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POLICY BRIEF



STRENGTHENING SOCIAL TIES: A KEY ASPECT FOR AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY BASED CRIME PREVENTION INITIATIVE



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El Salvador

This brief was developed based on the Comparative Evidence Paper [Community-Based Crime Prevention Practices in El Salvador and Nigeria: Understanding Communities' Willingness to Act](#). That document was authored by an inter-regional team of researchers, based on regional evidence, as well as original data collection and analysis on a particular research topic. All ELLA publications can be found in the [programme website](#).

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL TIES:



A KEY ASPECT FOR AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-BASED CRIME PREVENTION INITIATIVE

Policy Brief
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SUMMARY

The difficulties of many governments to provide adequate security for their citizens are a major reason behind the adoption of non-state approaches to crime prevention.

When crime is severe, it might be expected that these conditions would overpower the resources and capacities of communities to address crime. Yet, the study base for this policy brief shows that in some communities, members continue to act together to prevent or reduce crime even under these severe crime conditions.

This policy brief focus on why some communities are better able to confront high rates of crime compared to others? And given that Community Based Crime Prevention (CBCP) operates in contexts that are far from uniform, what can be learnt about what drives better results in communities suffering high levels of insecurity?

The policy brief describes the results of a multi-country study conducted to explore the interplay between the severity of crime, levels of trust within a community, community participation rates, social ties and

willingness to act, in order to understand why CBCP may be effective even in the face of severe crime.

We found that in communities where social ties are strong but trust in state crime prevention institutions is low, community-led crime prevention initiatives may be effective in addressing the problem of crime. On the other hand, in communities where the level of trust in state crime prevention institutions is high and the levels of social ties are weak, state-led crime prevention initiatives may provide a better option.

The study concludes that efforts aimed at improving CBCP in El Salvador should seek to strengthen and sustain social ties, collective action and civic participation in order to address crime and violence at the community level, combining presence of the state and high levels of participation from the communities.

This policy brief is based on the paper: "Community-Based Crime Prevention Practices in El Salvador and Nigeria: Understanding Communities' Willingness to Act" by Fundaungo and the University of Ibadan.

THE PROBLEM OF INSECURITY IN EL SALVADOR

A recent report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC 2013) shows that the Americas have the highest crime rates in the world at 16.3 per 100,000 people in the Americas and far higher than the global average of 6.2.

Crime rates in El Salvador are disturbingly high where homicide rates have reached alarming proportions of 70.1, theft rates 92.8 and robbery rates 174.9 per

100,000 inhabitants in 2011, respectively (Fundaungo 2014).

Due to the magnitude of the problem the authorities in El Salvador has used different approaches to address the problem of insecurity over the last decades. One of these approaches is CBCP, in which local governments and communities work together for a common goal of preventing crime and violence at the community level.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT CBCP APPROACHES?

In Latin America local governments play a leading role in designing and implementing CBCP alongside local actors including communities themselves, civil society groups and the private sector, as well as international cooperation agencies who have also been prominent in CBCP initiatives in Latin America over the last decade in countries like Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Panama (Córdova, Melara and Armijo, 2016).

But whatever the structure and nature of CBCP, the community undoubtedly takes on a central role as the prime location and/or driving force behind actions. It is important to understand the characteristics of the community since they will inevitably shape the performance of any given CBCP and its likelihood of success.

Kubrin and Weitzer (2003) point out that crime prevention efforts are found to be effective (that is, fear of crime is lowered and crime rates fall) where high levels of trust and social networks exist. This happens when community members influence existing solidarity in the neighbourhood to promote peaceful coexistence, unity, togetherness, support and vigilance.

Within this approach it is expected to respect one-another's interests and cooperate for common well-being. However, some studies suggest that trust and social networks do not automatically translate into the willingness to act collectively within the community (Maxwell, Garner and Skogan 2011; Rukus and Warner 2012; Ansari 2013; Abdullah et al. 2015).

'Social Disorganization theory' offers useful propositions that strengthen our understanding of the possibilities for CBCP initiatives:

- Interpersonal trust is important in shaping the ability of a community to prevent crime;
- Interpersonal trust is a necessary condition for the existence of a willingness to act together;
- Formal social control is an important complement to communities' efforts to reduce/prevent crime;
- Some contextual factors, such as social exclusion, weak social networks, and residential mobility, decrease a community's ability to exert informal social control among neighbors.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE EXISTING EVIDENCE

We can conclude that community-based crime prevention and state response to crime are constrained by the attributes found amongst communities (including strong or weak social ties, low or high levels of trust in crime prevention institutions), which act to limit or enhance the success of CBCP initiatives.

Where there is high level of trust in crime prevention institutions amidst weak social ties, state-led crime prevention initiatives may provide the better option, complemented by communities and other actors (private corporations, local government, international cooperation).

High willingness to act collectively for a common goal, strong social ties and high levels of trust are common features of CBCP in some countries; however, it may be very difficult for communities to deploy these resources if crime severity rises sharply and overwhelms their capacity to respond.

The design and monitoring of CBCP initiatives should be based on an understanding of the dynamics of the community and the limits to its capacity to stand against severe crime which may contribute to their success or failure to prevent crime at the community level.

THE STUDY: EL SALVADOR COMPARED TO NIGERIA

To shed new light on the determinants of communities' willingness to act collectively towards a common goal, community-level surveys were carried out across eight Salvadoran and six Nigerian communities (14 in total). 40 individuals per community were randomly selected (560 surveys).

For the second stage of the analysis we selected the data from the communities that presented the higher levels of insecurity (four in El Salvador and four in Nigeria). This allowed us to measure the severity of crime, willingness to act and trust in comparable communities.

We compared communities in El Salvador and Nigeria, based on a wider comparison of CBCP in Latin America and Africa, and the high levels of crime experienced in both countries. We explored two explanatory variables - trust and willingness to act – to see how these are affected by the severity of crime, and how these can be buffered by strong social ties.

THE EVIDENCE FROM THIS COMPARATIVE STUDY

From the data gathered it can be observed that the communities in both countries recorded high levels of insecurity relating to five conditions used to determine its levels: gang-related activities, presence of illicit drugs trading, violent crime, problems between neighbours and disorder conditions in the community, in which **El Salvador present an average of 51.3 compared to 65.9 of Nigeria**¹.

In general respondents from communities in both countries reported fairly similar levels of trust in their neighbours (**55.5 in Nigeria, 48.9 in El Salvador**)². Their responses on 'willingness to act', however, show a significant difference (**64.4 in Nigeria, 34.5 in El Salvador**)³.

In order to complement the analysis on this divergence in willingness to act, despite similar levels of insecurity and similar levels of trust in the communities in both countries, the study explored actions that people have taken in the last twelve months in their community, actions which contribute to solving a problem in their communities, either through the donation of money or materials or through contributing their own labour. Here we note that despite the higher levels of insecurity showed in Nigerian communities, they showed higher levels of contributions within their communities when compared to El Salvador.

- **Have you contributed to help solve a problem? El Salvador 28.1, Nigeria 48.1.**
- **Have you donated money or materials? El Salvador 26.3, Nigeria 55.6.**
- **Have you helped with your own work? El Salvador 34.4, Nigeria 40.0.**⁴

- Another independent variable of the study was social ties. This variable captures the frequency with which residents attend meetings held by different organisations and is used as a proxy for community belonging and membership. The results show that, social ties are much higher in **Nigeria (45.2)** when compared to **El Salvador (23.1)**⁵.

Another variable we studied was the confidence in the work of the police and the local government in the two countries. Salvadoran communities demonstrated much higher levels of trust in both institutions (**45.4 in the police and 49.6 in the local government**) compared to their Nigerian counterparts (**11.5 in the police and 36.9 in the local government**)⁶. In El Salvador the level of confidence felt towards both institutions is similar; in Nigeria residents demonstrated a much lower level of trust towards the police.

Finally, we analysed how the severity of crime affects community inhabitants, examining the behavioural changes that residents have adopted to cope with the fear of being victims of crime. The results show on average higher levels of behavioral change adopted by inhabitants of communities in **El Salvador (58.6) when compared to Nigeria (34.0)**⁷.

Overall, few Nigerians modified their behavior for fear of crime. This could help explain why in some Nigerian communities people are more willing to help than in El Salvador.

Overall, the data supports that the strength of trust and social ties explains why some communities are willing to act collectively in the face of severe crime situations while others are not.

It also indicates that strong social ties can reduce or even overcome the tendency of severe crime to undermine community trust and willingness to act, as long as the nature and the severity of crime do not overcome the capacity of the communities.

1. Data recoded to a 0 to 100 format, where 0 is not a problem and 100 a serious problem.

2. Data recoded to a 0 to 100 format, where 0 is Untrustworthy and 100 very trustworthy.

3. Data recoded to a 0 to 100 format, where 0 is no and 100 yes.

4. Data recoded to a 0 to 100 format, where 0 is no and 100 yes.

5. Data recoded to a 0 to 100 format, where 0 is no and 100 yes attend meetings.

6. See note 2.

7. See note 4.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Initiatives to promote crime and violence prevention at the community level should include actions to address the level of social ties within the community, and focus on encouraging higher levels of 'willingness to act' towards a common goal through the solution of community problems.

The particular conditions and dynamics of each community should be taken into consideration when drafting a Community Based Crime Prevention initiative in order to produce the expected results, based on the needs and problems recognized by each community and deliver the answers to address those problems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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