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CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO GANG ASSESSMENT



*USAID Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs
Office of Regional Sustainable Development*

April 2006

USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment

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Acknowledgments

This assessment resulted from collaboration between the USAID Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean/Office of Regional Sustainable Development (LAC/RSD) and USAID Missions in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. The Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance/Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation also provided support to this assessment.

LAC/RSD thanks the following individuals for their valuable contributions to this report:

Aurora Acuña, Local Researcher, Nicaragua
Dr. Elena Azaola, Local Researcher, Mexico
Ernesto Bardales, Local Researcher, Honduras
Hilda Caldera, Local Researcher, Honduras
Marlon Carranza, Local Researcher, El Salvador
Marco Castillo, Local Researcher, Guatemala
David Evans, U.S. Gang Researcher
Juliana Guaqueta, Research Assistant, Creative Associates International, Inc.
Paul Hrebenak, Administrative Assistant, Creative Associates International, Inc.
Edward Macias, U.S. Gang Specialist
Lainie Reisman, Independent Consultant
Enrique Roig, Development Analyst, Creative Associates International, Inc.
Lynn Sheldon, Project Director, Creative Associates International, Inc.
Harold Sibaja, Field Team Leader, Creative Associates International, Inc.

LAC/RSD also expresses appreciation to USAID Missions and Embassy officials in the five assessment countries for their important insights. In particular, LAC/RSD thanks the Gang Assessment Coordinators in each USAID Mission:

Jay Anderson, USAID/Honduras
Aurora Bolaños, USAID/Nicaragua
Patricia Galdamez, USAID/El Salvador
Mauricio Herrera, USAID/El Salvador
Rafaela Herrera, USAID/Mexico
Lisa Magno, USAID/Guatemala
Evelyn Rodríguez-Pérez, USAID/Honduras
Sara Walter, USAID/Mexico

The technical insights offered by the above about the gang phenomenon were of great assistance to the team and raised the overall quality of the assessment.

Editing Assistance – Kristi Rusch, Rusch and Co.

Photo Credits – Donna DeCesare, University of Texas at Austin

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Executive Summary

Rising crime is threatening democratic development and slowing economic growth across Central America and Mexico. Gang activity has transcended the borders of Central America, Mexico, and the United States and evolved into a transnational concern that demands a coordinated, multi-national response to effectively combat increasingly sophisticated criminal gang networks. Whereas gang activity used to be territorially confined to local neighborhoods, globalization, sophisticated communications technologies, and travel patterns have facilitated the expansion of gang activity across neighborhoods, cities, and countries. The monikers of notorious gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (Barrio 18) now appear in communities throughout the United States, Central America, and Mexico. Members of these international gangs move fluidly in and out of these neighboring countries. The U.S. Congress has recognized that some gangs in Latin America and the United States are international criminal organizations whose criminal activities in the Americas have damaging effects on national security by increasing domestic crime levels and facilitating drug trafficking. To combat these gangs which continue to expand their cross-border networks and illegal activities, the United States should act quickly and seize the opportunity to work with Central America and Mexico to develop a coordinated, effective response.

Recognizing that gang activity is a complex, multi-faceted, and transnational phenomenon that is clearly in the national interest to address, the USAID Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean Office of Regional Sustainable Development (LAC/RSD) initiated the Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment in 2005 to study the phenomenon and propose solutions in five countries – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. LAC/RSD received assistance from the USAID Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance/Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation.

The objectives of the Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment are to: (1) analyze the nature of gangs, their root causes, and other factors driving the phenomenon; (2) examine the transnational and regional aspects of gangs in Central America and Mexico, including the impact of deportation and immigration trends; (3) evaluate policies and programs and identify best practices in the assessment countries and the United States; and (4) provide strategic and programmatic recommendations to USAID about addressing the gang problem in the assessment countries¹. Highlights follow.

Gang members and gang networks are heterogeneous. Gang members in Central America and Mexico are not homogenous. There is no typology applicable to every gang

¹ Note that this version of the USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment was edited for public distribution. Certain sections, including specific country-level recommendations for USAID Missions, were omitted from the Country Profile Annexes. These recommendations are summarized in the Conclusions and Recommendations Section of this assessment.

or gang member, and not all gangs have the same objectives or engage in the same type of activities or with the same level of violence. Although each country has its own brand of gang problem, the factors driving gang activity throughout the region include a lack of educational and economic opportunities, marginalized urban areas, intra-familial violence and family disintegration, easy access to drugs and firearms, overwhelmed and ineffective justice systems, and the “revolving door” along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Gangs represent a regional problem. Though data on gang activity is limited and often unreliable, the number of gang members in the five assessment countries range from a conservative estimate of 50,000 to approximately 305,000. Crime and gang violence is threatening economic and democratic development across the region. Estimates of the direct and indirect costs of violence suggest that the costs of crime are roughly 12 to 14 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), although only a portion of this cost can be attributed to gangs.² Gangs such as MS-13 and 18th Street conduct business internationally, engaging in kidnapping, robbery, extortion, assassinations, and the trafficking of people and contraband across borders. Some Central American governments claim that a primary source of the gang problem is the U.S. policy of deporting gang members without sharing information about these deportees with government officials on the receiving end. They point to the fact that the majority of U.S. annual criminal deportations go to the five countries in this assessment. Gang members who commit crimes in their own countries often flee to the United States to hide, engage in criminal activity, and earn income until they are caught and deported, a cycle that often repeats itself again and again.

Current policies and programs to address gangs across Central America and Mexico are disjointed; an integrated, coordinated approach is needed. Research on gangs in the United States, interviews with experts on gangs, and reviews of anti-gang efforts in eight U.S. cities reveal that gang and youth violence problems are complex and an integrated and coordinated response that incorporates prevention, intervention, and law enforcement approaches is needed to achieve sustainable results. Current efforts to address gangs in the five assessment countries are fragmented, disjointed and further underscore the need for coordinated action and leadership. The results of the country investigations showed:

- **El Salvador** has a serious problem with international gangs, a harsh anti-gang law, and an emphasis on a law enforcement approach. It has modestly applied NGO and government prevention and intervention approaches.
- **Honduras** has a serious problem with international gangs, harsh anti-gang legislation, and also emphasizes law enforcement approaches. Honduras has a limited application of prevention and intervention approaches.

² UNDP. *Cuanto Cuesta la Violencia a El Salvador*. 2005. pages 9 and 37.

- **Mexico** has a largely unacknowledged problem with international and local gangs, no anti-gang laws, a law enforcement emphasis, and has applied some NGO and government prevention and intervention approaches.
- **Guatemala** has a serious, localized gang problem but a limited international gang presence, an anti-gang law under consideration, and a primarily law enforcement emphasis with some application of prevention and intervention approaches.
- **Nicaragua** has a minor, largely localized gang problem with no international gangs. An anti-gang law was considered but not adopted. Nicaragua emphasizes prevention and intervention approaches integrated with law enforcement.

Gangs are a serious problem requiring U.S. Government (USG) involvement and interagency and international cooperation. The gang problem in the region cannot be adequately addressed by each country acting alone. A variety of USG agencies must work in cooperation with the assessment countries. There are several strategic and programmatic areas in which the USG can effectively address the gang issue.

Law enforcement must be balanced with prevention/intervention efforts, and both must receive adequate emphasis and funding. Prevention and intervention initiatives coupled with law enforcement approaches are more effective than law enforcement or prevention and/or intervention alone. Only an integrated approach offers a long-term solution to the gang problem.

The direct engagement of law enforcement agents is critical to effectively combating gang violence. Since gang activities tend to be concentrated in a limited number of “hot spots” in each country with unique contexts and needs, the USG should support interventions that demonstrate the efficacy of community policing models that provide integrated prevention, intervention, and law enforcement activities tailored to the particular needs of the local community.

Law enforcement, judicial, and criminal justice systems need to be strengthened throughout Central America and Mexico. Structural weaknesses in the Central American and Mexican judicial, law enforcement, criminal justice, and penitentiary systems contribute to the gang problem in each country. USAID, along with other USG and international donors, should continue efforts to strengthen these institutions.

Transnational initiatives that promote informational exchanges among gang-affected countries are important. Actors in gang-affected countries cannot act independently to implement effective, sustainable anti-gang strategies and programs. As gangs are transnational in nature, information must flow freely between all countries involved to provide the most impact.

Intervention activities should be evaluated to determine their effectiveness, creatively constructed, and take into account local factors. Intervention, and more specifically rehabilitation, programs exist in each country but are largely under funded, have a number of inherent risks, and are not easily able to provide the multitude of services needed for gang members to engage in alternative lifestyles.

Policy initiatives and reform at both the national and regional levels are urgently required. Each Central American government is in the process of reviewing its policies towards gangs. While some countries have adopted largely hard-line policies focused on strengthening law enforcement's ability to remove gang members and suspected gang members from the streets, other gang-affected countries have yet to fully define, legislate, and/or implement balanced prevention and enforcement policies.

Accurate information on gangs and gang violence is unavailable. While anecdotal information abounds, there is little solid research being conducted on gang activities in Central America. Data on gangs across the region is unreliable and inconsistent.

Introduction

Rising crime is threatening democratic development and slowing economic growth across Central America and Mexico. When Central Americans are polled about their primary fears, personal security and neighborhood safety are the most common concerns and gangs are often cited as the reason for high rates of crime and violence in their communities. USAID-funded public opinion surveys in Latin America revealed that victims of crime have less confidence in democratic institutions³. In addition, in many countries, high levels of crime provide the strongest justification in people's minds for a military coup.⁴

Gang activity in Central America and Mexico is a sophisticated form of violence and an increasing threat to security in the region. Since the end of the 1980s period of armed conflict, gang violence has evolved from a localized, purely neighborhood-based security concern into a transnational problem that pervades urban enclaves in every country in the region. The two predominant Central American gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (Barrio 18), while originating in the Los Angeles region of the United States, have capitalized on globalization trends and communications technologies to acquire arms, power, and influence across the United States, Mexico, and Central America. Gang activity has developed into a complex, multi-faceted, and transnational problem that cannot be solved by individual countries acting alone. New approaches are needed to curb the social and material devastation wrought by these extremely violent networks.

The five countries studied in this assessment – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua – have each responded differently to the gang problem. El Salvador and Honduras, for example, have largely committed to the *mano dura* (firm hand) approach, which emphasizes zero-tolerance law enforcement for tackling gang violence issues. The remaining countries are pursuing different approaches or are still debating *mano dura's* merits and shortcomings. Nicaragua has adopted an anti-gang approach that is weighted more towards prevention and intervention than heavy-handed law enforcement. Guatemala continues to debate *mano dura* while it struggles to operationalize prevention and intervention activities amid accusations of social cleansing tactics used on gang members. Mexicans, in general, do not feel they have a gang problem, although news of gang and drug cartel activity is reported daily. While each country struggles with its internal response, to date there have been few initiatives that address the transnational nature of gang activity in the region.

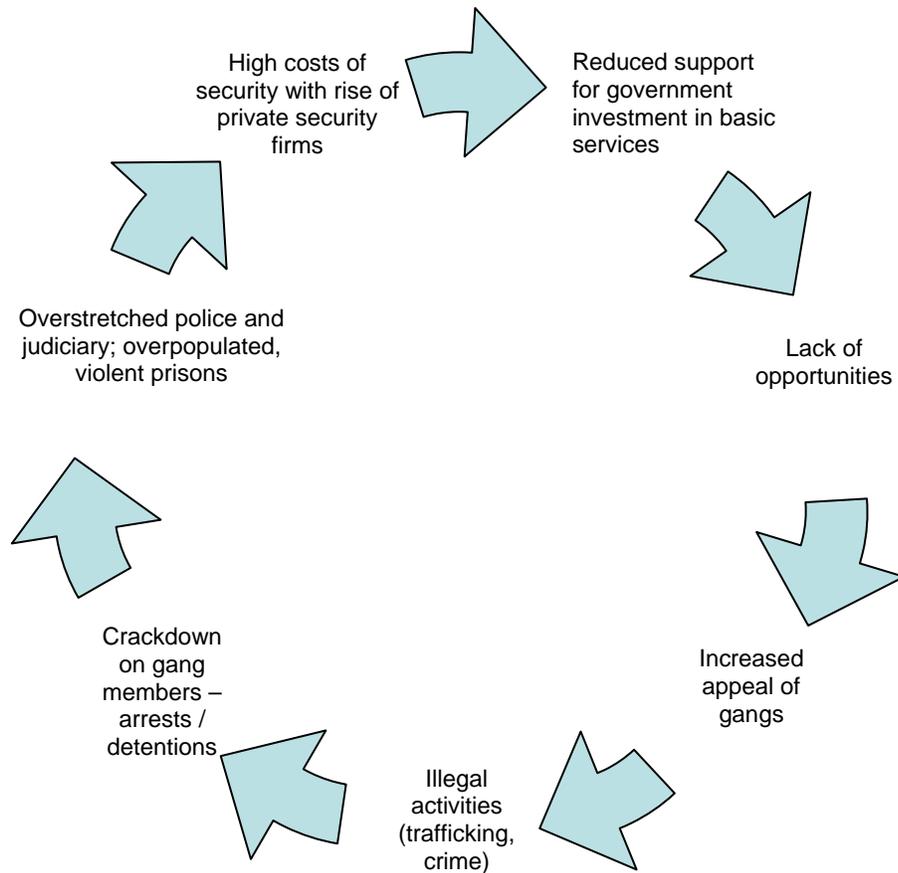
Figure 1 is a simplified representation of the cause-and-effect nature of gang activity. This cycle is further supported by sophisticated international communication networks, deportation and immigration trends, and a tendency by the press to sensationalize gang activity, thereby increasing the allure of gangs to youth.

³ Democratic Monitoring Indicators Survey. Latin American Public Opinion Project. <http://www.lapopsurveys.org>

⁴ Report: *Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy*. United Nations Development Programme. 2004.

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Figure 1: The Vicious Cycle of Central American and Mexican Gangs



U.S. Congressional Interest in Gang Issues

The U.S. Congress has expressed interest in understanding why Latin America has been identified as one of “the most violent regions on the planet.”⁵ In April 2005, representatives from USAID, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security/Immigration and Customs Enforcement (DHS/ICE), Howard County Police Department, the Heritage Foundation, and the Inter-American Dialogue were called before the House of Representatives International Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere to testify. The purpose of the hearing was “to examine the current threat level to economic and political stability in the Western Hemisphere, the implicit implications for U.S. security, and current remedies

⁵ Chairman Dan Burton. U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. Hearing: Gangs and Crime in Latin America. April 20, 2005.

being pursued by the U.S. and other world organizations.”⁶ The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that there are some 30,000 gangs with about 800,000 members operating in the United States. Chairman Burton’s statement cited “strong evidence that our porous borders are providing easy passage for gang members and illegal immigrants, [and] the children of illegal immigrants are prime targets for gang recruitment.” The agencies that testified at the hearing were challenged to find “new and innovative ways to strengthen international cooperation to fight gangs and crime.”⁷

USAID Involvement in Addressing Gangs

While USAID has experience implementing crime prevention activities in Central and South America, its experience directly addressing the gang issue is limited. USAID undertook this gang assessment in 2005 to study the transnational nature of gangs, review the United States’ experience over the last two decades tackling this issue domestically, analyze the current situation along the southern and northern borders of Mexico and in four Central American countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), and make recommendations for future actions by the United States Government. The decision to undertake this assessment coincided with a greater recognition of the seriousness of the gang problem across the United States, in part a function of increased media coverage of violent gang-related acts in cities throughout the United States. During the hearing, Adolfo A. Franco, USAID Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, remarked on the impacts of gang activity in the region: “Rising crime and gang violence in Latin America pose a direct threat to security, economic growth, democratic consolidation, and public health in Latin America. USAID is prepared to continue working with other U.S. agencies to develop multi-sectoral responses to address both the law enforcement and social prevention aspects of crime mitigation.”⁸

Assessment Objectives

The Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment has four main objectives:

- To analyze the nature of gangs and identify root causes and other factors driving the phenomenon
- To examine the transnational and regional nature of gangs in Central America and Mexico, including the impact of deportation and immigration trends
- To identify and evaluate policies and programs that address gang issues in the five assessment countries and in the United States

⁶ House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. Hearing: “Gangs and Crime in Latin America,” April 20, 2005.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Excerpt from the testimony of Adolfo A. Franco, Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, USAID on April 20, 2005, before the Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere.

- To provide strategic and programmatic recommendations to the LAC Bureau and LAC Missions in the five assessment countries

Methodology

This assessment intends to provide an overview of the transnational nature of gang members and their networks spanning Mexico, Central America, and the United States; a review of current policies being implemented; and recommendations for further action. There were several constraints worth noting in undertaking the assessment. Accurate research and analysis regarding this topic is scarce. In fact, this is the first in-depth assessment of transnational gang linkages and activity. Moreover, quantitative data on gangs at the local and state levels is either unavailable or unreliable. However, anecdotal information from media outlets, citizens, NGOs, and some local and state government officials is plentiful.

To account for these constraints and utilize the wealth of qualitative data available in-country, USAID contracted Creative Associates International, Inc. to conduct fieldwork in Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador, while USAID staff conducted fieldwork in Guatemala. Field teams consisted of 4-5 individuals, including USAID representatives and local researchers in each country. The team employed a fieldwork methodology based upon a research tool developed by the Creative Associates team and refined with the input of USAID. Creative Associates developed a list of interview questions for various stakeholders, e.g. USG representatives, mayors, police, judges, correctional officers, other government officials, private sector stakeholders, church clergy, NGO officials, vulnerable youth, gang and former gang members. The questions covered nine key areas – effective programs, root causes, gang recruitment, government/donor/organizational policies, current responses to gang issues, status of security, border issues, deportation issues, role of the media, and gangs in prison. In addition, a team based in Washington, D.C. researched gang initiatives in eight areas in the United States and conducted a series of half-day consultations in Washington, D.C. with a representative sampling from various offices within USAID and other USG agencies, international donors, academics, private sector, police, local government officials, NGOs, and former gang members. These meetings provided a testing ground for preliminary recommendations and conclusions and created relevant linkages between domestic and international agendas related to gang activity.

Five Country Profile Annexes follow this report. Each profile includes a country-specific analysis of gangs, a review of responses to the gang issues, and policy and programmatic recommendations⁹.

⁹ Note that this version of the USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment was edited for public distribution. Certain sections, including specific country-level recommendations for USAID Missions, were omitted from the Country Profile Annexes. These recommendations are summarized in the Conclusions and Recommendations Section of this assessment.

The Typology of Gangs¹⁰ in Central America and Mexico

Gang members in Central America and Mexico are not homogenous. There is no typology applicable to every gang or gang member. Not all gangs have the same objectives, engage in the same type of activities, or exhibit the same level of violence.

Figure 2 below shows a hierarchy of organizations and networks in Central America and Mexico that most commonly fall under the definition of gangs. While the pyramid does not do complete justice to the level of complexity within each strata, it does provide a general understanding of the various groupings of gangs and their relation to organized crime networks and the broader at-risk youth population.

Figure 2: Gang Structures



¹⁰ For the purposes of this report, the use of the word “gang” refers to any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its identity (Professor Malcolm Klein, “Voices from the Field Conference”, February 2005). However, this definition is not used consistently in the region, and a wide range of organized groups and networks are referred to as gangs.

Box 1- Profile of a Boss: “El Chapo”

Max Aregon a.k.a. Joaquin Guzman-Loera, a.k.a. “*El Chapo*” Guzman, 51 years old, of the notorious Mexican drug cartel is an example of an organized crime boss who has contracted out work to gang members. It is speculated that El Chapo has hired MS-13 gangsters to combat rival cartels. In addition, other lower level cartels use gang members to distribute drugs.

Organized Crime and International Narco-Activity Bosses (international): The top block of the pyramid represents the highest levels—the leadership—of organized crime and narco-activity networks. Most analysts do not believe that there is a direct ascension from street or neighborhood gangs to organized crime, yet it is believed that some narco-bosses work closely with the leadership of the most sophisticated transnational gangs. In general, these bosses do not have communication with members below the regional and national levels. But, other lower levels maintain close relations to ensure drug distribution in specific regions or neighborhoods.

Transnational Gang Leadership (regional): This block represents the leaders of 18th Street, MS-13, or other gangs with international presence. These individuals oversee well-connected cells with extensive communication networks that are engaged in extortion and support drug and arms trafficking through territorial control of specific *barrios* (neighborhoods), or of other places such as nightclubs. When detained, a few of them have lawyers who are able to help them avoid prison sentences.

Box 2- Profile of a Transnational Gang Leader

Bernardo Bonilla, 24 years old, a.k.a. the *Loco*, is an ambitious gang member who has evolved from involvement in local neighborhood operations to more sophisticated, transnational organized crime activity. He has built strong networks with gang members in prisons and in other countries. He understands the potential of the gang organization and is trying to become more involved in lucrative organized crime. As the majority of his clique currently lacks the necessary skills to engage in the more sophisticated business of organized crime, its involvement is limited. However, Bonilla has begun to groom some members for future involvement.

Box 3- Profile of a Gang Cell Member

Eduardo Perez, a.k.a. the Joker, is a member of MS-13, and the leader of his *clicka*. He and his gang regularly distribute drugs in the neighborhood. He has moved his way up in the gang through his progressively brutal acts. His gang extorts buses, local businesses, and families in residential areas. The money collected is used to satisfy various needs of the *clicka*, finance parties, and support the families of those who have been killed or those who are in prison. Despite these financial gains through extortion, Perez still lives in relative poverty.

Gang Cell Members (national): At this level, 18th Street or MS-13 *clickas* (cells) are involved in lower-level trafficking and have lesser territorial control over *barrios*. These gang members may be involved in extortion, such as the collection of *impuestos de guerra* (war taxes) from bus and taxi drivers and small businesses owners, and they sometimes carry out orders from regional leaders. They often receive special privileges in prison from other gang members when detained. These members communicate up to the drug traffickers and down to the lower level members.

Neighborhood Gang Members (local): *Maras de Barrio* (neighborhood gangs) are not necessarily members of the 18th Street or MS-13 gangs, but they may imitate these two gangs. They fight for territorial control over *barrios* and carry homemade arms or arms that are often acquired through the robbery of private security guards. These gangs typically comprise youths from marginal urban neighborhoods. They do not receive special privileges from other gang members while in prison and are often viewed as illegitimate by gang members who consider themselves true members of specific gang *clickas*. Youth gangs in Mexico are normally referred to as “*pandillas*,” not “*maras*,” and exhibit these same characteristics.

Box 4 – Profile of a Neighborhood Gang Member

Roberto Lopez, 16 years old, says that he joined the gang because he wanted love and respect. He dropped out from school, consumes crack, and carries a homemade arm. He is protective of his territory, and regularly fights with the rival gang to safeguard it, which often gets him in trouble with the police. He knows about the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs and may one day become a member of one of them.

Box 5- Profile of a Youth at Risk of Joining a Gang

Alberto Mendez is 10 years old and does not like school. His family lets him hang out on the street with friends even though his mother knows that his cousin joined a gang sometime ago. He admires his cousin. Last week his cousin’s picture was in the newspaper. He was detained by the police but back in the neighborhood three days later. If his father continues to get drunk at night, and beat his mother and his little brother, he will ask his cousin to let him join the gang.

Vulnerable Youths at Risk of Joining a Gang: This group represents the largest segment of the population: youths ages 8-18 whose lives are characterized by several risk factors, making them susceptible to joining a gang.¹¹ The majority of youths in this group are poor, live in marginalized urban areas, have limited to no educational or job opportunities, and represent the lowest level of the gang supply chain. This group can be further broken into three subsets. The first group of at-risk youth is often referred to as “*simpatizantes*,” or sympathizers. This group includes at-risk youth who are exposed to gang activity, may have a relative who is in a gang, are somewhat familiar with certain aspects of gang culture (e.g., gang symbols, graffiti), and often display allegiance to one gang over another; that is, they are sympathetic to one particular gang, but have not been officially inducted, or “jumped into” a gang. This group is perceived to be the group of youth *most* at risk of making the decision to join a gang. The second group of at-risk youth, often referred to as “*aspirantes*,” or aspirants, includes often the youngest youth who have some exposure to gang activity but have not yet become very familiar with specifics of gang culture. With continued exposure, this group of youth will become well-versed and more sympathetic to gang life. Lastly, the third and largest subset includes the broader at-risk youth population that includes youth living predominantly in poor, marginalized, urban areas without access to education, employment, and other opportunities. While this group has not yet been exposed to any significant level of gang activity, the likelihood does exist that they will be drawn to gang life especially if their basic needs such as income and fulfilling social ties are not satisfied in other ways. Subsets can help policy makers identify and target appropriate policies and programs.

¹¹ Causes and risk factors for gang activity in the five assessment countries are explained in greater detail in the Country Profile Annexes.

Responses to Gang Activity: The Prevention—Intervention—Law Enforcement Continuum

This assessment distinguishes between three responses to gang violence: prevention, intervention, and law enforcement. **Prevention** refers to efforts to prevent, reduce, or minimize the incidence of gang activity and its negative consequences by dissuading at-risk youths from joining gangs. Specific prevention activities include, but are not limited to, expanded educational opportunities, implementation of school-based violence prevention curricula, provision of safe recreational opportunities for youths, alternative income generation activities, and targeted community and parental awareness initiatives and training. **Intervention** refers to efforts to support, encourage, and positively address the needs of individuals attempting to leave or who have left a gang, and may include efforts to persuade individuals to leave the gang. Specific intervention activities include, but are not limited to, the provision of skills training, counseling, access to employment opportunities, drug and alcohol abuse programs, alternative sentencing, and prison rehabilitation programs. Prevention and intervention activities can be implemented by both government and non-government actors. **Law enforcement** approaches focus on the arrest, detention, prosecution, and incarceration of criminals. Most countries, including the United States, rely heavily on law enforcement as the primary response to gang activities, while prevention and intervention services receive less attention and budgetary support. However, experience gained in the United States and elsewhere indicates that successful anti-gang programs implement a balanced and unified prevention–intervention–law enforcement approach.

The Gang Phenomenon in Central America and Mexico

Many transnational gangs originated in Los Angeles, formed by Latin American immigrants who came to the United States to escape Central American conflicts in the 1980s. Once in the United States, many young Mexican and Central American immigrants were exposed to gangs. When they returned or were deported back to their native countries, they brought the U.S. gang culture with them. Gangs now exist across Central America, Mexico and the United States, and their international connections feed a thriving gang culture.

While gangs in each country have singular characteristics, gang members and their activities are intricately linked across borders. International borders in Central America and Mexico offer minimal obstacles to illegal crossings. Gang members can easily relocate to another country if they feel that the threat level against them in their home country has become too great. There are an estimated 62,700 gang members in the four Central American countries (see Box 1). Additionally, conservative estimates are that about 19,000 members of MS-13 and 18th Street gangs combined operate along the Mexican borders. MS-13 and 18th Street also have thousands of members living in the United States. They are rival gangs, and generally where one is found the other is operating nearby. They conduct international business including the trafficking of illegal

substances and people, kidnapping, robbery, extortion, assassinations, and other illicit profit-generating activities.

Box 1. Estimated numbers of gang members

Country	Gang membership (predominantly MS-13 and 18 th Street)
United States	38,000 ¹²
El Salvador	10,500 ¹³
Honduras	36,000
Nicaragua	2,200 ¹⁴
Guatemala	14,000
Southern Mexico border	3,000 ¹⁵
Northern Mexico border	17,000 ¹⁶
Totals	120,700

The root causes of gang activity in the five countries are similar—marginalized urban areas with minimal access to basic services, high levels of youth unemployment compounded by insufficient access to educational opportunities, overwhelmed and ineffective justice systems, easy access to arms and an illicit economy, dysfunctional families, and high levels of intra-familial violence. A demographic youth bulge has created a cohort of youth without jobs, decent education, or realistic expectations of employment. The four Central American countries have a combined total population of nearly 30 million people and approximately 60 percent are under 25 years old.¹⁷ The Mexican states assessed (Chiapas, Baja California, Chihuahua, and Tamulipas) have an estimated population of 9.6 million people and nearly 50 percent are under 25 years old.¹⁸ Underemployment and unemployment ranges from less than 20 percent in Guatemala, to about 25 percent in Mexico, to over 50 percent in the remaining three countries.¹⁹ Although many of these youth represent untapped economic potential for their countries, they face a much bleaker future than their parents did at the same age.

While countries may suppress gangs by stepping up law enforcement actions in areas with high levels of gang activity, few have developed long-term plans for a balanced prevention-intervention-law enforcement approach. However, governments and regional institutions have begun to recognize the importance of working together on this issue. In early April 2005, Central American leaders met in Honduras to consider regional approaches to coordinate security and information-sharing initiatives to combat gangs. In

¹² These figures are the conservative estimates of MS-13 and 18th Street gang membership in the U.S., used by the FBI and the National Drug Intelligence Center.

¹³ These figures were collected by the FBI from national counterparts in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

¹⁴ This figure is an approximate number used by the National Police in Nicaragua.

¹⁵ This figure is an approximate number used by the border authorities in the Tapachula, Mexico area.

¹⁶ This figure is an estimate of the number of gang members in Ciudad Juarez based on an interview held in the Direccion de Prevencion Municipal office. October 2005. Numbers of gang members were difficult to obtain and substantiate in the other northern border towns visited by the Assessment Team.

¹⁷ www.paho.org 1996 and 2000 combined statistical estimates.

¹⁸ Population information . GeoHive. <http://www.geohive.com>. and www.dallasfed.org. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. El Paso Branch.Issue 2. 2001. Page 2.

¹⁹ Multiple sources: Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos. <http://www.nph.org/>; The World Factbook. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/>; Industry Canada. <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/>.

addition, later that year the Organization for American States hosted a two-day meeting in Tapachula, Mexico where member states considered regional responses to the transnational phenomenon of youth gangs in Central America and Mexico. In April 2006, government officials from across Central America and Mexico and from various USG agencies, along with experts in prevention, intervention, and law enforcement, will come together in El Salvador to discuss the state of the gang problem across the region, share information about what different countries are doing to address gangs, and brainstorm solutions.

The Transnational Nature of Gang Activity in Central America and Mexico

The transnational nature of gangs is the result of a confluence of factors including a lack of services and opportunities within countries, deportation trends, and migration between countries. These factors can make relocation to other countries and gang activity more alluring. Contradictory to many claims, U.S. deportation practices are not the single, overriding factor fueling the growth of gangs. The emergence of gangs in Central America and Mexico pre-dated the 1990s, the decade when the U.S. deported large numbers of convicted gang members to their home countries. However, deportation is one of several factors contributing to the expansion of gangs. Deportation is of particular relevance as it has directly resulted in the exporting of the U.S. brand of gang culture to Central America and Mexico. This resulted in Central American and Mexican gangs adopting more sophisticated gang techniques – which originated on the streets of urban America. In addition, these gangs became increasingly connected to their gang affiliates in the U.S., which has continued to facilitate cross-border communication, organization, and growth among gang members in the U.S., Central America, and Mexico.

In general, neither criminal nor administrative deportees to Central America and Mexico receive any social or remedial services upon their return to their home countries. This increases the likelihood that deportees will either attempt to illegally re-enter the United States or, with particular respect to criminal deportees, continue criminal activity in their countries of origin. During FY 2004, the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) sent 72,173 criminal and 64,520 administrative deportees²⁰ back to the five countries studied in this assessment (See Box 2). These numbers represented 85 percent of all deportations that fiscal year. While initial efforts have been undertaken by the U.S. Government to share background information on deportees with host key country officials, this is not yet standard practice.

¹⁷ An administrative deportee is a person, who has not been charged with committing any crimes, expelled from a country by recognized authorities and in accordance with legal jurisdictions of that country.

Box 2. FY 2004 Criminal Deportations from the U.S. to Five Assessment Countries

Country	U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement FY 2004 Criminal Deportations
El Salvador	2,667
Honduras	2,345
Nicaragua	388
Guatemala	1,831
Mexico	64,942
Totals	72,173

Migration is another factor that has resulted in the transnationalization of gang activity. Gang members often relocate from one Central American country to another. For example, Central American gang members consider southern Mexico to be a lucrative business environment where one can profit from the cross-border trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans. On Mexico’s northern border, gangs are reportedly hired by international drug cartels for various services such as drug distribution and assassinations. To respond to the fluidity of gang migration in this region, government officials have an incentive to ensure that their internal policies and procedures are strict enough to discourage gang members from neighboring countries from migrating to their country.

In June 2005, the DOJ’s Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) confirmed the transnational nature of gang activity. The FBI MS-13 National Task Force traveled to Chiapas, Mexico, on a fact-finding mission. On that trip, the FBI obtained 180 fingerprint records of gang members. These records were later shared with ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The interagency partners determined that 46 of those same individuals had already been identified in the United States. Although it was not clear from the June fact-finding mission in which direction—north or south—the gang members were heading, it was evident that there is frequent transnational movement by gang members throughout the region.

The Revolving Door

Transnational gang activity is fueled by the relative ease in which gang members can cross borders, which creates a self-perpetuating “revolving door” phenomenon. The revolving door refers to the ongoing and circular flow of gang members from the north to the south and also from the south to the north. The reasons behind this continual movement are complex and varied. One contributing factor is the tendency for gang

members to flee areas where they are either wanted by authorities, have committed a crime, or have recently been released from jail. For example, when gang members in Central America commit crimes in their own countries, they often flee the crime scene and hide out in the United States with acquaintances or family members – thus the door swings from the south to the north.²¹ Once in the U.S., deportation proceedings may eventually result in gang members being returned to their home countries (door swings from the north to the south). Further complicating the panorama, it is not uncommon for a gang member to stage an intentional minor arrest by U.S. authorities in order to get a free trip back to their home country. Regardless of the intentionality of arrest and deportation, anecdotal information indicates that gang members often travel back to the United States in a matter of weeks.

Deportation is a frightening prospect for many known gang members, as reprisals in their home countries can be deadly. For example, some Salvadoran gang leaders who have been deported from the U.S. claim to fear El Salvador's *Sombra Negra* (Black Shadow), a purported assemblage of rogue police and military personnel who deal out vigilante justice to criminals and gang members. They say that they would prefer to take their chances with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security than with groups like the *Sombra Negra*,²² and therefore try to enter and remain in the U.S. illegally. Gang members living illegally in the U.S. may then proceed to extort and threaten Central Americans in the United States with claims that they will retaliate against family members in home countries if pledges of silence are broken, or if knowledge of a gang member's actions are revealed to U.S. authorities.

The Cost of Violence

The cost of gang violence will be a key determinant in how much countries should choose to invest in addressing the problem. Regrettably, data required to calculate this cost is vague and inconsistent. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have made significant strides in developing an understanding of violence more broadly and its costs. The IDB measures the costs of violence by considering direct and indirect costs and economic and social multipliers. Using this approach, they estimate the cost of violence in Latin America to be 14.2 percent of GDP.²³ In industrialized nations, the costs are estimated to be around 5 percent of GDP. Similarly, the World Bank has identified a strong correlation between crime and income inequality. Business associations in the region rank crime as the number one issue negatively affecting trade and investment. A cost assessment focused specifically on gang violence to assess the range of costs posed by gang violence, including additional security measures, law enforcement, medical

²¹ Interview with gang members. Washington, D.C. December 2005.

²⁰ Daniel Borunda, "Central American Gang May Have Presence in EP," *El Paso Times*, January 3, 2005.

²¹ Londono, J. and Guerrero, R. (1999), "Violencia en America Latina: epidemiologia y costos," IADB Working Paper, No. R-375. Page 22.

attention, foregone investment, and losses in productivity, would reveal potentially large investments that could be redirected for more productive uses.

Box 3. Costs of Violence in El Salvador

In 2005, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) financed a study “*Cuanto Cuesta la Violencia a El Salvador*” (“How Much Does Violence Cost El Salvador?”), in which the costs of violence were estimated to be approximately 11.5 percent of the GDP, or about US\$1.7 billion annually. The proportion of this which can be specifically attributed to gang violence can only be estimated. The Government of El Salvador claims that 60 percent of the homicides are related to gang violence. Using this figure, it can be estimated that gang violence costs the country about US\$1 billion per year.

The U.S. Experience Addressing Gang Activity

Central American gangs are a growing concern in the United States, and the federal government is becoming increasingly involved with state, local, and community actors to develop solutions to the gang problem. While by no means solved, the gang problem in certain areas of the United States has abated, and multiple gang programs have been implemented that provide important lessons and experiences that should be drawn upon in addressing gangs in the Central American and Mexican context.

In preparing this report, researchers began by reviewing available data on gangs and related violence in the U.S. Statistics revealed that over the past decade there has been an overall decrease in youth and gang related violence in the United States. The U.S. law enforcement community contends that these overall violence reductions among youth and gangs coincided with the introduction of new community policing tactics and practices by police. However, the 2005 National Gang Threat Assessment reports that Hispanic gang membership is increasing and in communities where the more notorious gangs such as MS-13 and 18th Street operate, there is increasing violence and crime. This is not surprising, as MS-13 and other gangs have begun to cross national boundaries, and Latin America now has the second highest violent crime rate in the world (second only to sub-Saharan Africa).

Detailed case studies of anti-gang programs in several areas of the United States are found in Annex 6. Case studies cover Boston, Massachusetts; Newark, New Jersey; Indianapolis, Indiana; Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; Los Angeles, California; Mountlake Terrace, Washington; and the Greater Washington, DC region. Research reveals that the success of any anti-gang initiative hinges on its ability to integrate a number of approaches. Both the law enforcement-only and prevention-only approaches failed or at best provided mixed results in the U.S. experiences. Gang and youth violence problems are complex and, as the following two case studies demonstrate, a coordinated response that incorporates prevention, intervention, and law enforcement approaches is needed in order to achieve sustainable results.

CASE STUDY 1. BOSTON

After years of anti-gang initiatives led by the Anti-Gang Violence Unit of the Boston Police Department (BPD), a new program emerged in the late 1990s that became known as “Operation Cease Fire.” First, instead of localized and episodic crackdowns, Cease Fire was a systematic, citywide operation with the clear purpose of continuing until the gang violence stopped. Police and others communicated directly with gang members and “pulled every lever” to ensure severely unpleasant consequences for those who perpetuated the violence. Cease Fire also included a focused law enforcement attack on illegal gun trafficking. The Operation maintained continuous and coordinated communications with gang members, relaying its message that violence would not be tolerated and would be met with an unprecedented law enforcement response. Second, Operation Cease Fire offered an array of prevention and intervention programs that supported gang members interested in making positive choices for their future. Third, Operation Cease Fire institutionalized the BPD training program and shifted the way police and probation officers worked on gang issues.

Operation Cease Fire had a dramatic impact on Boston’s youth homicide rate. In the twelve months following the introduction of Operation Cease Fire, the number of youth homicides fell by two-thirds and remained low until 2001.

Lessons Learned from the Boston Experience:

- Monitor and adapt. The Boston strategy developed over time as law enforcement and community leaders gradually gained confidence in each other and recognized the need to work as a cohesive unit. In addition, the developing program was molded through trial and error.
- Use a multi-sector approach. Forming a working group consisting of representatives from all agencies that deal with violence as well as community-based entities was paramount to the success of the Operation.
- Hold groups accountable. The Boston program was successfully predicated on using the social structure inherent in gangs to enforce collective accountability for individual violent actions.
- Assess first. Conducting a community-wide assessment of the gang problem is an important first step in reaching consensus among stakeholders.
- Communicate. A direct communications strategy aimed at chronic offenders and backed by the community may have the potential to generate at least short-term declines in criminal activity.

CASE STUDY 2. LOS ANGELES

In 1998, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded the RAND Corporation to develop and test strategies for reducing gun violence among youths in Los Angeles. After forming a working group with community and law enforcement representatives, the Hollenbeck area of Los Angeles was targeted. Approximately 75 percent of all homicides in the area were gang motivated or gang-related, and about half involved drugs. A spatial analysis identified hot spots where much of the violence took place.

The working group team designed an intervention that incorporated both carrots and sticks. The sticks used included (1) targeting all members of the given gang, regardless of who committed the act, with strict law enforcement; (2) increased police patrols in the offender's and victim's area; and (3) stricter enforcement of public housing requirements. The carrot side of the intervention focused on community-based violence prevention programming through a consortium that included local churches, job referral agencies, gang workers, and others. Some support services offered to gang members included job training and placement, tattoo removal, and substance abuse treatment.

The overall results of the initiative were mixed. Although violent gun-related crimes involving gang members dropped by one-third in the Hollenbeck area during the intervention, the effects decreased over time.

Lessons Learned from the Los Angeles Experience:

- Start small. In a large geographic area like Los Angeles, with a wide range of ethnic, political, and socioeconomic differences, researchers thought it doubtful that a citywide intervention would have succeeded.
- Form working groups. The working group provided a regular forum for exchanging ideas and focusing attention on a discrete and manageable problem.
- Use neutral facilitators and analysts. Nongovernmental organizations can play an important role in cutting through the bureaucratic channels to reach key people, provide unbiased analysis, and maintaining program momentum.
- Increase funding for carrots. Once law enforcement decided to implement the intervention, they had significant resources to carry out the action and well-developed procedures and command structure to produce outcomes. The community partners, on the other hand, had fewer resources, less flexibility, and less experience mounting a coordinated effort with other agencies. Community-based organizations may need additional resources and training to become more effective partners.

The U.S. case studies highlight the difficulties that the United States confronted when attempting to address issues related to violence, crime, easy access to small arms and gang activity. Several U.S. cities continue to struggle with these issues today. While any attempts to obtain similar results in Central America and Mexico should draw upon lessons learned from the U.S. experience, it is important to acknowledge that the infrastructure and level of sophistication to address these U.S.-based problems does not generally exist in the five assessed countries.

U.S. Government Efforts to Address Gang Violence in Central America and Mexico

The USG is implementing some activities in the region that fall within the broad parameters of the anti-gang response continuum—prevention, intervention, and law enforcement. USAID is implementing a few programs to directly address gang activity utilizing these three approaches. In addition, the State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement is assisting local police to more effectively address the gang problem and the Department of Justice is providing assistance to strengthen law enforcement.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has increased its efforts to address domestic gang violence as it is connected to Central American and Mexican gangs. In September 2005, during a one-day operation, the FBI MS-13 National Gang Task Force coordinated an international effort involving 6,400 police officers, federal agents, and other officials in twelve U.S. states, as well as in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and southern Mexico, to target MS-13 and other violent gangs. This operation resulted in a series of arrests, searches, detentions, and other law enforcement actions against over 650 gang members. The DOJ has also convened an International Anti-Gang Task Force comprised of three operational working groups (Extradition and Mutual Legal Assistance, Law Enforcement Cooperation and Information Sharing, and Repatriation) to focus and coordinate international anti-gang enforcement efforts of the various U.S. federal law enforcement agencies with efforts of their counterparts in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In addition to the law enforcement components of the DOJ and the Department of Homeland Security (including the FBI; Drug Enforcement Administration; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; Bureau of Prisons; U.S. Marshals Service; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; and U.S. Customs and Border Protection), other interested U.S. departments and agencies such as the Department of State and USAID are participating in this task force.

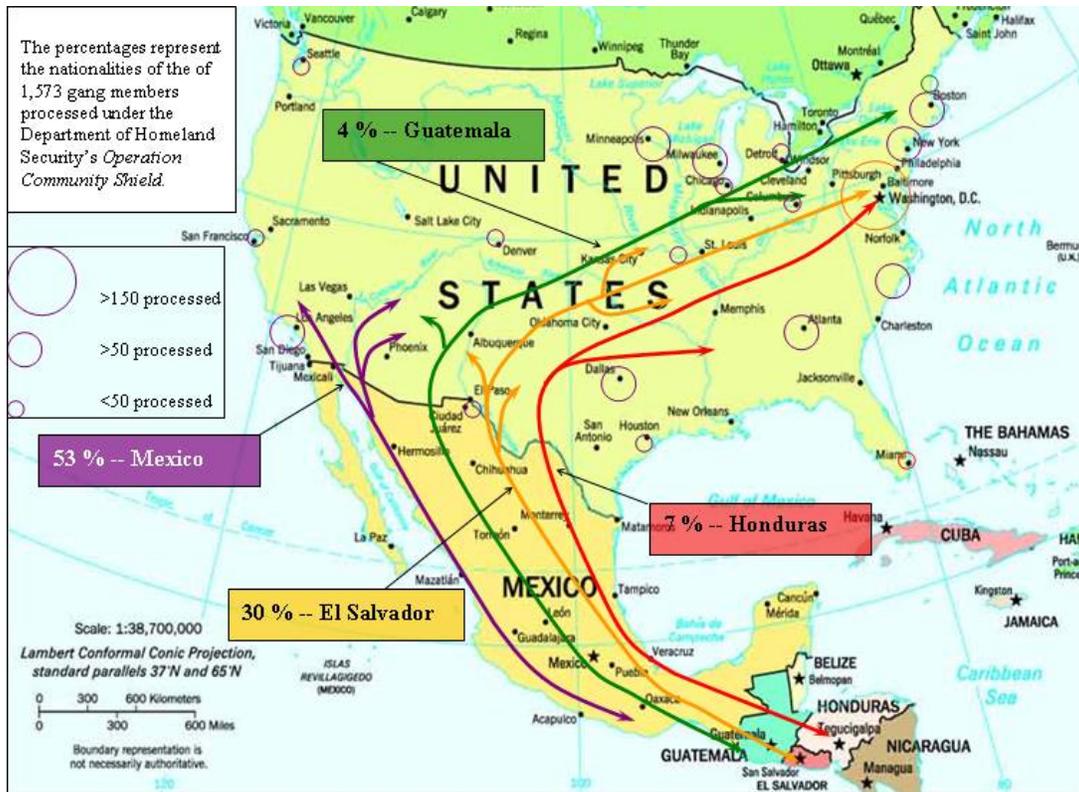
The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has also increased efforts to address the gang problem. To combat gangs, DHS stepped up deportations in general during 2005, along with collections of gang-related information on persons picked up and interviewed by the DHS Office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE started formal information collection on gangs under “Operation Community Shield²⁴” in February 2005. Since then, there have been over 1,500 gang member entries included in the operation’s database.²⁵ Over 10 percent of those identified as gang members were charged by ICE with illegal re-entry after deportation, and over 60 percent were charged

²⁴ Operation Community Shield, started in February 2005, is a national law enforcement effort that links all of ICE’s law enforcement authorities to combat violent gang activity.

²⁵ The ICE Operation Community Shield database for each person processed includes photographs, fingerprints, distinguishing markings such as tattoos and reference to criminal records, citizenship, immigration status and gang affiliation.

with entry without inspection.²⁶ (See Figure 3: The Revolving Door of Transnational Gang Flow).

Figure 3: The Revolving Door of Transnational Gang Flow



The Revolving Door of Transnational Gang Flow

The map depicts approximate migration trends of Central American and Mexican gang members to the U.S. who were identified and processed by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Operation Community Shield initiative. Operation Community Shield is ICE's first broad effort to collect information on gang members as it relates to: deportation, removal and prosecution proceedings; identification of violent gangs; deterring and dismantling gang operations; increasing public awareness on violent gangs; and partnering with other law enforcement organizations for these objectives.

These migration trends indicate a movement of gang members to many points in the interior sections of the U.S. as well as to the primary coastal, urban and suburban areas. The arrows indicate tendencies or patterns of gang member migration. The circles are representative of areas where larger numbers of gang members were processed. Every state has a Latino immigrant population and all U.S. cities with a population over 250,000 have a gang presence.

During Operation Community Shield's first nine months of operation, from February through November 2005, ICE processed 1,573 persons who identified themselves, or were identified

²⁶ Information obtained from DHS ICE Human Rights Violators and Public Safety Unit. Washington, D.C. "Entry without inspection" indicates that a person has crossed an international border and entered the US without being subjected to routine DHS border and customs procedures.

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based on records or other intelligence, as gang members. Of the 1,573 processed, 1,346 (85%) were charged with re-entry after deportation, illegal re-entry and entry without inspection. Of those 1,346 individuals, 95% of them were from four countries – Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador – and 372 (27%) had criminal charges against them.

The United States did not statistically identify deported gang members until recently. The Department of Homeland Security and the FBI are beginning to work more closely with authorities in Central America and Mexico, but there are still large gaps in procedures and coverage that push the implementation of a cogent, cooperative regional approach years into the future.

The U.S. has made important advances in battling gang violence at home and abroad, particularly over the last two years targeting Hispanic gang members. However, much like its counterparts in Central America, the United States has yet to implement a broad policy initiative that fully takes into account prevention, intervention, and law enforcement approaches. Further coordination among agencies is necessary, to recognize the comparative strengths and limitations of each organization and strike the appropriate balance necessary to effect a lasting reduction in gang violence over time.

The Gang Problem at the Country Level and Country Responses²⁷

Despite their proximity, each country's gang problem exhibits unique characteristics. Political events, country contexts, legislation, and other factors influenced how gangs established themselves within a particular area. The governments of all five countries have expressed concern with gang activity in their countries. For example, the governments of Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico recently signed an agreement committing themselves to combating international terrorism and cracking down on arms and drug trafficking, and criminal gangs. The five countries studied have taken various steps along the prevention-intervention-law enforcement spectrum to address gangs within their national boundaries. The specific gang conditions in the five assessment countries, as well as current responses, are covered in detail in the individual country profiles that follow this chapter. A summary is provided in Table 1.

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of the gang situation in each of the five assessment countries, refer to the five Country Profile Annexes of this report.

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Table 1: Overview of Gangs in Central America and the Mexican Borders

Country	Gang Situation	Gang Legislation	Government Focus
El Salvador	Gang problem severe and international. Despite heavy-handed anti-gang laws, homicides still on the rise.	Anti-gang law (see country section for details).	Law enforcement emphasis, with active government and NGO prevention and some intervention.
Honduras	Gang problem severe with international aspects that warrant concern. Homicides increasing notwithstanding anti-gang legislation.	Anti-gang law (see country section for details).	Law enforcement emphasis with limited resource support; limited prevention and intervention.
Nicaragua	Gang problem is relatively minor and localized. Gang activity continues due to drug trafficking, poverty and lack of opportunities.	Anti-gang law debated and not accepted by Congress.	Approach more weighted towards prevention and intervention, with law enforcement involvement.
Guatemala	Gang problem severe but localized. Increasing reports of social cleansing of gangs appeared in international news.	Anti-gang law under consideration.	Law enforcement emphasis, with some prevention and intervention.
Mexico (Southern and Northern Borders)	Gang problem along the borders considered both local and international, but not widely recognized. Southern border offers drugs/arms/human trafficking opportunities for gangs. Northern border gangs cooperating with drug cartels.	No anti-gang law.	Law enforcement emphasis, with some NGO and government prevention and intervention.

Working Towards the Solution: Donor Responses

Many donors support programs that indirectly address the gang problem by focusing on major causes and risk factors. Examples include primary education, youth leadership, community development, alternative dispute resolution, micro-enterprise development, and vocational and skills training. Participation in these more traditional development programs tend to be based on beneficiaries' past performance and few truly target the hardened gang members or potential gang members. In many cases, donors and local service providers are absent in neighborhoods that are considered to pose high security risks. As a result, there are huge gaps in service provision in these areas and marginalized youth in these areas often perceive their only alternatives to be gang life or illegal immigration.

Table 2 below provides a non-exhaustive list of current donor activities that address the gang issue, or crime and violence more broadly.

Table 2: US and other International Donor Assistance

Country	Donor	Description
El Salvador	USAID	Aid to Artisans has developed inroads to dialogue with gang leaders and involves their members in artisan development activities in the Ilobosco region. Proyecto MOJE (Movement of Young Discoverers) works toward eliminating violent gang rivalries and provides technical job training to local gang members with skills in pottery-making, welding, carpentry, and screen-printing. Targeting gangs in Ilobosco, MOJE also provides workshops on self-esteem and personal development for participating gang members. The program, in which MS-13 and 18 th Street gangs work together, has succeeded in reintegrating some 300 gang members back into society.
El Salvador	Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)	The IDB is executing a \$45 million violence reduction loan which, after some delay, is now in the process of reactivation.
El Salvador	European Union	The European Union has provided \$10 million assistance to the Government of El Salvador's National Council on Public Security (CNSP) for prevention activities launched in 10 municipalities of San Salvador and to be expanded to 25 municipalities.
Guatemala	Department of State and USAID	The US Government Rule of Law Strategy in Guatemala identifies "creating a new vision of policing" as a key objective. The US Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) and USAID are working together to implement a pilot project in Villa Nueva, a satellite city of Guatemala with high levels of gang activity. The activity's objective is to combine law enforcement approaches with community-based policing methods to reduce gang violence. Specific elements of the program include the creation of a specialized "Gang Unit" to use improved criminal investigative methods to identify gang members involved in drugs/arms trafficking, homicides, and extortions and process them through the formal justice system.

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Country	Donor	Description
Guatemala	USAID	APREDE (Association for Crime Prevention) operates three youth centers (<i>Casas Jovenes</i>) in Guatemala. The USAID Youth Alliance Program is helping APREDE develop a replicable model to respond to youth issues and tap into public and private sector support for APREDE, the Villa Nueva Crime Prevention Council and several Outreach Centers. The Youth Alliance Program has trained more than 700 youth, reached more than 7,000 youth with prevention initiatives and found employment for nearly 100 vulnerable youth. The Project recently launched a five-episode reality show, called “Challenge 10: Peace for the Ex,” which features ex-gang members working together to develop small businesses.
Guatemala	USAID	The Rule of Law program is working to strengthen the justice sector and, through the creation of and support to Justice Centers, is improving coordination between different justice sector actors. In addition, the Rule of Law program is working in several departments in Guatemala to conduct community-based crime mapping to develop community-driven solutions to local crime problems. The Rule of Law program has also begun production of a radionovela program entitled “Amor Entre Rejas”, about a Guatemalan family struggling with crime and gangs, and examining the different approaches to dealing with crime.
Guatemala	IDB	The IDB recently approved a \$30 million, 2.5-year loan to Guatemala focused on citizen security projects. The emphasis will be on working with Ministries that already have resources and policies in place, to implement those policies. Specifically, the IDB will focus on working with COPREDEH to elaborate the new youth violence prevention policy; strengthening the police, especially community-based policing; developing a citizen security “observatory;” job training and youth employment; improving communication and social awareness on crime issues; preventing domestic violence; and supporting community crime prevention projects.
Guatemala	United Nations	Several UN offices (UNESCO, UNDP, and UNICEF) are joining forces to work with the GoG Ministry of Government to strengthen the police, protect human rights, and work with NGOs to implemented youth violence prevention activities. In addition, UNDP is working with Ceiba, a Guatemalan NGO, to strengthen police capabilities to analyze the gang phenomenon in Guatemala. UNDP is also supporting a pilot social/laboral insertion program in Antigua, with private sector support. Lastly, UNICEF is working with APREDE to provide rehabilitation services through Casa Joven – Edy Gomez, or the Edy Gomez Youth House, as well as analyzing the potential for an increased use of alternative sentencing for youth.

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Country	Donor	Description
Honduras	USAID	USAID/Honduras, while having no specific experience in working with gangs, supports youth through its Strengthened Rule of Law Program, which uses Alternative Dispute Resolution to resolve conflicts at the community level before turning to violence. The Advisory Center for Human Resources Development annually enrolls 5,000 low-income young people who are considered high-risk youth and could potentially be recruited by gangs. The Education for All project uses distance learning to train 100,000 out-of-school youths and young adults.
Honduras	IDB	The IDB has provided a \$32 million loan to Honduras for a violence reduction program. This program will develop infrastructure, provide training to gang members in micro-entrepreneurship, and help gang members reintegrate back into society (San Pedro Sula area only)
Nicaragua	USAID	The Enhancing Vulnerable Children’s Support in Nicaragua project, which is being implemented with the Fabretto’s Children’s Foundation, indirectly supports anti-gang responses. The project has three objectives: to improve school attendance and enrollment so children advance from primary to secondary school; raise the level of education achievement in primary schools; and improve health and hygiene in the participating schools.
Nicaragua	United Nations Development Program (UNDP)	UNDP has supported the development of a database on gangs and at-risk youth and made efforts to help ensure that information collected by the various NGOs was shared.
Regional	WB	The World Bank has developed a tool entitled “A Resource Guide for Municipalities: Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention in Urban Latin America,” which it uses as the foundation of training it conducts for municipalities in the region. The document is based on the “Manual for Community-Based Crime Prevention,” developed by the Government of South Africa, but was adapted to the Latin American urban context. The guide includes specific municipal approaches for addressing crime, best practice principles in crime prevention, and numerous examples of international municipal crime and violence prevention and reduction strategies.
Regional	Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO)	The objectives of the recently established Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence (CCPVJ), which PAHO is supporting, include: promoting programs and policies for the prevention of juvenile violence; coordinating the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations to support a common agenda and achieve optimal impact; developing and advocating for public policy; and promoting respect for human rights. PAHO’s support includes technical and financial assistance for ongoing activities in the region to halt the proliferation of gangs and diminish youth violence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Gangs are a serious problem requiring USG involvement and interagency and international cooperation. The gang problem in the region cannot be optimally addressed by each country acting independently. USG agencies must work in cooperation with the gang-affected countries and include a broad spectrum of stakeholders including community groups, NGOs, and government institutions in these efforts.

Law enforcement must be balanced with prevention efforts, and both must receive adequate emphasis and funding. Empirical evidence from research on U.S. domestic anti-gang efforts indicates that prevention efforts coupled with law enforcement approaches are more effective than law enforcement or prevention alone. This tandem, integrated approach is the only true long-term solution to the gang problem. By working with youth, parents, churches, schools, and communities, the next generation of gang members can be dissuaded from joining gang life. Specific recommendations include:

- Support community-based initiatives that bring together a broad range of actors, including government (health, education, law enforcement, justice and economy), NGOs, the private sector, and community groups.
- Improve media coverage of the gang issue to minimize bias, increase public awareness, and promote social responsibility.

Law enforcement agents should be directly involved with the community to combat gang violence. Based on experiences in the United States and Central America, community-based policing models in many cases have proven effective at increasing the effectiveness of the police, improving community-police relations, and building support for the justice sector. Community-based policing, if supportive conditions exist, can be a powerful element of any effective program to combat gangs. Specific recommendations include:

- Introduce and expand community-based policing in gang-affected countries, where appropriate conditions exist, focusing on high priority urban neighborhoods where gang activity is most problematic.
- Establish independent police oversight committees and citizen oversight/watchdog mechanisms.

Law enforcement, judicial and criminal justice systems should be strengthened throughout Central America and Mexico. Structural weaknesses in the Central American and Mexican judicial, law enforcement, and criminal justice systems are fueling the gang problem in each country. USAID, along with other USG agencies and international donors, should continue to support institutional strengthening. Specific recommendations include:

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- Analyze police record keeping and procedures to improve record sharing and encourage the development and maintenance of an electronic database on gang intelligence.
- Provide regional opportunities for police to receive anti-gang response training in enforcement, prevention, and rehabilitation to improve understanding of gang resistance dynamics.
- Analyze and discuss human rights and public defender issues related to gangs with local authorities.
- Share gang-related information in accordance with international protocols.
- Work with governments to analyze and address weaknesses in the prison system that are driving the gang phenomenon.

Transnational initiatives that promote informational exchanges among gang-affected countries are essential. The research collected during this assessment confirms the necessity of developing a regional approach to addressing gang problems. USAID and the State Department should encourage dialogue with the five countries and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and Organization of American States to develop a focus, agenda, and tentative timeline for transnational initiatives to address gangs. Specific recommendations include:

- Provide fora for regional leaders from all sectors (governmental and nongovernmental) to discuss gang issues.
- Calculate the costs of gang violence to individual countries and to the region, using methodologies that are consistent across countries.
- Extract lessons learned from anti-gang efforts in the United States and apply them in the Central American and Mexican context.
- Convene discussions with other donors on their regional and country-specific plans to coordinate and leverage donor resources for anti-gang responses.
- Establish regional standards for anti-gang approaches and practices.

Intervention activities should be creatively constructed, evaluated to determine their effectiveness, and take local contexts into account. Intervention and rehabilitation programs exist in each country but are largely underfunded, have a number of inherent risks, and are not easily able to provide the multitude of services gang members need to reintegrate into society. In some of the more violent neighborhoods, security risks are an ongoing challenge for organizations and individuals alike. Outreach workers, which are often rehabilitated ex-gang members, run additional risks in the streets as they can be easily confused with current gang members. Furthermore, there are few organizations that can provide the holistic breadth of services required to help rehabilitate gang members that include, at a minimum, psychological counseling, medical treatment for addictions and other health issues, skills training, and educational opportunities. Specific recommendations include:

- Evaluate existing rehabilitation programs to determine their effectiveness.

- Design and implement programs and provide training to organizations that target newly arrived deportees and provide alternatives to continued gang membership and facilitate re-entry.

Policy initiatives and reform at both the national and regional levels are urgently required. Each Central American government is in the process of reviewing its policies towards gangs. While both Honduras and El Salvador have adopted relatively hard-line policies, the other countries have yet to fully define and legislate policy initiatives. Specific recommendations include:

- Provide high-level technical advisory services to help Central American governments design effective gang policies, budgets for interventions, and safeguards for human rights.
- Support multi-sectoral policy reform dialogues to develop broad-based solutions to gang activity.

Accurate information on gang violence is largely unavailable. While anecdotal information abounds, there is relatively little solid research available on gang activities in Central America. Data on gangs across the region is unreliable and inconsistent. Specific recommendations include:

- Support reliable research on gang issues.
- Collect regional statistics on gangs and design and improve databases on vulnerable youth populations.
- Undertake a mapping exercise to identify “hot spots,” and target activities accordingly.
- Develop case studies and databases on anti-gang best practices to be shared among gang-affected countries.

A Summary of the Gang Problem in the Five Assessment Countries

A detailed analysis of gangs in each of the five assessment countries, country-level responses, and country-specific policy and programmatic recommendations can be found in the five attached Country Profile Annexes²⁸.

The following are brief summaries of the gang phenomenon in the five assessment countries.

²⁸ Note that this version of the USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment was edited for public distribution. Certain sections, including specific country-level recommendations for USAID Missions, were omitted from the Country Profile Annexes. These recommendations are summarized in the Conclusions and Recommendations Section of this assessment.

El Salvador

El Salvador is captive to the growing influence and violence of gangs. MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, the two most notorious and active of the Central American gangs, are rooted in El Salvador and demonstrate transnational characteristics. If programs are to be strengthened and approaches diversified to address the gang scourge in El Salvador, it is critical to be able to understand and respond to the adaptive nature of gangs in the region. Countries neighboring El Salvador must also receive assistance to deal with El Salvadoran gangs that might relocate elsewhere due to crackdowns, among other reasons. The gang problem in El Salvador has escalated faster than in any other country assessed in this study. This phenomenon is partially fueled by the deportation of gang members from the United States to El Salvador.

Crowded living conditions, lack of public space for recreation and sport, high unemployment rates, intra-familial violence, proliferation of guns, and the easy access to drugs and alcohol are factors that encourage youths to join gangs. This combination of factors, together with the arrival of gang members deported from the United States who are highly skilled in street gang life, contributed to the consolidation of MS-13 and 18th Street gangs.

The Government of El Salvador instituted a hard-line law enforcement strategy, *Super Mano Dura* (“super firm hand”), which was motivated by a desire for safer streets and communities but has resulted in severely overcrowded prisons. In addition, the heavy-handed policy catalyzed a highly charged debate on the constitutionality of the law that allows individuals to be arrested based on inference or assumed association and held for up to 72 hours without charges. As a consequence of ongoing criticism, the Salvadoran government initiated two umbrella strategies designed to address the problem at its source: a prevention strategy for youths at risk, and a strategy that provides assistance to former gang members who want to be rehabilitated. However, these two strategies receive only a small percentage of the overall funding being allocated to address gangs. In sum, while arrests of alleged gang members have certainly increased, there is no clear indication that the gang problem has abated as a result of these policies.

Guatemala

According to the Government of Guatemala’s Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office, homicides in the country have risen 40 percent from 2001 to 2004. The homicide rate in Guatemala was 35 per 100,000 people, compared to 5.7 per 100,000 in the United States. The year 2005 did not see an abatement of crime, with the number of homicides through September 2005 at 3,154, already approximately eight percent higher than in all of 2004.

Guatemalans cite crime, along with corruption, as one of their top concerns and high levels of crime is cited as the top justification for a military coup.²⁹

The majority of gang members in Guatemala are under 24 years of age. The average age of gang recruits appears to be on the decline, with youth as young as eight years old now joining gangs and serving low-level functions such as serving as *banderas*, or “look-outs,” and drug distributors in their *barrios*. While the FBI estimates that there are approximately 14,000 gang members in Guatemala, similar to other countries in the region, estimates of the number of gang members in Guatemala vary widely, ranging from 14,000 to 165,000. This reflects the weaknesses and limitations of data collection systems in the country, where data varies by source and where police and judicial data systems are plagued by consistent underreporting. According to the National Civilian Police, there are 340 *maras* in Guatemala and the localities with the greatest gang presence are Zones 6, 7, 12, 18, and 21 in Guatemala City, along with Villa Nueva, Mixco, and Amatitlan on the periphery. The two largest youth gangs in Guatemala are the *Mara Salvatrucha* 13 (MS-13) gang, with members comprising approximately 80 percent of the total number of gang members in the country, and 18th Street (*Barrio 18*), whose members comprise about 15 percent, and the remaining five percent making up other smaller, copycat gangs.³⁰

The costs and impacts of gang activity on Guatemala’s development can be categorized into three general areas – impacts on economic, social, and democratic/political development, many of which are interrelated and overlap. The primary impacts on economic development include deterred trade and investment and the privatization of security. The economic costs of crime (not just gang violence) in Guatemala in 1999 were estimated to be 565.4 million dollars. It is estimated that firms in Guatemala individually suffer average losses of about \$5,500 annually due to crime in 1999; the total budget for private spending on security was at least 20 percent greater than the public security budget and amounts annually to approximately \$3.5 million.³¹ Social development impacts include stigmatization and victimization of youth and the further weakening of social capital. In addition, an increase in sexual and physical violence against women and violent murder of women, or “femicide” instills fear in citizens and increases public insecurity, thus hindering social development. Impacts on democratic/political development include reduced public faith in democracy; a diversion of resources from critical development sectors; media sensationalism; the deterioration of the state-citizen relationship in poor, urban areas; and increasingly enabling environment for institutional and extra-judicial violence.

Like its neighbors, the Government of Guatemala has not yet developed a comprehensive national plan to address the various dimensions of the gang problem including prevention, rehabilitation, and law enforcement. Currently, government investments to

²⁹ Seligson, Mitchell A. of Vanderbilt University and Azpuru, Minora of the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales. *La cultura política de la democracia en Guatemala*, 2004.

³⁰ Interview with Raymond M. Campos, U.S. Embassy/Guatemala, Narcotics Affairs Section, October 12, 2005.

³¹ Moser, Caroline and Winton, Ailsa. 2002, extracted from Arriagada and Godoy, 2000. “Violence in the Central American Region: Towards an Integrated Framework for Violence Reduction.” Working Paper 171, Overseas Development Institute.

address the gang problem overwhelmingly favor short-term law enforcement, to the neglect of long term prevention-oriented programs that address the root causes of the problem.

Despite not having enacted specific anti-gang legislation, the Government of Guatemala has nonetheless stepped up efforts to control gang violence in selected neighborhoods with high crime levels. As organized crime, particularly drug-related crime, establishes a firm foothold in the poor urban areas of Guatemala and other countries in the region, the standard government response has been to increase efforts to control the violence through increases in arrests and/or police presence. In Guatemala, this response has been representative of the state response to gangs. The state has stepped up efforts to control violence by increasing law enforcement and criminal justice actions in areas such as Villa Nueva. In addition the Government, and in response to an increase in reports of state-sponsored violence and “social cleansing,” has begun to send observers from the Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office along with police patrols to monitor potential abuses of power.³²

In addition to the stepped up law enforcement efforts to directly confront gang violence in targeted communities, the Government of Guatemala has developed certain policies and strategies whose implementation could significantly impact the problem of gang violence by tackling key socioeconomic and contextual factors that are fueling the gang phenomenon. The first policy that could have a significant impact on the problem of gang violence is the National Policy on the Prevention of Youth Violence, a product of the Presidential Commission of Human Rights. The plan focuses on addressing the socioeconomic risk factors such as unemployment, weak social capital, and insufficient education. A second strategy would reform the National Civilian Police (PNC), another positive step. While there are some non-governmental organizations implementing activities aimed at preventing at-risk from joining gangs and working towards rehabilitating and reinserting former gang members into society, such efforts are relatively small scale.

Honduras

Honduras is considered one of the most violent countries in Latin America. In 1999, the homicide rate, which reached 154 per 100,000 inhabitants, was attributed largely to juvenile gangs, organized crime, drug trafficking, and social violence. More recent levels are lower—46 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants—but it is still higher than other countries in the region.³³ In addition to the high homicide rate, there is a high rate of physical violence. There are claims that groups of citizens and state workers have committed violence against youths and gang members. During the last five years, extra-judicial killings of street children have raised concerns about social cleansing and the possible involvement of police in some of these murders.

³² Reploye, Jill. Christian Science Monitor. *In Guatemala, a Rise in Vigilante Justice*. csmonitor.com. October 6, 2005

³³ Clare Ribando. CRS Report for Congress. *Gangs in Central America*. Order Code RS22141. September 21, 2005.

Honduras is a relatively poor country, with two major urban centers—Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula—that account for much of the country's 7 million inhabitants. The majority of the population (41 percent) is under the age of 15. With precarious economic conditions and the social fabric weakened by the lack of education and job opportunities, many at-risk youths are extremely susceptible to entering the gang lifestyle.

For the most part, Honduras faces many challenges similar to its neighbors in dealing with criminal violence and delinquency. Many Hondurans have a sense of insecurity, which is further exacerbated by the overwhelming attention given to gang violence by the media and government. In Honduras there is evidence that media coverage of gang violence facilitates and enhances the reputation of gangs portrayed. Rival gangs compete over who can demonstrate the most brutality or audacious delinquent behavior. Daily news in Honduras often shows gang members displaying their tattoos and using hand signs to show their gang affiliation.

Honduras has adopted a hard-line law enforcement approach to deal with gangs. The costs of law enforcement and subsequent health care expenses (which are related to violence) results in Honduras losing a significant portion of its GDP that could be invested elsewhere. When combined with the already rampant corruption, the loss of resources is significant. Despite the *anti-mara* (anti-gang) legislation and the fact that the majority of government resources goes towards law enforcement, police officers believe their efforts are under-funded. The need for prevention and rehabilitation programs has been recognized as an integral component to any law enforcement effort, yet very little is allocated for prevention and rehabilitation programs.

Southern and Northern Mexico

The perception of the gang problem in Mexico has not reached the level of hysteria seen in some Central American countries, though a growing fear of the *maras* is brewing. While there are gangs, their sphere of influence seems linked to the numerous operational drug cartels and other organized crime organizations. Mexico, in addition, has two cause-phenomena that are not found in the other countries: (1) Central American gang members view Mexico's southern border as an opportunity to become involved in the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans as they flow north and south; and (2) gangs on the northern border are intergenerational. Gang activity on the northern border is related to drug cartels; narco-trafficking; trafficking of people, weapons, and other illegal substances; the *maquiladora* (assembly plant) industry; lack of sufficient educational opportunities for many children of *maquiladora* employees; substance abuse among youths; dysfunctional families; and minimal parental supervision. Another factor that contributes to the growth of youth gang members in the northern border area is the movement of individual youths attempting to join relatives in the United States. The United States deports more people to Mexico than to any other country in the world. In FY 2004 the U.S. sent 64,942 criminal and 49,454 non-criminal deportees to Mexico.

Reliable data on the extent of the gang activity in Mexico is non-existent. Mexico's decentralized system makes national statistic gathering difficult. A corrupt police and national security force coupled with an inefficient and ineffective judicial system compounds the gang problem and the public perception of the gang problem in Mexico.

The Government of Mexico has had long-standing approaches to law enforcement. However, its approach to gang problems does not balance prevention, intervention, and law enforcement. To date, Mexico has not adopted national *anti-mara* legislation as has El Salvador and Honduras. The national police do not have an anti-gang strategy, and the emphasis continues to be on incarceration and deportation. While the federal, state, and municipal police do not coordinate on this issue, there is limited government assistance targeting youths who are in gangs or at risk of joining gangs. Mexicans, in general, do not perceive that their country has a gang problem.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua's gang problems are much different from those of its neighbors to the north. While Nicaragua is transitioning to a democratic system, the level of violence reported in El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala is not found in the country. Nicaragua's approach to the problem of youth gangs differs from that of other countries in the region. Where El Salvador and Honduras have taken a hard-line law enforcement approach, Nicaragua has focused much of its efforts on prevention and rehabilitation, which have had important results in reducing criminality and youth violence.

MS-13 and 18th Street gangs have not made their presence felt in the Nicaragua. The combination of lingering socialist structures such as the neighborhood watch, the crime prevention role the police have carved out for themselves during the last few years, and Nicaraguans' interest in deterring the proliferation of "outside" gangs may have prevented these two transnational gangs from establishing a foothold in Nicaragua. Nicaraguan homegrown gangs are resistant to foreign gangs attempting to set up shop in their *barrios*.

Nevertheless, Nicaragua's fragile economic situation is fertile ground for increased youth gang activity. Some political parties hire youths to cause disturbances at rival political or social events. Others are mainly involved in petty crime to feed crack and glue drug habits. Many of these youths end up on the street with no future and find themselves joining a street or neighborhood gang, which becomes the basis for delinquent activities.

It appears that although Nicaragua may have a serious problem with high levels of common violence; it does not currently have a major gang problem. Moreover, its prevention and rehabilitation approach appears to be working well and may be a model for other countries in Central America and Mexico.

A Summary of Country-Level Recommendations

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The Assessment Team concluded that all of the five countries could benefit from utilizing a three-step process for developing anti-gang responses: (1) change public perception; (2) mobilize people and organizations who are advocates and will support the development of effective solutions; and (3) create allies with donors, governments, and civil society stakeholders to leverage resources and support, and to develop and implement coordinated anti-gang policies and programs.

Prerequisites to success include: (1) the marketing of anti-gang response concepts to educate and win over stakeholders not currently engaged in the issue; (2) the availability of arenas through which to foster the development of necessary synergies and alliances; and (3) the building of public awareness about various aspects of the gang issue through exchanges of information and communication through such channels as the print and television media and community-based town hall meetings.

Specific policy and programmatic recommendations for all five countries include:

- Work collaboratively with other gang-affected countries to develop a comprehensive regional strategy that balances prevention, intervention, and law enforcement, and is accompanied by country-specific action plans.
- Pursue linkages with the American private sector; local, regional, and international business communities; and donors to leverage support and funding for, and improve coordination of, anti-gang activities.
- Support the development of municipal information systems to build local capacity to collect data and use crime-mapping to identify hot-spots and more effectively target anti-gang interventions.
- Support targeted prevention programs that provide youth at risk of joining a gang in hot-spot communities with productive alternatives to gang life. Youth should be provided with such opportunities as educational scholarships, skills training, job placement, recreation, mentoring, and drug counseling/rehabilitation.
- Develop programs to address domestic violence. Intra-familial violence is one of the predominant risk factors drawing youths into gangs as a replacement for dysfunctional family structures.
- Assess weaknesses within the judicial, law enforcement, and criminal justice systems that are fueling gang activity, and develop solutions. These sectors are not working together effectively to produce a functioning rule of law system that can effectively deter and combat violent gang activity.
- Train judges, police, prosecutors, and public defenders on issues related to organized crime investigations, gang activity, incarceration, and human rights.
- Provide alternative dispute resolution training for police, local officials, community leaders, youth at risk of joining a gang, and gang members.

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- Develop gang resistance school curricula for incorporation into standard teaching requirements, and measure the effectiveness of such efforts.
- Working with partner governments and other local and national actors, assist in the development of a plan to reintegrate deportees arriving from the United States to minimize the prospects of deportees choosing to engage in criminal gang activities.
- Work with the media to encourage more accurate public perceptions of gang activity and more responsible and investigative journalism.
- All anti-gang programs should incorporate a gender-sensitive approach. While an in-depth assessment of female involvement in gangs and as victims of gang activities was beyond the scope of our research, additional studies documenting this important and increasing trend are necessary.
- Support community-based policing efforts to improve the citizen-police relationship and increase the effectiveness of law enforcement.

For detailed, country-level information, please refer to this assessment's five Country Profile Annexes for El Salvador Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua.