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USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America Found Effective in LAPOP Impact Evaluation

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Executive Summary: LAPOP's multi-year, multi-country randomized control trial impact evaluation of the USAID community-centered approach to violence prevention found that the programs have been a success on a wide variety of community-level indicators. The study was based on over 29,000 quantitative interviews and more than 800 qualitative interviews. Results show that outcomes in the treatment communities improved more (or declined less) than they would have if the programs had not been administered. Specifically, LAPOP found that the approach produced a significant reduction in the level expected of crime victimization and violence and also resulted in a significant increase in the level expected of citizens' sense of security. Perception of neighborhood insecurity *and* perception of insecurity when walking alone at night declined more than would be expected without USAID intervention. Levels of satisfaction with police performance and trust in the police have increased significantly over the levels expected in the absence of the treatment. Indirect effects of the programs include strengthening democratic values, which increased significantly over the expected level in the absence of the program. An extensive series of qualitative interviews generated many specific policy recommendations, some of which are summarized in this short report.

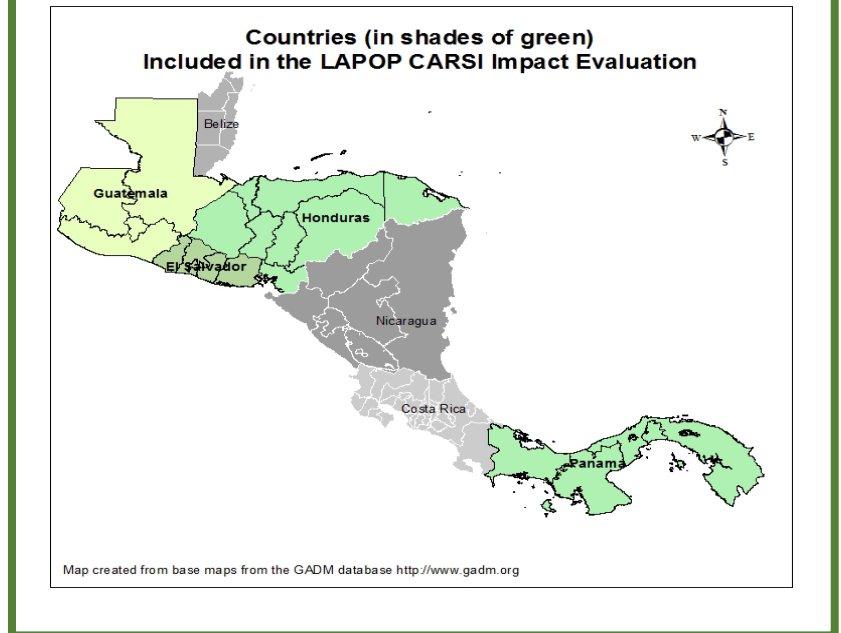
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The countries of Central America — especially “the Northern Triangle” of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Figure 1) — are among the most criminally violent nations in the world (Figure 2). As part of the U.S. Government’s Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has designed and implemented a set of programs to improve citizen security in Central America by strengthening community capacity to combat crime and by creating educational and employment opportunities for at-risk youth.¹ This *Insights* report² is taken largely from the Executive Summary of the Impact Evaluation³ published by LAPOP.⁴

LAPOP’s multi-method, multi-country, multi-year randomized control trial evaluation was designed to contribute to an understanding of the effectiveness of USAID’s community-based crime and violence prevention approach. The package of interventions – that is, the “treatment” under evaluation – includes activities such as planning by municipal-level committees; crime observatories and data collection; crime prevention through environmental design (such as improved street lighting, graffiti removal, cleaned-up public spaces); programs for at-risk youth (such as outreach centers, workforce development, mentorships); and community policing. USAID’s community-based crime prevention projects are inherently cross-sectoral. That is, they integrate education and workforce development, economic growth and employment, public health, and governance interventions. What follows are the main findings of both the quantitative and qualitative

Figure 1. CARSI Impact Evaluation Sites



evaluations of the various crime prevention programs.

Overall, the LAPOP study found that in several key respects the programs have been a success. Specifically, based on the results of a classic experimental design, involving randomly selected at-risk treatment and control communities, the outcomes in the treatment communities improved more (or deteriorated less) than they would have if USAID’s programs had not been administered. This conclusion is based on direct evidence from extensive survey data gathered from more than 29,000 respondents living in 127 treatment and control neighborhoods and through 848 qualitative stakeholder interviews and 44 focus groups. Collectively these important data allow LAPOP to draw important policy suggestions which will be highlighted in the conclusion.

Quantitative Findings

There are five broad areas in which impact was measured: neighborhood crime and violence; citizens’ sense of security; neighborhood disorder; satisfaction with police performance; and democratic values.

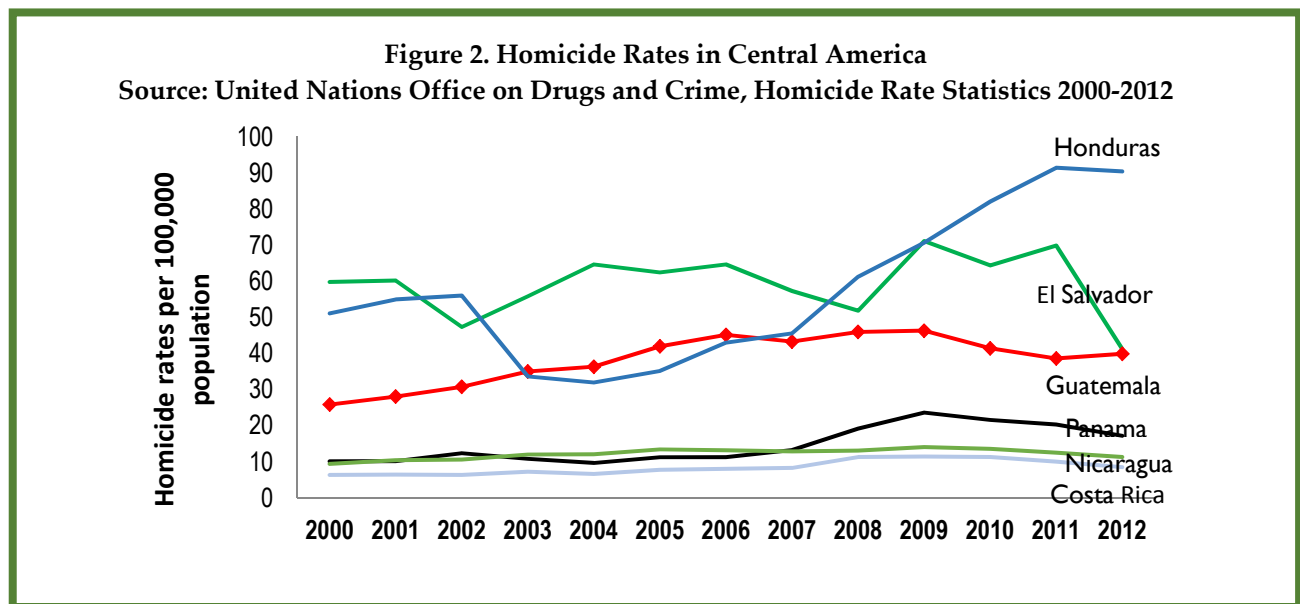
¹ See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/central-america>, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/148416.pdf>

² Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

³ For more information and a copy of the regional report see: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi-study.php>.

⁴ The funding for this study came from USAID.



Compared to what would be expected without USAID interventions, it is observed, for example, that 19% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of robberies in their neighborhoods and 25% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of illegal drug sales in their neighborhoods. When asked about murder, 50% fewer surveyed residents reported being aware of murders in their neighborhoods, when compared to what would be expected without USAID intervention. The impact evaluation also found that perceptions of insecurity were 5% lower and reported feelings of insecurity when walking alone at night in the neighborhood were 11% lower than would be expected when compared to neighborhoods having no USAID intervention.

Encouraging results were also found regarding neighborhood disorder. Compared to what would be expected to be found without USAID intervention, perception of youths loitering as a problem was 8% lower; perceptions of youths in gangs as a problem was 14% lower; and perceptions of gang fights as a problem was 13% lower. When considering how communities are organized to prevent crime, compared to what would be expected without intervention, residents' evaluations of their communities'

organization for crime prevention were 18% higher.

In looking at evaluations of police performance, residents' satisfaction with police performance was 5% better and residents' trust in the police was 9% greater than what would be expected without intervention.

Indirect effects of the community-based crime prevention program under the CARSI program can also be seen. Compared to what would be expected without USAID intervention, respondents' levels of interpersonal trust at the community level were 3% higher and their satisfaction with the functioning of democracy was 7% higher.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative study highlighted five areas in which the respondents identified programmatic successes and/or concerns: the role of schools; gang extrication; the role of family; the role of churches; and the role of the community.

Schools were found to play an important role in crime prevention. Some schools are creating better environments for at-risk youth with the

innovative *Convivencia Escolar* (School Harmony) program in El Salvador and similar programs in the other countries; institutionalization of student leadership groups within schools; and the training of teachers and students in mediation and alternative approaches to conflict resolution.

School leaders can be pivotal. Many teachers and administrators are enthusiastic about the role of school-based, on-site psychologists in improving the behavior of troubled students. As schools begin using less punishment and more psychological counseling and mediation for conflict resolution, they are seeing positive results among troubled youths. Students frequently divulge home abuse and other problems to psychologists, opening the door to assistance. School directors and teachers play a vital role in uncovering child abuse and other kinds of domestic violence in the home, and they have been sensitive to domestic violence situations that adversely affect their students' behavior. One repeatedly mentioned problem is teenage pregnancy, which often leads to female students dropping out of school. Some administrators said that they make allowances for students who care for babies, in order to help enable these young girls to complete their high school education.

Even though the quantitative findings indicate that the gang situation in treatment neighborhoods has improved, police officers consistently reported that it was no longer possible for gang members to dissociate themselves from their gangs. In El Salvador for example, police officers reported that the only way out of a gang was in a coffin. Previously, gang members could leave the gangs by, for example, joining a church. More recently,

interviewees said, gang members who mature into middle-aged fathers with steady jobs may be expected to perform non-violent services, such as money laundering, for the gang over the course of their lives.

There was near universal agreement in the stakeholder interviews that the major factor associated with youths dropping out of school and joining violent gangs is the "broken home." Children in single-parent households, ones typically headed by mothers, often lack supervision and thus are more at risk of joining gangs. The risk is especially high when the single-mother takes on a partner who is not the biological father of the children, a situation that can push the minor out of the house and into the arms of a gang.

USAID's crime prevention programs in Central America have been a success. The outcomes in the treatment communities improved more (or deteriorated less) than they would have if USAID's programs had not been administered.

Churches of all denominations play an especially important role in crime and violence prevention. Their youth group programs, some of them funded by USAID, are seen by stakeholders as

keeping youths from hanging out on street corners by getting them engaged in socially positive activities (recreational, religious, and job training).

Evangelical pastors were considered by our stakeholders to be especially active in reaching out to youths already in gangs, in an effort to extract them from active membership. They also often serve as mediators between warring gangs, in order to help prevent bloodshed. In addition to pastors, there are also "Christian police officers," who evangelize in the prisons with the hope of counseling gang members before they are released from prison.

The Catholic Church was seen as being effective in reducing crime levels as it engaged in well-established, age-graded programs, beginning in

early childhood and continuing into adulthood. Some of those who have actively participated in the various youth programs graduate to become community leaders as young adults.

Community development association leaders, often members of Municipal Crime Prevention Committees, play a key role in violence prevention efforts. They are willing to share intelligence with police officers, but only if they know and trust them. A dedicated police hotline can be very useful for getting the authorities to show up when a crime is in progress, but apparently largely when the official answering the call was known to the association leaders.

At-risk youth reported that vocational training was the most valuable of the various outreach activities they had participated in, believing it to be the path to a good job and a self-sufficient future. They found computer literacy courses especially valuable, and some said that they would have liked more advanced courses than the ones that were given, and smaller class sizes. Many others expressed appreciation for the music and art programs of those centers, as well as the athletic outlets that they provide.

The Municipal Crime Prevention Committees comprise an innovative structure, one that is supported by USAID. Their importance comes from their ability to galvanize the various stakeholding sectors of the targeted municipalities (specifically, the police, school directors, clergy, community development association leaders, and health service providers) by incorporating representatives of each sector into every committee. These representatives become the

link between the municipality and the various communities that have been selected for the crime prevention treatment, by reporting the Committees' plans to community stakeholders.

Policy Recommendations

Considering the documented successes of the USAID-sponsored programs in Central America, this evaluation suggests several ways to bolster these successes. Making community-based crime and violence prevention programs a frontline weapon to improve citizen security is key. So, too, is improving community organizations to address crime and violence.

Schools and families also play a vital role in decreasing instances of crime and violence. Expanding pre-school, after-school, and day-care access for children living in single-parent homes would be beneficial. Working with school administrators is important. Continuing to inform administrators and teachers on important issues such as recognizing signs of abuse in children is necessary. Directing more resources to school security, especially in the form of patrols when students enter and leave school, could prove useful both in cutting down violence in the schools and protecting children from gang members who lurk outside the school grounds. Lastly, given the aforementioned positive role of religious organizations, actively partnering with these organizations to support church-affiliated youth programs is likely to be fruitful.