

Rodent infestations in Chile's collapsed schools: A powder keg in the making

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28 August 2026

A week has passed since Carabinero officers ordered two secondary students to strip inside a classroom at the Rayen Mapu Lyceum in Quellón, on the southern island of Chiloé. Less than three months earlier, the school had been paralyzed by a vermin infestation. In May 2026, 11 schools across the Los Lagos Region—including the Rayen Mapu Lyceum—had classes suspended or were prohibited from operating due to the presence of rodents, pigeons and bats.

These conditions are a microcosm of the state of public education across Chile at municipal schools, schools administered by the Local Public Education Services (SLEPs), and subsidized private schools alike. The Pinochet constitution's "subsidiary state" established the principle that the state does not provide for social needs. It devolves responsibility downward to municipalities with radically unequal tax bases, or outward to private operators who extract profit from per-pupil subsidies while minimizing every cost.

Across the length of Chile, from Coquimbo to the southern archipelagos, schools in working-class and rural communities are in such a state of decay that they were infested with rodents.

In the **Coquimbo Region**, the Teachers Association of La Serena conducted a survey of 32 schools and found that 70 percent presented serious health risks, including "plagues of rats and pigeon feces."

In the **Metropolitan Region**, the Augusto D'Halmir Lyceum in Ñuñoa, the only municipal school in the country to appear among the top 100 in the university entrance exam, saw its students vote by 89.1 percent to begin an indefinite strike in August. Their demands included resolution of a rat plague that "returns from time to time." At the Javiera Carrera Lyceum in Santiago, the second-oldest public girls' school in Chile, the canteen was closed due to a termite plague, with rats running from one side to the other.

In the **Maule Region**, student leaders in Talca presented a formal petition demanding urgent action on "leaking roofs, cracks, mold, and the presence of rodents."

In the **Biobío Region**, at the Almirante Pedro Espina Ritchie Bicentenary Lyceum in Talcahuano, a school built after the 2010 earthquake and tsunami, parents and students denounced conditions that included a live rat running through the school canteen. A parent complained to the press that the school "was never handed over in good conditions. It's full of mold, it has leaks in the windows" producing respiratory illnesses. "We also have a rat plague." Water leaks pass through light fixtures; one student received a mild electric shock.

In the **Los Lagos Region**, at least 11 schools faced class suspensions due to rodent presence, with five establishments on the Island of Chiloé facing operating bans and sanitary investigations.

In the **Los Ríos Region**, the crisis spread across four communes

simultaneously. At the Rodolfo Amando Philippi Bicentenary Lyceum in Paillaco, approximately 1,000 students remained without classes for an entire week after rodent feces were detected. In Futrono, the José Manuel Balmaceda College had its kitchen prohibited from operating. A local newsletter noted that in May 2025 the same school had already been reported for a rodent plague, meaning the 2026 incident was a recurrence. In coastal Valdivia, the Rural Bonifacio School was forced closed for the same reasons.

In the **Araucanía Region**, at the Trovohue Public Lyceum in Carahue, students demonstrated inside the building after finding dead rodents throughout the school.

In the **Aysén Region** the most dramatic episode in the south took place in Melinka, one of the most geographically isolated inhabited places in Chile. Students occupied the building. They described a crisis combining cold, bathrooms in poor condition, leaking roofs, broken doors, and most distressingly, the smell of biological waste making the environment unbreathable. Walls were described as "gnawed."

In the **Magallanes Region** health investigations into the Juan Ladrilleros School and the Hernando Lyceum confirmed rodent feces in classrooms. In Punta Arenas, the community of the Villa Las Nieves School parents refused to send their children into a building with a rodent plague while teachers and education staff suspended activities due to "grave and imminent risks to life and health."

The rodent infestations in Chile's schools are not merely a matter of disgust and indignity. They represent a direct and potentially lethal public health threat.

While the rodents infesting urban areas are overwhelmingly the introduced commensal species (*Rattus rattus*, *Rattus norvegicus*, *Mus musculus*), this is not the case in rural settings. The primary reservoir of hantavirus in Chile is the long-tailed pygmy rice rat (*Oligoryzomys longicaudatus*), a native wild rodent found from Atacama south to Aysén, whose range overlaps with school buildings in rural or peri-urban settings. Moreover, research conducted in 2008 confirmed the Andes virus in urban *Rattus norvegicus* in the Metropolitan Region.

As of Epidemiological Week 31 of 2026, Chile had recorded 49 confirmed hantavirus cases and 19 deaths nationally, reaching a lethality rate of 39 percent. This is a dramatic deterioration from 2025, when 44 cases produced 8 deaths, a lethality rate of 18 percent. Argentina's 2025-2026 epidemiological season, running from July 2025 to June 2026, accumulated 101 confirmed cases and 32 deaths, a lethality rate of 31.7 percent.

The Andes variant of the virus, which predominates in Chile and Argentina, is one of the most dangerous strains and the only hantavirus known to be transmissible from person to person. The

standard transmission route remains inhalation of viral particles from rodent excreta, precisely the risk created when rodent feces accumulate in enclosed, poorly maintained school buildings, kitchens, storerooms and workshops.

The virus became international news earlier in the year with the outbreak aboard the Dutch expedition cruise ship MV Hondius.

On July 28, 2026, the Ministry of Health declared a formal Sanitary Alert, the first preventive hantavirus alert in Chilean history, covering the territory from Atacama to Magallanes, valid until July 31, 2027. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has maintained an epidemiological alert for the Southern Cone since December 2025.

Yet the government's response has been to criminalize students rather than repair their schools. The same week the Sanitary Alert was declared, Kast was ramming the "Protected Schools" law through Congress. The same month that Chile recorded its 19th death from hantavirus, the Santiago Centro SLEP had its infrastructure budget cut by 78 percent.

The vermin plague is the most visceral manifestation of the crisis, but it is far from the only one.

Sewage and Sanitation: At the Darío Salas Lyceum in Santiago, classes were suspended in March 2022 after the Health Authority found sewage water in the toilets. A teacher described children "paddling in sewage water," with only eight functioning toilets for nearly two thousand students. Four years later, in March 2026, the same school again had classes suspended for the same problem. A teacher reported hearing an education official say, "well, they're not going to close the school just for this," as the director showed him the conditions. In La Serena, parents at the Víctor Domingo Silva College reported that students were avoiding the bathrooms entirely and presenting urinary tract infections, after the education authorities failed to replace cleaning staff who had left.

Heating Failures: At the Temuco Bicentenary Lyceum, boilers were out of operation from June 2025 through May 2026, nearly a full year without heating, through an entire Araucanía winter. In Aysén, the SLEP installed 225 pellet-burning heaters across 20 schools. When winter arrived, the heaters began failing. The electrical regulator withdrew from the sale because they lacked mandatory certification. Old wood-burning stoves had to be retained to keep children from freezing while the litigation proceeds.

Structural Collapse: At the Gabriela Mistral Lyceum in La Serena, an emblematic establishment and national monument, a bathroom ceiling collapsed while students were inside. Bathrooms have leaks, floors are corroded, windows are rotted shut, classrooms lack ventilation, and patios are in dangerous condition. Spaces have been closed off for safety reasons.

Electrical Hazards: The director of Santiago Centro SLEP cited two electrical fires at the Isaura Dinator Lyceum. At the Augusto D'Halmar Lyceum, students reported that the electrical network, supposedly renovated at the beginning of the year, causes constant blackouts and has delivered electric shocks to students.

Copper Stripping and Theft: The Javiera Carrera Lyceum suffered eight major robberies in the first five months of 2026. Thieves stripped copper and bronze plumbing and railing. The copper plumbing was entirely removed, leaving the school without water. By March 2026, seven SLEP Santiago Centro establishments had been robbed since January, including one where more than 50 computers were stolen, leaving 1,400 students without classes.

The conditions documented are not the result of one government's negligence, but the cumulative impact of a system imposed by the

Pinochet dictatorship and preserved by every administration since.

The Pinochet constitution established the "subsidiary state"—the principle that the state exists to facilitate private profit, not to provide for social needs. In 1981, education was municipalized, and the voucher system introduced in which funding was tied to enrollment and attendance rather than need. The dictatorship's labor reforms resurrected unions that lacked even the limited defensive qualities of the reformist organizations of the previous period.

The Christian Democrat and Socialist Party administrations that followed did not reverse this architecture but built on it. A 2012–2013 National School Infrastructure Cadastre found an average deterioration rate of 20.3 percent. A decade and a half later, a new cadastre finds it at 22 percent, meaning the rate of investment has not even compensated for the rate of decay.

The 2006 student rebellion, the "Penguin Revolution," demanded the repeal of Pinochet's education system and an end to the privatization and inequality it fostered. The first Bachelet government responded with tear gas, water cannon and a presidential advisory council designed to co-opt and demobilize the movement from below.

The 2011 student uprising brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets under the slogan "Put an end to profit" (Fin al lucro) in education. The first Piñera government deployed the Carabineros; a teenager was killed. The Communist Youth, the Socialist Youth, student radicals Gabriel Boric, Giorgio Jackson and others worked to channel the movement back into parliamentary negotiations that produced nothing and brought them into the corridors of state power. Bachelet II's "New Public Education" law, which created the SLEPs to replace municipal administration, was sold as a reform. But it maintained the same funding logic: per-pupil subsidies that starve schools in poor communities of resources.

Then in 2019 the largest mass uprising in Chilean history erupted, with millions chanting "It's not about 30 pesos, it's about 30 years" expressing the understanding that every party of the post-dictatorship order was complicit.

The ex-student radicals in the Broad Front and the Communist Party again channeled the incipient revolutionary energy into the dead end of constitutional reform and to the parliamentary process—Boric, as a presidential candidate, was elected on promises that he would "bury neoliberalism" and introduce the most "progressive" constitution in the world. Instead he brought in austerity, slashed spending, funded the Carabineros, maintained the state of emergency against the Mapuche, and handed power to the Pinochetista Kast in an "orderly and exemplary transfer."

Now Kast is accelerating the destruction while bringing in methods that belong to Chile's former dictatorship. The "Protected Schools" law, rammed through Congress, is a mechanism for militarizing schools, placing armed agents of the state inside classrooms and granting them disciplinary powers over children. The fascistic Kast government intends to use brute force to deal with the social crisis consuming Chile's schools and society at large. This will produce a social explosion that dwarfs all others.



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