



# Law enforcement and public health programs in Latin America: The role of collective learning

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## ABSTRACT

Implementation of law enforcement and public health programs in Latin America has been challenging. From financial reasons to lack of political support, positively evaluated programs are terminated. In this context, we argue that collective learning is an innovative strategy that leads to stronger, well-organized, resilient groups of policy entrepreneurs who can advocate for better policies and programs.

**Key Words** Policy entrepreneurs; collective knowledge; civil society organizations; community policing; sex workers; harm reduction

## INTRODUCTION

The Latin American context, with complex patterns of violence and high crime rates, requires new public safety solutions and policing alternatives in the region. Considering the lack of citizen trust in police forces' effectiveness (Malone & Dammert, 2020) and the increased militarization of law enforcement that drives human rights violations (Flores-Macias & Zarkin, 2021), a window of opportunity has opened up to implement law enforcement alternatives. These actions can be oriented to strengthen citizen participation in the design and implementation of security policies, particularly those that consider public health as a key element of successful policing.

However, it is worth mentioning that the lack of citizen trust in police is linked to the violent actions perpetrated against communities; we understand trust as an instinctive unquestioning belief in and reliance upon an entity, such as a public institution established to protect citizens (Cao, 2015). As such, an important source of confidence is affective: people are concerned with how they are treated by the police (Jackson et al., 2012), and citizen trust relies on the relationships people perceive they have with them (Stanko et al., 2012). If oppressive and violent actions are perpetrated against communities, the relationships will be perceived negatively and trust will be lacking.

To improve the rapport with police, some countries have implemented community-oriented policing practices inspired by strategies from other countries (Malone & Dammert, 2020). However, some aspects have made it difficult to reach their

intended goals, for example: for some police institutions, the community is still perceived as an external actor and deprived of any significant role in accountability mechanisms, there is opposition to decentralization of power, and indicators of police performance remain the same (Dammert, 2019; Malone & Dammert, 2020).

Despite this, there is significant progress in the region: in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Panama, community policing initiatives can be found—at local and national levels—that have developed prevention strategies and actions to get closer to communities and regain citizens' trust (Malone & Dammert, 2020). In recent years, there are examples of initiatives that seek to replace traditional policing responses to situations such as problematic use of drugs and alcohol, violence against women, and mental health outbreaks. One example is the Colibri Centers in Iztapalapa (Mexico City), an innovative program that aims to provide medical care to people who use drugs using a public health approach, giving them full information and tools for self and collective care (Castrejón & Pasarán García, 2020). Another example is the Women's Emergency Centers in Peru, which offer free, specialized public services providing comprehensive and multi-disciplinary care for victims of violence against women and their family (Gobierno del Perú, 2021). The Centers provide legal guidance and representation, psychological counseling, and social assistance.

Alternative strategies of policing not only aim to change the relationships between communities and police officers but constitute a turning point to move from traditional and

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**To cite:** Arredondo, J., Maulen, S., & Campos, N. A. (2022). Law enforcement and public health programs in Latin America: The role of collective learning. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 7(Suppl 1), S19–S22. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.252>

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militarized policing models (Alvarado, 2019) to community-policing ones. We understand community policing as a strategy that relies on collaborative partnerships between the law enforcement agency and the individuals and organizations they serve (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2012). An outstanding example is Nezahualcōyotl's community policing, an innovative program in a Mexican municipality with historically high crime rates. The police reform that led to the consolidation of the new policing model helped overcome corrupt practices by driving an institutional reform and firing police officers unfit for duty (Alvarado, 2009).

In Latin America, the emergence of these alternatives is not a completed process, and in many countries we are seeing a transition to the militarization of public safety (Magaloni & Rodriguez, 2020). Most of them are pilots or projects in early stages in which design, evaluation, and reformulation are ongoing (Quintero Cordero, 2020). Apart from the common challenges of public health-oriented interventions, in some cases law enforcement and public health initiatives face strong political opposition that seeks to prevent its design, implementation, and continuation. This phenomenon can be seen through the cancelation of these initiatives when a different political party comes to power. In this context, the participation of communities is crucial. The existence of strong, well-informed, empowered groups that can act and react before policy changes are made that may impact the evolution of these alternatives and their results is key for project sustainability.

For these reasons, there is a need to promote and ensure the continuity of existing law enforcement and public health alternatives to tackle security problems in Latin America, instead of promoting militarized and repressive policing strategies. Thus, we propose strengthening civil society actors—through collective learning—as an innovative strategy in aligning the goals of public health and law enforcement to generate evidence-based successful public policy in the region.

### Citizen Participation, Law Enforcement, and Public Health Policies

Citizen participation has three main objectives: (i) restoring citizens' trust in police by strengthening police–citizen relations, allowing joint work and actions; (ii) involving the police itself in the action-items developed by the communities; (iii) giving the residents the ability to play an active role in designing and implementing policing strategies (Quintero Cordero, 2020).

Correspondingly, there is a relationship between public trust in police officers and the effectiveness of community-oriented security strategies: “Public trust in the police is essential, for if citizens view their police as corrupt, inefficient, and/or abusive, they will be reluctant to turn to police for protection or to solve problems in their communities or homes” (Malone & Dammert, 2020, p. 419).

Promoting citizen participation is therefore crucial for enhancing trust between police institutions and communities, and accordingly, for the effectiveness of police actions. This is important because one of the key challenges that community-oriented strategies face is ownership (Malone & Dammert, 2020), since domestic actors engaged with the public policy process make it more difficult to discard the strategies when external conditions change. Citizen engagement is key for long-term sustainability of policing projects.

### Policy Termination: A Permanent Risk for Programs with Good Results in Latin America

As mentioned previously, changes in the political landscape can lead to the cancelation of innovative programs that are in the early stages of evaluation. A poster child for this phenomenon can be found in Open Arms (*Braços Abertos*), a positively evaluated yet canceled multidisciplinary urban policy program in São Paulo (SP) (Brazil) (Evans, 2017). By the end of 2013, policy makers (SP mayor's office experts) and representatives from the local community of Crackolandia (a pejorative name for an urban area characterized by its high criminality and problematic drug use rates in downtown SP), held meetings and proposed a new strategy to address the street-based drug use phenomenon.

Rather than constantly evicting marginalized populations and applying heavy policing tactics, the City Administration designed a program based on three axes: housing, work and income, and health and social follow-up (Paiva & Garcia, 2021). One important aspect to emphasize is that the program was designed and implemented with the active participation of its target population, considering the demands of local tenants, represented by community leaders (Paiva & Garcia, 2021). It was an innovative approach designed to tackle a complex public problem taking into consideration the needs of the target population, always fostering a dialogue between the authorities and citizens.

The program demonstrated good preliminary results and was supported by a significant group of residents: 87.3% of its participants were receiving health care services, 87.9% reported diminished crack use, and 84.3% said they had reduced their use of other drugs (Teixeira et al., 2018). In terms of beneficiary-State relations, a preliminary evaluation conducted in 2015 showed that beneficiaries had a very positive perception of the public servants involved in the program (Rui et al., 2016). Despite this evidence, the municipal election winner, João Doria Jr., who belonged to a different political party, ended the program in 2016 after it had been running for 3 years, cutting short what could have become an example for other countries in the region.

The Open Arms case is remarkable but not unique: law enforcement and public health programs in Latin America are commonly placed at the centre of political polarization and can become an instrument of confrontation in the political arena. It is common that these programs, despite having citizen support and early evidence of a positive impact on social and policing indicators, move back and forth depending on political shifts and, ultimately, the presence of political will.

In policy termination processes, there are *Oppositionists*, proponents of termination who dislike the policy and firmly stand against it because of their personal values and principles (Bardach, 1976). These kinds of groups do not intend to promote a substitute policy, they only want to end it. It is within this context that anti-termination coalitions can occur. When these groups are viewed as prospectively powerful, authorities avoid attempting policy termination (Bardach, 1976).

We argue that strong and well-organized civil society groups can be strategic coalitions that act in the context of policy termination processes to advocate for policies with good results and support from communities. This requires creating a network where local civil society groups can share

information, experiences, good practices, and challenges in a collective learning process.

### Civil Society Groups as Policy Entrepreneurs: A Need to Create Stronger Networks in Latin America

Civil society organizations and community-based groups have played an important role in the emergence and evolution of important law enforcement and public health policies in Latin America. One successful example of this is RedTraSex, a transnational network of sex worker organizations in 15 countries (Mzilikazi, 2016). By identifying the common struggles sex workers face and using this knowledge to work together, these organizations nurture solidarity and enhance support from the local communities (Mzilikazi, 2016) to modify the policing environment that increases their daily risks.

RedTraSex members worked together to advocate for their human rights and confront situations that negatively impact their daily lives such as stigma, the risk posed by infectious diseases such as HIV and syphilis, discrimination, and violence perpetrated by law enforcement in the region (RedTraSex, 2017). Their members have designed, implemented, and analyzed the outcomes of a project oriented towards changing police behaviours and attitudes towards sex workers, through training with national and local police officers on human rights and sex work dynamics.

In some countries, such as Honduras, where sex workers can be victims of institutional violence, the organization, along with the police training attendees, elaborated a Police Protocol oriented towards guaranteeing their human rights protection. Considering the positive results of the Honduras project, the network set the goal of sensitizing at least 150 people in each country (RedTraSex, 2017). In Honduras, the sex workers worked closely with police officers in planning the training sessions. This led to important achievements: 16 sessions were run with the active participation of 240 police officers. This is important because despite prejudices and a history of aggression against sex workers, police officers could get first-hand knowledge of their reality and daily life experiences. The project has also faced some challenges, such as trying to empower and support sex workers who could teach these lessons to officers who have conducted violent actions against them.

RedTraSex is an example of an active and organized civil society effort that aligns policing, public health, and human rights goals. Within the network, participants constantly share information, organize events, maintain communication, conduct research and coordinate to demand the protection they deserve by law. By doing this, they present themselves as policy entrepreneurs who are alert to opportunities and act upon them (Petridou et al., 2015).

However, the existence of networks is not enough to guarantee the human rights protection of vulnerable individuals. It is necessary to maintain the collective dynamic and direct the networks' actions towards people whose agency is lost. This means that networks must be designed with an extensive connection with their environment, considering that collective initiatives may not emerge spontaneously and that some people may be left out of the community. Solidarity is needed as an enduring principle of law enforcement and public health collective networks. There is also the need to continue funding community organization efforts to foster the

survival of these networks. Some countries, such as Mexico have unfortunately cancelled all federal funds for any type of civil society organization since 2018 (López Obrador, 2019).

### Collective Learning as an Innovative Strategy to Design, Implement, and Advocate for Law Enforcement and Public Health Policies

Collective learning is defined as "a collective process, which may include acquiring information through diverse actions (e.g., trial and error), assessing or translating information, and disseminating knowledge or opportunities across individuals in a collective" (Heikkila & Gerlak, 2013, p. 486).

In the context of new policing and public health alternatives, collective learning may be useful in two ways: first, it can be a tool for sharing information between groups or communities within or across countries. This information can be related to good practices, challenges, and strategies related to their projects and programs and lessons learned from them. In Latin America, there is need and an opportunity since civil society groups that strive for changes in policing models are not linked and significant knowledge is therefore not shared.

Also, through collective learning, communities and groups can collect data and develop strategies to influence policy decisions regarding existing or new alternatives. Activists, community leaders, and citizens can become involved in communicative situations, in which they argue, propose, and assess new perspectives, modifying their cognitive structures (Forchtner et al., 2020). This is how communities can construct knowledge and use it in their favour. This is important because, as mentioned above, innovative models and approaches can be at the centre of political confrontations and are at permanent risk of being terminated despite positive impact evaluations. Fostering collective learning throughout the region could help make some of these potentially successful short-lived programs, or "shooting stars," sustainable across communities that face similar structural problems.

An important limitation of collective learning is stigmatization that vulnerable groups often face. When there are rooted patterns of invalidation of communities, collective learning processes are not possible because excluded groups cannot be recipients of any kind of information. In the context of resource-sharing networks, they are invisible; simply, they do not exist: "Stigmatization and its [effects] are themselves powerful forces that act against interaction and 'integration', enforce separation and hinder collective actions" (Crețan et al., 2022, p. 97). Therefore, stigmatization, exclusion, and discrimination are incompatible with the collective learning strategy we propose here. In other words, collective learning actions require significant efforts to overcome stigmatization and, at the same time, collective learning initiatives can insist on inclusion. The fight for collective building is tied to the fight for more inclusive societies.

## CONCLUSION

In Latin America, the expansion of law enforcement and public health alternatives has faced lack of interest, as it goes against the current wave of militarization of the security forces and is therefore perceived as a threat by the authorities and policy-makers. Hence, there are certain risks that may impede such policies' success: 1) institutional corruption of

the police and lack of trust on the part of citizens; 2) abandonment of the policy due to changes in government or political authorities; and 3) absence of the dissemination of collective learning from successful programs.

In this article we argue that collective learning is an innovative strategy to strengthen civil society and local community actions advocating for law enforcement and public health programs and policies that are perceived positively. To understand the Latin American context, we concisely explained the dynamics of community-oriented security programs, including the challenges and situations that can lead to policy termination. Also, we reviewed specific cases to illustrate how positively evaluated programs can be terminated and how civil society organizations can actively look for alternatives to influence the status and evolution of certain programs.

We conclude that it is necessary to sensitize the authorities and civil society on the possible alternatives that citizens and interested groups can implement to avoid authoritarian, violent, and corrupt models, lack of knowledge, and the lack of trust of certain political authorities in this kind of strategy.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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