



**FITS THE PATTERN:** Police investigator Glenzor Vallejo takes notes by the body of a drug suspect killed in what police said was a shoot-out. Police identified the victim only by his alias, Gilbert. As with many other killings, officers said sachets of white powder and a gun were found on the body.  
Picture by Damir Sagolj

# Duterte's War

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL, MANUEL MOGATO, JOHN CHALMERS,  
CLARE BALDWIN AND DAMIR SAGOLJ

MAY 25 — DECEMBER 7 DAVAO/MANILA

# Philippine death squads very much in business as Duterte set for presidency

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL AND  
MANUEL MOGATO

MAY 25 DAVAO, PHILIPPINES

**O**n May 14, five days after voters in the Philippines chose Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte as their next president, two masked gunmen cruised this southern city's suburbs on a motorbike, looking for their kill.

Gil Gabrillo, 47, a drug user, was returning from a cockfight when the gunmen approached. One of them pumped four bullets into Gabrillo's head and body, killing the small-time trader of goods instantly. Then the motorbike roared off.

The murder made no headlines in Davao,

where Duterte's loud approval for hundreds of execution-style killings of drug users and criminals over nearly two decades helped propel him to the highest office of a crime-weary land.

Human rights groups have documented at least 1,400 killings in Davao that they allege had been carried out by death squads since 1998. Most of those murdered were drug users, petty criminals and street children.

In a 2009 report, Human Rights Watch identified a consistent failure by police to seriously investigate targeted killings. It said acting and retired police officers worked as "handlers" for death-squad gunmen, giving them names and photos of targets — an allegation denied by Davao police.

But a four-year probe into such killings by the National Bureau of Investigation, the Philippines' equivalent of the FBI, hasn't led to a single prosecution, and one senior NBI agent told Reuters it will probably be shelved now that Duterte is set to become president. The nation's Justice Secretary last week told reporters the probe may not be able to proceed.

Such impunity, and Duterte's demands in recent weeks for more summary justice, could embolden death squads across the country, say human rights and church groups. Already there has been a spate of unsolved killings in nearby cities, with other mayors echoing Duterte's support for vigilante justice.

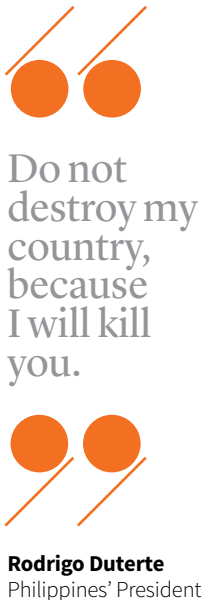
"We've seen it happen in Davao and we've seen copycat practices," Chito Gascon, chairman of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), an independent Philippine watchdog, told Reuters. "Now can you imagine he is president and the national model for crime-fighting is Davao?"

Ask Clarita Alia, 62, who still lives in the Davao slum where her four sons were murdered, and she gives a mirthless chuckle.

"Blood will flow like a river," she says.

## DENIES DIRECTING KILLINGS

Duterte, who has been Davao's mayor or vice-mayor for most of the past 30 years, has denied any involvement in the murders. "I never did



that," he said on the campaign trail in April, responding to allegations he had directed the killings. An Office of the Ombudsman investigation also found there was no evidence connecting Duterte to the murders.

He has, though, repeatedly condoned them.

For example, in comments to reporters in 2009, he warned: "If you are doing an illegal activity in my city, if you are a criminal or part of a syndicate that preys on the innocent people of the city, for as long as I am the mayor, you are a legitimate target of assassination."

And more recently he has vowed to wipe out crime in six months across the country by killing criminals, drug pushers and "sons of bitches" after he takes office on June 30.

"Do not destroy my country, because I will kill you," the 71-year-old former prosecutor told a news conference in Davao on May 15.

He has also promised to restore the death penalty in the Philippines, warning he will hang the most heinous criminals twice: once to kill them, then again to "completely sever the head from the body".

People here remember pre-Duterte Davao as a lawless battleground for security forces and Communist rebels. The city's Agdao district was so violent it was nicknamed "Nicaragdao" after the then war-torn Central American nation.

Today, thanks to Duterte's campaigns against drugs and crime, Davao today feels much safer, say the locals. But it still ranks first among 15 Philippine cities for murder and second for rape, according to national police.

### ON WATCH FOR ASSASSINS

Reuters interviews with the families of four Davao victims, one of whom was a 15-year-old, showed that murders continued even as Duterte campaigned for the presidency.

All four killings occurred in the past nine months and bore the hallmarks of a loose-knit group that the locals call the Davao Death Squad.

The victims were shot in daylight or at dusk, three of them on the same street in a riverside slum seething with people. The killers rode

motorbikes with no license plates, their faces hidden by helmets and masks.

Reymar Tecson, 19, was executed last August while sleeping at the roadside. A week later, Romel Bantilan, 15, was shot dead while playing a computer game less than 30 paces away.

Tecson's family said Reymar was a drug user, but Bantilan's family insisted that Romel was clean.

Romel had a twin brother, and their father, Jun Bantilan, said he had heard "rumors" that the other boy would be next. Most days Jun sits at the end of the street, watching out for assassins.

Nearby, in her tumble-down shack, Norma Helardino still wondered why her husband Danilo, 53, was shot dead in January. He didn't use drugs, she said, although "maybe his friends did."

The police filed a report but Helardino said she saw no sign of an investigation: "No witnesses came forward." When asked who her husband's killers were, she pointed to her tin roof and said: "Only God knows."

The three dead males in the slum were "noted drug dealers," said Major Milgrace Driz, a Davao police spokeswoman.

"It is their destiny to be killed because they choose to be criminals," she said. "The mayor has already said there is no place for criminals in the city."

Driz described 15-year-old Bantilan as a "recidivist" with a "criminal attitude" who had been repeatedly warned to mend his ways. She said he had delivered drugs for a gang which had probably murdered him over a money dispute.

Lack of witnesses meant the three murders remained unsolved despite diligent efforts to investigate, Driz added.

Responding to the Human Rights Watch allegations that the police conspire with the death squads, Driz said the police get the names of local criminals through a public hotline but don't kill them.

### CLOSED AND TERMINATED

Human rights activists say official investigations of death-squad killings have been



## Who will investigate the president?



NBI source

hampered by a lack of witnesses, bureaucratic apathy and political influence.

The Human Rights Watch report called on the CHR to investigate whether Duterte and other officials had been involved or complicit in the deaths.


A CHR report three years later confirmed the “systematic practice of extrajudicial killings” by the Davao Death Squad. It, in turn, was successful in getting the Office of the Ombudsman to investigate whether Duterte was criminally liable for inaction in the face of evidence of numerous killings.

But in a January 2016 letter seen by Reuters, the Ombudsman told the CHR its investigation was “closed and terminated” because it had found no evidence that Duterte or the police were involved in the killings. The letter also dismissed the death squad as a product of “rumors and other gossips”.

The CHR report also triggered a probe by the NBI. Four years later, it is still ongoing, an agency spokesman said.

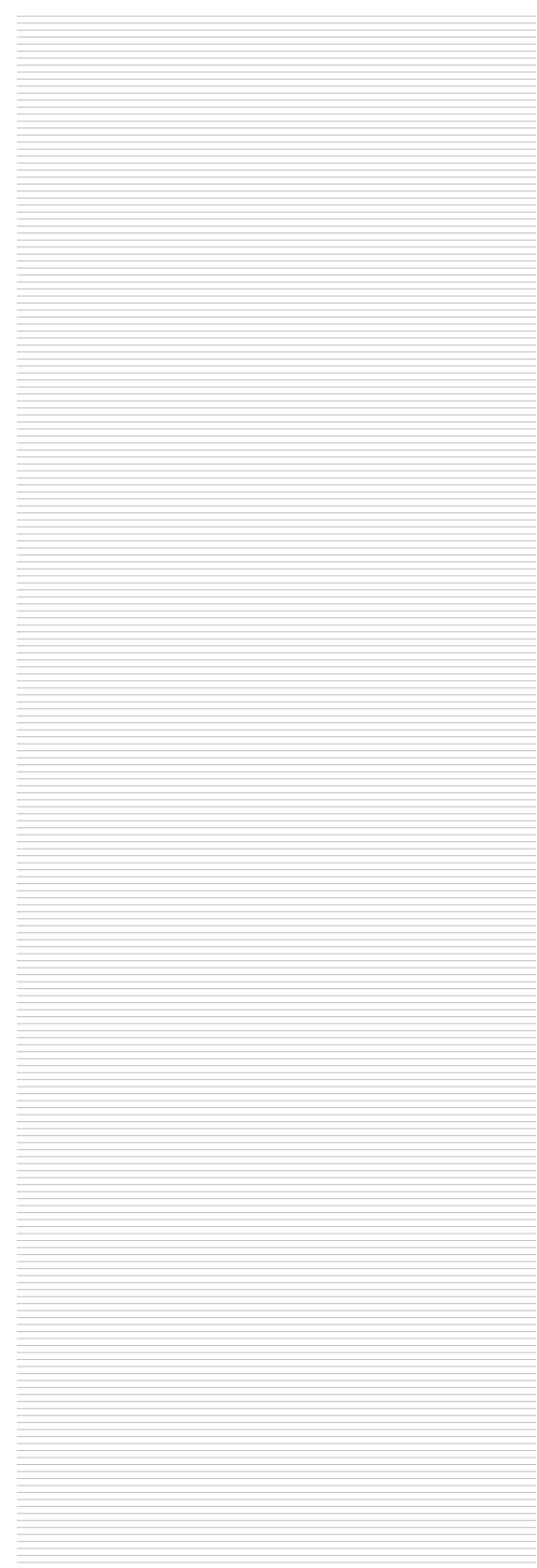
However, Secretary of Justice Emmanuel Caparas, who oversees the NBI, told reporters on Friday that the status of the investigation was unclear because a key witness, a former gunman, had left protective custody. “It’s really just a question now if the witness will surface,” he said.

And another NBI source, who requested anonymity because he wasn’t allowed to talk to the media, said the probe was now likely to be halted.

“Who will investigate the president?” he said. 

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Editing by **John Chalmers** and **Martin Howell**



# In Duterte's war on drugs, local power brokers help draw up hit lists

BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL AND JOHN CHALMERS

OCTOBER 7 MANILA

There are two versions of how Manila pedicab driver Neptali Celestino died. According to Philippines police, he shot at plainclothes officers during a sting operation on Sept. 12, and they returned fire. His family says police burst into their ramshackle home, cornered an unarmed Celestino and shot him in front of his teenage sons.

Whatever the case, Celestino's days seem to have been numbered. His name had appeared on a police "watch list" of drug suspects drawn up with the help of community leaders and other people who lived alongside him in Palatiw, a frenetic, traffic-choked area on the eastern side of the nation's capital.

The local officials who help cops draw up these lists are foot soldiers in a war on drugs that has led to the killing of more than 3,600

people since President Rodrigo Duterte took office on June 30.

Most of the 1,377 people shot by the police had appeared on the lists, according to national police chief Ronald Dela Rosa. It was unclear how many of the remaining 2,275 victims, who human rights activists suspect were mostly killed by vigilantes, were on the lists.

The campaign draws its momentum from President Duterte: Last Friday, he seemed to compare himself to Hitler and said he would be "happy to slaughter" three million drug addicts in the Philippines. But the campaign's efficiency depends on the lowliest officials in the country's barangays - its districts and villages.

"They are on the forefront of this fight," Dela Rosa told Reuters. "They can identify the drug users and pushers in their barangays. They know everyone."

## MOTORBIKE-RIDING ASSASSINS

Interviews with local police, residents and barangay officials reveal the mechanics of an anti-drugs crusade that the popular Duterte has vowed to wage until next June in the face of global condemnation.

Barangay leaders, known as "captains", have been instrumental in drawing up the lists, say police.

Maricar Asilo Vivero is the captain of Pinagbuhatan, a Manila barangay with about 145,000 people, and says she is an enthusiastic supporter of Duterte's campaign.

"The war on drugs is good," she said. "It lowers crime. It identifies those who want to change."

The night before, said Vivero, motorbike-riding assassins killed two men who had been named as pushers on the barangay's watch list. Vivero said she sympathised with the victims' families but didn't feel responsible for the deaths.

People weren't included on the watch list with "the objective of killing them, or asking the police or authorities to kill them," she said. "Our objective is to guide them, to direct their lives to the better - not to kill."

Asked if people named on the watch list



It's an environment conducive to someone with a grudge and a gun to hunt you down.



**Karen Gomez-Dumpit**  
Commissioner at the Philippines' Commission on Human Rights

were more likely to get killed, Vivero replied: "No, I don't think so."

There were 323 suspected users and dealers on Pinagbuhatan's watch list, according to a computer print-out seen by Reuters. It had been swelled by people who had gone to the barangay office to admit to police they were users, a process known as "surrendering".

### OFTEN A FAMILY AFFAIR

The origins of the barangay system predate the arrival of Spanish colonisers in the 16th century. In Manila, a barangay can consist of just two densely populated streets; in the countryside, it can sprawl for miles.

Each has a barangay captain and six kagawad, or councillors, who are elected in polls often dogged by allegations of corruption. And as with more senior posts in the Philippines, the barangay captaincy often passes between members of the same family.

The barangay office sits at the heart of the community and, on any given day, its hallways are clogged with people seeking so-called "clearances." These are certificates, signed by the captain, for people needing to establish residency, set up a business, apply for a job or enroll a child at a local school.

Barangay captains routinely attend the weddings, baptisms and funerals of constituents, and even victims of serious crimes will sometimes report to them first rather than the police.

"They trust us more and get an immediate response," said Eriberto Guevarra, who for 11 years was captain of Palatiw.

His wife Dinah now occupies the position, while Eriberto works at her side as a self-styled "peace and order czar".

### "DRUG PERSONALITIES"

The Barangay Anti-Drug Action Committees (BADACs) play a key role in helping the police identify alleged drug dealers and users in each district.

Each BADAC's 6-10 members are chosen by the barangay captain, who also chairs the

committee. They might be teachers, church workers, youth leaders or members of other civil society groups.

Each BADAC provides the names of what police term "drug personalities", meaning suspected users or dealers, most of them small-time. Police say they then "validate" these names in consultation with national anti-narcotics and intelligence officials. They also add names of their own.

First created by the government in 1998, BADACs were meant to convene every month, but for years many did little or existed only on paper. Duterte not only revived the BADACs, he made them the lynchpin of his war on drugs.

Duterte pioneered the nationwide campaign in the southern city of Davao, where he was mayor for 22 years.

There, barangay leaders and police compiled similar lists that were used by death squads to assassinate hundreds of alleged drug dealers, petty criminals and street children, said Human Rights Watch in a 2009 report. Duterte denied any involvement in the killings.

### "A GRUDGE AND A GUN"

Officials say the watch lists are not arbitrary hit lists.

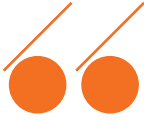
Metro Manila's list of 11,700 users and dealers has been "validated and revalidated by intelligence", said Kimberley Molitas, police spokeswoman for a region that has seen more than a quarter of the drug-war deaths.

Human rights monitors and some officials counter that the process is open to abuse.

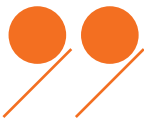
Lists have included the names of people "who are not even drug users, never mind pushers," said Karen Gomez-Dumpit, a commissioner at the Philippines' Commission on Human Rights.

"It's an environment conducive to someone with a grudge and a gun to hunt you down," she said.

In one high-profile case, the bullet-riddled body of Mark Culata was found in Cavite, a province south of Manila, on Sept. 9. It bore a placard identifying him as a drug dealer.



My husband had already surrendered, so why did they kill him. Why didn't they give him one more chance?



**Zandey**  
Wife of Neptali  
Celestino

Culata's mother Eva told local media that her 27-year-old son had nothing to do with drugs and had been heading overseas to start a job. Police told Reuters in a statement that investigators were considering the "illegal drug trade and love triangle" as a possible motive.

Four officers involved in the case have been moved to administrative positions pending an investigation by the National Bureau of Investigation, the Philippines equivalent of the FBI. Culata's death was raised as a possible extrajudicial killing in a Philippines Senate hearing on Oct. 3.

Police told Reuters that watch lists are confidential. But so-called "knock and plead" operations, in which police visit drug suspects at their homes and urge them to mend their ways, means inclusion on a list is often public knowledge.

Drug pushers and users are also urged to "surrender" to the police at barangay meetings that are, again, public. Their names are added to the watch list.

The process resembles a mass arrest. The so-called "surrenderers" are questioned by police, who ask for details of their dealers and fellow users. This information can be used to identify other drug suspects, police said. The names of surrenderers are later added to a national database so they can be watched even if they move to another barangay.

After the questioning, the users are fingerprinted and pose for a mugshot holding a whiteboard bearing their name and that day's date. Raising their right hands, they then swear to stay away from drugs and support "the government and the police in their noble campaign."

In the following weeks, said barangay captain Vivero, surrenderers are expected to do community service such as painting walls, unclogging sewers or picking up trash.

### INTENDED TO CHANGE

Former barangay leader Eriberto Guevarra said he tried to avert the killing of pedicab driver Celestino. The dead man, Guevarra said, was just a small-time dealer and user, not the "notorious pusher" police dubbed him.

"He was endangered because he was on the watch list," he said.

Guevarra said he had warned Celestino to stop dealing and using drugs. Three days before his death Celestino had attended a three-hour "drug awareness" seminar run by police and barangay officials.

"It was his intention to change," said Guevarra.

John Patrick Celestino, 17, one of Celestino's four children, trembled as he recalled the night his father died.

The dogs began barking at about 9 p.m. There were armed men at the door who showed John Patrick a photo on a cellphone. "Is this your father?" they demanded.

When he said it was, according to John Patrick, the men rushed upstairs and kicked open the door to a small room where Celestino was hiding.

John Patrick, who had followed them to the room, said: "The men kept shouting, 'Where's the shabu?' Where's the shabu?" referring to the local name for crystal methamphetamine, a highly addictive drug widely available in the Philippines.

He told them his father was unarmed and begged them not to shoot. But one gunman fired three rounds into the room, and the teenager heard his father gasp with pain.

The gunman then ordered John Patrick to flee. As he ran downstairs, he heard five more shots.

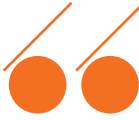
Police said they found a .22 revolver and three sachets of shabu on Celestino. His wife Zandey, 38, denies this was the case.

"My husband had already surrendered, so why did they kill him?" she asked. "Why didn't they give him one more chance?"

Sitting around his coffin, relatives told a Reuters reporter of a long-running feud with another family, who they blamed for telling the police that Celestino was a drug dealer. Reuters was unable to independently verify this claim.

### "NEFARIOUS ACTIVITIES"

Celestino was on the watch list as a drug dealer, confirmed Chief Superintendent Romulo Sapitula, director of the Eastern Police District of Manila.



It will be bloody. You have a problem with dengue. You think you can solve it without killing mosquitos?



**Romeo Caramat**  
Police chief of  
Bulacan province in  
central Luzon

“The information came from the community,” he said. “It was given by barangay officials and validated by the police.”

The “best information” comes from the neighbourhood itself, he added. “Most of the watch lists which came from that place are true and correct.”

Celestino’s surrender as a drug user didn’t put him above suspicion, said Sapitula.

“There are some on the watch list who surrender but continue their nefarious activities,” he said. “They pretend to embrace the programme, but in reality ... they are still doing their old thing. And there are some who surrender as users when they’re really pushers.”

Sapitula confirmed the operation was carried out by seven or eight members of the anti-narcotics police. He rejected the family’s claim that drugs were planted on Celestino. An internal investigation, he said, had concluded that the police opened fire in self-defence because Celestino had “opted to shoot it out”.

Sapitula said family members shouldn’t be afraid to file a formal complaint, but only “if they’re innocent” and not involved in criminal activities.

The Celestinos told Reuters there was little point appealing to the same people who had killed their relative. Zandey said she feared not only for the safety of her children, but for other members of her extended family who, like Celestino, had “surrendered” to authorities.

Her older son, Cedric, 19, was so traumatised by the killing that he has stopped talking, she said.

### “IT WILL BE BLOODY”

Some local leaders plead with the police to spare lives.

In the Manila slum of Tondo, barangay captain Erick Simbiling said two policemen recently told him they had “scheduled to kill” a local man who was a small-time but persistent drug dealer.

“I spoke to the policemen and said, ‘Please give him a chance,’” Simbiling said.

He then visited the dealer and urged him to

surrender to the authorities. The dealer did so, like hundreds of thousands of others nationwide, and then fled the barangay.

The barangay captains are under pressure from the president himself. Duterte has vowed to publish a list of a thousand elected officials suspected of drug ties. Prominent among them are captains who have connived with terrorists and drug lords, he told reporters on Sept. 18.

But not all barangays have toed the line. Police in central Luzon told Reuters that 31 of the region’s 3,100 barangays had not supplied a watch list.


Romeo Caramat, police chief of Bulacan province in central Luzon, said these barangay officials were probably either allied to Duterte’s political opponents or bankrolled by drug traffickers.

“Actually, one of the barangay captains who was uncooperative got killed,” said Caramat. The man was shot in early August in San Jose Del Monte city by unidentified assassins on a motorbike, he said.

“One barangay chairman runs out of luck!” added Caramat, laughing. He described the man as “a well-known drug pusher and user” who had not included himself on his barangay’s watch list.

The dead captain, Damaso Santiago, was a drug user, not a dealer, said his younger brother Arman Santiago. “Anyone you ask, they will say he does not peddle drugs. He was just a victim of drug use,” said Arman.

Police chief Caramat described his province’s 17,000 drug dealers and users as “a walking time bomb”. For him, the death toll in his province is a measure of the campaign’s success.

“It will be bloody,” he said. “You have a problem with dengue. You think you can solve it without killing mosquitos?” 

Additional reporting by **Clare Baldwin**, **Manuel Mogato** and **Neil Jerome Morales** in Manila; Editing by **Martin Howell**



# As death toll mounts, Duterte deploys dubious data in drugs war

BY CLARE BALDWIN AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

OCTOBER 24 MANILA

Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte ended a recent speech in Manila with a now-familiar claim: Two policemen were dying every day in his violent battle to rid the country of illegal drugs.

But police statistics have shown that figure to be exaggerated. From July 1, when Duterte launched his "war on drugs," to Oct. 12, when he spoke in Manila, 13 police officers were killed. That's an average of one every eight days.

This is not the only dubious claim Duterte has used to justify his bloody anti-narcotics

campaign, according to a Reuters review of official government data and interviews with the president's top anti-drug officials.

These officials say that data on the total number of drug users, the number of users needing treatment, the types of drugs being consumed and the prevalence of drug-related crime is exaggerated, flawed or non-existent. But they say the problematic statistics don't matter because the campaign has focused attention on a long-neglected crisis in the Philippines.

"I don't see it as a problem," said Wilkins Villanueva, the Metro Manila regional director for the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), the country's leading anti-narcotics agency. "Before, our fight against dangerous drugs was a lonely battle... Now, everybody's helping us — the community's helping us."

Nearly 2,300 people have been killed in police operations or by suspected vigilantes since Duterte took office on June 30, according to the Philippines police. That figure was revised down this month by the police from an original tally of 3,600 deaths.

In response to questions from Reuters, Presidential Communications Secretary Martin Andanar said the story was "malicious" and referred Reuters to the Philippine National Police.

The crackdown has been criticised abroad but enjoys widespread support in the Philippines, which Duterte has said faces collapse if the "drug menace" isn't tackled.

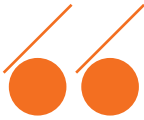
## REAL-WORLD IMPACT

In his inaugural State of the Nation Address on July 25, Duterte declared that there were 3.7 million "drug addicts" in the Philippines.

"The number is quite staggering and scary," he said. "I have to slaughter these idiots for destroying my country."

But according to a 2015 survey by the Office of the President's Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB), the main drug policy and research unit, the Philippines has fewer than half that many drug users.

And rather than being "addicts," as Duterte



That's  
the reason  
we are  
having a  
hard time.  
We need to  
produce



A senior Philippines  
law enforcement  
officer

refers to all drug users, about a third of the 1.8 million users identified in the DDB survey had taken drugs only once in the previous 13 months. Fewer than half of them — 860,000 — had consumed crystal meth, or shabu, the highly addictive stimulant widely blamed by officials for high crime rates and other social ills. Most were marijuana users.

PDEA's Villanueva said he didn't care if President Duterte "overestimates" the number of drug users as long as it made people aware of the problem.

Officials in the president's media office contacted by Reuters could not say where the data came from to back up another of the government's central claims: that 75 percent of serious crimes in the Philippines are drug-related.

Police and senior officials have used the claim to justify tough measures against drug users and pushers, and say those measures have been vindicated by a drop in crime since the anti-drug campaign began.

The faulty figures have other real-world implications. They determine, for instance, how many people the government says must be targeted to eradicate drug demand in the Philippines. That has led to the drawing up of police "watch lists" with the names of drug suspects, hundreds of whom have been shot dead either in police operations or by unknown gunmen.

The president's statistical claims continue to drive policy. In September, Duterte said the number of "addicts" would rise to four million by the end of the month and vowed to extend his drug war for another six months — to June 2017. That statement came after remarks on Sept. 30, when Duterte seemed to compare himself to Hitler and said he would be "happy to slaughter" three million drug addicts.

### **BURDEN OF HARM**

A senior Philippines law enforcement officer said Duterte's "arbitrary" figures had put pressure on police and government officials.

"The problem is, every time the president says something, it's already some sort of a

policy statement," said the officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We have to toe the line."

The officer pointed, for example, to the more than 700,000 people who have registered in the past three months with the authorities as drug users or pushers, a process known as "surrendering." But, he said, authorities were expected to produce at least 1.8 million "surrenderers" to match the number of users cited in the DDB report.

"That's the reason we are having a hard time. We need to produce," he said. "Even if we add up everything...we are not even close to 1.8 million."

PDEA's Villanueva said the president's assessment of the drug problem was reasonable, and he felt no pressure.

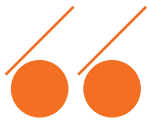
"He just exaggerates it so we will know that the problem is very big," Villanueva said of Duterte. "The implication is that we have to work hard to solve the problem and we have to work hard so that...occasional drug users do not turn into regular drug users."

Statements by Duterte and other officials not only fail to distinguish between users and problem users, say drug-treatment specialists, but also between users of shabu and marijuana. Shabu is a highly addictive stimulant with side effects that can include aggression and psychosis.

"They are completely different substances in terms of risk profiles and harms," said Robert Ali, director of a University of Adelaide research centre on drug and alcohol treatment who works with the World Health Organization. "Shabu has a higher risk of addiction. It is associated with a greater range of physical and psychological harms."

While drug abuse is a real problem in the Philippines, said Ali, it was hard to devise an effective national response based on flawed data. "With public health, whether it's diabetes or drug use, you need a sense of the burden of harm to understand how to use your resources," he said.

Joanne Csete, a specialist in health and human rights at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University in New



Compared with last year, we are better off this year. Most of the victims this time are the drug users.



**Dionardo Carlos**  
National police  
spokesman

York, said that the term “current drug users” usually refers to those who have used drugs in the past month. However, the DDB survey counts anyone who has used drugs in the past 13 months, which Csete says could inflate the number of users.

“So the president can make up whatever numbers he likes — the survey does not adequately estimate current use,” she said.

### “BLATANTLY UNSUPPORTED”

The claim that 75 percent of “heinous crime” in the Philippines is drug-related features in an official booklet called “Winning the First Phase of the Drug War.” It was handed out by the president’s media team in September at a regional summit in Laos attended by world leaders.

According to the booklet, heinous crimes include murder, rape, human trafficking and treason.

It is not clear where the president’s media team got the 75 percent figure. The booklet identifies the source of the number as the Philippines National Police Directorate for Investigation and Detective Management (DIDM). But six officials in the office responsible for the booklet and at the DIDM were unable to point to a specific study or explain how the figure was calculated.

Nimfa Reloc, who monitors heinous crime cases for DIDM, said the office had released no such data or analysis and did not know where the number came from. She said 15 percent of heinous crimes are drug-related.

Benjamin Reyes, the DDB’s chairman, said there was “actually no data” on crimes committed under the influence of drugs.

An estimated 18 percent of convicted prisoners worldwide are in jail for drug-related offences, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

“Illegal drugs do create a substantial burden on societies, and it’s important that governments respond in ways that reduce the economic cost of drug use...and reduce pain and suffering from drug use,” said Alison Ritter, a researcher at Australia’s National

Drug & Alcohol Research Centre.

But crime is complicated, and the rise and fall in crime rates can’t be attributed to a single campaign or even a single institution such as the police, Ritter said. “To argue that killing people for consuming drugs is associated with crime reduction is blatantly unsupported,” she said.

“Index” or serious crimes in the Philippines dropped by 31 percent in January to August this year compared with the same period in 2015, according to police statistics presented to a Senate hearing on extrajudicial killings on Oct. 5.

“If you don’t call it winning, I don’t know what to call it,” said Villanueva at PDEA.

But the same police statistics show serious crime was already in decline during the administration of Duterte’s predecessor, President Benigno Aquino, who did not conduct a war on drugs.


In fact, Aquino was still in office for most of the period covered by the 2016 statistics. The police figures show that in the January-August period of 2015, serious crime was down 22 percent compared with the same period the previous year. In 2014, it declined 26 percent.

While the crime rate has been dropping for several years, under Duterte the murder rate has risen since he launched his anti-drug campaign. In the first three months of his administration, police recorded a total of 3,760 murders, compared with 2,359 in the same period last year, a rise of 59 percent.

“Compared with last year, we are better off this year,” said Dionardo Carlos, the national police spokesman. “Most of the victims this time are the drug users.”

In Davao City, where Duterte was mayor for 22 years, he led an equally brutal anti-drugs crackdown. There, death squads killed hundreds of alleged drug dealers, petty criminals and street children, said Human Rights Watch in a 2009 report. Duterte denied any involvement in the killings.

Despite the crackdown, Davao still ranks first among 15 cities in the Philippines for murder and second for rape, according to police crime data from 2010 to 2015.



I believe he has his own survey, aside from the DDB. But it's not a scientific one.



**Wilkins Villanueva,**  
The Metro Manila regional director for the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA)

### METH VERSUS MARIJUANA

Senior anti-narcotics officials in the Philippines also invoke conflicting or incomplete data in trying to identify how many people are problem users, which drug they use and what treatment they might need.

While the DDB survey says about 860,000 people are shabu users, PDEA chief Villanueva puts the number at 1.4 million. He explained to Reuters how he reached this number.

Villanueva started with an estimate based on drug-rehab facility data that he said showed 75 percent of patients at these facilities were shabu users. He then applied this percentage to the DDB's 1.8 million figure for all drug users.

He acknowledged that rehab data was already skewed towards shabu users, who seek treatment more often than users of less addictive drugs, and that applying the percentage to another study was problematic.

"Actually, the 75 percent does not translate, but it's a pretty good assumption," said Villanueva, who spent 12 years with PDEA in Davao City, where he said he got to know Duterte.

Of the 1.4 million shabu users Villanueva had identified by his method, about 700,000 people had already "surrendered" to the police as drug users and pushers, he said.

"We are taking away already one half of the demand," said Villanueva.

Treatment experts dispute this claim, since the severity of drug use among those who surrender is unclear. A spokesperson at the Philippines' Department of Health said he didn't know how many "surrenderers" had been medically screened.

This matters, said Ali, the University of Adelaide treatment specialist, because "drug use is not necessarily drug dependence." Only about 10 to 15 percent of shabu users might require residential care, he said. Ali said he based this estimate on his clinical experience and the experience of treatment services in the United Kingdom.

The DDB's survey does not distinguish between users and problem users.

"We did not try to categorize them, whether

or not they were addicts, problematic drug users, or just plain users," said DDB chairman Reyes.

To calculate the number of problem users, said Reyes, the DDB relied on global estimates from the UNODC that say 0.6 percent of drug users are problem users, which means they require treatment.

Reyes said he rounded this figure up to one percent and applied it to the figure of 1.8 million users, and concluded that the Philippines had, at most, 18,000 drug users in need of treatment.

"It's a small number," he said.


### "HARDLINE APPROACH"

Yet Reyes said domestic support for the drug war wouldn't change even if it was widely known that the country had far fewer drug users than Duterte claims. "There is really a perception that we need a hardline approach to the problem," he said.

Other top backers of the drug war agree. The 3.7 million figure cited by Duterte "doesn't mean anything," said Villanueva. "I believe he has his own survey, aside from the DDB. But it's not a scientific one."

What's important, he said, is that the president is now marshalling the resources needed to address the drug problem. PDEA is hiring and training another 400 agents and is expecting more firearms, vehicles and surveillance equipment, he said.

Philippines Senator Vicente Sotto, a former DDB chief who supports Duterte's drug war, said inflated figures serve a purpose if they scare users into quitting.

"If they make people alarmed, then why not? It doesn't hurt anyone," he said. "People don't care how it's done as long as it's done." 

Additional reporting by **Neil Jerome Morales** and **Karen Lema** in Manila; Editing by **Peter Hirschberg**

# Police rack up deadly record in Philippine drug war

BY CLARE BALDWIN, ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL AND DAMIR SAGOLJ

DECEMBER 5 MANILA

**N**orberto Maderal and George Avanceña made a fatal choice on the afternoon of October 19, the Philippine police say. The two pedicab drivers drew their guns in a slum in northern Manila and “tried to open fire” at plainclothes officers posing as drug buyers, according to the police report into their killings.

The officers defended themselves, resulting in what the report called “the instantaneous death of the suspects.” Dante Novicio, the police chief of Navotas City, told Reuters his men shot the pair “almost simultaneously.”

Maderal, 42, and Avanceña, 33, are casualties in President Rodrigo Duterte’s “war on drugs.” Police say that 2,004 people have been shot and killed by officers in self-defense during anti-drug operations since the president took office on July 1.

When the police open fire in Duterte’s war, the suspects almost always die.

Reuters reviewed 42 drug-related shooting incidents involving the police in the Manila region covered by its journalists, as well as another 9 cases investigated in the same area by the government-funded Philippines’

Commission on Human Rights. In these combined 51 cases, police officers killed a total of 100 suspects and wounded just three. Of the three people who were shot but survived in these cases, two played dead and the third was arrested as he tried to flee the scene.

The kill ratio is much higher than in countries with comparable drug-related violence.

The Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro, where police have been accused of extrajudicial killings in a bloody crime crackdown, pales next to the Philippines under Duterte. For every five people the Rio police killed between 2013 and 2015, they injured one person, according to a Human Rights Watch report in July.

In the Philippine cases examined by Reuters and CHR, the police killed 97 percent of those they shot — 33 dead for every person wounded. A Philippine police spokesman said that no national statistics are available for injured drug suspects.

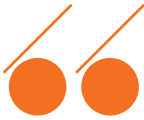
The figures pose a powerful challenge to the official narrative that the Philippines police are only killing drug suspects in self-defense. These statistics and other evidence amassed by Reuters point in the other direction: that police are pro-actively gunning down suspects.

## ‘I PRAYED TO GOD’

Eyewitnesses interviewed for this article often contradicted the police version of events. Norberto Maderal’s nephew told Reuters that his uncle was unarmed — and that he heard Maderal begging for his life before the police began shooting.

Efren Morillo, one of the rare survivors of a police raid, said he too was unarmed when an officer, standing a few feet away, shot him through the chest. As Morillo lay bleeding, feigning death, officers began shooting his companions. “I prayed to God to let me live,” he said.

Asked why almost every police drug encounter ended with the suspect being killed, Derrick Carreon, spokesman for the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, chuckled: “I guess some cops are just good at shooting. They’re probably good shots.”



The police report says there is a gun battle or a firefight. In our investigations, there is no such thing. Instead of drug bust operations, they are conducting extrajudicial killings.



**To Jun Nalangan**  
Special investigator  
at CHR

Further stretching the plausibility of official statements, a review of police reports shows that officers often give remarkably similar accounts each time a suspect is shot dead.

In their reports, officers describe the typical victim as an alleged user or small-time dealer in a poor neighborhood. The attempt by undercover police to catch the suspect dealing drugs — a so-called “buy-bust” operation — quickly goes wrong. The suspect panics, draws a weapon and starts shooting. The police return deadly fire.

Found on the victim’s corpse is a .38 caliber revolver, often without a serial number, and plastic sachets of what police reports call “a white crystalline substance suspected to be shabu.” Shabu is the street name for crystal methamphetamine, a highly addictive drug that Duterte’s government has blamed for most of the serious crime in the Philippines.

Police crime-scene investigations and autopsies, meanwhile, are opaque and perfunctory. CHR investigators say that under Duterte they have had to subpoena police forensics units to get access to full autopsies and forensic reports. The secretiveness has fueled suspicion among bereaved families and human rights monitors that guns and drugs are planted on suspects at crime scenes.

To Jun Nalangan, a special investigator at CHR, the pattern of evidence points to murder. “The police report says there is a gun battle or a firefight,” he said. “In our investigations, there is no such thing. Instead of drug bust operations, they are conducting extrajudicial killings.”

### LESS DEADLY FOR POLICE

In the poor neighborhoods targeted by Duterte, many people interpret the police force’s apparent freedom to kill without consequence as proof of a nationwide shoot-to-kill policy. While more than 1,500 anti-drug operations have come under investigation by the police force’s Internal Affairs Service (IAS) since the start of Duterte’s drug war, no officers have been dismissed from the force for misconduct, an IAS official said.

Senior police officials say that IAS

investigates all killings by officers. Chief Superintendent Leo Angelo Leuterio, the policeman who ran IAS until recently, told Reuters he was reluctant to prosecute officers while his country needed “warm bodies in the field” to fight the drug war.

For the police, the shootouts are far less deadly. Police say 17 officers have died in anti-drug operations across the country since July 1. That means one officer has died for every 118 suspects killed. In Rio, for every officer who died in 2015, 24.8 people were killed by police, a rate more than double that of South Africa and triple that of the United States, according to the Human Rights Watch report.

President Duterte has denied that the police are conducting extrajudicial killings. At the same time, he has welcomed the mounting death toll. In September, he said he’d be “happy to slaughter” three million drug addicts.

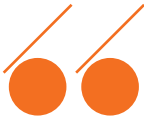
Duterte also has signaled to the police that they can act with impunity. In the run-up to the May presidential election, he said he would pardon members of the security forces — and himself — if they committed human rights abuses while fighting crime. “Pardon given to Rodrigo Duterte for the crime of multiple murder, signed Rodrigo Duterte,” he told a group of business people in Manila in April.

In a statement to Reuters, the Presidential Communications Office said Duterte hasn’t given the police license to kill drug dealers, but officers have a right to defend themselves when their lives are in danger. “The drug war is not child’s play,” the statement said.

In one key area, the police do depart from Duterte’s stated game plan. The president and his senior officials routinely warn that “drug lords” will be taken down. So far, almost all the victims have been poor, like Maderal and Avanceña, the two pedicab drivers who were shot dead by police in Navotas City in October.

### QUIVERING WITH SHOCK

Maderal’s nephew, Joemari Rodriguez, and other family members shared a house in North Bay Boulevard South, a district of teeming



He  
(Maderal)  
was begging  
them, 'Sir,  
please!'.



**Joemari Rodriguez**  
Norberto Maderal's  
nephew

slums and trash-choked waterways in Navotas City. Reuters interviewed Rodriguez at the scene, less than two hours after the killings.

Rodriguez said he believes police executed his uncle but is too scared to lodge a complaint. "They might come back for me," he told Reuters outside the house.

Still quivering with shock, he said three plainclothes men barged into their home and dragged his uncle into the living room. "They didn't say who they were," said Rodriguez, 24, a medical technician.

Rodriguez said a man pushed him into his room and the door was held shut from the outside. Rodriguez couldn't see what happened next but said he could clearly hear his uncle pleading for his life. "He was begging them, 'Sir, please!'" he said. Then came two shots.

Minutes later, Rodriguez emerged from his room to find the men gone and his uncle slumped in a puddle of blood. "There was a gun in his hand," said Rodriguez. "I don't know where he got this." He said his uncle was a drug user, but didn't own a gun and hadn't fought back.

Within five minutes of the shooting, said Rodriguez, uniformed police arrived to seal off the scene. Then, five to 10 minutes later, Rodriguez heard two more shots. He said this was when George Avanceña, a friend of Maderal who was hiding in a back room, was shot.

Two neighbours — Ruby Miradora, 49, a street sweeper, and Norminda Barbo, 38, a housewife — echoed Rodriguez's account. They said they had heard two gunshots and then, 10 to 15 minutes later — after uniformed police had arrived — two more shots.

### A FAMILIAR PATTERN

The killings of Maderal and Avanceña followed a familiar pattern described by eyewitnesses. Gunmen in civilian clothes burst into a home without identifying themselves. Suspects are moved away from relatives and other potential witnesses to a secluded spot or a different room, then shot dead by police. Many families also say the victims couldn't have fought back because they didn't own guns.

Dante Novicio, the Navotas City police chief, told Reuters he stood by his officers' claim that Maderal and Avanceña were armed and were shot moments apart. Contradictory accounts were "allegations to confuse the result of the investigation" and discredit his men, he said.

Maderal and Avanceña are two of 18 people police say they have killed in anti-drug operations in North Bay Boulevard South. An additional 14 bodies have been found in the district, most of them near C-3 bridge, a local dumping ground for victims.

The killings are part of a vast anti-drug campaign whose impact has been felt nationwide. Police say they have arrested more than 38,000 people. And over 800,000 drug users and pushers have registered with the authorities, a process known as "surrendering."

In addition to the 2,004 drug suspects killed by officers, police are investigating another 3,060 deaths, though it isn't clear how many of those are drug-related. Human rights monitors believe many of these people were killed by vigilantes operating with the backing of police — a charge the police and the government deny.

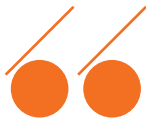
The police version of the August 21 shooting of Efren Morillo and four others in another poor Manila neighborhood closely follows the pattern of other killings. The police report says that the suspects opened fire, and that four guns and shabu were found at the scene.

But there was one difference: Morillo survived. The 28-year-old fruit vendor played dead until the police left.

Morillo said in an interview that he was standing only three paces from the police officer who shot him in the chest. He collapsed. A friend fell dead beside him, blood spewing from his mouth and head. Nearby, he said, police killed three other companions.

That night, said Morillo, only the police had guns. The officers appeared relaxed when they arrived. Two were carrying fighting cocks in baskets. "This is the police!" one of the officers joked. "No one run! Our fighting cocks might get squished."

Morillo said he has no criminal record or



These operations are not meant to just apprehend or arrest the drug suspects but really to liquidate them.



**Leila de Lima**  
Senator

involvement with drugs. Even as he was being led around the back of his friend's shack by the police, Morillo thought the worst that could happen was that he would be photographed and arrested.

Then the police started shooting. Morillo was hit first and collapsed into a chair. Pretending to be dead, he said, he heard three of his companions outside crying before they were shot.

### 'DAGGER LOOKS'

The police left. Holding his shirt to his wounds, Morillo slid down a nearby hill, waded across a creek and then struggled up the other bank, where he chanced upon a friend who drove him to a clinic. In an interview at CHR headquarters in Manila in early November, he lifted his shirt to reveal his scarred chest. The bullet that passed through him missed his heart and lungs.

He said his family had sold their home to pay his medical bills and other expenses. When the police discovered he was still alive, they pressed charges against him for assaulting a police officer. He turned to the Commission on Human Rights, which is helping defend him.

Fearing for his life, he rarely goes outside and has stopped working. A daily CHR stipend of 150 pesos, about three dollars, isn't enough to feed his two sons, aged 8 and 9, he said. Morillo must also face his alleged attackers in court; one of them, he said, had shot him "dagger looks" during his first court hearing.

The most outspoken opponent of Duterte's crackdown, Senator Leila de Lima, says the drug busts are designed to be lethal. "These operations are not meant to just apprehend or arrest the drug suspects but really to liquidate them," she said in an interview.

At an August Senate inquiry, de Lima, a former justice secretary, quizzed national police chief Ronald Dela Rosa about the killings. At that time, police had killed 756 suspects.

"All resisted arrest?" asked an incredulous de Lima. "Yes, they resisted," replied Dela Rosa. "Otherwise, they are alive today," he added. His response provoked disbelieving laughter.

In November, the National Bureau of Investigation charged de Lima with involvement

in the illegal drug trade at a national jail. De Lima called the charges "trumped up," part of a harassment campaign by Duterte and his allies.

The mounting death toll is putting pressure on the police force's forensics unit, the Scene of Crime Operatives (SOCO). Officers routinely work 24-hour or even 48-hour shifts, its chief, Reynaldo Calaoa, told Reuters. From the moment a suspect is shot to the time the funeral parlor gives his or her body to the family for the wake, SOCO controls almost every process by which forensic evidence is gathered.

### SIGNS OF 'TATTOOING'

Forensic evidence can be vital in determining whether cops or witnesses are telling the truth. But in the Philippines, police forensic scientists are underfunded and overwhelmed, and the evidence they produce is hard for CHR investigators to access. The crime laboratory at the police headquarters at Camp Crame in Manila has only two dissection tables and no cold storage for bodies, SOCO said. It also lacks an X-ray machine to scan corpses for bullet fragments.

Instead, SOCO performs most of its autopsies at police-accredited but privately owned funeral parlors, which act as both official morgues and crime labs. The funeral parlor then embalms the body before it is given to the family for the wake.

SOCO autopsies are mandatory and usually take place at the funeral parlor within hours of the body's arrival. The full autopsy reports are not released to the families. CHR investigators told Reuters they had to subpoena SOCO to get full autopsies, even though CHR is a government agency.

Those autopsies are potentially damning, as a killing in the first week of Duterte's campaign suggests. Police said they shot dead Conrado Berona, 36, who was wanted for robbery and drug dealing, in a gunfight on July 6, and that shabu was found on his body. But a CHR investigation into his death, reviewed by Reuters, noted that the bullet wound in Berona's chest showed "tattooing." This distinctive skin abrasion is caused by partially burned or unburned gunpowder and



indicates the victim was shot at close range.

In its report, based in part on sworn witness testimony, CHR found that “the alleged shootout never happened,” and that Berona was unarmed and surrendering when plainclothes and uniformed police shot him. CHR said it recommended filing criminal and administrative cases against the police who killed Berona.

SOCO medical-legal officer Jane Monzon told Reuters she had seen evidence of tattooing in four victims of police buy-bust operations in Manila. She declined to say more. SOCO's chief, Reynaldo Calaoa, said his agency is not tracking close-range shootings.

### **PRISON CELL SHOOTING**

SOCO came under scrutiny in November in the shooting of one of the few high-profile people targeted in the anti-drug crackdown. On November 5, Rolando Espinosa, a mayor from central Leyte Province, was shot and killed in his prison cell. A fellow prisoner, Raul Yap, was also killed in what police said was a shootout.

Earlier, Duterte had put Espinosa's name on a list of top drug suspects. The mayor, who denied involvement in narcotics, was arrested on October 5 on drugs and firearms charges. Police said Espinosa and Yap fired at a police team that had come to search their cells for guns and drugs. Police returned fire and killed them.

A Senate hearing on November 10 into the mayor's death found that the police team had summoned SOCO crime-scene investigators about 40 minutes before entering the prison, according to an affidavit from an officer at a police operations center.

Senator Panfilo Lacson, a former national police chief who co-led the hearing, likened this to phoning a funeral parlor before a shootout. He said the call suggested Espinosa's killing was “premeditated.”

A police spokesman said a preliminary investigation showed operational procedures had not been followed, and a number of officers have been confined to police headquarters while the investigation continues.

The shooting followed the familiar pattern.

Police said they recovered two guns from Yap's and Espinosa's cells. Drug paraphernalia and a small sachet of suspected shabu were also found inside Espinosa's cell, police said.

### **SIGNS OF TORTURE**

Angela Lafuente has been trying to get hold of SOCO's autopsy report for her brother Angelo, who was murdered in August after witnesses said he was detained by police. She believes it could prove that police were involved in his gruesome death.

During his election campaign, Duterte vowed to dump the corpses of criminals into Manila Bay and “fatten all the fish there.” Angelo Lafuente didn't make it as far as the water.

According to Navotas City police records, Lafuente's body was found on August 19 at about 3.20 a.m. next to a filthy river that feeds into the bay under C-3 bridge. His corpse was riddled with bullets and covered with what his family said were signs of torture — deep cuts and cigarette burns.

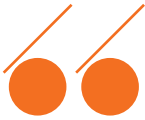
The deaths of Lafuente and two companions cast doubt on police claims that they have nothing to do with vigilante-style killings.

Two eyewitnesses said Lafuente, 22, was last seen alive in police custody on August 18, about 12 hours before his body was found. Police, including a SWAT team, had swept through his squatter settlement, a dense jumble of shacks near Navotas fishmarket. The operation, according to police records, turned deadly when police shot and killed three other men who opened fire or tried to open fire on them.

When police arrived that afternoon, Lafuente ran, said his sister Angela. Running with him was a cousin, Renato Forio, 26, and another local known only as Benjie, also in his early to mid-twenties.

Angela and other residents say the three young men were caught by police near the main road that runs past the settlement. Standing in a crowd on the other side of the road, Angela said she saw men in plainclothes bundle her brother, Forio and Benjie into a marked police van.

Elisa Martinez, 59, a local resident, was



I think that there are a greater number of abuses committed in the course of these operations than the numbers reflect.



**Leo Angelo Leuterio**  
Chief Superintendent

standing closer to the police van. She saw three young men emerge from the van, their hands tied behind their backs. She told Reuters they were put onto motorbikes ridden by masked men in civilian clothes, and driven away.

### 'GUNSHOT WOUNDS, HEAD AND TRUNK'

Angela went to the station to look for Lafuente, Forio and Benjie. She didn't find them. She returned home. Around 2 a.m., a neighbor told her that three bodies had been discovered. "We knew then that Angelo was dead," she said.

His body was found with Benjie's by C-3 bridge. According to Angelo Lafuente's death certificate, the cause of death was multiple gunshot wounds to the "head, trunk (and) right lower extremity."

Forio's body was found outside a nearby school, also around 3.20 a.m., according to police records. Cause of death: "Gunshot wounds, head and trunk."

Angela went to the funeral home to see the bodies. She said her brother had short, deep cuts on his chest, arms and face, and what looked like cigarette burns on his chest and hands. Benjie's neck looked broken and his left eye had popped out, she said.

Forio's father, also named Renato, told Reuters his son's face had been beaten so badly it was "unrecognisable."

Police said the bodies of Lafuente and Forio were found with their hands bound with plastic straps, and they had sachets of "a white crystalline substance suspected to be shabu" on them.

There was no record of Lafuente, Forio and Benjie having been detained during the August 18 police operation, Navotas City police chief Novicio told Reuters. "Maybe they scampered away because of their illegal activities," he said.

Novicio said their deaths were under investigation, but "we are expecting nothing." Local residents weren't cooperating with police, he said, mainly due to their "fear of these criminal elements."

On November 14, police gave Angela a two-page summary of the autopsy they had performed on her brother nearly three months

earlier. It recorded the cause of death as gunshot wounds. The full autopsy, police told her, was "confidential."

### CLEAR SYMPATHIES

National police chief Ronald Dela Rosa and other top officers have said that all operational deaths are investigated by the Internal Affairs Service, the police watchdog, and that their men were blameless unless proven otherwise.


But the sheer volume of shootings is overwhelming IAS. Chief Superintendent Leo Angelo Leuterio, who was acting head of IAS until recently, said the office investigates all cases in which there has been a discharge of weapons, the death of an officer or a civilian, or allegations of human rights violations or evidence tampering.

Of the 1,548 cases IAS scrutinized from July 1 to November 24, about a quarter were dropped for lack of evidence or witnesses — IAS doesn't have a witness protection program. More than a third were still pending investigation.

Only 29 cases had reached a stage that could result in disciplinary action. IAS lawyer Maria Constantinopla estimated that perhaps 21 of these cases would be dismissed on grounds of self-defense due to evidence of a shootout between the police and suspects.

Leuterio, who remains a senior official at IAS, acknowledges that witnesses and families fear the police and either don't file a complaint or refuse to testify in IAS cases, which are dropped as a result. And he suspects investigators are failing to uncover some police wrongdoing. "I think that there are a greater number of abuses committed in the course of these operations than the numbers reflect," he said.

But Leuterio makes his sympathies clear.

"We have to settle the debate of whom do we protect more," he said. "The drug pushers, the drug suspects, the drug addicts? Or the government agent whose only intention is to preserve order in society?" 

Additional reporting by **John Chalmers** in Manila; Editing by **Peter Hirschberg** and **David Lague**.

# A family challenges the official story of a killing in Duterte's drug war

BY CLARE BALDWIN, ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL AND DAMIR SAGOLJ

DECEMBER 7 MANILA

**I**t's a Friday morning in late October, and Florjohn Cruz's body lies on a metal table at a funeral parlor in the Philippine capital of Manila. A forensics team is about to perform an autopsy on him — his second.

His widow, Rita, glances at the tidy stitches running up his torso from the previous examination. Then she poses for the picture that will serve as proof of Florjohn's identity in the report being compiled on his death by the Philippines' Commission on Human Rights (CHR).

Rita, who had been separated from her

husband for more than a year, starts crying. Then she leaves the room.

Rita and her grief-stricken family are desperate for answers. They don't believe the police account of the killing of her husband. The police have conducted an autopsy, but the family has asked CHR to perform a second one.

Florjohn Cruz, 34, was shot dead in his mother's house in northern Manila on the evening of October 19, joining the more than 2,000 people police say they have killed so far in Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs."

Police say plainclothes officers killed Cruz in self-defense after he fired at them during a drug-buying sting operation. The family says police burst into their home and shot Cruz, as he protested his innocence.

In a rare move, the family has pushed for a second autopsy, which Reuters attended, in a bid to challenge the police version of events. With Duterte encouraging police to kill drug addicts, and officers answering his call with a near-perfect kill rate, many bereaved relatives say they are fearful of questioning law enforcement authorities.

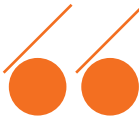
But the Cruz family crave information. There are things that don't add up. If Cruz fired first from close range, how is it possible that no policemen were injured? And how could Cruz have fired at police if he didn't own a gun?

"We had no information whatsoever," said Rita. "All we saw was the body in the body bag."

## 'IT'S LIKE THEY JUST KILLED A DOG'

According to the police report, Cruz and two accomplices were selling drugs outside the house on October 19 at about 9.45 p.m. when they realized their would-be customers were undercover police. Cruz ran inside the house, pulled a gun and shot at the officers, missing them. The police returned fire "to prevent and repel Cruz' unlawful aggression," said the report. Cruz was killed.

The family tells a different story. They believe he was executed.



Duterte said a lot of funeral parlors are going to be rich, but that's not the case. How can you make money from unclaimed bodies?



**Orly Fernandez**  
Operations manager of The Eusebio funeral home

Policarpia Cruz, 74, said she was at home with her son, who was fixing her radio, when between four and six men in civilian clothes barged in with guns drawn and ordered her outside. She said she couldn't see what happened next, but she heard her son pleading, "Please stop, there's nothing here," as the men slapped him around. Then she heard someone shout, "Gun!"

Shots rang out. The police didn't allow family members back into the house to see what had happened.

The family next saw Cruz's bullet-riddled body at Eusebio Funeral Services, a privately run funeral home that also serves as a police morgue. Photos taken there by the family show that Cruz was shot beneath the chin, through the heart and in the abdomen.

"He's a father. He's just a normal human being who used to do drugs," said Cruz's niece, Sophia, 26. "It's like they just killed a dog."

Cruz, who left behind three daughters, aged 5, 7 and 12, had stopped using drugs when Duterte took office and had never owned a gun, Sophia said. "If he really did try to protect himself with a gun, then one of the (policemen) would have got shot," she said.

The police report makes no mention of officers getting hurt.

Sophia said the family found a cardboard sign in the room where Cruz was killed. Scrawled in the Filipino national language, it read: "PUSHER AND ADDICT — DON'T IMITATE."

Hundreds of nearly identical signs have been retrieved from the corpses of drug suspects purportedly killed by vigilantes. Cruz's niece Sophia said she was "shocked" to find it. She believes it was left by the police, and thinks this may be evidence to support a widespread suspicion in the Philippines that police and vigilantes are acting together.

The police report makes no mention of the sign, and Johnson Almazan, the police chief of Caloocan City, told Reuters his men "vehemently denied" leaving it. Putting such a sign there served no purpose, since "they have already neutralized Florjohn Cruz," he said.

## NO MONEY FROM 'UNCLAIMED BODIES'

While campaigning for president, Duterte vowed to kill so many criminals if he won that people should go into the funeral business.

"Are there many funeral parlors here? Go put them up now," he told a crowd in a campaign speech in March. "I'll supply the bodies to you."

But most victims of Duterte's drug war are poor, and their families often struggle to pay for funeral services. The Eusebio funeral home charges about 35,000 pesos (\$700) for storing and embalming a body. About one in five Filipinos lives on less than \$1.20 a day, according to government statistics.

The bodies of some drug war victims remain unclaimed. Orly Fernandez, Eusebio's operations manager, shows Reuters a shelf stacked with five rigid corpses dressed only in underwear.

"Duterte said a lot of funeral parlors are going to be rich, but that's not the case," he said. "How can you make money from unclaimed bodies?"

Fernandez said Duterte's campaign has been costly because about one in five drug-war victims arriving at his funeral home aren't claimed. They are eventually buried in a mass grave, he said.

After the police autopsy, Cruz's body was embalmed at the funeral parlor and placed in an open casket. The casket sat for the next nine days in the narrow alleyway outside his mother's home.

Observing Filipino tradition, family and friends gathered there to gamble with cards and listen to music, often into the early hours of the morning. Many donated money to help pay for the funeral.

## THREE BULLETS

Autopsies conducted by CHR, a government-funded body, are free. CHR investigators screen the case for suspected human rights violations before agreeing to take it on.

The autopsy room at the Eusebio funeral



It happens that you sometimes overlook something. There is putty and makeup. It's not obvious.



**Joseph Jimenez**  
CHR coroner

home is stark, clean and odorless. Kitchen knives and a sharpening stone are stacked in a sink. A wire rack holds glue, metal probes and other tools.

First, the CHR team takes an inventory of Cruz's tattoos — on his right upper pectoral, right arm and back. Then they remove the stitching from the previous autopsy and sponge away the embalming fluid from his torso.

They discover three bullet wounds, in Cruz's abdomen, chest and head. Later, they trace the path that each bullet took. One entered his chest, crossed a lung and ventricle of his heart, then exited through his back. Another bullet entered near his navel and pierced part of his small intestine.

The path of the third bullet through Cruz's brain is more difficult to trace. The CHR team finds a hole above his right ear and another in his shattered skull.

With a foot-long kitchen knife and a hacksaw, the team opens his skull and finds a bullet fragment. The police coroners missed it because they didn't open his skull.

Only toward the end of the autopsy does the CHR team spot the entry wound beneath Cruz's chin, obscured by embalming putty and make-up applied after the first autopsy. They use a metal probe to trace the bullet's path. It entered from underneath his chin, then the bullet split.

"It happens that you sometimes overlook something," says Joseph Jimenez, a CHR coroner, referring to the difficulty of conducting a second autopsy on Cruz. "There is putty and makeup. It's not obvious."

### 'NEW FINDINGS'

The CHR autopsy takes two hours. That's twice as long as the police autopsy, according to Eusebio's staff.

At the end, Jimenez says "thank you" to Cruz's corpse, and his team observes a moment of silence. Then he explains his findings to the family. The bottom line: None of the findings of the second autopsy suggest that Cruz was executed, he says.


There are no obvious clues pointing to an execution, such as a shot to the forehead or the back of the head. And only limited information can be gleaned from an autopsy on a body like Cruz's that has already been embalmed, Jimenez told Reuters. Organs change consistency, he said, and stitching destroys the edges of wounds and changes their size and shape.

Nevertheless, some evidence has clearly been overlooked. And Rita seems mollified by the new information from the second autopsy. The police hadn't opened her husband's skull and hadn't found the bullet fragment lodged in his brain.

She says she and her family will need to decide whether to continue to press for answers. "There are new findings," she says. "We may file a police case."

Back inside the funeral parlor, Rogelio Coraza, who has worked at Eusebio for a decade, spends an hour re-stitching Cruz's wounds and bathing and dressing the body. He glues Cruz's eyes shut, then uses an assortment of sponges, brushes and make-up on the body.

He then puts baby oil in Cruz's hair and combs it. After Cruz's body is placed in the coffin, he combs his hair again.

Two days later, the family again leaves home with Cruz's coffin, this time for the cemetery. Family and friends crowd around the coffin inside a small concrete chapel, holding white helium balloons with the words, "We will miss you Florjohn FJ Cruz." 

Reporting by **Clare Baldwin**, **Andrew R.C. Marshall** and **Damir Sagolj**; Editing by **Peter Hirschberg** and **David Lague**.