

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE OF CHILE, CRIME, AND RECENT IMMIGRATION PATTERNS

Cambios en el escenario demográfico chileno. Crimen y nuevos patrones de inmigración

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Abstract: People and media outlets in Chile, one of the safest countries in the Western hemisphere, are claiming that crime is on the rise in their country. They are also claiming that the increased crime rates are caused by the recent boom of migrants from places like Haiti, Colombia, and Venezuela. This is an oversimplified and inaccurate explanation. A closer look at the issue yields a very different perspective. First, I contend that immigration to Chile is not actually increasing, but the demographic of those arriving is changing. Chile has historically seen migrants from European countries, but now new arrivals are coming from other South American and Caribbean nations. Second, violent crime in Chile is actually declining, while petty crime is slightly increasing, if not stagnant. This leads me to believe that crime is being overrepresented in the media and causing unneeded concern. Finally, Chile's own immigration policies are forcing people into the informal sector of the economy. The informal economy leads to increases in occurrences of petty crimes. To move towards a better and safer future for all people residing in Chile, policy makers need to make it easier for migrants to gain access to the formal economy.

Keywords: Immigration, Violence, Crime, Migration, Chile.

Resumen: Las personas y los medios informativos en Chile, uno de los países más seguros del hemisferio occidental, sostienen que la criminalidad está en aumento. Afirman, además, que el incremento en la tasa de criminalidad es causada por la reciente explosión de inmigrantes provenientes de países como Haití, Colombia y Venezuela. Esta explicación es imprecisa y extremadamente simplista. Una mirada más exhaustiva al asunto arroja una perspectiva muy distinta. Primero, afirmo que la inmigración en Chile no va en aumento, sino que la demografía de quienes llegan sí está cambiando. Chile ha visto, a lo largo de la historia, migrantes provenientes de países europeos; sin embargo, quienes migran actualmente lo hacen provenientes de países sudamericanos y del Caribe. Segundo, el crimen violento en Chile está disminuyendo a la vez que el delito menor está aumentando levemente, si es que no está estancado. Esto me lleva a pensar que el crimen está siendo sobre representado en los medios,

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generando preocupación innecesaria. Finalmente, las propias políticas migratorias chilenas están forzando a las personas a sectores informales de la economía. La economía informal provoca un aumento de los delitos menores. Para dirigirnos hacia un mejor y más seguro futuro para todos los residentes en Chile, los políticos deben facilitarles a los migrantes el acceso a la economía formal.

Palabras clave: Inmigración, Violencia, Crimen, Migración, Chile.

I. INTRODUCTION

Walk around Santiago, Chile and murmurings of the city's declining security can be heard throughout the streets. Newspapers hanging from vending booths display news of the most recent shootout. The national television media always seems to report on increased gang violence in La Pintana and La Legua, the poorest sectors of the city. In fact, the day that I sat down to write this essay, La Tercera, a national newspaper, reported a shootout just a few miles south of my apartment. The incident left a 16 year old boy dead and several other juveniles in critical condition. Two gangs, Los Cochinos and Los Galvez, had squared off in a gun battle in the middle of the street. Many residents say an incident like this would have been unheard of just a few years ago (La Tercera, 2018).

Santiago is the capital of Chile and one of the safest cities in Latin America (OSAC, 2018). Despite being so safe, rhetoric has been circulating in the last year or so around how crime has been on the rise. The increase in crime has coincidentally coincided with what many are saying is a boom in immigration from Haiti, Colombia, and Venezuela. As people have begun to point fingers and look for the culprit of the increased crime rate, many have found a connection between the two concurrent phenomena. Essentially they are stating that the rise in crime is a result of the increased immigration from other American countries.

I am not certain this is the case. This paper seeks to better understand the relationship between increased migration in Chile and the supposed present crime wave. First, I will look at historic and more recent immigration patterns in Chile. The second part of the paper will look at crime rates to see if there is any truth to the recent claims that insecurity and crime are on the rise. Finally, alternative explanations will be examined, using existing literature on the subject. It is easy to see why Chilean society might make the claim that increased immigration to the country could result in increased crime. Chile's long history of isolation, lack of diversity, and inequality lend it to seek a simple explanation to the problem. Digging a bit deeper, however, reveals that there are several other more viable reasons why crime and immigration could be concurrently on the rise.

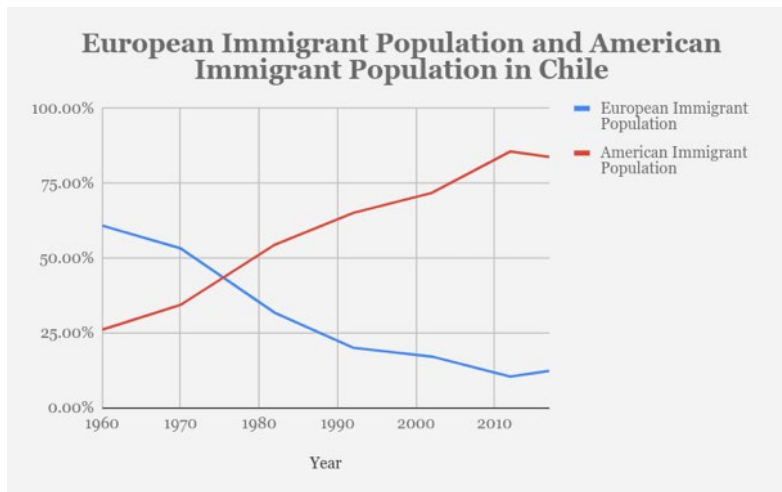
II. IMMIGRATION

Chile demonstrates many important differences from its South American neighbors that are relevant to explaining its current situation. Geographically speaking, Chile has been quite isolated from the rest of the continent. With the Pacific ocean to the west, the hot and arid Atacama desert in the north, frigid Patagonia to the south, and the natural barrier that is the Andres mountains to the west, Chile has been cut off from the world. The rest of the continent, including Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia, were players in the slave trade and consequently have large afro-descendent populations. Chile, with eight or nine dry months out of the year, never had a market for labor-intensive crops that required slaves. For this reason, Chile was never a very desirable place in which to immigrate.

The first and questionably last major migration of non-Americans to Chile was when the Spanish arrived in the 16th century. There have been other waves of European immigration throughout the country's history, but most have been from other predominantly caucasian countries like Germany, Italy, and Ireland. The combination of immigration patterns and geographical barriers has led Chile to remain relatively homogenous for centuries, relative to other countries in the region. Although the demographics are changing, just a few decades ago it would have been difficult to see anyone of African descent walking around the streets of Santiago.

In the past century, specifically in the later part of the 20th century, there were migratory trends from other south American countries to Chile. Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela all have sizeable populations in Chile. The most recent phenomenon would be the Haitian migration boom of the past few years. This has perhaps been the most shocking for Chile, for several reasons. First, Haitians speak french creole, unlike the spanish speaking Colombians and Venezuelans who have also come recently. Second, the Haitian migration wave is the first time in the history of Chile that a sizeable population of people of color has entered the country. The National Institute of Statistics estimates the Haitian population to be around 10% of the total population of non-Chileans in the country (INE, 2017). The Miami Herald reported that approximately 1% of the entire population of Haiti has moved to Chile. It is not just the size of the migration that has raised concern, it but the speed at which it has occurred. In 2017 alone, nearly 105,000 Haitians arrived both "legally" and "illegally" to Chile (Charles, 2018).

Chart N° 1



Data sourced from INE, Chile.

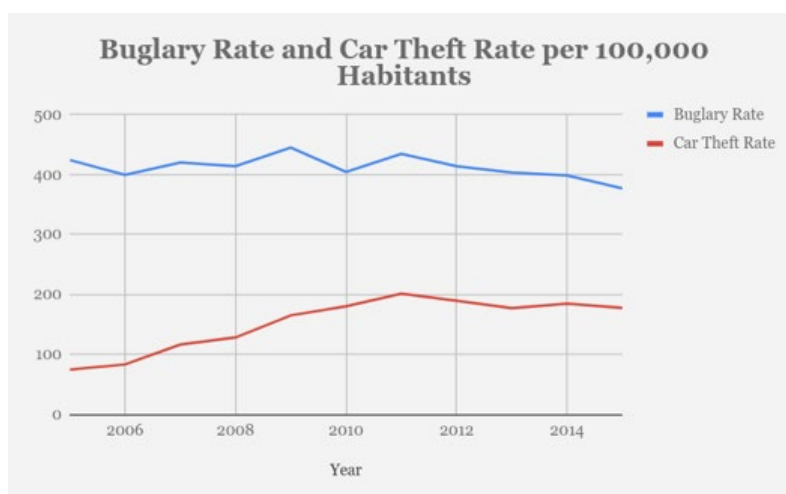
As seen in the chart above, immigration numbers are proportionally roughly the same as they were decades ago. What has changed, however, is the appearance of those who are immigrating. Political instability due to the Pinochet dictatorship from 1973-1990 probably deterred immigration from Europe, as it drastically drops from around 1970 onward. The last few years have also seen an interesting trend emerge. It appears that immigration from other American countries has actually slowed down since around 2012, proportionately speaking, despite what is reported in the news. Europe, who is facing immigration issues of its own, has seen a slight increase in migration to Chile, for the first time in decades. Immigration from other countries in the Americas, as a whole, is actually slowing down, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2017).

III. CRIME

Saying that crime in Chile has been on the rise is only half true. A study done on fifty-two Chilean cities by Fundación Paz Ciudadana and GFK Adimark showed that from 2016-2017 there was a 7.8% increase in the amount of people affected by theft and attempted theft. Street crime also rose to 85.3% from 82.5% in 2016 (OSAC, 2018). This falls in line with what people have been saying in Chile, that crime is on the rise. But no one has specified what type of crime is on the rise, which is an important distinction.

Going back a bit further to previous years, the crime rate has been quite sporadic, as seen in the figure below which shows burglary rates over the years. Burglary, in particular, has actually been steadily declining since 2011. Car theft rates have also been steadily declining since around the same time. Both of these crimes make up a significant portion of crime in Chile, besides pickpocketing and domestic disturbances. Although not represented in the graph below, it is worth noting that nonviolent crime dropped in 2017 down to 23.9% from 29.5%, a significant decrease of almost 6 points (Knoema, 2018).

Chart N° 2



Data sourced from INE, Chile.

Despite the ups and downs of recent violent and non-violent crime trends, Chile is still one of the safest and most stable countries in the region. In fact, in 2012 the homicide rate in Chile was only 3.1 per 100,000 residents, as compared to the United States who had a homicide rate of 4.9 per 100,000 people (Hideg & McEvoy, 2017). The World Bank Crime and Theft Index gives Chile a score of 3.4 on a scale of 0-30, making it safer than the U.S., which scores a 4.9 on the same scale (World Bank, 2017).

With society's baseline for security being so strong, it is possible that there is a low threshold for security concerns. Any increase in security and crime issues, is likely to cause alarm in a country that is not used to having these problems. Also, with so much instability in the region, it is possible that there is the presence of the "neighbor effect," in which Chileans feel that the continents problems are slowly making their way to Chile. This is, of course, is purely speculation.

Despite the recent rhetoric, many crimes in Chile are not on the rise. In fact, for almost a decade many common crimes like burglary and theft have been on the decline. Violent crimes have followed their normal trends, of being low for regional standards. It is possible that there are more incidences of crimes, violent and non-violent, being reported in the media. A disproportionate amount of attention to these crimes could be instilling the fear that has driven Chileans to claim that there is an increase in crime.

IV. EXISTING LITERATURE & POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

It is difficult to pinpoint why the growing fear of insecurity has been on the rise in Chile, especially if the numbers do not support that fear. An argument could be made, however, for growing security concerns in regards to petty crimes. This begs the question, why is petty crime on the rise in Chile? One reason could be the growth of the informal economy in Chile, as a result of increased immigration.

With increased immigration from non-European countries to Chile in the past few years, there has been an increase in people operating in the informal economy. Recent laws, like the one implemented months ago which mandates that Haitians and Dominicans seek visas in their host countries and not in Chile, have pushed many immigrants to the informal sector (Miami Herald, 2018). Immigrants who come to Chile illegally or with visas that expire within months or years, ultimately end up in the informal economy, which has numerous negative effects, including augmenting petty crime rates.

A 1997 paper by the World Bank Group defines the informal economy as the set of economic units that do not comply with government-imposed taxes and regulations (Loayza, 1997). In Chile, entry into the formal economy is too costly (or even impossible in some cases) for those coming from Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The level of education and money required is often prohibitive for immigrants. The legal proceedings and paperwork are also cost-prohibitive. Ultimately, immigrants are forced to work and live informally, often without housing contracts, work contracts, and little access to public services.

Not being part of the formal sector has disadvantages that may push people to commit crimes. According to the same World Bank Group study, and as seen in Chile, those in the informal economy are still subject to fines and government compliance, but they do not have the benefit of receiving government assistance or aid through public programs. In this way, it is the government's failure to act that is creating the growth in the informal sector (Loayza, 1997).

Informal economies have been linked to increased crime, in circumstances similar to Chile's. The lack of transparency and oversight in the informal economy lends it to a host of illegal activities. These activities can range from selling candy bars at the subway entrance, to human trafficking or drug dealing. Minimizing the informal economy will minimize the negative effects created by the informal economy. It is plausible to think that crime generated by the informal sector of society could be reduced by introducing those committing the crimes into the formal sector, where there are more rules, regulations, and economic structure (Ponsaers, Shapland & Williams, 2008).

V. CONCLUSION

Although Chile has seen a shift in the demographic of its immigration in the past few decades, the overall immigration numbers have not changed much over the years. In the last decade, less Europeans have arrived to Chile, while more Americans have immigrated to Chile. Although some have connected Chile's increased crime wave with the increased non-European immigration, there are other explanations that help explain the current situation.

Despite recent rhetoric around increased crime rates, there has actually been a drop in many nonviolent crimes, including burglary and car theft, two very common crimes in Chile. Regardless, Chile remains one of the safest countries on the continent, which makes me wonder if there is any real cause for concern.

It is clear that there has been a growth in the informal economy. The growth in the informal economy has several negative effects, one of which is potentially pushing people towards lifestyles of crime due to lack of resources and opportunities. Chile seems to be at the beginning of this immigration issue that it currently finds itself, and there is still time to make positive, effective public policy to curb the growth in the informal sector.

Increased social programs and decreasing cost of quality education could decrease nonviolent crime by including more people in the formal economy. More lenient immigration laws that are inclusive and do not force people into the informal economy would be another possible solution, although politically challenging. In the short term, Chile needs to find a way to integrate those already in country into the formal economy, so they can begin paying taxes, be fully protected under the law, and receive state benefits. In the long term, Chile can change the immigration process to ensure that new arrivals have these benefits and responsibilities early, mitigating any chance of them entering the informal economy, committing crimes, and ostensibly augmenting perceptions of fear that lead to harmful, racist rhetoric.

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