

# Open Streets but Closed Minds: Differentiated Exclusion of Buenos Aires' *Cartoneros*

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## Abstract

Although Buenos Aires is *de jure* an 'open city', both at the global level due to neoliberal reforms and at the local level due to democratic reforms, *de facto* a large part of its (poor) citizens is excluded, mostly socially and politically. Buenos Aires' waste-pickers (*cartoneros*) exemplify this dual trend. When as a consequence of the 2001 economic crises, unemployment, poverty and violence rapidly increased in Buenos Aires, the number of waste-pickers multiplied simultaneously. Although they are allowed access to the inner city to collect recyclable materials and are nowadays *de jure* even considered integral part of the city's formal Integrated Waste Management System, *de facto* they experience different forms of exclusion. Different manifestations of violence inhibit them to fully enjoy the opportunities "the open city" offers. Seen the nature of their work – late at night, early in the morning in unprotected public space - they are particularly vulnerable to violent shocks. Following Moser's classification of urban violence this paper addresses the different manifestations of violence that *cartoneros* experience, and what these violent encounters imply in terms of physical, social and political exclusion in the theoretically "open space" of the city of Buenos Aires

*Today in Argentina, at this very moment, the justice system does not serve us cartoneros. The only thing that serves us are preventive measures and to be careful yourself. Of all risks, precaution is ours. Nobody is going to come to protect us. We have to protect ourselves out there on the streets.*

Alberto (Interviewed in Buenos Aires, 27 August 2007)

## Introduction

During the 1990s Argentina's economy started to decline. Neoliberal reforms were failing which culminated in a severe national economic crisis at the beginning of this millennium (2001-2002). The economic depression ravaged the Argentine economy. In Greater Buenos Aires, poverty peaked in 2002 when at one point 52% of its households were living in poverty (Epstein & Pion-Berlin 2006). Even though this figure dropped to 39% in May 2003, poverty levels remained high. Extreme poverty in Argentina, i.e. people living under the food poverty line, increased from 6 percent to 28 percent in 2002 and in urban areas unemployment rose to a peak of 22 percent in May 2002 (World Bank 2003). Particularly the formal sector of waged employees was hit hard and accounted for 90% of the job loss. To make things worse, income inequality worsened as the incomes of the poorest groups were declining more than that of richer groups (ibid., 6).

As a result of rising inequality and increasing poverty due to Argentina's economic downturn, many Argentines were forced to survive in the informal sector. The country's informal economy has grown substantially to a point where more than 50% of the population is employed in the informal sector (World Bank 2007). The 'informalisation' and downturn of Argentina's economy soon became symbolised by one particular group of informal workers: the *cartoneros*. Cartoneros symbolised the lack of formal employment, the vulnerable position of many Argentines, and the struggle for survival that many shared in the collapsing country. Cartoneros are people that look for cartons – hence the name<sup>i</sup> –, cardboard, paper, plastics / PET, metals and other recyclables. These can in turn be sold to intermediaries. This way cartoneros are able to make a living. To make a living out of the collection of garbage became an important livelihood strategy that enabled many people that had lost their formal jobs, poor people as well as many former middle-class households, to survive the harsh economic times (Schamber & Suárez 2002; Chronopoulos 2006). Today, about seven years after the economic crisis reached its climax, many people still suffer from poverty and unemployment. As a result, waste-picking still is a popular way of coping with the absence of formal alternatives. Every night the capital of Argentina fills up with cartoneros going through the cities refuse to look for recyclables that are a valuable source of income. At the end of the fieldwork from which this paper results, in August 2007, 15.526 cartoneros were formally registered by the *Dirección General de Políticas de Reciclado Urbano* (DGPRU)<sup>ii</sup>. Yet, the real number of registered and unregistered cartoneros working in the city is more likely to approach 30.000<sup>iii</sup>. Other estimates by people from cooperatives and cartonero organizations lay between 8.000 and 25.000 (e.g. in Van Egmond 2007).

Generally, increasing income inequality leads to increasing levels of violence and crime (Fajnzylber *et al.* 1998 & 2000; Heinemann & Verner 2006). This is also the case for Argentina where violence levels have been going up simultaneous with the increasing 'informalisation' of its economy. Although Buenos Aires is relatively safe compared to other Latin American cities – such as for instance Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, or Managua – in the 1990s Argentina has experienced a 'dramatic increase' in violence (Vanderschueren 1996). This increase predominantly took place in Argentina's cities (Lederman 1999). Between 1995 and 2000, urban crime rates in Argentina increased by 65 percent (Tedesco 2000, 536). Based on figures of the Argentina's *Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal* and the Justice Studies Center of Americas<sup>iv</sup>, the development of crime rates in Argentina and Buenos Aires between

2000 and 2003 can be summarised as follows: The number of crimes reported in 2003 was 12 percent higher than in 2000, with an annual rate of growth of approximately 4 percent. Between 2000 and 2003, Argentina's homicide rate increased by 4 percent; rape by 5 percent; wilful injury and simple and attempted robbery by 7 percent; and aggravated robbery by 3 percent.. According to a victimisation study executed by the *Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal*, 37.5 percent of respondents in the city of Buenos Aires claimed to have been victim of some kind of crime. Therefore, it is not a surprise that almost 80 percent of the Argentines consider crime a very big problem (Pew Global 2007).

What causes increasing crime rates and victimisation to crime in Buenos Aires has been debated by various scholars. Tedesco (2000) argues that increasing unemployment stands at the basis of increasing violence in the city. Hojman (2002), however, disagrees and shows that in fact inequality is a better predictor for violence and crime in Buenos Aires. Auyero (2000) argues that the structural adaptations enforced on the people of Argentina and Buenos Aires can be interpreted as neo-liberal violence as it has sparked a steep increase of violence in the slums of Greater Buenos Aires. He describes a rise of drug related crimes, crimes against property and police violence in the slums. In fact, rising crime rates and increasing fear of crime have been used to justify increasing socio-spatial segregation, e.g. through gated communities (Dammert 2001). Increasing socio-spatial segregation should be worrying as it increases inequality and might lead to a higher incidence of violence instead of less (ibid.).

Taking into account the above, cartoneros can be expected to also suffer substantially from the increase in (urban) violence. In addition, they share a number of characteristics that make them specifically vulnerable to violence: they work under poor conditions, in dangerous places and mostly during the evening or at night. Besides that, like other workers in the informal economy, they have no access to formal social safety nets, and although *de jure* they have access to the justice system, *de facto* they cannot rely on legal services and protection. These characteristics of cartoneros as well as the rapid and vast expansion of the informal recycling sector have been documented from various angles (e.g. Schamber & Suárez 2002 & 2007; Medina 1997; Koehs 2004; Chronopoulos 2006; Anguita 2003; IOM / UNICEF 2005). However, only very few studies have touched upon the experiences of violence of cartoneros or waste-pickers in general. Therefore, this paper will explore the experience and interpretations of violence by cartoneros and by doing so it will both extend the body of academic literature on livelihoods and vulnerabilities of waste-pickers in Latin America as well as theoretical and empirical knowledge of the impact of violence on the micro-level.

## **From Criminals to Environmentally Valuable Entrepreneurs**

Already during the 1990s, when the economy was starting to slide down into a crisis, waste-picking was an individual survival strategy for the very poor. Often it was part of a package containing several household livelihood strategies (Van Egmond 2007). The recycling sector was popular amongst the poor as it did not require special experience, skills, contacts or capital and could be taken up at any moment (Reynals 2002). Several elements explain the 'boom' of the number of cartoneros just prior to and during the crisis. Chronopoulos (2006, 168-171) distinguishes three elements. He stresses that the formal labour market could not absorb the offer of labour and therefore many people were forced to make a living in the informal sector. Further, an upper class that consumed a lot, but did not find recycling worth the effort, unconsciously and unintentionally provided these people with a means of living. Finally, the market for recyclables became profitable and entities were created to buy the goods from cartoneros and sell them to bigger (recycling) factories. Also, due to the devaluation of the peso, import prices increased and therefore recycling of cardboard products, paper, glass and metal became more profitable than to import them (Schamber & Suárez 2003).

Although the increasing population of cartoneros met quite some solidarity during the climax of the crisis in 2002 – 2003 (Schamber & Suárez 2007b), this had not always been the

case. Prior, in the late 1990s, many residents of Buenos Aires were receptive to a repressive discourse that portrayed cartoneros “as being part of the mafia, making the city dirty, paralyzing traffic, and scaring away tourists” (Schamber & Suárez 2003, 17). In addition, “quite some government officials were talking about combating the cartoneros” (ibid., 15). A good example of the repressive discourse is a statement by Mauricio Macri<sup>v</sup>, at the time running for mayor of Buenos Aires. He called cartoneros criminals. In 2002 he stated in a renown Argentine newspaper<sup>vi</sup>: “I will imprison them [cartoneros] ... stealing garbage is just as much of a criminal offence as robbing a man at the corner of a street”. At that time, formal private garbage collection companies were paid per ton of collected refuse. Cartoneros, taking away recyclable materials from disposed garbage before it could be collected by a formal garbage company, were therefore stealing these companies’ input and, consequently, turnover. Instead of victims of the crisis, the repressive discourse displayed cartoneros as criminals being a nuisance to the city.

Often the repressive discourse became a repressive reality. By law, stemming from the days of the military junta headed by Jorge Rafael Videla Redondo, waste-picking was illegal and cartoneros were therefore vulnerable to political and institutional repression. Cartoneros experienced many problems with the police, who regularly confiscated their belongings or arrested cartoneros randomly (Martín *et al.* 2007). Occasionally they had to bribe police officers (ibid.). Cartoneros were also suffering from the aggressive behaviour of employees of the formal private garbage companies who shared Macri’s idea that cartoneros are thieves. Besides all that, cartoneros worked in a precarious environment, often suffering from aggressive traffic, insults and health injuries due to working with garbage (Martín *et al.* 2007).

However, gradually the political, legal and institutional context started to change. The first cartonero cooperatives, uniting ‘old’ and ‘new’ cartoneros, started to surface and thereby transformed cartoneros from individual outlaws to social actors (Schamber & Suárez 2003). Cartoneros with prior experience in the formal economy used their knowledge to include cooperatives in local political structures and to link them with other institutions, public and private organisations and (inter)national cooperative networks (ibid., 15). Additionally, a cartonero union called the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos* (MTE) was created in 2002 to represent cartoneros in Buenos Aires.<sup>vii</sup> Furthermore, a national movement for cartoneros and recyclers called *Movimiento Nacional de Trabajadores Cartoneros, Recicladores y Organizaciones Sociales de Argentina* (MNTCRyOS) exists since 2006.<sup>viii</sup> In addition, already in the late 1990s, *Trenes de Buenos Aires* (TBA) started operating four special cartonero trains. These trains were emptied of the seats and therefore provided sufficient space for the cartoneros to transport the carts they use to collect their materials and their collection of the day between the city and the suburbs. Between 2000 and 2002 the amount of carts in these trains quadrupled from 200 to 800<sup>ix</sup>. Also in 2002, weekly roundtable meetings were established with the various stakeholders concerning recycling. These served to stimulate participatory planning and therefore included cartoneros and cartonero organisations<sup>x</sup> (Koehs 2004). Furthermore, in October 2002 the local government started a ‘green bags’ campaign aiming to simplify separation of solid waste at origin which in turn would make collection of recyclables by cartoneros easier.

The greatest achievement regarding cartonero rights, however, came at the end of the year 2002. In December, a new law, *Ley 992* (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires 2003), legalised waste-picking in the autonomous city of Buenos Aires. This law is commonly known as the ‘cartonero law’. Besides granting cartoneros the right to waste-picking in the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, this law also ordered the creation of the DGPRU. The DGPRU is a governmental department of the city of Buenos Aires and has as its main task to promote recycling and to implement the cartonero law. The DGPRU coordinated the above mentioned weekly roundtable meetings and registers cartoneros, cooperatives and intermediaries. Furthermore, it provides cartoneros with cartonero credentials, shares information about subsidies and explores the situation of cartoneros in Buenos Aires. DGPRU’s fieldworkers also fulfil an important role. They are the link between

the cartoneros and the DGPRU. Among other things, they register cartoneros, inform them about their rights and try to help them wherever they can. The ‘cartonero law’ was complemented in 2005 by another law. This law, *Ley 1.854* (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires 2005) which is commonly known as the ‘zero garbage law’, lays out a set of principles about SWM in Buenos Aires. It reinforces the government’s legal obligation to promote recycling and to reduce its disposal of solid waste on sanitary landfills.<sup>xi</sup> More importantly for this paper, it also lays out a system of integrated Solid Waste Management (SWM) which includes informal waste-pickers, i.e. cartoneros, by formalising them through the creation of six recycling centres throughout the city. Certainly, these two laws have changed the formal discourse of waste-picking to move from perceiving it as an individual, illegal activity to a legal, environmentally valuable livelihood strategy for the poor in Buenos Aires.

## Measuring Violence and its Impact

Violence is often defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Krug et al 2002, 5). Manifestations of violence have been roughly categorised either based on quantitative analyses of the economic costs violence generates for individuals, households or society as a whole (e.g. Heinemann & Verner 2006; Becker 1968; Waters et al 2004; Yodanis et al 2000), or based on a more holistic approach that focuses on the impact of violence on people’s livelihoods. Criticising other classifications as being not all encompassing and lacking conceptual congruency Moser (2004) introduced an alternative framework based on the main conscious or unconscious motivations behind the use of violence (Moser 2004, 4; Winton 2004, 167). The motivations behind violence are intentions to gain power over certain aspects of life. In her classification meaning is ascribed to violence by the political, institutional, economic, and social power that is gained through force or violence (Moser 2004; Moser et al 2005). According to Moser (2004, 5) political violence is “driven by the will to win or hold political power” and institutional violence is perpetrated by state and other informal state institutions as well as the private sector that seek to increase institutional power. Economic violence is motivated by a desire for economic gain or to obtain or maintain economic power and social violence is used to obtain social power (Moser & Shrader 1999, 4). This is reflected for instance in the manifestation of gendered power relations or interfamily violence such as the abuse of children by their parents. Social violence is particularly important, while it is omnipresent in many people’s every-day lives (Moser & Winton 2002)<sup>xii</sup>. Besides four categories of violence (political, institutional, economic and social), Caroline Moser distinguishes between types of violence (according to either the perpetrator or victim of the violent act) and manifestations of violence (which describe the actual violent act). In sum, table 1 shows the categories of violence and some examples of types and manifestations of violence in urban areas. Moser’s original classification formed the starting point for the classification of manifestations of violence the cartoneros in Buenos Aires encountered.

## Data and Methods

The primary data upon which the empirical analysis below is based, have been gathered in Buenos Aires between April and August 2007. Various methods, both quantitative and qualitative, have been applied to gather data on cartoneros’ experiences and interpretations of violence. As quantitative method, 120 face-to-face surveys have been conducted in order to map what kinds of violence are encountered by cartoneros as well as to gather some basic demographic and socio-economic data. For the face-to-face surveys a quota sample has been used. Roughly three groups of cartoneros could be distinguished: those working on foot, those

**Table 1: Examples of categories, types, and manifestations of violence in urban areas**

Categories of violence	Types of violence (per perpetrator and/or victim)	Manifestations of violence
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State and non-state violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guerrilla conflict</li> <li>• Political assassinations</li> </ul>
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence of state and other “informal” institutions including the private sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extra judicial killings by the police</li> <li>• Lynching of suspected criminals by community members</li> </ul>
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organized crime</li> <li>• Robbers</li> <li>• Business interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Street theft, robbery, burglary</li> <li>• Conflict over scarce resources</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intimate partner violence inside the home</li> <li>• Child abuse: boys and girls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical and psychological abuse</li> <li>• Incivility in areas such as traffic, road rage etc</li> </ul>

*Source:* Adjusted from original in Moser (2004) Urban Violence and Insecurity: An Introductory Roadmap. *Environment & Urbanization*, 16(2): 3-16

making use of trucks to transport themselves and their carts to the city, and those who come into the city by train. Their mode of transport has implications for the times and the manner in which they work, and therefore was expected to have an impact on their exposure to acts of violence. The quotas have been weighed according to their estimated share of the total number of cartoneros based on the DPRU registration and interviews with various key-informants<sup>xiii</sup>. Sampling took place in six different areas in the city of Buenos Aires in order to avoid neighbourhood effects to interfere with the representativeness of the sample. The qualitative methods of data collection consisted of five semi-structured interviews with cartoneros and 25 semi-structured interviews with key-informants from academia, civil society, cartonero cooperatives and city government. Furthermore, participatory and non-participatory observations as well as many informal conversations with cartoneros and others were important qualitative data sources.

The research population consists of 74 percent men and 26 percent women. Both train and truck cartoneros each make up 37.5% of the sample and truck cartoneros 25%. These are the estimated shares of the population of cartoneros as a whole. Their average weekly turnover is 118 pesos per cartonero. About 5 percent of the sampled cartoneros are below the age of 17. However, other studies have estimated the percentage of child labour to be a lot larger than 5 percent (IOM / UNICEF 2005). Just over 19 percent of all sampled cartoneros started working during the crisis, 36 percent after the crisis and 45 percent was already working as cartonero before the economic crisis hit Argentina.

## Introducing the Experience of Violence by Cartoneros

Cartoneros that comb the streets of Buenos Aires experience violence on a regular basis. More than 90 percent of the surveyed cartoneros indicated that they were affected by at least one form of violence. In fact, the majority encountered more than one manifestation of violence with over half of all respondents suffering from four or more manifestations in the last year. One cartonero had even encountered thirteen different acts of violence with various frequencies of occurrence. In sum, all 120 surveyed cartoneros together have experienced 505 manifestations of violence over the last year. This number is still an understatement as most manifestations of violence are encountered more than once per year. See table 2 for an overview of the experienced categories, types and manifestations of violence.

**Table 2: Overview of the experienced categories, types and manifestations of violence (in percentages of all cartoneros) by cartoneros in Buenos Aires**

Category of violence	Type of violence (perpetrator and/or victim)	Manifestations
Economic (78%)	Galponeros (50,8%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mess with balance (45,8%)</li> <li>• Pays too little (11,7%)</li> </ul>
	Camioneros (qualitative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fix prices through monopoly</li> <li>• Make up 'the rules of the game'</li> </ul>
	Robbers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theft during recollection of materials (33%)</li> <li>• Burglary (29,2%)</li> </ul>
	Other cartoneros (18,3%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defending territory &amp; clients (14,2%)</li> <li>• Quarrel about materials (2,5%)</li> <li>• Violating territory of other (1,7%)</li> </ul>
Political & Institutional (69%)	Political discrimination: state, politicians & governments (58,3%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They do not help (25%)</li> <li>• They are not interested in cartoneros (22,7%)</li> <li>• They do not listen to cartoneros (10%)</li> <li>• They do not provide other (decent) employment opportunities (7,5%)</li> <li>• They seek to remove cartoneros from the city / <i>Quieren sacar los cartoneros</i> (5,8%)</li> <li>• Cartoneros do not have the same rights and opportunities as others (5%)</li> <li>• They do not implement their laws and promises (4,2%)</li> </ul>
	Police (40,8%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asks to see ID (24%)</li> <li>• Arrested / accused without legitimate reason (5,8%)</li> <li>• Was told to go away (4,2%)</li> <li>• Treated as a criminal (3,3%)</li> <li>• Bribes (3,3%)</li> <li>• Was denied access (2,5%)</li> <li>• Threats to confiscate or actual confiscation of materials and/or cart (4,2%)</li> <li>• Insults (2,5%)</li> <li>• Bribing camioneros (qualitative)</li> </ul>
	Formal garbage companies & employees (5%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal / physical confrontations (5%)</li> <li>• Confiscating materials together with officers of local authorities (qualitative)</li> </ul>
Social (64%)	Non-political discrimination (56,7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are looked at with a dirty face / <i>con mala cara</i> (45,8%)</li> <li>• They are called <i>negro / negra</i> (5%)</li> <li>• They do not have the same rights and opportunities as others (5%)</li> </ul>
	Traffic (35%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passes really close / assaulted (25%)</li> <li>• Unnecessarily honking the horn (3,3%)</li> <li>• Got hit (2,5%)</li> </ul>
	Abuse in the public arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal insults (19,2%)</li> <li>• Sexual abuse (1,6%)</li> </ul>

Source: Surveys, fieldwork April – August 2007

Acts of violence come in various forms, at different times and in various frequencies. The most common experienced category of violence among cartoneros in Buenos Aires is that of economic violence (78 percent), followed by the experience of political / institutional violence (69 percent) and social violence (64 percent). In addition, it strikes that almost three quarters of the respondents have encountered at least two of the three categories of violence.

This is portrayed in figure 1. The areas where circles overlap contain percentages of cartoneros who have encountered either two or three categories of violence in one year. It shows that cartoneros do not only experience a high number of manifestations but also suffer from different categories of violence.

Yet, it is not only the number of encountered manifestations of violence that counts. The frequency with which a violent act is encountered plays an essential role too in deciding its impact on the vulnerability of cartoneros. A female cartonero explained that it was not so hard to deal with the first time she was victim of burglary. But eight burglaries later it became ever more difficult to cope with since she had lost the psychological and economic resilience to start from scratch again after every burglary. She said: “dealing with burglary is difficult. The effort to recover becomes larger every time”. Therefore, it can be argued that the more often someone experiences a certain violent act, the greater will be its impact on this person’s vulnerability and, related, the greater is the impact on his or her livelihood. Thus, the number of experienced manifestations of violence combined with the frequency per manifestation provides us with an accurate overall measure which indicates the level of violence that a cartonero experiences<sup>xiv</sup>. See table 3 for an overview of the encountered levels of violence.

**Table 3: Encountered levels of violence**

Violence level	Frequency	Percentage
No violence	9	7,5
Below average (scores 1 - 8)	35	29,2
Average level of violence (scores 9 - 16 / average score = 13.9)	33	27,5
Above average level of violence (scores 17 – 24)	23	19,2
High level of violence (scores 25 - 32)	14	11,7
Extreme level of violence (scores 33 - 40 / 40 = max. score)	6	5,0
Total	120	100,0

Source: Surveys, fieldwork April – August 2007

A first clear finding, demonstrated in table 3 is that only 7.5% of the surveyed cartoneros experienced no violence at all<sup>xv</sup>. It, furthermore, demonstrates that 35.9% of cartoneros experience higher than average levels of violence. Almost 17% face high to very high levels of violence. One of the cartoneros that faces an extreme level of violence is Norman (32). He collects his materials a neighbourhood called *Once*. He feels heavily discriminated by various actors such as passers-by, residents and the police. Moreover, he feels threatened by traffic, suffers from robberies during the recollection of materials and mentions to experience problems with an intermediary (*galponero*). Even though he started working just after the crisis, he cannot obtain clients that might sooth his circumstances a bit. The worse part is that he feels powerless to change his situation. Juan (25) who works in *Recoleta*, faces comparable high levels of violence. Amongst other manifestations of violence, he suffers from insults and traffic assaults. He had clients but unfortunately was unable to maintain them. Although his weekly income is twice the average, he emphasises to be incapable of dealing with the high level of violence that he encounters

### The Experience of Violence in Depth

Following Moser’s classification we will hereafter elaborate more on the different categories and manifestations of violence, as perpetrated by different actors, encountered by cartoneros in Buenos Aires.

**Economic violence** – Cartoneros experience various types of economic violence. The most commonly expressed form of violence (50%) indicates that they experience exploitation and fraud from their middleman, the *galponeros*. Numerous cartoneros depend on small intermediaries in or close to their working area in the city as they cannot take all the collected recyclables with them to the far away slums where intermediaries pay higher prices. Many cartoneros distrust the intermediaries. Most said to suspect or know that intermediaries rig their balance so it registers less than the actual weight of the material. A cartonero who had weighed his materials himself before going to the *galponero* found a difference of several kilos. Another said

*“My galponero robs me. He messes with the balances, I tell you. I just go where they pay me a bit more. It’s not much, but at least you know that that money is for you. And, moreover, I don’t have many other options. The problem is that we cannot do it ourselves. If I would have had a truck myself I would have more possibilities to sell my materials for a good price. For example, I could stock up materials for a week and sell them in the province or somewhere here where*

*they would pay a fair price. Then I would make much more money. Yet, unfortunately I don't have this possibility*" (Maria, 34, Villa 31).

Another often heard complaint was that intermediaries form oligopolies and thereby, together, keep prices low. Partly, this is caused by the sphere of informality in which both cartoneros and the smaller *galponeros* operate.

A similar story of dependency and a lack of choice can be told about the *camioneros*. Many cartoneros from South of Buenos Aires come to town by communal trucks owned by a *camionero*. As a female cartonero from villa Caraza explained, there is a high demand for transportation and only a limited supply in the slum neighbourhoods. When the neighbourhood is not connected by one of the

Robbery is an important type of economic violence. One third of all cartoneros suffers from thefts or robberies during the recollection of materials and almost 30 percent suffers from burglary. In one year, almost 13% of those suffering from thefts or robberies during the collection of recyclables had experienced five or more thefts or robberies, 15.4 percent was robbed three or four times, and 46.2 percent had suffered from one or two thefts or robberies. Sometimes cartoneros are victims of theft of collected materials and even of their carts. Robberies during the recollection often consist of a small amount of relatively expensive goods that are easy to transport, do not attract the attention of other cartoneros, are simple to hide and not easily identifiable. These are, for example, 'white paper' (like the kind used in printers and photocopiers), metals, or consumption goods such as sneakers. The costs of theft and robberies during the collection of materials accounted on average for two third of the measured average weekly income<sup>xvi</sup>. Yet, when a cart or a whole bag of materials is stolen the financial damage is considerably larger. Regarding victims of burglary, 25.7 percent had suffered from three or more burglaries in a year and 74.3 percent from one or two. Burglaries included theft of recyclables, savings, carts, household effects. In some cases everything that was in the house was stolen, including beds and the children's toys. The average amount of financial loss as a result of burglaries is even higher than that of robberies during the recollection of materials. On average the damage was 475 pesos (2.7 average week salaries) per victim in the last year. In some cases the financial loss was 1000 pesos or more. Since the household economies of cartonero are typically organised per day or week and because they tend to have very few or no savings available to cope with financial loss the consequence can be detrimental.

**Political / institutional violence** – Cartoneros experience various forms of political and institutional violence. The police remains, like in the past (Martin *et al.* 2007), an important perpetrator of violence. More than 40% of cartoneros has experienced one or more manifestations of police violence. One fourth of all cartoneros found that the main nuisance related to the police is to be asked to show their ID or cartonero credentials<sup>xvii</sup>. On average these cartoneros had to show their ID twice per month. Cartoneros feel stigmatised by the police, stating that they treat cartoneros "very aggressive and ... without respect" (Maria, 34) or "like criminals" (Silvina, 34). Furthermore, this social stigmatisation of cartoneros by the police results in accusations of criminal offences and even an arrest without any legitimate reason. In stark contrast with the past, only very few cartoneros, 3 percent, mentioned that they have to pay bribes directly to police officers.

Cartoneros also stressed manifestations of institutional violence committed by companies. Most striking is the case of the *tren blanco* – the special cartonero train running between the slums where cartoneros live and the inner city where they collect their materials enabling cartoneros to transport their carts and materials to and from their home. In the second half of July 2007, two trajectories of the *tren blanco* were cancelled by TBA which operated these services (La Nación, 29 December 2007; Infobea 2007). These services were used daily by at least 1.300 cartoneros (Clarín 30 May 2007). The company stated that it needed more coaches to provide regular passenger services (Clarín, 7 July 2007) stressing that the "bad state of the equipment caused by vandalism and depredation by those who use them" forced them to take

the *tren blanco* out of service (Clarín, 29 December 2007). As the availability of a safe, reliable and accessible infrastructure for the poor is crucial in order to sustain development (e.g. Ayres 1998), many cartoneros depending on these trains for their source of income and livelihood perceived the cancellation of these services as an act of violence against their lives and a violation of fundamental human rights. The consequences of this are far reaching. A cartonero expressed this by saying: “By taking away the trains, they take away our lives. When I left today I had only five pesos to give to my wife to buy food for ourselves and our child. This is already nothing. What do we do now when I lose the possibility to work?” Institutional violence resulting from employees of formal garbage collection companies, however, has diminished sharply over time. Where Martin et al (2007) found that in 2003 cartoneros suffered substantially from physical harassment by these employees, in 2007 only 5 percent experienced violence related to formal garbage companies. In fact, many cartoneros were receiving help and/or materials from employees of formal private collection companies. Yet, still stories circulate about private garbage companies, accompanied by government officials and/or police officers, which vandalize cartoneros or their equipment and confiscate their materials.

Surprisingly however, the cartoneros most often mentioned neglect by politicians and government officials as the most experienced form of political and institutional violence. Almost 60 percent of cartoneros experienced to be excluded by politics and politicians. They stress that the government does not make an effort to help (25 percent), that politicians are not interested in their fate (23 percent), and that the government does not listen to them (10 percent). Cartoneros feel that the government does not provide “decent” job opportunities, that it does not implement her laws and promises and that the politicians just want to get rid of cartoneros. It is interesting to note the contrast between the experience of cartoneros of political neglect and the policy measures implemented since the 2001-2002 crisis which aimed to improve the lives of cartoneros in Buenos Aires. The explanation for this contrast can probably be found in more recent developments. In November 2006 the government started to impose stringent checks on trucks that transport cartoneros, their carts and the collected materials in and out Buenos Aires. By doing so, it “actively seeks to limit activity of cartoneros in the city” (Clarín 21, November 2006). Moreover, many cartoneros showed their concern about the recent newly elected head of government of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri. Although solid waste management reforms were of key concern in the election campaigns of various candidates, numerous cartoneros fear that the tide is turning and that recent positive transformations of the government’s perception of cartoneros – from being considered criminals to valid public actors (Koehs 2004) – will be reversed, since Macri was one of the key figures that depicted cartoneros as criminals as was already mentioned above. Macri officially strives to remove all garbage from the streets and to integrate all cartoneros into the formal solid waste management sector. Yet, many cartoneros fear that local government and local politicians, and Macri often in particular, “want the city to be disposed of cartoneros”. In any case, the perceived neglect by politicians together with a lacking willingness to promote equal rights for cartoneros in practice and the very limited initiative to actually improve the lives of cartoneros demonstrated by allowing TBA to cancel important *tren blanco* services are in the eyes of many cartoneros an important type of political and institutional violence and the result of a repressive attitude.

**Social violence** – An important, but fragmented, manifestation of social violence is social discrimination. 57 percent of all cartoneros experience to be discriminated in at least one way or another. Encounters of discrimination are fragmented because of the variety of perpetrators of discrimination. Discriminative manifestations of violence appear in relation with passers-by when cartoneros are collecting recyclables (30 percent of all cartoneros), the police (38 percent of all cartoneros) and residents of the cartoneros’ working area (2 percent of all cartoneros). A main expression of discrimination is that cartoneros perceive people to look at them with “a dirty face”<sup>xviii</sup>. Furthermore, cartoneros are called *negro* or *negra*<sup>xix</sup>. Although many cartoneros are proud of the fact that they are working instead of robbing, various cartoneros believe that waste picking is not a decent or worthy job. They are ashamed of their

activity or feel bad about it because they have to go through other people's garbage in order to make a living. They feel discriminated because society does not value their right to other more honest employment. For an important part, this is directly the result of the marginal position of cartoneros. For example, a female cartonero in an inner city slum (Villa 31) explained that employers do not give you a job when they see that you live in a slum. In their eyes slum dwellers are thieves.

Verbal insults and physical abuse are experienced throughout the public domain. 19 percent of all cartoneros underwent verbal molestations coming from various sources. Most often it is people in traffic or passers-by, but cartoneros also mentioned to be insulted by residents of their working area, *porteros* (which are doormen of residential buildings) and employees of the formal garbage collection enterprises. Usual comments are that the cartonero has to go and find a real job, that he or she is a nobody, or other regular swearwords. Two female cartoneros, i.e. 6,5 percent of all surveyed female cartoneros, were sexually abused. They were harassed by passers-by on the streets. During interviews, stories about sexual harassment and abuse focussed mainly on porteros. Every so often a portero wants women to perform sexual deeds in exchange for materials. As one woman said, porteros are "abusing the great need of cartoneros."

Also the public road in down-town Buenos Aires is dangerous, especially when you are not inside a vehicle. Similar to the findings of Martín et al (2007) dating from 2003, today 35 percent of all cartoneros experienced direct violence and aggressive behaviour related to traffic. Unnecessary honking and verbal insults from drivers are the most innocent form. More threatening is traffic that on purpose passes very close in order to intimidate cartoneros. Related, 19 percent of those that experience violence caused by traffic say people attempted to run in to them and 7 percent actually was hit. Usually the perpetrators are taxis or busses. Like Maria (34) said, "people in traffic do not respect us cartoneros. At times they try to hit you. It is because of this that many cartoneros are involved in accidents. They crash into them and their carts. People in traffic don't care about us. It is as if we do not exist."

## **How Cartoneros Interpret Violence: The 'Socialisation' of Violence**

When the way in which cartoneros interpret the violence they encounter is compared with earlier studies<sup>xx</sup>, a 'socialisation' of violence becomes clear. The legal and policy changes and their related institutional, political and social transformations discussed above have, to a certain degree, contributed to a shift in the experience of violence. The legalisation of cartoneros which formally allows cartoneros to work throughout Buenos Aires has reduced the financial and physical impact of the more classic political and institutional violence such as bribery, confiscation of materials and tools, or imprisonment, more recently this has been less the case. Nowadays, problems with the police have mainly social and human consequences and come in the form of discrimination, insults, and a lack of respect for cartoneros. The police had to change its way of handling cartoneros since the atrocities of the past are particularly easy to prove and are clearly forbidden as a result of newly gained right to work as cartonero. Yet, the less tentative forms of police violence with non-financial and non-physical consequences remained. Also, assaults and violence from employees of formal garbage collection companies has largely disappeared due to the reforms of the formal SWM sector.

In fact, even though economic violence is encountered the most by cartoneros and often has substantial financial consequences, they stress political and institutional exclusion as well as discrimination to be most important to them. Buenos Aires has opened up to the cartoneros in terms of the right to be working there, but remains closed due to political exclusion, impeded access due to the cancellation of important *tren blanco* services, and discrimination. The simultaneously attempted integration and participation of cartoneros in policymaking processes turned out to remain limited. First, key participatory initiatives such as the weekly roundtable meetings mentioned above have been put on hold. Koehs (2004) found that the

scope and depth of cartonero participation in the development of the cartonero law was limited too. Second, whatever limited participation exists is very much restrained to cooperatives and some other cartonero organizations. As almost all cartoneros are unorganized and work individually they are underrepresented in or excluded from governance processes. Third, hardly any progress has been made to integrate cartoneros into the formal solid waste management sector. Thus, the legal recognition of the rights of cartoneros has worked to decrease some forms of institutional violence, but failed political and institutional inclusion makes that cartoneros still do not feel treated as full citizens, feel excluded and perceive that as violence. Due to the 'socialisation' of violence cartoneros feel powerless to deal with the violence they encounter. Although social capital and networks are used in various ways to avoid and mitigate manifestations of economic violence, cartoneros state to have no choice but to submit to political exclusion and discrimination. Obviously, this creates feelings of powerlessness and being marginalised which increase (mental) ill-being.

## Conclusion

Buenos Aires is *de jure* an 'open city' in economic and in political terms. The informal economy, often characterized as being easily accessible for unskilled labour, with little or no investment capital, absorbed many new cartoneros. Due to various legal and policy reforms, *cartoneros* are allowed access to the inner city to collect recyclable materials and are nowadays *de jure* even considered integral part of the city's formal Integrated Waste Management System. Cartoneros furthermore enjoy *de jure* enjoy all political citizens rights, and have even several channels in which they can voice their interests.

However, the cartoneros exemplify how despite their economic possibilities and formal rights the city's poor citizens are *de facto* excluded, mostly socially and politically. Their *de jure* rights do not enable them to counter exclusion. As important to them is that political exclusion and social discrimination, make cartoneros feel to be *de facto* socially and politically excluded. They value these forms to be more important than the relatively higher level of economic violence they suffer from. In fact, within the theoretically "open space" of Buenos Aires, cartoneros see submission to these forms of violence as basically the only way of dealing with it.

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<sup>i</sup> The English translation would be ‘cardboard people’. For a further discussion of the term cartonero see Koehs 2004: 17.

<sup>ii</sup> See [www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/med\\_ambiente/dgpru/](http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/med_ambiente/dgpru/). The accuracy of the formal number of cartoneros is subject to doubts, however, because it excludes children and is not updated regularly. Furthermore, during field visits I saw and heard from cartoneros that many slum dwellers register as cartonero even though they are not. This is explained by some minor social benefits that the cartonero credential provides.

<sup>iii</sup> Of this study’s sampled and questioned cartoneros only 55 percent was officially registered at the DGPRU. When 15.526 equals 55 percent of all cartoneros then 100 percent equals 28.229 cartoneros.

<sup>iv</sup> See [www.polcrim.jus.gov.ar](http://www.polcrim.jus.gov.ar) for data from the *Dirección Nacional de Política Criminal*; see [www.cejamerica.org/reporte/muestra\\_pais.php?idioma=ingles&pais=ARGENTIN&tipreport=REPORTE2&seccion=TASADELI](http://www.cejamerica.org/reporte/muestra_pais.php?idioma=ingles&pais=ARGENTIN&tipreport=REPORTE2&seccion=TASADELI) for the Justice Studies Center of Americas’ remarks about Argentina and Buenos Aires.

<sup>v</sup> Macrí is the current mayor of Buenos Aires. Before going into politics he was an important businessman, the president of Boca Juniors, the most popular football club of Argentina, a former owner of a garbage company, and part of the city’s economic and political elite.

<sup>vi</sup> La Nación, 27 August 2002, author’s translation

<sup>vii</sup> Rafael, MTE. Interview: Buenos Aires, 31 May 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Alberto Cruz. Vice-president of MNTCRyOS. Interview: Buenos Aires, August 2007

<sup>ix</sup> Francisco Suárez, anthropologist UNGS. Interview: Buenos Aires, 11 May 2007

<sup>x</sup> However, the roundtable discussions were not very successful and were cancelled again fairly soon.

<sup>xi</sup> For example, the ‘zero garbage law’ sets mandatory targets for reducing the disposal of solid waste by 30 percent in 2010, 50 percent by 2012, and 75 percent by 2017 relative to disposal in 2004. Furthermore, it prohibits the disposal and combustion of organic and recyclable materials after 2020.

<sup>xii</sup> See Moser & Shrader (1999) and Moser (2004) for a more detailed elaboration on the typology and a deeper understanding of the definitions behind the categories.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Most notably Francisco Suárez, anthropologist and cartonero expert from the *Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento* (UNGS).

<sup>xiv</sup> In this measure all manifestations of violence have been given the value '1'. Thus, because of the highly subjective nature of the experience of violence, no distinction of value has been made between types or manifestations of violence. Then, according to a high, middle, or low frequency of occurrence, each manifestation have been addressed with the values '3', '2' or '1' respectively. Finally, values of manifestations noted to be most important by the respondents have been raised with '2'. The sum of all values per manifestation adds up to the total level of violence.

<sup>xv</sup> Note that this number cannot be compared with the earlier mentioned 37,5% of inhabitants of Buenos Aires that reported they had been victim to some sort of criminal offence, since this study among cartoneros also included manifestations of violence in for instance the form of discrimination, insults that are not criminal offences.

<sup>xvi</sup> The average weekly income of a cartonero is 118 pesos.

<sup>xvii</sup> When a cartonero is registered he or she receives a credential from the city government.

<sup>xviii</sup> Author's translation. In Spanish: *con mala cara*.

<sup>xix</sup> *Negro* and *negra* are also used in a more neutral and sometimes even affective manner. However, these terms also bare a discriminatory load since they are often used to refer in a negative way to indigenous people, and foreigners from Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru and Brazil.

<sup>xx</sup> See section 2.3.2 for an account of data that elaborate on prior experiences of violence by cartoneros in Buenos Aires.