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Violent Caracas: Understanding Violence and Homicide in Contemporary Venezuela

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Venezuela has recently experienced soaring rates of violent crime, in particular homicides; Caracas presently ranks among the cities with highest homicide rates globally. This article moves beyond established explanations and suggests an alternative approach to the problem of homicide in contemporary Venezuela. In particular, it explores political and institutional causes of violence in a polarized society under the government of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and his Bolivarian Revolution. The research focuses on the city of Caracas, as the epicenter of the political life of the country with highest levels of socio-economic segregation, urban poverty, and homicide. Both the city and the country are "paradoxical" cases, as violence soared while programs addressing social inequality, exclusion and poverty were quite successful. The results show that political polarization during the Bolivarian Revolution, institutional weakening, delegitimization of civilian security forces, and absence of a coherent public security policy were more closely linked than social exclusion to homicidal violence.

1. Homicidal Violence in Venezuela and Caracas

Caracas is one of the three most dangerous and violent cities in the world based on crime and homicide rates, according to media reports and international and non-governmental organizations (for example, UNODC 2014, WHO 2012). In 2012 the homicide rate in the Venezuelan capital was 122 per 100,000 inhabitants,[1] over twenty times the global average of 6.2 (UNODC 2014, 12). The homicide rate in the Metropolitan District of Caracas was three times the national rate, which recorded 48 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants for the same year (see Figure 1).[2] From 1986 to 2012, homicides in Caracas increased by 838 percent, while during the same period the national rate rose by 500 percent. The homicide rate in Caracas is the highest in the country, and in general homicidal violence is mainly concentrated in the most urbanized and industrialized states located in the north-central part of the country: Capital District, Miranda, Vargas, Carabobo, and Aragua (see Figure 2). Caracas thus epitomizes a process of relentlessly increasing violence that Venezuela has experienced over the past decade.

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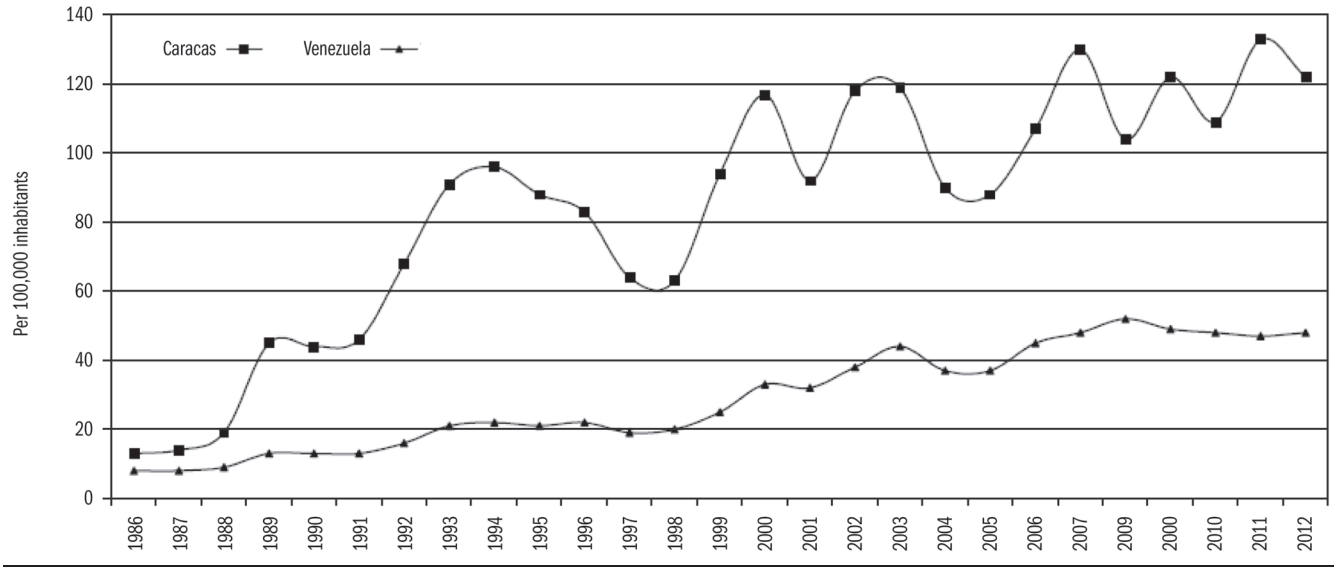
1 Measuring homicidal violence in Venezuela is challenging. On the one hand, since 2006 no systematic and disaggregated official data on homicide and violence statistics have been published by any institution within the Venezuelan government. On the other, most of the data provided by private sources cannot be relied on as they lack information on sources and measurement. Given this, the paper is based mainly on carefully selected data from non-governmental and international organizations, as well as media reports.

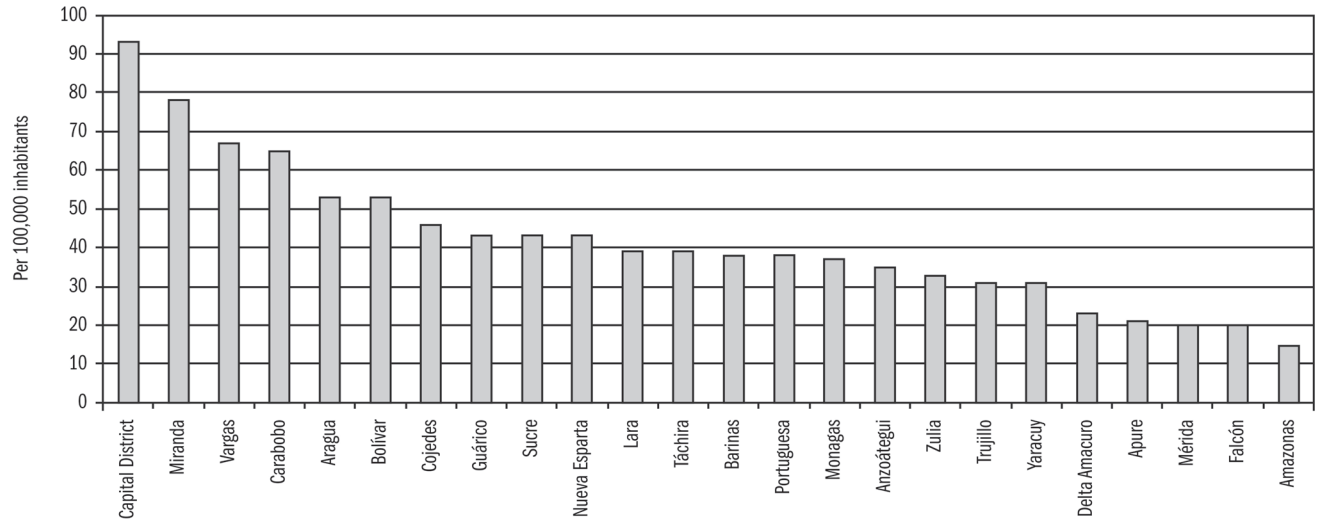
2 The Metropolitan District of Caracas is home to 3.25 million people and comprises the Capital District (and its only administrative division, the Libertador Bolivarian Municipality) plus four municipalities of the neighboring Miranda State (Chacao, Baruta, Sucre, and El Hatillo). In contrast, the Metropolitan Area of Caracas or "Greater Caracas" is not an official administrative entity, but a conurbation including adjacent municipalities, home to most of the population economically and socially involved in the capital city. This area is comprised of the Metropolitan District of Caracas itself, and the communities Guarenas, Guatire, Altos Mirandinos, and Valles del Tuy. "Greater Caracas" is home to 5.3 million people, approximately 18% of the Venezuelan population.

Figure 1: Homicide rates in Venezuela and in the Metropolitan District of Caracas (1986–2012)



Source: Based on data from Sanjuán (2008, 152) and Cedeño (2013, 3), and the Statistics Division of the Scientific, Penal and, Criminal Investigative Police; own computations.

Figure 2: Homicide rates in Venezuelan federal states, 2011



Source: Paz Activa Asociación Civil (2012, 4); own computation.

Figure 2 shows that the homicide rate in Caracas exceeds all other states, but is also mirrored by neighboring Miranda thus testifying to the violence in the greater metropolitan area of Caracas. The high levels of violence in Venezuela and in particular Caracas defy general notions of and explanations for violence in Latin America. As Kasang (2014, 201) points out, "the Venezuelan capital is particularly notable since local violence cannot be predominantly attributed to the illicit drug trade and cartel wars that consume Mexico, nor is it due to the civil conflict

and gang violence that has largely characterized Central America since the 1990s." Nor has Venezuela seen the civil conflicts and prolonged armed confrontation between government forces and non-state groups witnessed in neighboring Colombia. Venezuela's increase in lethal violence is exceptional even within the Latin American context, and the fact that five of its cities were among the fifty most violent cities in the world in 2012 speaks to both the high level of violence in the country and its concentration in its major cities (see Table 1).

This paper aims at unravelling this process through a case study of Caracas. Caracas represents and epitomizes this process for several reasons: It is "the symbolic center of the state, the political capital and the economic center as well as the site where urban poverty is most concentrated, where urban segregation most clearly maps class and political divisions, and where the incidence of violence is the highest" (Humphrey and Valverde 2013, 148–49). However, the capital city also constitutes an exceptional case, since no other city in Venezuela reports such high figures for crime and homicide (see Table 1). In the 2012 ranking of the world's most violent cities by homicide rate, published by the NGO Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal, Caracas ranks third, topped only by San Pedro Sula (Honduras) and Acapulco (Mexico). Moreover, five of the world's fifty most violent cities are Venezuelan. The paper starts with an in-depth description of violence in Caracas. It then moves on to the exploration of the drivers behind the violence, with a focus on political and institutional processes. It concludes with an assessment of these processes in the development of violence in Caracas and Venezuela.

Table 1: Ranking of Venezuelan cities among the fifty cities with highest homicide rates globally in 2012

Place	City	Federal state	Population	Number of homicides	Homicide rate per 100,000
3rd	Caracas	Capital District/Miranda	3,247,971	3,973	122.32
9th	Barquisimeto	Lara	1,120,718	804	71.74
20th	Ciudad Guayana	Bolívar	1,050,283	578	55.03
31st	Valencia	Carabobo	2,227,165	977	43.87
39th	Maracaibo	Zulia	2,212,040	784	35.44

Source: Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal (2013, 16–17); own computations.

2. Violence in Caracas: Scope, Distribution, and Characteristics

Zubillaga (2013) characterizes homicidal violence in Venezuela as urban, social, and armed. It is an urban phenomenon because it occurs mainly in the most industrialized and populous cities, where most of the wealth and economic growth are concentrated. Thus, one of the origins of homicidal violence in Caracas might be found in the accelerated and unplanned urban growth caused by the oil boom in the mid-twentieth century.[3] This is what caused the emergence of the *barrios*, the large shantytown settlements at the margins of rich neighborhoods, particularly in the western and eastern parts of the city, and in peripheral areas. As Table 2 shows, homicidal violence in Caracas is mostly concentrated in these impoverished and overpopulated marginal districts, such as the municipalities of Sucre and Libertador. In contrast, Chacao and El Hatillo, where most of the middle- and upper-class neighborhoods are located, account for less than 1 percent of the total of nearly 4,000 homicides.

Violence in Venezuela can be described as intra-class crime, as it is mostly committed among the middle- and lower-class citizens (Antillano 2014, 258). According to available data from the National Institute of Statistics (2010, 70), 56.5 percent of all homicide victims in Caracas

3 In 1950 the Venezuelan population was 46.8% urban, increasing to 93.6% sixty years later (Briceño-León 2007; ECLAC 2012).

come from social stratum D, which is over-represented, whilst 27.2 percent are from stratum E.[4] This reflects the fact that in Caracas 83.7 percent of the victims are from the two lowest socio-economic groups. The majority of them lived in the municipalities of Libertador and Sucre and, as Table 2 shows, 97 percent of all homicides occur in the two poorest municipalities of Caracas, where 85 percent of its citizens live.

Table 2: Homicides by municipality in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, 2012

Municipality	Number of homicides	% of the total in Caracas	Population	Homicide rate per 100,000
Libertador	3,185	80.17	2,114,871	151
Sucre	679	17.09	665,203	102
Baruta	83	2.09	323,758	26
Chacao	14	0.35	71,244	19
El Hatillo	12	0.30	72,895	17
Total	3,973	100	3,247,971	122

Source: Cedeño (2013, 4); based on information from the Statistics Division of the Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigative Police.

Homicides in Caracas are committed mainly with firearms. According to data for 2011, 91 percent of all homicides were committed with guns, and 5 percent with bladed weapons (OMSC 2012, 22). The exponential growth in homicide rates in the last two decades has coincided with an increase in brutality (Zubillaga 2013). Victims were shot multiple times in public during daylight; 30 percent of all victims murdered with firearms were shot more than six times, and 16 percent received more than eleven gunshots (OMSC 2012, 23).

A further characteristic element of homicidal violence in Caracas is that it involves mainly young men both as victims and perpetrators. In this respect, Caracas does not differ from other cities in Latin America and the Global South (UNODC 2014, 22–28). In 2011 93 percent of victims were male, of which the 15–24 age group represented more than 40 percent, and together with the 25–44 age-group accounted for almost 80 percent of all victims (see Table 3). Among the female victims, 66 percent were between 15 and 44 years old. Thus, the average age of homicide victims in Caracas is around twenty-eight years (Magallanes 2010, 164).

Table 3: Homicide victims in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, 2011: Gender and age

Age range	Gender (%)			Total (%)
	Male	Female	No data	
0 – 14	1.27	0.64	0.07	1.98
15 – 24	39.38	1.91	0.21	41.50
25 – 44	35.78	2.40	0	38.18
45 – 64	6.56	0.85	0	7.41
65+	2.75	0.49	0	3.25
No data	7.48	0.21	0	7.69
Total	93.23	6.49	0.28	100

Source: OMSC (2012, 20).

In Caracas during 2011, lethal violence was related to other types of crimes, as Table 4 demonstrates. Almost 40 percent of cases involved armed robberies, in particular when victims struggled or resisted. Confrontations between slumlords (gang leaders who control a neighborhood/shantytown) and their gangs, and quarrels and revenge attacks *(las culebras)* were responsible for 24 percent of murders.[5] Police officers

4 Social stratification in Venezuela is classified by the National Institute of Statistics (2010) in four groups (A-B, C, D, and E); stratum A-B represents the upper-middle class and 2 percent of the population, stratum C typical middle class (15 percent of the population), stratum D the lower class (37 percent), and E the poor (46 percent). This classification is based on variables such as occupation and education level of the household head and his/her partner, main source of family income, housing conditions, and neighborhood context like ease of access, security level, urbanization, proximity to health services, etc.).

are also targets of homicidal violence. According to media reports, 106 public security employees were murdered in Greater Caracas in 2012, an increase of 26 percent over 2011, year in which 84 law enforcement agents were killed (*El Universal* 2014a). Women are mostly victims of intra-familial and domestic violence, which accounts for 22.7 percent of victims, ten times more than male victims. They are also 2.5 times more often victims of stray bullets than men. However, the lack of official and disaggregated statistics and cause of death records leaves almost 50 percent unaccounted for. In figures from the NGO Venezuelan Prisons Observatory, "no data" includes the number of prison inmates murdered (mainly during prison riots), which accounted for 560 deaths in 2011, and 591 in 2012 (OVP 2013, 10).

Table 4: Contexts of lethal violence: Male and female homicide victims in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, 2011

Context	Gender of victim (%)		Total (%)
	Male	Female	
No information	44.36	28.26	43.47
Information available	55.64	71.74	56.53
Context	Male	Female	
– Robbery	40.70	24.24	39.94
– Settling scores	24.77	15.15	23.96
– Stray bullet	9.94	25.76	11.23
– Clashes with police	7.62	0	6.99
– Gang clashes	1.37	1.52	1.37
– Hired assassins	1.10	0	0.99
– Intra-familial violence	1.36	7.57	1.87
– Partner or ex-partner	0.68	15.15	1.87
– Other	11.84	10.61	11.73
Total contexts	100	100	100

Source: OMSC (2012, 21), own computations.

Violence and insecurity in Caracas also result from the high prevalence of other types of violent crime. According to the 2009 National Survey of Victimization and Perception of Public Safety, robberies represented 70 percent of all crime incidents, followed by personal injury and threats (see Table 5). On average, seven out of ten robberies in the Metropolitan Area of Caracas are committed by armed motorcyclists, mainly during rush hour in traffic jams on the main traffic arteries. This modus operandi also applies to homicide with six out of ten incidents, and contract killings – known as *sicariatos* – with nine out of ten incidents (*El Universal* 2015, *Últimas Noticias* 2015). Other violent crimes also increased over recent years, i.e. kidnappings in the form of "express kidnapping", where the victim is just temporarily taken away just for few hours and released after the payment of a ransom in cash by family members (Briceño-León 2007, 562). The public sees street criminals (55.1 percent) and youth gangs (16.9 percent) as the main perpetrators of crime. Interestingly, police and members of the National Guard rank third as perpetrators (4 percent) (National Institute of Statistics 2010, 119).

Table 5: Types of crime in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, 2009

Crime	Total	Percentage
Homicide	8,047	1.82
Threat of violence	14,224	3.21
Assault	14,798	3.34
Sexual assault	1,483	0.33
Robbery	308,971	69.79
Kidnapping	7,017	1.59
Extortion	1,967	0.44
Corruption	3,713	0.84
Burglary	69,716	15.75
Fraud	12,765	2.88
Total	442,701	100

Source: National Institute of Statistics (2010, 115).

Even against the background of high homicide rates in the Western hemisphere, Caracas (and in fact Venezuela with second place) stand out. Latin America and the Caribbean is the world's most violent region in terms of intentional homicides, with twenty-nine of the region's thirty-three independent countries exceeding the global average in 2012; the highest rates are found in Central American and Caribbean countries (see Table 6). In 2012 Latin America

5 *La culebra* – the snake – is Venezuelan slang referring to antagonisms between male youth, particularly settling of scores or struggles for influence or respect, which are commonly solved through direct physical confrontation (Zubillaga 2008).

accounted for 36 percent of all deaths by homicidal violence in the world (equivalent to 437,000 murders) (UNODC 2014, 11). The main causes of homicide in the region are criminal activities, organized crime, and gang warfare.

Table 6: Homicides in Latin American and Caribbean countries in 2012

Country	Rate per 100,000	Count
Honduras	90.4	7,172
Venezuela	53.7	16,072
Belize	44.7	145
El Salvador	41.2	2,594
Guatemala	39.9	6,025
Jamaica	39.3	1,087
Saint Kitts and Nevis	33.6	18
Colombia	30.8	14,670
Bahamas	29.8	111
Trinidad and Tobago	28.3	379
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	25.6	28
Brazil	25.2	50,108
Dominican Republic	22.1	2,268
Saint Lucia	21.6	39
Mexico	21.5	26,037
Dominica (2010 data)	21.1	15
Panama	17.2	654
Guyana	17.0	135
Grenada	13.3	14
Ecuador	12.4	1,924
Bolivia	12.1	1,270
Nicaragua	11.3	675
Antigua and Barbuda	11.2	10
Haiti	10.2	1,033
Paraguay	9.7	649
Peru	9.6	2,865
Costa Rica	8.5	407
Uruguay	7.9	267
Barbados	7.4	21
Global average homicide rate: 6.2 per 100,000 inhabitants		
Surinam	6.1	33
Argentina (2010 data)	5.5	2,237
Cuba	4.2	477
Chile	3.1	550

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2014, 125–27), own computations.

Even against the backdrop of high rates of violence in the region, Venezuela and in particular Caracas stand out as a kind of "paradox," as Zubillaga (2013) termed it. Homicide rates have soared unprecedentedly despite undeniable improvements in the socio-economic situation, and this increase coincided in particular with declining social inequality during the fourteen years of Chávez's presidency. Understanding the true causes of urban violence in Caracas requires a critical review of the political and institutional context of contemporary Venezuela. For this reason, the period covered by this study focuses on the changes under the left-wing political movement led by President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and his successor, Nicolás Maduro (since 2013), the so called Bolivarian Revolution.[6]

According to Venezuelan historiography, the Bolivarian Revolution ended forty years of elite domination (1958–1998), with parliamentary democracy under the rule of the social-democratic party Democratic Action and the social-Christian Independent Political Electoral Organization Committee (COPEI, by its Spanish acronym). The Bolivarian Revolution project essentially aims to build a "twenty-first century socialism," characterized by direct and participatory democracy in the management of public affairs and a strong social welfare state. In terms of economic policies it involves the promotion of a mixed economy with state control over key industries and the support of cooperatives and so-called "social enterprises" (*Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar: Primer Plan Socialista para el Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación 2007–2013*, 2007). The question arises how this policy might have contributed to the increase of violence in the country and Caracas.

3. Inequality, Social Exclusion, and Violent Crime in Caracas

Research on cross-national determinants of homicide rates has found that one of the main causal determinants of levels of lethal violence is social inequality and economic discrimination (Messner 1989, Sun et al 2011). As inequality engenders patterns of exclusion, exacerbates personal frustrations, and sharpens disparities among social groups,

6 The adjective "Bolivarian" refers to Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), military strategist and political leader born in Caracas and liberator of the present-day territories of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia from Spanish colonial rule.

violent conflicts between individuals and groups arise (Chamlin and Cochran 2006). In its extreme forms, inequality implies marginalization of parts of the population who are excluded from opportunities to enjoy the benefits provided by the social order, or from establishing productive channels of communication, interaction, and exchange within the system of a society. Exclusion from economic resources leads to the denial of fundamental rights like education, health, access to public services, and political participation (Schroer 2004). Within this framework violence is seen as the consequence of the structural imbalance between potentially available and actual capabilities and opportunities for groups of individuals to realize their potential and standards of living; Galtung (1969) has termed this as "structural violence" built into the social and economic structure of a society.

The Chávez government prioritized reducing social inequality as a way to improve citizens' security, as a public policy that Humphrey and Valverde (2013, 155) call the "Bolivarian urban security model." This included a policy of redistributing oil revenues through a diverse range of anti-poverty and social welfare programs targeted mainly toward the lower-income strata of the population, with the aim of reversing the negative consequences of the neoliberal economic restructuring programs adopted during the 1990s; these had increased poverty and widened the social divide. The cornerstone of the Bolivarian urban security model were the *misiones* (social missions), a range of nationwide social welfare programs launched from 2003, managed directly by central government and funded by revenues from the oil state company, Petroleum of Venezuela S.A (PDVSA). To name some examples, the *Misión Barrio Adentro* (mission inside the neighborhood) and the *Misión Mercal* (mission market of food) stand out in particular. The former addresses health care needs, with Cuban and Venezuelan doctors providing medical treatment in poor quarters, while the latter focuses on "attending to basic alimentation needs through the provision of subsidised food in government-sponsored cooperatives" (Daguerre 2011, 842). Over a period of ten years, forty-two different social missions were launched, in areas including education and vocational training, land reform, housing, employment, indigenous rights, culture, environment, and social enterprises, representing a total investment of approximately US$71 billion (*Últimas Noticias* 2013, 13–14).

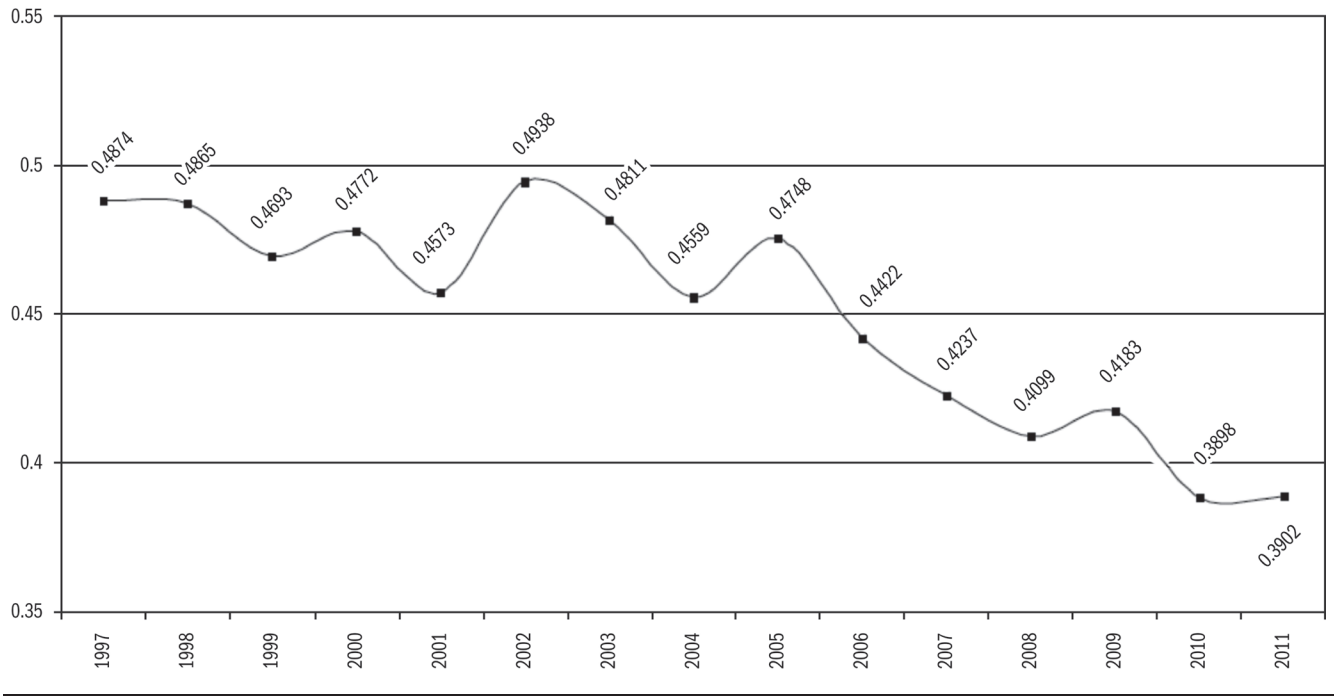
The improvement in living standards in Venezuela under the Chávez government has been internationally recognized in several occasions by institutions like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, mainly because of the outstanding results of the social missions in terms of poverty reduction, employment rate, health assistance, and literacy (see Table 7). The social missions worked as an effective fast-track poverty alleviation strategy, since they were grounded in a multi-dimensional approach and targeted several dimensions at once (Daguerre 2011, 841). Chávez's social policy seemingly contributed to a significant reduction in social inequality, according to the Gini index (see Figure 3). Over the course of eight years of implementation of social missions, the Gini index fell from 0.48 in 2003 to 0.39 in 2011, which means that inequality gap in Venezuelan society was reduced by one fifth.

Table 7: Key social indicators for Venezuela, 1999–2012

Indicator	1999/2002	2011/2012
Population in poverty	49.4%	23.9%
Population in extreme poverty	21.7%	9.7%
Unemployment rate	13.4%	7.0%
Literacy rate	93.0%	98.5%
Net enrollment in secondary education	50.9%	78.2%
Gross enrollment rate in tertiary education	28.3%	78.1%
Social expenditure, as proportion of GDP	8.8%	19.7%

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2012), own computation and compilation.

Figure 3: Gini index in Venezuela, 1997–2011



Source: National Institute of Statistics (2011, 8); own computation.

However, while the indicators in Table 7 demonstrate an improvement in basic living conditions of the most vulnerable parts of the population between 1999 and 2012, during the same time period homicidal violence has increased, and in exactly the social groups that most benefited from such programs. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) notes, in its *Human Development Report 2013*, that in some cases "there is a small negative correlation between homicides rates and HDI [Human Development Index] values" (UNDP 2013, 39), meaning that as countries improve on the Human Development Index their homicide rates increase. Venezuela is among these few exceptional cases, with a high level of human development and a rank of 71 out of 186 selected countries. There are two possible explanations for this negative correlation in the case of Venezuela: First, efforts to promote social inclusion have not been effective in delivering social change because they are in essence welfare programs with a strongly paternalistic approach. This means that the Chávez government did not really eradicate the core of structural violence in Venezuelan society, but merely replaced it with an assistance-based policy and "a populist mode of discretionary spending" (Hawkins 2013, 230). Although several of these schemes formed the basis of People's Power in the participatory democracy promoted by the Bolivarian Revolution, most of them actually functioned with high levels of dependency and corporate patterns in state-society interactions.

Second, the focus on social exclusion in the Chávez government's "Bolivarian urban security model" more generally ignored the groups most involved in violence, young men aged between 15 and 24 from the poorest neighborhoods and shantytowns. The Venezuelan labor market offers few incentives and very limited opportunities for social advancement to this group of unskilled workers, and many young people "experience intense frustration with obstacles to social mobility, disparities in the quality of education, and lack of job prospects" (Berkman 2007, 17). On the one hand, the Chávez government designed special programs to offer equal opportunities and access to the educational system to adolescents

from the *barrios*. In 2003, three initiatives were launched in the educational field; the Missions Robinson, Ribas, and Sucre offered literacy programs and technical training for adults at the three levels of schooling – primary, secondary, and higher education. On the other hand, the programs aiming at facilitating access to the labor market, such as the *Misión Vuelvan Caras* (Mission Turn Faces) seem to have failed in their expected goals: "individuals were mainly attracted by the monthly allowance and because Vuelvan Caras did not create a network of economically sustainable cooperatives or social enterprises" (Daguerre 2011, 842). Programs for cultural and sport activities for young people that explicitly targeted violent behavior were only launched very recently in 2013, with the *Movimiento por la Paz y por la Vida* (Movement for Peace and Life) initiated by Chávez's successor, President Nicolás Maduro. It was piloted in the poor neighborhoods of Caracas most affected by homicidal violence, and aimed at building sport facilities in five of the nineteen cities with the highest crime rates (*El Universal* 2013a).

The economic policies of the Bolivarian Revolution did not come without costs, in particular when the oil price plunged; this left Venezuela in a critical economic situation which has continued to worsen. The exchange controls in force since 2003 have produced an artificial valuation of the national currency, hardly concealed price speculation, and an accumulated inflation of around 1,000 percent compared to 1999 (*El Mundo* 2013). For citizens of Caracas, costs of living have hugely increased as did local price inflation, making it the sixth most expensive city in the world (*The Economist* 2014). Did the mounting economic crisis contribute to the violence? One indicator is the link between the availability and cost of "luxury goods" and the number of robberies in Caracas. As already mentioned, robberies represent 69.7 percent of all crimes committed in the capital city, with a very high rate of 5,076 assaults per 100,000 inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics 2010, 67). About 40 percent of all armed robberies target mobile phones, and offenders are linked to black markets and organized crime networks (*El Universal* 2014b).

4. Political and Institutional Causes of Homicidal Violence in Caracas

As the socio-economic contexts give few clues as to why violence rose in this way, we now turn to the political and institutional context created by the Bolivarian Revolution. Several authors (Álvarez 2010; Crespo 2006; Boeckh 2011; Humphrey and Valverde 2013; Jácome 2011) suggest exploring the links between violence and the complex process of political, social, and economic transformations taking place in Venezuela since the mid-eighties, and in particular this article reviews the interrelation between the mounting homicide rates and the changes in the political-institutional system that the Bolivarian Revolution set in motion. During the Chávez's government, radical changes in the social structure of the country ensued from the attempt to move from a capitalist to a socialist economy and society. These changes weakened basic rules of social life and community cohesion through political polarization and thus increased levels of tension and hostility among the population.

During the fourteen years of Chávez's presidency, Venezuelan society was increasingly divided into two distinct and irreconcilable groups: one supported the revolutionary process – known as *chavistas* – and one in opposition, called pejoratively *escuálidos* – "the thin ones". This originally political polarization fueled antagonism between social classes, as it was associated with stereotyping and derogatory remarks by Chávez in his public speeches. He and his followers portrayed the Bolivarian Revolution as a decisive class struggle, in which the people – understood just as the poorest classes – were called "to defeat" the oligarchy, a notion that included the middle and upper classes (García-Guadilla 2003). In addition, Chávez's military training and his personal political style of directly confronting his adversaries contributed to a large degree to an "advocacy of violence" (Jácome 2011) in the political arena and beyond.

In the everyday life of Caracas, this generated violence in two ways: first, it divided the city along the lines of territorialized political conflict; second, it increased the levels of physical violence during mass demonstrations. Today, Caracas is not only divided along the lines of socio-economic strata, but also along political allegiances, with zones of violent clashes between supporters and opponents. These include the *chavista* territory, composed of downtown and some of the poorest shantytowns located on the western margins of the city; and the opposition territory, in the east and southeast, where the upper and middle class neighborhoods are located (García-Guadilla

2003). Overlap in some areas which are not clearly assigned to one side or the other increases the possibility of conflict and physical confrontation. Thus both political groups clashed in these spaces, in particular during 2002/2003 when political tensions reached high levels.[7]

Political polarization has particularly affected the management of public security in the Metropolitan District of Caracas. It has led to institutional fragmentation of long-standing political alliances, incompetence, and incapacity to establish a coordinated security policy addressing the problem of urban violence across different levels of governance and all Caracas municipalities.[8] The capital city is "the heart of pro- and anti-Chávez divisions in Venezuela and in fact has two governments" (Gratius and Valença 2011, 13): the elected mayor is from the opposition party *Alianza Bravo Pueblo* – Fearless People's Alliance – while the head of the government of the Capital District was appointed by the president himself.[9] As a consequence, the political fragmentation has generated a lack of coordination among mayoralties and local law enforcement agencies. Moreover, it has severely affected the functioning of policing functions, often creating an institutional vacuum in which lawlessness and impunity could thrive in the absence of a properly functioning civilian police force.[10] This institutional vacuum came with a dissolution of the Metropolitan Police and the transfer of civilian policing functions to the National Guard, which as military police is a branch of the National Armed Forces (Birkbeck 2011). It comes as no surprise that the Venezuelan public, as outlined above, saw police and National Guard members as themselves highly involved in criminal activities.

Caracas has suffered particularly from weak governance in the security sector, due to these upheavals and changes in the organization and management of urban security. This resulted in failures to develop and implement a policy focusing on the particular local security needs of citizens. The National Commission for Police Reform started a comprehensive restructuring process of the country's 123 regional and municipal police bodies in 2006. The changes for Caracas included the merging of the five municipal police forces of the Metropolitan District of Caracas in 2009 under a unified command, the National Bolivarian Police. Another significant step was the creation of the Presidential Commission for Arms Control, Ammunitions, and Disarmament in May 2011; in June 2013 the Disarmament Law was adopted, which among other measures includes programs of voluntary surrender of small arms by gangs and other groups, without prosecution.

These changes coincided with a lack of stability and continuity in the state security apparatus. During the fourteen years of Chávez's presidency, twelve ministers of interior were appointed, who issued twenty-two plans for citizen security, with little continuity between them (*Últimas Noticias* 2013). Among these, the Integral Plan of Security Mission Caracas, launched in 2003, and the Safe Caracas Plan five years later addressed the security situation in the city. Many of the newly introduced policing strategies lasted less than a year; activities mainly included motorcycle patrols on the streets, roadblocks with heavily armed National Guard officers at hotspots, and early morning police raids in the shantytowns. Thus, security deteriorated in Caracas because of the lack of a coherent government security policy, but also due to the poor performance of the institutions responsible for the oversight and management of the whole criminal justice system. A high level of impunity for homicides is an indicator of widespread incompetence, inefficiency, and corruption in the system;

7 These clashes took place during or close to a coup d'état attempt in spring 2002 and a general strike between December 2002 and February 2003. They include an incident on April 11 when as yet unidentified snipers shot into a crowd of protesters causing nineteen casualties; an incident on December 6, when three civilians were killed and other twenty-eight wounded during an opposition rally. Due to the failure of police investigations, not all perpetrators have yet been identified.

8 Just one out of the five administrative divisions of Caracas, the Libertador Bolivarian Municipality, is under the rule of a mayor belonging to the ruling party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. The other four ones are governed by mayors from different opposition parties.

9 The post of Head of Government of the Capital District was created by presidential executive decree in 2009 as an additional and parallel authority to the municipalities.

10 As a result of the participation of police officers in the 2002 coup d'etat attempt and mounting reports of abuse of force by the police, the central government intervened and transferred oversight over the Metropolitan Police from the Mayor of Caracas to the Ministry of Interior (Gabaldón 2004, 71). Later, the Metropolitan Police was dismantled during the process of restructuring starting in 2008.

in 2003 just 6.9 percent of all homicide cases were duly investigated, solved, and closed. Notoriously high levels of distrust towards the police and justice system seriously impact on the level of reporting by the public, and only one third of all crimes (31.4 percent) are reported to the police; most of those surveyed said that "nothing would happen anyway even if the case went to court" (National Institute of Statistics 2010, 69).

As demonstrated by the transfer of civilian policing responsibilities to the National Guard (as a branch of the Armed Forces), Bolivarian Venezuela saw an increasing militarization of society and in the police service delivery. The Armed Forces (renamed National Bolivarian Armed Forces since 2007) were repeatedly called upon to intervene and act as guarantor and protector of the Revolution against domestic threats. Chávez's government also encouraged the establishment of armed pro-government militias – known as *colectivos* – as community-based defense units after the 2002 coup d'etat attempt. This strategy was aimed to promote civilian participation in the integral defense of the political process of the Revolution, in a sort of alliance between citizens and the military.[11] Some of these *colectivos* are paramilitary groups, purportedly armed by state security forces.[12] Groups like the *Colectivo La Piedrita*, *Tupamaros*, and *Grupo Carapaica* have publicly paraded their arsenals in the media, and reported links with high-ranking government officials or insurgent forces in neighboring Colombia. Like other militias on the continent, they act with little oversight; in Venezuela, they are blamed for violent assaults and murders of civilians during mass demonstrations, in particular during the wave of protests in February and April 2014 (*El Universal* 2014c). The strategy of installing pro-government militias has certainly counteracted any efforts to reduce the availability of firearms, and has certainly also increased membership of gangs and other illegal armed groups. Presently, the number of firearms in legal or illegal civilian possession is estimated at approximately eight million (Jácome 2011).

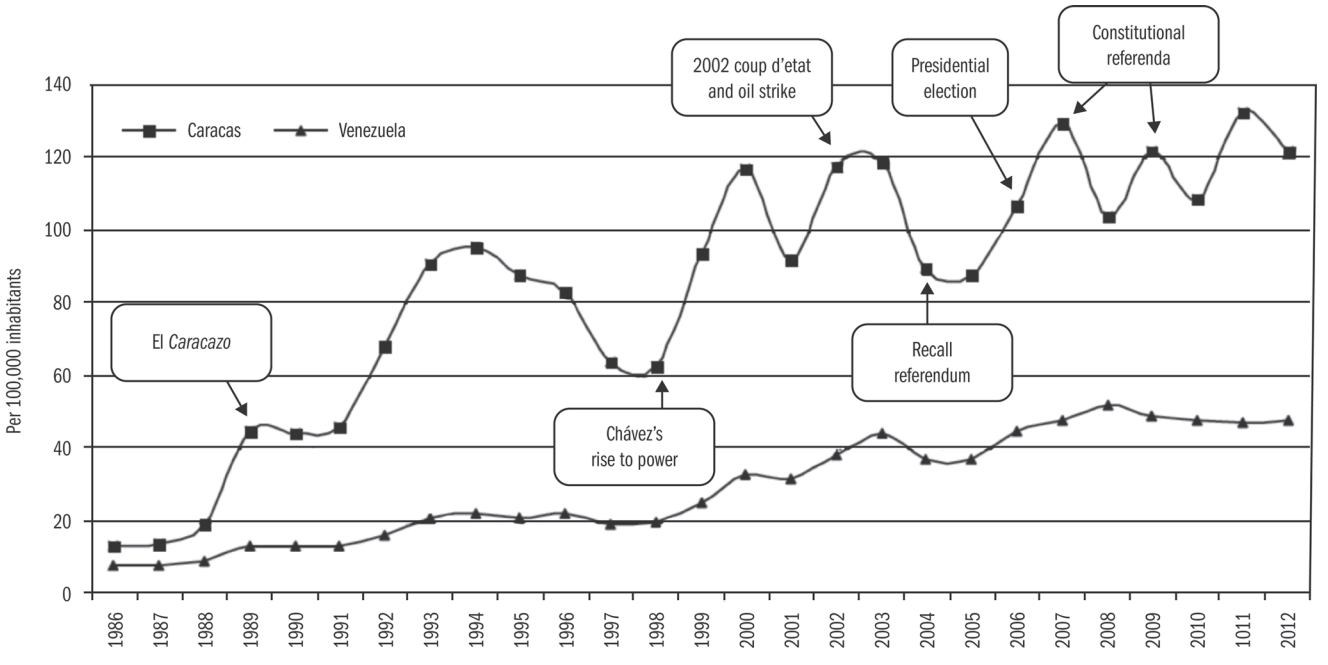
Furthermore, the Bolivarian Revolution followed a period of great political instability beginning with the February 1989 uprisings, known in Venezuelan historiography as *El Caracazo*. Nivette (2014, 103–105) suggests that in societies affected by periods of political crisis and loss of institutional and political legitimacy, social bonds are loosened and levels of crime and violence tend to rise as citizens withdraw compliance from institutions and rules: "What leads citizens to break from normative compliance and ignore obligations to violate moral rules and laws may be the *delegitimization* of authority. Legitimacy offers a direct link between the institutions that hold authority and demand obedience (in particular political institutions) and individual rule-breaking, crime and violence" (ibid, 106). Citizens' satisfaction with democracy in Venezuela is notably low with 49 percent satisfied, while 35 percent are not (Latinobarómetro Corporation 2010, 38). Venezuela ranks fourteenth on government approval out of eighteen polled countries in Latin America with 47 percent approving, 9 percent lower than the regional average. Political instability and polarization have created accelerating vicious circles of uncertainty and distrust of institutions, thus facilitating the legitimacy of violent crime and the use of violence. The positive correlation between political instability and higher homicide rates is examined by Chu and Tusalem (2013, 257), who state that "in societies with high levels of political instability, the institutionalization of violence becomes entrenched in the polity, causing citizens not to respect life vis-à-vis societies where political stability provides an opportunity for citizens to value the importance and significance of human life." In line with this, Álvarez (2010) points out that in periods of high political tension and social confrontation (such as during elections and institutional crises), homicide rates in Venezuela increased considerably. As Humphrey and Valverde (2013, 147–48) note: "Elections provoke fear because they involve the public mobilization of supporters in a polarized struggle for power between fiercely antagonistic national imaginaries and the specter of possible defeat."

11 Launched under the 2009 New Bolivarian Military Doctrine.

12 In October 2010, in his regular television Sunday broadcast, *Aló Presidente*, Chávez ordered the National Guard "to arm these militiamen." However, there is no official evidence to prove the armament of these groups by any state institution.

According to Álvarez (2010), the weakening and delegitimation of institutions increases violence throughout society, and not only in the political sphere. He compared homicide figures in Venezuela during the course of the mounting institutional crisis over two decades. Figure 4 shows that shortly before *El Caracazo* in 1989 homicide rates were already building, and have risen exponentially since then. Political events of the kind that multiplied in the political atmosphere of the Bolivarian Revolution, for example during the 2006 presidential elections and the 2007 and 2009 constitutional referenda, seem to have been triggers for violence.[13] Figure 4 shows that in Caracas in particular homicide rates tended to increase around contested political events like the referenda, and around episodes of political violence and economic unrest like the coup attempt and strike in 2002/2003.[14] In contrast, events that are seen as positive by a majority coincide with decreasing violence in Caracas, and a more stable level in the country. This was the case for the 1998 presidential elections, in which Chávez rose to power, and when the government won a major victory as in the 2000 "mega-elections" and the 2004 recall referendum, when Chavez's party achieved nearly 60 percent of the votes.[15]

Figure 4: Political events and homicide rates in Venezuela and Caracas, 1986–2012



Source: Álvarez (2010, 105), own computation.

13 In December 2007 President Chávez called a referendum to change the 1999 Constitution and transition the Venezuelan economy and political system to a socialist regime. The governmental proposal was rejected by 50.7 percent of votes cast. Two years later, in February 2009 a second constitutional referendum was held with the aim of abolishing term limits for all elected offices, which was approved by 54.9 percent of voters.

14 Between December 2002 and February 2003, the Democratic Coordinator – a coalition of opposition parties – together with business associations and trade unions called for a national strike in order to force President Chávez to call extraordinary presidential elections. This event is known as the "oil strike" because its core element was bringing the operational functioning of the state oil company PDVSA to a halt.

15 After the new Constitution came into force in 1999, all elected offices were subject to re-election. National and regional elections were held simultaneously in July 2000, the so-called "mega-elections". As expected, President Chávez was confirmed in office by 59.8 percent of voters and the majority of the ruling party candidates were reelected. The 1999 Constitution also provides for the possibility to recall elected office holders after they had served half their term. This provision was used by the opposition to request a referendum to recall President Chávez from office, held in August 2004. However, the recall attempt was rejected by 59.1 percent of the voters.

When President Chávez died on 5 March 2013, Venezuelan society descended into a severe political, economic, and social crisis. Scarcity of basic staple foods and galloping inflation coincided with rising homicide rates. According to information provided by the then minister of interior, in the first three months of 2013 homicide figures rose to 3,400 in Venezuela, 1,364 of which occurred in Caracas, representing an increase of 7 percent compared to 2012 figures (*El Universal* 2013b). The presidential election in April 2013 started a new cycle of political legitimacy crises, and the ensuing violence was mainly concentrated in the city of Caracas. The electoral results, with a narrow victory for the candidate of Chavez's party, Nicolás Maduro, were followed by street protests demanding a recount, clashes between police and demonstrators, and burning of government buildings. The unrest left nine civilians dead and seventy-eight persons injured during a week of protests (*La Voz*, 2013). The events following Chavez's death clearly demonstrate the impact of political legitimacy on violence and homicide, as argued by Nivette (2014), and in particular testify to the role of Caracas in leading these processes.

5. Conclusion: Equality, Legitimacy, and Violence

The level of urban violence and homicide in Caracas seems to have altered the dominant perception of peaceful democratic coexistence and inclusive non-violent politics in modern Venezuela. The deteriorating security situation in the city has negatively affected citizens' lives. The wave of violence that turned Caracas into a threatening and hostile city impacted on the lives of thousands of young men and women, and on economic activity. Likewise, it has undermined democratic values and the rule of law.

The Venezuelan case demonstrates that policies aimed at socio-economic inclusion in particular of the poorest strata of society do not necessarily result in the reduction of violence. The programs launched during the Chávez government were part of a nationwide strategy for fighting social inequality. However, they were not designed to attend to the particular needs and realities of those sectors of society most affected by violent crime, or the very particular conditions of the capital city. Moreover, policies of social inclusion were not supported by a coherent policy at all levels aiming at addressing crime and insecurity. To the contrary, continuous changes in the civil security forces and their militarization in this process led to institutional instability, incompetence, and ineffectiveness in fighting the rising crime and violence in the capital city and the country. Police brutality increased during this time, leading to extraordinarily low levels of public trust in the police and justice system, which further weakened law enforcement capacity and exacerbated impunity for offenders. Thus in the case of Caracas and Venezuela a loss of legitimacy of the security apparatus seems to be closely related to a surge in violent lethal crime.

During the Bolivarian Revolution political polarization thrived, and in its wake norms of social solidarity unraveled and generated an environment of animosity and confrontation. This was fertile ground for crime and interpersonal violence to flourish. However, it was also legitimized by political actors. Chávez's political project encouraged violent behaviors among citizens, and the permanent discrediting of his adversaries was a common pattern of his confrontational political and governance style; in addition, during periods of political tension an appeal to violence was a common strategy of this project. In combination with the weakening of law enforcement, support for pro-government armed groups was detrimental. These militias and groups are to a large extent responsible for political and other violence.

It was also demonstrated that political and institutional legitimacy has an impact on violence and homicide in society, as argued by Nivette (2014). Interpersonal violence peaked at times of heightened political tension and when opposition forces seemed to be strong, thus indicating low levels of government legitimacy. During these periods an appeal to violence was a common strategy of the leadership of the Bolivarian Revolution project, which obviously was not confined to political confrontation alone but had spillover effects into society, which were particularly visible in Caracas itself.

Importantly, processes of delegitimization that affected both the civilian security forces and the political system seem to have been more powerful than the successful policies to reduce poverty and social inequality, and promote social

inclusion. The failure and delegitimization of institutions played a major role in the descent into violence that occurred in Caracas, and Venezuela as a whole. The challenge for government and civil society in Venezuela is now to rebuild institutions with sustainable strategies for reducing urban violence, and generally to strengthen and relegitimize law enforcement. These are necessary preconditions for a renewal of citizenship values and peaceful community life.

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