



## **Award-Winning Costa Rica Report Urges Smarter Fight against Crime**

*Officials hope other Latin American countries will take notice*

21 June 2007

For many in Latin America, a chief obstacle to a higher quality of life is crime. Not only does crime drain the economy, it can create debilitating fears. In Costa Rica, which has been grappling with rising numbers of robberies, rapes and drug-related offences, the problems and solutions are complex—and at times surprising, according to an independent report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme.

For example, Costa Ricans, when asked in a survey about the likely nationality of violent criminals in their country, overwhelmingly believed foreigners from other Latin American countries were to blame.

But Costa Ricans have misplaced their fears, the report found. The vast majority of violent crimes in the nation actually were committed by young Costa Rican men, according to the report's analysis of conviction statistics.

Full of revealing findings on these and other crime-related topics, the report—titled "Overcoming Fear: Citizen (In)Security and Human Development in Costa Rica"—has helped decrease xenophobia and reshaped national debate on formulating better anti-crime strategies, policy experts say. As a result of the report, new initiatives also are being proposed to regulate firearms and reduce violence against women.

On 20 June, the Costa Rica research team and their report were honoured with a Human Development Award at the United Nations in New York for excellence in innovation, for being the first of its kind in the region.

Like other human development reports produced around the world, the Costa Rica one was editorially independent, from conception to research, analyses to policy recommendations. That means it was free to say and advocate what politicians and bureaucrats in Costa Rica and elsewhere didn't necessarily want to hear.

"The implications of this report go well beyond Costa Rica," said Kevin Casas, Second Vice President and Minister of Planning and Economic Policy for Costa Rica, who accepted the award on behalf of the local research team. "Latin America is in many ways the world's most violent region. Forty per cent of all homicides take place in Latin America, a region with no more than 8% of the world's population. More people die today in Central America as a result of violent crime than at the height of civil war in the region."

In Costa Rica, drug-related crimes more than tripled over the past decade, while the number of rapes and robberies rose by 37% and 30%, respectively. In 2004, one out of every three households had someone who had been victimized by crime in the past year.

But the national murder rate (6.6 for every 100,000 people) is still far below the world average (10.7) and less than a quarter of the average rate of intentional homicides for Latin America (28.4). Surveys also showed gaps between people's perceptions and actual likelihood of victimization. The poor and rural people are among the least fearful, while the most fearful live in cities. Among the most fearful are urban women from middle- to high-income households and people under 25—the nation's future.

“When people feel insecure about their personal safety, they go outside less. It restricts mobility, reduces economic opportunities, impedes social interactions and interferes with civic involvement,” said Kevin Watkins, director of the Human Development Report Office in New York. “Human security, as opposed to national security, is a major concern for Costa Rica and many countries around the world. It is an essential freedom for a well-functioning society. Without it, a country will not be able to attain its full potential in human development. ”

The Costa Rica report found that police departments suffered from many problems, such as poor coordination, a lack of systematic efforts to gather intelligence, disparities in officer training and outdated communications equipment. Costa Ricans, in response, are resorting to hiring private security and failing to report two out of three violent crimes. People's loss of faith in government to provide public security, the report warned, can erode participation and undermine democracy. When victims are too paralyzed to go to police, it emboldens lawbreakers and can worsen criminality in the country.

Among the report's recommendations are information campaigns, for citizens and policymakers alike, to dispel myths. Also outlined are strategies to improve the police force, programs to divert youthful offenders from turning into hard-core criminals, and policies to reduce domestic violence.

“This report held a mirror to Costa Rica, and in some sense it is a wakeup call on the structural conditions that feed insecurity and citizen beliefs with respect to their fight against crime,” said Rebeca Grynspan, Regional Director of UNDP’s Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, and also a former vice president of Costa Rica. “Through this report, Costa Rica can develop innovative solutions. Other countries in Latin America, where people are suffering much worse violence than people in Costa Rica, should sit up and take notice.”

The Human Development Awards, which are given every two to three years, recognize the contributions of national and regional reports to improve policies and practices. Judges for this year’s awards included Crown Prince Haakon of Norway, Princess Basma of Jordan, President Jorge Quiroga of Bolivia and Dr. Gita Sen of Harvard University and the Indian Institute of Management. Previous awards were given in 2000, 2002 and 2004.

More information about this year's Human Development Awards can be found at:

[www.http://hdr.undp.org](http://hdr.undp.org)

Human Development Report Office Outreach and Advocacy Unit:

Telephone: +212.906.6763

Mobile: +646-201-8036

Email: [marisol.sanjines@undp.org](mailto:marisol.sanjines@undp.org) or [pedromanuel.moreno@undp.org](mailto:pedromanuel.moreno@undp.org) or [maritza.ascencios@undp.org](mailto:maritza.ascencios@undp.org)