Decalogue: Improving Security in Latin America's Cities—Ten Lessons Learned

A summary of major challenges and promising policy responses

Introduction

The deterioration of citizen security has been a prevailing trend in Latin America for decades, with new and more sophisticated criminal groups constantly emerging to further complicate the problem. Even in countries that have implemented successful security policies, crime and violence remain disturbingly high, undermining public confidence in government. Furthermore, assessing the state of public security by analyzing national crime averages can mask highly complex criminal activity at the local level and may lead to the misallocation of security resources away from areas of greatest violence. Crime averages may also render "invisible" successful efforts by governments to lower homicide rates and improve quality of life in specific localities, especially in smaller countries.

The Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center has worked for more than a decade and a half to study the factors driving crime and violence in the region, and to advance innovative ideas and approaches that address the problem of citizen insecurity. This document summarizes some of the ideas that resulted from two seminars organized by the Wilson Center during 2014 with the support of CAF/ Latin American Development Bank. The seminars took place in Monterrey, Mexico, and Salta, Argentina, and brought together public officials, scholars, and experts in the field to exchange ideas and experiences—both positive and negative—about local efforts to promote security.

Decalogue

The following summarizes ten of the most important and often common elements of the local experiences in promoting citizen security analyzed in the seminars. This document is not intended as a rigid plan or a guaranteed remedy for high crime and violence. It does include important elements that should be considered and possibly adapted to local particularities when addressing urban security challenges. Moreover, the decalogue is intended as a vehicle to spark further discussion on ways to address local insecurity challenges and, thus, broaden and enrich the policy debate into new and innovative ways.

1 Leadership and responsibilities devolved to local authorities and in collaboration with national authorities

Local authorities, with a more direct connection to their communities, better understand the needs of their cities and population. However, mandates giving local leaders the authority to address security challenges, control police forces, and implement preventative policies vary widely. Mechanisms that promote greater collaboration and coordination between national and local authorities need to be developed to promote clear roles for each level of government authority. Furthermore, an institutional architecture that promotes cooperation and transcends individual political figures or political parties must be developed and implemented.

2 Improved strategic planning based on high quality, continuously updated information management systems, and appropriate diagnostic tools

Successful public policies require a baseline of reliable information that more accurately defines the challenges at hand and identifies key indicators for assessing progress. In many countries, statistics gathered by police and judiciaries are inadequate, as are data from victimization surveys and public perceptions of insecurity. This data is rarely updated in a consistent manner, making strategic crime analysis difficult—especially locally. Furthermore, the nature and intensity of crime can vary greatly between localities; good diagnostic tools (such as geo-mapping) are key for developing successful, targeted policies.

3 Capacity for integrated multi-agency intervention and a balanced approach using both crime prevention and control approaches

Successful interventions over the past decades have shown the importance of complementary initiatives for the prevention and control of crime. This includes the improvement of non-police crime control mechanisms, such as

better customs controls, and policies that improve social cohesion, better access to education programs, and improvements to urban environments.

4 Police committed to and aligned with local authorities

Local leaders need clear lines of authority over police forces in their jurisdiction, which is often lacking or underdeveloped. Local police need to build and maintain community relationships based on respect rather than fear, adequate resources, and mechanisms to prevent corruption and abuse. Collaboration between local and national police forces is critical, together with good relations between local and national civilian authorities.

5 Create specific local space for improved policy coordination between the state and society

Successful interventions in citizen security at the local level require successful coordination between local executive authorities, such as mayors, with other public sector departments, such as education, employment programs, fire departments, and disaster management authorities. An inter-agency coordination unit, sometimes a council or committee, empowered to take local action, can be an important mechanism to regulate actions and create government legitimacy within the community. These mechanisms should involve all sectors of the community and government (local, state, and federal), promote local participation, and create a space for discussion, development, and implementation of innovative policies.

6 Increased geographic focus and distinct forms of intervention to better address security needs

Citizen security needs can vary greatly from place to place, making good local diagnostics critical. Different types of interventions should be tailored to the nature and severity of crime and violence in a particular area. The most intense crimes often occur in the zones where State presence is weak or absent, and where the first intervention should seek to break the control criminal groups have over the territory and reinstate government control, while establishing a better relationship with the population.

7 Use of modern technology to further security

There are a variety of technological tools that can aid in improving citizen security at the local level. These can include techniques such as geo-mapping crime

to better target enforcement; use of silent alarms; and technologies that aid in surveillance, analysis, and evidence collection. The use of GPS in public vehicles can reduce misuse of resources and aid in planning law enforcement operations. Additionally, social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter can be powerful tools, which can be used for two-way communication between law enforcement and the public, especially youth.

8 Community participation and alliances with local civil society

Citizen security is the sole responsibility of the government, and no country can abdicate this responsibility or transfer it to the population; however, citizen participation is necessary to ensure success. Local organizations (churches, NGOs, and others) can serve as the basis for greater community collaboration with government on citizen security.

9 Promote local alternatives to incarceration for minor crimes

Decades of hardline, punitive policies in fighting crime have led to over-crowded jails and prisons throughout Latin America. In turn, these have become "schools of crime" where imprisoned minors and first-time offenders develop connections with more organized criminal groups. Defendants are often incarcerated for months awaiting trial, where treatment needs for drug and alcohol addiction or mental health problems go unmet.

Although national changes in prison policy are needed, local authorities may also have the option to explore alternative punishments for first time, minor, and non-violent offenders. This might include community service or other reparative activities that benefit their communities. Restorative justice programs can also help improve social cohesion and reduce future violence.

10 Follow-up, evaluation, and systemization

Successful policies are those that have persisted over time, transcended their initiators, and have come to involve a variety of stakeholders at the local level. Successful policies also require ongoing planning, systemization, and transparent systems for monitoring and evaluating outcomes with the goal to learn from successes and mistakes.

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