
Social Fabric Fracture and Strategies for Its Reconstruction in a Community on the Outskirts of Acapulco, Gro., Mexico.

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Abstract

This research addresses the disarticulation of the social fabric in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Acapulco, Mexico, resulting from criminal violence and insecurity that has plagued the city and much of the country for over two decades. This work aims to provide a clear picture of how everyday violence and conflict have disrupted trust and solidarity in the Cinco de Mayo community (the study site), in Acapulco. Consequently, through a qualitative and ethnographic approach, the research examines how neighborhood disputes, the lack of public services, and institutional distrust have fractured family and community bonds. Through a qualitative, participatory action research approach, alternatives are proposed for the reclamation of public spaces and the strengthening of community identity. The reconstruction of the social fabric is presented not merely as a theoretical concept, but as a social urgency to restore peace and cohesion to the population of this area of Acapulco. The study was conducted with a sample of volunteers from the Cinco de Mayo community, which included high school students, their parents, and senior citizens who have resided in the area for over 30 years. The results reveal a communication gap between parents and children, as well as low citizen participation driven by fear, following years of security crises. The document concludes with a strategic proposal for social reconstruction through the strengthening of local leadership, vocational workshops, and neighborhood care committees. In this manner, the study seeks to transform community identity and reclaim public spaces to foster a culture of peace in one of the city's most vulnerable areas.

Keywords: social fabric, social conflicts, violence, community identity, social ties.

1. Introduction

The increase in violence in the municipality of Acapulco, Guerrero, is a phenomenon that reflects a profound disruption of the social fabric, a current reality that has been settled in diverse regions of Mexico since the beginning of the security strategy during Felipe Calderón's government in 2006. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the nation; it is also observed in other countries, such as Colombia, Brazil, and El Salvador, where violence disrupts neighborhood ties and reduces citizen participation in the community. In the local context, the state of Guerrero ranks as one of the least peaceful entities in Mexico, ranking 22nd out of 32 according to the Mexico Peace Index (IPM 2021), with a negative contrast in the quality of neighborhood relations and governmental functioning.

This research is situated in the Cinco de Mayo community, a settlement located in the northwest of Acapulco, which forms part of the Ejido de la Sabana. With a population of 4,505 residents, this community possesses a unique cultural richness. It hosts an archaeological zone protected by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), featuring petroglyphs that date back more than a thousand years. However, this historical heritage contrasts with the current reality of the neighborhood, which has been profoundly affected by homicides, robberies, and the weakening of social ties between neighbors.

In this area, not only is criminal violence experienced, but also a series of neighborhood conflicts, some derived from the deficiency in public services. Among the most notable problems are the collapse of the drainage system, the lack of potable water in high-lying areas, which forces inhabitants to haul water from neighboring wells, and the uncontrolled proliferation of stray animals. These factors, including the lack of arbitration processes, have created an environment of mistrust in which individual interests often take precedence over the common welfare.

In the face of this panorama, the research is guided by the premise that the conditions of insecurity, criminal violence, and low citizen participation disarticulate the social fabric. To delve into this problem, fundamental questions are posed: Is it possible to corroborate that insecurity and neighborhood conflicts promote the rupture of the social fabric in the Cinco de Mayo neighborhood? And, what strategies can be implemented to strengthen the social fabric based on a situational diagnosis? The objective of the research is to identify the violence and conflicts that generate this disarticulation, performing a diagnosis based on the ties, identities, and community agreements.

The importance of this work lies in the prevailing need to reconstruct the social fabric in the most affected neighborhoods of Acapulco, where government institutions have not made enough engagement. In this sense, the research is linked with efforts from the *Guerrero es Primero* Organization and the Autonomous University of Guerrero (UAGro), collaborating specifically in the 'Community Health' (*Salud Comunitaria*) project. These types of actions not only seek to benefit local people but also intend to serve as a replicable model in other communities with similar problems.

From a methodological perspective, the study adopts a qualitative approach with an exploratory and descriptive scope. The ethnographic method is used to collect the meanings of facts from the daily life of the community, employing techniques such as participant observation, surveys made to parents and adolescents, and semi-structured interviews with senior citizens. Remarkably, the research had significant limitations, like the perception of danger during fieldwork, the initial lack of interest from some residents, and the devastating impact of Hurricane Otis, which limited the time for data collection.

1.2. Theoretical framework

A review of institutional initiatives was conducted, including previous experiences of reconstructing the social fabric and the theoretical foundation that defines the categories of violence and social fabric. On the local level, it was found that the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB) implemented Phase One for the Promotion of a Culture of Peace and Reconstruction of the Social Fabric in Acapulco, based on components such as community participation, health, education for peace, and historical identity (SEGOB, 2021). This effort joins prior strategies such as the 2012 'Todos por Acapulco' program, which sought to intervene in high-vulnerability polygons through community diagnoses and participatory action plans.

At the national level, the experiences of Cherán and Tancítaro in Michoacán are notable. In these localities, civil resistance movements against deforestation and organised crime made it possible to recover territories and establish models of government based on customs and traditions (Atilano, 2019). The reconstruction model implemented in these areas proposed five fundamental support systems: family reconciliation, social economy, education for good coexistence, and a government with eco-community spirituality (Atilano, 2019).

In the international sphere, Falla (2003) in Soacha, Colombia, analyzes the reconstruction of social fabric in displaced populations, highlighting that the disappearance of relatives and forced displacement corrupts basic social ties. Likewise, in Bogotá, Téllez (2013) emphasizes the creation of community and family networks as protective factors against domestic violence. In Argentina, Covelli (2019) reports how the community theatre emerged as a tool for identity and reconstruction in the face of political instability during the 1980s. Finally, in Spain, Alguacil (2006) gave priority to participatory action research in communities to improve the quality of services and strengthen social ties.

Finally, the research operationalizes these categories based on the idea that the social fabric becomes disarticulated in the face of public insecurity and criminal violence. Insecurity is defined as the vulnerability of living without state preventive actions (LGSNSP, 2010), while criminal violence is associated with the use of force to violate integrity or property (Pegoraro, 2000). In this context, reconstruction necessitates the active involvement of citizens in decision-making and the establishment of social agreements (Guzmán, 2020).

1.3 Conceptual Bases.

The understanding of violence in this work is supported by the propositions of Galtung (1969), who maintains that violence arises when conflicts are not solved peacefully, classifying it into direct, structural, and cultural forms. Addressing conflict is therefore key to preventing violence. Concerning the social fabric, this research adopts Mendoza's (2014) definition, which describes it as the set of social and institutional ties that promote cohesion, identifying three key indicators:

1. Social bonds: Structures that provide trust and care (family, friends, church).
2. Identity: Referents of meaning and belonging to a group, manifested in rituals and celebrations.
3. Agreements: Participation in decisions that affect community life.

Citizen participation is another fundamental pillar. Zicardi (1999) points out that this implies an effective bonding between civil society and the state. For his part, Bolos (2001) distinguishes between participation in matters of public interest (elections, plebiscites) and social practices that respond to the interests of specific groups, parents' associations, or self-help groups.

2. Method

The methodology employed in this research is grounded in a qualitative approach, which allows for the generation of descriptive and interpretive data based on the participants' own words and the behaviors observed during the study. According to Strauss and Corbin (2002, cited in the text), this approach facilitates the obtaining of data from various sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents, to develop categories based on their properties and dimensions.

The inductive method was used during the development of this investigation, starting from specific realities to reach a general perspective on the breakdown of the social fabric. The study adopted an ethnographic approach, which, according to Bernal (2002), enables us to understand the meaning of events for groups of people in their daily lives through constant critical reflection. This study is descriptive in nature, aiming to identify the specific causes of the phenomenon, and has an exploratory scope. Furthermore, it employs a non-experimental, cross-sectional design, as the data collection was conducted at a single point in time within the target population.

2.1 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

The study focused on the population of the Cinco de Mayo community in Acapulco. A non-probability, purposive sample of volunteers was selected, categorized into three different groups:

1. Parents: The study engaged 24 participants who completed a survey designed to assess family dynamics, community relations, and civic engagement.
2. Adolescents: A group of 35 participants was interviewed to gather their perspectives on their domestic and educational environments.
3. Senior Citizens: Three residents, each with over 30 years in the neighborhood, were semi-structuredly interviewed about insecurity and criminal violence.

Data Collection Techniques and Tools. Diverse techniques were implemented to collect information, coordinated with previous fieldwork, in collaboration with the Guerrero es Primero organization and the UAGro.

Participant Observation: The researcher participated in community activities, such as the Community Health Committee, using a logbook, photographs, and videos to document the local culture and the absence of organized groups.

- Surveys. Forms were designed based on indicators of bonds, identity, and agreements. The questionnaire for parents consisted of 28 questions, and the one for adolescents consisted of 27 questions.
- Semi-structured interview. Conducted with senior citizens to delve into community testimonies about perceptions of insecurity and personal experiences of victimization.
- Newspaper review. The local newspaper was consulted to record the patterns of violence and conflict in Acapulco, strengthening the situational diagnosis.

The research was conducted using four central categories: Disjointed Social Fabric, Public Insecurity, Criminal Violence, and Low Citizen Participation. These categories allowed for the structuring of data collection tools to analyze dimensions such as institutional ties (family and school) and social ties (neighborhood relations and conflicts). The category of Low Citizen Participation was analyzed and described directly by the researcher through observation of the absence of community groups and civil associations.

2.2 Data analysis

The analysis of data obtained in the Cinco de Mayo community reveals a significant breakdown in the social fabric, manifested in the fragility of neighborhood ties, family dynamics disagreements, and a persistent perception of insecurity. The information was collected through a survey of 24 parents and 35 adolescents, as well as semi-structured interviews with senior citizens who are deeply rooted in the community.

Regarding neighbor relations, the results show a duality. Although more than half of those surveyed consider that there is a good neighborly relationship, very few residents feel truly included or have a sense of identity with the neighborhood. This lack of belonging translates into low solidarity: almost half of the participants said they turn to their neighbors for help only 'sometimes', and a considerable number said that they never do so due to the lack of a solid relationship.

Far from being solved, everyday conflicts often appear from the lack of empathy and neglect of public spaces. The main causes of friction include garbage management, the proliferation of stray animals (dogs), and damage to road infrastructure caused by incomplete repairs made by institutions such as the Acapulco Water and Sewer Commission (CAPAMA). Although these problems seem minor, they act as barriers to creating a strong community identity.

The analysis of institutional ties, specifically within the family, reveals a perception gap between parents and children. While parents claim to share recreational time every week, the adolescents report that these activities take place every six months or even once a year. This disagreement can be explained by the work dynamics of the neighborhood, where the need for both parents to work to earn a daily living forces them to delegate the care of their children to third parties, such as grandparents.

This lack of quality time has weakened communication. Teenagers report feeling more understood by their mothers than by their fathers. They point out that the father-child relationship is the most fractured in the family unit. Furthermore, although most households have rules for coexistence, they are not always followed. Young people perceive methods as 'unfair', which leads to recurring disputes that do not escalate to physical violence, but maintain a state of latent tension.

The Cinco de Mayo community's recent history has been marked by criminal violence. Senior citizens agree that clashes between illegal armed groups, kidnappings, and homicides peaked between 2008 and 2013. Although there has been a perceived decline in current crime rates, the 'bias' of insecurity persists and has drastically turned the habits of residents: people avoid going out at night, and public spaces have been deserted for fear of reprisals.

An example of this impact is the abandonment of the local archaeological site. Despite its historical and cultural value, visitors no longer frequent the site as they did in past decades, since they were constantly victims of assaults. The fear is so profound that, during the investigation, two of the three senior citizens interviewed requested not to publish their testimony for fear of retaliation, highlighting the social control that violence exerts over the inhabitants' freedom of expression.

Finally, there is low citizen participation in terms of leadership and formal organization. Also, there is resistance in forming part of neighborhood committees due to a lack of time or disinterest, which makes it extremely difficult to manage requests to the government. However, two key actors have been identified that function as centers of cohesion: the Church (Capilla de Jesús Mesías Nazareno) and the Community Health Committee supported by the Guerrero es Primero organization.

These groups have achieved important milestones, one of which is reviving the May 5th celebration after a decade of suspension due to violence, demonstrating a desire for coexistence, which requires adequate procedures to manifest itself. Participation in social events is adequate, but the challenge remains in transforming sporadic attendance into a permanent structure of citizen participation that can address the structural community problems.

3. Discussion and results

The research results in the Cinco de Mayo community reveal a contradiction in the perception of family and social ties, as well as a breakdown in the social fabric caused by insecurity and a lack

of citizen participation. The analysis is divided into three fundamental areas: the internal family dynamics, the quality of neighborly relations, and the impact of violence on community identity. Family Relationships: Bonds and Agreements. One of the most significant findings is the disagreement in the perception of quality time between parents and children. While parents claim to share recreational activities every week, the adolescents surveyed say that these dynamics occur every six months or even once a year. This situation is due to the demands of work in the area, where both parents often work long hours to solve basic needs, delegating the care of their children to grandparents or other relatives.

This lack of coexistence has deteriorated emotional bonds, especially in the parent-child relationship, which young people perceive as the most fractured; adolescents report feeling less understood by their fathers than by their mothers. As for coexistence agreements, although most households have established rules, compliance is inconsistent. Children often perceive their parents' corrections as unfair, leading to recurring debates that, although they do not escalate to physical violence, maintain a state of tension that fractures the most important core of society. At the neighborhood level, the results show a fragmented social fabric marked by mistrust. While more than half of the residents rate neighborly relations as 'good', there is little reciprocity; the other half of respondents say they never ask their neighbors for help with personal or collective problems due to the lack of a solid relationship. Conflicts in the neighborhood emerge from a lack of empathy in everyday issues, such as the cleaning of public areas, garbage management, and the proliferation of stray animals, issues that have become normalized and prioritize individual interests over the common good.

The identity with the community has also been disrupted. A critical example is the condition of the Cinco de Mayo Archaeological Zone. Despite being a historical heritage site with valuable petroglyphs, the site has been forgotten and no longer receives visitors because trails have become hotspots for assault. The fear of crime has caused residents to abandon their own spaces of identity, recommending that people may climb the hill only in groups organized by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

The research confirms that criminal violence has altered the behavior of residents. Although senior citizens interviewed agree that rates of homicide and kidnapping have declined since the critical period of 2008–2013, they still perceive danger, which limits public life and collective organization.

Regarding citizen participation, there is a paradox of involvement: the community attends social or religious events en masse, such as the May 5 festival—rescued after a ten-year hiatus—but remains apathetic when it comes to forming neighborhood committees or permanent leadership. The reasons for this low participation include lack of time due to work commitments and mistrust of management processes. However, institutions such as the Capilla de Jesús Mesías Nazareno and the Community Health Committee act as the only remaining centers of social cohesion.

3.1 Reconstruction Proposals

According to Atilano (2019), the family is the primary group affected by the torn social fabric, and it is from this unit that reconstruction efforts must begin. The results obtained suggest that it is possible to implement strategies based on 'practices of good coexistence', such as:

- Family reconstruction workshops to bridge the communication gap between parents and children.
- Creation of vocational workshops for young people, seeking to steer them away from violent behavior through technical training.
- Attention neighborhood committees organized in blocks, designed to avoid overburdening residents and enable effective management of public services such as drainage and street lighting.

In conclusion, the breakdown of the social fabric in the Cinco de Mayo community is a multifactorial phenomenon, in which past criminal violence and present neighborhood conflicts have deteriorated the bonds of solidarity. The reconstruction requires not only institutional intervention but also the strengthening of community identity and local leadership to restore residents' sense of belonging and security.

Conclusions

Based on the research conducted, it is concluded that the breakdown of the social fabric in the Cinco de Mayo neighborhood is the result of a combination of critical factors, including criminal violence and the absence of mechanisms to address everyday conflicts among residents. These elements have not only disrupted trust but have also severely limited citizen participation, manifesting itself in public security problems linked to illegal armed groups and crises within the family unit due to the lack of attention from parents towards their children.

The study successfully achieved its main objective by identifying the specific forms of violence and conflict that fracture community cohesion. Through a comprehensive diagnosis focused on ties, identities, and agreements, it was possible to determine which social and institutional relationships were most affected. Although a proposal was designed to strengthen these relationships, due to the time constraints of the research, only preliminary strategies could be presented to address the problems detected during the fieldwork.

A relevant point in the conclusions is the identification of key actors who continue to work for the betterment of the community and the welfare of the new generations. The work of parents who participate in the local Catholic church is highlighted, as is the role of the religious institution itself in offering meeting spaces and support without discrimination. Likewise, the positive influence of external actors such as the Guerrero es Primero organization, psychologists, and students, who contribute to fostering a sense of identity and belonging among children and adolescents, is also highlighted.

Finally, it is concluded that the proposed strategies represent a viable opportunity to strengthen the social fabric of the community. The effectiveness of these actions depends on the consolidation of a network of actors who, through collaboration and commitment, can transform the social conditions of the neighborhood and restore the bonds of solidarity necessary for peaceful coexistence.

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