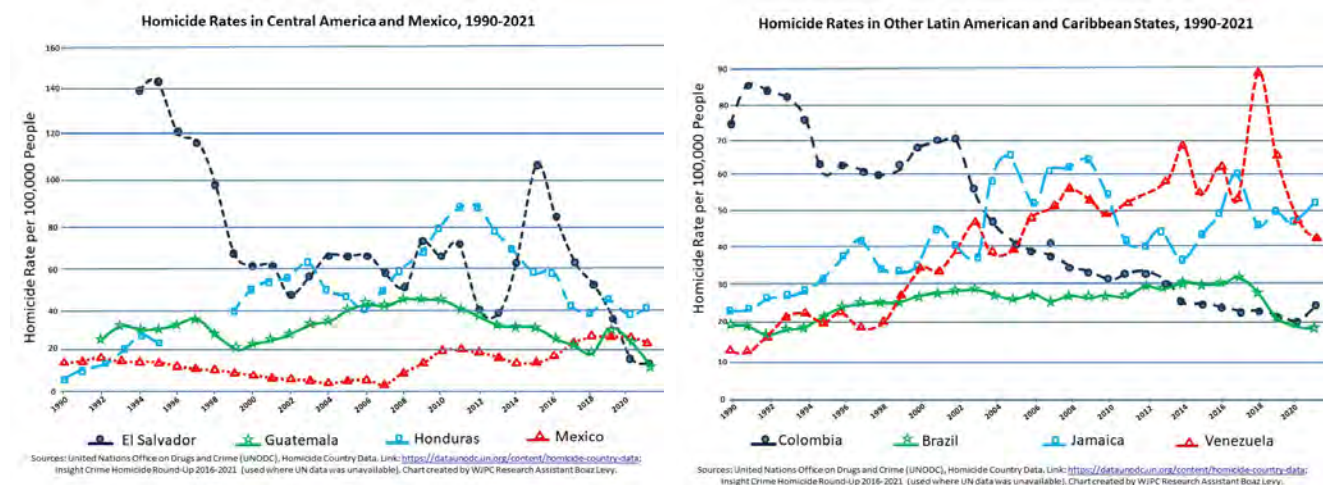
The crime syndicates in the Americas are characterized by several distinguishing factors. First, the estimated 200 transnational criminal organizations (TCO) that operate in the region are not highly coordinated networks of cartels.⁵⁷ Most of the groups are decentralized networks that have loose

⁵⁶ The survey defined crime as robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, and violent threat, among others. Source: Alyssa Dunsizer, “Spotlight on Crime Victimization in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) Americas Barometer, August, 2022.

⁵⁷ The estimate of 200 number of TCOs comes from the Commander of U.S. Southern Command testimony before Congress in March 2023. See Commander, U.S. Southern Command General Laura Richardson, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, March 8, 2023. Link: https://democrats-armedservices.house.gov/?a=Files.Serve&File_id=94371221-738B-45D3-AE23-A967ECBE8087

affiliations with several smaller criminal groups, each of which has responsibility for different aspects of the drug trafficking enterprise (packaging, transportation, and distribution, for example). Whereas there may be a central kingpin who oversees the trafficking operations, arresting or removing that leader is often not sufficient to dismantle the group's activities because operations are run in a disparate manner.

Second, the success of the drug industry depends on the illicit economy and the public's participation in some of the activities. In parts of the Americas in which extreme poverty is the norm rather than the exception, drug trafficking may be the only substantial form of revenue. This results in a large group of willing participants who create the foundation of the illicit economy and who do much of the menial labor (e.g., drug lab operators, couriers, lookouts, drivers, loaders, and even authorities who are paid to enable the trafficking operation) that is required to move the drugs through an area.



Graph caption: Homicides in select Latin American and Caribbean nations from 1990-2021

Credit: Created by research assistant Boaz Levy, Perry Center

Third, much of the extreme violence that occurs in the region is often gang-on-gang attacks. Control of the drug trafficking in a certain area is a very profitable opportunity, one gangs are willing to fight for. Innocent bystanders and locals working in the illicit activities can frequently get caught up in the violence but most of it is directed at competitors or opponents in the field.

Consequently, Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest rates of violence in the world. Much of the recent violence is occurring in countries that have generally been immune to it in the past. The murder of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in Ecuador in August 2023 is an indication of the growing strength of organized crime groups. Criminal gangs have become so prolific that nearly half of the population (48 percent) of Ecuador reported that they or a member of their household had been a victim of a mugging or robbery from September to December 2022. Guayaquil, the biggest city in the country, saw 600 murders in just four months as gangs fought for turf control.⁵⁸ In Central America, Costa Rica has seen a 67 percent rise in homicides since 2012.⁵⁹

Fourth, part of the problem lies in the structural deficiencies of the transit countries. Poverty,

⁵⁸ Francesco Manetto, "From Mexico to Chile: The Security Crisis consuming Latin America." *El Pais English*. April 08, 2023.

⁵⁹ Francesco Manetto, "From Mexico to Chile: The Security Crisis consuming Latin America." *El Pais English*. April 08, 2023.

inequality that inhibits economic opportunities, and a societal contempt for government because of corruption and cronyism empowers drug traffickers by providing a ready source of employment. Law enforcement authorities don't have the human or financial resources to keep up with the levels of crime they must investigate or prosecute. Prisons in most Latin American nations are overcrowded and have been converted into finishing schools rather than rehabilitation centers that convert criminals into law-abiding citizens.

All of these combined threats contribute to an economic and social frailty in many parts of Latin America. It contributes to poverty, lawlessness, crime, and immigration. Venezuela and Haiti have been the source of the most number of migrants, with 7.5 million having left Venezuela and 1.7 Haitians having abandoned their island nation with another two million internally displaced in Haiti.⁶⁰

Drug trafficking

Revenue from illegal drugs is the principal source of income for transnational organized crime groups in the Americas. The money is used to pay off corrupt officials, buy lethal arms, and contributes to other problems such as corruption and money laundering. In that sense, the illicit drug industry is the fuel that drives the high levels of crime and violence that make Central and South America so dangerous.

The amount of money available to traffickers is extremely seductive and traffickers can leverage that financial power to remove potential obstacles to the drug transport. Take for example, the case of the Secretary of Defense of Mexico (2012-2018), General Salvador Cienfuegos. The top military official in the country, Cienfuegos was arrested in Los Angeles on October 16, 2020, for money laundering and drug trafficking, allegedly in collusion with drug cartels.⁶¹

Cienfuegos is not alone among senior government officials who have been tempted or coerced into taking dirty money. The list of senior Latin American officials accused of colluding with organized crime groups is long and distinguished. In 1989, former Bolivian Minister of Interior Arce Gomez was arrested, charged with drug trafficking, and sentenced to 30 years in prison. In 1990, Panamanian President Manuel Noriega was charged with drug trafficking. In 1994, President Ernesto Samper was accused of receiving campaign funds from drug cartels. In 1997, Mexican drug czar General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo was arrested for drug trafficking and corruption. In November 2008, Mexican drug czar (from 2006 to 2008) Noe Ramirez was charged with accepting bribes from drug traffickers. In January 2009, Mexican drug czar (1997 to 2000) Mariano Francisco Herran was charged with colluding with cartels. In 2010, the Guatemalan Chief of National Police and the country's drug czar were arrested for working with drug trafficking organizations. In 2011, General Rene Sanabria, Bolivia's former anti-drug police chief, was sentenced to 15 years in prison for attempting to smuggle more than 300 pounds of cocaine out of Chile. Former Suriname President Desi Bouterse was convicted in absentia in the Netherlands for drug trafficking.

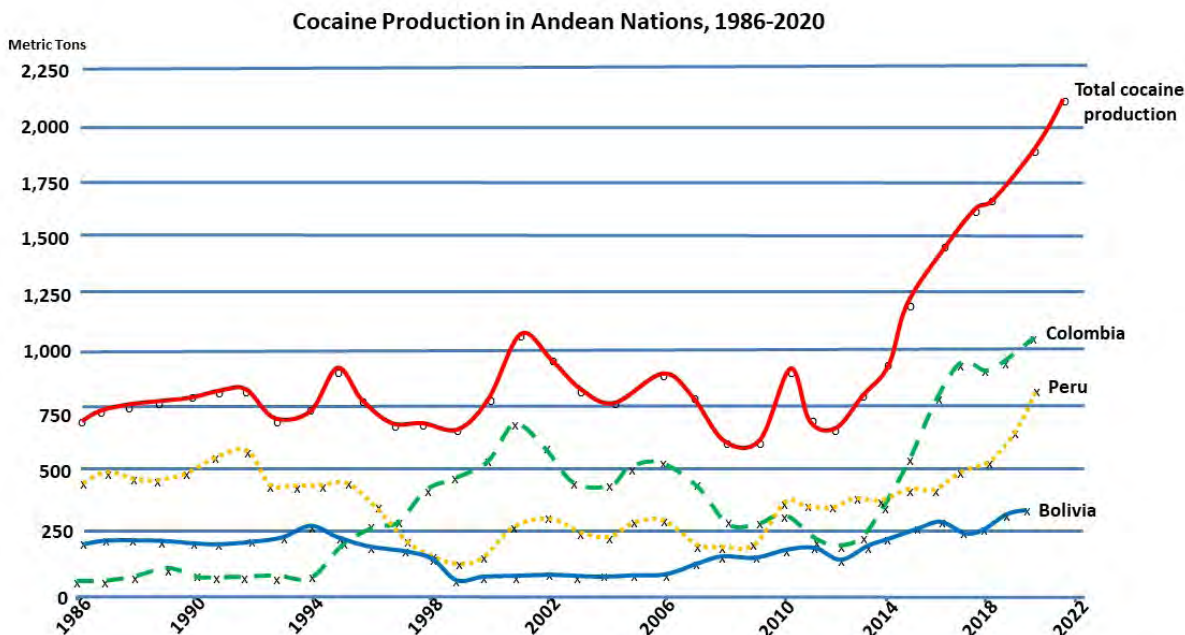
⁶⁰ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), "ECLAC Presents a Selection of Key Statistics on Development in the Region's Countries," Press Release, 22 Feb 2023. Link: <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-presents-selection-key-statistics-development-regions-countries>

⁶¹ On November 18, 2020, just a month after he was detained, U.S. authorities released the general and permitted him to return to Mexico on the condition that Mexican authorities would investigate the charges against him. On January 14, 2021, Mexico dropped all charges against Cienfuegos, stating the accusations were politically motivated.

Despite this, he was reelected president of the country in 2010.⁶² In April 2022, former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez was extradited to the United States to face trial on cocaine trafficking charges.

Of all the illegal drugs produced, transported, and marketed through the Americas, cocaine is the biggest revenue generator. The cocaine market is worth an estimated \$42 billion per year⁶³ and, in a region that suffers from chronic poverty, severe inequality, and an extensive informal economy, the illicit drug market can be an irresistible temptation for inhabitants.

What explains the dramatic increase in cocaine production shown in the previous graphic? In 2015, the



Cocaine Production in the Andean Nations from 1986-2020. Cocaine production has dramatically increased in the region. Both Colombia and Peru have seen marked growth since 2012. According to ONDCP data, overall cocaine production in the Andean Region has increased to more than 2,100 metric tons, far surpassing the previous record of 1055 metric tons set in 2001. Source: Data from 1986 to 2018 drawn from the Data Supplement (table 164) of the National Drug Control Strategy 2020, produced annually by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). Data from 2019 and 2020 drawn from the ONDCP Drug Control Data Dashboard (topic 4). See Daniel Chang and Pat Paterson (March 2022), “The Colombia Coca Bloom, the Mexican Heroin Surge, and the Fentanyl Crisis, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, Regional Insights.

Credit: Created by author

World Health Organization (WHO) declared that glyphosate, the principal chemical used in aerial spraying, was a potential carcinogen that could cause cancer in people who ingested it. As a result, the Colombian government stopped using the chemical for aerial eradication. The cessation of aerial spraying combined with the reduction of manual eradication efforts (a dangerous process for ground forces) gave coca growers a chance to increase their crops. By 2018, coca planted in Colombia covered 208,000 hectares, more than a 250 percent rise from just five years earlier and the largest amount in the history of the country. The increased amount of coca is, of course, directly correlated to the amount of cocaine produced. The same year (2018), an estimated 900 metric tons were produced in Colombia, more than 350 percent of the amount than that in 2012. In neighboring Peru, traffickers also had a bountiful year, producing more than 500 metric

⁶² Patrick Paterson, *The Almanac of Latin American History: Political and Security Events from 1800 to the Present*, Rowman and Littlefield, February 2024.

⁶³ United Nations Office of Drug Control, *World Drug Report 2021: Drug Market Trends* (booklet 4), p. 11.

tons, an amount not seen in the country since the early 1990s. From the three Andean source countries – Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia – the amount of metric tons of cocaine had doubled from 2013 to 2018.⁶⁴

Cocaine is not the only dangerous and addictive substance in the Americas. Heroin and fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, have recently surged in Mexico. The number of metric tons of heroin being produced in Mexico has increased 350 percent since 2012. The number of hectares of opium poppies in Mexico (the plant from which heroin is produced) has increased more than 1,000 percent since 2005.⁶⁵

The Fentanyl Crisis

Perhaps the deadliest of the narcotics in the Western Hemisphere is fentanyl. Often used as a painkiller for severe cases of cancer, fentanyl has legitimate, legal uses. A white powdery substance, it is easy to mix with heroin because of its physical similarity. It is estimated to be 30-50 times stronger than heroin so a tiny amount can serve as a powerful, euphoric stimulant. It is also less expensive than heroin and the drug provides such a potent “high” that traffickers are lacing heroin to meet the fentanyl demand from users.⁶⁶ In other words, fentanyl is both deadlier and cheaper than heroin, a frightening combination. More than 40 percent of black-market prescription pills contain lethal amounts of fentanyl. Traffickers are even mixing the deadly drug into cocaine and methamphetamines also.⁶⁷ Ingesting too much can be fatal. Only two milligrams of fentanyl – whether injected, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin – can kill a human.⁶⁸

In response to the reduction of opium cultivation in Mexico, drug dealers have had to resort to creative means by which to meet the demand of users in North America and other heroin markets. In 2013, U.S. border agents seized only two pounds of the powerful synthetic opioid. In 2018, that amount had skyrocketed to 2,463 pounds in 2018 and almost 4,000 pounds in 2020.⁶⁹ Since then, fentanyl trafficking into the United States has skyrocketed; almost 22,000 pounds of the drug have been seized in 2023.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ This excerpt drawn from Patrick Paterson and Daniel Chang (May 2022), “The Colombia Coca Bloom, the Mexican Heroin Surge, and the Fentanyl Crisis,” Regional Insight, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies.

⁶⁵ Patrick Paterson and Daniel Chang (May 2022), “The Colombia Coca Bloom, the Mexican Heroin Surge, and the Fentanyl Crisis,” Regional Insight, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies.

⁶⁶ According to the DEA, a kilogram of heroin costs about \$90,000 but a kilogram of fentanyl costs only \$3,500 to \$7,000. Paige Winfield Cunningham, “Skyrocketing fentanyl seizures illustrate its growing contribution to opioid crisis,” *Washington Post*, 06 December 2017.

⁶⁷ Sarah Maslin Nir, “Inside Fentanyl’s Mounting Death Toll: ‘This Is Poison’,” *New York Times*, 20 Nov 2021; Spencer Bokart-Lindell, “Overdoses Have Skyrocketed During the Pandemic. How Do We Stop Them?,” *New York Times*, 02 Dec 2021; Roni Caryn Rabin, “Overdose Deaths Reached Record High as the Pandemic Spread,” *New York Times*, 17 Nov 2021; Josh Katz and Margot Sanger-Katz, “It’s Huge, It’s Historic, It’s Unheard-of’: Drug Overdose Deaths Spike,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2021; Casey Schwartz, “How Fentanyl and Meth Took Over America,” *New York Times*, 02 Nov 2021.

⁶⁸ U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), “Facts about Fentanyl,” accessed 23 October 2023. Link: <https://www.dea.gov/resources/facts-about-fentanyl>

⁶⁹ “CBP Border Security Report: Fiscal Year 2018,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 05 Dec 2018; “CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2020; Paige Winfield Cunningham, “Skyrocketing fentanyl seizures illustrate its growing contribution to opioid crisis,” *Washington Post*, 06 December 2017. See also, Patrick Paterson and Daniel Chang (May 2022), “The Colombia Coca Bloom, the Mexican Heroin Surge, and the Fentanyl Crisis,” Regional Insight, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies.

⁷⁰ Aldrin Ballesteros, “Fentanyl Seizures at the Southwest Border: A Breakdown by CBP Areas of Responsibility,” Woodrow Wilson Center, 29 Aug 2023.

The result is the worst wave of drug overdoses in the history of the United States. In the twelve months ending in April 2021, more than 100,000 Americans died from drug overdoses, most caused by fentanyl-laced heroin or opioids. That number – a 56 percent increase from the previous twelve months – is more than the combined total of deaths from car accidents and gun shootings.⁷¹ The “war on drugs” is now threatening to take a new twist as U.S. politicians have suggested taking military action against Mexican cartels that are trafficking fentanyl into the United States, a crime that is contributing to the death of tens of thousands of Americans (2021 data).⁷² U.S. unilateral action would, of course, violate Mexican sovereignty and would be unlikely to have much effect on drug trafficking. The drug trafficking industry is too decentralized to pursue a kingpin strategy and the involvement of Mexican citizens in the drug markets means that lots of Mexican citizens would be at risk of a U.S. military action. The responsibility Mexicans feel about U.S. drug deaths must be mutual in light of the fact that arms purchased from U.S. gun manufacturers are the same used in the murder of thousands of Mexicans every year. U.S. decision makers should know that the Mexican government has sued U.S. gun companies in an effort to stop the flow of arms into Mexico – a reported 2.5 million weapons in the past decade to include military assault rifles – many of which are used to murder Mexican police and soldiers.⁷³



Caption: U.S. President Joe Biden and Mexican Manuel Lopez Obrador met on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Conference in San Francisco in November 2023. Intrinsically linked together through culture, geography, and finances on the North American continent, the two leaders have to negotiate thorny trade, humanitarian, economic, and security matters.

Credit: The White House

To close this section, it is important to understand how cocaine, fentanyl, and other illegal substances arrive in the United States. In other words, if 95 percent of the drugs that come to the United States come through Mexico (as authorities on both side of the border contend), how does it get into the country? Participants in Perry Center courses often assume it is by boat, plane, or by tunnel. Indeed, all three of

⁷¹ Josh Katz and Margot Sanger-Katz, “‘It’s Huge, It’s Historic, It’s Unheard-of’: Drug Overdose Deaths Spike,” *New York Times*, 14 July 2021; U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), “Facts about Fentanyl,” accessed 23 October 2023. Link: <https://www.dea.gov/resources/facts-about-fentanyl>

⁷² National Institute of Health, “Drug Overdose Death Rates,” accessed 23 October 2023. Link: <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

⁷³ Mary Beth Sheridan and Kevin Sieff, “Mexico sues U.S.-based gunmakers over flow of arms across border,” *Washington Post*, 21 August 2021; Kevin Sieff and Nick Miroff, “The sniper rifles flowing to Mexican cartels show a decade of U.S. failure,” *Washington Post*, 20 November 2020.

those methods are used. But the majority of dangerous drugs come right through the 75 official border checkpoints between the two countries. The 2,000-mile long U.S.-Mexico border is the busiest border between two countries in the world. More than 300 million people, approximately 90 million cars, and 4.3 million trucks cross the border annually, according to government data. Daily, an estimated \$650 million of trade passes through the 25 ports of entry.⁷⁴ It is impossible to inspect every vehicle transiting the border without bringing commerce between the two countries to a grinding halt.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The Perry Center threat survey results provide important contextual information that assist policy makers with the challenge of addressing multiple problems in the Americas. As the results indicate, there are serious security concerns across the region, each of which represents a severe challenge to governance, security, and prosperity of the inhabitants. How decision makers in the U.S. and Latin America address the problems is a formidable challenge.

From a strategic perspective, there are several important takeaways. First, many of these problems are inter-related. Inequality and poverty drive people into profitable but illicit activities, which in turn drives away foreign investors and increases corruption, which further contributes to poverty. Climate shocks may see surges in these effects as droughts and storms destroy the livelihood and reduces the resiliency of those already living at or below the poverty line. All the worst impacts – economic, governance, personal security, and political – happen concurrently.



Caption: Thousands of Central American migrants on the outskirts of the Mexican town Matías Romero in Oaxaca state on November 1, 2018.

Credit: United Nations

⁷⁴ White House archives, “Quick Facts about the U.S.-Mexico border,” Link: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/usmxborder/quickfacts.html>

⁷⁵ Presidents Nixon and Reagan both ordered the border closed during their terms in office but the outcry from business leaders was so loud that trade routes were restored quickly. In 2023, Mexico was the third largest trade partner for the U.S. From the other side of the border, the U.S. is Mexico’s largest trade partner. See Patrick Paterson, *The Almanac of Latin American History: Political and Security Events from 1800 to the Present*, Rowman and Littlefield, February 2024 (forthcoming).

Second, most of the threats in the region are irregular. That is, they are not exclusively the responsibility of the armed forces but rather require a whole-of-government response to adequately address them. Think, for example, of the high levels of corruption that exist in many countries. Political corruption is obviously not a military mission but rather one that requires intervention from the Ministry of Justice or the Congress. Money laundering, the means by which criminal gangs convert their illicit products into financial revenue that funds their corruption and malign influences, requires intervention by the Ministry of Budget or Finance.

Third, the survey results do not account for differences among the nearly three dozen countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. In other words, the security threat in Chile may be very different from that in Cuba or Panama. Aggregating all the responses together blurs the distinctions by nation or sub-region in the hemisphere. This problem was considered unavoidable because it was not viable to conduct 34 individual country studies nor even sub-regional studies within the hemisphere.

Fourth, some of the 35 options were closely related or interconnected. For example, organized crime activity can include drug and arms trafficking, human trafficking, and money laundering, and can contribute to problems such as corruption and impunity. Likewise, natural disasters such as hurricanes can contribute to poverty, unemployment, and illegal migration. To the maximum extent possible, the author of the report attempted to add the associated sub-components to the main subject to avoid skewing the results toward one issue.

Fifth, the ranking of the threats by the survey participants is relative. That is, some security challenges may have ended up ranked low but only because other threats were perceived to be more immediate or urgent, not necessarily more dangerous. For example, it is possible that the survey respondents ranked natural disasters low – despite being the cause of frequent catastrophes in the region - because other serious security issues such as crime and corruption take higher priority. Crime victimization in Mexico and Nicaragua, for example, affects one of every three citizens in those countries and is a much higher risk on a daily basis than climate change which in the long term will have more devastating impacts.

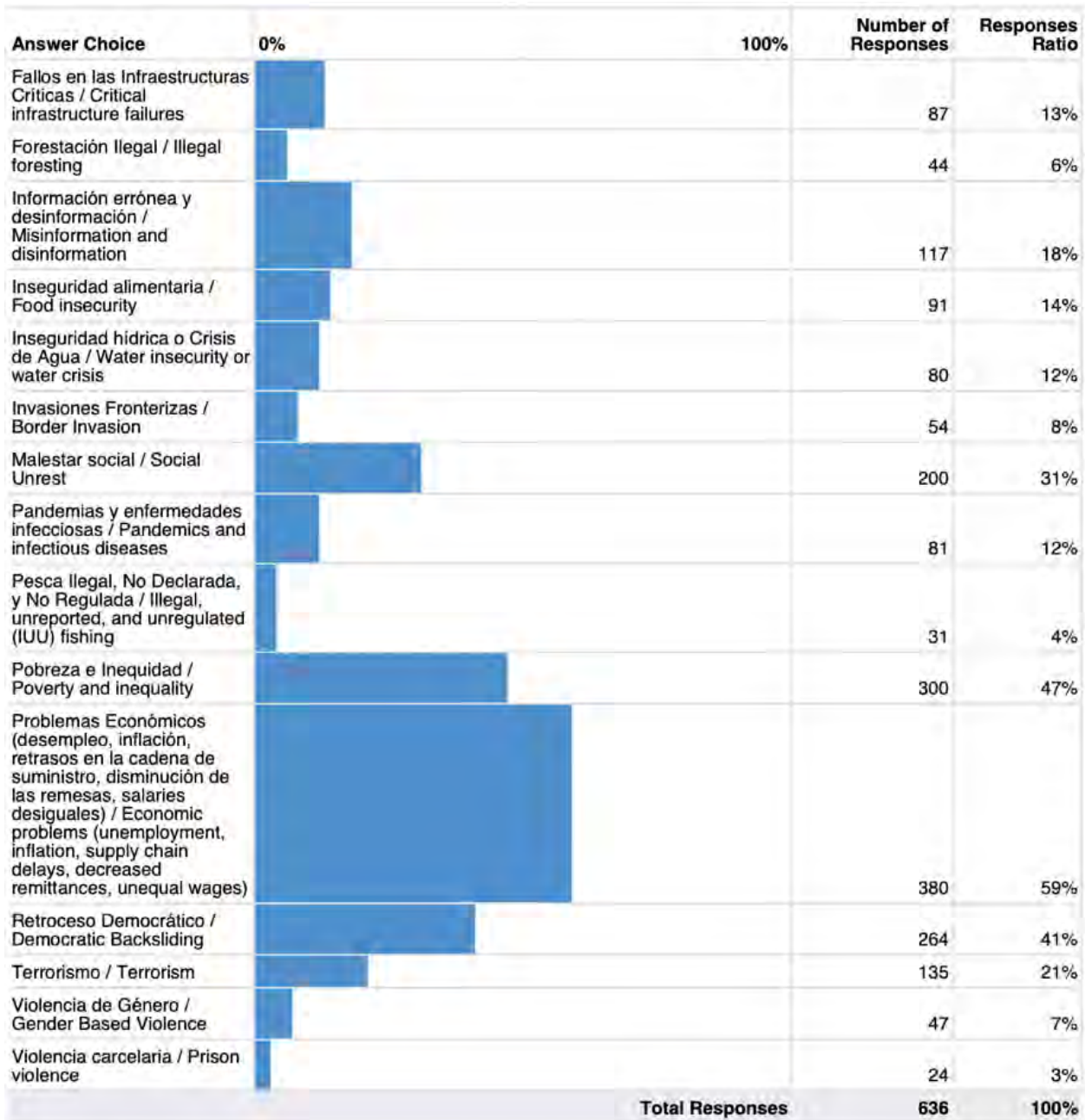
Government authorities in Latin American and Caribbean nations besieged by these security challenges should employ innovative strategies to combat the worst threats that their communities face. At the same time, most face competing demands for resources, budget, and personnel training. All the while, population growth and persistent poverty drive citizens toward illicit activities which compounds the problems in a vicious cycle of cascading effects.

Appendix 1 – Results of the Perry Center Threats Survey

CHECKBOXES

1- ¿Cuáles son los mayores riesgos de seguridad en el hemisferio occidental? (Escoger máximo de 3 opciones) / What are the most dangerous security threats in the Western Hemisphere? (Choose no more than 3)

Answer Choice	0%	100%	Number of Responses	Responses Ratio
Acceso Inadecuado a la Atención Sanitaria (vacunas, oxígeno, acceso a camas de hospital) / Inadequate access to healthcare (vaccines, oxygen, hospital bed availability)			42	6%
Actores Estatales Externos – China / External state actors – China			85	13%
Actores Estatales Externos – Estados Unidos / External state actors – United States			2	0%
Actores Estatales Externos – Irán (con Hezbolá como proxy) / External state actors – Iran (with Hezbollah as proxy)			30	4%
Actores Estatales Externos – Rusia / External state actors – Russia			57	8%
Actores Malignos en las Américas – Cuba / Malign actors in the Americas – Cuba			29	4%
Actores Malignos en las Américas – Nicaragua / Malign actors in the Americas – Nicaragua			12	1%
Actores Malignos en las Américas – Venezuela / Malign actors in the Americas – Venezuela			41	6%
Armas de Destrucción Masiva / Weapons of mass destruction			29	4%
Ataques Cibernéticos y Ciberseguridad / Cyberattacks and cyber security			219	33%
Bandas y Maras / Gangs and Maras			78	12%
Cambio Climático (sequía, incendios forestales, exceso de calor, aumento del nivel del mar, pérdida de biodiversidad) / Climate Change effects (droughts, forest fires, excessive heat, sea level rise, loss of biodiversity)			203	31%
Conflictos Convencionales entre Países / Conventional conflicts between countries			7	1%
Corrupción e Impunidad / Corruption and impunity			345	53%
Crimen Organizado (narcotráfico, tráfico de armas, tráfico de personas, lavado de dinero) / Organized crime (drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering)			472	72%
Débil o Inefectivas Instituciones Gubernamentales / Weak or ineffective government institutions			189	29%
Desastres Naturales (huracanes, terremotos, erupciones volcánicas, tsunamis) / Natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis)			72	11%
Elecciones libres y justas / Free and fair elections			25	3%
Emigración Ilegal o Involuntaria / Illegal or involuntary migration			70	10%
Exclusión Socioeconómica / Socioeconomic exclusion			68	10%
Total Responses			650	100%





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