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POLICY BRIEF

COMMUNITY-BASED CRIME PREVENTION IN EL SALVADOR: SOCIAL CAPITAL, COLLECTIVE EFFICACY, SOCIAL-ENVIRONMENTAL FACTOR AND INSECURITY IN COMMUNITIES



EL SALVADOR

This brief was developed by the authors as part of the ELLA Programme. It was developed based on a Regional Evidence Paper [Social Capital, Collective Efficacy and Community Based Crime Prevention in El Salvador](#) by the same authors, which contains an overview of regional evidence, as well as original data collection and analysis, on a particular research topic. All publications can be found in the [ELLA programme website](#).

COMMUNITY-BASED CRIME PREVENTION IN EL SALVADOR:

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THE CHALLENGE OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE

During the last two decades in Latin America, homicide rates have increased and are higher than the international average (Alda, 2014; UNDP 2013). By 2012, 12 of the 18 Latin American countries showed a homicide rate greater than 10 x 100,000 inhabitants, a situation which the World Health Organisation considers epidemic. Central America is the most violent sub-region of Latin America.

According to academic experts in the field, **the hardline policies and repressive measures promoted in the nineties to reduce crime and violence in Latin America did not produce the expected results** (UNDP, 2013; Basombrío & Dammert, 2013). This allowed the repositioning of prevention policies within the public agenda. Thus the importance of community involvement and participation in prevention efforts was recognized. It is in this context that **Community-based Crime Prevention has been promoted in Latin America, as a novel way of addressing the problem of violence, crime and lack of security.** The participation of local governments, the definition of community-level interventions, and the inclusion of mechanisms for citizen participation are the main elements for crime prevention in this new approach.

Community-Based Crime Prevention

When speaking of Community-based Crime Prevention, one of its main components is citizen participation, hence the importance of exploring concepts such as social capital and collective efficacy. Both refer to the links between the individual and society, as well as social interactions among neighbors. The combination of both is necessary to act cooperatively in order to achieve shared goals, considering three main elements for coexistence: social networks, trust and participation. Specialized studies (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997; and Ansari, 2013) argue that **social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene for the common good (collective efficacy), is linked to reductions in crime levels at the community level.** On the other hand, social capital and collective efficacy complement each other; however, social capital alone does not guarantee security, and collective efficacy cannot exist in the absence of social capital.

SUMMARY

Community-based Crime Prevention has begun to be perceived as a good initiative to meet the increasingly high levels of crime and violence in Latin America and in El Salvador. Our study indicates that for communities to cope with crime, violence and lack of security, the inhabitants of these communities, not only must trust each other -this is essential- but they must go further and have the will to act together to solve community problems. To achieve this virtuous circle, community-based crime prevention programmes need to strengthen the capacities and community institutions and improve the physical and social conditions that lead to disorder in the community and to criminal behavior

This policy brief is based on the study: [*"Social capital, collective efficacy and community-based crime prevention in El Salvador"*](#) by Fundaungo (2016).

DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY-BASED CRIME PREVENTION

The World Bank (2003) defines it as: (a) an instrument to prevent crime and violence, and reduce the population's fear of crime; (b) a tool to bring together different actors involved in crime prevention; (c) a means to develop local partnerships for the prevention of crime and violence; (d) a method to ensure the coordination and management of crime prevention initiatives, and (e) a way to identify priority areas and tasks.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study included a review of secondary literature and primary research. For the former, a review of the literature was undertaken on various prevention initiatives that have been implemented in Latin America in recent years, which were grouped into three types: (i) community-based crime prevention, (ii) those directed by the central government and (iii) citizen cooperation with police.

As part of the community-based crime prevention, two projects that had been carried out recently in El Salvador were analyzed. Project documentation was revised and analyzed, and semi-structured interviews with 26 stakeholders and two focus groups with community members were held. In addition, a survey was used as a quantitative method and was conducted in eight communities in El Salvador. The communities were divided into two groups according to the levels of lack of security: four communities with high levels of lack of security and four communities with low levels of lack of security. The survey was used to determine the perception of lack of security, levels of victimization, social capital and collective efficacy at a community level. 320 people in total were surveyed and the field work was conducted between September 4 and October 3, 2015.

INTERPERSONAL TRUST, COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION, COMMUNITY EFFICACY AND LACK OF SECURITY IN EL SALVADOR

Our study analyzed interpersonal trust levels, collective efficacy and how they relate to the perception of lack of security at the community level.

The results of the survey, conducted by Fundaungo, show that in terms of interpersonal trust, people rely more on the residents of their community compared to people living outside it. Meanwhile, by comparing the opinions of respondents according to the levels of lack of security in the (high and low) community, we found that in communities with low interpersonal trust, the lack of security is higher. By exploring the relationship between levels of interpersonal trust and lack of security, evidence shows that to the extent that interpersonal trust decreases there is an increase in the perception of lack of security.

Fundaungo created an Index of Social Cohesion (SOCOH) with three questions that explore the following: (i) the people of this community are willing to help their neighbors, (ii) they can rely on the people of this community, and (iii) this community is very cohesive. Afterwards, Fundaungo created the Index of Informal Social Control (INSOCON) with three questions exploring the possibility that a neighbor intervene under certain specific conditions: (i) if children escape from school, (ii) if children are disrespectful to an adult and (iii) if a fight started outside their homes.

The mean of SOCOH for both types of communities shows that the group of communities of Low Lack of Security has the highest average with 63.5, followed by the group of High Lack of Security with 57.3. In the INSOCON for both groups, the result was that communities of Low Lack of Security have the highest average 47.5, while those with High Lack of Security have 42.0. There are two aspects to highlight. First, INSOCON averages are lower when compared with those of SOCOH, indicating that the neighbors' dispositions to intervene under certain specified conditions is lower. Second, in terms of the comparison between communities of low and high lack of security, community with Low Lack of Security exhibit higher levels in both indices.

Collective efficacy that is built from: (a) the rate of social cohesion among neighbors combined with (b) the rate of informal social control that they can exercise; shows two aspects: (i) that social cohesion is greater than the informal social control, indicating that the disposition for neighbors intervening under certain specific conditions is low; and (ii) when comparing communities with high and low lack of security,

those with lower levels of lack of security have higher levels of both.

Collective efficacy is greater in communities with low lack of security (55.6) compared to communities with high lack of security (49.8). By analyzing these levels of collective efficacy with the perception of lack of security we find that the perception of lack of security decreases as the collective efficacy increases.

The data reinforces the importance of social interactions, building social capital and particularly fostering interpersonal trust and participation to reduce the lack of security and crime in the community.

The data collected show that in **communities with high levels of lack of security**, people adopt behavior changes due to fear of being a victim of a crime:

- 83.8 % avoid going out at night
- 75.6 % limit visits to places of recreation
- 55.3 % prevent their young children to go outside
- 56.3 % have stopped visiting relatives or friends
- 38.8 % have made changes to their homes

This reduces social interactions among community members. This produces **a vicious circle that affects interpersonal trust, civic coexistence and social cohesion in the community.**

SOCIAL-ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AND INSECURITY

Some experts like Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997) argue that in communities where the will to intervene and informal social control are strong, levels of physical and social disorder are low, which is why the study measured if certain environmental conditions were considered a problem in the community. Thus the environmental risk around five factors was measured: gang-related, risk factors related to illicit drugs, criminal activity, civic coexistence and risk factors associated with socio-environmental conditions. The survey data shows that **as the will to intervene and informal social control increase, the perception of environmental risk factors associated with crime decreases.**

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Literature on the subject shows that in Latin America various types of initiatives were identified that address the problem of crime and lack of security. Community-based crime prevention seeks to foster community organisation and participation, as well as interpersonal trust, as the evidence has shown that high levels of collective efficacy are associated with lower levels of lack of security at the community level, which poses the challenge of increasing levels of community participation and trust between citizens, and on the other hand, increasing the willingness of neighbors to act together in the context of high uncertainty for the common good.

Finally, the review of the literature shows that there are few evidence-based studies to inform what is working or not in crime prevention initiatives in the region. This is due to two factors: (i) methodological difficulties to measure effects and / or impacts, and (ii) that projects do not include impact assessments from the beginning. There is a need for analysis based on evidence to better understand what is working and to better inform the debate to formulate evidence-based policy analysis.

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