

STREET VIOLENCE TAKING OVER BARCELONA



It's Friday afternoon in Barcelona. A group of half a dozen youngsters corners a tourist to steal his watch, right in the middle of the seafront promenade of Joan de Borbó. That is the exact scenario encountered by the Mossos d'Esquadra, the autonomous police force of Catalonia, every day in Barcelona. Street violence has become a serious problem.

"It is a new paradigm. Hordes of young people go out to hunt," said police sources, who explain that these groups are responsible for most of the violent robberies committed in the center of Barcelona (about 40 a day, taking into account those that happen in the street, establishments, and locals).

In May, the Catalan police formed a special team - dubbed as 'Poliédrico' ['multifaceted' or 'multidirectional'] - **with the intent of closely following these gangs, mostly formed by underage refugees and others who have just turned 18**. The analysis of their work shows a list of 22 young perpetrators who accumulate, on average, 15 arrests or complaints according to data submitted at the last Local Security Board of Barcelona. Some of these add up to more than 30 arrests.

"It is very difficult to act against them," said police sources. You cannot go through usual procedures for local thieves with task assignments, minimal planning, and study of the objective, or handling experienced pickpockets who know how to steal without violence. They are established in the city center and when in the mood, they strike altogether. "From a group of eight, you may catch three, and maybe they are not even the perpetrators or you don't recover the stolen goods," said the police. This makes it difficult to have incriminating evidence against them for the assaults and that pre-trial detention can be attained. This year, only 10% of those arrested for violent robberies have entered pre-trial detention (165 out of 1,529 detainees until August 14).

Street violence and robberies create great insecurity in Barcelona, but they are only 3.6% of all crimes (115,014 until June, increasing by 9%). The bulk of crime in the city are thefts (half of the total), with about 365 a day on average. On the other hand, robberies with domestic violence have been reduced by 16%.

"Barcelona has a problem and it cannot be hidden," says Josep Cid, head of Criminology Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB). He believes that there's also a slight rise in crime throughout the rest of Spain, with 8.5% more violent robberies until March, according to the latest crime balance released by the Ministry of Interior. Sexual violence also increases, but experts say that this is largely explained by the rise in complains due to increased awareness.

Nevertheless, Barcelona leads, by far, in crime data (the city reported 17% more crimes in 2018). Cid does not doubt that part of it is due to the "degradation of living conditions" in the Raval neighborhood located in the heart of the city, with half of all thefts and violent robberies taking place in Ciutat Vella. "You need to take measures to prevent it, fight so that this degradation does not continue, and have the neighbors get involved," explains the head of Criminology Studies. And he especially highlights how delicate it is that "crime is seen as an opportunity in the neighborhood."

Diego Torrente, Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Barcelona, says that there is no “other alternative criminogenic phenomenon that varies so much as to explain the figures” of Barcelona than the arrival of underage refugees, with an “overflowing” reception system that attempts to “mitigate exclusion”. Most do not commit crimes, but those who do (12%) are repeat offenders, according to data from the Mossos d'Esquadra.

But how is this not noticeable in other cities that also take in these young refugees? Torrente points to the “environmental and social disorders overlapping” in Barcelona, such as tourism or street vendors, which “have been able to create a less cohesive environment, weakening informal social control.”

In Madrid and Barcelona, crime rates have grown in the first quarter of the year, according to data from the Ministry of Interior, by 7.6% and 12% respectively. These cities have different population, extension and tourist pressure, and yet the data suggest that both have identical homicide rates (0.6 per 100,000 inhabitants), within the Spanish average, which is one of the lowest in Europe. The big difference is violent robberies, with 312.9 per 100,000 inhabitants in Madrid, compared to 757.6 in Barcelona. Experts say this is motivated by tourism: 30 million tourists a year visit the Catalan capital, including those who spend the night and those who only stay a day. 22% of the victims of all the city crimes are tourists, police sources suggest. In both cities, thefts account for almost half of all crimes committed in the streets.

Date: 2019-09-16

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/street-violence-in-barcelona-aimed-at-tourists-news11178>