



# Conference Report

## XXI International Safe Communities Conference: “Prevention to build safer environments”, Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico

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Mexico is a country where crime (including drug wars, homicide, assault, rape and murder) is considered amongst its most urgent concerns (Albuja, 2014). Juarez in Mexico is known as the murder capital of the world where approximately 70,000 people were killed as a result of intense criminal violence over a six-year period between 2007 and 2012 (Pan, Widner & Enomoto, 2012). Mérida, Yucatán, on the other hand, has remained a state with very low criminality and is regarded as the safest city in Mexico (Piccato, 2013). Mérida provided the backdrop for the 21st International Conference on Safe Communities. In 2009, the International Safe Communities broadened its reach to Mexico, and engaged with a large group of Mexican citizens who decided to mobilise resources in cooperation with the authorities and governments in Mexico in pursuit of solutions to the safety issues faced by their citizens. The XXI International Safe Communities Conference is an outcome of this initiative which sought to promote a local culture of injury and violence prevention.

The conference was held from 21–23 October 2013 and hosted by The National Association of Councils for Citizen Participation in Mexico. This Safe Communities Conference was the only conference to date to be hosted in two languages, English and Spanish, as a result of the overwhelming attendance of Mexican and Latin American delegates’ and their respective countries’ commitment to building safer environments and promoting a culture of safety promotion. The focal theme of the conference was *Prevention to build safer environments*, with more than 300 delegates in attendance from over 24 countries, including the United States, Columbia, Peru, Korea, Australia, and South Africa. The conference provided a dynamic platform for the exchange of ideas, experiences and thoughts in the interest of safe communities. Exposure to available information and successes reflected by presenters highlighted the necessary realities communities face in identifying local risks, and implementing preventative measures to reduce the high injury, illness, and mortality rates.

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The conference's keynote addresses encapsulated the essence of the conference as well as the Mexican approach to building safe communities. Mr Marcos Fastlicht, President of the National Association of Councils for Citizen Participation, stressed the importance of encouraging citizen participation as a driver of development in Latin America and in particular Mexico. Dr Manuel Mondragon y Kalb, Commissioner of National Security and personal representative of the President of Mexico, in his opening speech emphasised the importance of every citizen's contribution towards constructing safer environments. He stated that this is one of the fundamental principles in the prevention of crime in order to build safer communities. Dr Antonio Luigi Mazzitelli, regional representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), believed that making prevention the focus of efforts to create safe communities is what will distinguish Mexico from the rest of the world. He commented that having a proactive rather than a reactive stance will lead to their success in establishing safe communities and preventing crime and violence in the country. He also noted that in the city of Mérida alone over 800 citizens volunteer their services in support of building safe communities.

The conference's scientific programme had a strong emphasis on the Latin-American experience and provided a platform to highlight work on strengthening citizen action and issues of prevention. Presenters shared their success stories in their communities and countries through thematic oral sessions and interactive poster sessions. These sessions focused on strategies of prevention such as institutional initiatives, community organisation, communication, surveillance systems and security in public places. In addition to this, presentations focused on issues pertaining to road safety, injury prevention, youth and elderly safety, as well as challenges and barriers that promote a culture of prevention.

A Safe Community Certifier Centre meeting complemented the XXI International Safe Communities Conference and was also held on the 22nd of October 2013 and attended by certifier centre representatives from around the globe. The meeting concentrated on the quality issues surrounding the indicator development as well as the process to which newly designated communities and their organisations need to adhere in order to become accredited. This meeting was hosted by the WHO Collaborating Centre on Community Safety Promotion which has since 1989 formally designated and accredited members of the WHO Safe Communities Network, including 220 communities across 30 countries. There are 100 communities currently working towards designation as a Safe Community.

The conference coincided with the celebrations of the rich cultural heritage and traditions in Mérida and foregrounded the team effort of Mexican governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and role players in the pursuit of safe communities. Prof Leif Svanström, Chair of the WHO Collaborating Centre on Community Safety Promotion, commended Mexico as

a leading example of safe communities. In the concluding sessions the mayor of Mérida, Mr Concha Barrera, echoed his commitment together with his municipality in the city of Mérida to obtain certification as a safe community. He believes that Mérida will lead by example by employing best practices in terms of initiatives for prevention and citizen participation which will ultimately have a high impact on its citizens.

## REFERENCES

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