

[Drug Policy Home](#) > [News](#) > News Story

## DRUG POLICY NEWS

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### MEDELLIN REVIVAL FLOWERING AFTER YEARS OF VIOLENCE

by John Lantigua, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer, Palm Beach Post

MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA -- Every morning, when the mist burned off in this mountain city, they found the bodies.

In 1991 alone, in a municipality of 1.7 million people, 6,349 were homicide victims, 18 times the rate in Miami-Dade that year and 37 times that of Palm Beach County.

Residents of a town near Medellin, San Luis Antioquia, go through the ruins of their homes, which were attacked and destroyed by leftist guerrillas in 1999.

Members of the United Self Defense Forces, a vigilante army, overlook Medellin in this 2002 photo. About 4,000 have accepted amnesty and receive about \$300 per month as well as education and job training.

Locals adopted a macabre slang for those lifeless forms found strewn in the streets: muoecos - dolls.

The principal engineer of that murder spree: chubby, curly-haired Pablo Escobar, founder of the Medellin cocaine cartel. But leftist guerrillas, right-wing vigilantes, other cartels, and common criminals all contributed to making Medellin "the murder capital of the world."

"It was horrifying," says police subcommander Jorge Rodriguez, who according to published reports had 457 fellow officers gunned down in 15 months.

Many Medellin residents ran for their lives, heading to South Florida, including Palm Beach County.

Now, 16 years later, political leaders here hope their city's terrifying reputation is burning off like the mist. They say homicides have dropped by almost 90 percent since 1991 and that this traditionally commercial city has come up for air. Some exiles have returned.

One of them is Hernan Gulfo, who fled with his family to West Palm Beach four years ago after his life was threatened by both leftist guerrillas and right-wing killers. His U.S. work permit finally ran out and he returned to Medellin last month.

"The city has improved," says Gulfo, 47. "In the surrounding areas - let's say the distance from West Palm Beach to Loxahatchee - you still get some armed bands. But yes, the city is calmer."

Nevertheless, for many people, especially outside Colombia, the name Medellin still chills the blood and keeps them far away.

"It's very unfair," says Jorge Perez, assistant planning director responsible for tourism. "A very small number of people participated in those crimes. Most of our citizens are good, hard-working people. But our city has this trademark and, unfortunately, it was designed by Pablo Escobar."

Escobar's Legacy

'Don Pablo,' as he was known, left behind a gaudy legend.

He bought passenger planes, took out the seats and used the planes to smuggle tons of cocaine - much of it through South Florida. With \$69 million, a small fraction of his bankroll, he bought an estate outside Medellin and opened a zoo for the public, featuring rhinos, hippos, giraffes.

In 1989, Forbes magazine listed him as the world's seventh-richest man. Among his holdings: property in Miami-Dade County and a \$7 million apartment complex near Plantation, in west Broward.

Escobar negotiated a surrender with the Colombian government in 1991 and lived overlooking Medellin in a "prison" he designed called La Catedral, the Cathedral. It featured a bar, a disco, his own chef and resident prostitutes.

He ordered hundreds of executions of police officers and others, often carried out in daylight by paid assassins on motorcycles, some of them Darth Vader-like characters in helmets and dark visors. When he was threatened with extradition to the United States, he escaped.

Escobar was gunned down by the government in 1993, but the bloodshed continued. The country was caught in a guerrilla war stoked by cocaine. In 2002, murders in Medellin still topped 3,700.

"What went on then was absolutely crazy," says Gustavo Villegas, chief of staff at Medellin City Hall. "We can't deny it happened, but it's past. We are in a different time now."

Medellin has grown into a city of 2.2 million residents, and last year it reported 696 homicides. "We have fewer murders per capita now than Washington, D.C., or Rio ( de Janeiro )," Villegas says.

Kidnapping for ransom, once a cottage industry here, is also way down, says Rodriguez of the Medellin police, although he concedes that abductions are not always reported.

"We targeted the levantadores ( pickup men ) ... who used to grab people and sell them to the guerrillas to ransom," he says.

In general, crime is down 65 percent in four years, according to Rodriguez, and 5,000 police officers now patrol every section of the city, which wasn't true before because of the danger.

#### City's Turning Point

Not everyone believes police crime statistics, and the U.S. State Department continues to post a travel warning for all of Colombia. But everyone agrees that crime and political violence have plummeted here.

An important moment came in 2002 when government troops, in several days of pitched battle, drove leftist guerrillas from trenches in Comuna 13, one of the poor barrios that cling precariously to steep green mountainsides around the city.

"You heard the battles and saw the smoke and everything stopped while people stared up there," says cab driver Jose Jaramillo, 53.

And then came the amnesty granted to members of the United Self Defense Forces ( AUC ), right-wing vigilantes known as paramilitares recruited by large landholders and business interests to counter leftist guerrillas.

The AUC often did that by massacring unarmed suspected guerrilla sympathizers - men, women and children. Some 4,000 AUC soldiers, many of whom started killing when they were minors, have accepted the amnesty in and around Medellin.

They receive about \$300 per month, education and job training, and support from psychologists.

"Some have been left with serious pathologies and need more attention," says Silvia MontaOes, of the mayor's office.

Meanwhile, the Medellin Cartel, following Escobar's death, atomized into small cliques and cocaine smugglers disappeared into quiet lives more resembling legitimate businessmen.

"They are still there," says Villegas, "but people don't know their names."

If Villegas knows, he isn't saying, so as not to create legends like that of Escobar.

The change in Medellin is palpable. Today, in some poor parts of the city where bodies were regularly found on nearly-

deserted streets, families have emerged from hiding.

On a recent evening, near sunset in the hillside barrio of Santo Domingo, laughing children raced down the steep streets on skateboards and others clambered on a jungle gym near a mural of flowers.

Overhead, a system of shiny cable cars built by the municipal government ferried residents up the mountainside from the city center, saving hours of commuting time.

"Life here has changed completely," says William Acevedo, 46, a laborer interviewed dangling above the valley, gazing down at his teeming neighborhood. "Before, you never let your children onto the street because you were afraid they would get caught in gun battles. You were in your house by six and hopefully asleep before the shooting started."

Raul Uribe, 43, a local tailor, puts it succinctly: "We live in times of peace."

### The Model Neighborhood

The Santo Domingo neighborhood, once blood-drenched, is the model of accomplishment so far. City government, led since 2004 by Mayor Sergio Fajardo, is planning another cable car system for the far side of the valley.

Fajardo, a former university mathematics professor, has also emphasized education, erecting five libraries in poor comunas and renovating 140 schools, according to city hall.

To attract traditional tourists, the city sponsors at least two large yearly cultural festivals. The green mountains around Medellin are home to wildly colorful flower farms and one festival features hundreds of floats covered with complex floral arrangements. The city also hosts a new international poetry festival.

Medellin continues to be an industrial capital of Colombia, with strengths in banking, textiles, clothing, mining and food products.

"Our growth was stunted for 20 years by the violence, but we are coming back some," says businessman Juan Camilo Ortiz, 52.

Last year, two new international flights began arriving from Venezuela and Ecuador. Daily flights arrive from Miami and Panama City, Panama, as well.

The Sheraton and Intercontinental hotels, for years nearly deserted bunkers, say they are much closer to full these days, and Holiday Inn has announced it will open a new hotel.

That project is part of a building boom in Medellin - governmental, commercial and residential. The boom makes some suspicious.

"Everybody knows that a lot of the money for this construction is coming from drug interests laundering their profits," says Alvaro Ortiz, a supporter of Polo Democratico, the center-left opposition to the conservative government of President Alvaro Uribe. "This is still a mafia culture."

He and others fear that when the boom ends, unemployment, already at least 16 percent, will explode again - and so will crime.

Critics also fear that conservative interests could bring the baby-faced AUC killers out of retirement some day to murder their liberal opposition. In December, an AUC commander, who was to testify about ties between the paramilitares and the conservative elite, was gunned down in the center of Medellin by a killer on a motorbike - a wraith from the past.

One thing many citizens of both the left and right agree is vital to lasting peace here: They want the U.S. and Europe to legalize cocaine.

That legalization would put the trade in the hands of governments where coca leaf is grown. The price would drop, but it would allow the countries to collect taxes on what is sold. Most importantly, it would put criminals out of business and end the influence of illegal billions in cocaine money in Colombia.

"People say it is wrong morally, but they don't understand that in our situation, those of us who don't use cocaine are affected by it much more than those who do," says businessman Ortiz, whose wife and two sons were once kidnapped by a criminal gang. "I'm a conservative person, but if it were up to me, cocaine would be legal."

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