

CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE

How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved

REPORT DIGEST

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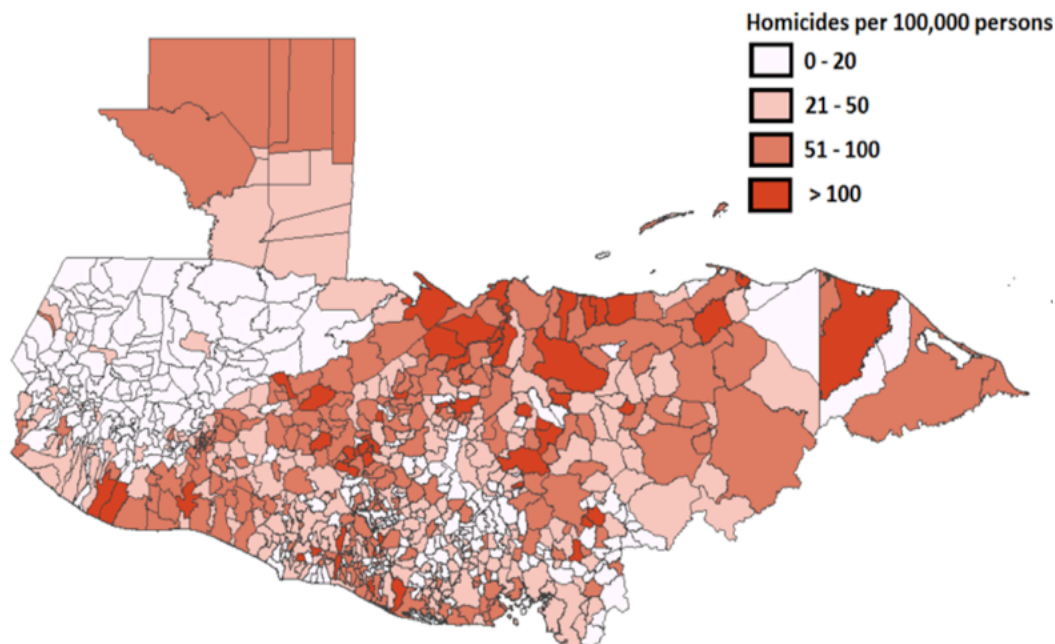
December 2014

Over the past year, the Woodrow Wilson Center's Latin American Program has undertaken an extensive review of the principal United States security assistance program for the region—the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). This review has focused on the major security challenges in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and how CARSI seeks to address these. Compiled in *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved*, part of the Latin American Program's Reports on the Americas series, this report includes a review of the current in-country security context in each Northern Triangle country, as well as an assessment of CARSI's effectiveness for addressing these challenges. The report also includes a chapter providing an in-depth analysis of the geographic distribution of homicides and an examination of how such an analysis can help policy makers design more effective targeted strategies to lower violence. A final chapter outlining policy options for the future completes the report.

During the spring and summer of 2014, a wave of undocumented, unaccompanied minors and families from Central America began arriving in record numbers at the United States' southern border, triggering a national debate on immigration and border policy, as well as an examination of the factors compelling thousands of children to undertake such a treacherous journey. This wave of migration has underscored

Photos (left to right): After school program in Honduras, courtesy of Honduran Youth Alliance/Alianza Joven Honduras; U.S. Border Patrol Agent training Guatemalan Police, by Miguel Negron via defenseimagery.mil; Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, by Flickr user Walking on Tracks

Homicide Rates in Northern Triangle Countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), 2013



Source: Created by Carlos Mendoza and team, with data from Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), Guatemala; Policia Nacional, Honduras; and Fiscalia General de la Republica (FGR) and Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), El Salvador.

the chronic problems that have plagued the region for decades. Many of these children and families come from Central America's Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—fleeing some of the world's highest homicide rates, rampant extortion, communities controlled by youth gangs, domestic violence, impunity for most crimes, as well as economic despair and lack of opportunity. While each of the three countries is unique, common factors drive their high rates of violence and insecurity—gangs and criminal organizations competing for territory, weak household and family structures, and weak institutions unable to control and prosecute crimes.

U.S. policy and practice are also a major contributing factor to the violence. U.S. consumption of illegal drugs remains among the highest in the world, and U.S. and Mexican efforts to interdict drug trafficking in the Caribbean and Mexico have contributed to the trade's relocation to Central America. Furthermore, the policy of deporting large numbers of young Central Americans in the 1990s and 2000s, many of them already gang members in the United States, helped transfer the problem of violent street gangs from the United States to Central America's Northern Triangle. Trafficking of firearms, including from the United States, has also contributed to the lethality and morbidity of crime.

The United States Response

The humanitarian crisis at the border has prompted an important discussion about U.S. policy in Central America and whether more assistance is needed; and, if so, for what. In July, 2014, President Obama sent to Congress a requested for \$295 million

CARSI'S FIVE GOALS

1. Create safe streets for the citizens in the region
2. Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband within and between the nations of Central America
3. Support the development of strong, capable and accountable Central American governments
4. Re-establish effective state presence and security in communities at risk
5. Foster enhanced levels of security and rule of law coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region

in aid for Central America as part of a \$3.7 billion emergency supplemental request intended to reinforce border security, expand detention facilities, and expedite immigration processing in an attempt to dissuade further migration. Additionally, the Northern Triangle's three Presidents have called for a substantial aid package focused on energy and transportation assistance for Central America.

CARSI began with the Bush Administration's request in 2007 for \$500 million for Mexico and \$50 million for Central America, as the initial phase of a three-year, \$1.4 billion security package known as the Mérida Initiative. Ultimately, Congress provided \$400 million for Mexico and \$65 million for Central America, authorizing funding to "be made available for assistance for seven Central America countries, as well as Haiti and the Dominican Republic." The assistance was designated to help combat drug trafficking and related violence, and organized crime; and for judicial reform, institution building, anti-corruption, rule of law activities, and maritime security. The Mérida Initiative-Central America component was eventually spun off to become the Central America specific CARSI program in FY 2010.

To accomplish CARSI's five stated goals (see above), the United States, particularly through the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), works with host countries to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement institutions, including police and prosecutors, to fight crime; to engage in community-level crime and violence prevention efforts focused on at-risk youth; and to support drug interdiction efforts.

The CARSI Assessment

The authors of the overview chapter and the three country studies, found in Part One of the Wilson Center report, conclude that despite several notable successes, many CARSI-funded programs suffer from significant weaknesses. Among the successes are the demonstrable impact USAID supported community-based crime and violence prevention programs have on perceptions of security in target high-crime neighborhoods; improved confidence in local police in target areas; and, most importantly, a decrease in reported crime. This is the only program area



where a robust and comprehensive impact evaluation has been conducted with baselines established before program implementation. Nevertheless, there are questions about the level of host country commitment to broaden and deepen these programs using their own resources, so the sustainability of these initiatives is uncertain.

A central conclusion of this report is that CARSI does not reflect a comprehensive strategy to address the critical public security threats that have shaken the region, and thus its impact on the problems of crime and violence driving Central American migration to the United States is quite limited. Absent a strategic focus policy choices have, at times, contradicted each other and undermined CARSI's laudable goals. Some agencies favor a more traditional counter-narcotics law-and-order focus, while others prioritize the reduction of community-based violence, and these distinct approaches periodically work at cross-purposes.

Other common criticisms from the three country studies include the absence of rigorous impact evaluations of CARSI funded programs, over-reliance on vetted units and training programs to reform law enforcement institutions and build their capacity to function more effectively. The exceptional impact evaluation work commissioned by USAID and noted above notwithstanding, CARSI programs do not undergo comprehensive impact evaluations as a general rule especially in the areas of institutional strengthening and drug interdiction. Drug seizures, arrests, and number of people trained continue to be used as indicators of success even though these offer little evidence of long term impact on violence or crime rates, or institutional capacity.

Likewise, CARSI-supported vetted units and special vetted task forces have had mixed results. Vetted units have two primary objectives: (1) to conduct professional investigations and carry-out sensitive operations; and (2) to strengthen the capacity of the rest of the police force by providing a positive example and repopulating the force with well trained personnel. In general, vetted units and task forces have succeeded in the first part of their mission—specialized training and sensitive operations. However, both Honduran and Salvadoran police officers interviewed for this report have questioned whether the vetting procedures are effective, and suggests that corruption continues to be a problem in the units, albeit less so.

Furthermore, the impact of vetted units on the institutional capacity of their broader law enforcement agency has never been evaluated or measured. In many cases members of vetted units are not cycled out so their ability to act as a “feeder system” to repopulate the agency with skilled and trustworthy personnel is not occurring. Furthermore, the fact that vetted units are in a position of privilege creates resentment and animosity with the broader agency.

In the report's fifth chapter, “Violence in Central America: A Spatial View of Homicide in the Region, Northern Triangle, and El Salvador,” Matthew C. Ingram and Karise M. Curtis use exploratory spatial analysis to identify patterns in the region's homicide



data. Their examination of available data leads to three important conclusions. **(1)** homicides are not distributed in a geographically random manner but tend to cluster in areas of high violence (“hot spots”) and low violence (“cold spots”). By narrowing the analysis to the municipal level, the authors are able to identify clusters that would otherwise be missed by a national- or departmental-level analysis. **(2)** The authors identify an important “neighborhood effect” among these clusters where violence in one municipality influences violence in neighboring municipalities. **(3)** Spatial regression reveals some explanatory factors with potential policy implications: policy makers might use spatial regression tools to better target assistance on clusters rather than on departments; rapid urbanization and population growth have a positive effect on homicide rates (that is, increases them), while education has a negative effect (decreases).

POSSIBLE NEW DIRECTIONS FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS

In the final chapter of the report, Eric L. Olson addresses possible new directions for policymakers to consider as they weigh further aid for Central America. Olson argues that the United States should adopt a new framework for security assistance in Central America that prioritizes reducing community level violence by focusing on the principal factors driving this violence. He suggests seven suggestions for improving the impact of U.S. security assistance for Central America:

- **Reduce violence, build community resilience.**
- **Tie new United States resources to progress in meeting specific mutually agreed upon targets for reducing violence.**
- **Name a high-level coordinator or special envoy for U.S. security programs to ensure that a strategy is fully articulated and, more importantly, successfully carried out.**
- **Increase and expand prevention programs in targeted high crime areas.**
- **Fight corruption.**
- **Empower civil society.**
- **Make social investments and economic opportunity part of the security strategy.**

There are no easy solutions or shortcuts for dealing with these issues. It will require a long-term bipartisan commitment to the region, discipline to stay focused on the framework, and adequate, not unlimited, resources.



Table: Institutional Reform / Institutional Strengthening Projects

	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Regional
Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based policing (2010-2013) Support Police Reform Commission (2014) Villa Nueva Model Precinct program (2009-10) Support National Civil Police Internal Affairs and Office of Professional Responsibility (2014) Model Police Precincts (2009-10, 2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for Honduran National Police Financial Crimes Task Force and the Violent Crimes Task Force (2014) Support police-reform laws (2014) Improve Honduran National Police internal affairs (2014) Support HNP establishment of Administrative Division as well as Intelligence, Computer Forensics, Fugitive Recover, and Monitoring and Evaluation Units (2014) Model Police Precinct (2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based (2010-2013) Strengthen anti-corruption capacity (2010) Model Police Precinct Program (2014) USAID: Justice Sector Improvement Project (expand the community policing model) (2012-2017) USAID: Security Sector and Justice Sector Reform Project (technical assistance and training for security sector, including a career path for police and international standard certification of quality management systems; promotion of civil society oversight of public and private security services) (2012-2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community policing (2010-11, 2013) Encourage cooperating with prosecutors and judiciary (2008) Improve police academies (2011, 2013)
Fiscalia/PM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support transition of CICIG functions to Attorney General's Office (2013, 2014) Strengthen Public Defender's Institute (2013) Strengthen Ministry of Interior (2013) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional legal advisor to enhance capacity of criminal investigations of Trafficking in Persons (2014) Assist with justice reform strategy (2014) Advance professional responsibility policies and procedures (2014) Support cross-organization collaboration (2008, 2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Electronic Monitoring Center (Attorney General's office) (2011) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance prosecutorial capacity (2008-11)



<p>Judiciary</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen the Judicial Branch (2013) Strengthen prosecution and adjudication of criminal cases (2012-2013) Provide more secure environment for pre-trial hearings (2012) Support implementation of the criminal procedure code (2011) Support for 24 Hour and High Impact courts (2011) Support asset seizure and money laundering cases (2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-gang-focused capacity building (2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of the criminal procedures code (2010-2013) Improve practices for processing criminal cases (2013) Effectiveness and accountability of judges and private attorneys (2013) Anti-corruption legal framework (2013) Redesign of model “peace” courts (2010) Monitor justice system performance (2010) Support task forces to combat extortion of businesses and transportation systems (2014) USAID: Justice Sector Improvement Project (implement criminal procedure code and improve practices for processing criminal cases) (2012-2017) USAID: Security Sector and Justice Sector Reform Project (technical assistance and training for justice sector reforms) (2012-2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage cooperation with police and prosecutors (2008) Courts management (2009-11)
<p>Prisons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management (2009, 2012) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management (2009, 2012) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management (2009, 2012) Management support including case management and classification systems and procedures (2014) Efforts to reduce pre-trial detention (2014) Prisoner rehabilitation programs including <i>Yo Cambio</i> (2014) Cell improvements (2014) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model prison and regional training (2012) Management (2008-11, 2013)
<p>Other crime prevention (law enforcement based only)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crime information statistics system (2009) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Municipal crime prevention (2011-2013) Crime pattern identification (2011-2013) Deploy COMPSTAT (or equivalent) analysis system (2014) USAID: SolucionES GDA-Alliance Project (2012-2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of best practices (2013) Fingerprint analysis initiative (2008) USAID: SICA regional network of Crime Prevention Observatories (2013-2017)

