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Why Justice is Unresponsive to Crime: The Case of Cocaine in Colombia

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In recent years, over ninety percent of all crimes in Colombia have gone unpunished. This paper addresses the reasons for this extreme unresponsiveness of the country's judicial system to high rates of violence, in particular since the end of the seventies when drug trafficking became a major source of crime. A model of justice provision is presented where the reaction of authorities to shocks in the level of violence is analyzed within a framework of decentralized police and judicial decision-making, along the lines of Lucas (1973, 1976). Namely, law provision is performed at the regional level, with the response of authorities depending crucially on their perceptions regarding the origins of violence. To the extent that the causes of violence are systematically perceived as originating beyond local boundaries, the response to the violence shock at the regional level will vanish over time. This in turn implies that the total provision of justice in the country will be lower. We claim that this explanation describes the Colombian experience over the past fifteen years in two senses. First, regions within the country have considered the emergence of cocaine traffic to be an extra-regional phenomenon. Second, the country as a whole has also perceived it to be an internacional problem. Both of these aspects have led to an under-provision of justice in Colombia.

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