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ELIMINATING THE KIDNAPPERS IN EL SALVADOR

From 1999 to 2004 the National Civil Police (PNC) of El Salvador virtually eliminated kidnapping for ransom as a significant crime problem. This paper describes recent reforms to the Salvadoran criminal justice system and reviews the country's experience with kidnapping. The authors induced 11 lessons for combating kidnapping for ransom from open-ended interviews with high-ranking PNC officers who were involved in developing and executing the strategies to control this crime.

INTRODUCTION

The civil war in El Salvador subjected the country to more than a decade of destruction, social instability and brutality perpetrated by both opposing sides in the struggle (see Martínez, 1996; Rosenthal, 2000; Baklien, 2001). Since the 1992 Chapultapec Accords which ended the war, Salvadoran law enforcement, prosecutorial and judicial systems have completed the reforms called for in the peace settlement. In this context, the National Civil Police of El Salvador (*Policía Nacional Civil* or PNC) confronted a multitude of crime control problems. One of the most significant was the prevalence of kidnapping for ransom. Their response, through a variety of reforms, produced a reduction in kidnappings known to the police from a peak of 114 in 2000 to a frequency of 7 for all of 2003 and 4 during the first six months of 2004. The rate of kidnapping for ransom fell from approximately 1.78 per 100,000 to approximately 0.125 per 100,000 in only three years.

THE CONTEXT OF REFORM

The agreements reached in the Salvadoran peace accords in 1992 implied radical changes for the public security system (Call, 1997): (1) the dissolution of the old military-controlled national police; (2) the creation of the National Civil Police (PNC), responsible for the country's public security overseen by the Minister of the Interior and Public Safety (Costa, 1999); (3) the formation of the National Public Security Academy (ANSP), an autonomous public entity in charge of recruiting, selecting, and training old and aspiring PNC officers and agents; and (4) the creation of the Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office, which has the power to investigate human rights abuses through unannounced inspections of police and military facilities.

POLICE REFORM

In 1995, the ANSP produced enough graduates to allow the PNC to completely replace the old security structures (Costa, 1995). This was done through a systematic and orderly process, under the supervision of the United Nations Mission in El Salvador (for details see Costa, 1999).

JUDICIAL REFORM

El Salvador's judicial branch functions as an independent public entity with no executive influence in its activities. Historically, it has been an inquisitorial system, where the same judge performed accusatory, investigative, and sentencing tasks (JSCA, 2003). Even though trials by jury for "common crimes" were introduced in

1906, they followed a pattern similar to the traditional bench trials: no oral presentation of evidence or argumentation to the jury; reliance on written evidence in the case file only; no examination of witnesses, experts, defendants or victims; and no jury instructions to assist them in reaching a verdict (Popkin, 2000). The 1992 peace treaty required several reforms in the Salvadoran judicial system, including an enhanced role for the National Judiciary Council (CNJ) which had been created in 1989. The CNJ was to take a supervisory role over the judiciary from the process of selection through promotion, discipline and dismissal (Popkin, 2000).

The peace negotiations also resulted in the transfer of the power to prosecute persons accused of crimes (previously an exclusive duty of penal judges) to the Attorney General. In 1998, the Salvadoran Penal and Criminal Procedure Codes were drastically changed, transforming the Salvadoran inquisitorial judicial system into a hybrid between the adversarial and the inquisitorial models.

REFORMS IN THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE

Since its creation in 1939, the General Attorney's Office (FGR) has been part of the Public Ministry, which currently also includes the State Council and the Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office. These offices function separately and are independent of any other government entity. Until the peace accords, the FGR had no formal power over criminal investigations, but constitutional reforms gave it the power to direct the PNC's investigations. Nevertheless, the FGR was "ill-prepared for its new role" and the PNC was unwilling to recognize it (Popkin, 2000: 217).

The new codes gave the FGR a monopoly over criminal investigations in El Salvador by awarding it the authority to direct police investigations. Before the new codes, the only academic requirement for becoming a public prosecutor was to have taken the approved college-level Criminal Procedure and Civil Procedure courses. After the reforms, newly hired prosecutors were required to have law degrees. The prosecutors already working for the FGR who were not lawyers were given the chance to finish law degrees within an established time period. During the transitional period, the United Nations launched a series of training programs. A 2002 report describes the FGR's overall court performance as "acceptable" (CEPES & FESPAD, 2002).

KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM IN EL SALVADOR

El Salvador's experience with kidnappings has not been academically studied or even properly documented. Nevertheless, looking at this country's recent history, one can clearly distinguish that the kidnappings committed between 1970 and 1992 generally have political motivations and the ones perpetrated since the end of the civil war in 1992 have been primarily for criminal reasons.

According to the criminological theories that base their explanations of criminal behavior on environmental changes (e.g., strain, social disorganization, and anomie theories), the sociological changes that accompanied the transition from the civil war to a new peaceful society would imply a rise in Salvadoran crime rates (which, in fact, happened). After the peace accords, non-political violence has been one of the most important issues in El Salvador (Arana, 2001), along with a general rise in crime rates (Stanley, 1999). Perito (1997) argues that an increase in common crime is followed by a growth of organized crime. This proved to be true in El Salvador. A large number of civil war ex-combatants who found themselves unemployed (as a result of the demobilization of leftist rebel groups and the reduction of the army's personnel after the peace

accords) took advantage of the weapons left over from the war and their organizational skills learned in the fighting to form various criminal groups which collectively shaped a large criminal network (Call, 1997).

Organized crime in El Salvador may be best described by what Homer (1973) calls "matrices of crime" and "criminal societies," where (in the former) criminals do not belong to any organization but associate with others in recurring illicit activities, and (in the latter) they work together as a formal criminal organization. According to Commissioner José Luis Tobar, founder and head of the PNC's Special Anti-Kidnapping Group (GEAS) (2000-2001) and the Elite Division against Organized Crime (DECO) (2001-2002), and head of criminal investigations in El Salvador (1999-2002), some offenders always work together as a formal criminal organization and others form criminal crews or bandas depending on the characteristics of the crimes that were going to be perpetrated (J. L. Tobar, personal communication, March 3, 2004). Commissioner Tobar and Sub-Commissioner Saúl Hernández, founder and second in command of the GEAS and DECO during the same period, argue that many of these "criminal societies" and "matrices of crime" did not initially engage in kidnapping for ransom, but (just as it happens in the legal business world when selling or manufacturing a new product becomes attractive and profitable, creating a saturated market) several factors contributed to making kidnapping an attractive illicit activity (J. L. Tobar, personal communication, March 3, 2004; S. Hernández, personal communication, April 14, 2004).

This is consistent with the number of kidnappings reported to the PNC, which show a steady rise reaching 101 in 1999 and 114 in 2000. A constant decrease can be observed in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004, with 49, 19, 7, and 4 kidnappings, respectively. Tobar maintains that this is the result of the implementation of different policing strategies that made the investigation of these crimes more efficient and effective, which obviously made it a less attractive illicit activity.

Sub-Inspector Walter Lazo, who was directly involved in the battle against kidnapping for ransom in El Salvador as head of the Kidnapping and Extortion Department of the now extinct Criminal Investigations Division (1999-2000), and as founder and chief of the Investigations Department of the GEAS (2000-2001) and DECO (2001-2002), states that, by 1999, kidnapping in El Salvador was a chronic criminal problem, as opposed to an emerging one. Offenders who were involved in other organized illicit activities, such as bank robberies, fencing of stolen goods, car robbery and theft, among others, viewed kidnapping not just as a profitable business but as a necessary step they had to take in order to increase their reputation in the underworld (W. Lazo, personal communication, March 5, 2004). He also suggests that, because of this, the profile of the victims and the kidnapers, and the level of structure, organization, and criminal sophistication of the criminal organizations, varied greatly. In other words, kidnapers could be part of a recognized criminal enterprise or just a group of petty criminals who decided to venture into kidnapping for ransom. In a similar way, victims could be prominent business people or just humble persons who lived in a countryside village and were locally considered wealthy. Likewise, a kidnapping could be committed by a rigid organization, with a clearly defined hierarchy, or by informal group of inexperienced criminals.

METHODOLOGY

Every policy-making police officer of the PNC involved in the fight against kidnapping for ransom from 1999 to 2004 was interviewed during March and April, 2004 (J.

L. Tobar, personal communication, March 3, 2004; S. Hernández, personal communication, April 14, 2004; W. Lazo, personal communication, March 5, 2004; R. Menesses, personal communication, May 24, 2004; P. González, personal communication, April 14, 2004; D. Hernández, personal communication, March, 5, 2004; G. Mayorga, personal communication, February 26, 2004; M. Sandoval, personal communication, April 15, 2004). Interviews were open-ended and were conducted by one of the authors (Ponce) who is also an official of the PNC. The other authors (Woods and Skelton) had previously conducted interviews with many of these same subjects (and other PNC officials) on more general organizational topics in February, 2004. From these interviews, the authors have induced eleven "lessons" learned from the experience of these PNC officers in combating (and virtually eliminating) kidnapping for ransom in El Salvador.

LESSONS FROM THE SALVADORAN RESPONSE TO KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM

Lesson 1. Kidnappings for ransom should be investigated by a single law enforcement unit.

The kidnappings of Guillermo Sol Bang, Harold Hill, and Andres Suster ("Giro a Caso de Secuestros," 1999) which were perpetrated after the peace accords and were linked to political motivations, captured the attention of the Salvadoran government. Hence, these cases became a national security issue and the newly created Intelligence Organization of the State (OIE), in charge of gathering information for the development of strategic plans concerning social, political, and economical issues, was assigned to look into the matter. Since its jurisdiction was confined to intelligence collection (and therefore could not be used for building a case for the prosecution of the offenders), the PNC created a special unit in 1996 to work in coordination with the OIE: the Support Group (GA).

The peace accords required that ex-combatants from the military's law enforcement structures and the FMLN would compose 40% (20% each) of the initial deployment of the PNC (Stanley, 1999). Since it was suspected that the FMLN was involved in the three kidnappings in question, it was determined that GA would include only people who had no links to leftist organizations and who were considered capable and trustworthy.

While the GA was in charge of investigating the Suster, Hill and Sol Bang cases, the Criminal Investigations Division's (DIC) Kidnapping and Extortions Department (DSE) was responsible for solving all other kidnappings. As this crime became an attractive illicit enterprise and more were perpetrated, the GA started to investigate the kidnappings of prominent citizens, leaving the DSE with those cases that were not considered as "important" (under the conception that the better the socio-economic status of the victim, the greater the complexity and the organization of the group that perpetrated the crime). Although the DSE and the GA were investigating the same type of illegal activity, there was no efficient or effective way of sharing intelligence or case information. This was caused mainly by the confidentiality with which the GA started its operations and the lack of trust that existed between the units. The flow of information only went from the DSE to the GA and was restricted to specific requirements made by the latter. This limited the ability of the PNC, as the sole Salvadoran law enforcement body, to have a clear picture of the kidnapping for ransom industry in El Salvador, thus preventing it from developing effective crime control strategies.

In 1999, aware of the difficulties of having two separate units to investigate kidnapping for ransom, the PNC decided to create the Special Anti-Kidnapping Group

(GEAS). This allowed it to concentrate all of the intelligence regarding kidnapping for ransom and, therefore, have a clear understanding of this illicit activity and the people who engage in it. This change provided the necessary impetus to formulate strategies to attack the problem.

Lesson 2. Treat all cases equally, without considering the socio-economic status of the victim or the complexity and organization of the criminal group.

Kidnapping for ransom became an attractive illicit activity. Criminal societies became interested in this type of crime, and independent professional criminals also began to organize for this purpose. The GA and the DSE were assigned cases on the basis of the socio-economic status of the victim. The GA had more human and material resources, making enforcement more effective in the cases it investigated and weaker in the ones worked by the DSE. This enabled the criminals and criminal societies that perpetrated kidnappings (and never came to the attention of the GA) to become more proficient, better organized, able to acquire the means to corrupt police officers, able to hire defense attorneys, and able to improve their modus operandi. In other words, they moved from a predatory to a parasitic phase. The PNC realized this mistake, and, as a result, adopted the policy that every case would be assigned the same resources and follow the same investigative procedures. The statement made by Transito Cabrera, leader of the one of the best organized criminal groups (the "Tacoma-Cabrera" crew) best described the deterrent effect of the new strategy during the interrogation following his arrest. He referred to the high probability of being caught by the PNC with the words: "Anyone who gets involved in kidnapping is crazy!"

Lesson 3. The unit that investigates kidnappings for ransom must have a leadership of career police officers who are trustworthy, responsible, capable, dedicated to their work, and are able to adapt to innovative strategies in a short period of time.

During the planning stages for the creation of the GEAS, choosing the people who would direct it was a key concern. Commissioner José Tobar Prieto was selected to be the chief of the GEAS. He was a seasoned investigator, having graduated from Chile's School of Criminal Investigation in the 1980s and having worked as a police officer in many law enforcement investigation units since then. His role as head of the PNC's Narcotics Division (DAN) has been widely recognized by foreign agencies such as the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). He also was credited by the American government with dismantling the biggest human trafficking in minors ring in Central America. Since the creation of the PNC, he has visited several countries, including France and the United Kingdom, to receive training on different investigative techniques and investigation management systems. Tobar also graduated from the FBI Academy course on major case management and law enforcement leadership. When he was appointed, he was in charge of criminal investigations nationwide and continued to perform those duties during the time he was also head of the GEAS.

Sub-Commissioner Saúl Hernández, was selected as second in command for the GEAS. Although his only experience with criminal investigations came from directing the DIC's Automobile Theft and Robbery Department, he was responsible for the establishment of the local office of INTERPOL (of which he became chief). He was responsible for initiating the process by which El Salvador created a Sub-regional office of INTERPOL in the country.

Sub-Inspector Walther Lazo was selected as the head of GEAS's investigations department. Lazo was head of the DSE in 1999 when the GEAS was created. During his time as head of that department, he managed to partially remove the barriers that existed between the unit he directed and the GA. He also demonstrated that, with fewer resources, the DSE was able to solve kidnappings for ransom cases as efficiently and

effectively as the GA, disregarding the complexity and organization of the criminal group involved. As the DSE had fewer resources, Lazo would lend his own family car to conduct surveillance (knowing that he could be easily identified and that this could make him and his family targets for reprisals), demonstrating his commitment to his department's work. The investigators under his command saw this and started to use their own vehicles for the same investigative purposes.

Lesson 4. The Chief of Police should be committed and involved with the unit that investigates kidnapping for ransom.

Mauricio Sandoval, Director General of the PNC from 1999-2003, was directly involved and committed to the work of the GEAS. He was kept up to date in the developments in each case and participated in every operation, himself serving arrest and search warrants and participating in rescue operations side-by-side with GEAS detectives and other police officers and agents from other specialized units. This degree of involvement allowed him to have first-hand knowledge of the problems and obstacles encountered by the GEAS. In turn, he assigned proper resources and coordinated needed support from other government institutions and private entities. Sandoval's direct involvement in operations increased the morale of the police officers involved, as it tacitly sent the message that their work was important, and showed the Salvadoran citizens that kidnappings for ransom were a top priority of the PNC.

Lesson 5. There should be a mechanism through which case development and operations are constantly evaluated.

Organized crime adapts to its environment, seeking new opportunities and devising ways to avoid police identification (Albanese, 2000; Mastrofski & Potter, 1987). The PNC developed an evaluation mechanism through which it could ensure the quality of the GEAS' investigations and operations and change its procedures to respond to the volatile nature of organized crime. High-ranking, trustworthy police officers with outstanding law enforcement careers were appointed to an Evaluation Committee which would be in charge of evaluating the development of investigations on every case, in order to decide what investigative tasks needed to be performed, and if there was sufficient evidence and/or intelligence to coordinate arrest or search warrants or conduct rescue operations. They evaluated the investigation, planning, execution and results obtained in every operation that arose from the work of the GEAS. Commissioners José Tobar Prieto, Pedro González, and Ricardo Meneses, heads of the investigations and GEAS, public safety, and intelligence departments, respectively, were selected to become part of the committee. Mauricio Sandoval, the Director General of the PNC, chaired the evaluation meetings. The work of the committee assured that case investigations would gather enough evidence and intelligence to secure excellent conviction rates. The evaluations also allowed the GEAS to change their investigative practices to respond to the changing tactics of criminal organizations.

Lesson 6. Surveillance, intelligence and information analysis, and investigations should be performed by different departments within the investigative unit, but there must be a constant flow of information among them that provides every participant with feedback.

The PNC determined that the GEAS should have three separate departments for intelligence and information analysis, surveillance, and investigations. Appropriately qualified personnel were assigned to each functional department. GEAS also established a mechanism for sharing intelligence and information. The investigators and surveillance police officers gave daily updates of their work to the analysis department which would study the information, disseminate it to the right department, and make recommendations regarding tasks that should be performed. A similar procedure was

followed between detectives and surveillance teams. This method of work provided several advantages: (1) it guaranteed open-mindedness in the investigations, avoiding a single investigative path based on "hunches"; (2) investigations were carried out efficiently, reducing the time it took to solve cases by having different people perform the necessary investigative steps; (3) detection of surveillance teams was reduced, since the people who worked surveillance had no other contact in which they identified themselves as police agents; and (4) the information provided by informants and other sources was not evaluated by a single person and, therefore, was available to everyone involved in order to carry out investigative tasks.

Lesson 7. The unit in charge of investigating kidnappings for ransom should be located in an isolated, unmarked and secure location to avoid information leaks, maintain confidentiality and prevent identification of personnel.

The GEAS was located in a house with nothing that identified it as a police unit. Only authorized people within the PNC knew its location. The DSE did not have this luxury, as it was situated in the DIC building, along with other PNC offices. This allowed others to know when its officers and agents went out to serve warrants and permitted its personnel to associate with other police personnel. As organized crime evolves, it generally manages to infiltrate and corrupt law enforcement (Bradshaw et al., 1991). El Salvador was no exception. Investigations determined that organized criminal groups involved in kidnapping for ransom had infiltrated the PNC and policemen had directly participated in their activities (Alas, 2000). Selecting an undisclosed location for the GEAS reduced the risks incurred by the DSE, minimizing the probability of information leaks, assuring the confidentiality of operations, and avoiding the identification of its personnel.

Lesson 8. The kidnapping investigation unit is not enough to combat the problem; every police unit should be considered when developing strategies, but confidentiality should be a top priority.

The GEAS was exclusively dedicated to the investigation of kidnappings for ransom. Nevertheless, certain activities, such as serving warrants and victim rescue attempts, needed the support of other police units with special expertise. Activities were coordinated on a "need-to-know" basis. Tactical and crowd control units, which collaborated on serving warrants, were given notice and briefed only a few hours before the activity would take place, and their personnel had to be isolated until it did. Using specialized units for this type of work assured successful operations, and ensured that the proper amount of force was used.

Although the GEAS gathered most of its own intelligence, the PNC's intelligence unit (SID) also collected information. The information obtained by the former was very good, and that gathered by the latter was used to complement it. GEAS' intelligence gathering operations became so effective that, through it, several families were warned about possible kidnap attempts on them and were given training in preventive behavior.

Lesson 9. Public trust of the police can be gained through a combination of rigorous selection and control mechanisms for those involved with kidnapping investigation and a systematic institutional cleansing process.

Societies going through a post-civil war period often have negative attitudes towards the police (Zvekic, 1998). Polls conducted in El Salvador in 1998 showed that the Salvadoran citizens doubted the PNC's ability to reduce crime and approved of a vigilante approach to do so (Monterrosa, 1998; IUDOP, 1998). Furthermore, police officer involvement with organized crime, abuse of authority and other illegal be-

havior had been widely exposed by the media (Alas, 2000, 1999; Infopress Centroamericana, 1998; "Intolerancia Causa Ola Criminal," 2001). As a result, the Salvadoran citizens often did not report kidnappings, nor did they collaborate with the PNC's investigations.

When the GEAS was created, a rigorous selection process was designed for those people who were to become part of the unit. Polygraph tests, background checks, drug testing, and psychological tests were used to screen candidates. Intellectual capacity and the ability to maintain confidentiality were also considered. Once a person was accepted in the GEAS, he or she could be subjected to periodic polygraph or any other tests to ensure reliability. Each member was hand-picked to ensure that the elite of the PNC would be included in the GEAS. This was done to assure people that, even if they did not trust the PNC, they could trust this unit because their members went through a complex process which guaranteed their proficiency and dependability. This proved to be a key factor for gaining access to kidnapping victims and their families.

The GEAS, through its intelligence operations, knew when a person was kidnapped and had information about cases that occurred in the past. The problem was that people did not report the crime or did not collaborate whenever they were contacted. The PNC turned to the National Private Enterprise organization (ANEP) for help, explaining that the GEAS was an elite unit which could be trusted. ANEP, being a private and respected organization, contacted the families of victims that were captive and those that had been kidnapped in the past, and convinced them to collaborate with the PNC. To further establish trust among the victims, families and the GEAS, ANEP offered to hire private lawyers to prosecute the offenders when they were caught.

The PNC also initiated a cleansing process (*depuración*) through which hundreds of police officers and agents were dismissed from the police. Both strategies managed to increase trust among kidnapping victims, reducing the percentage of kidnappings not reported to the PNC from 30% in 1999 to 10% in 2000, 1.5% in 2001 and zero in 2002. Lesson 10. Involve the mass media and the private sector in strategies developed to generate public support and make kidnapping for ransom a less attractive criminal enterprise.

As the 1990s were coming to an end, kidnapping for ransom stories plagued crime news reports in both printed and televised media in El Salvador. The issue was handled negatively, portraying the PNC's work unfavorably, revealing police investigative techniques, and making kidnapping for ransom an attractive crime.

News stories about kidnapping cases exposed law enforcement's limitations and shortcomings before the GEAS, increasing fear of crime among Salvadoran citizens. Police investigative techniques were uncovered and described in detail, providing criminals with knowledge to become more proficient and avoid detection. News reports which mentioned ransoms paid by the victims' families emphasized the large quantity of money involved. Collectively, this mishandling of the problem by the media sent a message to criminals telling them that the PNC was inefficient in kidnapping investigations, how they could avoid being detected, and how much money they could make.

The PNC decided to meet with the media and discuss the negative effects of their reporting. The purpose was to open up to them and show them all the work that was being done in order to control kidnapping for ransom. The strategy was based on openness, where reporters were allowed to go along when arrest and search warrants were served. Statistics were provided to them on a regular basis, and statements were

given by PNC authorities whenever possible. The media, in turn, stopped revealing police investigative techniques and downplayed the quantity of money paid in terms of ransoms.

Including the media also proved to be a vital factor in the development of campaign strategies against kidnapping. With their help, the PNC was able to launch "the most wanted," "know your neighbor," and "landlord awareness" campaigns, all intended to help in locating fugitives, promoting citizen reports of suspicious activities in their communities, and informing landlords that they could be renting their house, apartment, or property to criminals who were going to use it to keep their victims captive. In other words, the messages behind these campaigns were aimed at behavioral changes within Salvadoran society, which, if effective, would imply an increased degree of difficulty for criminals who decided to try kidnapping, making it an unattractive type of crime. Even though the help of the Salvadoran media was essential for implementing this type of strategy, funding was still necessary. ANEP again came forward, and provided financial aid to the PNC's anti-kidnapping campaign.

Lesson 11. Law enforcement anti-kidnapping strategies are effective only if the rest of the criminal justice system is considered during their formulation.

The 1998 reforms to the Criminal Procedure and Penal Codes provided that the Attorney General's Office would direct every PNC investigation. Therefore, a drastic change in the police unit in charge of solving kidnappings for ransom implied a similar adjustment in the FGR. A team of public prosecutors was assembled, following a process similar to that required for GEAS members. This was not enough. PNC had had difficulties adjusting to the new authority of the FGR regarding criminal investigations. Commissioner Tobar, being an experienced investigator and knowing the advantages of working hand-in-hand with the FGR, incorporated the public prosecutors in operational police activities so they identified with the police mission. Prosecutors were given radios with GEAS' frequencies and office space at GEAS headquarters. The objective was to involve the public prosecutors with the police, assuring a good working relationship, excellent flow of information, and outstanding coordination. As a result, more than five hundred criminals involved in kidnapping for ransom have been captured, of which approximately 90% have been convicted by the courts.

Organized criminal groups often use violence to intimidate people and get their way (Bradshaw et al., 1991). Considering that judges that presided over small town courts were more vulnerable to threats and violence by offenders, the PNC, to avoid possible judge or jury intimidation, arranged for all kidnapping cases to be heard in courts located in the nearest large city. This strategy seems effective because there is no evidence that a judge's decision has ever been influenced by intimidation by organized criminals since the policy was adopted.

To ensure that the strategies that involved the PNC, the FGR and the judiciary would have a significant impact and reduce kidnapping, the PNC also recommended new laws to make kidnapping for ransom an unattractive criminal enterprise. Together with the FGR, the PNC presented to the Legislative Assembly a proposal that contained several reforms intended to enhance criminal investigations, to eliminate legal restrictions on police practices used by kidnappers to avoid detection, to define organized criminal behavior as an illicit activity, and to increase sentences for crimes associated with kidnapping for ransom. These changes have been incorporated into Salvadoran law and have been a useful tool in the reduction of kidnapping.

CONCLUSION

The virtual elimination of kidnapping as a crime problem in El Salvador is remarkable, especially considering the social, political and human struggle which wracked the country during the civil war and the monumental efforts to restore and preserve democracy in the past twelve years. The lessons drawn in this paper from the Salvadoran experience can be useful for other countries trying to develop strategies to attack similar criminal problems. Nevertheless, the kidnapping for ransom experience in El Salvador has to be studied further, analyzing the characteristics of the offenders and organizations involved in it. This will allow policy makers to determine if the Salvadoran lessons are a viable alternative as a crime control approach.

A national police department (which includes many officers who were opposing combatants in the civil war) now strives vigorously to ensure democratic policing for all of the people of El Salvador. A part of this long-term effort is the development of record systems and databases which will permit researchers to conduct longitudinal studies of crime control efforts in El Salvador. In the meantime, researchers must be content with the examination of available data and the willingness of the PNC leadership to make themselves and their department available for study in an open, honest and transparent manner.

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