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Understanding the impact of public discourse about crime and poverty on crime policymaking.

The interdisciplinary workshop on *Confronting poverty* organized by UCLouvain provided me with theoretical and methodological tool to address my main research interests.

I'm currently interested in understanding the policy process of crime policies in Chile during the last 20 years. Its systematic failure is what puzzles me. Despite the relative low crime rates of Chile in comparison with the region, and the flat tendency of violent crimes, the perceptions of insecurity among Chileans increases every year (Figure 1). These have driven politicians to constantly pass punitive laws after some tragic crime stories, covered by the media, successfully mobilize the public opinion.

Since 2005, roughly 10% of the laws passed by the Chilean legislature are related to crime and security issues. As consequence of the increase of sentencing and reduction of pre-trial imprisonment, the incarcerated population in Chile increases constantly, beyond structural capabilities of the prison system (Figure 2).

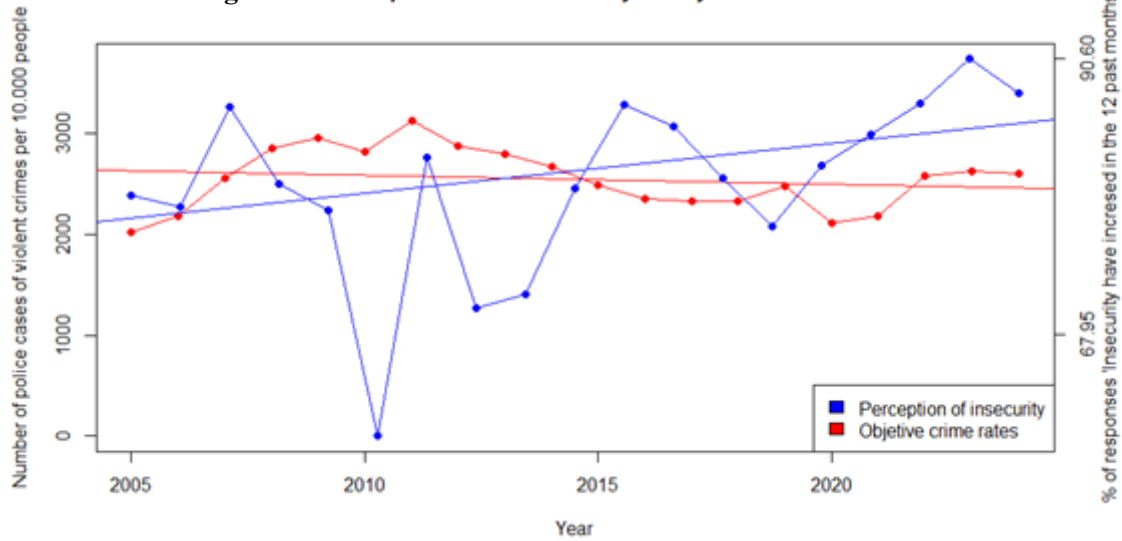
Within the policy process, the public discourse and agenda setting is an essential step to address this problem. Not only does it determine what problems are targeted as policy relevant but also provides the framework to understand the problem itself, which is form of exercising power (Cairney, 2019). Regarding these aspects, two dimensions of how poverty is conceived in the public sphere developed in this workshop are deeply insightful to dive into these specific puzzles. One is theoretical, and the other is methodological.

First, this workshop contributed to my understanding of the role that language and narratives plays in the legitimacy of social structures reinforcing conceptions of crime, punishment and poverty. The contributions of the theory of symbolic domination of Pierre Bourdieu presented by Prof. Phillipe Hambye applied to poverty, provide an analytical tool to understand how representations of criminality in the public sphere reinforces symbolic forms of social domination. Poverty as the lack of something (i.e. cultural capital), depicts an "other" that might be "helped" or "punish" depending on his disposition to comply with the imposed social structures of dominance.

Then within this theoretical framework, the methods of discourse analysis presented by Prof. Barbara de Cock provide a powerful research tool to detangle how crime and poverty are depicted in the public sphere to legitimate the mass imprisonment of poor people. The systematic analysis of who is speaking about crime, who is targeted as criminal, and what are the causes and responsibilities attached to it in the public discourse of politicians and media is essential to fully comprehend this problem.

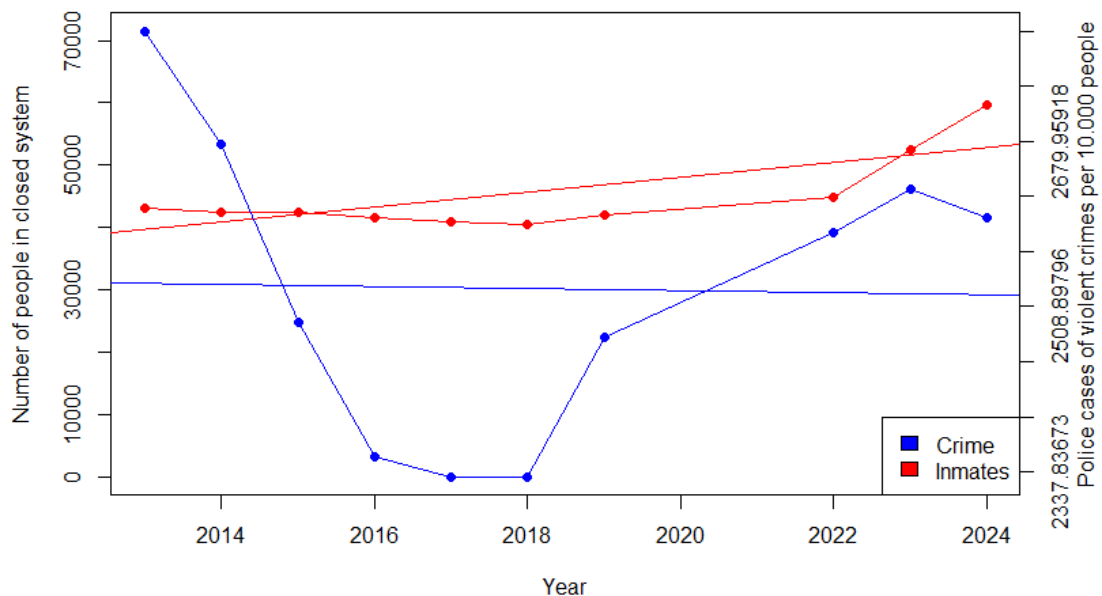
Combining both approaches developed during the workshop, my analysis of the phase of agenda setting in the policy process of crime policy in Chile will be enriched in both substantial and methodological aspects. This is not only useful for academic research, but also for policymaking and advocacy. Understanding the narratives and representations about poverty deployed in the public sphere by the those with the capacity to determine the policy outcome is a strong practical tool to conduct desirable policy changes or prevent those undesired.

Figure 1. Perceptions about insecurity vs objective crime



Note. Preferences correspond to the same results graphed in Figure 1 for crime. Perception corresponds to data from the National Urban Survey of Citizen Security for the period 2005-2023. Objective measurements correspond to police reports of violent crimes from the Undersecretary of Crime Prevention. Straight lines represent the fitted value of each variable excluding 2010 and 2019 as outliers.

Figure 2. Crime and incarceration in Chile



Note. Objective measurements correspond to police reports of violent crimes from the Undersecretary of Crime Prevention. Prison population correspond to data provided by the Chilean Prison Administration. Straight lines represent the fitted value of each variable.

Cairney, P. (2019). Power and Public Policy. In *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kcl/detail.action?docID=6234708>