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Erin B. Taylor

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Poverty as danger

Fear of crime in Santo Domingo

● Erin B. Taylor

University of Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT ● Poor urban communities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean have been historically represented as sites of physical and moral danger. In recent years they have been blamed in particular for causing a surge in urban crime. This article explores how such representations are constructed through a process of engagement between many sectors of society. I examine how the general public, the national media and a poor barrio in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) contribute to a discourse that spatializes poverty and crime. I argue that the poor are the victims of a class politics that is played out on designated urban spaces in which they symbolize the economic and political crises of the state and middle-class fears of loss of social status. By marginalizing the poor to bounded, powerless spaces, the middle class retain their moral right to respectability and the possibility of social ascendance. ●

KEYWORDS ● crime ● danger ● fear ● media ● moral order ● poverty ● representations ● social class ● urban space

Representing poor neighbourhoods¹ as sites of physical and moral danger is a common and powerful way of legitimating their marginalization. From the *favelas* of Brazil through the ghettos of the United States to Jamaican slums, poor neighbourhoods are seen consistently as dangerous spaces, characterized by underdevelopment, disorder and violence (Austin-Broos, 2005; Bourgeois, 1996; Caldeira, 2000; Jacobowicz, 1994; Perlman, 1976). Spatialized social class is key in this discourse. It provides a representation of danger that integrates social status, class position and place of residence in order to position the poor. When these factors intersect with race and gender together they can

produce a range of historically specified marginalizations. Diane Austin-Broos remarks that this phenomenon promotes a 'politics of moral order'. These are 'forms of thinking and practice that naturalize a people and their social circumstance as the product of a moral deficit, deviance, or degeneracy' (2005: 184). Integral to this process is the positioning in space of crime along with poverty and race.

Though crime rates in Latin America and the Caribbean have risen alarmingly in the past decade, the accompanying fear of poor urban spaces far exceeds the threat they pose. In the Dominican Republic, for instance, poor urban communities are often portrayed as sites of conflict where residents engage in violent combat and attack outsiders who dare to venture into their space. Danger is seen to transgress these enclaved spaces through its embodiment in certain types of people, particularly unemployed black youth, who carry danger between sites. The conflation of poverty with danger reflects middle-class fears of social descendency in response to a series of economic crises throughout the region over the past two decades. Crime discourse that blames the poor masks the fact that social inequality, not poverty, is at the root of crime.

In this article I explore how poverty becomes a symbol of social disorder despite the presence of evidence to the contrary in the public domain. I detail how representations of poverty as danger are constructed through a process of engagement between many sectors of society, including the poor. I begin by discussing some views on the relationship between poverty and crime, and introduce the problem of crime and representation in Santo Domingo. I then examine how the general public, the national media and a poor community contribute to a discourse that spatializes poverty and crime. Lastly, I discuss the circumstances under which poor urban residents accept hegemony or resist these negative representations. My analysis draws from 10 years of newspaper articles about urban crime, a street survey on the waterfront and from fieldwork in La Ciénaga, one of Santo Domingo's poorest barrios.

Poverty and crime

There has been a sharp growth of crime rates in Latin American and Caribbean cities in the past decade, with violent crimes increasing as a proportion of overall crime (Moser et al., 2005). For example, in 2007 the Caribbean had a homicide rate of 30 per 100,000, compared to 26 per 100,000 in South America (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank, 2007).² Caribbean nations are increasingly concerned with problems of law enforcement in response to rising crime rates and rising public fear. Public discourse tends to point to rising poverty and economic crises as the cause of the rise in crime and violence. However, the relationship between crime and poverty has been questioned by scholars, who point out that the poorest strata of society experience the highest rates of victimization. Furthermore, research indicates

that inequality is much more closely related to crime than poverty. Inequality, migration, social instability, state violence, economic insecurity, the inadequacy of legal processes and global transformations have all been posed as likely alternatives (Briceño-León and Zubillaga, 2002; Caldeira, 2000; Moser et al., 2005). Briceño-León and Zubillaga argue that: 'The new violence in Latin America is a consequence of the convergence of global transformations and local transformations in urban society since the 1980s' (2002: 21). In particular they cite the free market economy, rising consumption and economic recession. According to Caroline Moser et al.:

The common stereotype is that poverty is the primary cause of violence. But the evidence clearly shows that in Latin America, inequality and exclusion, associated with the unequal distribution of economic, political, and social resources in urban context across the region, are more important. (2005:137).

These two viewpoints are essentially parts of the same model in which structural changes have resulted in social instability. According to this model, it is not poverty itself that results in crime, as poverty has always existed. Rather, globalization has increased the gap between rich and poor while at the same time making inequality more visible. Crime is used as a means to close that gap by young urban males whose lack of social mobility is firmly grounded in a racialized labour market and a history of marginalization, such as young Puerto Rican men in New York (Bourgeois, 1996). In the Caribbean this model is supported by the work of scholars such as Helen Safa (1995) and Stephen Gregory (2007), who draw attention to how economic crises throughout the region in the 1980s and beyond have increased insecurity for the urban poor.

The poor are much more likely to be victims of all types of crime than any other social group, thus defying the class-delimited view of perpetrators and victims (Briceño-León and Zubillaga, 2002; Caldeira, 2000; Kleinman, 2000). Briceño-León and Zubillaga found that: 'The poor suffer more from the violence of their neighbours, the abuses of the police and the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system which excludes them, acquitting or condemning them without due process of law' (2002: 35). Experiences of violence are gendered, with both poor men and women suffering more than their wealthier counterparts. Poor women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse and robbery, while poor men are more likely to experience violence on the street or at the hands of police. The notion that the wealthy are victims of the poor is clearly unbalanced. Rather than see the greater vulnerability of the poor as a function of the wealthy having the means to protect themselves, Caldeira (2000) argues that violence is the result of social exclusion that is exacerbated by the construction of walls and barriers. She observed that as spatial segregation increases in São Paulo, the poor become further marginalized and class conflict, including crime and violence, also increases. A discourse relating poverty to crime therefore increases the very danger that was feared in the first place.

Crime levels have become a major concern in Santo Domingo. Recently, newspapers have suggested that crime has overflowed the borders of the barrios and is impinging upon middle-class suburbs. An article in *Listín Diario* by Pérez Reyes, dated 10 February 2005, complained that:

In the leafy suburb of Gazcue, the residents cannot sleep in peace. The fear of being assaulted at any time prevents them sleeping. The wave of robberies, assaults and attacks, characteristic of almost all the popular [poor] barrios of the city of Santo Domingo, have arrived at this historic middle-class area.

In this article, the problem is presented as one of transgression: criminal behaviour is no longer contained in its site of origin but is manifest in a site that was previously pure. It is alarming because it represents social change and uncertainty. Another journalist protests the measures that people have been forced to take to protect themselves. In an article entitled 'Open the Doors,' dated 6th March 2005, Gautreaux Piñeyro comments:

Years ago, the majority of houses remained with their doors open and the danger of someone entering to rob the house was perhaps one in a thousand. Is there such a large economic bonanza that Dominicans have locked themselves up in their houses with bars, electronic alarm systems, motorized gates and other modes of protection? Almost without noticing we have allowed ourselves to get cornered: robbery, assault, attacks, in one word, crime appears to have won the game over decent people, working people.

Whereas the first article diagnosed the illness, the second describes the cure. Dominicans are taking increasing measures to protect themselves from crime, particularly robbery. The problem is posed as one of the flow of danger from certain city areas to others: crime has, shockingly, arrived in middle-class areas whereas once it was confined to the domain of the poor, and the middle class are reacting by hemming themselves into a corner. In order to isolate safe spaces and people from dangerous ones, certain areas of the capital city are designated as dangerous. As the above article illustrates, the structural reasons for the crisis have not gone unnoticed, and indeed many residents of Santo Domingo blame the prolonged economic crisis for the increase in crime. Nevertheless, media representations continually connect crime to poverty.

The growing fear of crime is not limited to the media, nor is it clear that the media are the *cause* of the widespread fear. It cuts across all social classes, with wealthy and poor alike expressing concern and calling for stronger law enforcement. Many residents swear that 10 years ago there was no crime at all and become distressed when crimes occur in areas that they have previously considered safe. They are disturbed not only because they feel they face greater danger, but also because they feel that the national character is changing. The image of the Dominican as friendly and sociable, mixing with neighbours on

the street, is threatened as people retreat behind locked and barred doors. The consensus on the presence of danger under the diverse conditions of the region is indicative that the fear of crime and violence constitutes a ‘moral panic’ in which perceptions of and responses to danger are disproportionate to actual risk (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Goode and Ben-Yehuda argue that:

The point is, yes, fear and concern *do*, for the most part, grow out of the very real conditions of social life. But no, they need *not* be commensurate with the concrete threat posed specifically by that which is feared – indeed, that threat may not even exist in the first place. At the same time, concern is almost certainly based on *some* concretely real phenomenon – even though that which is feared, specifically, may be only tangentially related. (1994: 49, italics in original)

The fear of crime is based on factors such as a real increase in crime rates, heightened media publicity, personal experiences and rumours. The reputation of certain city spaces as dangerous is developed through a public dialogue in which residents exchange rumours, personal experiences of crime, eyewitness reports and news reports. Through everyday talk, consensus is reached on the nature and source of danger. Caldeira called this ‘the talk of crime’, saying that:

Crime supplies a generative symbolism with which to talk about other things that are perceived as wrong or bad, but for which no consensus of interpretation or vocabulary may exist. It also offers symbolism with which to talk about other kinds of loss, such as downward mobility. Moreover, crime adds drama to the narration of events that themselves may be undramatic – for example, a forty-year process of change in a neighbourhood – but whose consequences can be distressing. (2000: 34)

In Santo Domingo, the ‘talk of crime’ affects in particular the poor communities around the River Ozama, located 2 to 5 km from the old city. Poor communities are considered to be potentially dangerous spaces for everyone who enters them due to a combination of threats including violence, crime, lack of sanitation and underdevelopment. They are also seen as unhealthy places to visit, as sewerage pipes feed directly into the adjacent river and open channels carry away dirty water (*agua negra*) from the streets and houses. Furthermore, barrios are devoid of middle-class destinations (such as shopping malls, universities, workplaces, and the homes of family and friends) and so non-residents would have little cause to visit them. These barrios are perceived to be not only dangerous to visit but also as the residences of thieves who prey on middle-class areas. As one respondent told me: ‘People are afraid of these sectors, it’s the number one theme. They [the delinquents] leave the barrios to steal things like cell phones’ (male, porter, from Villa Consuelo). Residents of these poor communities are isolated from the city’s social life through their lack of resources and geographic marginalization, evinced by the reluctance of taxis to enter them. This fear

then becomes embodied in the residents themselves, who are stereotyped as criminals. Residents face discrimination when looking for employment and may adopt friends' addresses so that their prospective employers do not learn that they live in a *barrio marginado*.

Notions of racial difference are also a factor that heightens representations of the barrios as criminal and can impact upon residents' employability. While barrio residents represent a range of colour shading, on average colour is visibly darker in the poor barrios than in the wealthier parts of the city. In the Dominican Republic one's appearance impacts upon one's chances in the job market; for example, front-desk jobs are often given to lighter-skinned people (Gregory, 2007). Lightening one's appearance, such as by bleaching the skin or straightening hair, is commonly practised to maximize chances in the job market and gain social acceptance as a person of value (see Candelario, 2007).

This fear of blackness stems from the Dominican Republic's long project to distance itself from its neighbour Haiti (perceived to be characterized by blackness, backwardness, poverty and disorder) in favour of Europe and the United States (characterized by whiteness, progress, wealth and civilization) (Torres-Saillant, 2000). Unable to deny the African heritage of Dominican people, the dictator Trujillo invented the term *indio* in the 1930s. *Indio* means 'Indian-coloured' and it replaces the polarity of white/black with its own central classification that is flexible enough to cover the majority of mixed-heritage Dominicans. Today, *indio* is the paradigmatic descriptor of Dominican identity and is used by the state and civilians alike. Indeed, people who are classified as *negro* or *prieto* (black) and *blanco* (white) are generally considered to be foreigners: the former are assumed to be Haitian, whereas *blancos* are American or European. Dark-skinned Dominicans are classified as *moreno* (brown) rather than *negro* (black) to avoid denying them citizenship while simultaneously permitting an idiom of *exclusion*.

While the category *indio* presents a solution to the polarizations of a white/black dualism, it can serve to mask racism in two ways. First, it perpetuates a myth of racial democracy and inclusion by placing blackness outside Dominican experience. Second, it de-legitimizes an idiom of blackness that has been used elsewhere in the Caribbean to speak of racial discrimination and oppression. As a result, the racial aspects of discrimination are overshadowed by discussion of poverty and place. In the following sections I explore how the relationship between poverty and place is used by various sectors to discuss insecurity and danger, and the extent to which it masks their sources.

Public perceptions of urban danger

In order to gauge perceptions of the nature and spatialization of danger in Santo Domingo I conducted a survey of 35 people on Santo Domingo's waterfront, known as the *malecón*. Of the respondents, 11 were female and 24 were male, and their occupations included shoe shiner, police officer and

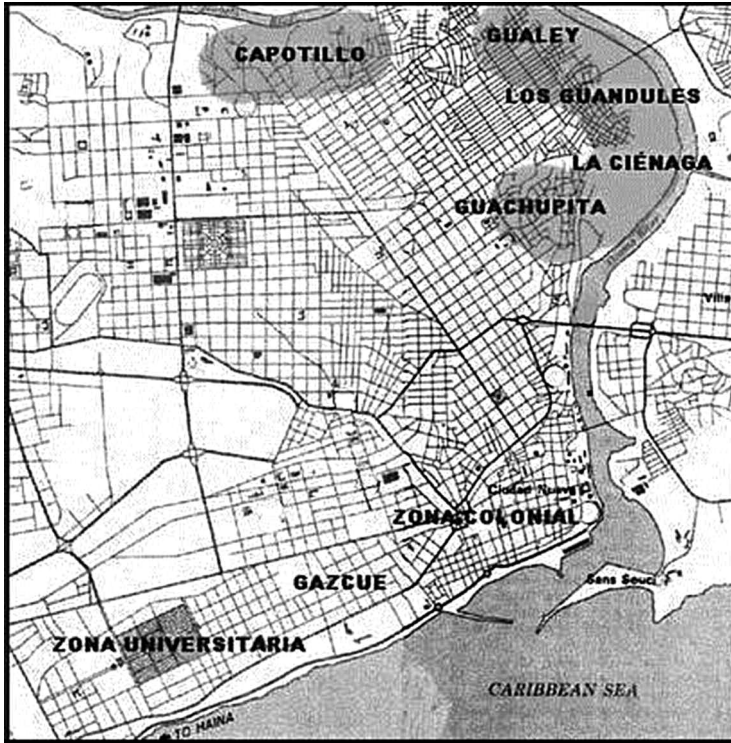


Figure 1 Map of the National District in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, showing the five sectors respondents considered to be the most ‘dangerous’ in grey: Capotillo, Gualey, Los Guandules, La Ciénaga and Guachupita. All but Guachupita border the Ozama River. Guachupita and La Ciénaga are around 3 km from the Zona Colonial.
 Source: Modified from <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/yates/yates.asp> (consulted 12 May 2006).

lawyer. Four of the respondents lived in a poor community and the remainder resided in working-class or middle class areas. None of my respondents were from areas considered to be ‘elite’, nor are the elite known for hanging out on the *malecón*. I asked the respondents 13 short questions and the survey took around 10 minutes to complete. The questions related to people’s perceptions of crime, criminals and dangerous places within the city.

The sectors of Santo Domingo that respondents considered most dangerous were (1) Capotillo, (2) Guachupita, (3) Gualey, (4) Los Guandules and (5) La Ciénaga (see Figure 1). All five are poor/working-class barrios in which the majority of residents identify as *indio* or *moreno*, while residents of middle-class neighbourhoods such as Gazcue are *indio* or *blanco*. Guachupita is a high-density urban setting consisting of four-storey apartment blocks and small, individual

dwellings made of concrete. The other four are poor, medium-density barrios situated on the banks of the Ozama River. They have few apartment blocks and perhaps only a quarter of the houses are made of concrete, with the rest constructed from any available materials, primarily tin and wood. La Ciénaga is a squatter settlement and the least developed of the five barrios.

Despite middle-class efforts to avoid unsavoury sectors, 30 out of the 35 respondents had visited a sector that they considered 'dangerous' to see relatives or friends, to do charity work, or had simply passed through. Six respondents had been robbed at some time in the past, but the remaining 29 had never been attacked. None of the reported robberies took place in these five sectors, and only two took place in other barrios that were mentioned as dangerous. When I asked respondents what type of person carries out these attacks, the most common responses were lower-class people/poor/unemployed; delinquents/*tígueres*/minors, and drug addicts. Uneducated people, deportees from the United States and children who had been mistreated by their parents were also mentioned. Not surprisingly, the typical criminal was considered to be a young man. Not one respondent mentioned colour or nationality in their depiction of a criminal, but I can attest from conversations that *morenos* and *haitianos* are considered to be dangerous. On at least three occasions after a robbery had taken place, I heard people (including the police) ask, 'Was it a brown man (*moreno*)?' to gain a profile of the perpetrator.

The issues that respondents had most heard about in the media (television, newspapers, radio) regarding these sectors were (1) attacks, (2) drugs, (3) murders and (4) a government plan to improve security in the barrios. For example, respondents told me:

Almost every day you hear in the press that there have been attacks, bullets fired, it's dangerous. (male, retired, Zona Oriental, a middle-class area)

Every day there are deaths and attacks, they rape girls, there are drugs and everything. These are lost sectors. (male, seller from Ensanche La Paz, a middle-class area)

The main reasons the respondents cited for considering these sectors to be the most dangerous were delinquency, drugs and unemployment in the barrios. One particularly telling response given to me by a street vendor was:

Because they're the barrios where the *tígueres*³ are, people who come from the country for the capital, and those that stay are these [delinquents], no-one else. (male, street vendor, Ensanche La Paz, a middle-class area)

Other reasons cited were poor parenting, lack of discipline among the poor, poverty and the presence of delinquents. Just over half of all respondents cited crime as the main reason why these sectors are dangerous, and just under half cited social causes. During my fieldwork I talked informally with many people about crime in the barrios, and I found that most ultimately blamed the weak economy, lack of assistance from the government and

insufficient education. That is, for the most part people cited the causes of crime as being structural. Furthermore, the most popular solution to the problem of crime in Santo Domingo was to increase police patrols in the barrios; for example, that ‘the barrios need more police. When you go to a barrio they tell you, be careful!’ Respondents relied upon typologies to make judgements about which places and people to avoid. In other words, awareness of inequality as a cause of crime does not at all guarantee that these barrios and their residents will be valued any more highly.

Types of danger in newspaper reports

Not all five sectors considered to be dangerous by my survey respondents (Capotillo, Guachupita, Gualey, Los Guandules and La Ciénaga) are treated equally by the press. For example, most stories about La Ciénaga concern its poverty. This contrasts with the adjacent neighbourhood, Guachupita, where most stories feature crime caused by urban social problems. However, public opinion of *both* barrios is primarily concerned with the danger of crime and violence. In this section I draw upon articles about La Ciénaga and Guachupita, published in major Santo Domingo newspapers between 1995 and 2005, to shed light on their criminalization in the public eye.

Guachupita sits at the top of the cliff that leads down to the Ozama River and borders the lively commercial district. It is a working-class suburb and its streets are laid out in a grid, lined with medium-density housing and three- or four-storey, concrete apartment blocks. Guachupita is much more developed than La Ciénaga, has better services and is popular for its proximity to transport. However, it is noisy and has little of the community feel of La Ciénaga. Although residents of Santo Domingo and the media consider Guachupita to be more dangerous than La Ciénaga, Guachupita is visited with much more frequency. This is because it is adjacent to the commercial district and also because it is easier to access, with plenty of transport running through it. La Ciénaga is more difficult to access due to its lack of transport and its isolated geographic position. Few of La Ciénaga’s streets and alleys are shown on the map (Figure 1) and indeed still do not appear on official maps of Santo Domingo.

La Ciénaga formed in the 1960s from the overflow of Guachupita. It is situated at the bottom of the cliff, right next to the river, and consists of an unplanned collection of tiny houses, most of which can only be accessed via a maze of narrow alleyways. The view of La Ciénaga as dangerous because of its underdevelopment is grounded in its history as a squatter settlement. It was sparsely populated until the late 1970s and early 1980s, when economic crisis brought migrants to the city from the south-west of the country. In 1977 and again in 1991, the reigning President Joaquín Balaguer carried out an incomplete and rather unsuccessful eviction of La Ciénaga.

Throughout the 1990s most media coverage of La Ciénaga dealt with clashes between residents and the police rather than civilian crime. In 1995 the

barrio had a run of bad press due to protests that took place within the barrio between March and July of that year. Residents were protesting against the construction of a new sewerage treatment plant in their barrio that would receive waste from a neighbouring suburb, not from La Ciénaga itself. On 11 March 1995, *El Siglo* reported that protests of the day before had left two people dead (one young man shot by police and a woman from a reaction to tear gas) and dozens injured in clashes with the police the day before (García, 1995a).

Protests continued for a few days until 14 March 1995, when the Balaguer government promised to relocate 50 families who lived immediately adjacent to the plant (García, 1995b). The journalist Genris García continued to cover the dispute in *El Siglo* during the next few months with sympathetic headlines such as 'Suffering Violence, Maintaining Hope' (1995c), a reminder of the government's promise (1995d) and reports of police abuses (1995e). He also reported a protest outside the National Palace by a commission of residents of La Ciénaga (1995f), and the arrest of dozens of young people following further protests in July (García, 1995g).

After Leonel Fernandez was inaugurated as President for the first time on 16 August 1996, the tone of media reports changes to focus on La Ciénaga's underdevelopment and promote the government's urban development plans. On 4 September 1996, *Hoy* quotes a document sent to the newspaper by a group of leaders from La Ciénaga that declares: 'The barrio La Ciénaga has been converted into the sector with the worst physical and moral conditions, thanks to the arbitrary and unjust measures taken by the governments of the past 20 years' (Rámos, 1996). Other articles published in that year include stories of overcrowding, disadvantaged children, public health, food distribution, the construction of housing, the ambiguity of land title and, as the year draws to a close, youth gangs. In May 1997 there is a resurgence of protests against the sewerage treatment plant and one young man is shot dead by the military (Medrano and Martínez, 1997). Reports of non-politically motivated violence does increase in this year, however, with the murder of a military officer in La Ciénaga and reports on the problem of delinquency (García, 1997; Valenzuela, 1997). Nevertheless, the majority of articles are concerned with the physical development of the barrio and the relocation of select residents, with a number of stories announcing improvements. President Fernandez visits the barrio twice, in August and in December, to inaugurate the sewerage treatment plant and mark the beginning of the construction of the school (*Nuevo Diario*, 1997; Peña, 1997).

In September 1998 residents of La Ciénaga formed a neighbourhood coordination group called the Coordination for the Development of La Ciénaga (CODECI, Coordinación para el Desarrollo de La Ciénaga). This organization takes the role of community public relations and creates dialogue with government institutions and the press. Henceforth there are fewer articles about La Ciénaga in the newspapers, and those that do appear generally refer to an ordered process of work and progress. By focusing on material improvements within the barrio, the media project an implicit message of a change in

the moral order. This representation rings true with what I was told by residents of other neighbourhoods who, when questioned, told me that La Ciénaga is dangerous but not as dangerous as it was in the past.

Guachupita begins to figure strongly in the press in 1997. From this year onward, stories about Guachupita almost exclusively report violence, public disorder, delinquency and drugs. Particular attention is paid to gangs, gang violence and gang culture, and the media exhibit none of the sympathy they show toward La Ciénaga. On 1 October 2004, *El Caribe* declared Guachupita to be in a 'state of emergency' after a particularly active week of gang activity in which two people died and nine were injured (Crousset, 2004). The imagery and content of media reports of Guachupita are evocative of an inner-city, North American ghetto. Indeed, it is common for Dominicans to blame return migrants for importing gang culture from the United States. By contrast, representations of La Ciénaga are more evocative of an urbanized World Vision advertising campaign, complete with images of naked children and substandard housing. However, most residents of Santo Domingo fail to differentiate between Guachupita and La Ciénaga unless they are specifically questioned about the differences. In practice, they treat the two sectors as equally dangerous.

In many ways newspaper stories about crime in the barrios appear more moderate than the stories I heard from people on the street. Overall, newspapers avoid blaming whole communities, report on police violence, publish results from international investigations into human rights and point to the structural causes of crime. However, the net result of representations of poverty and crime is to create a climate of fear, which 'becomes uniform because the media make information on crime a daily occurrence, and the vicarious experience of victimization is emotionally stronger than the rational calculation of the risk' (Briceño-León and Zubillaga, 2002: 30). Although newspapers differentiate between types of danger by portraying La Ciénaga as underdeveloped and Guachupita as controlled by violent gangs, the two representations have a similar effect in that they signify danger and therefore also crime and risk. Despite their different conditions and representations, the barrios are conflated in the public's imagination. Poverty and crime are both classified as sources of 'danger', which becomes an overarching trope by which barrios and their residents are valued. Residents' opportunities for social mobility are thereby constrained by a process of homogenization.

An insider's view

According to a survey of 300 people that I carried out in La Ciénaga, 66 percent of residents read the newspaper, 63 percent of households own a radio and 73 percent of households own a television. Residents are well aware of how the media and public view their community, and most agree that La Ciénaga is neither a desirable nor safe place to live. They learn about their dangerous status explicitly through the nightly news, and they experience it

implicitly through the 'violence of everyday life' (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) as they encounter themselves mirrored hierarchically in the body language and actions of others. Barrio residents tend to agree with some representations of their community, such as the belief that the barrios are more dangerous than wealthier parts of the city, but they contest the way in which public discourse fails to separate individuals as moral beings from the space in which they live. Their ambiguity reflects the way in which this discourse of poverty as a source of danger holds a partial, but distorted, truth. The range of positions and biases in this discourse impact upon residents as they attempt to distance themselves from the dual objective realities of crime itself and their experiences of criminalization.

When I asked *cienigüeros* (residents of La Ciénaga) what they considered the most negative aspects of their barrio, 68 percent identified delinquency, followed by pollution at 28 percent, robberies and thieves at 17 percent, and drugs at 11 percent. Delinquency has a similar meaning in Spanish as in English, referring to the anti-social behaviours of young men. In the context of La Ciénaga, this includes theft, fighting, shooting guns into the air, taking drugs and drinking excessively. The main difference between the responses of residents and the public was that *cienigüeros* noted pollution as a major problem. They are referring to the rubbish that litters the streets and the open drains of black water that run through many areas of the community. *Cienigüeros* also referred less to police patrols than did either the general public or the media. Newspapers reflect more accurately the concerns of residents than do either the general public or television news.

I then asked: 'What are the positive things about La Ciénaga?' The most common responses were 'Nothing' (28 percent), 'The barrio is being improved' (21 percent), 'the schools' (17 percent) and 'the churches' (13 percent). This means that almost half of the residents I surveyed believed that La Ciénaga currently had nothing to offer its residents, although a fifth expressed hope in the future. A third of residents saw their educational and religious institutions as the most positive features. Many parents were hopeful that education would help their children find decent employment and move out of the barrios, but adults tended to be less hopeful for themselves, some telling me that they would remain in La Ciénaga until they died or until the government relocated them. A full 93 percent of respondents said they would relocate to another part of Santo Domingo if they had the opportunity. One neighbour told me:

La Ciénaga is a barrio you can begin in. For people who have the wish to have something in their life it is a barrio where you can acquire a house with very little money, and from then on try to keep developing. There are very few positive things because it is a barrio where there is an abundance of delinquency, lots of drugs, lots of what you call bars where they drink a lot and do innumerable other things. In reality it's a little bothersome, but one has to live in some place or other until you are able to advance. (Juan, carpenter, aged 32)

While crime is often cited as a motivation to relocate, in reality residents are influenced by a range of social, structural and natural problems. Most of the housing in La Ciénaga is of very poor quality and residents live in cramped conditions. Services such as water and electricity are irregular and inadequate. The low-lying parts are seasonally flooded, and the areas near the cliff are at risk of landslides. Although the barrio is within walking distance to the city, transport is an issue, particularly in the night. Residents whose houses have street frontage have better access to services than those without, and concrete houses are easier to secure against robbery than the tin-and-wood sheds that make up the majority of housing in the alleyways. I found the least hope and the greatest willingness to move in the central, low-lying area, which consists of a maze of alleyways and tiny shacks, and is prone to seasonal flooding.

Residents talk daily about the problems of the barrio, sharing stories of crimes and near misses, arrests and encounters, complaining about the difficulties of living in La Ciénaga, and appraising new government initiatives to improve services or combat crime. Unlike outsiders who view entire barrios as dangerous, residents differentiate between places and people within their community, viewing some people and places as more dangerous than others. The public's and the media's view, in which the barrios are conflated as equally threatening, comes from their unwillingness to differentiate between types of danger. By identifying sources of danger, residents position danger away from themselves and their community networks, claiming legitimacy as a community. The source of danger, thus identified, becomes easier to imagine, articulate and manage.

Although *cienigüeros* acknowledge the presence of danger, they oppose the way in which the danger representation fails to acknowledge the presence of civility and community in their barrio, arguing that: 'We are not all delinquents, there are plenty of serious people in La Ciénaga.' Calling attention to individual morality is the most intimate line of defence against negative representations. Residents may be disproved in saying that their barrio, sector or street is safe, but the claim to individual morality is not so easily challenged, and nor do outsiders have a vested interest in perceiving each barrio dweller as morally corrupt (see Taylor, forthcoming, for a discussion of rural migrants' experiences in the city).

Residents of La Ciénaga point to the strength of their community organizations, the hard work they have done to develop the community, and identify as strongly religious in order to reverse the moral disorder imposed upon them. Civility is communicated through personal relationships when visitors come to La Ciénaga or when *cienigüeros* visit other city spaces for study, work or recreation. It is also promoted consciously by the organizations and the churches through press conferences and discussions with government officials. Residents have managed to change their public image to some extent through their community organizations and relationships with the Catholic Church. If place of residence and poverty are the foundations of representations of

danger, then individual morality, family and community are offered up by residents as evidence of respectability and the right to social inclusion.

One method to dissociate the barrio from crime is to externalize its source. According to many residents, the young men who live in La Ciénaga are not the troublemakers, but rather delinquents come to the barrio from other, more dangerous barrios such as Guachupita, with the purpose of committing crime. In a modified version, delinquents have an arrangement whereby they commit crime in each other's barrios rather than their own, tipping each other off as to the best places to rob. Residents of the different poor barrios tend to be suspicious of one another, and rarely consider their own barrio to be the most dangerous in the city. For example, residents of Guachupita asked me if it wasn't very dangerous for me to live in La Ciénaga, whereas residents took extra precautions against thieves when they visited Guachupita.

A similar process operates within the boundaries of La Ciénaga whereby residents would claim that their own sector is safe but that others are dangerous. For example, one particular sector was widely agreed to be the most dangerous part of La Ciénaga. When I visited that sector, residents frequently told me that the sector was safe, but perhaps a particular street or house was a source of danger. In this manner, residents continually manoeuvred themselves out of negative representations by displacing the danger on to other spaces that they felt were at a social and physical distance to themselves. Spaces with particular community functions, such as schools and churches, were exempt from regional competition and were seen as positive and safe by all. Morally suspect spaces such as bars or abandoned buildings were believed to be unequivocally negative and dangerous. There is also a temporal aspect to danger, in which spaces such as parks that are considered safe in the daytime become dangerous in the night time. At 11 p.m. when the *colmados* (grocery stores) shut their doors, people come in from the street where they have been enjoying the fresh night air and bar themselves in for the night. It is ironic that doors remain open until such a late hour in barrios that are considered to be so dangerous, whereas in middle-class areas doors are closed and locked around the clock.

While certain spaces were consistently referred to as dangerous, danger is not always fixed, but rather moves around in relation to the self and others. As I walked around the barrio with one young man, he pointed down a street and said, 'Where we are now isn't dangerous, but see down this street? It's really dangerous down there.' When I asked him why it was so dangerous, he answered: 'Because down there they don't know me.' Hence danger is relative to the social self as one moves around a given spatial field. Social danger is also gendered and aged: as a young man, he risked his safety by entering a new neighbourhood that is dominated by groups of other young men. If he were an older man or perhaps a woman, he may not face the same threat. Men are also perceived to be the perpetrators of violence. Men and women are victimized differently, and in La Ciénaga, victims of homicide are almost always men. While women can experience robberies and domestic abuse, men have a virtual monopoly over homicide by civilians or police.

In 2006, the Fernandez government extended the *Barrio Seguro* programme to La Ciénaga. When I visited in July 2006, groups of between four and six policemen were patrolling the barrio throughout the day and night. Police efforts to reduce crime have met with a mixed reception because the police are perceived to be the problem *as well as* the solution. Mothers are fearful when their sons walk around in the evening because they fear that the police will shoot them. The police are despised for using violence, but violence is tolerated when residents believe that ‘delinquents’ are the victims. On the other hand, a young, white, male neighbour of mine in La Ciénaga told me that the problem with the police is that, lamentably, they don’t kill enough delinquents. He told me that Dominicans need ‘la mano duro’ (a strong hand) to keep them in order. In his view, Balaguer was justified in killing delinquents and dissidents because he at least kept the country in order. Caldeira (2000) found that a similar attitude prevailed in Brazil, and she wondered why the Brazilian public support the death penalty if they do not trust the justice system. It is widely accepted in the Dominican Republic that the state and police are corrupt, but strong action is supported because fear of the danger of crime often outweighs the perceived risk posed by state institutions.

This greater security represents a loss of control of the spaces that residents have constituted for themselves, and it is unlikely that improved perceptions will improve the reputation of the community enough to bring more social mobility. In this context, policing becomes the cheaper alternative to effective development that would open up opportunities to the poor. The exercise of state control, through the constant policing of La Ciénaga and other barrios, masks the state’s relatively precarious position within the world economy. The hierarchy of societies, cultures and races in the trans-Atlantic means that the options of the Dominican Republic are limited, even were liberal progressives in power. Therefore, the danger of the circumstance, the dispossession and frustrations of the poor, are projected onto a population characterized mainly in terms of crime and thereby pathologized. In sum, the representations that confront *cienigüeros* serve not only to consolidate statuses but also to mask the limitations of the state.

Conclusion

While the public and the media are largely aware that the poor are not to blame for their condition of poverty, and even recognize that inequality is a major cause of the current rise in crime, poor barrios and the people who inhabit them nevertheless come to symbolize social disorder. Danger is situated and embodied in an attempt to manage and control it. Barrio residents reproduce this discourse in their attempts to distance themselves from both crime and the discrimination they experience as residents of criminalized communities. The currently proposed antidote is greater state control at the source of the danger, under the assumption that if the barrios can be brought under control internally their violence may not spill over into the rest of the city.

The issue here is not so much that a discourse of poverty as dangerous masks the structural causes of inequality and crime (which it unarguably does), but that the urgency of the situation demands immediate action, and an increase in policing is the only method that can generate rapid change. I suspect that this is not simply a case of choosing a simple, ready-made solution, but in fact speaks to the historical experiences of the Dominican people. While Dominicans recognize the structural problems inherent in their present society, they struggle to act against them, for their roots lie in other societies, and indeed in other times. Centuries of *caudillo* (strongman) politics, rebellion, dictatorships and police violence have shaped Dominican thought regarding the efficacy of violence in controlling social disorder. At the same time, poverty and insecurity have long appeared insurmountable. Dominicans are well aware that the state's ability to *provide* is constrained by their position in the global market, but that the role of *protector* is within its capability. Rendering poverty as a symbol of danger therefore has a cultural logic that is consistent with experience. Given these circumstances, re-educating the public is not likely to have a significant effect in reducing discrimination. Rather, it is necessary to address the structural causes of inequality.

Notes

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- 1 I use the terms 'poor neighbourhood', 'poor barrio' and 'the poor' throughout this article to refer generally to the lowest-income communities in a given city. These are primarily, but not exclusively, 'shantytowns' or 'autoconstructed' communities, whose residents work predominantly in the informal economy.
- 2 In Jamaica the homicide rate was as high as 49 per 100,000 in 2006, and in the Dominican Republic it has almost doubled from 14 per 100,000 in 1999 to 27 per 100,000 in 2007 (United Nations, 2007).
- 3 *Tiguere* means tiger, or a street-wise and potentially dangerous man.

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● **Erin B. Taylor** is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, Australia. She is interested in the localizing effects of globalization, representations of urban communities in the media, the conflation of poverty with violence, and processes by which people and places are classified, valued and ranked. Address: Department of Anthropology, R.C. Mills A26, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. [email: erin.taylor@usyd.edu.au] ●