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Research Article

## Comparative Reflections on Community-Oriented Policing (COP) in Post-Conflict Central America

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**Abstract:** In this article we discuss the comparative impact and significance of Community-Oriented Policing (COP) in Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua). We emphasize in particular the formal role of COP as a means to re-establish trust between the state and community, demonstrate professionalism and to evidence the democratic accountability of the police to the population. Although these formal goals remain the goal of community oriented policing, we demonstrate in this article that there has been an increased emphasis on more kinetic or militarized forms of policing in recent years. Hard handed, heavily armed and interventionist police policies have spread from El Salvador to Guatemala, and more recently Nicaragua. Moves towards more aggressive policing are explained by governments and police forces as a necessary response to the rising threat of gangs and drug cartels and horrifying levels of homicide statistics. However, as we highlight there is also evidence of these changes reflecting undemocratic shifts within national administrations and the repositioning of people within government and national institutions with links to these countries' earlier military governments. The net effect of these changes we argue is to erode the intentions of COP initiatives, and severely reduce levels of trust and accountability between people and the democratic state.

**Keywords:** accountability; Central America; democracy; policing; trust; violence

### 1. Introduction

With the end of civil war and armed conflicts in Central America a new period of civilian and democratically elected government started in the 1990s. Elected governments were quick to announce that a new era of peace, security and economic growth had arrived. To ensure this new era, multiple reforms were made to secure the dissolution of the pre-existing security and law enforcement forces and their replacement by new civilian police institutions.

In the years that followed, academics, international

development organizations and some social leaders promoted community policing as synonymous with democracy given its emphasis on the construction of cooperative relations with the community, the prevention of crime and respect to human rights [1]. The continuing efforts to introduce this kind of policing can also be interpreted as an effort to gain the trust of the public in the police, with basis in the idea that community policing constituted an effective manner to provide service to the public. The projects for community policing would develop with different characteristics and longevity, something that inspired critique

from authors who questioned its long-term impact [2]. As with other efforts to create institutional trust in the police, projects for community policing were developed through complex institutional systems, in which other actors and factors intervened other than just the police and public [3]. Of these factors the most salient was the institutional persistence in the police forces of actors associated with previous authoritarian military regimes. This contributed to continued violence and would create an obstacle for the transformation of the police [4].

Community policing (COP) constitutes a model for policing derived from a particular economic, social, and political context i.e., liberal democratic political systems. The literature written on the practice of the model takes for granted that there is a stable political context, and high levels of social cohesion [5,6]. It has been assumed that any resistance to the model will be produced internally within policing institutions themselves [7–10]. Acknowledging this, the comparative study of community policing in the country cases of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala we will carry out in this article provides an important addition. In contrast to earlier writing, the context of a post-conflict era is seen to mould the results of attempts to reform policing. The structure of political power in each case explains the characteristics that the police acquire in Nicaragua, their marginalization from power in Guatemala and the co-existence of contradictory forces of community policing and the militarization of law enforcement in the context of El Salvador.

In this article we discuss the comparative characteristics of police trust building efforts in three countries. All the countries have significant histories of armed conflict, and they all revamped their systems of security following the formal return of peace. In each context there has also been important support to the design and training for community policing. This has been given to the police and national police forces by international organizations and law enforcement specialists. Until recently, the international community praised the police command in these three countries for leading the way in developing systems for COP.

In this article we argue and evidence through our focus on COP that although the period following armed conflict was one of democratic experimentation the results of this have ultimately been weak transitions. Indeed, in Guatemala and El Salvador the concept of “violent democracies” has been applied [11] recognizing evidence of elevated levels of state violence and continuance in positions of power by members of the military and civilians that had been key actors in earlier dictatorial governments. Nicaragua has also lost its democratic direction in recent years with clear signs of presidential authoritarianism. These features explain why much of the international praise and support for COP strategies has now come to an end. Although COP models remain in action there has been an increased emphasis on militarized forms of policing in all three countries in recent years.

Hard handed, heavily armed and interventionist police

policies have spread from El Salvador to Guatemala, and more recently Nicaragua. These moves towards more aggressive policing are explained by governments and police forces as a necessary response to the rising threat of gangs and drug cartels and horrifying levels of homicide statistics. Central America continues to be one of the most violent regions of the world not at war [12–14].

Our discussion of the experience of COP and other related policies in these contexts is based on substantial research carried out for the European Union Horizon 2020 financed project “Community Based Policing and Post-conflict Police Reform”. In connection to this project a series of researchers, local and international research institutions have collaborated to carry out qualitative field research over a five-year period in different locations within each country. This research has involved the application of a series of methodologies including semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and participant-observation.

In the pages below we will discuss the comparative experience of Community Policing as part of other trust building strategies focusing on three different stages in each country: the initial steps made to establish new civilian police forces and the first projects to engage the police with citizenry; detail and evidence of the functioning of COP in the field; and finally recent development in the rule of law and policing in each country. Our analysis assists improved understanding of the limitations confronted in the process of democratic police reform in post-conflict contexts and highlights the challenges faced by COP implementation in such situation.

## **2. Community Policing and Trust in the Police in Post-Conflict Contexts**

Community policing (COP) is a strategy developed and adopted with the specific goal of improving conditions of trust between the police and public. Its modern roots lie in the United States in the 1970s [10,15,16], from where it spread into Canada and Europe, and on into Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Although Bayley [17] argues that there is no agreed definition of COP there appear to be similar conditions [18] for its testing and implementation i.e., it is a clear effort to respond to a lack of public confidence in the police. COP places an emphasis on the preventative role of the police in a closely defined geographic area i.e., the neighborhood. A second condition of the model is the promotion of close relations with the community with the goal of creating the basis for a continuous dynamic of consultation with local citizens, and responsiveness to local perceptions and priorities [19]. This forms the basis of a focused strategy in which the police study the conditions of delinquency and crime at the local level, revises its priorities in response to the fears of the local community, and implements the resolution of both crime and broader social challenges with the neighborhood [20] reducing levels of crime and related fears [21].

Key sources on COP have focused on its impact, concluding that there is significant evidence that this strategy

for policing improves local citizens perceptions of the police, their approval of their activities, their legitimacy as a state institution, but it has some limited impact on the levels of crime and related fears [22]. In Latin America there are studies which focus on conditions for COP success [23], as well as on problems of implementation [10,24–26].

Our approach is different, given that we have chosen to study COP acknowledging the significance of the political and social context in which it has been implemented. In this sense, we do not look to explain the strengths and weaknesses of the model of policing, but rather the processes that explain its eventual character in the three countries under study. In this respect, we argue that it is only with careful contextual analysis of the political and social context that we can fully understand COP's implementation in each case, the reasons for their survival in parallel to increased militarization and their possible impact on the public confidence in the police. The histories of conflict and post-conflict in each of the countries under study are important points of entry to understand the background of community-oriented policing in each case, as part of trust building strategies.

Efforts to reform the police forces in Latin America multiplied throughout the region in the 1990s to separate police from the military, improve professional standards, curb police abuses, and improve police-community relations. The signing of the peace accords between the governments and armed opposition groups in El Salvador in 1992 and Guatemala in 1996 was particularly significant to police reform in the region. In both cases, the peace accords stipulated the creation of new civilian police forces to replace the former police bodies that were subordinated to the armed forces. Police reformers comprised human rights activists, bilateral and multilateral international organizations, academics, and some government officials [27–29]. Twenty years later, academic analysis that takes stock of the process considers its results disappointing [30].

### *2.1. The Centrality of Trust*

Trust as a concept plays an important role in police reform because a deficit of trust in both government and the police are all too common in post-conflict societies [31]. Goldsmith argues that the reform of the police in post-conflict contexts requires substantive attention to the improvement of trust in the police and forces of law and order. In contexts in which trust in the police is absent, he observes that it has been impossible for the police to gain the legitimacy and consent from the public needed to effectively carry out their duties. The perception of the public with respect to the police has consequence in terms of a contribution to the nature of the relationship between society and the state. Police presence is a representation of the existence of the state in a location, and for that reason the public impression of their actions has impact on the citizens trust and understanding of the state. In a democratic society the legitimacy of the police and other public institutions act to reinforce the conformity

of citizens to the laws and norms that are represented by the police [32].

Belief that COP will improve relations between the citizenry and the police, and the effectiveness of policing has significance for understanding the consolidation of democratic states in Central America. Several studies carried out in developed liberal democracies conclude that trust depends on the perception of how justice is practiced in citizens' encounters with the police [33,34]. In the context of Latin America, Malone & Dammert [35] suggest that confidence in the police depends equally on the perception of the police community relations, as it does on effectiveness and measurable results.

The increase in violent crime can be interpreted to be a result of ineffective policing and generate pressure for military personnel being assigned tasks in public security. This is highly probable in countries that have an historical tradition for the participation of the armed forces in the control of the citizenry and where they are recognized as a force that can be actively used where the police are unable [12]. Another effect of deficient policing is an increase in mistrust in the rule of law and tendency towards increasing acts of vigilantism [36,37].

The efforts to implement community policing we describe here can only be discerned within a theoretical frame of understanding in which the state is interpreted to be a fundamental actor in the definition of politics but composed of diverse organizations that may not have a singular or coherent interests and loyalties. It is only within this frame that sense can be made of the co-existence of COP programmes and authoritarian policing resulting in serious violations of human rights. At the same time, it is of note that within police forces there has been the reproduction of debates and perspectives that are antagonistic to the democratic rule of law.

The contributions of this article are therefore the following: analysis of three distinct effort to install COP in post-conflict countries; differentiation of two different styles of COP contrasting the experience of Nicaragua with those of El Salvador and Guatemala; and finally, conclusions regarding the factors explaining the failed establishment of COP in post-conflict societies.

## **3. Case Studies**

### *3.1. El Salvador*

#### *3.1.1. The Initial Post-Conflict Period and the Construction of the National Civil Police*

The 1992 Peace Accords and Security Reform promised a new democratic beginning following 12 years of civil war that had prioritized counter-insurgency strategies [38]. The security reform mandated the creation of a new National Civil Police (PNC), composed mainly of civilian personnel. For this purpose, the Peace Accords established quotas to include, but limit, ex-combatants from both the dismantled public security forces and the demobilized guerilla [39]. A

National Academy of Public Security (ANSP) was also created as an autonomous civilian academic body mandated with the training of the new professional police force.

These reforms did not completely transform the structures of power in the country. The transition to democracy in El Salvador, like other countries in Central America, visibly retained the shadow of groups that were intimately connected to the old political order. The governing party ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacional- Nationalist Republican Alliance) was initially opposed to the removal of previous security institutions, only to later include elements of these institutions in the new police force and new national security arrangements [6,40,41].

In the period following the armed conflict ex guerrilla leaders were assassinated. This led to the creation of an independent investigatory committee named the Joint Group for the Investigation of Illegal Armed Groups with Political Motivations in El Salvador. The evidence produced by the committee demonstrate that there were several death squads still in operation in the country. These groups would also evolve to carry out actions of social cleansing exterminating members of youth gangs (maras) during the 1990s and initial years of the new millennium [42].

While political violence declined, the aftermath of the peace agreements continued to be very violent. Homicidal violence reached very high levels because of competition among organized crime organizations trying to assert territorial control over cocaine trade routes [43]. Given the lack of police capacity in the 17 years following the peace accords, the governments of ARENA reintroduced the armed forces into joint rural and urban patrols with the national police and placed an emphasis on reactive policing in response to increasing levels of crime. These actions can only be interpreted as a reversal of the democratic reform of internal security intended by the peace accords. It is important to note that this change to the police force also clearly reflects a lack of prioritization of the police by the government.

Between 2003 and 2006 a highly militarized strategy i.e., *Mano Dura* (Iron Fist), and subsequently the *Super Mano Dura* strategy, were introduced. A War on Gangs was also initiated reversing the focus of security from the citizens back to the state and identifying youth gangs as the key source of insecurity in the country [44–46]. Military intervention in the Salvadorian public security was justified by the reintroduction of a newly formulated idea of the ‘public enemy’ and recycled war paradigms of security. During these years violent practices became entrenched in policing. Young, poor, and marginalized men continued to be targeted by the police through abusive practices and the excessive use of force and violence. This led to a backlash that strengthened the gangs and their mutation into more organized forms of crime. According to Jeannette Aguilar [47], after the Super Mano Dura plan the abusive practices of the police continued and remained in police subculture. The police continued to target young poor and marginalized men, resulting in a backlash that led to the strengthening of

the gangs and their mutation into more organized forms of delinquency.

### 3.1.2. *The Practice of COP in El Salvador*

The election of Mauricio Funes supported by The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) the former guerrilla umbrella-organization brought a change of political discourse and initiated a new period of development from 2009 until 2014. Commissioner Carlos Ascencio, a former guerrilla leader was appointed police director at the beginning of the FMLN presidential period. In his opening speech in 2009, he called for a re-evaluation of the police’s development. He argued that strengthening the police required an institutional self-critique of the initial conception of the police in close relation to the community and proposed the introduction of an integral approach to security that prioritized preventive measures and community-oriented practices [14].

At the end of 2011 President Funes made changes in the Ministry of Justice and Security replacing individuals previously identified with the guerrilla. Sonja Wolff has indicated these changes were partly the result of US pressures, and partly the consequence of the president fearing the FMLN was withholding information from him [48]. For instance, Brigadier General Francisco Salinas was appointed as the Director of the Police in 2012, replacing Commissioner Carlos Ascencio who had a COP approach. The weak capacity of the police to control crime led to an increased role of the military in public security. According to US estimates, around 8,000 soldiers were working with the police in 2016 [43,49].

These changes constituted a contradiction in the country’s overall treatment of the issue of security. Efforts were made to strengthen the orientation of the police towards service to the public, but at the same time military participation in the provision of public security was made permanent. Repressive actions by joint police and armed force operations increased during the superseding period of President Sanchez Cerén who also came from the FMLN (2014-2019).

A significant attempt to introduce police strategies directed to the service of the citizenry was the Institutional Strategic Plan 2011-2021. The plan incorporated gender diversity and vulnerable groups, including women, into the work of the police. In 2012, the LEIV or *Special Law for a Life Free from Violence* was introduced. Article 25 of the LEIV stipulates the creation of institutional units for assisting female victims of violence. Following this mandate, the National Civilian Police established a unit specializing in violence against women, as part of their Office for Reporting and Attention to Civilians (UNIMUJER-ODAC for its Spanish acronym) [50].

COP was officially implemented following the appointment of Brigadier General Salinas as the PNC’s general director. In this move the Salvadorean Police adapted the Brazilian Police Pacification Units (UPP, in Portuguese),

which placed communitarian-police bases in territories controlled by organized criminal groups. In Rio de Janeiro and other places where UPPs were implemented, organized crime networks were eradicated by forceful police tactics and then community policing occupied the favelas introducing a communitarian approach. In El Salvador the UPP became a source of inspiration for the implementation of repressive tactics, especially in areas of disputed territory controlled by gangs. According to Commissioner Hugo Ramírez, former sub-director of Public Security, the Salvadorian model also exceeded the UPP's model in the sense that both prevention and law enforcement are implemented in parallel with one another [14].

Since 2014 the contradictions between the discourse and the practice of security have been increasingly evident with the incremental use of repression against the maras. In 2014 103 presumed gang members were killed in confrontations with the police. This figure climbed to 591 killed and 119 injured in confrontations in 2016 [51]. In 2017, the government of the former guerrilla member Sánchez Cerén promoted the need for the militarization of the streets- with armored cars patrolling the capital San Salvador.

A report published in 2017 based on a national survey indicates the lack of territorial coverage of the police in the country at that time [52]. A fifth of the people in the survey reported that there was nobody in clear charge of security and that they did not know who was responsible for security in their neighborhood. Close to 60% of respondents to the survey reported that it was the citizens themselves that provided security in the neighborhood, with only 4.6% signaling other actors- amongst them the military and gang members- were responsible for the security of the area. These findings imply that a significant percentage of the population lacks police protection or considers it absent. With regards to the operation of the police in the community, only 24.3% of Salvadoreans polled responded that there was a plan for community policing in their locality. Approximately the same percentage (25.5%) answered that they know the officers assigned to look after and attend their neighborhood. Knowledge regarding community policing is worse in the zone of Greater San Salvador.

These reported experiences suggest that community policing is practiced in the country, but that this is done side by side with repressive measures such as the war on the gangs. The coverage of the COP programme, and its capacity to provide protection to individuals is limited.

### 3.1.3. Recent Developments

With the election of Nayib Bukele to the presidency in 2019 there was renewed hope for a change in the administration of the country and the direction of security policy. Bukele is young enough not to remember the civil war and is not currently affiliated with the traditional governing political parties e.g., ARENA and FMLN. Despite the widespread optimism, local human rights organizations were quick to highlight the lack of clarity and transparency of Bukele's

new security agenda. The Territorial Control Plan, a security plan that Bukele has defended since the beginning of his administration, keeps the military presence in public security operations. Within seven months of his taking power, Bukele ordered the police and military to surround and close the National Assembly (Congress). This action was taken because the Constitutional Chamber had opposed the approval for \$109 million credit from the Central American Economic Integration Bank (BCIE) and destined to fund the implementation of his security plan. The government also entered a new process of negotiation and agreement with the gangs. This event came to be known in El Salvador as the 9F (because it happened on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February), and again was observed to signal the participation of the military in politics. The military have therefore retained a position in public security provision that extends well beyond being a 'sleeping dragon' [53].

## 3.2. Guatemala

### 3.2.1. The Initial Post-Conflict Period and the Construction of the National Civil Police

Guatemala was the location of one of the longest and bloodiest civil wars in Latin American history. More than 200,000 people were killed between 1960 and 1996, most of them civilians, and 93 percent at the hands of the military. Another 50,000, an estimated 5% of the population at the time, were displaced from their homes [54]. During the conflict the National Police was an instrument of military intelligence to suppress opposition, capturing, secluding, torturing and frequently eliminating actual or alleged members of the resistance [55]. The police's collaboration with the military granted the governments with impunity and prompted many more acts of abuse, including contract-killings and widespread corruption.

The Peace Accords of 1996 provided a blueprint to overcome the legacy of authoritarianism and sought to reconfigure relations between state security institutions and the civilian population in substitution of the militarized approach that had reigned during the conflict. The *Agreement on the Strengthening of Civilian Power and the Role of the Army in a Democratic Society* set the stage for the creation of a new national civilian police force in 1997. The Agreement also required the reduction in the numbers of the army from 47,000 members in 1996 to 15,000 in 2004 and dismantled the so-called "Civilian Self-Defense Patrols" i.e., community members who were forced to become vigilante collaborators with the military command in rural areas.

During the internal war the army had contracted its services to protect populations affected by the war and promoted self defence mechanisms whose structure and activities were different in each region of the country. With the transition to formal democracy these structures were reconverted into private security companies, self-defence groups and vigilante organizations which participated in several instances of extra judicial executions [56,57]. The army successfully maintained control of the Ministry of the

Interior and blocked several attempts at police reform.

The effort to reform the police in Guatemala was partial and frustrating. The army as a corporation continued to hold positions of power in successive governments. The political system was much less conducive to reforms than in El Salvador, given the absence of strong political parties that could have held political authorities accountable for their actions [58]. The political strength of the FMLN in El Salvador allowed it to negotiate as an equal with ARENA during peace negotiations. As opposition in Congress, FMLN monitored the police reform measures taken by the government.

In Guatemala, the final phase of peace negotiations was carried out by the conservative National Advancement Party (PAN), which had won presidential elections by a very small margin and confronted a weak fiscal situation. President Álvaro Arzú personalized the achievement of signing the peace accords and did not follow up with political negotiations with other forces to make it a state-wide accomplishment. The *Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity* (URNG) had already been defeated militarily and did not achieve important support in Congress after it was legalized as a political party. It thus became extremely difficult for the new civilian police to emerge as a credible law enforcement institution which respected and promoted the rule of law.

Soon after its establishment, President Alvaro Arzú's government (1996 – 2000) increased the size of the police force to 20,000 to achieve the widest deployment possible throughout national territory. The Police Academy of the time was only able to train 500 recruits at a time. The government opted to bring in the Spanish Civilian Guard (Guardia Civil), to train the new force. The Civilian Guard opted to recruit elements from the disbanded National Police, the Military Police, and the Finance Police into a new force to fulfill the government's formal quantitative goals, and with the hope they could be substituted in the years to come. The lack of preparation for enrolment, the low wage levels, and the consequent limitations in academic preparation and other capacities of the new recruits resulted, however, in a failure to deliver a clear severance with the repressive police culture of the past [59].

During the administration of Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004) and the Guatemalan Republican Front [60], the police academy was cut by 20% and police chiefs and interior ministers were frequently substituted. In line with security policy in El Salvador punitive “hard fist” (mano dura) measures were taken against street gang members, including arbitrary mass incarceration. This further alienated street gang (*Mara*) members, encouraged their connections in prison and strengthened their capacities for criminal activities. Allegations of “social cleansing” plagued Oscar Berger's administration (2004 – 2008) ending with accusations against the Minister of the Interior, the Police Chief and other high-level security sector authorities for extra-judicial executions.

Pressure from human-rights defenders and international actors led the government to agree to the creation of the UN International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala

(CICIG) which conducted several investigations into political corruption, including the “La Línea” case that caused the resignation and indictment of the President and Vice-president of the Republic [61]. CICIG found that election campaigns were funded by up to 25 per cent by economic elites, 50 per cent by ‘internal corruption’ and 25 per cent by funds originating from organized crime [62].

### 3.2.2. *The Practice of COP*

During the years following the peace accords, the National Civilian Police developed several projects for community policing in response to initiatives from international donors. USAID provided support in 2005 for a community policing project focused on improving the relationship between community members and the police. Another example was the implementation in 2007 of the *Plan Cuadrante de Seguridad Preventiva* (Block Plan for Preventative Security) led by the Chilean Carabineros. The pilot project was initiated in Zones 1 and 2 of Guatemala City and later in the towns of La Antigua and Quetzaltenango. These foreign funded and contrasting efforts are illustrative of the institutional weakness of the police. They did not constitute a clear model for police reform in the country.

The sky-rocketing levels of homicides in the 2000's led the administration of Álvaro Colom (2008 – 2012) to establish a Police Reform Commission and appoint a human rights defender, Helen Mack as president. The Commission established a dialogue with all police officers, regardless of their hierarchy, aiming at transforming the militarized culture within the institution. Yet, she found that senior officers were more reluctant to support her views on democratic policing [63]. The new body lacked the political authority to fully enact its technical proposals and depended on the will of the Minister of Governance- a position that was frequently changed. The Commission was also perceived by senior police officers as an intrusion. The Commission lasted until 2018 without achieving its intended objective.

Even under these difficult circumstances, the PNC attempted to strengthen itself as an institution. A new strategy document was released, and the police academy was reopened in 2011. Two other regional academies were also created i.e., in Huehuetenango in the west of the country and Santa Rosa in the central-eastern area. A police career system was established requiring members to fulfill training to advance to higher positions. The PNC's budget also grew in real terms [64]. The rate of police people per 10,000 inhabitants increased dramatically to 22.36 in 2018. By 2020 the PNC had grown to 40,693 operational elements (15.6% of which were women) supported by an administrative staff of 569 (59% women) [65].

Efforts to strengthen capacities in matters of violence and crime prevention have also taken place. A Sub-directorate General for Crime Prevention was formed in the 2000s with departments specialized in working with children, women, multicultural issues and fostering community relations. Programs have included door-to-door visits to

neighbors, presentations in schools, work with traditional authorities, support to local citizens' committees, and a "safe schools" program that kept educational premises open after-hours and during weekends providing educational and recreational activities for young people [66].

An institutional policy for community policing was not, however, adopted until the launch of the Integral Community Security Police Model (MOPSIC) in 2014 [59]. MOPSIC is a model founded on the assignment of clear responsibilities to police officers in charge of stations or sub-stations for crime indicators in their demarcations. Under MOPSIC a special unit was set up to train sub-station personnel using a guiding manual. Locally deployed policemen are expected to make use not only of techniques for criminal investigation, analysis, and direct control of crime, but to implement a sustained effort to approach their communities to prevent criminal activities, nurture trust and collaboration with the population- and in this way prevent violence.

The MOPSIC model is part of the PNC's Strategic Plan 2014-2020 and its principles have been adopted as the guiding standard for police work in Guatemala. Decree 48-2014 reorganized stations and substations to respond to the model deploying specialized agents and officers to each as part of "facilitator teams". Officially all units throughout the country have received MOPSIC training since 2014.

The MOPSIC manual provides guidance for police stations to carry out work in specific sectors of their assigned district [59]. An Integral Format of Police Activities (FIAPOL) sheet is used to plan activities and set up times of turns and work periods. A Statistical Analysis Format (FAES) is used to summarize and determine the security situation in a particular territory. Each of the 130 stations have at least a pair of analysts that compile and verify information. With this information they formulate a diagnostic of the security situation and plan responses according to the crime level and resources at hand. The strategy chosen may then be preventive, reactive, or investigative in character. The PNC's Directorate of Community Relations (DIRC), part of the Sub-Directorate General for Crime Prevention (SDGPD), played a key role in the outset of MOPSIC's implementation. In each station DIRC personnel have provided support in training and deployed personnel to fulfill MOPSIC processes. Since 2017 the much larger Sub-Directorate General for Operations of the PNC has also become more actively engaged in the implementation of MOPSIC and the take-up of responsibility for it in different districts.

The development of MOPSIC has received support from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), part of the U.S. Department of State and the main donor to Guatemala in matters of security. Other international donors include the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the German Federal Enterprise for International Cooperation (GIZ), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has provided continuous technical support to the development of COP in Guatemala.

Our research conducted in Villa Canales and Totonicapán show that community engagement by the police has met with positive reactions from residents [59]. However, not all police agents have been trained to implement the model. In areas of high criminality there are not enough police officers to patrol the territory. Our research was not able to find examples of the use of problem-solving methods, which probably requires more police training and better analytical capabilities.

Despite the difficulties faced by COP, there is a gradual movement towards reform as a new generation of police officers is taking over. Even if trust from the community towards the police in rural areas remains low, the development of the MOPSIC model has started to create more empathy and social cooperation. Clear challenges to this reform process remain. This is particularly evident when the police are compelled by the government and business elites to clamp down on free expression and social protest. Powerful economic actors and politicians have demanded repressive action by the police in response to the protests organized by communities affected by resource extraction and energy and infrastructure projects. When badly managed land, water and energy projects escalate, the police have been required to evict peasant farmers and indigenous communities from privately titled holdings of agroindustry, or to remove blockades formed by protests opposing the diversion of rivers for hydro-electric schemes [67].

In recent years, the police have failed in its responsibility mainly because of its absence. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, peasant organizations called for attention from human rights organization and the national media due to the violent eviction of 40 families of former employees of the Dieseldorff company from their homes. The landowners allege that the land had been illegally occupied and denied responsibility for the burning of the houses. The police were accused by the local peasant organizations for not having attended their calls for aid and protection during the event [68].

### *3.2.3. Recent Developments*

The work carried out by CICIG in assistance of the rule of law in Guatemala ended in 2019. The institution made a series of accusations of irregularities in the election campaign of President Jimmy Morales. Following a review of its mandate, the Guatemalan government announced that it was withdrawing from the UN-backed anti-corruption commission, and that its leaders had twenty-four hours to leave the country [69].

In September 2020 the police arrested the journalist Sonny Figueroa in the central square of Guatemala City when he requested support from police officers following an alleged robbery. Figueroa claims he was unduly beaten. Later a Twitter account published pictures of this capture raising question of a larger state-intelligence sponsored action. Figueroa had recently been responsible for reports on government corruption.

The Guatemala Ombudsman's national report depicts



a series of failures by the police to act in similar cases as those above [70]. There are concerns about recent police actions trending towards the heavy-handed policing tactics seen in other Central American states. Countries responsible for the donation of development assistance to Guatemala have asked for an investigation to be made regarding possible police repression during a series of recent violent protests focused on proposed government spending in the national budget.

### 3.3. Nicaragua

#### 3.3.1. Initial Post-Conflict Period and the Construction of the National Police

The case of Nicaraguan policing is different to the others previously described. First, the national police force was not created because of the terms and conclusions of a peace accord and return of democracy. Previous studies of Nicaraguan policing also commonly connect the *communitarian* origins of the police force with the Sandinista Revolution (1978-1990)[30]. Existing studies also recognize that the shape and practice of the Nicaraguan COP model is the result of several generations of change and reform [71].

The defeat of the Anastasio Somoza dictatorship marked the end of the Nicaraguan National Guard, and their substitution by the Sandinista Popular Army and the Sandinista Police. The Sandinista Police were founded on the 5th of September 1979. With its establishment, the new government aimed to end the history of open repression carried out by the earlier National Guard. From 1979 onwards, the Sandinista government decided to separate the functions of defense and security from that of law enforcement. This resulted in the creation of the Ministry of Defense and the Sandinista Popular Army, and the Ministry of the Interior and the Sandinista Police. The New Sandinista Police force initially counted on the advice and training of Panama, but its equipment and professional training drew mostly on socialist policy (and particularly East Germany and the example of Cuba). From 1979 to 1989, the police force was formally tasked “to guarantee the status quo and property with revolutionary sentiment, confront crime and assist the task of securing the state” [72].

Throughout the 1980s the police formed part of the broad defense of the revolution in which they were assigned the task of preventing crime and counter-revolutionary activities [73]. However, the government also created the General Direction of State Security which was independent from the police and carried out intelligence and counterintelligence activities on a more permanent basis [74].

The new police implemented their tasks with a strong emphasis on participation from the public. In response to the drastic economic measures adopted by the Nicaraguan government at the end of the 1980s and with the aim of counteracting the legacy of war, the Sandinista Police started a process of experimentation in which a significant reduction was made of its technical, human, and material

capacities. Significant cuts were made to the budgets of all parts of the state apparatus. At the same time there was an increase in the level of crime. This in turn influenced the capacity and attitude of the police force to exercise the functions with which it had been entrusted.

With limited resources and personnel, the Nicaraguan National Police (PNN) was forced to decentralize its responses to crime and manifestations of insecurity [73]. It did this by establishing broad and permanent channels of communication with community organizations, both through the formation of community-assemblies and maintaining direct links with residents, who supported the Sandinistas. In the 1980s, the Nicaraguan police introduced two important elements of their current COP model i.e., committees for the defense of the revolution (*Comites por la defensa de la revolución*—later to become Committees for Citizen Power-CPCs) and *jefes de sector* (heads of sector). Whereas the committees would become a key point of articulation between the police and the families, the heads of sector would become members of the police in charge of maintaining links and responding to security needs from the neighborhoods [73].

In 1989, the police force’s position in relation to the Ministry of the Interior was ratified by Law No.65 “Law of the Functions of the Sandinista Police” in which it was defined as an “organ of the Ministry of the Interior” [73]. In contrast to its earlier formal remit to defend the state and popular revolution, the police were now tasked with the protection of the life and physical integrity of the country’s civilian inhabitants. They therefore assumed responsibility for the prevention of crime and preservation of public order.

During the 1980s a coalition of several rebel groups combined to become the Nicaraguan resistance (*Contras*). They carried out attacks against government officials and blew up strategic bridges with substantial funding and support from the US. To gain national and international legitimacy the Sandinista government called for presidential elections in 1990, which were won by the liberal Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997).

The new government was faced on the one hand with economic pressures from the US to reduce Sandinista influence in the security apparatus, but on the other it was forced to recognize the considerable popular strength of the Sandinistas and their control over the armed forces and the police. This led to negotiations between the government and the Sandinistas that the police structure would remain in place, but new rules would be established ensuring the independence of the police from the Sandinista party [5]. The police leadership decided that it had to institutionalize itself and remain professional and non-partisan.

The Chamorro government rejected the socialist premise of the earlier government and of its efforts to organize the masses. The National Police now implemented the concept of public security as its principal doctrine and adopted the conception and philosophy of public service and prevention. As such the new model was as one informant put it “aimed at 1. De-politicizing the national police

and 2. removing party-based alliances". The Organic Law of the National Police (1992) established the national police public civilian organization founded on professional criteria including political impartiality. In addition, the Police based their legal foundation on a newly reformed political constitution: "The National Police is an armed body of civil nature. It has as its mission the guarantee of internal order, the security of the citizenry, the prevention and prosecution of crime and other activities specified by law" [75].

### 3.3.2. The Practice of COP

In the process of modernization and de-politicization the police improved its recruitment and training systems. At the same time, it refocused its communitarian strategy with support from European donors in a completely new political and social context. The police established contacts with civil society organizations, NGOs and on occasion with remnant elements of the Sandinista guilds. The aim of these kinds of contacts also changed, becoming focused on the prevention of gender violence, youth crime and a coordinated response to problems confronted by the community.

The National Police proposed the institutionalization of the issue of gender in the institutions policies and practices [73]. Particular attention was given to the intra-family and sexual violence. This process culminated in the creation of the *Mother and Child Stations*. These stations were born out of a joint initiative between the civil society and the National Police, as spaces that provide integrated attention to the victims and survivors of intra-family and sexual violence.

The process of professionalization of the national police in the 1990s also included the introduction of a programme aimed at the prevention of adolescent crime. In 1995 the national police introduced a strategy targeting adolescent crime and related gang violence. In contrast to other Central American countries, adolescent crime was recognized not only an issue of public order, but as a social problem. The programme aimed to address the issue of adolescent crime not by force, but through a system of youth education and promotion. The police established several Centres of Youth Formation and Development (*Centros de Formación y Desarrollo Juvenil*) where adolescents identified by their families and the police were encouraged to enter vocational training programmes and a system of follow up and supervision by designated police officers.

These developments lead up to the formal introduction of the Preventative Community Policing model. On the 20th of November 2001, following Decree No 0426-2001, the Director General of the National Police the then Director General of the National Police, First Commander Edwin Cordero Ardila established the Integrated Police-Community Policy. This policy was conceived of as an instrument permitting the promotion of a change of attitude amongst members of the Police, and the facilitation of direct relations between the police and the community to achieve its institutional mission with increased efficiency and efficacy [73]. The central goal of the model was the operationalization,

mainstreaming and integration of COP as a joint action in all areas of specialization within the national police. It has its formal expression in the operative plans implemented at the level of sector, municipality, delegation and police district, and national level. The stated aim of this policy is to contribute to the improvements of the quality of life of the population, and particularly with regards to citizens' security, guaranteeing the relationship between the institution of the police with the communities, putting in place preventative work and activities aimed at optimizing the quality of police services [73].

The main features of the policy were based on the reinforcement of social relations between the national police and different social groups in the community: the prevention of crime at the level of the community; a focus on gender and prevention amongst children and youths; respecting human rights and constitutional guarantees for individuals under police custody and their families [76].

Three central aspects differentiate the community policing model in Nicaragua from others. First, the authorized protagonist role of collective actors such as the Committees for the Social Prevention of Crime (*Comités de Prevención Social del Delito*) created by a resolution of the Director General of the National Police as "spaces for proactive citizen participation" [77]. Their mandate is specified in the Plan for the Implementation of Integral Police-Community Human Rights as organizing community assemblies, identifying local problems, and obtaining resources to solve them [78]. A second aspect is undoubtedly the role carried out by the jefe de sector (sector leader), whose role it is to respond to the community and to consider the linkages between policing and social challenges. This leads us to a third aspect- undoubtedly an inheritance of a revolutionary past-, the police are to understand that crime prevention is also reliant on actions of social development. An example of this is the activities of the Directorate for Youth Issues of the National Police (*Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles de la Policía Nacional*). The Directorate carries out interventions in psycho-social issues with youths at risk of being integrated into organized crime.

Until recently there was broad agreement that the Nicaraguan police were considerably less repressive than other police forces in the region. It is however also recognized that in recent years violence against youths has been routine [79]. Despite this, the Nicaraguan police have historically been recognized for their greater willingness to change and reform leadership structures and crime prevention strategies [13].

The real value of the *jefes de sector* is less clear. Their work and presence are different from sector to sector, place to place. This in part reflects that they have not received specific higher-level education and training. There are also no sets standards. This has problematic results. According to a survey carried out by the Institute for Strategic Study and Public Politics (IEEPP), only 21.8% of citizens know who the *jefe de sector* is in their neighborhood or community.

### 3.3.3. Recent Developments

In 2006 Daniel Ortega, leader of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was elected President. He gradually took control of the other branches of government, and through a decision of the Supreme Court was allowed to run for office again in 2011. In January 2014 the National Assembly, dominated by the FSLN, approved constitutional amendments that abolished term limits for the presidency and allowed a president to run for an unlimited number of five-year terms.

Under Ortega the police became increasingly politicized and repressive. In 2015 the Nicaraguan government approved the establishment of the Sovereign Security Act. The Act's stated objective was to "preserve, promote, and maintain sovereign security" against threats that include transnational organized crime, international terrorism, foreign interference, criminality, rebellion, illicit acts against aviation and maritime navigation, attacks against cyber security and infrastructure, or "any illegal act that threatens the existence of the Nicaraguan state and its institutions." In the years that followed the reform, the police's use of force to stop and break up protests the government were characterized by government communications as necessary in the interest of public security and national strategic interest.

In 2017 the security analyst Roberto Cajines suggested in a blog post that the hard-handed actions of the police against protesters represented "the profound systematic crisis in which the Police finds itself, in which the police are now denaturalized and converted into a body at the service of a dynastic project and the continuance of Daniel Ortega" [80]. Further signs that democratic conditions were worsening included the way in which the government has used to the judicial system to ban most of the political opposition in the run up to elections in November 2016 [81]. Days later Ortega also positioned his wife, Rosario Murillo, as the candidate for the vice-presidency. The revival of the strongman role is interpreted by some analysts as reflecting an authoritarian turn, and the complete return of the political tradition for *caudillismo* in Nicaragua after an interlude of democracy lasting from the Revolution to the return of Ortega in 2008.

Following success in the 2016 elections, the new government carried out a series of changes to the set-up of the police and the security forces. Changes were made to the operation of COP, including the transference of responsibility for programs aimed at youth, community sports, mothers, and children and at combatting domestic violence to other government institutions. This has changed the quality of police-community relations. Whilst from the outside these programs appeared to be beyond the bounds of the public security mandate of the police, they are acknowledged by national analysts as having enabled both a close and effective relationship between the community and the police. The recent removal of responsibility for these programs (the *Centros de Juventud* remain under police jurisdiction) whilst given explanation in terms of increasing institutional efficiency, is interpreted at least by some commentators as

a politically motivated strategy by the Presidency to co-opt the popular support surrounding these programs.

The national administration also notably made a shift at this time towards more heavy-handed tactics to make up for low police numbers and poor coverage. In rural areas the military have always had a role in the provision of security and taken a particular role in combatting the transportation of narcotics along the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast. There has now been a heightened presence of specially trained police units in Managua and Bluefields. In the case of Managua this was officially characterized as a response to the rise in violent crimes in the city. The police put into place the "Plan for the Strengthening of Security in the City of Managua" which according to official information is led by the *Directorate of Special Police Operations* (DOEP). Law 872 of the National Police Law establishes that the DOEP is a specialized department of the Police that "corresponds with the intervention to restore public order in serious altercations, to participate in special operations against drug trafficking, terrorism, organized crime and other serious crimes". This is first time that the DOEP had been tasked with the response to everyday crimes. It also involves the expanded use of the black uniformed and heavily armed *Dantos Brigade* in patrols and responses to reported violent crime in public spaces. According to Roberto Cajina this is a sign that "the Police have lost their capacity to prevent and to be proactive, that they have lost their capacity to anticipate actions and guarantee the security of the population" ...it is "the unfolding of the police special forces in the application of a "heavy hand" policy in response to common crime" [80]. Events in 2018 sadly unfolded to corroborate these claims.

A series of protest were sparked in April 2018 following the decision by the Nicaraguan government to introduce cuts to pensions that would increase workers contributions and reduce overall benefits. Although the government would cancel the welfare reform in response to the initial unrest, protest nonetheless spread largely because of the heavy-handed police response and government administrations claims that protest was the result of political manipulation by opposition groups [82]. On the Atlantic Coast anger also boiled over into violent protest due to the perceived failure of police and governmental response to wildfires in the Indio Maíz biosphere [83]. Media coverage highlighted the presence of the black uniforms of the Dantos Brigade at the center of the violence both in the initial protests and multiple confrontations that would take place in Managua, Masaya and Bluefields in following weeks and months [84]. International and national media coverage has also emphasized the apparent alliance between the unit and balaclava clad para-police groups otherwise in civilian clothing. Media articles suggest that these para-police groups are civilian volunteers from the Sandinista FSLN party [85].

It is these groups that are together attributed with the killing of hundreds of civilians and continuing threats made to community and opposition activists [86]. From 2018 to present multiple international news articles and reports de-

tail the involvement of these joint forces in the arbitrary detention and physical abuse of student protesters [87,88]. Key think-tanks critical to the Ortega government, including the Institute for Strategic Study and Public Policy (IEEP)-our academic partner institution in Nicaragua- have had their legal status revoked by the government.

#### 4. Discussion and Comparative Reflections

Our review of the implementation of community policing programmes in three Central American countries reveals the significance of their foundations. We highlight the lasting problem of the integration of individuals allied with earlier authoritarian government institutions. This is particularly evident in the case of Guatemala, where the influence of civilians and military personnel with this history in the Ministry of Government (Ministerio de Gobernación) resulted in the formation of a police force weakened by connections to corruption and organized crime [5]. In El Salvador where the effort to construct a new police force has largely been considered more successful, the ARENA governments worked to integrate members of the previous military regime in clear opposition of the philosophy and stated intentions of the Peace Accords. Under these conditions the democratic character of the police has been permanently affected and their participation in waves of repressive actions against the gangs has eroded public trust and confidence. As a result, two decades after the transition to democracy, c. 20% of the citizenry indicate that they do not depend on the police for their security. This implies that in key areas of the country there are hybrid systems of security in which citizens themselves intervene or where private security companies and criminal organisations are in control. All of which do not respond to democratic norms of the rule of law [5,89].

This reality places in doubt one of the substantial claims of the literature with regards to the importance of the police for the consolidation of trust in the Salvadorean and Guatemalan states. Goldsmith argues that trust in policing cannot be examined separately from trust in government [31]. Other authors argue that the actions of the police symbolize the State and therefore the legitimacy of the police is vital in terms of convincing citizens to obey the law [90]. The invisibility of the police to significant parts of the population in El Salvador and probably Guatemala limits this argument. This is especially the case given that this invisibility is not a matter of a lack of resources, but rather the outcome of decisions by powerful actors in government and policing institutions.

Whilst sweeping changes were made to Latin American public institutions, democratic practice, and law during the 1990s and 2000s, throughout this period it has also been evident that the region's earlier history of military dictatorship, class division and armed conflict has cast long shadows into the present. Peace in the region of Central America was to be secured through the combination of democratic institutions, the strengthening of civil society, and a set of neoliberal reforms aimed at unleashing the potential of the

local private sectors and foreign investment required for growth [91]. This combination of political liberal democracy and economic neoliberalism was supported by donors through a variety of assistance programs that led to specific adjustments. However, the co-existence of electoral democracy with violent practices sponsored by the State and a weak state of rule of law has generated a political context that struggles to remain democratic, and clearly affects the efforts to reform the police [10]. Global diffusion and local "editing" [10] or "translation and adaptation" of COP programs intermesh to generate policy outcomes that may adhere to the original model in some ways, but diverge from, or even oppose its precepts, in others [24].

The implementation of community policing in Guatemala and El Salvador was further compromised by the weak capacity of their police forces to control rising homicidal rates. Based on the argument that crime was at a level beyond the police capacity, several governments reintroduced the military in public security operations.

Our research in two distinct communities in Guatemala clearly evidences the need to pay attention to the context into which COP programmes are introduced. In Totonicapán formal policing is secondary to the policing that the community carries out itself, and trust in the police is based on an understanding that they do not interfere in the norms and customs of the local population. In contrast, in Villa Canales the population are overwhelmed by risks and insecurities that the community itself cannot control on its own. The population there appreciate the increasing level of police effectiveness but understand the scarcity of resources that affects police operations in their community.

The situation in Nicaragua represents a partial contrast to that which has occurred in Guatemala and El Salvador. Elections in the 1990s obliged the Sandinistas to accept reform leading to a delinking of the police from politics. This contributed to the rule of law in the country. Two factors facilitated this transition. The first was that the levels of violence and crime in the country was a lot lower than in neighboring countries, to a significant degree assisted by the removal of groups allied with the Somoza dictatorship. The second, was the formation of a model in which the police operated in alliance with civil society organizations with origins in Sandinismo. These unique factors explain the consolidation of a foundation of trust and confidence not found elsewhere in the region.

In the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala the efforts to support COP programmes initially corresponded with the initiatives of international donor institutions. This was strongly exemplified by the support granted to these efforts by multilateral and bilateral institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank, GIZ, JICA, Norad and the European Union. These institutions viewed COP as an appropriate path towards a more democratic form of policing. In an era of democracy accompanied by ever-rising rates of crime and violence COP was seen as a method to reform policing, but also to sell policing to the public [10].

Before 2014 there was no solid institutional support to

the police in either Guatemala or El Salvador. However, there were some pilot projects for community policing, and support for a focus on the issue of gender [14]. An aspect that has received little attention is that community policing programmes emerged without significant reform of institutional contexts. The creation of the Vice Ministry of Communal Affairs in Guatemala was aimed at creating crime prevention by funding security committees at the municipal level. The *Juntas Locales de Seguridad* (Local Security Committees) created in 1999 took place, however, on the foundations of self-defence committees (autodefensas) that had been founded during the armed conflict. These committees had been accused of episodes of extra-legal violence and hangings. Argueta [57] characterizes this process as one of layering, in which the institutional norms that encourage community participation end up reinforcing mechanisms that are anti-democratic.

In the case of Nicaragua, the characteristics of a communitarian police were formed on the foundations of social organization introduced during the Sandinista Revolution. Two important characteristics we have highlighted earlier is the emphasis given to collective organizations in the relationship between police and community, rather than to individuals or neighbors. The police's participation in social prevention programmes is also notable given that it surpasses similar characteristics of policing studied in other countries. Through these structures the national police were able to not only generate a strong contact with the local community but ensure the rapid exchange of information regarding crime and local development concerns. They also enabled the police to proactively identify threats at an earlier stage and efficiently intervene to prevent and remove these risks. Changing circumstances, however, make claims that the Nicaraguan COP model represents an example of good practice in public security increasingly untenable.

As a result of the institutional changes made by the Nicaraguan government, the police now have a permanent first commissioner and many of its social programmes with women and youths removed from their control. Whilst the government argues for this in terms of bureaucratic efficiency, the removal of these responsibilities from the police has also removed vital points of communication with the community. The key institutional mechanisms mentioned above continue to function, but increasing critique is made of the way in which the Ortega government's particular brand of ideology i.e., Sandinismo mixed with conservative Catholicism, has intervened in their operation. Party al-

liance appears to be proactively replacing democratic communitarianism as the defining characteristic of who receives attention from these instances. Indeed, it appears that issue of political alliances is at least a feature of the growing inability of the national police to respond to the growing levels of violence and insecurity developing in the Atlantic Autonomous Regions. In this context the police not only appear partisan but are also failing to actively prevent rising tensions and further conflict. The extraordinary violence and public unrest of recent years demonstrate that trust between the police and community, and the government and community are no longer what they once were.

In our research we have emphasized that COP is a trust building strategy. However, in studying these three contexts we think it worthwhile to explore the possibility of a more anthropological orientation in understanding trust and policing. We note in line with Broch-Due & Ystanes [92] that there is a common tendency to assume that trust is essentially the same everywhere. Borrowing from the work of Broch-Due & Ystanes we echo their argument that trust is a composite social phenomenon formed in complex social landscapes, each with their own histories [92]. The shared social spaces that trust builds are of different scales, complexity and duration depending on the specific geographical, cultural, and historical location. Trusting is built over time and always vulnerable to the countervailing forces of mistrust, which can overwhelm some social spaces and biographies [92]. In other words, local settings that reflect concentrations of ethnic population or social disadvantage often provide distinct experiences and socialization processes for residents that impact negatively upon public perceptions of public services including the police [93–95].

COP was exported to many countries in the context of a return to civilian rule. COP plus a better police service were supposed to facilitate a transition to democratic policing. However, in an authoritarian context COP has served the interests of authoritarian government. As a result of persisting authoritarian politics and social dynamics, a breakdown in state-community relations is occurring in all three countries- albeit with somewhat distinct features and gravity. Significant features of this breakdown are not only new articulations of civil and political violence, but a major reversal of the broad agreement on human security- concerned not only with public order, but well-being- that had started to take root with the establishment of community-oriented policing in the region.

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