violence, an issue that we have experienced personally and which we fear experiencing again, since we do not know when, where, or with whom we will face another violent situation. We physicians, health workers, who imagine ourselves vanquishing disease, now face an "epidemic" or rather "pandemic" problem, the main cause of death among young adults in the majority of our countries. We find ourselves immersed in a process where we shift from subjects of knowledge to "objects" of violence. We must not be indifferent to this process; may it at least serve for us to review our ways of understanding the problems. We citizens of Latin America, men and women, must understand that we should not take violence for granted. We need to reclaim public space and build social citizenship that turns the city of fear into the city of law, of rights, and of social citizenship. I believe this is Roberto Briceño-León's spirit when he ends his paper by quoting the old German saying "*Stad Luft mach frei*".

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1. Matus C. Política planificación y gobierno. Caracas: Fundación Altadir; 1987.
2. Castellanos P. Sobre el concepto de salud-enfermedad, un punto de vista epidemiológico. Cuad Med Soc 1987; (42):15-24.

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Nasty, brutish and short: violence and the unrule of law in Latin America

Urban violence in Latin America has become so ubiquitous that it can be seen not only as a problem of individual security but also of public health, as the WHO data cited in the first paragraph of Briceño-León's article amply demonstrate. Any attempt to grasp the underlying causes of violence is to be welcomed, as an understanding of the causes is a necessary first step towards overcoming them and hence reducing violence. It is particularly to be welcomed when, as here, a broad-ranging analysis is presented that distinguishes the impact of various factors. Thus, Briceño-León differentiates between originating factors of violence, factors that foment, and factors that facilitate violence. This approach avoids the pitfalls of more simplistic explanatory theses, by distinguishing between causes in the strict sense of the term, and factors that tend to exacerbate the propensity to use violence. Thus, the widespread availability of firearms is seen here as a facilitating condition, not an underlying cause. Canada, a country where firearms possession is fairly common, is at the same time a society with very low levels of violence because the originating factors – essentially Briceño-León identifies these as being related, not to poverty, but to inequality – are absent.

In the space allocated to me for this commentary, it would be impossible to do justice to the scope of this rich, wide-ranging, and thought-provoking article. Instead, I propose to point to two factors that I believe could usefully be given more weight in the analysis. I then turn to the role of the state as a factor of violence and end by linking this with the question of citizenship.

My first point relates to those factors that Briceño-León identifies as fomenting violence, i.e., they are not its originating causes, but tend to stimulate or encourage the use of violence. Briceño-León identifies three such factors: urban density, the culture of masculinity, and the drugs market. Two additional factors could, I believe, be usefully added. The first is the culture of hedonistic consumerism that has become pervasive throughout much of the world. Probably never before has the acquisition of material goods mattered so much to individual self-esteem and peer group recognition – especially among the adolescents that Briceño-León identifies as being particularly violence-prone because of their imprecise insertion into society in the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. He argues, compellingly, in my view, that there is a huge discrepancy between the democratization of cultural aspirations, in which television plays a crucial role, and the actual possibilities of fulfilling such aspirations in an increasingly unequal society: "*We are terribly equal in what we desire and frightfully unequal in our real possibilities to achieve it*". So the culture of consumerism is present in his analysis; I suggest that it deserves to be treated in its own right as a factor that foments violence and its impact analyzed in the same way as he proposes for the culture of masculinity.

A further factor that foments violence and that, in my view, deserves rather more weight, is the discursive treatment of the phenomenon in the mass media. Discourse not only reflects, but also creates, perceptions of reality, and as Briceño-León points out, a subjective feeling of insecurity has real consequences for behavior, from the acquisition and hasty use of firearms to various forms of violent and sometimes anticipatory self-help. It is noteworthy that the

subjective sensation of insecurity has grown considerably in recent years, including in cities that can be counted as among the safest in the world. Within Latin America, Briceño-León identifies Argentina as one of the region's least violence-prone countries (Table 2), yet recent media discourses in that country could lead one to imagine that a war without quarter is raging between society and violent criminals, and private security provision has become one of the country's few growth industries. If we accept the proposition that discourse can impact on behavior, I believe it is a logical second step to integrate a critical analysis of discourse into this explanatory model as a factor that foments violence.

On a more general level, and from a West European perspective, the question arises: What is the role of the state in all this? The notable weakness of the Latin American state, especially in its legal dimension (as argued above all by Guillermo O'Donnell) has a huge impact on citizenship, and the state fails in its most fundamental and essential task, that of guaranteeing a basic level of physical security for its citizens. Thus, weak state performance is reflected not only in an inability to fulfill welfare functions, but also in non-fulfillment of the central function of providing security. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that life in many of Latin America's cities is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short", just as Hobbes imagined life before the social contract. Of course there are exceptions within the region, states such as Chile and Costa Rica, where the state is comparatively strong in its legal dimension and the level of interpersonal violence is low (lower indeed than in an old-established democracy like the United States, as Briceño-León points out), as well as important gradations that should make us cautious about sweeping generalities. In one respect, the situation is worse than Hobbes' imagined state of nature, for not only does the state fail to provide a minimum level of security, but it also invests its agents with an authoritative power that is frequently used arbitrarily and with no regard for legality. Citizens are thus doubly insecure, threatened by high levels of interpersonal violence and also by state agents whose supposed function is to protect them. Pre-state forms of political organization no longer exist, and the state, through its agents, is effectively an additional source of violence through its acts of omission and commission. This argument does not (necessarily) imply the need for more security agents, but rather points to the need for more rule of law. The weakness of the state in its legal dimension

is also directly relevant to the meaning of citizenship. If we define citizenship with Tilly [1] (p. 253) as "*a set of mutually enforceable claims relating categories of persons to agencies of government*", we can readily perceive that the concept has little meaning where formal claims, foremost among them the right to a basic level of physical security, are effectively non-enforceable. The ideal of urbanity thus gives way to the truncated citizenship described by Briceño-León.

1. Tilly C. Conclusion: why worry about citizenship? In: Hanagan M, Tilly C, editors. Extending citizenship, reconfiguring states. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield; 1999. p. 247-59.

The author replies
El autor replica

Roberto Briceño-León

I wish to begin by expressing my appreciation for the generous comments and sharp criticism sparked by my article. The opportunity offered by the *Debates* section of *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* confirms the key importance that the scientific community ascribes to expanding our knowledge and scientific practice. It behooves me to humbly and joyfully accept such comments and criticism, because the precise remarks on the aspects that are missing or that merit greater substantiation reveal our limitations. The commentary is valid and demonstrates our inevitably limited way of reconstructing the world, and the intelligent and knowledgeable debate is so varied culturally and professionally that it allows me to move forward and improve the sociological framework through which I propose to understand violence, refining its favorable aspects and correcting its flaws.

At the end of a beautiful text on the empirical basis of knowledge, Popper [1] proposes a metaphor according to which we do not build our knowledge on a rock, but rather on muddy ground. That epistemological premise always holds true, because a theory's role is to blaze