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U.S. aid to Central America is successfully combatting crime and violence: LAPOP study

by Jim Patterson (<http://news.vanderbilt.edu/author/patterjm/>) | Posted on Thursday, Oct. 30, 2014 — 2:40 PM



<http://news.vanderbilt.edu/files/gang-violence-crime.jpg>

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Neighborhoods in El Salvador, Panama, Guatemala and Honduras given the benefit of community-based crime and violence prevention programs reported murders and extortions were 51 percent lower over a three-year period than they would have been in the absence of the programs, according to a survey and analysis conducted by the [Latin American Public Opinion Project](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/) (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.

The United States has been funding crime and violence prevention programs in the four countries through [USAID](http://www.usaid.gov/) (<http://www.usaid.gov/>), the lead U.S. government agency that works to end extreme global poverty and enable resilient, democratic societies to realize their potential. USAID engaged LAPOP to do the survey and analysis.

Results, along with recommendations for the future, were released Oct. 30 at the [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/) (<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/>) in Washington, D.C. Presenting were [Mitchell A. Seligson](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/bio/mitchell-seligson) (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/bio/mitchell-seligson>), founder and senior adviser of LAPOP and Centennial Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt; and [Elizabeth Zechmeister](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/bio/elizabeth-zechmeister) (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/bio/elizabeth-zechmeister>), director of LAPOP and associate professor of political science at Vanderbilt.



(<http://news.vanderbilt.edu/files/SeligsonZechmeistercrop.jpg>)

Mitch Seligson and Elizabeth Zechmeister
(Vanderbilt)

“The evaluation is part of a broader effort in community-based crime prevention, in contrast to the traditionally more common get-tough law enforcement approach to addressing the widespread crime and violence permeating Central America,” Seligson said. “The crime prevention approach attempts to address the root causes of crime, rather than deal with it after it has become endemic, with interventions such as youth outreach centers and workforce training to prevent youths from joining gangs, and facilitated coordination between community stakeholders, municipal crime and violence prevention committees and law enforcement officials.”

The crime statistics are not based on police reports. Instead, they are based on extensive survey data gathered in the treatment and control communities via probability samples of voting-age adults.

Other results of the survey analysis show substantial improvements when compared to the expected outcome in the absence of the programs:

- 35 percent decline in reports of avoiding walking through dangerous areas
- 25 percent decline in reports of sales of illegal drugs
- 19 percent decline in reported robberies
- 18 percent increase in community organization to prevent crime
- 14 percent decline in reported problem of young people in gangs
- 13 percent decline in reported problem of gang fights
- 11 percent decline in perception of insecurity when walking alone at night
- 9 percent increase in trust in the national police
- 8 percent decline in reported problem of youth loitering
- 7 percent increase in satisfaction with democracy
- 5 percent increase in satisfaction with police performance
- 5 percent decline in perception of insecurity
- 3 percent increase in interpersonal trust

In addition to continuing the assistance programs through USAID, the LAPOP researchers’ suggestions include:

- Establish more community-based violence prevention programs, prioritized over traditional law enforcement approaches.
- Increase family support by expanding pre-school, after-school and summer vacation child care and making

them available for free or only symbolic cost.

- Use the classroom to raise awareness of physical and sexual abuse and reduce such abuse through expanding presence of school psychologists, educating school directors on steps to take to report abuse and other measures.
- Increase security at schools by increasing police presence and routine backpack checks for weapons and narcotics.
- Improve community organization by making sure community leaders have phones, web addresses and cell phone numbers of police officers in their areas and provide more assistance to community-based councils for the prevention of crime.
- Train and improve police forces so they are more responsive to community leader's reports of criminal activity and ensure police officers get long-term assignments in communities so relationships can be developed.