

How to Solve El Salvador's Security Crisis? A Modest Proposal

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El Salvador is the most violent peacetime nation in the world, seemingly stuck in a perpetual cycle of gang hostilities and truculent police behavior. A new security approach could quell inflamed tensions, and just might lower the country's elevated homicide rate -- for good this time.

The Pendulum Swings

"[We're at war.](#)" The blunt declaration made by the head of internal affairs of [El Salvador's](#) police in February 2015 was, technically speaking, inaccurate. [El Salvador](#) is not officially at war.



Still, the officer wasn't too far off the mark.

Local newspapers in [El Salvador](#) are [routinely peppered](#) with accounts of confrontations between the country's belligerent street gangs and its security forces. In early July, the director of [El Salvador's](#) National Civil Police, Howard Cotto, [said](#) 318 gang members had been killed so far this year in 316 "exchanges of gunfire" with police. That number [is comparable](#) to the number of armed confrontations per year between [Mexico's](#) military and cartels in that country's so-called "drug war," or the annual clashes seen in [Colombia's](#) internal conflict. The comparison is more striking when you consider that [El Salvador's](#) total population of about 6 million is less than that of [Mexico](#) or Colombia's capital cities.

And not all the killings by police are legal. On the day of Cotto's announcement authorities [arrested](#) seven police officers connected to a high-profile incident known as the San Blas Massacre. Reports of police death squads [have surfaced](#) as well.

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Law enforcement is also on the receiving end of the violence; [58 police officers](#) were killed in 2015, many of whom were off-duty when they were gunned down.

The growing drumbeat of war is even coming from [El Salvador's](#) highest political office.

"Although some say that we are at war, there is no other path left," President Salvador Sánchez Cerén [said](#) in March. "There are no spaces for dialogue, there are no spaces for truces, there are no spaces to get along with them. They are criminals, and we must treat them like criminals."

Sánchez Cerén was alluding to the 2012 truce between the [Barrio 18](#) and [MS13](#) street gangs that was facilitated by the administration of former President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014). The truce temporarily cut [El Salvador's](#) homicide rate nearly in half, but the agreement [began to break down at the end](#) of 2013. Sánchez Cerén, who succeeded Funes in June 2014, rejected the possibility of reopening negotiations with the gangs. He instead reinstated a policy that seeks to crush the gangs with a "Mano Dura," or Iron Fist, with the security forces serving [on the front lines](#) of the battle.

Amid this oscillation from one end of the security policy continuum to the other, Salvadorans are dying at shocking rates. In 2015, [El Salvador](#) was the [murder capital](#) of the world, registering a [staggering homicide rate](#) of over 100 per 100,000. And the bloodletting increased during the first three months of this year, pushing the number of homicides from January to June 2016 [slightly above](#) the number registered in the first six months of 2015.

There has, however, been a temporary respite from the climbing murder rates. The government says newly implemented "extraordinary measures" were behind a significant drop in homicides from April to June 2016, but [the gangs credit](#) a non-aggression pact they reportedly struck in late March.

The Case for a More Balanced Approach

The polarization embodied by [El Salvador's](#) security policy is likely a response to the enormous toll the violence is taking on the country's social fabric. People are [fleeing the country in droves](#) to escape the rampant crime and reconnect with family members in the United States. Desperate times, the old saw goes, call for desperate measures.

But there is little evidence the policy prescriptions given by either of the last two administrations offer a long-term solution to [El Salvador's](#) dire security situation.

El Salvador's security policy will improve "not with truces, or with Mano Dura, but rather a systematic, methodological strategy based on international experiences," Amaya told InSight Crime.

The truce had an immediate impact on homicide rates, but eventually unraveled and precipitated the current levels of violence that have surpassed even those seen during the [El Salvador's bloody civil war era](#). On the other hand, the various iterations of Mano Dura implemented in [El Salvador](#) over the last decade have actually coincided with heightened homicide rates, according to Luis Enrique Amaya, an international security consultant based in the country. Although homicides have been on the decline in recent months, the improvement is unlikely to last without structural changes to the government's security policy.

An alternative approach that has been tried successfully elsewhere would establish a greater balance between the social and law-enforcement aspects of public security. To think of it in Salvadoran terms, such an approach would include communication with the gangs and other violence prevention strategies, but would not reach the level of open negotiations. It would require effective application of the law, but would not condone Mano Dura-style policing tactics.

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The United States is one place to look for examples of a successful security strategy in action. In a recent meta-review of violence intervention programs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [found that focused deterrence](#) "has the largest direct impact on crime and violence, by far, of any intervention" analyzed in the report, having a significant effect on homicide levels in 90 percent of cases. Focused deterrence is perhaps the epitome of a balanced approach. It involves mobilizing law enforcement, social services, and community leaders to directly communicate with offenders the rewards for complying with the law, and the consequences for violent behavior.

One specific intervention that has found success is the Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) program implemented in Los Angeles, which happens to be the birthplace of the [MS13](#) and [Barrio 18](#) gangs. The GRYD system, [which emphasizes](#) prevention, intervention and relationship-based policing, is [widely credited](#) with lowering gang violence in the city.

El Salvador also has plenty of examples to draw on from its neighbors in Latin America. In the 1990s, Colombia's cities [used a data-driven](#), epidemiological approach to tackle sky-high crime rates. By identifying and placing restrictions on high-risk behaviors like alcohol consumption on weekend nights and the use of firearms, authorities in Cali and Bogotá [lowered homicide rates](#) by as much as 50 percent. More recently, [authorities have credited](#) a 46 percent drop in murders this year in the city of Palmira -- ranked the eighth deadliest in the world at the end of 2015 -- to a combination of greater police presence and targeted community interventions.

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Meanwhile, a new report ([pdf](#)) by the Brazilian-based Igarapé Institute highlights 10 innovative security measures that have been implemented across Latin America. Some initiatives, such as Todos Somos Juárez in Ciudad Juárez, [Mexico](#), coincided with a decline in violent crime. Todos Somos Juárez sought to address the underlying social and economic issues helping to fuel insecurity by establishing "Mesas de Seguridad," or security round tables, which brought together government officials, representatives from the security forces and community leaders to discuss best security practices.

And these are just a few of many programs that have been implemented throughout the region.

"There has been a veritable explosion of citizen security initiatives across Latin America and the Caribbean since the late 1990s," Robert Muggah, director of research at Igarapé, told InSight Crime via email.

Muggah said that Igarapé has collected data from 1,224 such interventions dating back to 1998.

Why It Might Not Work

For a variety of reasons, balanced security strategies that worked in the United States or other parts of Latin America might not have the same effect in [El Salvador](#).

First, due to the threat posed by the gangs and the weakness of state institutions, well-intentioned interventions could end up facilitating even more crime, rather than preventing it.

"There are things that we did in Los Angeles such as using former gang members to mediate conflicts between gangs," said Guillermo Cespedes, the former deputy mayor of Los Angeles who started GYRD and is now tasked with implementing components of the program in Central America through a USAID [Honduras](#) project called Proponete Mas.

"That was done in collaboration with LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] and the work was very effective there in reducing homicides," Cespedes said. "Yet that type of work here right now might get people killed. I do not think we have the infrastructure here yet for that type of work."

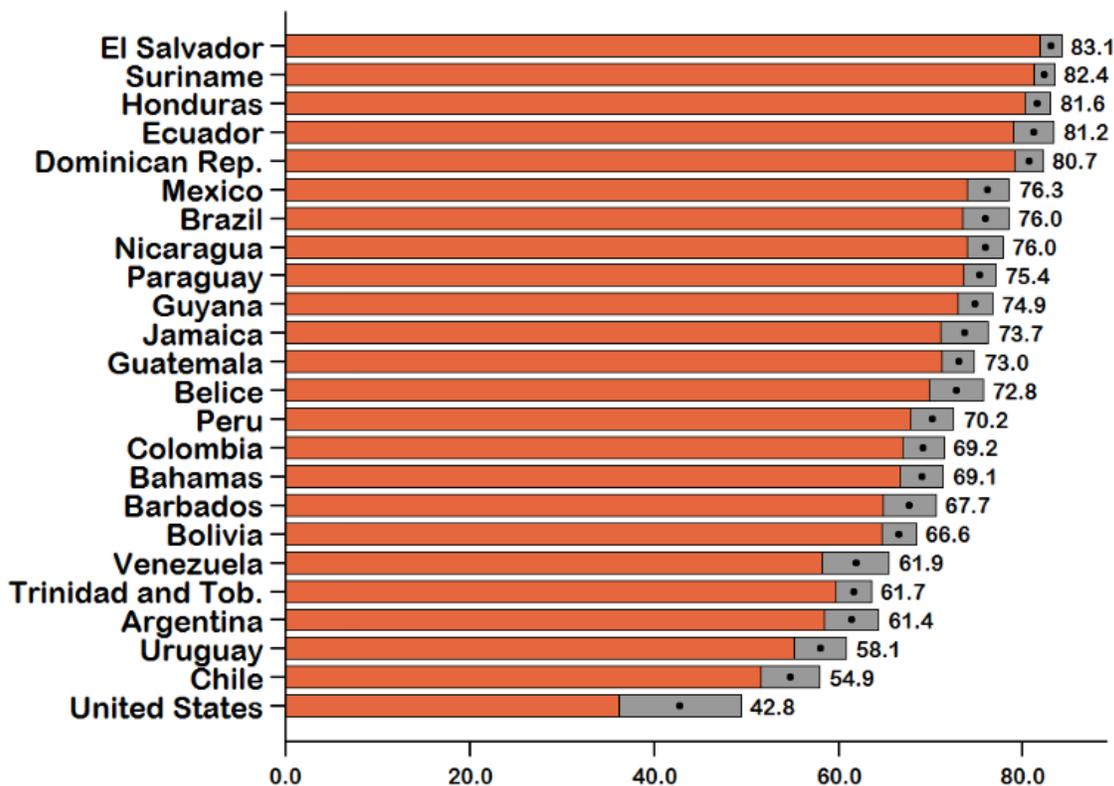
SEE ALSO: [MS13 News and Profile](#)

Second, a comprehensive strategy may not garner support from the Salvadoran population.

Salvadoran society "is very inclined to support repressive policies," Amaya told InSight Crime. "It does not necessarily receive news of a prevention policy with open arms."

Indeed, in 2012 and 2014, [El Salvador](#) ranked as the Latin American nation most likely to support the armed forces in combating street crime, according to [Vanderbilt University's AmericasBarometer survey](#). (See chart below)

Average Degrees Support for Armed Forces Fighting Crime and Violence, 2014



95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

MIL7. The Armed Forces ought to participate in combating crime and violence in [country]. How much do you agree or disagree?

Rescaled from 1-7 to 0-100.

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; v.M14_3.0; MIL7

Cespedes said the process of seeing gang members as more than just criminals was a slow, but ultimately necessary one in order for the social interventions in Los Angeles to take root.

"It's hard to ask a community to see the guy that's pulling the trigger also as the victim," Cespedes told InSight Crime. "Which is what Los Angeles had to get to. But it took Los Angeles over 60 years to get to that position."

Third, there is still not a lot of hard evidence supporting the effectiveness of citizen security interventions in Latin America. According to Muggah, only 7 percent of the 1,224 programs tracked by Igarapé have been subjected to any kind of assessment. In many of the success stories from around the region, a confluence of external factors [also contributed](#) to lowered homicide rates.

"No crime prevention program is wholly responsible for reducing lethal and non-lethal violence," Muggah said. "There are invariably mitigating variables -- including pacts, truces and ceasefires -- that can positively and negatively influence the best planned measures."

But without greater buy-in from top government officials and the security forces, Plan [El Salvador Seguro](#) will remain a component at odds with the overall security strategy.

Finally, a balanced security strategy requires a high level of inter-agency cooperation, something often lacking in [El Salvador](#) and elsewhere. Deploying troops or special forces to troublesome areas is a much more straight-forward

solution, although it is [rarely the best one](#). From military police forces in [Honduras](#) and [Brazil](#) to [Mexico's](#) combative war on drugs, the militarization of domestic security in Latin America is [hardly unique](#) to [El Salvador](#).

Even the United States, Cespedes says, has yet to fully grasp the complexities of a balanced approach.

"Implementing a violence reduction strategy that is made up of a balanced approach of social programs and constitutional relational policing is very, very difficult," Cespedes said. "It takes tremendous levels of collaboration, effort and community support, and it is in fact an ongoing struggle for many US cities... Are we asking the region to master something we still struggle with?"

Not Such a Radical Idea

Despite the extreme security measures taken by authorities in [El Salvador](#) over the last few years, reaching a more balanced approach may not be as difficult as it would seem. According to Amaya, the Sánchez Cerén government's stated policy on citizen security is actually quite similar to that of the previous administration's -- and reflects a much more comprehensive strategy than the government's abrasive rhetoric and Mano Dura tactics would suggest.

El Salvador's security "policy is not balanced in practice, but it is in terms of design," Amaya said.

The international security consultant pointed out that the current administration adopted with only minor changes a document previously presented by the Funes government that outlines the core objectives for citizen security ([pdf](#)). The document highlights "control and repression of crime," but it also makes violence prevention, social reintegration and institutional reform central platforms.

SEE ALSO: [Barrio 18 News and Profile](#)

The Sánchez Cerén administration has also taken some concrete steps to strengthen crime prevention efforts. In July 2015, [authorities launched](#) "Plan [El Salvador](#) Seguro," which has 75 percent of its budget earmarked for prevention programs, according to Amaya.

But without greater buy-in from top government officials and the security forces, Plan [El Salvador](#) Seguro will remain a component at odds with the overall security strategy. Any progress made in terms of prevention will likely be undermined and overshadowed by the government's repressive anti-gang policies.

"Social programs don't function in isolation of the power hierarchy in which they occur," Cespedes said.

In order for programs such as Plan [El Salvador](#) Seguro to reach their full potential, the guiding principles behind them will have to be adopted by those who occupy the country's highest political circles.

That's not say a more balanced security approach is guaranteed to turn the tide in [El Salvador's](#) ongoing struggle to rein in violence and criminality. But there's also good reason to think it can be done, and that this progress can be sustained over time. The experiences from around the region -- in countries like Colombia and cities like Ciudad Juárez -- show that a balanced security approach can work in places suffering from murder rates comparable to those in [El Salvador](#).