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Costa Rica Turns to Prevention as Key Weapon to Fight Drug Onslaught

by George Rodríguez

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Costa Rica, a country that historically has prioritized social investment over security spending, is now challenged by the violence stemming from the onslaught of criminal activity—mostly drug trafficking—that is gripping Central America.

A major component of this security challenge is the threat the drug problem poses to the country's young people, especially those in vulnerable social and economic situations, many of whom fall prey to trafficking structures.

Over the past several years, the Central American isthmus has been increasingly used by drug traffickers as a bridge between the cocaine producers in South America and the consumer market in the US, and has become a war zone where military and police forces fight the powerful international drug cartels.

Ongoing territorial wars between local gangs clashing over control of turf for marketing drugs have raised the level of violence throughout the region, especially in the area's Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—where organized crime structures plus hundreds of youth gangs known as *maras* have turned the three nations into one of the world's most violent places ([NotiCen, Jan. 7, 2016](#), [May 26, 2016](#), [Jan. 26, 2017](#)).

Homicide statistics up

In Costa Rica, homicide statistics have reached their highest level so far: 11.8 per 100,000 last year, from 6.3 per 100,000 in 2000. In the 2010-2016 period, homicides went from 461 to 580 a year, a statistic that, for this country's traditional security standards, is alarming. Most of the drug-related homicides are committed by hitmen in the 15-30 age group, a socially vulnerable population segment that includes school dropouts, unemployed youngsters, members of dysfunctional families (often, "drug families"), and small outfits engaged in drug retailing, according to local authorities ([NotiCen, Sept. 8, 2016](#), and [Jan. 19, 2017](#)). Among the areas showing the highest impact are the densely-populated, middle-class and low-income districts of Desamparados—also known as "Desampa"—and Guadalupe, respectively on the southeastern and northeastern outskirts of San José, the nation's capital.

This has led security authorities to address the problem on two complementary levels: repression—although not militarized or as harsh as in other countries in the region—and prevention.

The first approach includes training the police forces both locally and with international cooperation, primarily from Colombia, Panama, and the US. At the second level, socially-oriented programs are being implemented, some aimed at raising awareness that security involves not only the government and its Fuerza Pública (the country's main police body) but also the people.

Some initiatives focus on minors and young adults who have been or are vulnerable to being drafted by organized crime networks or local gangs, and on those who are addicted to drugs or about to be.

One such tool is the Programa de Seguridad Comunitaria (Community Safety Program, PROSEC), managed since 2012 by the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (Public Security Ministry, MSP). It targets elementary and high school students, who are coached by specialized police personnel on security risks—including exposure to drugs, domestic violence, and gang violence—and how to deal with them.

'Together for Everyone'

More recently, the ministry announced another youth-oriented initiative involving a trio of specialized government agencies plus a related NGO—the Patronato Nacional de la Infancia (National Childhood Board, PANI), the Instituto sobre Alcoholismo y Farmacodependencia (Institute on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, IAFA), the Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas (Costa Rican Institute on Drugs, ICD), and the NGO Fundación Génesis (Genesis Foundation). The initiative, known as Juntos por Todos (Together for Everyone) is aimed at kids under 18 and was launched on Feb. 15 for a six-month trial period in Desamparados and Guadalupe.

During the press conference announcing the project, authorities from the agencies involved described it as innovative, stressing that repression alone is not the adequate focus and that prevention is a key component in the fight against the drug scourge.

“Projects such as the one we’re going to announce today very much go hand in hand with the reality we’re facing ... in the struggle mainly against organized crime and all these trends by criminal groups that, on a day-to-day basis, are penetrating not only Costa Rica but the region,” said Security Minister Gustavo Mata.

The MSP “is engaged in a head-on fight against those criminal groups, regarding the repressive aspect,” said Mata, former director of the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (Judicial Investigations Bureau, OIJ) and a former vice minister for security.

“To win this war we must have a clearer vision about what prevention is, we must invest more in prevention than in repression, and I say this because I’ve worked for 35 years in repression, and, to this date, I haven’t seen, in our filled jails, a single change in our children on the streets using drugs,” he added.

Mata explained that, until now, when police officers patrolling the streets found minors using drugs, the procedure was to confiscate the drugs, and if the volume was large enough, refer them to a legal authority.

“And nothing more, nothing happened, and the truth is that ... it wasn’t appropriate to continue that practice,” the minister told journalists. He said the Juntos por Todos project calls for police officers who find minors consuming drugs to immediately contact the minors’ parents and report the situation.

Closing a gap

Security Vice Minister María Fullmen told LADB that the new plan is designed to close a gap in the nation’s policies concerning its youth.

“This is an innovative project, because the country has a strategy for working with youngsters, regarding addictions or doing prevention in education centers, but no strategy to care for youngsters at social risk,” said Fullmen, a key promoter of the ministry’s social initiatives centered on minors. “Young people at risk, who still have a possibility to reinsert—be it in education centers, or reinsert in the labor market, or reinsert in the family, let’s say—that’s the population we’re going to care for.”

She added that the project is innovative because it includes parents as well as other family members, “and the treatment is going to be not only for the minor, but it includes the people the minor lives with.”

The project stems from the frustration a police officer “patrolling the streets feels when he approaches a kid who is using drugs, removes the drugs, and after that, nothing happens,” Fullmen said. “The minor returns to the same neighborhood, to the same family, with the same friends, and very angry at society and at the police in particular, because they took away the drugs, and probably ready to steal and pay for the drugs that were taken away or to buy more.”

Elaborating on Mata’s outline of the initiative, Fullmen pointed out that now, “when a police officer working his beat finds a kid in possession of drugs -or realizes the kid has used drugs—[the officer] asks the minor to call, on his or her phone, the parent or the person he or she lives with and to say he or she is with a police officer and [the parent] has to come to where the police officer is, to be served a slip ... with the minor’s data.”

If the family doesn’t show up, the minor is immediately transferred to PANI for it to find those relatives. A report would also be filed with Génesis, for it to also make an effort to find the minor’s family, she said.

“And from then on, the NGO—Génesis—begins to care for the minor and the family, and there’s treatment for the entire family, with the aim that the kid comes out of drug consumption,” in order to continue studying, find employment or have “a different life project, and come out of the risk he or she was running,” Fullmen said.

According to the new initiative, if the police officer again finds the kid in the same state as day one, PANI will charge the family with neglect, she said.

“This doesn’t mean we’re going to take that minor away from the family, because we believe this population must be helped in order to come out from drugs and drug consumption in time,” she said.

Fullmen also said that Desamparados and Guadalupe were chosen as trial areas for the plan because according to a study by IAFA “those are places where more kids with risk problems are found.”

The authorities involved say that education is a key component of prevention in the fight against drugs.

“People believe that messing with drugs has small consequences, so what we’re trying to show families is that it’s not so,” PANI President Ana Teresa León told LADB. “If a family speaks to the youngster, brings him in, works with him, devotes time, devotes attention, he’ll have a lower tendency to [go into drugs]. That’s the educational part. I hope that will work, and I hope families will listen to us on that.”

-- End --