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## Is Chile Imagining a Crime Wave?

By Gideon Long

It was, without doubt the most expensive pizza I've ever eaten. I handed over \$150 in cash, a credit card, a digital camera and a mobile phone, and all I got in return was a 12-inch mushroom and pepperoni pie, with no extra toppings.

I'd just placed my order in a takeout pizzeria in the Chilean capital, early on a recent evening, when three young guys came in, checked the place out, and drew guns. One stuck a revolver between my ribs and made me empty my pockets, another did the same to a fellow customer, and the third shouted at the woman behind the counter to open the register. She mumbled that she couldn't, or that there was no money. His friends had already left, so he turned and ran after them.

It was all over pretty quickly and it could have been worse. And, of course, it's the kind of thing that happens every day in every big city in the world. Still, as I've recounted my experience to Chilean friends, I've been struck by their response: Rather than a commonplace experience, they regard it as a depressing sign of changing times — an indication that Santiago, long regarded as the safest capital city in Latin America, has a growing crime problem.

Statistics certainly reveal that Chileans have a growing *fear* of crime. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that they worry about it more than almost everyone else in the region — a startling finding in a country that prides itself on being a haven of safety in a dangerous continent.

Fundacion Paz Ciudadana (The Citizen Peace Foundation), an independent Santiago-based organisation committed to reducing crime levels, compared surveys on attitudes towards crime around the world. It found that Chileans are more fearful of crime than Argentines, Paraguayans — even more fearful than Colombians, whose country is widely regarded as one of

the most dangerous in the world.

The government's own figures tell a similar story. In 2003, 12.4% of Chileans regarded crime as the country's most pressing problem. By 2007, that figure had risen to 14.9%. And while in 2003, 44.6% of Chileans said they felt crime had gotten worse in their neighborhood over the previous 12 months, by last year, the figure had climbed to 53.5%.

But a rather different story emerges when the measure is *crimes committed*, rather than fear of crime. Delinquency has, in fact, fallen in Chile in recent years or, at the very worst, remained constant.

"Victimisation surveys suggest crime has been steady for the last five years or so," says Andres Baytelman, executive director of Fundacion Paz Ciudadana. "But at the same time, it is certainly true that fear of crime has consistently grown."

So, if Chile is no more dangerous now than it was five or ten years ago, why are Chileans more afraid?

Baytelman says part of the blame lies with the Chilean media. Local media tends to highlight sensationalist accounts of robberies, rapes, murders and assaults. Watching the TV news here, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in the favelas of Brazil or the mean streets of Colombia, not in relatively safe Santiago.

Chile's deep divisions on lines of social class exacerbate the problem. In a society where the upper, middle and lower classes seldom rub shoulders, the potential for fear of "those out there" can easily grow. And then, there's politics. Some see no coincidence in the fact that lurid TV reports of violent crime seems to have increased this month in the run-up to Sunday's municipal elections. Politicians around the world have long realized that a pledge to crack down on crime tends to win votes, and Chile's politicians are no exception. And when their message is that crime is a major and growing threat (to which they are the antidote) many voters start to believe that they are more threatened than is really the case.

Whatever the truth of the matter, crime will undoubtedly be a key issue in next year's presidential election. After nearly two decades in opposition, the political right is gaining ground in Chile and may be hoping that a "tough on crime" message will help defeat the leftist coalition that has ruled for most of the past two decades.

In the meantime, in a small act of defiance, I'll continue to buy my pizzas from the same place. But from now on, I might just look over my shoulder when it's time to pay.

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