

The Chilean Experience

Civic Responses to Crime

By Lucía Dammert

When I moved to Chile more than a decade ago, I experienced a professional crisis. What would a security expert do in Chile, one of the safest countries in Latin America? For a long time I had lived in Argentina and Peru, where increasing problems of violence and crime had shaped my interest on issues of police brutality, corruption, organized crime and community participation in crime prevention initiatives. However, Chilean society didn't seem to be facing any of these problems: Chile had one of the lowest homicide rates in the hemisphere and its police institutions were regarded as highly professional.

Upon my arrival in early 2000, however, I started reading surprising newspaper editorials highlighting Chile's "horrific security crisis." The main debate in the media centered on escalating levels of street crime; many considered the government was too soft to tackle this social phenomenon. Paradoxically, while most everyone was worried about crime, no one really accepted that organized crime was a problem in Chile. In fact, at the end of the 90s, Chile was considered to be safe due to geographical and institutional features; police institutions did not even have a special office in charge of organized crime.

For my part I was amazed to find a country with few traditional problems of violence and crime but high levels of fear. More than 60% of Chileans believed that they would be victims in the following year, a percentage as high as that of residents of Brazil or Honduras, countries that, at the time faced greater levels of crime and violence. Given this national perception, I focused on a new agenda of research in which community participation and civic responses to crime were key. Interestingly, my work in the government and at several research institutions helped me realize not only that citizens were active in crime prevention initiatives, but also that organized crime started to become an important problem.

I have to mention that when organized crime is discussed in Chile, it is limited to the topic of drug trafficking. Although there is some concern about money laundering, it is not really part of the public policy agenda or citizen concern. In that context the line that divides local drug trafficking and organized crime is really blurry. Most agree that the drug problem originates in neighboring countries such as Bolivia and Peru, blaming alleged regional cartels and local branches in charge of distribution.

Many initiatives have been designed to tackle street drug trafficking. Civil society organizations and citizens movements are not requesting more democratic institutions, however, but rather an iron hand. Drugs are perceived as a direct threat to everybody and—particularly in lower income neighborhoods—many worry that youth involvement will bring even more violence.

In Chile, most civic responses to crime have developed with the financial support and even with the participation of governmental institutions in charge of security policies, rather than through community activism or non-governmental initiatives. Those that developed (such as victims' associations) were rapidly inserted into specific governmental programs. Public-private partnerships to combat insecurity are not common either. In that sense, the Chilean experience of civic responses is very different from social movements that generate specific security agendas in countries such as Mexico or Argentina. At one time I was studying the reform of the security forces in Mexico and can confirm the importance of civic responses, government commitment and, of course, political will in order to develop and sustain crime-fighting initiatives.

The presence of organized crime greatly impacts community activism: citizens tend to shift from organizing general and cooperative initiatives to demanding state effectiveness, less corruption and more attention to the plight of the victims. Even in Chile, where this problem is not as acute as in other countries in Latin America, the perception has developed rapidly that crime is becoming more sophisticated and more challenging to security institutions. I am amazed how fast we moved from general conversations of crime and violence to considering drug trafficking as central.

In the last months, social conflicts have arisen in Chile due to growing frustration over the quality of education and lack of social inclusion. Those movements have no relationship whatsoever to crime, but every public protest has been linked to social disorder, destruction of public spaces and a general fight with police officers. Although only a small group of protesters demonstrate in such a fashion, the show of violence has expanded fear of crime and a general perception of impunity.

Civil society involvement in organized efforts to control or prevent crime is minimal, but in the past two decades several governmental programs have been developed to include citizens' participation at the local level. I was personally involved with the evaluation of the most important public policy initiative aimed at increasing community involvement in crime prevention. Here are some lessons:

1. Long-term interventions are needed

Many initiatives require time to develop. It takes a long while to establish enough trust among neighbors to get them to collaborate with one another and also with the police. I have seen many failed initiatives of local public security councils that meant to increase participation and accountability and to enhance possible links with the police or the public prosecutor office. Given these difficulties, the temptation to buy infrastructure or technology for police activities is hard to resist, and for many politicians, especially those running for reelection, it seems like the best and fastest solution.

2. Community is difficult to define

Who makes up a community? Many initiatives developed in Chile targeted the involvement of community leaders without much analysis of the people they represent. Especially in neighborhoods with high levels of organized crime, defining the community is a challenge since many neighbors are part of the intricate network of different crime groups. In some places whole families are dedicated to the drug business; it then becomes impossible to define the community without increasing fear and distrust among neighbors. I have learned that it is not useful to focus on crime control exclusively since eventually it increases insecurity and violence. A better strategy is to understand the importance of community needs such as sports facilities, better lighting or improving school infrastructure. Such initiatives tend to unify citizens not involved in crime related activities without increasing conflict or violence.

3. Local government should play a key role

Civic activities that foster crime prevention should be designed and implemented at the local level in order to have greater impact. Much involvement of local governments is needed to ensure coordination with other public policies, as well as with an array of institutions deployed at the local level. The places that had excellent results in Chile have always had the local mayor's personal involvement and support from local government leaders. I am a direct witness of how social agendas regarding crime are developed at the local level, while more punitive approaches play a more important role at the national government level.

4. Crime prevention is expensive

Crime prevention initiatives with community involvement as well as civic initiatives with no governmental support are expensive, and results are generally slow in coming. Keeping that in mind is key in order to manage expectations of progress, impact and direct results. Most cases I have analyzed in the Chilean experience showed me that impatience is a common flaw, not only from public officials, but also from community leaders. An interesting example is the use of technological solutions for crime in specific areas, such as closed circuit surveillance or community alarms. Some people expected that the implementation of the program would almost immediately change behavior and danger, which was not the case. In areas where organized crime prevails, crime prevention is more difficult since there is a direct competition between incentives of the formal and the alternative economy.

5. Situational crime prevention by itself is not enough

Many initiatives of community involvement in crime prevention are clear on the social roots of insecurity and crime, but due to the lack of funding, the proposed solutions tend to concentrate

on situational crime prevention. Those initiatives concentrate most efforts in improving neighbors' capacity to react against a possible crime (community alarms, neighborhood watch) and also to improve quality of public spaces (street lighting, better design of public spaces, close TV circuits).

It is impossible to evaluate whether the initiatives implemented in Chile played a role in preventing the rise of organized criminal activity. It is certain, however, that stronger communities are needed in order to tackle a fundamental challenge for peace in the region.

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