Venezuela Prisons: ‘Pranes’ and ‘Revolutionary’ Criminality

September 2017
Written by Venezuela Investigative Unit
In May 2011, a 26-year-old prison gang leader held 4,000 members of the Venezuelan security forces, backed by tanks and helicopters, at bay for weeks. Humiliated nationally and internationally, it pushed President Hugo Chávez into a different and disastrous approach to the prison system.

Home to more than 4,700 prisoners in 2011, Rodeo was one of Venezuela’s biggest jails. The disturbances in May that year began as a fight between rival gangs in the jail. There was a coup executed by the gang leaders or “pranes” of Rodeo II against a pran in the neighboring building of Rodeo I. A change of “carro,” or “car,” as the criminal governance structure in the prisons is called. But this was not some punch up with prison shanks and clubs. This was a battle with fully and semiautomatic weapons.

The prison authorities called for backup. Three thousand members of the Bolivarian National Guard, 400 paratroopers and a contingent of military police were deployed to the baking heat of Miranda state, just 40 kilometers east of Caracas. On June 17, the soldiers attacked. A battle ensued. Four prisoners were killed and several soldiers were wounded. The military managed to take control of Rodeo I, the installation closest to the main road. The prison building by this stage had come to resemble something out of downtown Aleppo.

Inside Rodeo I authorities found 20 semiautomatic pistols, seven assault rifles, five shotguns, eight grenades, 5,000 rounds, 45 kilograms of cocaine and 12 kilograms of marijuana.

Rodeo II, the block behind Rodeo I that was home to more than 1,200 prisoners, proved a far tougher target. Here the inmates were better organized under their pran, a man named Yorvis Valentín López Cortez, alias “Oriente,” aged just 26. The authorities were wary of an all-out assault. By then the media had descended and cameras covered far too many angles of the battleground.

On June 21, negotiations began with the prisoners in Rodeo II. Oriente spoke for the prisoners, while the government sent an evangelical pastor and former second hand car
salesman, José Argenis Sánchez, accompanied by Ronald Gregorio García Tesara, alias “Satan,” a member of “La Piedrita,” one the state-sponsored gangs that acted as political shock troops for the Chavista regime. It was assumed that this “good cop, bad cop” combo would bring the prisoners to their senses. Electricity and water had been cut off to the prison. The heat was unbearable. After two days of talks, all the authorities managed to extract from the prisoners were four swollen and rotting corpses. It was not clear exactly what the prisoners wanted, but there was no mistaking their tone.

“They are tricking us with evangelical leaders we do not know. We are not going to speak to people who do not inspire trust. This is a war and we are going to fight,” Oriente shouted.¹

It took the government 27 days to re-establish control of Rodeo. Official figures put the death toll at 23, with 70 wounded. The reality was likely far higher. The prison was only taken after Oriente escaped, somehow managing to slip through the ring of steel around the prison. The rumors were that the then interior and justice minister and now Vice President Tareck El Aissami, made a deal to let Oriente leave in exchange for an end to the standoff. There were allegations that the National Guard pulled backed on orders from on high.² Oriente was later recaptured, only to escape from another prison

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in December 2016.3

**Power to the Prisoners**

Embarrassed by the chaos and media frenzy, Chávez announced a full investigation and overhaul of the prison system. Two prison officials, among them the governor of Rodeo II, were arrested, along with a National Guard captain responsible for prison security. It was discovered that the arsenal of weapons in the hands of inmates were smuggled through after paying “tolls” to officials. As with everything that entered the prison, a system of taxes had been levied: $2,300 for an assault rifle, $70 for a pistol and $45 for a grenade.4

Vice President Elías Jaua pledged to take action against the pran system.

“We are going to get to the bottom of this. The revolution will not be blackmailed by these mafias. We are going to recover the full presence of the government in the prisons of the country,” he insisted.5

Except the government actually did the complete opposite.

On July 26, 2011, the Ministry of Popular Power for the Penitentiary Service (Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Servicio Penitenciario) was established. The first minister was a politician, a sitting representative of the National Assembly. Iris Varela had little experience with prisons, but she had the key credential that the president demanded. She was a Chavista loyalist and firebrand grass roots politician known as “Comandante Fosforito,” or “Commander Phosphorous.”

The new ministry was billed as a continuation of the policy laid out in Chávez’s 1999 Constitution. Article 272 of the Constitution dealt specifically with prisons. It opens: “The state will guarantee a prison system that assures the rehabilitation of the inmates and respect for their human rights.”

Carlos Nieto, a lawyer who heads the NGO Prison Observatory “A Window to

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Liberty” (Una Ventana a la Libertad), had helped draw up the relevant section of the Constitution.

“We could not believe it when we laid out what we wanted to put in the Constitution,” Nieto told InSight Crime over a coffee in Caracas. “The government just kept saying yes, include it. Of course, we had no idea then that none of it would ever be implemented.”

President Chávez reiterated this vision of prisons as rehabilitation centers when the new ministry was announced, saying, “Prisons must become a center for the formation of the new man, who leaves transformed, trained for life and for love.”

However, Varela faced a Herculean task. Prison infrastructure was crumbling. Overcrowding was at epidemic levels. Guards and administrators were poorly paid and vulnerable to criminal interests and intimidation. And criminality and corruption, as was illustrated in the Rodeo riot, were rampant.

There is no reliable data now on the prison population. The last trustworthy figures we could find date back to 2015, when there were 49,644 prisoners (46,883 men and

2,761 women) packed into 35 prisons built for 19,000 inmates; 63 percent of those incarcerated had yet to be sentenced.

Added to these numbers, there are estimated to be another 33,000 people being held in police cells built to hold 5,000. The conditions in the police cells are even worse than the prisons. The facilities were designed to be temporary holding cells, to keep prisoners overnight until they could appear before a judge. But they are so crowded that prisoners have to take turns to sleep on the floor. The police have no resources to feed them. Even worse, the guards charge the relatives of prisoners a fee to let food in.\(^8\) Hundreds more prisoners, especially those detained in political protests, are held in the emblematic building of the Helicoide, the headquarters of the feared secret police, the Bolivarian Service of National Intelligence (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional - SEBIN). Many wait, in prison or a police cell, for over two years until they are sentenced.\(^9\) Or found not guilty.

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The Venezuela prison system is also one of the most violent in the world, with 6,472 murders registered between 1999 when Chávez took office and 2014. In the first half of 2015 the Venezuelan Prison Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones - OVP) counted 109 dead and 16,417 injured.

Varela was faced with an almost impossible task. She was instructed that there were to be no more prison riots, that homicides within the prison system needed to come down, and that no more bad news should be generated in the media. Faced with this multitude of challenges and limited resources, Varela adopted a new policy to fulfill her mission. She simply befriended the most important pranes and started making deals with them. What they wanted, and got, was power within prison walls. They achieved control of everything that happened inside. In return, nothing was to spill over the walls and into the media. It was a Pax Mafiosa that would have profound consequences.

### Venezuela's Prison System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRISON POPULATION TOTAL</td>
<td>49,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including pre-trial detainees / remand prisoners</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PRISON POPULATION RATE</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per 100,000 of national population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-TRIAL DETAINES / REMAND PRISONERS</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>FEMALE PRISONERS</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUVENILES / MINORS / YOUNG PRISONERS INCL. DEFINITION</td>
<td>0% - Responsibility of Instituto Nacional del Menor (INAM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>FOREIGN PRISONERS</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of prison population</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS / INSTITUTIONS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICIAL CAPACITY OF PRISON SYSTEM</td>
<td>19,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCUPANCY LEVEL</td>
<td>269.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on official capacity</td>
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Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR)

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Wilmito and the Rise of the Pranes

The word *pran* is believed to come from a Spanish acronym drawn from the words, “Preso Rematado Asesino Nato.” The literal translation would be something like “natural-born double killer prisoner.”

One of the pioneering pranes, who helped establish the criminal structures in the prisons was Wilmer José Brizuela, alias “Wilmito.” A local boxing champion with nine children from six different women, Wilmito was a habitual criminal who was first convicted of kidnapping. He was, in many ways, more at home behind bars than on the outside. When Alfredo Meza, a journalist who best chronicled Wilmito’s life, visited him in the Vista Hermosa, prison in Ciudad Bolívar, in December 2013, Wilmito had an AR-15 assault rifle propped against the wall in his cell, alongside a 9 mm pistol.

It was in Vista Hermosa that Wilmito had started his life as a pran, running a section of the prison before deciding to systematically eliminate his rivals. Between 2005 and 2006, he took over one section at a time, eventually becoming the master of the jail. Over time, more structure formed. The lieutenants became known as “luceros.” If strong enough, a lucero could inherit the throne when the head pran left or was killed. The pranes also set up collection services, social committees, and security wings. Wilmito, for example, never moved through the prison without bodyguards, each of whom carried an assault rifle.

There was an attempt to dethrone Wilmito in Vista Hermosa in 2009. He was shot in the shoulder, but was able to collect his assault rifle from his room and kill four of the seven mutineers. By then his Vista Hermosa “carro,” or informal governing structure,

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12 InSight Crime interview with Humberto Prado, Caracas 7 July, 2016.
was generating more than $3 million in annual profits.\textsuperscript{14}

Wilmito’s rise in jail earned him national fame and popularized the notion of a pran. Even President Chávez mentioned him once in his weekly program “Aló Presidente,” poking fun at the then-governor of the state of Bolívar, Francisco Rangel Gómez: “This Wilmito has more authority than you.”

The power of the pranes was growing.

For Humberto Prado, the director of the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones – OVP), a turning point came in 2008, when Tareck El Aissami became minister of interior and justice. El Aissami made changes to the visiting hours for the penitentiary system, which opened the prisons to more goods and services, and created a thriving economy behind bars.

“Tareck El Aissami was the one who recognized the figure of the pran. He gave the authorization for families to spend nights in the prisons,” Prado explained to InSight Crime. “Visiting days used to be just twice a week -- Wednesday for conjugal visits, Sunday for families. That changed. Before there was a visit with a bag of food and some clean clothes for the inmate. That changed to full suitcases, lines of visitors, women coming to stay with the family.”

For Carlos Nieto of the Window of Liberty NGO, the arrival of the families was just part of the problem. It was not just wives and children. Prostitutes and party goers, along with drugs and alcohol, began to flow more freely.

“And so they began to put together parties that started on Fridays and finished Monday,” he said. “Parties where there was alcohol, drugs, music, where all that was done was sex, partying, alcohol and drugs. So it’s a Molotov cocktail, from which nothing good could come.”\textsuperscript{15}

Visits were the key to the pranes power. They were the means by which pranes could exert their will and expand their criminal economy. At the root of the pran system was the extortion charged within the prison, much of it related to the visits. Every prisoner had to pay a fee called “la causa,” or “the cause,” to the pran every week. Failure to pay led to punishment beatings and even death. If a prisoner wanted a nice cell, he paid more causa; if he wanted a nice flat-screen TV, he had to pay even more.


\textsuperscript{15} InSight Crime interview with Carlos Nieto, Caracas, 6 July, 2017.
To this day, everything that goes into the prison has a tax and can cost up to 10 times its value on the outside. Therefore the more inmates a prison has, the more visitors, the richer and more powerful the pranes. All businesses in the prison, the restaurants, shops, barbers, also pay the pran. In the most populous prison of Tocorón in Aragua, with some 7,000 inmates, the causa is estimated to be worth more than $2 million a month. With millions of dollars the criminal structures grew in size, power and sophistication.

So Varela’s decision to hand the jails to the prisoners was just another strengthening of the criminal system. The pranes became political actors, an extension of the Chávez revolution. It was not unlike the bargain the Chavistas had struck with pro-government colectivos and criminal groups inside poor neighborhoods. Only in the case of the pranes, the government had no jurisdiction.

“The government decided to essentially do nothing, and deliver the jails to the prisoners.” Roberto Briceño León, Director of the Venezuela Observatory of Violence (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia – OVV) told InSight Crime. “The police and the National Guard now have to ask permission to enter.”

Wilmito appeared again in the news on February 17, 2017 when he suffered another assassination attempt, not in prison where he was supposed to be serving a 14-year sentence for murder, but on a beach on the island of Margarita. He was there vacationing with his family, carrying a “get out of jail free card” signed by Varela herself.

He had been wandering free since December 2016. Such was the scandal generated by the incident that he was not sent back to his “home” prison of Vista Hermosa, but rather to another infamous prison, that of Tocorón, in the state of Aragua. There he did not enjoy the same status or protection afforded him in Vista Hermosa. In the early hours of April 1, Wilmito was shot dead in his cell. He had just celebrated his 35 birthday.


(A letter from Venezuela prison director Iris Varela authorizing the temporary release of the pran “Wilmito”)
Conejo and the Exportation of the Pran System

If visits were the key to a pran’s power, then holding a huge party was the ultimate manifestation of that power. In that regard, no one could compete with San Antonio, a prison on Margarita Island. Boasting four swimming pools, a disco and even a cock-fighting ring, this penitentiary was run by another of Varela’s favorite pranes, Teófilo Rodríguez, alias “El Conejo” (The Rabbit).

Conejo was so named for his buck teeth and passion for Playboy pornography. He adopted the Playboy bunny image as his own and the walls in the common areas of the prison had it painted everywhere. The one exception was the wall where a mural of Conejo and Chávez took pride of place.

Margarita Island, part of the archipelago of Nueva Sparta has long been a favorite holiday spot for Venezuelans. Blazing sunshine and perfect Caribbean beaches, it also became the best prison in which to have to do time. Conejo knew how to throw a party, but his bonhomie camouflaged a keen mind that built a criminal structure inside that prison that projected itself across the island.

The hedonism of the San Antonio prison was publicized across the world when the New York Times visited Conejo and was given the grand tour of the prison. But what was not covered was Conejo criminal activities outside the prison, which included drug trafficking on the island, a crucial stepping stone for cocaine making its way across the Caribbean.

While the criminal structures within the prison were called “carros,” or cars, the criminal

structures linked to the pran system which operated outside of the prison walls became known as “trenes,” or trains. Conejo ran his own train, called “Tren del Pacífico.”

Conejo was not the only pran working outside of prisons. Numerous other pranes ran criminal operations from their jail cells. Nieto, of Window to Liberty, said one of the most notable examples of the criminal structures inside and outside prisons is the “Tren de Aragua.” It is allegedly run from Tocorón prison in Aragua state. “Not only from there do they plan crimes, kidnappings, extortions, robberies, but also drugs are distributed and from there operate the megabandas,” Nieto said.

This criminal structure became one the most powerful in Venezuela while Tareck El Aissami was governor of Aragua, a post he held from 2012 until he took over the vice presidency this year. For Nieto, this is no coincidence. International law enforcement agents feel the same: El Aissami has fostered organized crime structures in every official post he has held.

Other pranes and luceros, who had served their time were leaving and replicating the prison structures outside jail walls. For Luis Cedeño, director of the NGO Paz Activa that studies organized crime in Venezuela, the pran system was instrumental in the establishment of what are known as the “megabandas.” These are criminal syndicates, sometimes hundreds strong, that control the local distribution of drugs, extortion and kidnapping in many parts of the country.

“Many prisoners who had been ‘pranes’ or ‘luceros’ took the criminal knowhow from the prisons and reproduced them outside, creating the megabandas,” said Cedeño in Caracas, clutching a copy of his report on the evolution of the megabandas phenomena.
In both cases, the relationship these criminals forged and maintained with officials of the government was critical to their success, despite government assertions to the contrary. Questioned about a 2011 photo showing her embracing Conejo, Varela scoffed at the implication and threatened the questioner.

“Please, why would you ask that? I am going to sue anyone who defames me in that manner,” she said. “I am a mother, I am the minister of prisons, I have been photographed with 100,000 prisoners in this country.”

Still, as it was with Wilmito, Conejo’s connections to the government could not protect him from every enemy. On January 24, 2016, while on parole, he was murdered outside a nightclub on Margarita Island, cut down in a hail of bullets along with several of his bodyguards. The murder remains unsolved, but talk of a debt owed to drug traffickers seems to be the favorite theory. His funeral was a lavish affair, inside and outside the prison of San Antonio. Inmates gathered on the roof, firing an impressive assortment of firearms to mourn the loss of their leader. Such was the scandal created that Varela closed down the prison soon after.

The Situation Today

High levels of violence. Rampant criminality. Corruption. Venezuela today looks much the same inside and outside of the prisons. The situation has gotten worse after the death of Chávez in 2013. Since Chávez’s handpicked successor President Nicolás Maduro has taken power, inflation is out of control, food has become scarce on supermarket shelves, and the government has established an even harder line on political dissidents.

Yet ironically it seems the pranes run a more efficient government than Maduro. Justice is swift, and while food is scarce on supermarket shelves, the pranes seem able to get all the food they need. Indeed, residents of Aragua state have been known to go the Tocorón prison when they cannot buy food anywhere else. The prison’s passageways look like Aladdin’s cave, with goods piled up against walls, vendors doing a brisk business with inmates and the general public alike.

The Pax Mafiosa that Varela established did manage to bring down homicides in the prisons. While there were incidents of prison riots, scandals and violence, she did manage to keep a lid on things in the jails. However, this system gave birth to a new generation of organized crime structures, and the pranes, the trains and megabandas now have reach across the country pushing up criminality and murder. All of this has helped turn Venezuela into one of the most dangerous nations on earth.

In June, the government’s longest serving minister, Iris Varela, resigned to run for a post in the National Constituent Assembly, Maduro’s latest, and to date, successful vehicle to sideline any opposition to his rule. Comandante Fosforito, to no one’s surprise, won a seat. Before she left she had a final word to say about pranes.

“I deny the existence of pranes,” she said. “I do not recognize the existence of such a figure.”

Just says before the elections in July she was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for “undermining democracy.” She joined numerous other members of the Bolivarian Republic on the OFAC list, including Vice President El Aissami. This was her response, the same she gave to the rule of law, to respect for human rights and to the prisoners placed under her care:

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### Prison structures and slang*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achicharrao</td>
<td>A prisoner who receives no visits, who matters to no-one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alta</td>
<td>The highest body in a prison, made up of “luceros” and the “pranes” of different parts of the jail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batanero</td>
<td>Someone who steals within the prison. The punishment is to be stabbed in the hand various times. These scars brand the prisoner as a thief wherever he goes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boca cosida</td>
<td><em>(sewn up mouth)</em> When a prisoner is about to be transferred or wants to protest against anything, he sews up his mouth, declares a hunger strike and refuses to cooperate. This person cannot be attacked by any other prisoner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleta</td>
<td><em>(hide)</em> A hiding place for weapons or money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carro</td>
<td>The government inside the prison, separate from the guards or director. Changes to the “carro” are seen as a coup and result in deaths or injuries. A pran can only be removed when he is killed by another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castigos</td>
<td><em>(punishments)</em> The idea is to produce suffering. Include opening old wounds to promote scarring; to shoot people in their feet and legs; to hang people until they almost pass out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causa</td>
<td><em>(cause)</em> The “causa” is what a prisoner pays to the “pran” and his “carro” to live in certain parts of the prison and enjoy certain privileges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincuenta</td>
<td><em>(50-50)</em> A shot to the stomach, which you have a 50-50 chance of surviving. Employed as a punishment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cochinos</td>
<td><em>(pigs)</em> Some prisons have pens with huge pigs. These are used to dispose of human remains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garita</td>
<td>Sentry posts where inmates patrol armed. Anyone who falls asleep on such duty is usually killed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gandules</td>
<td>Inmates who are drug addicts and do not respect the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luceros</td>
<td>The lieutenants of the pran who make up a “carro.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Luz</strong></td>
<td>A prison rule. To violate a “luz” results in immediate punishment</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mancha</strong></td>
<td>An infraction of a “luz” or rule within the prison. “Mancharla” is to disobey the rules.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Número</strong></td>
<td>The daily roll-call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pacificación</strong></td>
<td>The negotiation between the authorities and a pran to ascertain what he wants in exchange for keeping the peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paria</strong></td>
<td><em>(pariah)</em> An inmate who has no weapons and does not fight, that causes no problems. Once so designated by a pran, he cannot be messed with by other prisoners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pran</strong></td>
<td>The leader of a prison. In some of the bigger jails there is a principal pran and secondary pranes who answer to the first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tela de juicio</strong></td>
<td>A prison trial, carried out in a circle, in front of the “carro” where sentence is passed for any infractions of prison law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Varones</strong></td>
<td>Evangelical preachers who have special status and can move with relative freedom throughout the prison helping out inmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visita</strong></td>
<td><em>(The Visit)</em> This is the most sacred part of prison life. No-one can interfere with the Visit, harass the females or disrespect the visitors in any way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This is reproduced with permission from Runrunes. The original can be found at: http://runrun.es/relax/dda/147803/diccionario-de-la-pran-academia-espanola.html*
The InSight Crime Foundation

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