



BEST PRACTICE



FOR YOUR FAMILY, VOLUNTARY DISARMAMENT

Mexico City Committed to a Culture of Peace

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2012, the mayor of Mexico City, Dr. Miguel Angel Mancera Espinosa, launched the **"For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament"** program, which aims to prevent crime and to tackle urban violence caused by the use of firearms in the city. This program seeks to raise awareness among the population regarding the risks of owning guns and ammunition. It consists of an exchange of weapons for economic assistance, domestic appliances, or computer material. Furthermore, the program also contemplates the exchange of toy weapons (bows and arrows, toy guns and rifles, etc.) for educational toys. This exchange is voluntary, the anonymity of those handing over the weapons is guaranteed, and the exchange is held in the atrium of a church, which is seen by the population as neutral territory and therefore increases trust in the operation, thanks to an agreement with the church authorities.

The success of this program is based on a painstaking effort to raise public awareness, conducted by the brigades of the Mexico City Government's Social Development Secretariat, which visit homes door to door in neighborhoods with high crime rates. These brigades inform and invite the population (especially mothers and heads of households) to hand over the weapons owned by any of their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. The strength of this program resides in the close cooperation established between government and society, as well as in the involvement of different participants: the city government, the borough administrations (territorial subdivisions of the Federal District), Mexico's federal government (through the National Defense Secretariat), the private sector (which donated goods for the exchange), the Catholic Church, and the general population.

Thanks to the **"For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament"** program, over 4,000 weapons have been taken off the streets of Mexico City in just a few months. This figure stands in sharp contrast to the 5,000 weapons gathered over four years, from 2008 to 2011. With this program, the government of Mexico City favors the prevention of crime by means of agreements, citizen education, and the construction of a culture of peace among its citizens.

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Introduction

Large cities face important challenges caused by rapid population growth and urban sprawl. Guaranteeing the safety of their inhabitants is one of these problems. It is increasingly clear that this duty must be carried out with a comprehensive vision which not only includes greater professionalization of the police and the implementation of new technologies, but also strategies for the prevention of crime by means of social programs.

Mexico City has decided to incorporate this comprehensive vision in order to reduce urban crime rates and violence, while restoring the confidence of its citizens. To this end, the city has recently implemented programs designed to prevent teenage students from abandoning school early, improve the quality of healthcare services, facilitate access to culture, improve the quality of life in public spaces, and increase the efficiency of public transport, among other measures.

In an unprecedented effort for the prevention of crime and violence, the government of Mexico City has implemented an important initiative to increase inter-institutional cooperation and to raise the awareness of citizens, promoting a culture of peace hand in hand with the population. The **“For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament”** program is a case of a successful public policy that has attracted the interest of the media, the population, the authorities, and public security experts both in Mexico and in other cities around the world.

This document summarizes the origin, methodology, and results of the program, in order to divulge it as an adaptable initiative that is applicable in other cases as a best practice.

The Problem

According to conservative estimates, there are almost 15 million firearms of illegal origin in the hands of the civilian population in Mexico, compared with only 2.5 million legally registered weapons in 2011. Today some estimations assert that only one in 300 firearms is formally registered. Furthermore, from 2005 to 2009 the amount of weapons held illegally in Mexico increased exponentially, by 82%.

During the first ten months of 2012, a total of 1,039 firearm accidents or deaths occurred in Mexico City, which was the equivalent of 44% of all crimes committed. In 2010 Mexico City was rated fourth in the country's ranking of firearm deaths, with an average of two people killed per day. Furthermore, in late 2012 there was a 3.1% increase in the number of firearm injuries inflicted during the commission of a crime.

The **“For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament”** program represents a response to this increase in the possession and use of firearms among the civilian population, as well as to the growing number of injuries and deaths caused by them.

The Answer: “For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament”

On 20 December 2012, an agreement was published in the Federal District's Official Gazette, authorizing the delivery of economic assistance and goods to citizens who adhere to the **“For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament”** program¹. This is a strategy of voluntary surrendering of weapons, with the main objective of preventing crime and creating a culture of peace among citizens.

¹ <http://www.consejeria.df.gob.mx/uploads/gacetas/50d29e2643aa3.pdf>

The program aims to raise awareness of the risks entailed by owning guns and ammunition. To this end, a transversal and interdisciplinary strategy has been implemented with the aim of diminishing the social and cultural causes that lead a society to arm itself. The specific objectives of this program are:

1. To build a **new public security model** based on trust between the government and the civilian population;
2. To encourage the **disarmament** of the population, by promoting the non-acquisition or use of firearms as instruments of protection;
3. To **reduce accidents** and acts of violence caused by access and use of firearms;
4. To **raise awareness** among local residents in situations of vulnerability and/or social isolation, regarding the dangers of having guns in their proximity;
5. To **improve the perception** of citizens regarding levels of crime and violence in their city;
6. To **encourage citizens to report crime** to the authorities rather than taking justice into their own hands, seeking a peaceful resolution of conflicts;
7. To promote a **culture of peace** among individuals, families, and the city in general.

Initially, and before the “**For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament**” program could be implemented, it was necessary to identify those areas with the highest concentration of weapons or armed individuals. Once a location had been defined for the exchanges, a series of home visits were conducted to raise awareness among the population regarding the risks of gun ownership and to offer information on the program. This campaign included the presentation of promotional material in each house visited, as well as at strategic points (including posters, stickers, and fliers).

After evaluating the geographic and demographic characteristics of weapons concentration, an incentive system was established to encourage the voluntary exchange of weapons for cash payments, electronic equipment, domestic appliances, bicycles, groceries, etc. This exchange is voluntary, it guarantees the anonymity of those who hand over a weapon, and it is conducted in the atrium of a church, in order to guarantee neutrality and to increase trust, based upon an agreement with church authorities. All weapons gathered through this program are destroyed.

One goal, multi-level and multi-stakeholder coordination

One of the main strengths of the “**For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament**” program is the high level of cooperation and consensus achieved among different types of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

- **Mexico City Government**

The government of Mexico City, as the generator of this strategy of voluntary disarmament, leads the program, which is coordinated by the local government's Social Development Secretariat through its Undersecretariat for Citizen Participation, along with the Federal District's Family Development System, the Institute for Attention to the Elderly, the Federal District's Institute for Social Assistance and Integration, the General Directorate for Social Diversity and Equality, the Public Telephone Location Service (LOCATEL), the Mexico City Women's Institute, and the city's Youth Institute. These organizations are responsible for establishing bonds with civil society through campaigns to raise awareness and distribute educational material door to door. Since the program began, 384,660 homes have been visited by brigades including a total of 23,958 promoters.

Meanwhile, the City's Public Security Secretariat guarantees that the necessary conditions are in place at the exchange points, in order for the process to be carried out without any danger to the safety of the population.

- **Political Boroughs of the Federal District.**

The borough administrations (sub-territorial divisions of the Federal District)² cooperate with the program by identifying those neighborhoods and areas that are most prone to violence, where a significant presence of firearms can be expected. These authorities also offer logistical support on the exchange day, help to summon the population, and occasionally also donate goods or money.

- **Religious Authorities**

In addition to the aforementioned participants, the church authorities also play an essential role in the program. One of the reasons that prompted the Mayor to seek this alliance is the fact that many gun deaths and accidents occur during the celebration of patron saints' days. Thus, the Church has not only promoted the campaign by issuing entreaties during Sunday mass, urging churchgoers to hand over their weapons, but it has also allowed the exchange to be carried out within its own facilities, usually in a church atrium, which the population considers neutral ground. Exchanging weapons in a church allows participants to feel safe, rather than face the threat of judicial action for their gun ownership.

Given the importance of the Church in this strategy, the program was presented at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in January 2013. The highest representative of the Catholic Church in Mexico City has expressed the Church's complete support for the program, and has recognized the importance of joining forces with Mexico City's Government in its implementation.

This alliance between the town hall and the Mexico City Archdiocese has been developed in a context of respect and cooperation, without affecting the secular nature of the Mexican State.

- **Government of the Republic**

Mexico's federal government has welcomed this initiative, with which it cooperates through the National Defense Secretariat, in charge of guarding and destroying the collected weapons under the terms of the Federal Arms and Explosives Act.

Alliance Between Government and Society

The success of the **“For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament”** program would not have been possible without the active participation of civil society organizations and of the general population. It is worth highlighting the role played by the City's Citizen Council for Public Security and Law Enforcement. This board is the only civil society organization in the country with legal powers over the public security and law enforcement authorities in Mexico City. The Council operates as an organization for consultation, analysis, and citizen participation in areas including public security, law enforcement, civic culture, and attention to the victims of crime, among others. The Council is a bridge between citizens and authorities in these areas.

Likewise, the private sector has also contributed to the program's success, through the donation of domestic appliances (washing machines, refrigerators, ovens, grills, etc.), electronic material (computers, smart tablets), bicycles, etc.

Citizen participation has played a key role, displaying interest and taking part in campaigns to raise awareness, which have included workshops and specific work with focus groups such as women, boys, girls, youths, and the elderly. Talks have been organized in neighborhood assemblies, parks,

² The Federal District's territory is divided into 16 political boroughs, each led by a delegate elected by direct universal vote

and public squares, while workshops have been held for children and youths from the ages of 6 to 18. All of these activities are conducted in coordination with neighborhood committees and with block administrators, who have received training to multiply the effects of the program.

It is worth highlighting the role played by women, especially mothers and heads of households, who have proved particularly sensitive to the issue of disarmament. Their role has been instrumental in convincing friends, relatives, partners, and acquaintances of the risks of gun ownership. The teenage population has also mobilized around this effort, by means of voluntary groups in the “High School YES!” program, which offers economic incentives to prevent high school students from abandoning their studies.

Furthermore, the participation of the elderly has also been noteworthy. They are seen as beacons of wisdom, knowledge, and education; promoters of good habits for pacific coexistence. Their support has complemented the goal of raising awareness and sensitivity to the risks of gun ownership within families, with their children and grandchildren, and among neighbors.

Toward a Culture of Peace:

The “**For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament**” program entails a strong commitment to the promotion of a new culture of peace and healthy coexistence within the population. In addition to campaigns to inform and raise awareness among citizens, there have been cultural actions and educational incentives addressed at all sectors of the public, including puppet shows, art workshops for children, meetings for young artists' collectives, etc.

A special effort has been made with children, inviting them to exchange their toy weapons (guns, bows and arrows, shield, rifles, etc.) for educational toys. Furthermore, the “Let's Play at Peace” workshop included drawing and writing competitions, to promote the culture of peaceful coexistence without firearms.

Finally, the program has been widely promoted in the media, including social networks, the press, cinemas, radio, and television, both in Mexico and abroad. The Office of Mexico City's Mayor, through its General Coordination of International Relations, has launched a strategy to promote this program and its results internationally, in order to share the experience with other world cities.

Results and Citizen Approval

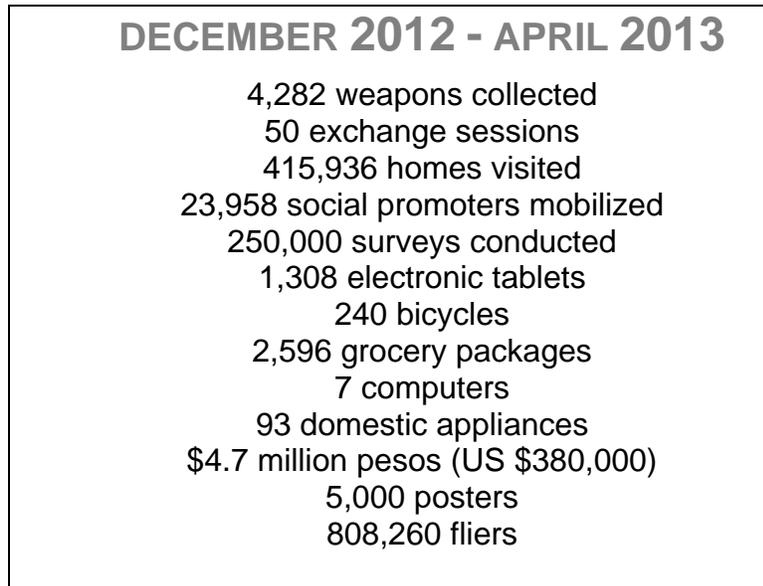
Since the program began on 25 December 2012 and until April 2013, voluntary exchanges have been held in eight boroughs and a total of 4,282 weapons have been collected. This figure is much higher than the 858 guns collected in 2008; 1,560 in 2009; 1,479 in 2010, and 1,556 in 2011, which undoubtedly proves the success so far of the program and its comprehensive strategy.

The program's success has been documented beyond any doubt thanks to a population survey which by April 2013 had canvassed over 200,000 people. The seven-question survey is a thermometer that helps the local government to monitor the perception of citizens regarding the relevance, effectiveness, and success of this initiative, as well as its impact.

The figures speak for themselves: 93% of the surveyed population agrees with the program, and 77% believe that it has had beneficial consequences for the population, particularly as a strategy for the prevention of crime and the reduction of violence. When asked what a gun in their home represented to them, over a third of respondents declared that it represented violence or lack of safety. This result is significant in order to understand why the efforts undertaken by the Mexico City government to raise the awareness of citizens have responded to a pressing concern of the people.

Guns represent danger, they are a source of potential violence, and they must therefore be controlled.

Figures



Lessons Learned

- ✓ Security in the city can be addressed from a perspective of social development, rather than just with a police or punitive approach.
- ✓ The proliferation of guns is a problem that concerns society as a whole, and which originates in the mistaken perception that weapons are a means to feel safe.
- ✓ It is indispensable to achieve inter-institutional cooperation among different levels of government, as well as with civil society and the private sector.
- ✓ Civil society is the government's ally in the promotion of a culture of peace, as long as this alliance is built upon a base of mutual trust.
- ✓ The cooperation of church authorities when facing a serious social problem is very valuable, without violating the secular nature of the Mexican State.
- ✓ Women play an essential role in convincing those in their immediate environment about violence prevention issues, especially mothers and heads of households.
- ✓ The culture of peace should be promoted from childhood and youth, in order to counteract the information received every day through TV programs and videogames, where violence is all-pervading.
- ✓ Disarmament is one of the responses to armed violence in an urban setting. Security will be achieved with fewer guns on the streets, not with more guns on the streets.
- ✓ The “**For your Family, Voluntary Disarmament**” program, an unprecedented effort to raise citizens' awareness, increase institutional cooperation, and prevent crime, reflects Mexico City's commitment to a culture of peace.

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