



# Social capital and violence in poor urban areas of Honduras <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world: the high level of violence threatens the economic and social development of the country as it erodes human and social capital and limits trust among people in poor urban areas. However, neither a detailed consideration of the complex manner in which distinct dimensions of social capital interrelate with violence, nor the potential for double causality has received much attention.

*Objectives:* The study examines the influence of structural social capital (social organization characteristics) and cognitive social capital (social trust and cohesion characteristics) on risk of violence in poor urban areas of Honduras.

*Methods:* The study was carried out in two urban communities of Tegucigalpa experiencing high levels of violence and insecurity. For the quantitative analysis, 1000 individuals older than 18 answered a structured questionnaire. Violence exposure was evaluated based on respondents' self-reporting. Social capital was defined based on the use of the short version of the Adapted Social Capital Assessment Tool.

*Results:* Our results support previous evidence from Guatemala showing that cognitive and structural social capital were inversely related to risk of violence: people with high cognitive social capital had a lower risk of violence (OR 0.46 CI 95: 0.28–0.76) compared to people with low cognitive social capital, whereas people with high structural social capital had a higher risk of violence (OR 1.68 CI 95: 1.04–2.71) compared to people with low structural social capital.

*Conclusions:* Social trust and social activism exhibit significant associations with risk of violence, however, these dimensions are consequences as well as causes of violence.

*Implications for practice:* In an intervention perspective it is important to recognize the difference between social organization and cooperative action for creating change, as these concepts represent very dissimilar levels of collective action toward violence. It is thus important to link the items of social capital, primarily within the structural dimension, to the specific objectives of a given intervention.

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## 1. Introduction

Crime and violence are key development issues for Latin America with the Central American countries; Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador representing the most violent countries in the region (Bank, 2010). Violence is a result of various societal, community and individual factors which interact in a complex manner. Its causes can be assessed within an ecological framework of four levels (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002b); at the individual level (first level) personal behavior, history of substance abuse and/or psychological disorders affect the risk of violence, which, in combination with relationship parameters (second level) like family bonds, violent friends and/or low socioeconomic household status can increase the risk of becoming either a victim of violence or a perpetrator (Krug et al., 2002b). Likewise, community factors (level 3), such as income inequality, social acceptability of violence and social capital significantly affect the overall risk of violence (Krug et al., 2002b). Societal factors (level 4) such as ineffectiveness of the justice system and the lack of control of firearms are crucial root causes of violence. The majority of serious crimes in the region are never solved: in Guatemala the impunity reaches around 98% as a result of poor rule of law and political polarization (Matute Rodríguez & Santiago, 2007). High levels of impunity entail low levels of trust in the police and other authorities, and general fear and insecurity in the Latin American populations.

Honduras is the world's most violent non-war country with a homicide rate of 85.5 per 100,000 inhabitants representing 7172 homicides in 2012; or an average of 20 murders per day. The murders are primarily committed with firearms (83.4%) and with a high proportion of contract killings (23.5%) (UNAH – IUDPAS, 2013). These threats have increased substantially over the past several years and the government of Honduras lacks sufficient resources to address these issues. The high level of violence threatens the economic and social development of the country in a context of poverty, high level of unemployment and local illicit drug trade, economic and gender inequality, and high firearm availability in combination with cultural norms that support violence (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002a). Importantly, violence is recognized as a serious public health problem due to violence-related physical and psychological morbidities and disabilities (Matzopoulos, Bowman, Butchart, & Mercy, 2008; Yacoub, Arellano, & Padgett-Moncada, 2006).

### 1.1. Preventing violence through building social capital

Violence prevention efforts in Latin America emphasize the need for launching policies aiming to build social capital due to their ability to provide social control and to engage citizens in partnering with the state to hold the institutions, in particular the police, accountable (Brune & Bossert, 2009; Cuesta & Alda, 2012; *Violence in Colombia*, 2000). Such policies call for cooperative action from civil society, which requires restoration of social cohesion in local communities and trust between individuals and may yield trust between strangers, providing the basis for peace and development (Bank, 2010; Brune & Bossert, 2009; Cuesta & Alda, 2012). However, if populations do not experience support from both the state and the private sector, neither social stability nor widespread popular support, social capital weakens. Due to the complexity of the problem of violence, prevention programs need a high degree of inter-sectoral involvement where criminal justice

reforms must be linked to broader reforms that address different sectors including education, health, social protection, and labor markets addressing risk factors at different ecological societal levels (Bank, 2010; Kjaerulf & Barahona, 2010; Moser & McIlwaine, 2006) and thus require long continuous efforts to produce positive results.

### 1.2. Social capital and violence: a view at the literature

Previous research has established that violence is associated with a reduced level of social capital (Dinesen et al., 2013; Hernandez & Grineski, 2012; Putnam, 2001; Sabatini, 2009) and fears related to violence impede social organizing and civic participation (Abom, 2004). Correspondingly, social connection including opportunities for active participation of community members and organizations (both formal and informal) in social and economic life has been shown to be an important protective factor against violent behavior (Bank, 2010; Weiss, 2011). Key elements of social capital represent networks and reciprocated exchange, solidarity, trust, and social control (Portes, 1998). However, operationalizing this complex concept is difficult, and satisfactory measures of social capital are generally hard to find. In this research, we focus on two dominant dimensions in social capital; a “structural” dimension of social capital, consisting of network connections facilitating mutually beneficial collective action through established roles, and a “cognitive” dimension, consisting of attitudes toward trust, shared norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs (Dasgupta & Serageldin, 2000). Such dimensions of social capital, emphasizing the distinction between trust and civic engagement have previously been analyzed in relation to crime rates in the United States with different modeling of the dimensions. These studies include a study by Kennedy, Kawachi, Prothrow-Stith, Lochner, and Gupta (1998), which found that both dimensions are significantly associated with firearm violence, and two studies showing that high levels of trust are associated with lower homicide rates (Galea, Karpati, & Kennedy, 2002; Rosenfeld, Baumer, & Messner, 2001). The primary results of these studies report that the trust dimension of social capital seems to be associated with reduced homicide rates, whereas less and somewhat irregular support is found for the effects of other indicators of social capital; i.e. civil engagement on victimization (Lederman, Loayza, & Menéndez, 2002; Rosenfeld et al., 2001). This is particularly found in a recent study from Guatemala which emphasizes the importance of separating structural and cognitive social capital in relation to violence (Dinesen et al., 2013). Social trust and social activism do thus exhibit significant associations with homicide rates, however, these dimensions are consequences as well as causes of homicide (Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2004).

In this study we aim to investigate the characteristics of the association between the structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital and violence in one of the world's most violent settings.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Data collection

This study is based on a survey study undertaken by The Centre for Prevention and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and Their Families (CPTRT) in Honduras in 2011. The survey was carried out in two urban areas in Tegucigalpa, Nueva Suyapa (NS) and Villa Nueva (VN). NS and VN represent similar contexts in relation to poverty, levels of

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