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CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO GANG ASSESSMENT



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

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USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment

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USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment

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 or gang member, and not all gangs have the same objectives or engage in the same type

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.

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.
- **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.

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

- **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.

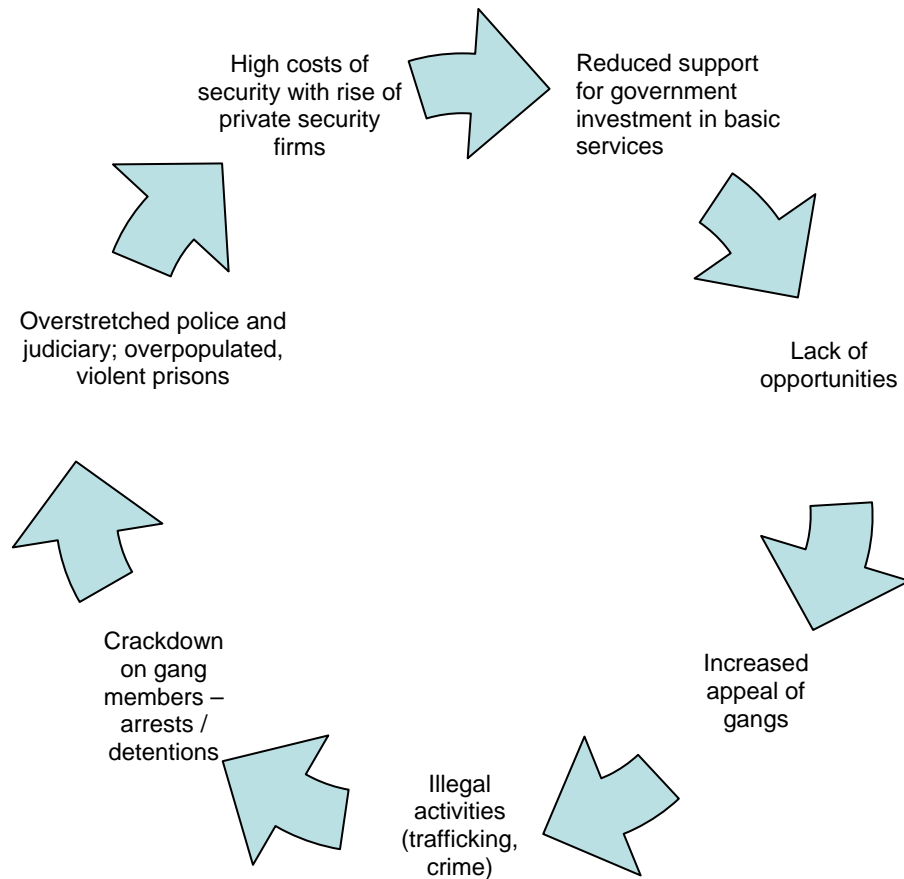
The five countries studied in this assessment – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua – have each responded differently to the gang problem. El Salvador and Honduras, for example, have largely committed to the *mano dura* (firm hand) approach, which emphasizes zero-tolerance law enforcement 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.

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 being pursued by the U.S. and other world organizations.”⁶ The U.S. Department of

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.

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

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

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.

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.

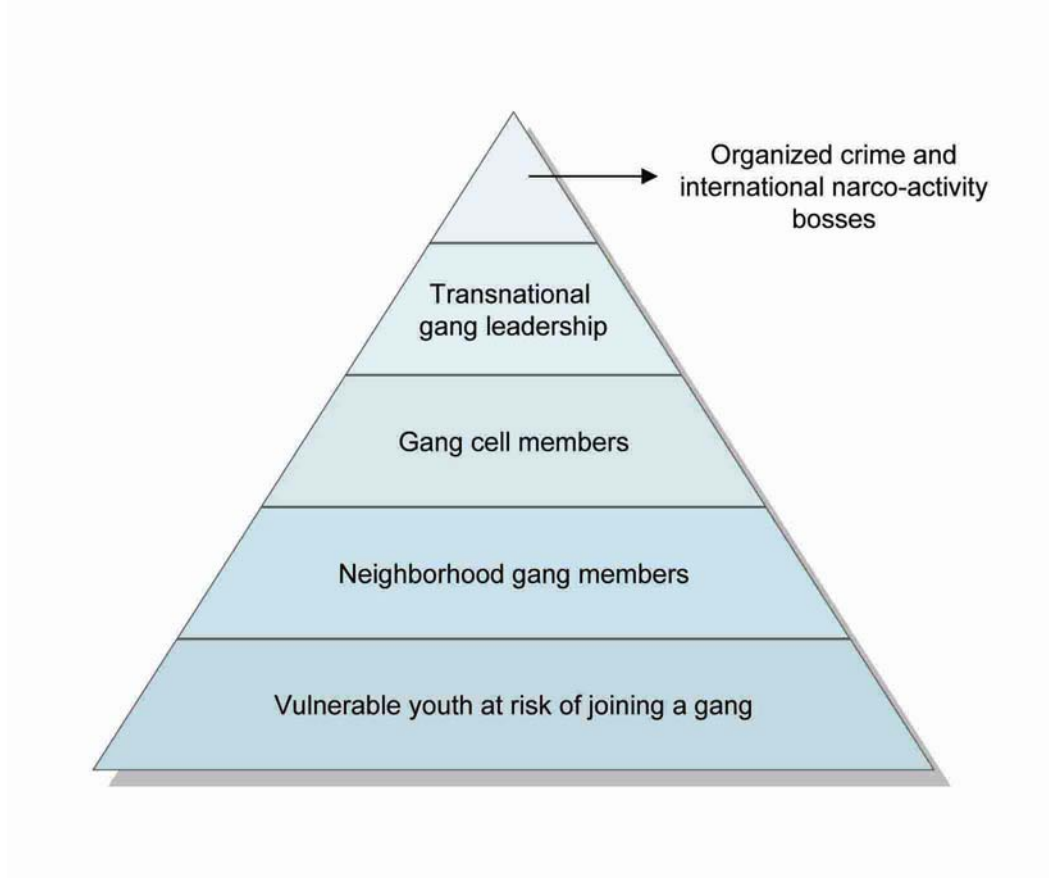
⁹ Note that this version of the USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment was edited for public distribution. Certain sections, including specific country-level recommendations for USAID Missions, were omitted from the Country Profile Annexes. These recommendations are summarized in the Conclusions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

