Community Policing and Youth Violence Prevention Approaches and Implementation in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua

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Overview

This case study analyzes the implementation of the community policing model in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Violence and street crime committed against and by young people are one of six principal threats to citizen security in Central America. Many factors have made it difficult for Central American governments to control youth violence. Community policing is designed to improve police-community relations by transitioning from repressive policing to a prevention model of policing. Community involvement is crucial to the acceptance of community policing. Social accountability mechanisms must be strengthened, and police departments must provide nontraditional as well as traditional police training. The results of community policing have been generally positive.

Key contextual conditions: Central America suffers from high rates of crime that seriously affect the quality of citizens' lives. The lives of young people are especially difficult and risky. In the past, the police used a repressive approach that led to increased rates of incarceration but no reduction, and in some cases an increase, in crime. There is a lack of trust between the community and the police.

Key stakeholders: Central American Integration System; National Police of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua; German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH; and the citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

PROJECT DATA

PARTNER ORGANIZATION:
German Development Cooperation: GIZ/BMZ

ORGANIZATION TYPE:
Government

DELIVERY CHALLENGE:
Design and planning

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:
Prevention of youth violence

SECTOR:
Fragility, conflict, and violence

COUNTRIES:
El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua

REGION:
North America

PROJECT DURATION:
April 2009–2018

PROJECT TOTAL COST:
€18.2 million

ORGANIZATION COMMITMENT:
€12.5 million

CONTACTS

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Lessons Learned

- **Implementation of community policing requires coordinated leadership.** Without a facilitator to maintain focus on prevention-related programs, policing reverts to reactive crime control. Attempts to bypass local government by establishing pilot projects directly with implementing institutions or organizations at the local level have been problematic.
- **The police, the local government, and the community must have clear and specific roles.** Each stakeholder must understand what is expected of it and of the other stakeholders.
- **Pilot projects can be the basis for scaling up successful programs, but the best results were found in Nicaragua, where community policing was implemented nationally.** An integrated information system is needed to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the broad range of interventions. The links between the national, departmental, and local levels of evaluation and monitoring systems should be strengthened.

- **Problems that are highly relevant to the community, such as security in the schools and the security of women, children, and youth must be made a priority.** Focusing on issues that are important to the community improves the chances that community policing will succeed.
- **Community policing requires changes in the police presence at the local level, in police communication strategy, and in the internal controls and the professional ethics of the police.** Police departments must provide nontraditional as well as traditional police training, institute a transparent and fair human resources policy, and increase the diversity of officers. Self-assessment, peer coaching, and supervision can improve and maintain the quality of services delivered.

Development Challenges

- **Citizen security is a major concern in Central America.** An unacceptably high rate of crime seriously affects the quality of citizens' lives.
- **Youth are most affected by criminality and violence and, at the same time, most commonly responsible for intentional violence and for committing crimes.** Traditional methods of policing focused on incarceration of criminals rather than on prevention of crime.
- **There has been a lack of trust between the police and the community.** Repressive approaches to crime control, poor coordination among governments, lack of public trust in the police, and the tendency among police to stigmatize young people have made crime prevention difficult.

Delivery Challenges

- Police often stigmatize young people as criminals.
- Community members tend to be deeply suspicious of the police and have little confidence in the capacity of the police to protect children and young people against violence.
- Preventing youth violence at the local level requires approaches different from those used to prevent violence and organized crime by adults.
- The iron-fist policies that were designed to combat gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have fueled a rise in violence by and against youth and an increase in the prison population.
- The conventional model of policing—characterized by top-down hierarchical structures with management styles focused on command and control—has been unable to solve the security problems of communities in Central America.