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Crime, Violence and Community-Based Prevention in Honduras

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Introduction

Violent crime has emerged as a growing development challenge, affecting large segments of societies and taking a severe toll on economic development. Estimates of the costs to developing country economies range from 3 percent to 8 percent of GDP.² The World Bank has begun to confront this challenge through an approach that balances justice and law enforcement with prevention efforts that address risk factors associated with violence. In many high crime environments, however, development actors have struggled in the face of weak institutions, fiscal constraints and political resistance that slow down reform and threaten sustainability. External actors also tend to neglect successful practices within societies that could serve as the basis for prevention. In Honduras, the most violent country in the world as measured by its homicide rate of 90.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2013,³ variations in the level of violence across time and space suggests that some communities have successfully prevented crime. In 2012, 65 percent of homicides were concentrated in five percent of urban municipalities, and in a small number of "hotspot" neighborhoods within those cities. Understanding why some neighbor-

hoods are more affected than others, and how some have succeeded in preventing violence, can point the way toward effective prevention approaches.

This note summarizes the findings of a study of crime dynamics and prevention practices⁴ focused around a comparison of nine communities in three of the most violent cities in Honduras.⁵ The research revealed that while the transnational drug trade, economic downturn and political crisis have deepened the effects of organized crime, some communities have prevented these forces from taking root in their neighborhoods. The study identified practices that communities have pursued to prevent violence, through collective responses and by effectively navigating state institutions. It also examined the capabilities of communities, municipal governments and national institutions that enable or constrain these responses. In the context of the World Bank's Safer Municipalities Project in Honduras, this research points to evidence-based approaches for preventing violence at the community level. The findings also illustrate how focused examination of the dynamics of insecurity and the ways communities manage it can inform efforts to improve public safety in violence-prone countries.

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² The World Bank. 2011. *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. p. 65; World Bank. 2011. *Crime and Violence in Central America*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

³ UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). 2013. *Global Study on Homicide Data*. Vienna: UNODC.

⁴ Louis-Alexandre Berg and Marlon Carranza. 2014. "Crime, Violence and Community Based Prevention in Honduras." Washington, DC: The World Bank. The study was conducted with the generous support of the Bank-Netherlands Partnership Program (BNPP).

⁵ The research was conducted in Choloma, La Ceiba and El Progreso. In each municipality, three neighborhoods were selected with similar income but varying homicide rates. The research included focus groups and interviews with community leaders, residents, and municipal officials, including with victims of violence.

How Has Violence Changed?

The steeply rising crime rate in Honduras can be linked to a combination of risk factors that have evolved in recent years. The percentage of the country's population living in poverty increased from 58.3 in 2007 to 66.2 in 2012, following the global economic downturn, and Honduras has maintained one of the highest levels of income inequality in Latin America. Youth unemployment, which increased from 4.9 percent in 2007 to 8.2 percent in 2012, along with limited access to secondary school and easy access to firearms have contributed to youth involvement in crime. Homicides overwhelmingly involve youth and guns, with 83 percent committed with firearms and 62 percent of victims between the ages of 15 and 34.⁶ The rise in homicides also coincides with a sharp increase in drug trafficking. Pressure from law enforcement in Mexico and the Caribbean, combined with competition among trafficking networks, has pushed the trade into Central America. Honduras has emerged as the primary transit country for cocaine from South to North America.⁷ This shift deepened after the 2009 coup d'état, which weakened state capacity, deepened political polarization and created opportunities for criminal networks. As shown in Figure 1, homicides are concentrated on the northern coast along the primary

drug routes through Honduras.⁸

These trends have contributed to two sets of changes in the nature of violence from the perspective of affected communities. First, the youth gangs (*maras*) that previously dominated neighborhoods have given way to new forms of criminal organization. The *maras*, which were driven by shared identity, local economic extraction and control over territory,

"Here, we can see that there is a strong presence of a cartel. I don't know what it's called, but they operate through the gangs that grew up within this neighborhood. All of the gangs are part of this group. The cartels have succeeded in converting the gangs into their drug distribution arm."
- Community Leader, Choloma

have either been repressed, coopted into transnational crime networks or eradicated. While they still maintain control over some neighborhoods, in most areas they have been pushed out by organized crime groups seeking to establish control over larger areas, or by vigilante groups who have targeted gang members while often forging their own links to organized crime. As a result of competition for control over lucrative drug smuggling routes, the environment remains fluid and constantly changing.

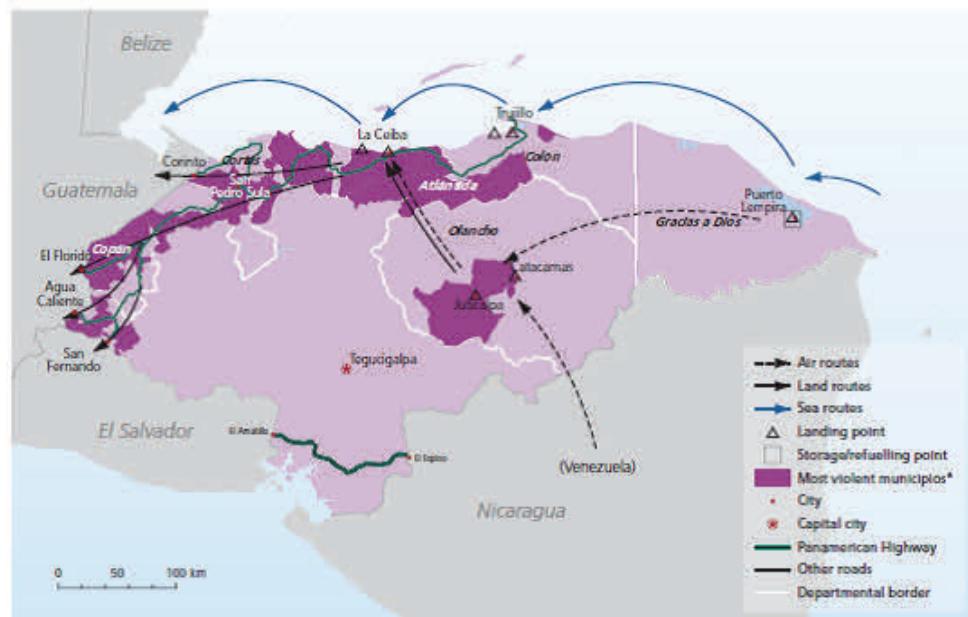


Figure 1: Cocaine Trafficking Routes through Honduras (Source: UNODC 2013)

⁶ UNAH-IUDPAS (Instituto Universitario de Democracia, Paz y Seguridad). 2014. "Observatorio de la Violencia, Boletín Enero-Diciembre 2013." Edition 32, February 2014.

⁷ UNODC. 2012. "Cocaine, Organized Crime Groups and Violence"; US Office of National Drug Control Policy. 2012. "Cocaine Smuggling in 2011."

⁸ UNAH-IUDPAS. 2014. "Observatorio de la Violencia, Boletín Enero-Diciembre 2013." Edition 32, February 2014.

"Although robberies are against people here, people come from elsewhere, from other neighborhoods, they sometimes walk around armed and one can't oppose them." –Youth, El Progreso

The types of crime have also evolved, fueled by growing economic incentives. As one resident noted, "there are no longer massacres committed during the clash of two maras." The violent turf wars between rival

committed by unknown people from elsewhere. This evolution has created new challenges for communities and made collective responses more difficult. Nonetheless, some residents still report that while crime is all around them, they feel safe in their own block or neighborhood. This perception points to the highly localized nature of crime, as well as to capacity of some communities to mitigate the effects of pervasive crime.

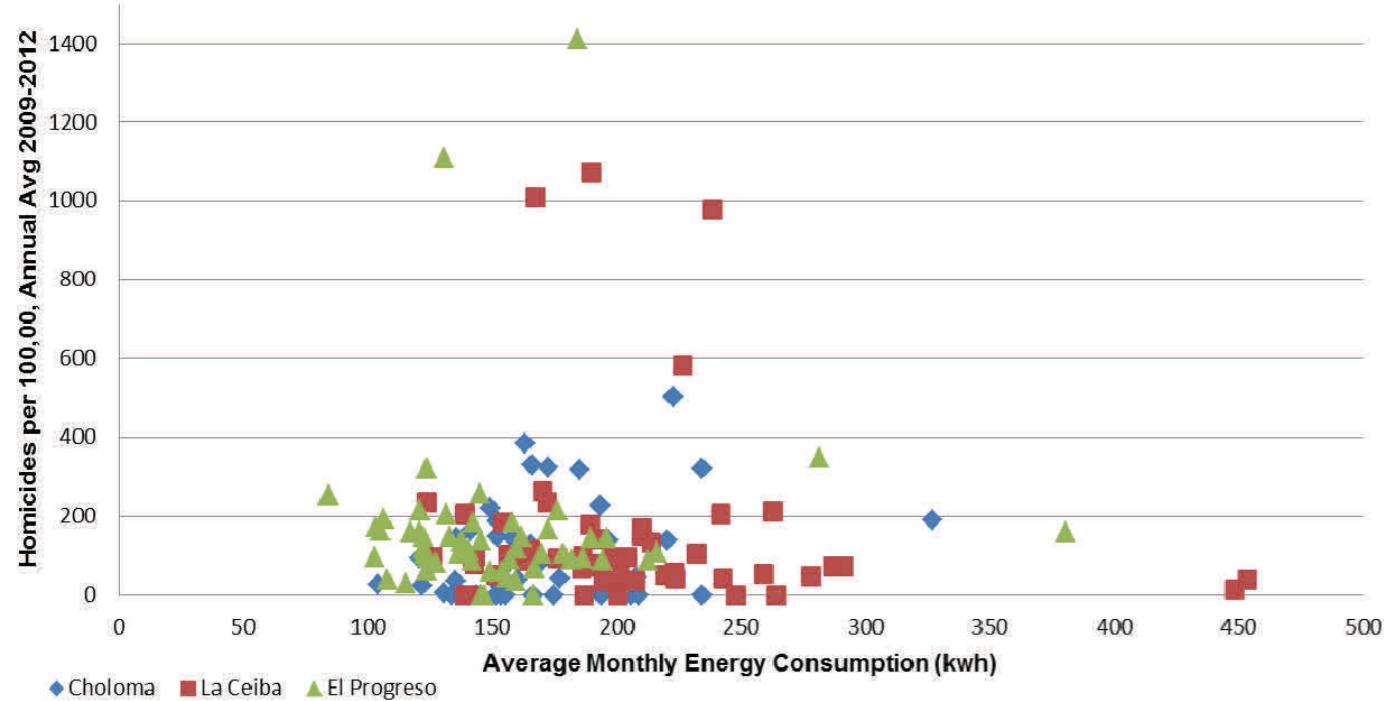
Why Are Some Neighborhoods More Violent Than Others?

Within these overall trends, the characteristics of each municipality and neighborhood affect the level and nature of violent crime. La Ceiba's position on the coast makes it a landing point for drug boats and planes, resulting in intense competition for control of strategic locations. Choloma and El Progreso are more affected by internal transit and the local drug trade. Crime in the latter two cities is exacerbated by rapid migration, transient populations and unemployment associated with their industrial zones. Choloma struggles with large urban slums and limited services for a rapidly growing population. Yet these societal level factors do not account for the variation among neighborhoods within each municipality. As shown in Figure 2, while the highest homicide rates are concentrated in neighborhoods with low – but not the lowest – average incomes, even at this income

maras that resulted in homicides among gang members and innocent bystanders have subsided in many neighborhoods, replaced by targeted killing and organized crime with economic motives. Communities note a dramatic increase in the sale and consumption of marijuana and cocaine, including among school-age children and youth. Extortion, assault and robbery have become so widespread, especially along transport routes, that they form part of daily experience and are not even recognized as out of the ordinary.

These changes have contributed to an increased sense of uncertainty and fear in urban neighborhoods. Although many residents perceive that visible forms of violence have declined as gang warfare has decreased, violence has also grown more unpredictable. Unlike in the past when perpetrators were easily identified as gang members from their own communities, crime has become more anonymous,

Figure 2: Homicide Rates by Neighborhood, Average 2009-2012



level violence varies significantly.⁹

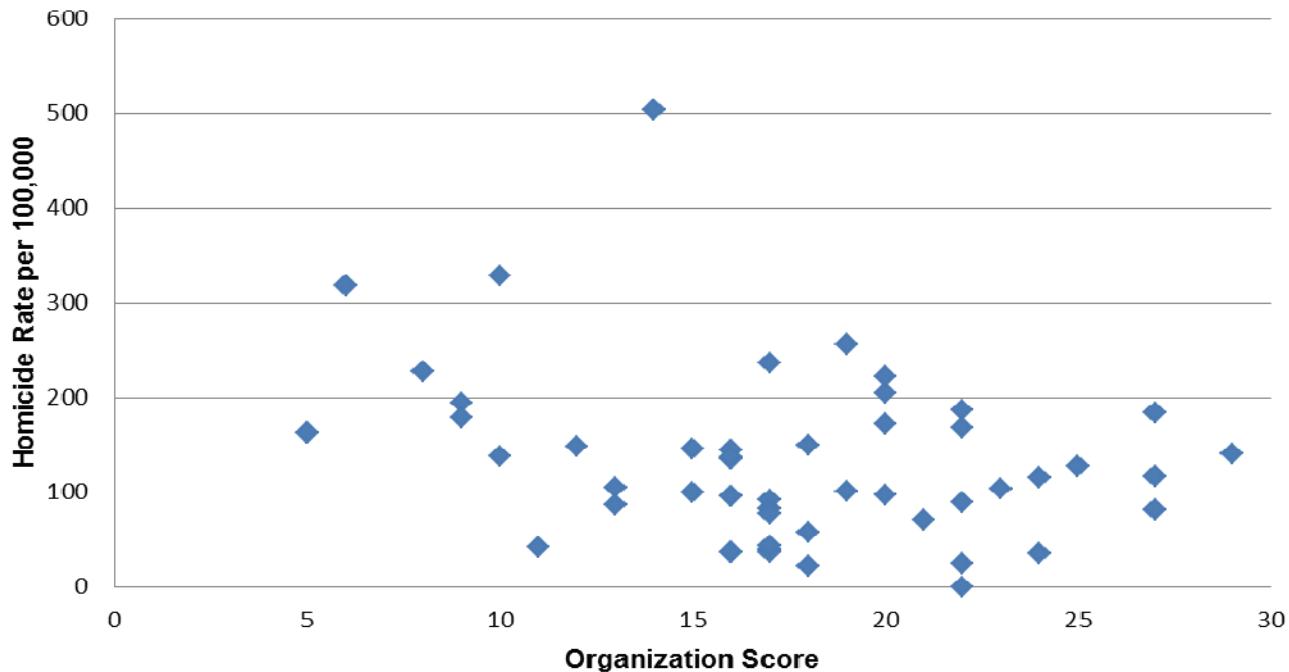
Comparisons among communities with different levels of violence point to the role of community-level organizations and their links to municipal and state institutions in shaping their ability to prevent violence. On the surface, community organization and institutional presence appear quite similar across communities. In most neighborhoods, a community leadership board known as the *patronato* is elected every two years and serves as the official liaison to the municipal government. Residents join church groups, sports teams, parents associations and youth and women's groups, and government provides a primary school and other basic services. Yet a comparison of the neighborhoods at highest risk of violence found that the density and level of activity among community organizations appears to be associated with lower homicide rates, as shown in Figure 3.¹⁰ Qualitative research further revealed that their effectiveness depends less on their level of activity, than on the nature of community organizations in two respects: whether they actively collaborate to organize collective crime prevention measures; and how effectively they secure resources from the state.

Community Capabilities, Collective Action and Criminal Control

An important distinction among Honduran neighborhoods in preventing violence involves the fragmentation or cohesion of their internal organization and resulting capability to act collectively. Based on a mapping of community organization in each neighborhood, the study found that in less violent neighborhoods, denser ties across organizations and sub-groups enable community-wide initiatives, while a stronger sense of community identity facilitates communication and collective action. These communities tend to benefit from stable residency that fosters a shared historical narrative, effective leaders who bridge organizations, and dense social networks that facilitate collaboration. Such attributes often emerge from structural factors like settlement and migration patterns, geographic proximity to drug transit routes, and the nature of economic opportunities. In some cases, however, they have been cultivated through the deliberate efforts of municipal government or civil society.

In many of the safer neighborhoods, residents organize their own initiatives to prevent violence. Commu-

Figure 3: Homicide Rate and Level of Organization by Neighborhood, All 3 Municipalities, Average 2009-2012



⁹ Average monthly energy consumption is used as a proxy measure for neighborhood income level.

¹⁰ Neighborhoods perceived as affected by violence were given a score based on the number and level of activity of community organizations.

nity members exercise informal social control to prevent incidents of crime, and organize activities that reduce risk factors. As one resident stated, “we stay informed on what is happening in different sectors of the neighborhood...whenever there are problems, whether they are natural disasters or violence, we find out and try to be supportive among neighbors.” While in all communities neighbors assist each other with a variety of tasks, in less violent communities their actions go beyond addressing immediate needs to community-wide responses. As organizations collaborate, they facilitate communication and generate shared norms. The result is consistent with the “collective efficacy” – the combination of shared norms and collective action – that has been observed in other countries, but the types of organization and forms of action are unique to Honduras.¹¹ Importantly for violence prevention, community organizations already exist in most neighborhoods, and the ties needed to facilitate action are relatively easy to achieve.

In general, however, Honduran communities have trended toward increasing fragmentation. Urban migration, erosion of traditional practices, few community-wide cultural activities, and the proliferation of Churches – every neighborhood contains several Protestant and Catholic churches – have weakened

Two Forms of Violence Prevention:

Two neighborhoods with low homicide rates in El Progreso reveal different forms of violence prevention. One was established by agricultural workers with jobs in the nearby banana plantations. Community leaders, who have been present since its founding, have fostered community-wide organization. Residents share a neighborhood identity, describing each other as “warm, humble people, who are ready to collaborate.” They have adopted several crime prevention measures, from rehabilitating public spaces to banning the sale of alcohol, and boast that gangs have never been present in their neighborhood. The other was constructed in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch and settled by migrants. Plagued by poverty, limited ties among residents and an absence of shared identity, the neighborhood came under the control of a notorious criminal group. Monitoring by this group prevents certain forms of violence—no outsider can enter without permission—but it conducts extortion and crime within and outside the neighborhood.

connections among residents. Lacking a common identity or neighborhood-wide networks, individuals only know members of their own church or organization and rarely collaborate across sub-groups. This fragmentation limits the impact of violence preven-

Community Crime Prevention Initiatives:

Monitoring Suspicious Activity. Residents of less violent communities cited examples of robberies, assaults and other crimes prevented when neighbors monitored homes, businesses and schools and noticed suspicious individuals.

Banning the sale of alcohol. Using favorable municipal ordinances, some *patronatos* have banned the sale of alcohol in neighborhood shops and bars. Enforcing such bans requires a high level of community organization and capability for collective action.

Managing Public Spaces. Rehabilitating public spaces can eliminate opportunities for crime and facilitate recreational activities. More important than the space is the organization necessary to build it, manage it, and resolve conflicts around its use. In neighborhoods that lack such organization, rehabilitated spaces have been taken over by criminals.

Resolving Community Disputes. Residents of communities with low levels of violence described the role of the *patronato* and informal leaders – pastors, youth leaders, or individuals – in resolving property, business or family disputes before they escalate.

Organizing “at-risk” youth. In some neighborhoods, individual leaders identify and organize at-risk youth, most often through sports teams or church groups, and provide them with informal education involving positive values and self-discipline.

Responding to Domestic Violence. Victims who freed themselves from abusive situations described the support of community networks – their neighbors and colleagues – in encouraging them to take action, serving as witnesses, and providing financial and moral support. Employers played a crucial role in allowing them to take paid leave to appear in court.

¹¹ On the concept of collective efficacy, see Sampson, R. 2012. *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

tion activities like infrastructure rehabilitation, sports and education, which fail to translate into community-wide efforts. Instead, residents rely on individual measures—staying home at night, avoiding certain areas, or not carrying valuables—to reduce the risk of falling victim to crime.

Some fragmented neighborhoods nonetheless maintain low levels of violence as a result of coercive control by a dominant armed group. The identity of these groups varies, from criminal gangs, to secretive vigilante groups, to organized crime networks. Those that successfully push out or eliminate rivals sometimes succeed in creating a partial sense of security as a result of the absence of turf wars. Some of these groups monitor everyone who enters the neighborhood, and do not allow outsiders—including police or other state officials—to enter without their permission. They sometimes protect members of their communities, as one resident noted: “if someone is assaulted, they go to the organized crime group, and they respond much more quickly than the police.” While some forms of violence decline, however, others persist as these groups extort local residents and business, violently intimidate rivals, and carry out criminal activity in surrounding areas.

Navigating the Institutional Landscape

Communities that have successfully prevented or reduced violence have also demonstrated the capability to obtain resources from municipal or national state institutions, in order to improve neighborhood infrastructure, access specialized expertise, or utilize social services. This capability is especially notable given the uneven presence of basic services in urban communities and the obstacles for many communities to access the resources needed for prevention activities. Effective community organization can help, but their success also depends on the systems for planning and service delivery by municipal and national governments.

The most direct contact for urban residents lies with municipal governments, which fund and manage most infrastructure inputs and facilitates key services. Yet municipalities have only circumscribed authority over most services, like education, water, sewage, electricity and roads, despite their need to

shoulder the burden of building the basic infrastructure.¹² A combination of pressures facing municipalities – including irregular fiscal transfers, centralized resources, difficulty accessing credit, and absence of data – inhibit effective planning and budgeting. Instead, most infrastructure and service improvements results from requests by the *patronatos*, who play a central – and often exclusive – role in liaising between the community and the municipal government. Service-delivery often takes on either a political logic as *patronatos* who mobilize supporters are rewarded with projects, or a financial one as *patronatos* or officials exploit their position as the exclusive channel between communities and the state to line their pockets. In most neighborhoods, residents point to unfinished or non-functional bridges, sewer pipes, school buildings and other projects that color their perception of the state and undermine violence prevention measures.

The inability of the national police and criminal justice system to control violent crime further undermines residents’ confidence in the state. A complex relationship to these authorities emerged from the research: many residents expressed their desire for greater police presence, but they have little faith that the police will respond when called upon, or that reports will lead to prosecution. Residents are also deterred from reporting by fear of retaliation by criminal groups, given widespread perception of links between police and organized crime. Most victims of crime interviewed for the study chose not to report their crimes to the police, and none of those who did received a helpful response. Residents instead turn to armed actors – some of them criminal – to resolve

“When we come and convene the community and say we are going forward with a project...when we don’t receive a response, our credibility begins to decay.”

– Community Leader, Choloma

“The patronatos used to sell [publicly owned] properties and kept the money ... They began to sell the properties once, again and again, until the point that there were properties with up to four titles, up to three or four owners ... Now we don’t have a school, and this is the result of these dishonest actors, of the first patronatos. They didn’t bother leaving a property for a park, for a football field, for a church, for a health center, for a school.”

– Community Leader, La Ceiba

¹² For a detailed description of such arrangements, see: The World Bank. 2013. *Honduras Public Expenditure Review: Toward Restoring Fiscal Consolidation*. Washington, DC: The World Bank

public safety problems.

Despite these challenges, some communities succeed in securing the state resources they need to pursue prevention activities. The most successful *patronatos* are those who are most persistent, have the best personal connections to government officials, or both. They are more effective, however, when they are backed up by an organized community. Dense community networks tend to exert greater pressure on the *patronatos* to deliver, and the involvement of multiple residents seeking state resources through various channels leads to a greater likelihood of response. Improvements in municipal governance systems can also help, by facilitating more regular communication with citizens, and by mobilizing resources from national institutions. One municipality in northern Honduras, Puerto Cortes, is often cited for its success in reducing homicide rates through a combination of improved data collection and planning, effective revenue mobilization, targeted infrastructure investments, and efforts to coordinate with the police. In other municipalities, the creation of hotlines, public-private partnerships and transparency committees have helped to improve access to services by providing multiple means through which affected communities could resolve their grievances, and helping to link them with a combination of local and national sources of support.

A striking example of effective state response – in cases of domestic violence – sheds light on the elements of institutional effectiveness in this context. Several victims of domestic violence interviewed for the study spoke positively of their experiences seeking assistance.

"The police only come when there are deaths. They spend three or four days riding around the neighborhood, and then we don't see them anymore."

- Woman, Choloma

"I: Did you formally report the crime to the authorities? R: No, I was afraid. I was afraid of those who were supposedly arrested. I prefer paying to reporting. Then I feel more relaxed, I don't go around thinking why did I report, they will arrest them and investigate them and I will have problems." – Man, La Ceiba

prosecutors and judges to respond to their specific needs. Neither community networks, nor municipal and state authorities could have succeeded without the support of the other. Initiatives that bring together community, municipal and national efforts to respond

"I worked in the "Star" factory and they gave me permission [to go to court] and did not subtract from my salary, this helped me a lot, and I had a colleague who had the same experience and encouraged me to report... I felt confident after I spoke to the chief of the investigative police...then the judge asked me what I wanted..."

– Woman, victim of domestic violence, *El Progreso*

to other issues, like school-based violence and drug consumption, hold similar promise in helping communities secure the resources they need for prevention efforts.

Conclusion and Entry Points

Despite overwhelming challenges, it is possible to prevent violent crime from the ground up. Since neighborhood context affects where crime occurs and criminal groups take root, understanding this context can inform which approaches are most likely to succeed. Prevention work at the neighborhood level has tended to focus on features of the physical environment – like lighting and public spaces – that facilitate crime. This research shows that the social and organizational environment also matters, and highlights the salient features of community life in Honduran cities. In neighborhoods that have remained relatively peaceful, community organizations that reach across sub-groups and promote a shared sense of identity have helped to overcome fragmentation, enabling communities to adopt simple but effective collective measures to prevent crime, and secure resources to sustain them. Although these capabilities often result from historical factors, such as settlement patterns, economic opportunities, and entrenched social norms, they can also be fostered through targeted efforts to build community organizations while working to address structural factors over time.

As the World Bank expands its support to prevent crime and enhance citizen security, evidence of local level practices can inform its approaches. Crime prevention in these environments can pose considerable risks. In the face of transnational forces beyond any one government's control, combined with incen-

tives for corruption, political resistance and institutional weakness, external funding can have little impact and even do harm if it ends up in the wrong hands. Efforts to reform police and justice systems have encountered resistance in many violence-affected countries, and in Honduras evidence of success at the national level remains scarce. Nonetheless, experience in Honduras demonstrates that engaging with communities can lead to tangible improvements. It also clarifies the types of support to municipal and national institutions that can expand effective practices.

The research thus points to entry points for further investment, with an appropriate dose of caution. Efforts to strengthen community-level organizations in ways that deepen intra-community ties and overcome fragmentation could enhance the sustainability and impact of crime prevention programs. Such investment costs little, but requires embedding into programs measures to systematically engage with communities. Support to municipal governments can help by building their capacity for more transparent municipal planning, communication with citizens, and mobi-

lizing resources from national-level institutions, while encouraging them to invest in community organization and support national-level reforms. The pressures that have inhibited prevention efforts cannot easily be overcome. Even for well-intentioned municipal officials and community leaders, the incentives to politicize or divert municipal resources remain strong. In Honduras, obstacles to reforming the police, justice system, and local governance remain high as national-level policymakers contend with competing visions and loyalties in the midst of deep political polarization. Yet examples of success can be found among local and national institutions, for example in responses to domestic violence and in municipal planning. Examining these cases can elucidate ways in which engagement with actors at various levels – local, municipal and national – can facilitate their efforts to navigate these obstacles, and to develop sustainable solutions to the realities they face.