Venezuela's violent death rate doubled in the 1990s and then tripled in the first decade of the century, reaching a peak far above that of war-torn Mexico or of (post-2007) Iraq. Why? Qualitative academic work, together with journalistic reports, have suggested competing hypotheses. Some observers blame poverty and inequality. Others point to the deterioration of policing and the criminal justice system under Hugo Chávez, noting especially the minuscule homicide clearance rate. Still others highlight the increase in cocaine trafficking, the illegal markets created by Venezuela's dual exchange rate system, or even the effect of environmental lead exposure (i.e., pollution from leaded gasoline) during the childhood of today's criminal cohort. While available data are not sufficient to definitively adjudicate among competing hypothesis, this presentation brings the first quantitative evidence to the puzzle of Venezuela's violent crime wave.

Dorothy Kronick is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Stanford. Before coming to graduate school she lived in Venezuela as a Fulbright Scholar.