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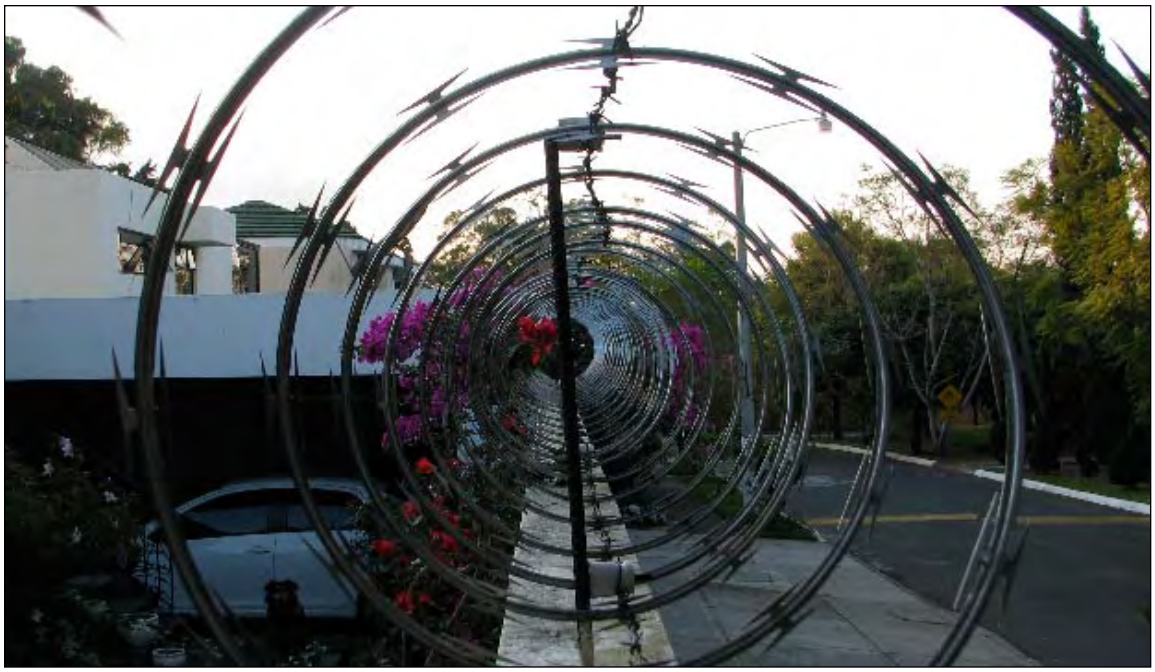
Raising Children Behind Guarded Walls

By Ezra K. Fieser



The wall in front of my home.

GUATEMALA CITY — When my wife and I were considering moving here last year, I visualized a life free of the constraints of U.S. suburbia.

Despite its rampant crime and well-publicized insecurity, Guatemala symbolized a reprieve from the long commutes, repetitious weekends and dull people that filled our lives. It was different. Fresh.

Hikes up volcanoes would replace our weekend walks around the small Maryland town in which we lived. Instead of interminable beach traffic to Delaware, we'd fight waves in the Pacific. We'd regularly find scenes worthy of a National Geographic cover photo.

That was before we relied on guards armed with 12-gauge, pump-action shotguns to keep us safe, before our neighbors were shot to death, and before our daughter was born.

Violence has shattered my preconception of life in Guatemala. A bombardment of friends' accounts of murder scenes and crime has stripped the sense of safety I felt as a foreigner living in a well-secured neighborhood. I now look over my shoulder in areas where I once walked freely.

I had felt generally safe here, but my daughter's birth has turned steering clear of crime into a preoccupation. With her, we are more likely to spend weekends behind the high walls of well-guarded housing complexes than on the dirt roads of Mayan villages.

My image of Guatemala is no longer of carefree weekends. It's the sight of the razor wire that sits atop the concrete wall that surrounds my house.

Guatemala's murder rate — of nearly 45 killings for every 100,000 people — is eight times higher than that of the U.S. and one of the worst in the hemisphere, behind Colombia and El Salvador. The ten largest U.S. cities have a combined population of roughly 25 million,

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nearly double Guatemala's population. In those 10 cities, only 2,638 murders occurred last year — about half the Guatemalan number.

The country is on pace to eclipse the 6,000 murders this year, the highest number since the 36-year civil war ended. Other types of crime are rampant. Youth gangs, loosely connected to Mexican drug cartels, shoot bus drivers and rob passengers with such regularity that buses don't run to some areas of the city. And thieves on motorcycles whip through traffic, jamming guns in the faces of unsuspecting drivers to steal cash and cell phones. For the last year, friends, acquaintances and even strangers have recounted their experiences with such violence. My wife's childhood friend stopped to help the driver of a broke-down vehicle in a safe neighborhood only to have a gun pointed at her face and to be robbed of her purse; a Spanish tutor came across two dead bodies wrapped in bloodied white sheets (a mark of a drug killing) while jogging with her father in a city park; and the nephew of my daughter's nanny was killed by random gunfire while walking home from work.

I was saddened by such stories, but not scared. Perhaps it was due to the sense of security I felt in my home, behind the concrete wall and razor wire, but I never considered changing my habits. I still walked by myself, sometimes with my camera, downtown. I still drove at night. I still pursued my work, no matter where it took me. Everyone tells you not to do this. The U.S. Embassy warns not to do this. But I did. I thought I'd have to do something particularly stupid or be in the wrong place at the wrong time for anything to happen.

But that all changed after my daughter was born.

OUR SKINNY-NOSED, BOY-FACED DOCTOR tugged my daughter, Ruby, red-faced and screaming, into the sterile air of a perfectly square hospital room on September 4th.

For the next 45 minutes, I was led through various corridors to little rooms where Ruby was weighed, examined, bathed, photographed, and dressed. The hospital staff made sure I was never more than a few feet away. They showed me her hospital bracelet and her nursery crib and went over security protocol, assuring me that there was no way for her to be abducted.

"In order to take her from the nursery, you must present a paid receipt, your identification and documentation that shows you are the parents," the nurse said. I was still drunk with the elation of being a father. I said, half-joking, "Well, at least I know she won't be stolen." She told me that children were *almost* never abducted.

She seemed to recognize the surprise on my face and stumbled into a sentence using a particularly Guatemalan phrase. "Fijese que" is used so frequently that it is something of a national joke. Literally, it translates to "notice that." But here in Guatemala, where talking around the point is an art form, the term is intended to soften the excuse or disappointment that nearly always follows, like when workers at a bakery are explaining why they are out of bread. But the day Ruby was born, I heard the expression used literally for the first time. The chubby chief neonatal nurse lowered her head, softened her tone and let out a "fijese que," I knew I was about to receive my first bit of parenting advice. "Guatemala City is no place for a child."

I forced a grin. "What a thing to say while I was standing over an hour-old baby," I thought.

I suppose new parents, no matter who they are and where they live, become more aware of their surroundings. But since Ruby was born, I have become hypersensitive to violence that floods Guatemala every day. Weeks of being questioned about why we're raising a child in such a dangerous place — usually tantamount to "are you nuts?" — caught up with me.

Since then, I've caught myself looking over my shoulder in places where I used to feel safe. I'm constantly locking and re-locking the car doors and taking extra glances into the rear-view mirror to make sure I'm not being followed. And I am second-guessing where I walk with Ruby.

And I have learned that I am not alone. People here live fearfully.

"As a nation, we're being ruled by fear of the violence," said Ligia Ixmucané Blanco, an analyst for the Guatemalan Association of Research and Social Studies, a non-partisan, private group. "I think it will be hard to find too many people who think the country is safer now than it was during the war."

In fact, *Prensa Libre* recently conducted a nationwide poll, asking that very question. The poll was conducted across the country. Seventy-five percent of the respondents had been affected in some way by civil war.

Ninety-four percent of the respondents said they were more afraid of being assaulted now than in the 1980s — the most violent years of the war, which claimed an estimated 200,000 lives. Ninety-two percent said they now feared something bad would happen to them or their family.

It's enough to keep people indoors, or behind guarded walls, which is how many pass their time in Guatemala City.

THE BIRTH OF OUR CHILD OPENED social doors. All of a sudden, we were being invited to birthday parties, piñata smashings, and barbecues. The gatherings are hosted by ex-pats working in international development. They

send their children to the same U.S.-style schools, where instruction is in English and security is heavy. The group is big enough so that a birthday or other social event is in order nearly every weekend. On the Saturdays when there is no birthday or other reason to gather, the men play poker or the women meet at a restaurant.

Recently, we were invited to a barbecue/birthday party thrown by a couple working for a U.S. agency.

Like many of the housing complexes in which ex-pats live, the Bouganvillas de Cayala was set behind a massive metal gate, painted black and manned by two guards who checked in visitors, dutifully photocopying their driver's licenses and documenting the reason for their visit. A12-foot-high tan wall, made of the thick, wide bricks you'd expect to find on a government building, extended from each side of the gate and went on, hugging the avenue beside it, until it disappeared with a bend in the road. For a moment, it reminded me of the grand entrances found in exclusive gated communities in the U.S. But two rolls of razor wire were stacked neatly atop each other and caught the spotty afternoon sun like diamond flakes.

An oversized SUV pushed through the gate as we entered. Spindly maple trees, leaves drooping and yellowing from the fall-like weather that comes with the end of Guatemala's rainy season, lined the smoothly paved streets. It reminded me of a Del Webb "active lifestyle" retirement community in the Arizona desert I'd once visited as a reporter. The homes, all made from grey brick, repeated each other in design every third or fourth house. One model's bay window protruded into the manicured lawn. A Halloween sign was propped against it, written in shaky English. "Booh! Did you scared?" The roofs peaked at steep angles like those found in the Northeast U.S. The lawns were smooth and bright like golf-course fairways.

A large round parking lot, guarded by two men, separated the gate from the clubhouse, kidney-shaped pool, complete with its flowing waterfall, and adjoining hard surface tennis courts. Children took turns cannonballing into the pool. Parents mulled around a table of imported booze.

It took all of 20 minutes before the conversation turned to security. Rob, who has lived in Guatemala for six years working on labor-rights issues, asked if I'd seen the morning's paper. The Catholic bishops had denounced the violence and urged the government to confront the growth of gangs and drug trafficking.

"It's crazy," he said. "This is the worst I've ever seen it. I've been robbed six times."

The neighborhood in which he lived — a mix of mid-size apartment buildings with big balconies and modern houses surrounded by ample yards — is publicized as a secure place for foreigners. It has become a target. A long, poorly lit road serves as the only entry and exit to the community. Thieves "just sit out there and wait until someone vulnerable comes by," he said.

Recently, a car full of female teachers — U.S. citizens who had come to work at one of the U.S.-style schools — was stopped on that road by a group of armed men. They were robbed and threatened with rape. Another teacher at that school told me they quit their jobs and left the country a few weeks later. Dozens of U.S. teachers who'd come to Guatemala to work at those schools quit and left the country last school year. "They're too freaked out by the city," the teacher said. "They know it's dangerous here, but they don't come thinking they will be targets."

The cedar-lined boulevard between Rob's neighborhood and my neighborhood is a well-traveled, busy shopping area that is seemingly safe. According to the police, groups of men, armed with 9mm pistols, cruise the boulevard searching for lone drivers to abduct. They have snatched more than a dozen people in the last four months, forcing them to withdraw as much money as possible from ATMs before leaving them on the side of the road. Most were taken in the middle of the day, according to police, from gas stations and convenience stores.

"It's ridiculous, you can't take the bus anywhere and now you have to be afraid where you drive," Rob said. By early November, roughly 80 bus drivers or passengers had been killed during attempted robberies in 2008, according to the police. And while overly dramatic, Rob's statement about the dangers of driving gets at a sentiment held by many.

Crimes along the highway to El Salvador, for instance, have occurred with such frequency that it is referred to as the "rout of death" in letters to the editor and in newspaper headlines. Colegio Maya, a pricey kindergarten-through-12th-grade private school, and dozens of tony, gated housing developments are located along the highway, meaning it's well-traveled by foreigners and also the focus of gangs. Along a 16-kilometer stretch of the road, which sits within city limits, 25 drivers have been shot to death this year. During the first seven months of the year, 106 other criminal acts, mostly robberies, were reported to police.

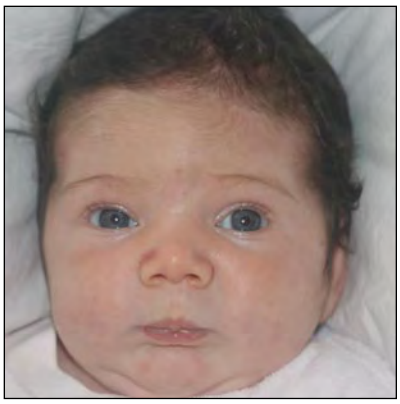
People who live along the road say many other crimes go unreported because they do not trust the police. For good reason. Last month, two inspectors for the National Civil Police station that is responsible for patrolling the highway were arrested for robbing drivers. According to the Inspector General of the Police, the pair stopped women and followed them home, where they stole jewelry and other valuables. The inspectors' office said many other police are being investigated for similar crimes. Most large NGOs forbid driving alone and/or after dark on that road and many others.

In 1999, the Guatemalan government dedicated a prosecutor to investigate crimes against U.S. citizens. Since then, according to U.S. Embassy statistics, 30 U.S.

citizens have been murdered. There have been two convictions. "The police force is inexperienced and under-funded, and the judicial system is weak, overworked, and inefficient. Well-armed criminals know there is little chance they will be caught or punished," the Embassy said in a recent crime and public safety report.

Most expats that I know have not been victims of violent crimes. But the barrage of horror stories and the occasional encounter with a crime scene is enough to instill fear.

Former neighbors — an American couple and their three children who had lived here for five years — were weighing a move to Addis Ababa a few months ago. Their decision was made when a Guatemalan couple that lived a few doors away was shot 27 times collectively in broad daylight while leaving their homes to pick up children from school. According to the *Prensa Libre* newspaper, the couple had called the police to report some drug activity in a warehouse across the street. A week later, the warehouse was raided. A week after that, the pair was killed. "Yeah, that was one of those days that makes you think, 'what the hell are we doing here,'" the mother of the American family, which now lives in Addis Ababa, said. "In how many places do you have to tell your children to not look at the body bags?"



Ruby Adelynn Fieser at 2 months.

The atmosphere of violence, the constant exposure to guns (carried by guards in front of nearly every shop and store), and the chance of turning the corner to see the aftermath of a crime is enough to whip even a rational parent into frenzy.

"It's hard to enjoy this place when the bodies are piling up in front of you," a friend and father of three said to me at the barbecue. A few weeks before, he said, he was arriving at work in a relatively safe area of the city when gunfire began. He ducked behind the walls of the office building. A bodyguard for the family that owns popular fast-food chain Pollo Campero was shot him six times, returning fire in the process. He died later that day in a hospital, according to news reports.

Within a week of the shooting, my friend's wife had picked up her children from school and got stuck in one of Guatemala City's notorious traffic jams. This one was caused by a mudslide. As they inched forward surrounded by little 4-cylinder cars and flatbed delivery trucks, they passed a body of a woman, surrounded by police, who had been raped and killed, according to news reports. Her children asked what was wrong with the woman. She didn't know how to respond.

That family arrived here around the same time we did. They talk frequently about leaving.

My wife and I rarely discuss when we will leave Guatemala. By way of her birth here, Ruby is a Guatemalan citizen. We want her to have ties to the country in which she was born. We want her to speak Spanish with that clear Guatemalan accent. We wouldn't even mind if she used 'fijese.' And I hope that the paranoia that we're experiencing will pass.

The other day I asked my wife if raising a child here was irresponsible. "If something happened, it would be awful. Awful," she said. "But I don't think we're bigger targets because we have a child. Do you?"

"I guess not," I said. But the truth was, I wasn't sure how to respond.

I thought about the previous day, which I had spent interviewing prostitutes in a seedy downtown barrio that is controlled by gang members. I was doing my best to conceal my camera and notebook and not look paranoid when the familiar smell of sour milk wafted up from my shoulder. Ruby had spit up on me that morning. I pictured her saucer-sized blue eyes and absurdly large cheeks. In a moment of discomfort, I recognized how comfortable she makes me feel. And I realized that no matter where we live, my responsibility is to do the same for her. ❑

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ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4303) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4545 42nd Street NW, Suite 311, Washington, D.C. 20016. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers on our web site.

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