

Alternative reflections on the treatment of violence and crime in Latin America: the prevention of crime as a strategy *

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Abstract

Latin America is the most violent region in the world with a rate of 24.24 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. In view of this situation, different types of measures have been implemented, ranging from a purely punitive approach to the design and application of programs to prevent violence and crime with various results. On this last point we will reflect, specifically on the relevance and usefulness of such initiatives, besides presenting some key cases in the region for the understanding of the prevention approach; likewise, its scope and limitations will be presented.

Introduction

Violence (s)^a and crime are global phenomena with different manifestations, effects, and treatments. In Latin America (LA), the world's most violent region, a response to the increase in crime has been a strategy of prevention. We offer a critical reflection on this approach, dividing our argument into four parts. First of all, we present a panorama of violence in the region; next, we discuss the emergence of the preventative approach; subsequently, we develop key cases, with a special emphasis on three outstanding programs in the region; finally, we close with a discussion of seven challenges faced by the prevention approach.

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A brief overview of violence and crime in the continent: the supremacy of control as a measure of attention.

Insecurity and violence have positioned themselves as two of the main issues faced by Latin American countries. These issues have a great impact on citizen's lives and on politics, since they affect levels of governability and institutionality through their handling. This owes to the fact that violence and crime have increased and diversified. In terms of intentional homicide (table 1), America is the most violent continent. Disaggregating the data, we observed that Latin America is the most violent region. In contrast to the rest of the world, in the last 20 years homicide rates have gone up, exceeding the international average. Between 2000 and 2010, LA was the only region where homicides

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^a For practical reasons, throughout the text we speak of violence in singular form. However, we start from a recognition of its plurality, as well as the heterogeneity of its possible causes.

increased (12%), with a death toll of more than 1 million (UNDP, 2014: 41-72).

In addition to a significant increase in crime, we can appreciate the emergence and/or consolidation of new kinds of criminal organizations. At the same time, Latin American countries and cities face strong inequalities in terms of insecurity, due to the territorial heterogeneity in which criminal experiences unfold. Thus, the issue of crime requires a complex approach, which considers both the internationalization of crime, and its local manifestations and impact.

Table 1
2010 Homicide rate by region

Region	Observations	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Africa	27	7.19	0.6	38
America	39	22.45	1.4	81.8
Asia	42	3.36	0.2	20.1
Europe	43	2.23	0	10.1
Oceania	9	4.56	one	10.4
Global	160	7.96	0	81.8
America				
North America	4	6.75	1.4	10.6
Latin America	35	24.24	3.2	81.8

Source: prepared by the authors with data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Strategies developed by governments to tackle the issue have given primacy to the criminal justice system, garnering broad support from political actors and a large part of the citizenry. These kinds of approaches have sprouted up in places where previous responses to crime have been considered ineffective due to the inefficacy of police and security institutions. Thus, they tend to incorporate proposals for police reforms, an increase in jails and a betterment of justice systems (Basombrio, 2010). The theoretical assumption is that these not only serve to sanction the offenders properly, but also - and above all -, to deter other criminals from committing new crimes. However, these measures have been questioned by certain authors (Carranza,

1996, Nuttall and Baxter, 2005, Carranza, 2005, Dandurad, 2005, IACHR, 2013), given their low effectiveness in terms of reducing crime. It is likely that their piecemeal approach and the little attention given to causes of crime, ultimately lead to their inefficacy.

Emergence of the crime and insecurity prevention approach

Given the poor results of measures focused exclusively on control and crime punishment, preventative approaches to violence and crime have emerged. These strategies embrace the idea of security as based on the well-being of people, and on the understanding and tackling of multicausality. It is thus that crime prevention emerges as an area of intervention that complements criminal justice measures in public policies dealing with security.

The prevention of crime is based on the integration of various criminological theoretical approaches. Its cornerstone is the idea of "practice guided by theory; that is, the better the theoretical explanation of the problem, the more capable of guiding practical problem-solving efforts."^b A myriad of theories explain the different types of crimes, expressions of insecurity, patterns of distribution, and etiology of offenders, among others.

At the individual level come into play epidemiological readings, which identify the risk factors that increase the probability of an event (criminal careers, etc.). These are analytically conceptualized as "adverse characteristics or behaviors identified prior to the beginning of a particular result."^c According to this model, "a risk factor predicts a high probability of offending, while a protection factor predicts a low probability of offense in a group that is at risk."^d

At the social level, approaches that follow that theory of social disorganization (Shaw and McKay, 1969) have stood out; in particular, in the design of community programs for crime prevention. These are based on an analysis of "the relationship between the structure of neighborhoods, social control and crime."^e Moreover, they offer "a specification of the effects of neighborhood

^b Akers and Sellers, 2013, p.9

^c MacAra, 2012, p.540

^d Farrington., 2014, p.2554.

^e Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003, p.374.

characteristics on the capacity of community residents to implement and maintain public standards,"^f as well as on crime rates in different areas of the city

On another note, readings from the theory of routine activities have been influential; particularly, in urban architectural design. This theory assumes that the probability of criminal incidents increases when the spatial and temporal convergence of available victims, motivated offenders, and guards increases (Cohen and Felson, 1979).

This richness of approaches has contributed to the understanding of crime's multi-causal nature. This has, in turn, facilitated the design of multiple measures that address its development as well as its manifestations at the individual, household and community levels (Buvinic, Morrison, Shifter, 1999).

It is only in the last two decades that crime prevention has begun to be incorporated into governmental policy. Thus, it has yet to acquire legitimacy in some LA countries. Furthermore, even in countries where it has become a fundamental part of security policy, it does not have the same centrality or priority as the aforementioned control measures (Waller, 2008). Most LA governments have discursively supported the need to validate and combine multiple strategies in the fight against crime. However, their policies have tended to focus overwhelmingly on the control and penalization of the phenomenon.

Considering this reality, researchers and specialists on the subject, as well as international organizations (the IDB, UN Habitat, CIPC, and others) have made efforts to establish the efficacy of crime-prevention strategies. Such initiatives have demonstrated that the efficiency of this approach greatly outweighs the high costs involved in the rehabilitation of criminals (Buvinic, Morrison and Shifter, 1999, Waller, 2008). Moreover, they point out that prevention can be particularly profitable^g in situations where very high levels of violence coexist with the inefficiency of key social control institutions, high levels of corruption, or weak criminal justice systems.

Prevention strategies not only prevent crime and victimization, but also strengthen the security of communities by improving quality of life. Their medium and long-term benefits include a reduction of the costs associated with the criminal justice system, as well as the social costs of crime, such as fear, the disintegration of the social fabric, and the loss of institutional legitimacy, among others (Waller, 2008).

Some key crime prevention experiences

The first attempts at crime prevention date from the 1930s. The works of Henry Shaw and Clifford McKay (1969), who studied crime distribution in Chicago neighborhoods, detail the development of "the first large-scale urban crime prevention program [...] in several lower class, high crime Chicago neighborhoods."^h As early as the 1950s and 1960s, programs inspired by the anomie-tension theory were applied, specifically in Boston, and the program *Mobilization for Youth* was applied in New York.ⁱ

Meanwhile, the United Nations Organization on Drugs and Crime has been organizing conferences on crime prevention and criminal justice since 1955. The focus of such multilateral meetings has expanded, from the creation of common criteria for the functioning of penal systems, to aspects centered on broader notions of development.

Beyond the academy, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the French and English governments implemented pilot projects to address the increase in crime within communities. In Manchester, the Neighborhood Watch Initiative was implemented in 1972 (Vanderschueren *et al*, 2004), while in 1982 the French government carried out a study of the causes of increases in crime rates, known as the Bonnemaison Report (Vanderschueren *et al*, 2004).

In terms of contemporary experiences, many cities have developed prevention initiatives at the local level (Vanderschueren *et al*, 2004). These have been described in the records of various international events, such as the conferences organized by mayors' associations in Barcelona (1987), Montreal (1989), Paris (1991) and Johannesburg (1998). These records describe experiences from Europe and North America. For instance, in England, France, Belgium and Canada,

^f Kubrin, 2009, p.227

^g There is an entire discussion about the costs and profitability of crime prevention. For more information see: Welsh, *et al*., 2001

^h Akers and Sellers, 2013, p.169

ⁱ *Ibid.*, Pp.192-194.

the fight against urban violence has been decentralized, granting municipalities a central role by having them work in coordination with local police to generate coalitions or local contracts for the design of city-wide integral security plans (Vandershueren *et al.*, 2004).

Experiences from LA have been highlighted for their hypothetical influence on the reduction of violence, particularly homicide, and on the generation of change in communities. Examples include Medellín and Bogotá, in Colombia; Peñalolén, in Chile; Belo Horizonte and some sectors of Sao Paulo, in Brazil; and Ciudad Juárez, in Mexico, to mention a few (Dammert and Paulsen, 2005, Dammert and Zuñiga, 2007, CIPC, 2010). Their results have been attributed to various elements, such as: 1) the participation of civil society; 2) multisectoriality, which brings together multiple stakeholders and sectors (Placencia, Alvarez and Arce, 2008; ICPC, 2010); 3) the continuity and comprehensiveness of policies (independently of changes in administration) (Dammert and Zuñiga, 2007; CIPC, 2010) and 4) a territorial focus, with local governments playing a key role, as the branch of government closest to citizens, as possessors of high levels of territorial knowledge, and through their daily presence through the execution of various services.

An outstanding example of this trend is the Security and Coexistence Plan implemented in Bogotá between 1995 and 2005 (Acero, 2005; Velásquez, 2006). This strategy, promoted by the three municipal administrations of the period, combined community prevention strategies (citizen coexistence, cultural activities in public spaces, etc.), situational prevention (improving lighting, neighborhood connectivity, better equipped public spaces, etc.), social prevention (universal access to health and education programs) and police prevention (increasing vigilance, improving resources and infrastructure, community policing actions, among others) (Acero, 2005; Velásquez, 2006). These interventions successfully tackled subjective and objective aspects of insecurity, garnering positive results (homicides decreased by 70% during the period). Moreover, community involvement in the process guaranteed the sustainability of these actions over time, independently of the political orientation of

subsequent municipal administrations (Acero, 2005; Velásquez, 2006).

In Mexico, the "Todos Somos Juárez" (TSJ) program has been highlighted (ICP, 2015). In the midst of a historic homicide crisis, rooted in criminal rivalry, this plan was massively funded (between 2010 and 2011 it had a budget of 400 million dollars). Its main objectives were the recovery of public spaces, the reconstruction of the social fabric, the improvement of living conditions, the improvement of the justice system and the answering of specific demands regarding public security. It consisted of 160 commitments, which would begin to show results in the first 100 days. Among the criticisms of this initiative is the absence of consistent evaluations.

Furthermore, it is said to reflect the entrepreneurs' vision of security, firstly, through their notable participation, and, secondly, through the kinds of actions and objectives chosen.^j

Moreover, it is not clear whether participation has been the central element in the reduction of homicides.^k

Another relevant Latin American experience was promoted in Medellín, Colombia, by mayors Sergio Fajardo (2004-2007) and Alonso Salazar (2008-2011). Its main purpose was to rescue the city from a prolonged crisis stemming from the violent competition between criminal groups dedicated primarily to drug trafficking. Additionally, it sought to clear the city from its stigma (Martin, 2014). During the efforts of Fajardo and Salazar the concept of "Medellin, the most educated" was developed, with a focus on developing public policies for the construction and renovation of schools, libraries, and housing, as well as productive projects for single mothers and youth. The policy-planning process started with an assessment of which were the most unequal communes, with the purpose of building "the most beautiful for the humblest". An ambitious policy called "social urbanism" was launched. This policy created opportunities for youth sectors that had been excluded from development for decades who were, in fact, the most vulnerable to being recruited by organized crime. It should be added that the

^j Cano and Rojido, 2016, p.155.

^k Ibid., P.159

project's initiative to create educational, labor and training opportunities, coincided with a politically tense moment in the capital of Antioquia, implied by the demobilization of armed groups. Thus, it was of great priority for the State and civil society to promote alternatives for the return to peaceful life.

In sum, the above-mentioned experiences have been shown to be feasible approaches to the tackling of violence and crime. However, the decrease in homicides cannot be attributed exclusively to these. Moreover, there is no reliable evidence to show the programs' effects on indicators of violence and crime other than homicide. Nonetheless, citizen participation and political will stand out as key elements for the enhancement of such experiences.

Main challenges facing crime prevention

In conclusion, it should be noted that, while facing many difficulties and limits, crime prevention strategies have made progress. However, in order to attain full recognition, positioning and validation as security strategies that merit institutionalization, they must still overcome a great number of challenges. Here are some of these outstanding challenges:

First of all, the prioritization of prevention strategies and the allocation of the necessary resources (economic and technical) for the creation of community participation mechanisms, necessitates political will on behalf of authorities.

Secondly, these processes require a patient and perseverant construction of trusting bonds between the different actors involved (neighbors, organizations, local authorities, and police, to name a few) (Baudino, 2015). Currently, the low level of trust is a very significant problem in the region. This is compounded by the difficulty of guaranteeing communities' demands for visible, concrete and immediate responses that stems from the complexity of crime and insecurity. The lack of responsiveness or alleged incapacity on the part of the State can be read as disinterest, risking the assumption that community participation is simply a practice driven by political discourse which does not translate strongly into practice.

Third, the need for a long-term commitment must be considered by the State, but also by organizations and neighbors. If participation is not continuous, it is difficult for processes to be sustained over time. Therefore, for prevention to be

able to unfold its full potential, it is necessary to have a lasting and deep commitment over time, beyond changes in administration (Baudino, 2015).

A fourth challenge lies in the recognition of the importance of the implementation stage. After all, the success of public policies depends not only on good design, but on the capacity to implement them with the support and participation of the territory's social actors. Thus, governance or security co-production schemes that are based on the involvement, coordination and articulation of social actors, are crucial for the development of effective prevention policies. Therefore, coordination and collaboration between various state agencies, security entities and community organizations, are required (UN-Habitat, 2009).

The fifth challenge has to do with the fact that addressing the problem of security requires the political will to generate structural social changes through concrete social inclusion policies, sustained efforts to reduce economic inequality, State policies that address drug trafficking, and specific approaches to the problem of addiction, among others. In turn, it requires the sustained interest of citizens in building community through appropriating the public space in which their daily life unfolds and avoiding leaving vacant spaces of power that can be occupied by illegality (Zavaleta *et al*, 2012).

The sixth challenge is related to the poor institutional capacities of governments; in particular, in terms of prevention and public safety approaches. Since these agendas are perceived as incipient, some Latin American countries lack the tools and knowledge to implement them properly. Hence, it is necessary to generate specialized areas in government, especially at the local level, that play a key role in the implementation of preventive strategies. Therefore, having properly trained personnel and the resources necessary to operate is a central issue (Fruhling, 2012).

The lack of information and accurate diagnoses to support prevention strategies is a huge obstacle. Solving this issue would allow for decision-making based on empirical criteria. Most LA programs do not have "methodologically rigorous impact evaluations, much less cost-benefit evaluations, that would allow for a conclusive judgment"¹ about the potential effects of such initiatives. Addressing such

¹ Ibid., P.12

shortcomings would enhance the prevention of crime as a means of reducing violence.

In short, prevention policy, as a fundamental part of a security strategy, needs to be viewed as a State policy that involves a long-term process. During this process, it is necessary to sustain government action through scientific evidence, and to consolidate strong accountability mechanisms and sustained support from society. Public safety is a public good based on peaceful coexistence, compliance with democratic norms and rules, as well as the possibility of developing, without coercion, the individual and collective potentialities of the entire population.

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