

Women's perception of urban insecurity in the Monterrey metropolitan area during COVID-19

■ **Percepción femenina de la inseguridad urbana en el área metropolitana de Monterrey en tiempos de COVID-19**

■ **A percepção das mulheres sobre a insegurança urbana na área metropolitana de Monterrey em tempos de COVID-19**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore women's perception of urban insecurity prevailing during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Monterrey metropolitan area (MMA) in Mexico. In recent decades, large cities have grown and with them, so has crime increased. As a result, the issue of urban insecurity has become important, particularly during this COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a cross-sectional, descriptive, non-probabilistic study was conducted involving 69 women aged 18 to 58, with Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León being taken as the sample frame. Our findings show that 74% of the participants indicate that urban safety near their homes, ranges fair to very bad, while 81% feel the same about safety near their workplaces. Ninety-three per cent say that crime has increased. Meanwhile, 55% say that the situation has affected their quality of life severely to very severely, denoting the MAM population's transition from one of social well-being to one of vulnerability, which has been further aggravated by the health contingency.

Keywords:

Urban areas, urban life, urban crime, urban victims (source: Criminological Thesaurus — United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute — UNICRI), urban insecurity, street crime (source: author).

Resumen

Este artículo investiga la percepción femenina de la inseguridad urbana que prevalece durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en el área metropolitana de Monterrey (MAM) en México. En las últimas décadas las grandes urbes han crecido y con esto también se favorece la delincuencia. Por lo tanto, el tema de inseguridad urbana se ha tornado pertinente y, particularmente, ha sido de interés abordarlo durante esta pandemia de COVID-19. Para esto, se realizó un estudio de carácter transversal y descriptivo, no probabilístico, en 69 mujeres de 18 a 58 años, y se consideró la Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León como el sitio de muestreo. En el presente documento los hallazgos muestran que 74% de las participantes indica que la seguridad urbana cercana a sus casas es regular a muy mala. Similar situación se presenta en sus lugares de trabajo, según afirma el 81%. El 93% asevera que los actos delictivos aumentaron. Entre tanto, el 55% dice que esta situación afectó de grave a muy gravemente su calidad de vida. Esta situación denota la transición de la sociedad en el MAM de bienestar social a otra de vulnerabilidad, que se ha incrementado por el escenario de la contingencia sanitaria que ha padecido.

Palabras clave:

Áreas urbanas, vida urbana, delitos urbanos, víctimas urbanas (fuente: Tesoro Criminológico — Instituto Interregional de las Naciones Unidas para la Investigación sobre la Delincuencia y la Justicia — UNICRI), inseguridad urbana, delincuencia callejera (fuente: autor).

Resumo

Este artigo investiga a percepção das mulheres sobre a insegurança urbana prevalente durante a pandemia COVID-19 na área metropolitana de Monterrey (MMA), no México. Nas últimas décadas, as grandes cidades cresceram e, com isso, a criminalidade também aumentou. Portanto, a questão da insegurança urbana tornou-se relevante e, particularmente, tem sido de interesse abordá-la durante esta pandemia da COVID-19. Para este fim, foi realizado um estudo transversal, descritivo e não—probabilístico entre 69 mulheres de 18 a 58 anos, e a Universidade Autônoma de Nuevo León foi considerada como o local de amostragem. Neste documento, os resultados mostram que 74% dos participantes indicam que a segurança urbana perto de suas casas é justa a muito ruim. Uma situação semelhante é encontrada em seus locais de trabalho, de acordo com 81%. Noventa e três por cento dizem que a criminalidade aumentou. Enquanto isso, 55% dizem que esta situação tem afetado seriamente a qualidade de vida deles. Esta situação reflete a transição da sociedade no MMA de uma situação de bem—estar social para uma situação de vulnerabilidade, que tem aumentado devido ao cenário de contingência de saúde que experimentou.

Palavras—chave:

Áreas urbanas, vida urbana, crime urbano, vítimas urbanas (fonte: Thesaurus Criminológico — United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute — UNICRI), insegurança urbana, criminalidade de rua (fonte: autor)

Introduction

Besides progress, the marked proliferation of urban developments has brought with it a series of social connotations that manifest as people's unease and insecurity. This has been motivated by the increase in the levels of criminality and its spontaneity, which have caused city configurations to be demarcated by places lacking in security or in attention on the part of the responsible authorities in charge of efficiently implementing protection and actions for crime control and prevention (Luneke, 2021; Vargas, 2000).

Corraliza and Aragonés (1993) commented in the 1990s, that urban centers had grown considerably, favoring increased criminal activities, an aspect that continues to this day, particularly due to economic and wealth concentration. It can therefore be argued that among the causes that have promoted this genesis are excessive population growth, the breakdown of social relations, and the increased opportunities for criminal activity (Pozuelo, 2018).

Thus, issues of citizen security —particularly in the urban area— have become salient throughout the world, especially if we want to build a society that guarantees people's rights (Paz & Ciudad, 2017). When this does not happen, citizens fear being subjected to personal violence and crime, fueling a lack of trust in the institutional structures created to control such events.

From this perspective, Fernández and Corraliza in 1996 (cited by Pozuelo, 2018), argue that the fear provoked in people is a negative response to the perception of a risk that is of an emotional nature, resulting from personal vulnerability and the danger of finding oneself in a threatening place or circumstance. In this respect, Morales et al. (2013) asserted in their research that “in recent years more than 60 percent of urban residents have been victims of crime” [en los últimos años más de 60 por ciento de los residentes urbanos ha sido víctima del crimen] (p. 32), a figure that may have increased in time and alongside urban growth.

The purpose of this study is to approach the phenomenon of urban insecurity, now considering the health contingency caused by COVID-19, in order to provide information to enrich the theoretical context surrounding this event. To this end, the position was to consider social and physical vulnerability as victimization resulting from this social disorder, from a women's perspective.

Reference and situational framework

It is today widely accepted that cities have undergone a series of transformations that have led to different social phenomena, which are precipitated by poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, prevailing inequalities, and the lack or application of social regulations by the institutions in charge (Vera et al., 2017).

However, underlying this event are roots that are intertwined with the changing economic scenarios, communities' living conditions and the increasing pace of urban development (UN—Habitat, 2009), and in which people's moral integrity — customs and habits — as well as their physical integrity are disrupted. Urban insecurity therefore responds to sociopathologies arising in the heart of large cities. This may have been aggravated by the circumstances of the COVID-19 health contingency, which has brought economic activities to a standstill and, consequently, a social condition that has posed various difficulties for all sectors of society, but particularly and mostly to a less economically favored sector of society. Morales (2021) also mentions that the results of a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducted among its member countries —including Mexico— to determine the repercussions of the pandemic, reveal that 6 out of every 10 inhabitants in Mexico have lost their jobs or source of family income and that 11 out of every 100 Mexicans are enduring hunger as a result of the pandemic.

These social factors can have a direct impact on the increase of urban insecurity. Jasso (2013) asserts that insecurity —in this case urban— proceeds substantially from a person's perception, in that the individual:

situates herself in the circumstances and judges the likelihood of being a victim of crime, based on their knowledge and daily activities, as well as on what the media reports, or what is discussed in conversations with other interlocutors¹

1 Translation of the following original textual quotation in Spanish: se sitúa frente a las circunstancias y emite un juicio sobre las posibilidades de ser víctima de un delito, basado en sus conocimientos y sus actividades cotidianas, así como en lo que refieren los medios de comunicación, o lo que se discute en las conversaciones con otros interlocutores. (p. 16)

Thus, the shock of urban insecurity faced by people in urban cities now poses greater challenges as a result of the proliferation and socio-economic havoc wreaked during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This has made urban insecurity a public problem. In this sense, Jasso (2013) further comments that this social event regardless of its origin leads to the deterioration of public spaces and is reflected in people's behavior by dismissing participation in urban life. Piedrahíta (2019) states that:

urban growth [...] has brought with it an increase in crime, violence, insecurity, and the perception of insecurity. Violence is more concentrated in urban areas, generating a complex relationship between higher population density, informal development and deficiencies in planning, greater exclusion, segmentation, and segregation of people²

With this, he also asserts that this imbalance in urban behavior is not related to poverty, but rather to the prevailing social inequalities such as social exclusion or discrimination. It is in this context that State institutions must enforce the substantive functions of urban security by encouraging urban security through “preventive, dissuasive, and deactivation actions to ensure minimum conditions of governance, administration of justice, protection of physical integrity, and respect for the individual rights of citizens” [preventivas, disuasivas y de desactivación para asegurar condiciones mínimas de gobernabilidad, de administración de justicia, de protección de la integridad física y de respeto a los derechos individuales de los ciudadanos] (Ramos, 2005, p. 38). So far, these activities have been strengthened by political frameworks based on preventive and punitive orientations in order to make these actions prevail. The following is a framework of the social conditions prior to COVID-19 prevailing around the scope of this research, which will be carried out both in the national context and in the studied socio-spatial circumscription of the metropolitan area of Monterrey (MAM).

Country situation before COVID-19

In Mexico, the National Urban Public Safety Survey (Inegi, 2021) reports that 66.4% of Mexicans —18 years of age and older— assert that living in their city is extremely unsafe. This insecurity increases when people

2 Translation of the following original textual quotation in Spanish: el crecimiento urbano [...] ha traído consigo el incremento de los delitos, la violencia la inseguridad y la percepción de inseguridad. En particular la violencia tiene una mayor concentración en las zonas urbanas generando una relación compleja que a mayor densidad poblacional con un desarrollo informal y deficiencias en la planeación, mayor exclusión, segmentación y segregación de las personas. (p. 4)

are withdrawing their money at ATMs —as stated by 78.4% of those surveyed—, when they are on public transportation (as stated by 71.2%), when they are in a banking institution (63.4%), and when they simply walk through the streets of the city (59.2%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. | Population aged 18 and over who feel unsafe, by type of place

Type of place	Percentage
ATM located on public roads	78.4
Public transportation	71.2
Bank	63.4
Streets you usually use	59.2
Market	51.6
Park or recreation center	49.2
Highway	49.1
Shopping mall	35.7
Automobile	32.7
Work	31.7
Home	20.4
School	20.4

Source: Inegi (2021).

In this context, Pansters and Castillo (2007) identified the emergence in Mexican society of “parallel power and territorial structures, along with no—man’s lands and government vacuums, as well as the formation of subaltern social and cultural integration schemes, which are plagued by violence” [“estructuras paralelas de poder y territoriales, junto con tierras de nadie y vacíos de gobierno, así como la formación de esquemas de integración social y cultural subalternos, que están plagados de violencia] (p. 578). Accordingly, Robles (2014) asserts that:

The increase in crime, the appearance of new and more violent forms of delinquency, insecurity on the streets, impunity for crime, and the deficient participation of police forces have increased society’s dissatisfaction to the point that the issue of public criminal insecurity is one of the main topics of social debate³.

Of course, in Mexico there have been other studies that have addressed the perception of urban insecurity,

in which there are different angles of approach. For example, Ramos (2005) conducts a study that investigates aspects of national security and another called citizen security, which emphasizes the right to life and the protection of people’s civil rights. Zepeda (2009), meanwhile, performs a national stratification —by state— using a crime and violence index that shows Chihuahua as the state with the greatest problems, followed by Baja California, the State of Mexico, Sinaloa, Guerrero, and Mexico City. This represents a high level of urban insecurity for citizens.

Meanwhile, Alvarado (2010) studies the existing forms of citizen participation in matters of public safety, and finds evidence that reveals how neighborhood committees created to represent them before the authorities have been transformed into entities to combat urban insecurity. However, their impact in reversing this social phenomenon has been limited. Jasso (2013) conducts research on the perception of insecurity in Mexico, which reveals that 66% of Mexicans perceive themselves as vulnerable and insecure in the locality where they live, preventing them from carrying out customary activities related to their daily lives. Subsequently, Morales et al. (2013) undertook a study based on the assumption of urban security in order to investigate and explain how this is territorialized and affects a pattern of threatening events that undermine citizen security.

Robles (2014) examines the perception of fear associated with walking the streets of Mexico. Here, he shows the differences between women and men with respect to criminal social behaviors. Flores (2015), on the other hand, conducts a study employing a methodology —using geomatics— to establish the understanding of urban insecurity as the fear of crime from a spatio-temporal perspective. With this, he reveals that this insecurity stems, firstly, from having been a victim and, subsequently, from other factors such as urban gossip and the mass media. Together, Jusidman et al. (2016) provide a publication in which they analyze the different urban contexts in Mexico, considering urban growth and the structuring of housing as determinants of urban insecurity and violence. They do so in an attempt to find answers to the evolution of this social event that is increasing and to which the cities themselves contribute by creating these spaces of urban insecurity.

In the same vein, Vera et al. (2017) conducted a study on the perception of insecurity, as well as victimization and the restrictions that these situations trigger. They found that there are still differences between the appraisals among the age groups of the participants. Echarri (2017) proposes another index to evaluate violence in Mexico, the characterization of the victims as well as the people who perpetrate the criminal acts, considering the temporality and occurrence of these events.

3 Translation of the following original textual quotation in Spanish: el incremento de la criminalidad, la aparición de nuevas formas de delincuencia más violenta, la inseguridad en las calles, la impunidad del delito y la deficiente participación de las corporaciones policiales han acrecentado la inconformidad de la sociedad hasta el punto de que el tema de la inseguridad pública delictiva es uno de los temas principales de debate social (p. 82).

More recently, Mohar (2018) published a paper on insecurity and violence in Mexico, in which he takes stock of the Mexican government's intervention and points out that much of this situation is caused by the derivations of drug trafficking activities, which results in urban insecurity. Also, according to the Index of Peace in Mexico shown in Mohar's work, 11 states — representing 34.37% of these in the country— are classified as less peaceful. Among these, we have Mexico City, Michoacán, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Zacatecas, Morelos, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Sinaloa, Colima and Guerrero. Thus, broadly speaking, Mexico today suffers from a citizen security crisis that has become a priority issue for the country that as indicated by Castillo and García (2021), is also affected by the area of study.

Surrounding areas of the MAM before COVID-19

The MAM located in northeastern Mexico has been the subject of several studies on urban violence and insecurity. Cerda (2009) conducted a study investigating urban violence, the intra-family scenario, and suicides in Monterrey and its surrounding municipalities, and found a relationship between acts of violence in the family context and human deaths. Cerda et al. (2012) later undertook a cartographic study to describe the areas in the MAM where aggressions and crimes are concentrated, which produce additional fear, and disrupt people's daily behaviors. In an investigation conducted in three metropolitan areas of Mexico —among them the MAM— regarding urban insecurity, Ayala and Chapa (2012) conclude that when the population feels insecure, the likelihood of reducing outings or even refraining from leaving the house increases due to a fear of being a victim of a violent or criminal act that threatens people's safety.

As a result of the social problem of urban insecurity in the MAM, in 2012, a group of businesspeople and 17 mayors visited the city of Medellín in Colombia to learn about the city's experiences in this area and how they were recovering public spaces and social harmony that had been broken by the insecurity and violence to which they were subjected. The purpose of this was to learn and illustrate the practices and programs implemented by the Colombian authorities (Sánchez & Pérez, 2014). On the other hand, the research by Sánchez and Pérez (2014) deals with the urban crisis of insecurity in Monterrey and its metropolitan area, characterized by the rise in crime, revealing that this has represented social and unexpected traumatic stress for the community,

increasing anxiety among citizens. Chávez and Veloquio (2014) also indicate in their published work that the MAM is beginning to exhibit territorial segregation — as a differentiation of urban space— as a product of violence, urban insecurity and criminal acts, but at the same time they point out that this urban social fragmentation is intensifying transcendental and structural changes of an urbanistic nature, which have also promoted a sharp socioeconomic differentiation among the citizenry.

Similarly, Aguayo and Medellín (2014) conducted a study to relate spatial dependence and crime events in Monterrey, and found that there is a dependence relationship in the tendency for these illicit acts to occur in places whose characteristics contain particularities of high density, in which families with female heads of household coexist and, finally, in which a large proportion of young people cohabit. A little further on, in their study on the imaginary of fear created by the citizens of the MAM, Gómez and De Aguiar (2015) highlight that there are still different expressions that are the result of this social construct of urban insecurity, and that it is based mainly on social exclusion and segregation, but also on the perceptible social differentiation of an urban nature. In this same discursive line, we find the work by Saucedo (2017), who in his research on the urban imaginaries of violence in public spaces concludes that criminal acts are now transferred from hostile areas to public and collective spaces, thus expanding the scenario of criminal and urban insecurity, as well as that of territorial order in the MAM.

At the same time, Rubio et al. (2017) evaluated the social impacts of social violence in Monterrey, and, in particular, inferred that these affect two relevant aspects: people's emotional and psychological states. They also add that they find a trigger of this urban violence and insecurity, which is gestated in the breakdown of the context of the social fabric and the concept of community. Meanwhile, Soto (2018) exposes some highly meaningful results when relating the context of urban violence and insecurity with social segregation, and reveals that the MAM's territorial configuration is quite exclusionary, as reflected in the social imaginaries. Rodríguez and Casado (2018) concurrently mention in their research work that the factors that foster insecurity and criminal acts in the MAM are rooted in social exclusion, poverty, unemployment and immigration, among other factors that are ostensible.

Avila et al. (2019) subsequently analyze social capital and its relationship with criminal acts, detailing that having this capital prescribes aspects of containment

against petty crimes and crimes against people's property. Alvarado et al. (2020), within this framework of urban insecurity, later analyze which factors are determinant in committing an illicit act against micro-businesses. They find that the most vulnerable businesses are small businesses located in urban environments where social conflict and hostility are evident. Cantú-Martínez (2020) published a study on young university women's perception of urban insecurity in the MAM. They report that 96% of the participants believe that urban insecurity has increased and 70% indicate that the quality of life has been severely affected. This is latent both in their place of study and in the surroundings of their homes.

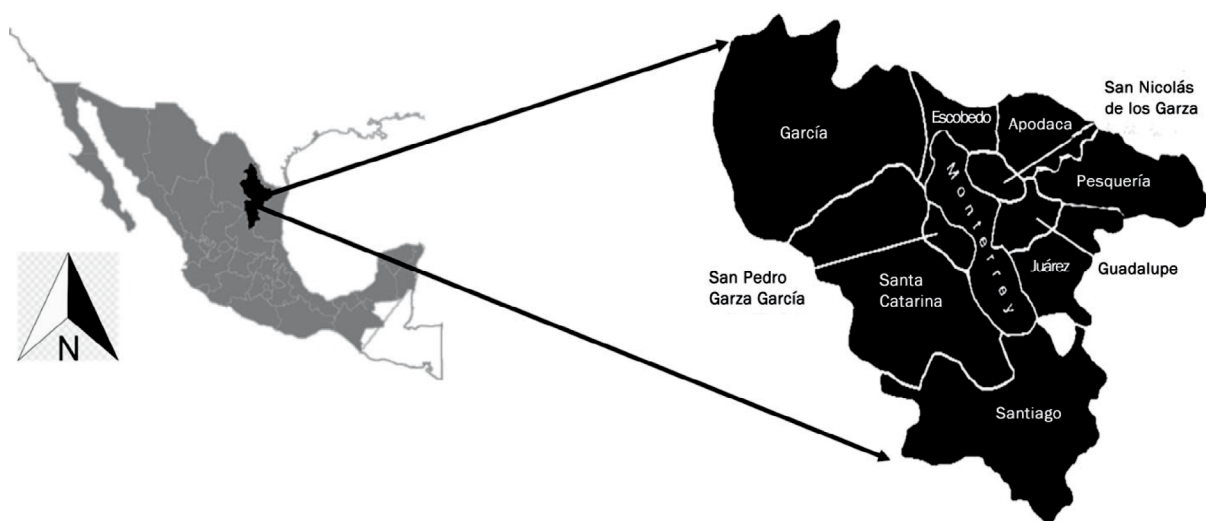
Meanwhile, Rodríguez (2021) conducts a study on what he calls vital frontiers, pointing out that the relationship between urban insecurity and embodied thoughts are the result of emotions arising from the socio-spatial implications of the crimes that take place, and that engender fear in the people who live in the MAM. Sumano (2022) recently published his work on the involvement of governance as a means of socially preventing urban insecurity, crime, and violence in Nuevo León —and, consequently, in the MAM— His argument highlights the authorities' and state policies' inability to provide an adequate response to this social eventuality. A key part of his argument indicates that the problem lies in the fact of having a policy based on the epidemiological model, which is highly questioned in environments with aggravated urban insecurity. In such cases, it is essential to first address the frenzy of violence —to stop it— and then, to address the causes associated with these criminal acts as prevailing urban insecurity.

In view of the above, both in Mexico and in the MAM, studies on the perception of urban insecurity have become valuable, as they allow, based on the actors themselves (citizens), to build the existing social imaginary that is demarcated in a defined space and contextualize the existing social relations (Almanza et al., 2020). On the other hand, there is a nuance with a gender perspective, as women, as Rojas (2021) asserts, experienced an epiphanic episode during the pandemic, in which violence and insecurity against them became much more dangerous. This examination is, thus, intended to explore the perception of urban insecurity among a group of women in the MAM during the COVID-19 pandemic. The juncture lies in knowing the context and perception of urban insecurity from a female perspective during this health contingency.

Methodology

A cross-sectional, descriptive, non-probabilistic study with a gender perspective (Blanco, 2021) was conducted. It involved 69 women from the MAM, in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico, who agreed to participate in order to address the specific objective of evaluating the perception of urban insecurity, and to offer information on the experiences of the stakeholders themselves (Hernández et al., 1991). The MAM is made up of the municipality of Monterrey and 11 other municipalities that converge in it. It lies in northeastern Mexico, in the State of Nuevo León (see Figure 1) and had an estimated population of 5,000,000 inhabitants at the time of the COVID-19 health contingency. Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León was taken as the sample frame.

Figure 1. | Location of the State of Nuevo León (in the darker shade) and the metropolitan area of Monterrey in Mexico



Despite the limitations of the research, due to the health restrictions of the time, studies with these characteristics mainly allow us to obtain information on the particularities of the participants, their perceptions, and the scenarios that prevail around the object of study, which, in this case, refers to urban insecurity (Cantú—Martínez, 2020). The participants in this study worked at Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, and were aged between 18 and 58 years.

A specially designed questionnaire was applied to collect the relevant information—with prior verbal consent—which contained the following sections: socio-demographic information, deterioration of their quality of life, and a final section referring to aspects of urban insecurity, both in their place of work and in their home. They were asked whether they or someone they knew had been a victim of a crime, and whether they had filed a complaint. A database was then created and processed using descriptive statistical techniques to obtain the frequencies related to the questions posed. Finally, an analysis of the responses was carried out to clarify the conditions in which the participating women coexist during the health contingency and their perception of urban insecurity.

Results

Sociodemographics

Fifty-seven percent ($f = 39$) of the women reported having been born in the state of Nuevo León, while 43% ($f = 30$) indicated that they were born in another state. Forty-nine percent ($f = 39$) of the participants reside in the municipality of Monterrey, 17% ($f = 12$) in the municipality of Guadalupe, followed by San Nicolás de los Garza with 10% ($f = 7$), followed by Apodaca and Santa Catarina with 7% ($f = 5$), Escobedo with 3% ($f = 2$), and the municipalities of Juárez, García and Pesquería with 2% ($f = 1$) each. Two percent ($f = 1$) did not respond (see Table 2).

When asked how long they have lived in this sector of the MAM, 30% ($f = 21$) reported having lived there for more than 20 years; 22% ($f = 15$), between 5 and 9 years; 19% ($f = 13$), between 1 and 4 years; 15% ($f = 10$), between 10 and 14 years; 10% ($f = 7$), between 15 and 19 years; and finally, 4% ($f = 3$), less than 1 year. The most frequently reported level of schooling completed by the participants was vocational with 58% ($f = 40$); followed by a bachelor's degree, 19% ($f = 13$); followed by completed high school, 7% ($f = 5$); completed secondary school, 6% ($f = 4$); incomplete high school, 4% ($f = 3$); incomplete secondary school, technical high school, and unfinished professional career, 1% ($f = 1$); finally, 1% ($f = 1$) did not respond (see Table 2).

Table 2. | Sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants

Characteristic	Percentage
<i>Place of residence</i>	
Monterrey	49
Guadalupe	17
San Nicolás de los Garza	10
Apodaca	7
Santa Catarina	7
Escobedo	3
Juárez	2
García	2
Pesquería	2
Did not answer	2
<i>Length of time residing in this area of the MAM</i>	
Over 20 years	31
15 - 19 years	10
10 - 14 years	15
5 - 9 years	22
1 - 4 years	19
Less than 1 year	4
<i>Schooling</i>	
Vocational	58
Bachelor's degree	19
Incomplete Bachelor's degree	1
Technical high school	1
High school	7
Incomplete high school	4
Secondary school	6
Incomplete Secondary school	1
Did not answer	1

Women $n = 69$.

Security

When asked about how they perceived the security where they lived, 48% ($f = 33$) indicated that it was fair; 26% ($f = 18$), good; 23% ($f = 16$), bad; and 3% ($f = 2$), very bad. In contrast, when asked about the safety where they work, 60% ($f = 34$) mentioned that it was fair; 19% ($f = 11$), good; 16% ($f = 9$), bad; and 5% ($f = 3$), very bad. Regarding their perception of crime during the COVID-19 health contingency, 93% ($f = 64$) considered that it had increased; 6% ($f = 4$), that it remained the same; and only 1% ($f = 1$) mentioned that it decreased. When asked about how the insecurity affects their quality of life, 41% ($f = 28$) said it affected them severely;

38% ($f = 26$) moderately; 14% ($f = 10$) very severely; 6% ($f = 4$) slightly; and 1% ($f = 1$) did not respond (see Table 3).

Table 3. | Urban security conditions

Characteristic	Percentage
<i>Urban security where they live</i>	
Fair	26
good	48
Bad	23
Very bad	3
<i>Urban security where they work</i>	
Good	19
Fair	60
Bad	16
Very bad	5
<i>Crime during the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	
Increased	58
Stayed the same	19
Reduced	1
<i>Quality of life affected by urban insecurity during the pandemic</i>	
Very severely	14
Severely	41
Moderately	38
Slightly	6
Did not respond	1

Women $n = 69$.

Experiences

When asked whether they had been victims of crime since March 2020, all respondents answered that they had not. However, when asked whether they had been involved in an act of insecurity before March 2020, 49% ($f = 34$) said yes and 51% ($f = 35$) said no. Of the women who claimed to have had this experience, 47% ($f = 16$) indicated that they had been involved in crimes against property and 29% ($f = 29$) in crimes against personal peace and security; 3% ($f = 1$) in each of the following circumstances: crimes related to property or crimes against freedom, crimes against freedom or crimes against security (persecution), crimes against life and personal integrity, crimes against public security, and sexual crimes. While 9% ($f = 3$) did not respond. Meanwhile, 53% ($f = 18$) filed a complaint and 47% ($f = 16$) did not (see Table 4).

On the other hand, when asked if someone close to them had been subjected to a criminal act—since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020—77% ($f = 53$) said yes, while 23% ($f = 16$) explained that they had not. And when we went on to ask the people who had responded affirmatively, 34% ($f = 18$) mentioned that it had happened to friends; 21% ($f = 11$), relatives; 17% ($f = 9$), friends and relatives; neighbors 9% ($f = 5$); and, finally, 3% ($f = 3$) relatives of friends (see Table 4).

Table 4. | Experiences of urban insecurity

Characteristic	Percentage
<i>Victims of crime as of March 2020</i>	
No	100
<i>Victims of crime before March 2020</i>	
Yes	49
No	51
<i>Crimes against women who were victims before March 2020</i>	
Against property	47
Against peace and security	29
Against property and freedom	3
Against freedom and security, and persecution	3
Against life and personal integrity	3
Against public safety and sexual crimes	3
<i>Did you discuss it with anyone (women who were victims before March 2020)?</i>	
Yes	91
No	9
<i>Did you report (women who were victims before March 2020)?</i>	
Yes	53
No	47
<i>During the pandemic was anyone close to you a victim of a criminal act?</i>	
Yes	77
No	23
<i>Who were the victims of the criminal act?</i>	
Friends	34
Family	21
Friends and family	17
Neighbors	9
Relatives of friends	3

Women $n = 69$.

Discussion

In spite of the limitations inherent to the COVID-19 health contingency, this research shows the scenario perceived by a group of women participants in their daily lives, in which extremely important information related to urban insecurity emerges, showing the relationship between the social space in which they co-exist and themselves. Few studies exist on this subject under the extraordinary conditions prevailing in the pandemic. We proceeded to examine the results with research prior to the health contingency, such as those that approached the purpose of this study and those that followed the pandemic. Having made this clarification, we present the analysis of the findings below.

We will begin with the indications of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2009), which warns in paragraph 2 of its report: "Citizen security is undermined whenever States fail to protect their population from crime and social violence, signaling a breakdown in the relationship between those governing and the governed." [La seguridad ciudadana se ve amenazada cuando el Estado no cumple con su función de brindar protección ante el crimen y la violencia social, lo cual interrumpe la relación básica entre gobernantes y gobernados]. Thus, the evidence found shows that the four fundamental needs that emerge from the imaginary of every person living in the city are disrupted. These are represented in the following needs: the need to survive; the need for well-being; the need for identity; and, finally, the need for freedom (Hidalgo et al., 2021). Thus, the problem of urban insecurity is an event of social order in which people and institutions in charge of safeguarding security in cities are involved and become fragmented. Behind the genesis of this event—urban insecurity—there are certain social determinants, as well as others of a cultural nature, which occur in different expressions of social instability, either directly, structurally, or permanently (Hidalgo et al., 2021).

Among these factors, we can highlight access to weapons, as well as the abuse of toxic substances and youth unemployment, as mentioned by UN-Habitat (2021). Moreno (2016) notes that urban insecurity is of a multicausal order. There are two positions that cause this event: on the one hand, those who believe that it is due to the existing social inequality in urban centers, and others who point out that it is the deterioration of living conditions due to the intertwining of different crises, such as economic ones, associated with a setback of the State in its actions of prevention and control. To this, we could now add the COVID-19 health contingency, which in Mexico began in March 2020. This health crisis led to a series of restrictions in the different socioeconomic spheres, which resulted in enormous losses in the productive sectors, causing

a large number of people to see their income decrease or to lose their jobs for good (Monroy-Gómez, 2021).

In view of the above, Fontana (2020) mentions that some people saw this health contingency as an unrecoverable lapse of time, in which debts incurred—such as payments to be made—would continue to accumulate, without adequate management possibilities, thus promoting precarious social conditions. This context of deteriorated social and economic order in which many people now subsist becomes a potential trigger that can contribute to an increase in urban insecurity. Ninety-three percent of our study participants reported that they perceived an increase in urban insecurity. Meanwhile, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sanchez and Perez (2014) stated that:

The perception of insecurity in Nuevo León is a clear determinant of the evolution of this phenomenon at the local level. According to data from ICESI [Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios sobre la Inseguridad], in 2002, only 34% of Nuevo Leon residents felt that they lived in an unsafe state. Two years later, in 2004, the figure was already around 41%. Five years later, in 2009, 70% of Nuevo Leon residents felt unsafe⁴.

In contrast, in our study, when asked how they perceived the safety of their place of residence, the participants rated this from fair to very poor. When asked about security where they work, 81% of those interviewed said it was fair to very poor. These figures are higher than those indicated above and are linked to the data collected by Inegi (2022) from the population aged 18 and over. In them, it was found that the population considered that it is unsafe to live in their city, indicating this in March and December 2021 (66.4% and 65.8%, respectively, expressed this opinion). On the other hand, this same instance, Inegi (2022), corroborates that urban insecurity has increased in the MAM between December 2021 and March 2022, by seven percentage points on average.

This widespread increase in urban insecurity, aggravated by job losses and economic detriment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has exposed women in particular, who due to their physical vulnerability, have had to tolerate different expressions of violence and inequality, as stated by Ariza—Sosa et al. (2021). Thus, women's situation worsened during the health crisis, as these

4 Translation of the following original Spanish textual quotation: La percepción de inseguridad en Nuevo León es un claro determinante de la evolución de este fenómeno a nivel local. Según datos del ICESI [Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios sobre la Inseguridad], en el 2002 solo el 34% de los neoloneses sentía que vivía en un estado inseguro. Dos años después, en el 2004, la cifra ya rondaba el 41%. Cinco años más tarde, en el 2009, 70% de los habitantes de Nuevo León se sentía inseguro. (p. 104)

same authors indicate, in Spain, Argentina, Ecuador, and Mexico, as well as in other Latin American and Caribbean nations. In these countries, women who have been affected suffer emotional distress that is aggravated by anxiety and other psychological or somatic alterations.

In this respect, Sanchez and Perez (2014) argue that before the health contingency, urban insecurity had already been growing in the MAM gradually since 2010. This was essentially due to structural deficiencies in human development which, conditioned to the existing urban development, have become factors that impact people's quality of life. Castro (2021) adds that this is how public spaces are gradually being affected—particularly in the area of security—, causing these common spaces to become barriers over time, and progressively constitute sites of crime and urban insecurity, which disrupt social harmony.

This is confirmed by our finding that 94% of the participating women stated that their quality of life has been moderately to very severely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This assessment is corroborated, according to Ruiz (2007), by observing an alteration in people's life practices and customs, a phenomenon that has been noted in the different expressions of urban insecurity: "robbery, extortion, threats, injuries and fraud" [robos, extorsión, amenazas, lesiones y fraude] (Vera et al., 2017, p. 185). The above is consistent with the findings of the research, in which 77% of the women participants reported that someone close to them had fallen victim to a criminal act. In this context, a study carried out by Cantú-Martínez (2020), regarding urban insecurity, indicates that 42% of female university students reported having been the victim of a criminal act, which coincides with our results, with 49% of women reporting that they had been the victim of a criminal act before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The above fosters anxiety and suspicion in people—which, examined from the perception point of view— results in a distancing from public spaces. Thus, as people walk through the streets of cities, each city infrastructure provides an opportunity for a crime to be committed. This has an impact on the urban fabric and, as Ramírez-Casas (2022) puts it, results in expressions of spatial inequality. Meanwhile, Oviedo (2002) has indicated that this urban insecurity reveals a somatization in people that is directly linked to fear. The author further adds: "this feeling of concern about a real or imagined danger influences the population's attitudes and behaviors and, in the long term, may influence its values and norms"⁵. In this area, the results of the study are consistent with the previous positions,

documenting that 93% of women say that crime increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, 55% of the women reported that their quality of life has been affected severely to very severely, and 44%, slightly to moderately, by the urban insecurity they perceived during this health contingency in their places of residence and work.

Our socio-patial context—prior to the COVID-19 pandemic— has revealed multiple sociodemographic changes that, when taken into account, have influenced the transition of the MAM from a nationally leading economic and socially stable society to one of vulnerability in recent years. It has thus become a metropolis with a crisis of urban insecurity that has affected residents' moral and daily lives, producing, according to Cantú-Martínez (2020), a palpable deterioration in the progression of the prosperity and social well-being that was previously enjoyed. This scenario, together with the sanitary contingency and the measures taken, created a social and economic environment prone to an increase in urban insecurity, as highlighted by the women who participated in the study.

It should also be noted that, as described above, the right to urban space in MAM is being lost. From Delgadillo's (2012) perspective, this is a very serious problem: "to lose or suffer the restriction of this right implies physical uprooting, deterioration of material living conditions and the violation of the most elementary human rights"⁶. In other words, this loss contributes to the emergence of a breakdown of social coexistence, coupled with other eventualities such as urban insecurity—the subject of this research—, violence, social exclusion, poverty, and labor precariousness, among others, and which are characteristic of complex cities as stated in the works of Bueno (2019), and Zavaleta and Rico (2021).

Thus, the problem posed by urban insecurity in the MAM—before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic— has become one of society's main concerns, since daily life, territoriality and social practices have been disrupted. These manifestations are the result of a process of social exclusion that has been developing over time and is rooted in treating certain population groups with disregard, as seen during this health contingency. We identified the aspects that are currently precursors of social exclusion in the MAM, among which, as pointed out by Garcia (2018) and Garcia (2021), the political-institutional, the

5 Translation of the following original Spanish textual quotation: este sentimiento de inquietud por un peligro real o imaginario incide en

las actitudes y conductas de la población y a largo plazo puede tener efectos en sus valores y normas (p. 266).

6 Translation of the following original Spanish textual quotation: "perder o sufrir la restricción de ese derecho supone el desarraigo físico, el deterioro de las condiciones de vida material y la violación de los derechos humanos más elementales (p. 120).

socioeconomic, and the sociocultural. To all of this, we can now add the sanitary aspect as well. It is in this way that the materialities and functioning of the MAM have an impact on the reproduction of the social life of its inhabitants. And, it is also in this way, that the presence of these four particularities of social exclusion has an impact on the increase of urban insecurity, manifested during the pandemic, according to the opinions of the women participating in this study.

Conclusion

In sum, when the population of the MAM found itself in an extraordinary situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social structures of work and daily life were historically disrupted. This led to a socioeconomic crisis, mainly evident in the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. Within the framework of the different manifestations of this event, the above highlighted the apex of urban insecurity.

Based on the information provided by the women participants, this aspect was palpable, as they were involved (4 to 5 out of 10) in criminal events as victims, and they affirm that their quality of life had been significantly disrupted. The above contrasts with the frame of reference on urban safety that 7 to 8 out of 10 of the women participants reported, in which they emphasized that it has ostensibly decreased, both where they live and where they work.

New challenges are now emerging in terms of urban security, and the loss of public spaces that has contributed to the social disharmony perceived by the women participants. We hope that these findings will induce reflection on how to recover the social and economic life of the MAM, since the COVID-19 health contingency has accentuated social inequalities, bringing down small economies and further pauperizing social decomposition. We therefore conclusively agree with what Garza (2018) states when referring to the MAM:

generates or inhibits citizenship processes. If the city is inhabited by diversity, we have to recover it not to highlight inequality, but to generate open spaces of plural coexistence that allow the re-linking of worlds, building intangible bridges to connect opportunities and level inequalities. Seeking to stimulate citizen interest, and developing projects that allow this attraction. By strengthening existing ties, urban fragments can be integrated to achieve urban unity⁷.

To conclude, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the urban insecurity perceived by this sample of women, in order to highlight how they perceived and internalized urban insecurity in their environment during this pandemic.

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⁷ Translation of the following original Spanish textual quotation: genera o inhibe procesos de ciudadanía. Si la ciudad es habitada por la diversidad, tenemos que recuperarla no para resaltar la desigualdad, sino para generar espacios abiertos de convivencia plural que permitan re-ligar mundos, edificando puentes intangibles que permitan

conectar oportunidades y nivelar las desigualdades. Buscando generar un interés en los ciudadanos, y desarrollando proyectos que permitan esta atracción. Potencializando los lazos existentes, se puede integrar los fragmentos urbanos logrando una unidad urbana (p. 139).

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