

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes

Issue: The Question of Crime Control and Management in Large Cities Suburban Areas

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“It occurred to me that the quiet in the suburbs had nothing to do with peace.”

— Melissa Bank, The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing

INTRODUCTION

All communities are affected by crime, but residents in large urban areas are particularly impacted. Moreover, within large metropolitan areas, the residents of poor, minority areas suffer disproportionately.

The incidence of violent crime in suburbs is related to a range of intertwined characteristics. These include poverty, segregation and inequality; collective efficacy, disorder, lack of trust in the institutions; difficulties in accessing to jobs; immigration; residential instability, foreclosures, vacancy rates and evictions; land use and the built environment; neighbourhood change and location of housing assistance. These characteristics can be both the cause and the result of violent crime.

Many studies in the USA show that racially and ethnically segregated suburbs and those with high poverty rates tend to have higher rates of violent crime. However, these areas change dynamically. In fact, violence can influence a person to leave, which leads to an increase in segregation and violence.

KEY WORDS

Suburban Area: a residential district or a community located outside of an urban centre and its outskirts. Synonyms: suburbs, suburbia, neighbourhood, district, outskirts, periphery.

Crime: it is an unlawful action, omission or neglect punishable by an authority, usually by a way of fine or imprisonment. It is different from a tort, or a civil wrong, which is an action against an individual that requires compensation or restitution.

Criminal Justice: it is the system through which crimes and criminals are identified, detained, judged and punished (not to be confused with the term “criminology”, that is the study of crime and its causes, costs and consequences).

Violent crimes: they are crimes in which an offender or perpetrator uses or threatens to use force upon a victim. This entails both crimes in which the violent act is the objective, as well as crimes in which violence is the means to an end. They include crimes committed with weapons. They could be: murder, rape, terrorism, manslaughter, arson, domestic violence, gang violence, kidnapping, robbery, assault and battery. With the exception of rape, males are the primary victims of all forms of violent crimes.

Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ): it is a UNODC governing body that acts as the principal policymaking body of the UN in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice. Its main mandates and priorities are, among the others: to improve international action; to combat national and transnational crime; to control the efficiency and fairness of criminal justice administration system; to prevent crime in urban areas. It was created in 1992 by the Economic and Social Council as one of its functional commissions.

UN Congresses on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice: they are five year congresses -since the twelfth named as “UN Congress on the Prevention of Crimes and the Treatment of Offenders”- that started in 1955 and have impacted criminal justice policies, national procedures and professional practices throughout the world. The thirteenth and last one was held in Doha, Qatar, in 2015 with the aim of “integrating crime prevention and criminal justice into the wider United Nations agenda to address social and economic challenges and to promote the rule of law at national and international levels, and public participation”.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Violent crime has numerous, lasting effects on suburbs residents that extend beyond its direct impact not only on victims, their families and friends, but also on nearby residents and the structure of their neighbourhoods. Exposure to violent crime puts youth at significant risks of psychological, social, academic, and physical challenges, makes them more likely to commit violence and can push communities into circles of decay. Moreover, exposure to gun violence can desensitize children, increasing the probability that they will act violently in the future. Suburbs of concentrated poverty can also create sexual environments in which sexual molestation, exploitation, and violence against women and girls become accepted. These environments, which disproportionately affect adolescents of colour, negatively affect children’s sexual development and can lead to long-term psychological stress.
- Violent crime has a uniquely powerful role in defining suburban areas. A study in 22 large cities suburban areas all over the USA indicates that levels of violent crime in a suburb, particularly robbery and aggravated assault, strongly predict residents’ perceptions of crime, whereas property crime has little effect. Perceptions also differ among groups. Residents with children and longer-term residents consistently perceive greater levels of crime and disorder than do their neighbours. Decisions on where to move often reflect concerns about safety. People with housing choice vouchers, for example, consistently rate a safer suburban area as their top priority.

A good practice example

Peru’s capital, Lima, hosts a suburban area called Matute, which, due to its many problems that made it a tough place to live, was once referred to as “The Jungle” by local people. Peruvian government officials refused that stigmatising nickname, as they believed it would have stolen away the community’s identity and disempowered people who live there. On this basis, Peru decided to start off a new programme called “Barrio Seguro” (“Safe Neighbourhoods” the English translation), which has as lead agency the UNODC, in partnership with other organizations.

The aim of this plan is to bring down crime, to reach out youth and to empower women; it concentrates on police, social and community prevention. The Peruvian Interior Ministry Elohim Monard plans to introduce this programme elsewhere, as it is currently only in place in the city of Trujillo, of which Matute is a suburban area. Trujillo is a heavily populated city with twice the population of the country's capital. Until recently the city was known for its high crime rates and the murder rate was four times higher than the national average. However, in the past two years,

thanks in part to the work of the programme, the murder rate has dropped by 40% and just as importantly the perceived fear of crime has fallen.

CRIME PREVENTION

Well-planned crime prevention strategies can prevent crime and victimization, promote community safety and contribute to sustainable development. Moreover, effective and responsible crime prevention enhances the quality of life of all citizens. It has long-term benefits in terms of reducing the costs associated with the formal criminal justice system, as well as other social and financial costs that result from crime. To prevent crimes from happening there is the need of strategies and measures that seek to reduce the risk of crimes occurring, and their potential harmful effects on individuals and society, including fear of crime, by intervening to influence their multiple causes.

The UNODC promotes multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary strategies, plans and programmes that favour civil society participation. These strategies and action plans are held up by the “basic principles for the prevention of crimes”, contained in the ECOSOC Resolution 2002/13 about the Guidelines for the Prevention of Crime.

In summary, the basic principles are:

- *government leadership*, which is required to create and maintain an institutional framework for effective crime prevention;
- *socio-economic development and inclusion*, which refer to the need to integrate crime prevention into relevant social and economic policies, and to focus on the social integration of at-risk communities, children, families, and youth;
- *cooperation and partnerships* between government ministries, authorities, community organizations, NGOs, the business sector, and private citizens;
- *sustainability and accountability*, which can only be achieved if adequate resources to establish and sustain programmes are made available, and clear accountability for funding, implementation, evaluation and achievement of planned results is established;
- *knowledge base strategies, policies and programmes* which need to be based on a multidisciplinary foundation of knowledge and evidence regarding specific crime problems, their causes, and proven practices;
- *human rights/rule of law/culture of lawfulness*: the rule of law and human rights must be respected in all aspects of crime prevention and a culture of lawfulness must be actively promoted;
- *interdependency* refers to the need for national crime prevention diagnoses and strategies to take into account, where appropriate, the links between local criminal problems and international organized crime;
- *the principle of differentiation* calls for crime prevention strategies to pay due regard to the different needs of men and women and consider the special needs of vulnerable members of society.

Regarding rather the CCPCJ, during its last six sessions many of the thematic discussed are strongly related to crime that occurs in large cities suburban areas. For example, on its 26th session the discussion was about “comprehensive and integrated crime prevention strategies: public participation, social policies and education in support of the rule of law”.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In order to solve any kind of problem, first of all it is important to understand why it occurs. Once that question has been answered everything becomes easier to comprehend.

The fight against crime can reach its objectives through a combination of national policies on criminal justice and crime prevention to deal with the causes of crime and violence. For example, if

crime in suburban areas happens because of, among the other things, foreclosures, vacancy rates and evictions, it becomes essential to provide residential stability to the inhabitants of that area. In general, policies that reduce economic, racial and ethnic segregation can increase communities' access to key resources to prevent violent crime and promote healthy development. Following this procedure, strong social organization, youth job opportunities and immigration stability are among several suburbs characteristics associated with lower crime rates. Moreover, it is important to involve both civil society and law enforcement authorities in the planning and implementation of crime prevention activities.

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

I hope this chair report will help you in writing your draft resolutions and all I can do now is to wish you well with your work.

Margherita

USEFUL LINKS

www.unodc.org

www.un.org

<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CCPCJ/>