

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY EXAMINES IMPACT OF USAID'S CRIME & VIOLENCE PREVENTION EFFORTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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With the highest murder rates in the world, Central America, in particular Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, is the most crime-ridden and violent region in the world. Narco-trafficking, gang violence, corruption, the proliferation of guns, and weak government institutions create a dire situation for these countries, which struggle to grow their economies and improve their citizens' standard of living.

Aggressive government crackdowns and heavy-handed suppression only led to wrongful arrest of thousands of youth, overwhelmed prisons and justice systems, and empowered gangs.

Against this backdrop, the United States Government launched the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), a whole-of-government effort to improve security conditions alongside Central American governments and other donors. Through CARSI, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) builds resilience to insecurity in high-crime, urban communities by improving access to public services, jobs, and justice. With 50 percent of the Central American population under 25 years old, USAID focuses on youth who are at particular risk of being not only victims, but also perpetrators of violence.

IMPACT EVALUATION OF USAID'S CRIME AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS

To assess the effectiveness of USAID's community-based crime and violence prevention programs in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama, Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project launched a three-year impact evaluation.

Through quantitative and qualitative research, Vanderbilt examined USAID's multi-tier approach to reduce community and individual vulnerability to criminal activity by:

- Creating Municipal Crime Prevention Committees that identify crime 'hot spots' and implement community-led plans to improve security.
- Working with faith-based organizations to provide at-risk youth with life skills, job training, and recreational activities.
- Supporting civic groups to reclaim gang-controlled public spaces and improve basic infrastructure, such as street lights.
- Promoting community policing to build trust between citizens and local police.
- Providing services at domestic violence assistance centers.

The randomized control trial compared at-risk neighborhoods with USAID's prevention programs to similar neighborhoods without a USAID or other donor presence. The evaluation comprehensively gauged perceptions over time of crime victimization and citizen security.

THE FINDINGS

The impact evaluation shows that USAID's programs, built on experiences from many U.S. and Latin American cities, have a significant positive impact on communities.

The quantitative findings, which assessed the success of USAID-presence neighborhoods compared to how they would fare without USAID assistance, show that:

- 51% fewer residents reported being aware of extortion and blackmail.
- 51% fewer residents reported being aware of murders.
- 35% fewer residents reported avoiding dangerous areas because of fear of crime.
- 25% fewer residents reported being aware of illegal drug sales.
- 19% fewer residents reported being aware of robberies.
- 14% fewer residents perceived youth in gangs as a problem.
- 18% more residents supported their community's crime prevention efforts.
- 9% more residents had trust in the police.

The qualitative research explains and deepens our understanding of the quantitative results:

At-risk youth: There was consensus that schools, families, and churches need to continue to play a critical role in exposing at-risk youth to more positive influences. Given the potential for youth to be recruited into gangs and other criminal activity, most residents called for more targeted interventions with extremely at-risk youth and those already involved in gangs.

Community planning: Residents called for greater coordination among community members to address insecurity.

Police: Residents desire an improved relationship with the police. Currently, individuals only share intelligence with police officers they know personally.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's positive findings and USAID's extensive prevention experience, the Agency will continue to 1) scale-up and expand prevention efforts to also target youth in conflict with the law and 2) promote a place-based approach to concentrate all efforts and ensure programs are the cornerstone of crime and violence reduction efforts.

While these findings affirm the impact of USAID's community-based crime and violence prevention interventions, USAID's experience also indicates that future efforts need to marry the community-based approach with law enforcement efforts in the same hot spot areas. A comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach requires prevention support to distressed communities while improving public security through trusted and accountable police.

USAID calls on Central American governments, U.S. government counterparts, private sector partners, and multilateral organizations to join efforts and increase prevention efforts to:

- **Expand USAID's proven community-based prevention model** in more dangerous, high-risk communities in Central America.
- **Target high-risk youth** that are most likely to become perpetrators of crime and violence and support re-entry programs for those gang-involved
- **Implement a place-based approach** that integrates law enforcement efforts closely with community-based crime and violence prevention programs to reduce insecurity
- **Align resources** with governments, donors, private sector, and multilateral organizations to ensure economies of scale on public security programming.