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Killing time in Medellin

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After a few years of relative peace under the rule of a mafia boss, the Colombian city of Medellin, birthplace of the first great narco-trafficking cartel, has seen violent crime soar once again. The culprits are from a new generation of urban youth specializing in protection rackets, drug sales and assassinations

The parts of Medellin which gave rise to the first great narco-trafficking cartel, and where criminal violence has leapt once again after a few years of calm, were born in the 1950s on in the steep slopes surrounding the old core of the city, where spontaneous invasions gave rise to settlements known as "communes".

The areas lacked utilities or roads. Settlers simply claimed land where they built their shacks. Over time settlers improved their housing, and the state had to come to grips with reality and provide services, building a few roads and carving out many narrow labyrinthine steep-staired alleys. This layout makes it extremely difficult for any outside authority to exert control without strong community support. Population density is high, houses are frequently overcrowded, and residents lack privacy.

Most settlers were peasants. Some were attracted by the city's manufacturing jobs, but many were displaced by violence. Most families had a father, brother, son or other close relative who had been murdered, and most troubled youths are children or grandchildren of people displaced by violence. Many families are headed by women who have children from several men, who are absent. Children grow without extended family ties, and with the mother as the only figure in their lives that deserves respect and that acts as an anchor.

In this environment, the state and indeed any external authority are conceived as alien, and are distrusted. Not surprisingly, formal laws and norms are also alien. The relationship of residents with public authorities is that of clients securing services and benefits from a patron. Even after a large amount of expenditure and improvements in infrastructure and social services, the state still lacks legitimacy within the communes. Criminal behaviour, on the other hand, is a socially accepted survival strategy.

Escobar, Don Berna and the gangs

Organized crime in Medellin has deep roots, and reflects a long process of learning by doing. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Medellin cartel had several patrones (capos) led by Pablo Escobar. After a bloody confrontation with the state, a "narco-terrorist" period and the demise of Escobar on December 2, 1993, the cartel was dismembered into several small groups. Among these, the Oficina de Envigado under the leadership of Diego Murillo Bejarano, aka Don Berna, gained prominence. This group had strong links with the paramilitary movement, and his activities went far beyond international drug trafficking. Organized crime in Medellin both diversified, and became less violent.

The fall of the Medellín cartel, and a few years later of the [Cali cartel](#), led to a restructuring of drug trafficking, and left wing guerrillas and paramilitary groups became involved in the business. The guerrillas took advantage of this situation to take over an important commune in Medellín that controlled the route to Urabá, a leading region for cocaine and weapon contraband. A military takeover of the commune in 2002, including aerial attacks, expelled the guerrillas only to open up an opportunity for Don Berna's organization to gain control. His organization had already begun to regulate neighbourhood gangs (*combos*), and imposed rules that aimed to improve people's security. Violence and homicides declined as the local government invested in social and infrastructure projects, and forged what may be construed as an informal pact with Don Berna.

However, once Don Berna was extradited to the United States in May 2008, organized crime evolved again as the controls over it weakened. Combos became isolated from the main criminal networks, and gained autonomy under the leadership of a new generation of 17 to 25 year-olds. Many of these young leaders sought to build their own organizations in the areas under their control, changing the structure of drug trafficking and crime as they began freely to "tax" residents and businesses and exploit local drug markets.

The most daring leaders developed fragile "federations" with neighbouring groups to strengthen their local power and resist pressure from outside criminal groups. As one gang member put it: "the young men learned to control the local areas, lost their fear of anything including 'Don Berna' and other large drug lords, and even tried to export drugs". The structure of crime in Medellín was transformed.

Under Don Berna, hit-men, or *sicarios*, were not allowed to sell their services freely, and kidnappings and thefts declined. These rules established de facto peaceful areas where criminals could live, and where drugs could be sold. A less dangerous drug market increased the number of sellers, buyers and profits. Gangs then sought control of small territories where they intended to monopolize these illegal activities.

Problems later arose when [gangs](#) began to fight for control of these areas: "a few got weapons and others followed suit" asserts a young resident. Adolescents who had served as "eyes" for gang members by guarding a city corner in exchange for sharing in their social life, and maybe partaking of a little liquor or illegal drugs, had to take sides and join a gang either because of pressure from the combo, or because he had become suspicious to members of rival neighboring gangs.

Today, these invisible frontiers within the communes have become extremely dangerous for young people to cross. Just being from one block or small neighbourhood implicitly makes them members of the local gang, and possible targets for rivals. Within these frontiers, children and adolescents are identified with the gang that controls the area whether or not they join in. Membership is not clandestine as it is not a stigma within the area controlled by the gang. Indeed, members seek fame and public recognition.

Economic interest plays a key role in gang development. As one member asserted: "the neighborhood is large and has commerce and other businesses that have to pay protection. This money is collected for the strong man who controls the gang, and hands out what he receives. Because of these profits, there are violent conflicts over territorial control." Once a gang has a monopoly of violence over a given area, they can regulate the distribution of staples like milk and bread, extort construction businesses working on government projects designed to improve the neighbourhood's quality of life, impose tolls on buses and cabs entering the area, and exert many other types of protection racket.

Kids with guns

In Medellín, criminals start their careers very early, in their adolescence and even before. In recent years there has been a marked increase in the use of violence and cruelty by very young criminals. Because of this, we have tried to understand who and what they are.

Our field work shows that these kids feel they have been invisible to their families, neighbourhood and society, and seek respect. Gangs inspire fear in their neighbourhoods, and provide an identity and much-needed respect.

They are not just about making money: "life in the 'hood is different: we know each other, we are all alike." "Whoever does not know the area and does not come from within it, is lost". These two statements show an extreme reluctance to have order imposed from outside the neighbourhood, and reveal a certainty that local criminals are better than the state at solving local problems and providing order. This is consistent with the long history of illegal urban development in the communes.

Gang membership, however, is not a satisfactory solution to these young people's problems: the identity provided is valuable in the lax society of the small area controlled by the gang, but the status it brings is based on fear and the power of their weapons. Most gang members lack hope outside their gangs, have low self-esteem and tend to become depressive. Commenting on the death of his boss, a young man asserted: "he had the pleasure of living well for one or two years: even he knew he would not last long". Despite this realism and apparent detachment, gang members are never satisfied with their lives or themselves.

Young men and women in the communes seek to escape reality through alcohol and illicit drug consumption. There is a consensus among government officials and commune residents that illegal drug use is widespread and socially accepted among the young population. Drug use prevalence is higher among males, but has risen substantially among women. The data may at times be questionable, but almost everyone agrees that illegal drug use is a serious problem.

Despite the very large population of young criminals, twenty per cent of the assassins commit eighty per cent of the homicides. A few captured *sicarios* have been indicted for 200 killings, about 40 percent of those that occur in the city in a violent year. Killing has become a specialized "job" for cruel and anomic young men who know that they are not going to last because of their own boasting and exposure and the frequency of retaliation.

Some *sicarios* form an elite group responsible for interrogations, torture and disappearances. Brutality and cruelty are common, and considered by them to be work skills. Most of the drug trafficking networks' members are not required to use extreme cruelty; they merely have to be pragmatic and mechanically obedient, and carry out their work by simply blocking any ethical controls on behaviour. As another young man puts it: "If you say 'this is a big sin', they respond: 'this man is useless; how come this is a sin? If you feel this way or are nervous, you cannot serve the boss'".

Sebastian and Valenciano: a school of crime

Don Berna's subordinates jockeyed to rearrange the crime structure after this extradition, and two [competing leaders](#) arose: "Sebastián" and "Valenciano". Ever younger criminals began to organize a network of combos that provide outsourcing services for the larger groups, but these small groups promoted the development of local drug markets under their control. It has frequently been said that Medellín's crime was "democratized".

Increased state presence in the communes is one factor that has contributed to the declining age of young people joining gangs. As the risk of capture increases, younger members are used in many risky activities because they are subject to more lenient child crime laws. One result is that a bill currently in the Colombian Congress aims to hike sentences for young criminals.

The two new trafficking leaders are young, under 40, and their success has in large part been due to their skills in connecting with neighbourhood youth combos that provide support for their operations. Their roots and family relations in those neighbourhoods have been instrumental in developing a support base.

Medellín's resurgent crime in the last few years reflects institutional and structural problems that have plagued Colombia throughout its history. The prevalent patronage-based political system generates authoritarian structures, and a state viewed as alien in local communities. But the young people of the communes are also confronting a world in which their helplessness and inability to obtain respect, affection and recognition generate strong feelings of resentment and retaliation against society.

These feelings are reinforced when an adolescent's father, brother or other close relative is killed, and are exacerbated by the loss of intimacy in an overcrowded space, the difficulty of handling sexual impulses, the lack of love, the feeling of being always suspect in the eyes of the police and other authorities, and the fact that the only space available to socialize is related to drugs and protected by criminals. In this environment, gangs provide a route to some dignity and self respect.

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