



Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress

Peter J. Meyer

Analyst in Latin American Affairs

Clare Ribando Seelke

Specialist in Latin American Affairs

August 30, 2011

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

R41731

CRS Report for Congress

Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

Summary

Central America faces significant security challenges. Criminal threats, fragile political and judicial systems, and social hardships such as poverty and unemployment contribute to widespread insecurity in the region. Consequently, improving security conditions in these countries is a difficult, multifaceted endeavor. Because U.S. drug demand contributes to regional security challenges and the consequences of citizen insecurity in Central America are potentially far-reaching, the United States is collaborating with countries in the region to implement and refine security efforts.

Criminal Threats

Well-financed drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), along with transnational gangs and other organized criminal groups, threaten to overwhelm Central American governments. Counternarcotics efforts in Colombia and Mexico have put pressure on DTOs in those countries. As a result, many DTOs have increased their operations in Central America, a region with fewer resources and weaker institutions with which to combat drug trafficking and related criminality. Increasing flows of narcotics through Central America are contributing to rising levels of violence and the corruption of government officials, both of which are weakening citizens' support for democratic governance and the rule of law. DTOs are also increasingly becoming poly-criminal organizations, raising millions of dollars through smuggling, extorting, and sometimes kidnapping Central American migrants. Given the transnational character of criminal organizations and their abilities to exploit ungoverned spaces, some analysts assert that insecurity in Central America poses a potential threat to the United States.

Social and Political Factors

Throughout Central America, underlying social conditions and structural weaknesses in governance inhibit efforts to improve security. Persistent poverty, inequality, and unemployment leave large portions of the population susceptible to crime. Given the limited opportunities other than emigration available to the expanding youth populations in Central America, young people are particularly vulnerable. At the same time, underfunded security forces and the failure to fully implement post-conflict institutional reforms initiated in several countries in the 1990s have left police, prisons, and judicial systems weak and susceptible to corruption.

Approaches to Central American Security

Despite these challenges, Central American governments have attempted to improve security conditions in a variety of ways. Governments in the “northern triangle” countries of Central America have tended to adopt more aggressive approaches, including deploying military forces to help police with public security functions and enacting tough anti-gang laws. Governments in other countries have emphasized prevention activities, such as intervention programs that focus on strengthening families of at-risk youth. Central American nations have also sought to improve regional cooperation, given the increasingly regional nature of the threats they face.

U.S. Assistance

To address growing security concerns, the Obama Administration has sought to develop collaborative partnerships with countries throughout the Western Hemisphere. In Central America, this has taken the form of the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Originally created in FY2008 as part of the Mexico-focused counterdrug and anticrime assistance package known as the Mérida Initiative, CARSI takes a broad approach to the issue of security, funding various activities designed to support U.S. and Central American security objectives. In addition to providing the seven nations of Central America with equipment, training, and technical assistance to support immediate law enforcement and interdiction operations, CARSI seeks to strengthen the capacities of governmental institutions to address security challenges as well as the underlying economic and social conditions that contribute to them. Since FY2008, the United States has provided Central America with \$361.5 million through Mérida/CARSI. The Obama Administration has requested an additional \$100 million for CARSI in FY2012.

Scope of This Report

This report examines the extent of the security problems in Central America, the current efforts being undertaken by Central American governments to address them, and U.S. support for Central American efforts through the Central America Regional Security Initiative. It also raises potential policy issues for congressional consideration such as funding levels, human rights concerns, and how CARSI relates to other U.S. government policies.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Background: Scope of the Problem	4
Underlying Societal Conditions.....	5
Structural Weaknesses in Governance.....	6
Criminal Threats.....	7
Drug Trafficking Organizations	7
Gangs.....	9
Other Criminal Organizations	11
Efforts Within Central America	11
Law Enforcement Approaches.....	12
Prevention.....	15
Counterdrug Efforts.....	15
Regional Security Efforts	16
U.S. Policy.....	18
Background on Assistance to Central America	19
Central America Regional Security Initiative.....	20
Formulation.....	20
Funding from FY2008-FY2012	21
Programs	23
Implementation.....	26
Performance Measures	27
Additional Issues for Congressional Consideration.....	27
Funding Issues	27
Human Rights Concerns.....	29
Relation to Other U.S. Government Policies.....	30
Outlook	32

Figures

Figure 1. Map of Central America.....	3
Figure 2. Crime Victimization Rates in Mexico and Central America	5
Figure 3. Central American Drug Trafficking Routes.....	8

Tables

Table 1. Estimated Homicide Rates in Central America and Mexico, 2005-2010	4
Table 2. Estimated Cocaine Seizures in 2010, by Country.....	16
Table 3. Funding for the Central America Regional Security Initiative, FY2008-FY2012.....	21
Table 4. Status of Assistance Appropriated, as of March 2011.....	27
Table A-1. Central America Development Indicators.....	33

Table A-2. Central America Poverty and Inequality Indicators 34

Appendixes

Appendix. Central America Social Indicators 33

Contacts

Author Contact Information..... 34
Acknowledgments 34

Introduction

The security situation in Central America¹ has deteriorated in recent years as gangs, drug traffickers, and other criminal groups have expanded their activities in the region, contributing to escalating levels of crime and violence that have alarmed citizens and threaten to overwhelm governments. Violence is particularly intense in the “northern triangle” countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which have some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Citizens of nearly every Central American nation now rank public insecurity as the top problem facing their countries.² The World Bank estimates that the overall economic costs of crime and violence averages 7.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) in Central America.³ Moreover, some analysts maintain that the pervasive lack of security in the region not only threatens Central American governments and civil society, but presents a potential threat to the United States.⁴ Given the proximity of Central America, instability in the region—whether in the form of declining support for democracy as a result of corrupt governance, drug traffickers acting with impunity as a result of weak state presence, or increased emigration as a result of economic and physical insecurity—is likely to affect the United States.

Although some analysts assert that the current situation in Central America presents a greater threat to regional security than the civil wars of the 1980s,⁵ policymakers have only recently begun to offer increased attention and financial support to the region. During the 1980s, the United States provided Central America with an average of nearly \$1.4 billion annually in economic and military assistance to support efforts to combat leftist political movements.⁶ U.S. attention to the region declined significantly in the early 1990s, however, as the civil wars ended and Cold War concerns faded. Prior to the introduction of the Mérida Initiative in FY2008, the bulk of U.S. security assistance to the hemisphere was concentrated in Colombia and the other narcotics-producing nations of the Andean region of South America. The United States provided Central America with some assistance for narcotics interdiction and institutional capacity building, but the funding levels were comparatively low. Central America has received higher levels of U.S. security assistance as a result of the Mérida Initiative; however, just \$361.5 million of the \$1.96 billion appropriated through Mérida and its successor programs between FY2008 and FY2011 has been allocated to Central America, with the remainder going to Mexico.⁷

¹ For the purposes of this report, “Central America” includes all seven countries of the isthmus: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

² Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2010*, Santiago, Chile, December 2010.

³ This figures does not include data from Belize and Panama. See Rodrigo Serrano-Berthet and Humberto Lopez, World Bank, *Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge*, Washington, D.C., 2011.

⁴ Bob Killebrew and Jennifer Bernal, *Crime Wars: Gangs, Cartels and U.S. National Security*, Center for a New American Security, Washington, DC, September 2010.

⁵ Steven S. Dudley, *Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels and Maras*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Mexico Institute & the University of San Diego Trans-Border Institute, Working Paper Series on U.S.-Mexico Security Collaboration, May 2010.

⁶ Figure is in constant, 2009 dollars. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2009*, <http://www.usaid.gov/policy/greenbook.html>.

⁷ For information on the Mérida Initiative in Mexico, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea.

Recognizing that U.S.-backed efforts in Colombia and Mexico have provided incentives for criminal groups to move into Central America and other areas where they can exploit institutional weaknesses to continue their operations, the Obama Administration has sought to develop collaborative security partnerships with countries throughout the hemisphere. As part of this effort, the Administration re-launched the Central America portion of the Mérida Initiative as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) in FY2010. CARSI takes a broad approach to the issue of security that goes well beyond the traditional focus on preventing narcotics from reaching the United States. Ensuring the safety and security of all citizens is one of the four overarching priorities of current U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean.⁸ Accordingly, CARSI not only provides equipment, training, and technical assistance to support immediate law enforcement and interdiction operations, but also seeks to strengthen the capacities of governmental institutions to address security challenges and the underlying economic and social conditions that contribute to them. Although Central American countries express appreciation for the funds provided, they maintain that the assistance could better respond to host country priorities and is insufficient given the scale of the region's security challenges.⁹

Congress has closely tracked the implementation of the Mérida Initiative/CARSI since its inception. Nearly three years after Congress first appropriated funding, a number of analysts assert that extensive long-term U.S. support will be necessary for Central America to successfully overcome its current security challenges.¹⁰ As Congress evaluates budget priorities and debates the form of U.S. security assistance to the region, it may examine the scope of the security problems in Central America, the current efforts being undertaken by the governments of Central America to address these problems, and how the United States has supported those efforts. This report provides background information about these topics and raises potential policy issues regarding U.S.-Central America security cooperation—such as funding levels, human rights concerns, and how CARSI relates to other U.S. government policies—that Congress may opt to consider.

⁸ The other three overarching priorities are building effective institutions of democratic governance, promoting social and economic opportunity for everyone, and securing a clean energy future. Testimony of Arturo A. Valenzuela, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, before the Senate Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs, February 17, 2011.

⁹ CRS interviews with Central American embassy officials, October 27, November 2, 3, and 9, 2010.

¹⁰ Killebrew & Bernal, September 2010, op. cit.; Diana Villiers Negroponte, "Understanding and Improving Mérida," *Americas Quarterly*, Spring 2010.

Figure 1. Map of Central America



Source: CRS.

Notes: The “northern triangle” countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) are pictured in orange.

Background: Scope of the Problem

As in neighboring Mexico, the countries of Central America—particularly the “northern triangle” countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—are dealing with escalating homicides and generalized crime committed by drug traffickers, gangs, and other criminal groups. While the drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico¹¹ has captured U.S. policymakers’ attention, the even more dire security situation in many Central American countries has received considerably less focus or financial support from the United States.¹² In 2010, the homicide rate per 100,000 people in Mexico stood at roughly 18, a rate exceeded by that of Belize (39), El Salvador (66), Guatemala (50), Honduras (77), and Panama (21) (see **Table 1**). Moreover, according to recent polling data, even Central American countries with relatively low homicide rates, such as Costa Rica and Nicaragua, have victimization rates for common crime (a term that includes robbery and assault) on par with Mexico (see **Figure 2**). As enforcement efforts in Mexico have intensified, the security challenges facing Central America, a region with significantly fewer resources and weaker institutions than its northern neighbor, have multiplied.¹³

Table 1. Estimated Homicide Rates in Central America and Mexico, 2005-2010

Homicides per 100,000 Inhabitants

Country	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Belize	28	31	30	32	32	39
Costa Rica	8	8	8	11	12	n/a
El Salvador	62	65	57	52	71	66
Guatemala	44	47	45	48	53	50
Honduras	37	46	50	58	67	77
Nicaragua	13	13	13	13	13	n/a
Panama	11	11	13	19	24	21
Mexico	11	11	10	12	15	18

Sources: For 2005-2008, data for Central America are drawn from U.N. Development Program, *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Para América Central 2009-2010: Abrir Espacios a la Seguridad Ciudadana y el Desarrollo Humano*, October 2009. For 2009-2010, homicide rates for Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama are drawn from U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Regional Gang Initiative: Progress Status Report – CY2010*, February 8, 2011. The 2009 homicide rate for Nicaragua is from police statistics obtained by CRS from U.S. State Department officials. The 2009 homicide rate for Costa Rica is from Programa Estado de la Nación, *Informe Estado de la Nación en Desarrollo Humano Sostenible XVI*, 2010. Data for Mexico are from Mexico’s National System of Public Security.

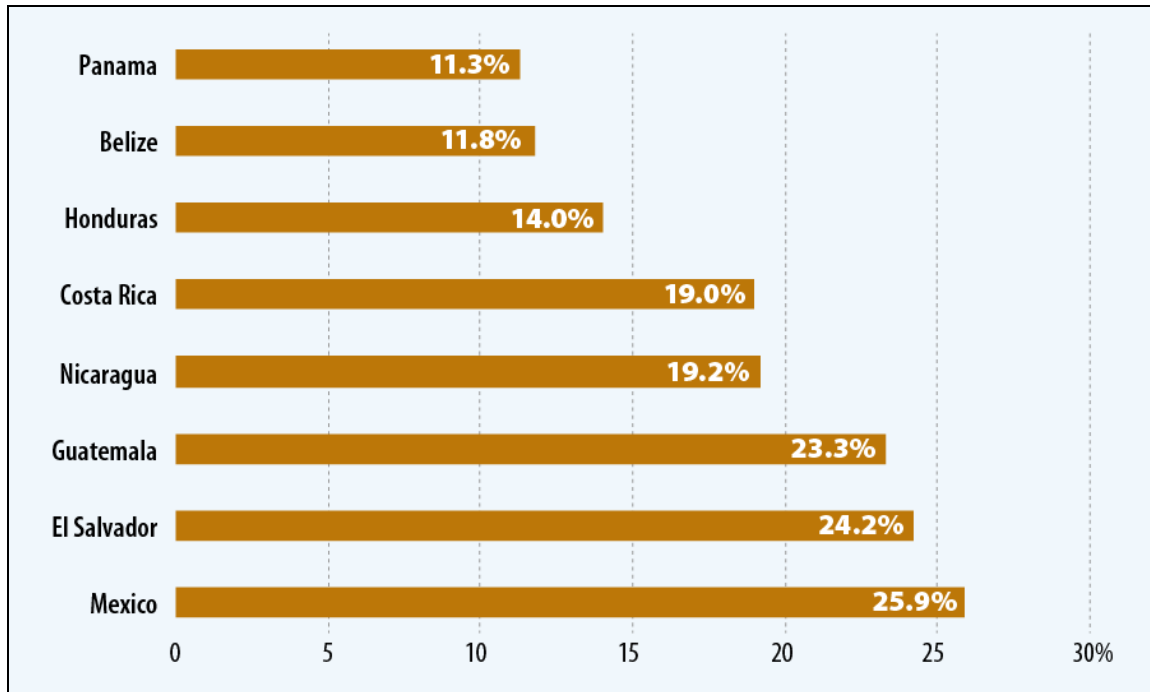
¹¹ For information on drug trafficking-related violence in Mexico, see CRS Report R41576, *Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence*, by June S. Beittel.

¹² Since FY2008, Congress has provided more than \$1.6 billion in counterdrug and anti-crime assistance to Mexico under the Mérida Initiative and \$361.5 million to Central America through Mérida and CARSI. For historical information, see CRS Report R40135, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; and CRS Report R41215, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S. Counterdrug Programs*, coordinated by Clare Ribando Seelke.

¹³ Michael Shifter, “Central America’s Security Predicament,” *Current History*, February 1, 2011.

Figure 2. Crime Victimization Rates in Mexico and Central America

Percentage of People Surveyed That Reported Being Victims of Crime in the Preceding 12 Months



Source: Americas Barometer survey data from 2010 by the Latin American Public Opinion Project of Vanderbilt University.

Underlying Societal Conditions

The social fabric in many Central American countries has been tattered by persistent poverty, inequality, and unemployment, with few opportunities available for growing youth populations aside from emigration, often illegal.¹⁴ Except for Costa Rica and Panama, the countries of Central America are generally low-income countries with low levels of human development (see the **Appendix**). Studies have shown that high levels of income inequality are often stronger predictors of high violent crime rates than poverty rates alone.¹⁵ For the most part, Central American countries are not only impoverished, but highly unequal societies, with income inequality exacerbated by the social exclusion of ethnic minorities and gender discrimination. The linkage between inequality and high crime rates holds true in Central America except for the case of El Salvador, a country with relatively low inequality but high crime rates.¹⁶ Poverty and inequality have been reinforced by the lack of social mobility and persistent unemployment and underemployment in many countries. With limited opportunities at home, roughly a quarter of

¹⁴ According to figures from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras follow Mexico as the primary source countries for unauthorized (illegal) immigration to the United States. Michael Hofer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2010*, DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, February 2011.

¹⁵ Pablo Fajnzylber, Daniel Lederman, and Norman Loayza, "Inequality and Violent Crime," *Journal of Law and Economics*, August 2001.

¹⁶ U.N. Development Program (UNDP), *Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Para América Central 2009-2010: Abrir Espacios a la Seguridad Ciudadana y el Desarrollo Humano*, October 2009.

Salvadorans now live abroad, leading analysts to assert that people have become one of the country's primary exports.¹⁷ El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which have large percentages of their populations living in the United States, have reportedly suffered more from the negative effects of emigration (such as family disintegration and deportations) than other countries.¹⁸

With the exceptions of Belize and Costa Rica, Central American countries have also had a long history of armed conflicts and/or dictatorships. A legacy of conflict and authoritarian rule has inhibited the development of democratic institutions and respect for the rule of law in many countries. Protracted armed conflicts also resulted in the widespread proliferation of illicit firearms in the region, as well as a cultural tendency to resort to violence as a means of settling disputes.¹⁹ Recent research details how illicit networks that smuggled arms and other supplies to both sides involved in the armed conflict in El Salvador have been converted into transnational criminal networks that smuggle drugs, people, illicit proceeds, weapons, and other stolen goods.²⁰ In addition, some former combatants in El Salvador and Guatemala have put the skills they acquired during their countries' armed conflicts to use in the service of criminal groups, as the end of civil conflicts there coincided with the emergence of drug trafficking in the region.²¹

Structural Weaknesses in Governance

In recent years, much has been written about the governance problems that have made many Central American countries susceptible to the influence of drug traffickers and other criminal elements and unable to guarantee citizen security, a basic function of any government. To begin with, many governments do not have operational control over their borders and territories. As an example, the Mexico-Guatemalan border is 600 miles long and has only eight formal checkpoints.²² This is partially a result of regional police and military forces being generally undermanned and/or ill-equipped to establish an effective presence in remote regions or to challenge well-armed criminal groups.²³ Resource constraints in the security sector have persisted over time as governments have failed to increase taxes. According to World Bank data,²⁴ tax revenue as a percentage of GDP averaged just 13.8% in Central America in 2009, below the levels of many African countries. A lack of confidence in the underfunded public security forces

¹⁷ Sarah Gammage, "Exporting People and Recruiting Remittances: A Development Strategy for El Salvador?" *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 33, no. 6 (2006).

¹⁸ UNDP, October 2009, op. cit.

¹⁹ Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), *Armas Pequeñas y Livianas: Amenaza a la Seguridad Hemisférica*, 2007.

²⁰ Douglas Farah, *Organized Crime in El Salvador: the Homegrown and Transnational Dimensions*, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars Latin America Program, Working Paper Series on Organized Crime in Central America, February 2011.

²¹ Ibid.; Hal Brands, *Crime, Violence, and the Crisis in Guatemala: A Case Study in the Erosion of the State*, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2010.

²² Embassy of Mexico, *Toward a Secure and Prosperous Southern Border*, October 2010.

²³ In Guatemala, for example, former President Oscar Berger reduced the size and budget of the military by 50% more than was required by the 1996 Peace Accords (to roughly 15,500 soldiers and 0.33% of GDP). That reform has since been partially reversed by the Colom Administration, which aims to have some 20,000 soldiers in the Guatemalan military. CRS interview with Guatemalan military official, January 20, 2011.

²⁴ Data are available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GC.TAX.TOTL.GD.ZS>. No figures were included for Belize or Panama.

has led many businesses and wealthy individuals in the region to turn to private security firms. One recent study estimated that the number of authorized private security personnel in Central America may exceed 234,000, dwarfing the total number of police in the region.²⁵

Resource constraints aside, there have also been serious concerns about corruption in the police, prisons, and judicial systems in Central America.²⁶ This corruption has occurred partially as a result of incomplete institutional reforms implemented after armed conflicts ended in several countries in the 1990s.²⁷ With crime victimization rates on the rise and impunity rates averaging roughly 90%,²⁸ people have low levels of trust in law enforcement, which has in turn increased support for government initiatives aimed at increasing the role of the military in public security. Survey data have shown that those who have been victims of crime or who perceive that crime is increasing in their countries express less support for the political system and the rule of law than other citizens, including less support for the idea that police should always obey the law.²⁹ In extreme cases, people in some Central American countries have taken justice into their own hands by carrying out vigilante killings of those suspected of committing crimes.

Criminal Threats

Drug Trafficking Organizations

Since the mid-1990s, the primary pathway for illegal drugs, including Andean cocaine, entering the United States has been through Mexico (see **Figure 3**). As recently as 2007, however, only a small amount of cocaine that passed through Mexico first transited through Central America. Currently, 95% of all illicit drugs that enter North America from South America have transited Central America.³⁰ The use of Central America as a transshipment zone has continued to grow as traffickers have used overland smuggling, littoral maritime trafficking, and short-distance aerial trafficking rather than long-range maritime or aerial trafficking to transport cocaine from South America to Mexico.³¹ A large but unknown proportion of opiates, as well as foreign-produced marijuana and methamphetamine, some of which is now locally produced, also flows through the same pathways. This overwhelming use of the Central America-Mexico corridor as a transit zone

²⁵ Otto Argueta, *Private Security in Guatemala: the Pathway to its Proliferation*, German Institute of Global Affairs and Area Studies, September 2010.

²⁶ According to Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), the Central American countries that are perceived to be the most corrupt are Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, while Costa Rica is viewed as least corrupt. (Belize is not ranked.) For recent examples of corruption, see country entries in U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 3, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2011/index.htm>.

²⁷ On police reform, see Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), *Protect and Serve? The Status of Police Reform in Central America*, June 2009. On the judicial sector, see Due Process of Law Foundation, *Evaluation of Judicial Corruption in Central America and Panama and Mechanisms to Combat It*, 2007.

²⁸ UNDP, October 2009, op. cit., p. 235.

²⁹ Mitchell A. Seligson and Amy Erica Smith, eds., *The Political Culture of Democracy, 2010: Democratic Consolidation in the Americas in Hard Times*, Vanderbilt University Latin American Public Opinion Project, December 2010.

³⁰ Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns, "Roundtable with Mexican Media," Remarks at the U.S. Embassy, Mexico City, Mexico, August 16, 2011.

³¹ Stephen Meiners, "Central America: An Emerging Role in the Drug Trade," *STRATFOR*, March 28, 2009.

represents a major shift in trafficking routes. In the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, drugs primarily transited through the Caribbean into South Florida.

Figure 3. Central American Drug Trafficking Routes



Source: STRATFOR, February 25, 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com>.

Stepped-up enforcement efforts in Mexico and instability in certain Central American countries have also led traffickers to use Central America, particularly Guatemala and Honduras, as transshipment points for Andean cocaine bound for the United States. Following the June 2009 ouster of President Manuel Zelaya, for example, drug flights into Honduras reportedly skyrocketed.³² In September 2010, President Obama identified every Central American country except for Belize and El Salvador as a major drug transit country, with Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua making their first appearance on the list.³³

³² James Bosworth, *Honduras: Organized Crime Gaining Amid Political Crisis*, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars Latin America Program, Working Paper Series on Organized Crime in Central America, February 2011.

³³ Beginning in 1986 (P.L. 99-570), Congress introduced an annual procedure to withhold certain types of bilateral foreign assistance, not including counternarcotics assistance, to major drug-producing and major drug transit countries worldwide, commonly termed the “drug majors.” The President is required annually to issue a presidential determination to identify which countries are to be included in the list of drug majors for the following fiscal year. For FY2011, President Barack Obama identified 20 drug majors, including Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. The drug majors are then evaluated on the basis of their effort to combat drugs and cooperate with the U.S. government on drug policy issues. The President must accordingly “certify” to Congress that drug majors have either “cooperated fully” or have “failed demonstrably” in U.S. and international counternarcotics efforts. President Obama certified all five Central American countries on the list. Barack Obama, Presidential Determination No. 2009- (continued...)

In the past, Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) tended to contract local drug trafficking groups in Central America, sometimes referred to as *transportistas*, to transport drugs through that region. Recently, drug transshipment activities have increasingly been taken over, often after violent struggles, by Mexican drug traffickers from the Sinaloa DTO and the Zetas, a rival DTO started by former Mexican military officers who, until recently, served as the paramilitary wing of the Gulf DTO.³⁴ Mexican DTOs have been most active in Guatemala, where they are battling each other and family-based Guatemalan DTOs for control over lucrative drug smuggling routes. Officials estimate that between 40% and 60% of Guatemalan territory may now be under the effective control of drug traffickers.³⁵ In May 2011, Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom declared a temporary “state of siege” invoking martial law in the Petén region of his country after the Zetas massacred 27 peasants on a farm near the Mexican border.³⁶ Mexican DTOs have also begun to pay *transportistas* and gangs who distribute drugs or serve as enforcers (or hit men) in product, which has increased drug consumption in many countries and sparked disputes between local groups over control of domestic drug markets.³⁷ The DTOs, particularly the Zetas, have also taken control of many migrant smuggling routes originating in Central America, enacting harsh penalties on those who fail to work for them or pay them quotas.³⁸

Gangs³⁹

In recent years, Central American governments, the media, and some analysts have attributed, sometimes erroneously, a significant proportion of violent crime in the region to transnational youth gangs, or *maras*, many of which have ties to the United States. The major gangs operating in Central America with ties to the United States are the “18th Street” gang (also known as M-18) and its main rival, the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13).⁴⁰ The 18th Street gang was formed by Mexican youth in the Rampart section of Los Angeles in the 1960s who were not accepted into existing Hispanic gangs. MS-13 was created during the 1980s by Salvadorans in Los Angeles who had fled the country’s civil conflict. Both gangs later expanded their operations to Central America. This process accelerated after the United States began deporting illegal immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the region after the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996.⁴¹

(...continued)

30, “Memorandum to the Secretary of State: Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2011,” September 16, 2010.

³⁴ Dudley, May 2010, op. cit.

³⁵ The lower estimate is cited in Brands, May 2010, op. cit. The upper estimate is from “Drug Traffickers Have Stranglehold on Guatemala Says Top Prosecutor,” *El Pais*, February 23, 2011.

³⁶ Rory Carroll, “Guatemala’s Drug War: Terror and Foreboding as Mexico’s Bloody Narco Wars Spread South,” *Guardian*, June 29, 2011. President Colom had previously declared a two-month “state of siege” in the Alto Verapaz region. Nicholas Casey, “Mexican Drug War Spills to Neighbor,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2011.

³⁷ Dudley, May 2010, op. cit.

³⁸ Tim Johnson, “Violent Mexican Drug Gang, Zetas, Taking Control of Migrant Smuggling,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, August 12, 2011.

³⁹ This section is drawn from CRS Report RL34112, *Gangs in Central America*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

⁴⁰ For the history and evolution of these gangs, see Tom Diaz, *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement*, Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

⁴¹ IIRIRA expanded the categories of illegal immigrants subject to deportation and made it more difficult for immigrants to get relief from removal.

Estimates of the overall number of gang members in Central America vary widely, but the U.S. Southern Command has placed that figure at around 70,000, a figure also cited by the United Nations. The gang problem is most severe in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Estimates of Central American gang membership by country also vary considerably, but the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has cited country membership totals of some 36,000 in Honduras, 14,000 in Guatemala, and 10,500 in El Salvador. These figures are compared to 4,500 in Nicaragua, 2,660 in Costa Rica, and 1,385 in Panama.⁴² Nicaragua has a significant number of local gangs, often referred to as *pandillas*, but does not have large numbers of MS-13 or M-18 members.

MS-13 and M-18 began as loosely structured street gangs, but there is evidence that both gangs have expanded geographically, become more organized, and expanded the range of their criminal activities. As happened in the United States, gang leaders in Central America have used prisons to recruit new members and to increase the discipline and cohesion among their existing ranks. By 2008, Salvadoran police had found evidence suggesting that some MS-13 leaders jailed in El Salvador were ordering retaliatory assassinations of individuals in Northern Virginia, as well as designing plans to unify their *clicas* (cliques) with those in the United States.⁴³ Central American officials have blamed gangs for a large percentage of homicides committed in recent years, particularly in El Salvador and Honduras, but some analysts assert that those claims may be exaggerated.⁴⁴ The actual percentage of homicides that can be attributed to gangs in Central America remains controversial, but analysts agree that the gangs have increasingly become involved in extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, and drug, auto, and weapons smuggling. Gangs have extorted millions of dollars from residents, bus drivers, and businesses in cities throughout the region. Failure to pay often results in harassment or violence by gang members, with at least 170 Guatemalan bus drivers and fare collectors killed by gangs in 2010 alone.⁴⁵ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has also documented increasing numbers of cases of extortion schemes carried out by gangs in El Salvador against Salvadorans in the United States.⁴⁶

Some studies maintain that ties between Central American gangs and organized criminal groups have increased, while others downplay the connection. Regional and U.S. authorities have confirmed increasing gang involvement in drug trafficking, although mostly on a local level. MS-13 members are reportedly being contracted on an ad hoc basis by Mexico's warring DTOs to carry out revenge killings. Some analysts assert that the relationship between DTOs and gangs appears to be most developed in El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, in Honduras, with few DTO-gang connections in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua, or Panama.⁴⁷

⁴² Testimony of General Bantz J. Craddock, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2005; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire*, May 2007. These estimates are still widely cited.

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Regional Gang Initiative: Assessments and Plan of Action*, July 1, 2008.

⁴⁴ UNODC, May 2007, op. cit.

⁴⁵ "Guatemala: Desde las Cárceles los Pandilleros Continúan Sembrando el Terror," *Agence France Presse*, January 6, 2011.

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Regional Gang Initiative: Progress Status Report – CY2010*, Feb. 8, 2010.

⁴⁷ Dudley, May 2010, op. cit.

Other Criminal Organizations

Much less information is publicly available about what analysts have termed “other criminal organizations” than about drug trafficking organizations or gangs operating in the region. Criminal organizations included in this catchall category may be involved in a wide variety of illicit activities, including, but not limited to, arms trafficking, alien smuggling, human trafficking, and money laundering. Some organizations specialize in one type of crime, such as human trafficking, while other enterprises engage in a range of criminal activities. Although most of the income-generating activities of these criminal organizations are illicit, some groups receive revenue through ties to legitimate businesses as well.

Some criminal enterprises active in Central America focus only on a certain neighborhood, city, or perhaps region in one country, while others, often referred to as “organized crime,”⁴⁸ possess the capital, manpower, and networks required to run sophisticated enterprises and to penetrate state institutions at high levels. The more organized criminal groups in Central America include both domestically based and transnational groups. In Guatemala, for example, much has been written on the ongoing influence and illicit activities of domestic criminal organizations, often referred to as “hidden powers,” whose membership includes members of the country’s elite, including current and former politicians and military officials.⁴⁹ While the dominant transnational criminal organization may vary from country to country, certain transnational criminal groups appear to be active throughout the region.

Efforts Within Central America

Confronting the increasing threat posed by both transnational and domestic criminal organizations has become a central concern of governments throughout Central America. Until recently, governments in the “northern triangle” countries of Central America have tended to adopt more aggressive law enforcement approaches than the other Central American countries. These policies have included deploying military forces to help police perform public security functions and enacting tough anti-gang laws (in El Salvador and Honduras), which have led to large roundups of suspected gang members. In general, such policies have failed to stave off rising crime rates in the region and have had several negative unintended consequences, including severe prison overcrowding. As a result, many experts have urged governments to move away from “enforcement-only” strategies toward more holistic approaches to addressing crime and violence.⁵⁰ Just as broad-based anti-crime efforts in particular countries need to be intensified, so

⁴⁸ The definition of what constitutes “organized criminal organizations” varies significantly from country to country. For example, the Mexican government refers to DTOs as organized crime, whereas the U.S. government has historically considered drug trafficking and organized crime as distinct for programmatic purposes. Similarly, the Salvadoran government considers gangs as transnational organized crime, while the Nicaraguan government seems to view gangs as a local problem to be addressed primarily by youth crime prevention programs. For a discussion of the various definitions of organized crime in the United States, see CRS Report R41547, *Organized Crime: An Evolving Challenge for U.S. Law Enforcement*, by Jerome P. Bjelopera and Kristin M. Finklea; and CRS Report R40525, *Organized Crime in the United States: Trends and Issues for Congress*, by Kristin M. Finklea.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Susan C. Peacock and Adrana Beltrán, *Hidden Powers in Post-Conflict Guatemala*, WOLA, September 2003; Brands, May 2010, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Holistic approaches to addressing gang-related violence may include prevention programs for at-risk youth, interventions to encourage youth to leave gangs, and the creation of municipal alliances against crime and violence.

too do regional security efforts coordinated by the Central American Integration System (SICA).⁵¹ SICA revised its proposal for a regional security plan for Central America and presented it to the United States and other international donors at a conference held in Guatemala in June 2011 (see “Regional Security Efforts” below).

Law Enforcement Approaches

Following the end of armed conflicts and dictatorships in Central America in the 1990s, most countries made significant progress in subordinating military forces to civilian control and in reducing the size of military budgets and personnel. They made less progress, however, in defining proper military-police roles and relationships, particularly as they relate to dealing with threats to public security.⁵² Despite, or perhaps because of, that lack of definition, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have deployed thousands of troops to help their often underpaid and poorly equipped police forces carry out public security functions, without clearly defining when those deployments might end. Salvadoran military officials estimate that approximately 8,000 troops are involved in border security efforts, joint patrols with police in high-crime areas, and patrolling the country’s prisons. Guatemalan military officials maintain that fewer than 10% of the country’s 9,000 soldiers currently perform traditional military functions.⁵³ The Honduran government has recently sent troops to help patrol its major urban centers. This trend has led many human rights groups to raise concerns about the “re-militarization” of some Central American countries and to predict an increase in human rights abuses committed by military personnel in the region who are ill-trained to perform police work (as has occurred in Mexico).⁵⁴ Evidence also indicates that military involvement in public security functions has not reduced crime rates significantly.

In the early 2000s, governments in the northern triangle countries also adopted *mano dura* (strong-handed) anti-gang policies in response to popular demands and media pressure for them to “do something” about an escalation in gang-related crime. *Mano dura* approaches typically involve incarcerating large numbers of youth (often those with visible tattoos) for illicit association, and increasing sentences for gang membership and gang-related crimes. Early public reactions to the tough anti-gang reforms enacted in El Salvador and Honduras were extremely positive, supported by media coverage demonizing the activities of tattooed youth gang members, but the long-term effects of the policies on gangs and crime have been largely disappointing. Most youth arrested under *mano dura* provisions were subsequently released for lack of evidence that they committed any crime. Some youth who were wrongly arrested for gang involvement were recruited into the gang life while in prison. Finally, in response to *mano dura* policies, gangs have changed their behavior to avoid detection.

⁵¹ The Central American Integration System (SICA), a regional organization with a Secretariat in El Salvador, is composed of the governments of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama. The Security Commission was created in 1995 to develop and carry out regional security efforts.

⁵² Richard L. Millett and Orlando J. Perez, “New Threats and Old Dilemmas: Central America’s Armed Forces in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Summer 2005).

⁵³ CRS interview with Salvadoran military official, January 17, 2011; CRS interview with Guatemalan military official, January 20, 2011. See also “Military Given Indefinite Role in Combating Organized Crime,” *Latin American Regional Report: Caribbean & Central America*, February 2011.

⁵⁴ See, for example, relevant sections of George Withers, Lucila Santos, and Adam Isaacson, *Preach What you Practice: the Separation of Military and Police Roles in the Americas*, WOLA, November 2010.

Aggressive roundups of criminal suspects have overwhelmed prisons in Central America, which are in desperate need of reform. Prison conditions in the region are generally harsh, with severe overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and staffing shortages. In recent years, facilities that were already teeming with inmates have been filled beyond their capacities with thousands of suspected gang members, many of whom have yet to be convicted of any crimes.

In addition to prison reform, large-scale institutional reforms to improve the investigative capacity of police and the conviction rates secured by public prosecutors' offices are still needed in many Central American countries; however, such reforms have generally not been undertaken because of limited funding and political will to do so. The U.S. government has urged governments to employ "intelligence-led policing" and urged legislatures in the region to give police and prosecutors new tools to help them build successful cases, including the ability to use wiretaps to gather evidence. In 2010, the Guatemalan government had some success in using wiretaps to arrest and prosecute gangs involved in extorting and murdering public transit workers.⁵⁵ Some countries are also in the process of implementing laws that would enable assets seized from criminal organizations to fund law enforcement entities. Improving trust, information-sharing, and coordination between police and prosecutors is another important component of the reform process. Building that trust will require proper recruiting, vetting, and training of police and prosecutors, as well as robust systems of internal and external controls in both institutions to detect and punish corruption.⁵⁶

The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) is a new approach to law enforcement in the region. Recognizing that its judicial system was too weak and corrupt to handle criminal prosecutions on its own, Guatemala agreed to the creation of an international entity capable of supporting investigative and prosecutorial efforts within the country. Other Central American nations are now considering the model as a result of its considerable success (see the text box below, "The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala: A Regional Model?").

⁵⁵ INCSR, March 2011, op. cit.; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Regional Gang Initiative: Progress Status Report – CY2010*, February 8, 2010. El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, and Nicaragua have wiretapping laws in place.

⁵⁶ For detailed information on the status of police reform in Central America and additional reforms that need to be undertaken in the region, see WOLA, *Protect and Serve? The Status of Police Reform in Central America*, June 2009, http://www.wola.org/publications/protect_and_serve_the_status_of_police_reform_in_central_america.

The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala: A Regional Model?

In August 2007, the Guatemalan Congress ratified an agreement with the United Nations to establish a commission to support Guatemalan institutions in the identification, investigation, and prosecution of illegal security groups and clandestine organizations, some of which have been tied, directly or indirectly, to the Guatemalan state. Inaugurated in January 2008, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) is a unique hybrid body that operates completely within the Guatemalan legal system, includes both international and local staff, and has a \$20 million annual budget funded entirely through international donations. In addition to assisting in investigative and prosecutorial actions, CICIG undertakes efforts to build capacity within justice sector institutions and recommends public policies and institutional reforms. CICIG's mandate, which was originally for two years, has been extended twice and is now scheduled to end in September 2013.⁵⁷

In its first three years, CICIG has produced considerable results. Commission-supported investigations into corruption and the infiltration of organized crime in state institutions have contributed to the dismissal of some 1,700 police officers and several senior prosecutors. Likewise, a number of former high-level officials have been charged with corruption and are facing trials.⁵⁸ CICIG has also helped prevent a number of individuals with significant ties to corruption and/or organized crime from being appointed to senior positions in the Guatemalan state, including the attorney general's office and three seats on the supreme court. Moreover, the Guatemalan government has approved CICIG-recommended legislative reforms, such as changes to an arms and munitions law, an organized crime law, and the code of criminal procedure.⁵⁹ Proponents of CICIG argue that perhaps its greatest achievement has been to demonstrate to the public that Guatemala's high impunity rates are not inevitable, and the criminal justice system can be made to work, even against powerful individuals who have long been considered "untouchable."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, many analysts maintain that recent events, such as the controversial May 2011 acquittal of former President Alfonso Portillo on charges of embezzling \$15 million, have demonstrated that the Guatemalan justice system remains weak and in need of reform, and that CICIG's work is far from over.⁶¹

Given the success of CICIG, the presidents of El Salvador and Honduras have indicated interest in setting up similar commissions in their countries or a regional commission to combat organized crime in the entire northern triangle. Although most analysts agree that both countries would benefit from technical assistance in conducting investigations and prosecutions, there is disagreement concerning what form of assistance would be most beneficial. Some have suggested that a regional commission would be best, given the regional nature of organized crime.⁶² Others argue that separate commissions may be more useful since security conditions and institutional capacity vary between the countries.⁶³ It may be difficult to establish any form of commission, however, as countries would need to look to international donors for funding, and many citizens and legislators are opposed to the idea of ceding sovereignty to an international body.

⁵⁷ Julia Shünemann, *'Looking the Monster in the Face': The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala and the 'Rule of Law-builders Contract,'* Initiative for Peacebuilding (IFP) and Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), October 2010; Frank Bajak and Juan Carlos Llorca, "U.N.-backed Investigators Shake up Guatemala," *Associated Press*, November 14, 2010; CRS interview with CICIG official, January 20, 2011.

⁵⁸ Bajak and Llorca, November 2010, op. cit.

⁵⁹ Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), *Tercer Año de Labores*, September 2010.

⁶⁰ Morris Panner and Adriana Beltrán, "Battling Organized Crime in Guatemala," *Americas Quarterly*, Fall 2010.

⁶¹ Geoffrey Ramsey, "After Portillo's Acquittal, a Challenge for Judicial Reform in Guatemala," *InSight: Organized Crime in the Americas*, May 13, 2011; Danilo Valladares, "Guatemala: Efforts to Uproot Impunity Receive New Setback," *Inter Press Service*, May 25, 2011; "Impunity in Guatemala: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back," *Economist*, June 8, 2011.

⁶² CRS interview with analysts at the Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES), January 18, 2010.

⁶³ CRS interview with CICIG official, January 20, 2011.

Prevention

In the past few years, Central American leaders, including those from the northern triangle countries, appear to have moved, at least on a rhetorical level, toward more comprehensive approaches to dealing with gangs and crime. In mid-December 2007, then-Salvadoran President Tony Saca opened a summit of the Central America Integration System (SICA) by stating that the gang problem had shown the importance of coordinated anti-crime efforts, with the most important element of those efforts being prevention. All of the Central American countries have created institutional bodies to design and coordinate crime prevention strategies and have units within their national police forces engaged in prevention efforts. Some governments, with support from the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and other donors, have also begun to encourage municipalities to develop crime prevention plans. In general, however, government-sponsored prevention programs have tended, with some exceptions (such as Nicaragua's national youth crime prevention strategy), to be small-scale, ad hoc, and underfunded. Governments have been even less involved in sponsoring rehabilitation programs for individuals seeking to leave gangs, with most reintegration programs funded by church groups or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Central American government officials have generally cited budgetary limitations and competing concerns as major factors limiting their ability to implement more extensive prevention and rehabilitation programs. This may be changing, however, as the government of Mauricio Funes in El Salvador has increased funding for prevention programs to roughly 14% of the Ministry of Security's budget (from a historic average of just over 1%).⁶⁴ Experts have long argued that it is important for governments to offer educational and job opportunities to youth who are willing to leave gangs before they are tempted to join more sophisticated criminal organizations. It is also critical, they argue, for intervention efforts to focus on strengthening families of at-risk youth.⁶⁵

Counterdrug Efforts

Despite having limited technology and relatively small interdiction budgets, many countries have markedly increased their seizures of drugs and illicit funds over the past few years, with Nicaragua showing especially high seizure rates. In 2010, Panama, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica seized more cocaine than Mexico (see **Table 2**). Although large quantities of cocaine do not tend to flow through El Salvador, and the country has registered only small cocaine seizures in recent years, Salvadoran police officials seized some \$20 million worth of illicit currency in 2010.⁶⁶

Even with these increasing seizure rates, however, obstacles to more effective counterdrug efforts are numerous and have not changed significantly over time.⁶⁷ Some of those obstacles include a

⁶⁴ CRS interview with officials from El Salvador's National Civilian Police, December 7, 2010.

⁶⁵ Bernardo Kliksberg, *Mitos y Realidades Sobre la Criminalidad en America Latina* (Guatemala City: F & G Editores, 2007).

⁶⁶ *INCSR*, March 2011, op. cit.

⁶⁷ A 1994 report by what was then known as the U.S. General Accounting Office found that "although all of the Central American countries have drug control efforts underway, no country possesses the technical, financial or human resources necessary to run an efficient drug interdiction program ... [and that] corruption also limits the effectiveness of Central American governments' narcotics control efforts." U.S. General Accounting Office, *Interdiction Efforts in Central America Have Had Little Impact on the Flow of Drugs*, GAO/NSIAD- 94-233, August 1994, <http://www.fas.org/irp/gao/nsi94233.htm>.

lack of funding and equipment for security forces engaged in interdiction efforts, an inability to sustain programs started with U.S. assistance, limited political support in some countries, and corruption.⁶⁸ For example, Costa Rica, which has no military, has only three boats with no nighttime navigation capacity to patrol its coastline, and no helicopters, radars, or planes for police engaged in interdiction efforts.⁶⁹ In Guatemala, high-level official corruption has exacerbated the country's resource constraints and limited political will. Two former heads of the country's national police are currently facing drug trafficking and conspiracy charges.⁷⁰

Table 2. Estimated Cocaine Seizures in 2010, by Country
(in metric tons)

Belize	Costa Rica	EI Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Panama	Mexico
2.6	14.8	0.1	1.4	9.0	17.5	49.5	9.4

Source: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 3, 2011.

Regional Security Efforts

Some analysts maintain that the increasing threat posed by transnational organized crime has led to greater security cooperation among Central American countries; others disagree, maintaining that many obstacles to regional efforts remain.⁷¹ While most governments appear to agree on a theoretical level that they need to work together on security issues and to approach donors jointly, they continue to differ among themselves as to the biggest threats facing the region and the best ways to combat those threats. The need to cooperate on shared security challenges has also sometimes been overshadowed by unrelated disputes among the countries, including the recent Costa Rica-Nicaragua border dispute. Even when the will to collaborate as a region has existed, political instability in particular countries, such as the June 2009 ouster of the president of Honduras, has inhibited regional efforts.

Central American governments have demonstrated differing levels of political will to address crime and tackle corruption, and varying degrees of willingness to collaborate with the United States, a major donor in the region. For example, according to a recent UNDP report, the Central American governments together spent a total of almost \$4 billion on security and justice in 2010, a 60% increase in total spending since 2006.⁷² That aggregate figure masks significant variance among the countries in terms of the amount of funding budgeted for criminal justice and law enforcement ministries. While funds dedicated to police and public security have increased significantly in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama, the other countries have posted more

⁶⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed*, GAO-08-784, July 2008, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08784.pdf>.

⁶⁹ CRS correspondence with Embassy of Costa Rica official, March 3, 2011.

⁷⁰ *INCSR*, March 2011, op. cit.

⁷¹ "Central America: Prospects for a new U.S.-Backed Regional Scheme," *Latin American Security and Strategic Review*, February 2011.

⁷² UNDP, *Información Sobre el Gasto Público de Seguridad y Justicia en Centroamérica 2006-2010*, Versión Preliminar, June 2011, http://www.pnud.org.gt/data/publicacion/informe_gastopublico.pdf.

moderate increases in security spending. Varying degrees of cooperation exist between Central American governments and the U.S. government. For example, although cooperation continues between the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Nicaraguan Navy on interdiction, the Nicaraguan government has disbanded the vetted anti-drug police unit trained by DEA and refused to sign bilateral counternarcotics agreements with the United States in fiscal years 2009 and 2010.⁷³

Central American leaders and officials have regularly met over the past few years, often accompanied by their U.S. and Mexican counterparts, to discuss ways to better coordinate security efforts and information sharing on gang members and other criminal groups. Most of the regional security meetings have been organized by the Security Commission of SICA. The leaders of the SICA member states and the president-elect of Mexico began developing a regional security strategy in October 2006, which was subsequently adopted at a summit held in August 2007.⁷⁴ The strategy identified eight threats to regional security, including organized crime, drug trafficking, deportees with criminal records, gangs, homicide, small arms trafficking, terrorism, and corruption. In 2008, SICA estimated that the costs to implement its regional security plan could exceed \$953 million.⁷⁵

Until recently, most regional security cooperation has occurred on a declarative, rather than an operational, level. International donors (including the United States) have formed a Group of Friends of Central America⁷⁶ that has worked with the Central American governments and SICA to revise and implement the aforementioned security plan. The scope of SICA's proposed plan was modified to focus only on efforts in Central America (not Mexico), to prioritize fewer initiatives, and to address new security threats that have emerged in the last few years. SICA convened a donors' conference in Guatemala City on June 22-23, 2011 at which donors pledged roughly \$1.1 billion in new funding for regional security efforts and ongoing support for the regional security strategy.⁷⁷ The new aid pledged at the donor's conference is in addition to roughly \$1.7 billion in committed or dispersed funds that donors have provided since January 2009.⁷⁸ The extent to which the United States and other bilateral and multilateral donors will now refocus their existing efforts to align better with Central America's top priorities still remains to be seen. Some observers question whether SICA has the institutional capacity to manage projects across the Central American region⁷⁹ and to oversee implementation of the new strategy.⁸⁰

⁷³ *INCSR*, March 2011, op. cit.

⁷⁴ A copy of that version of the strategy is available at <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/93586.htm>.

⁷⁵ SICA General Secretariat, Fifth Meeting of the Working Group for Drafting Proposals to Finance Central American Security, May 13-14, 2008.

⁷⁶ The Group of Friends of Central America originally included: Canada, Spain, the United States, the European Commission, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations, and the World Bank.

⁷⁷ In addition to the aforementioned donors, Colombia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and Norway signed on to a joint statement in support of the new Central American security strategy. See U.S. Department of State, "Joint Press Statement of Support for the Central American Security Strategy," press release, June 21, 2011 and "Central America Gets More Than Expected to Spend on its Public Security Strategy," *Latin American Security and Strategic Review*, June 2011.

⁷⁸ Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), *Mapeo de las Intervenciones de Seguridad Ciudadana en Centroamérica Financiadas por la Cooperación Internacional*, June 2011.

⁷⁹ Villiers Negroponte, Spring 2010, op. cit.

⁸⁰ "Central America: Region Hails 'Historic' Security Summit; Doubts Persist," *Latin American Weekly Report*, June 30, 2011.

U.S. Policy

U.S. security policy in the Western Hemisphere has changed considerably in recent years. In the aftermath of the Cold War, preventing narcotics from reaching the United States became the primary focus of U.S. security efforts in the hemisphere. In an attempt to reduce the supply of illicit drugs, the bulk of U.S. security assistance was concentrated in Colombia and the other cocaine-producing nations of the Andean region of South America. The United States provided some support for counternarcotics and other security efforts elsewhere in the hemisphere—including a major interdiction effort in Central America in the early 1990s—but the funding levels were comparatively low. Although U.S.-led efforts have contributed to temporary successes in particular countries or sub-regions, they have done little to change the overall availability of illicit drugs in the United States, as traffickers have altered their cultivation patterns, production techniques, and trafficking routes and methods in order to avoid detection. These mixed results, along with rising levels of crime and violence throughout the hemisphere, have led policymakers to move toward a more comprehensive approach to security issues.⁸¹

While largely maintaining previous narcotics supply reduction efforts, U.S. policy now places increased emphasis on coordinating efforts throughout the hemisphere and strengthening the capacities of partner governments. The Obama Administration, which has made ensuring the safety and security of all citizens one of the four overarching priorities of U.S. policy in Latin America, has sought to develop collaborative partnerships with countries throughout the hemisphere.⁸² These partnerships have taken the form of bilateral security cooperation with countries like Colombia and Mexico, as well as regional programs such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) and the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). According to the State Department, activities supported through these partnerships are designed to be complementary and are developed in coordination with one another, drawing on lessons learned from past U.S. initiatives. In addition to providing equipment, training, and technical assistance to support immediate law enforcement and interdiction operations, these partnerships seek to strengthen the capacities of governmental institutions to address security challenges and the underlying economic and social conditions that contribute to them.⁸³

Despite these changes in emphasis, a commission of prominent world leaders—including former presidents of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico—recently concluded that U.S. counternarcotics policies “have clearly failed to effectively curtail supply or consumption.” The commission suggests that supply reduction and incarceration strategies are futile and that government resources would be better spent on demand and harm reduction efforts.⁸⁴

⁸¹ For more information on the evolution of U.S. policies, see CRS Report R41215, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S. Counterdrug Programs*, coordinated by Clare Ribando Seelke. For information on interdiction efforts in Central America in the early 1990s, see GAO, August 1994, op. cit.

⁸² Valenzuela testimony, February 2011, op. cit.

⁸³ U.S. Department of State, “Hemispheric Security—An Integrated U.S. Government Approach,” January 25, 2011.

⁸⁴ Global Commission on Drug Policy, *War on Drugs: Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy*, June 2011, <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/Report>.

Background on Assistance to Central America

Given the proximity of Central America, the United States has long been concerned about potential security threats from the region and has provided Central American nations with assistance to counter those threats. During the Cold War, the United States viewed links between the Soviet Union and political movements in Central America as a potential threat to U.S. strategic interests. To prevent Soviet allies from establishing political or military footholds in the region, the United States heavily supported anti-communist forces, including the Salvadoran government in its battle against the leftist insurgency of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and the *contra* forces seeking to overthrow the leftist government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua.⁸⁵ Between 1979, when the Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua, and 1992, when peace accords were signed to end the civil war in El Salvador, U.S. economic and military assistance to Central America averaged \$1.3 billion annually.⁸⁶

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the civil wars in the region, U.S. assistance to Central American nations declined substantially. Between FY1993 and FY2007, total U.S. assistance to Central America averaged \$413 million annually, roughly a third of what had been provided in the previous 15 years.⁸⁷ Likewise, the majority of the assistance provided was directed toward economic and political development, as the United States sought to encourage the spread of free-market economic policies and the consolidation of democratic governance. Of the security-related assistance that the United States has provided to the region since the end of the Cold War, a substantial portion has been dedicated to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) rule of law programs, which have provided support for justice sector reforms in several Central American nations since the 1980s.⁸⁸ In El Salvador—where institutional reforms have been the most extensive—USAID has supported the establishment of informal justice centers that provide community-level mediation and dispute resolution, and the transformation of the judicial process from a written, inquisitorial system to an oral, accusatorial system, among other efforts. Although reforms such as these have strengthened the rule of law in El Salvador and other Central American nations, progress has been uneven and many justice sector institutions remain relatively weak, as noted above.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *The Caribbean Basin: Economic and Security Issues*, committee print, *Central America: Continuing U.S. Concerns*, study paper prepared by Nina M. Serafino of the Congressional Research Service, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess., January 1993, S.Prt. 102-110 (Washington: GPO, 1993), pp. 173-178.

⁸⁶ Assistance peaked in 1985 at nearly \$2.4 billion. Figures are in constant, 2009 dollars. U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants, op. cit.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ USAID initiated rule of law programs in El Salvador in 1984, in Costa Rica and Honduras in 1985, in Guatemala in 1986, and Panama in 1992. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Democracy and Governance, *Achievements in Building and Maintaining the Rule of Law*, Occasional Papers Series, November 2002.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Central America Regional Security Initiative

Formulation

The impetus for increased U.S.-Central American cooperation on security issues stemmed from a trip by then-President George W. Bush to Central America and Mexico in March 2007. Concerns over an increase in narcotics flows and the rapid escalation of crime and violence in the region reportedly dominated the President's conversations with his counterparts, as well as follow-on consultations between U.S., Central American, and Mexican officials. To capitalize on the emergence of a cohesive security dialogue among the seven nations of Central America and the Mexican government's willingness to address the issues of drug trafficking and organized crime, the Bush Administration began to develop the framework for a new regional security partnership.

In October 2007, the Bush Administration requested funding for a security assistance package designed to support Mexico and the countries of Central America in their fight against organized crime, to improve communication among the various law enforcement agencies, and to support the institutional reforms necessary to ensure the long-term enforcement of the rule of law and protection of civil and human rights.⁹⁰ This security assistance package was originally known as the Mérida Initiative, named after the location in Mexico where President Bush had met with President Calderón. The Central America portion of Mérida was split into a separate Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) in FY2010. Officials from nearly every Central American nation maintain that the region was not sufficiently involved in the formulation of Mérida/CARSI, and that the initiative could be more responsive to host government priorities.⁹¹

As currently formulated, CARSI provides equipment, training, and technical assistance to build the capacity of Central American institutions to counter criminal threats. In addition, CARSI supports community-based programs designed to address underlying economic and social conditions that leave communities vulnerable to those threats. The five primary goals of CARSI are to:

1. create safe streets for the citizens of the region;
2. disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband within and among the nations of Central America;
3. support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments;
4. establish effective state presence and security in communities at risk; and
5. foster enhanced levels of security and rule of law coordination and cooperation among the nations of the region.⁹²

⁹⁰ Testimony of Thomas A. Shannon Jr., Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and David T. Johnson, Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, U.S. Department of State, before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, November 14, 2007.

⁹¹ CRS interviews with Central American embassy officials, October 27, November 2, 3, and 9, 2010.

⁹² U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "The Central America Regional Security Initiative: Citizen-Safety—A Shared Partnership," Fact Sheet, January 26, 2011.

Funding from FY2008-FY2012⁹³

Since FY2008, \$361.5 million has been appropriated for the countries of Central America under what was formerly known as the Mérida Initiative-Central America and is now known as CARSI. This includes \$101.5 million in assistance that has been allocated to the region for the current fiscal year (FY2011). The Obama Administration has requested \$100 million in additional funding for CARSI for FY2012 (see **Table 3**).

The funds provided through CARSI comprise only a portion of total U.S. security assistance to the region. During a March 2011 visit to El Salvador, President Obama announced a “Central America Citizen Security Partnership,” under which the United States would review its security efforts in the region and potentially refocus funding to adapt to changing conditions.⁹⁴ At the June 2011 SICA conference, Secretary of State Clinton announced that U.S. funding for the Central America Citizen Security Partnership would exceed \$290 million in FY2011.⁹⁵ The \$290 million pledge includes the \$101.5 million being provided through CARSI as well as all other bilateral and regional U.S. assistance being provided to support security efforts in the region in FY2011.⁹⁶

Table 3. Funding for the Central America Regional Security Initiative, FY2008-FY2012

(\$ in thousands)

Account	FY2008 (Actual)	FY2009 (Actual)	FY2010 (Actual) ^a	FY2011 (Estimate)	FY2012 (Request)
ESF	25,000	18,000	23,000	30,000	45,000
INCLE	24,800	70,000	65,000	71,500	55,000
NADR	6,200	—	—	—	—
FMF	4,000	17,000	7,000	—	—
Total	60,000	105,000	95,000	101,500	100,000

Sources: U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2012*, March, 2011; U.S. Department of State, *FY 2010 Spending Plan for the Central America Regional Security Initiative*, July 29, 2010. FY2011 653(a) allocation data provided by the U.S. Department of State, August 2011.

Notes: ESF = Economic Support Fund; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, De-mining and Related Programs; and FMF = Foreign Military Financing.

- a. In the 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-117), Congress appropriated “up to” \$83 million for the countries of Central America “only to combat drug trafficking and related violence and organized crime, and for judicial reform, institution building, anti-corruption, rule of law activities, and maritime security.” After consultations with Congress, the Department of State allocated an additional \$12 million in ESF from funds appropriated to its Western Hemisphere Regional account to crime and violence prevention programs administered by USAID, bringing total FY2010 CARSI funding to \$95 million.

⁹³ This section partially draws from CRS Report R40135, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

⁹⁴ White House, “The Central America Citizen Security Partnership,” Fact Sheet, March 21, 2011.

⁹⁵ U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at the Central American Security Conference (SICA),” U.S. Department of State, June 22, 2011.

⁹⁶ CRS discussions with State Department officials, June 2011.

FY2008 Appropriations

When announcing the Mérida Initiative, the Bush Administration originally requested \$50 million for the countries of Central America. All of the funds were requested in the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) account, and were designated to be used for public security and law enforcement programs. Members of Congress, some of whom expressed considerable disappointment that they were not consulted as the plan was being formulated,⁹⁷ dedicated additional funds to Central America and broadened the focus of the initiative.

Through the FY2008 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 110-252), Congress appropriated \$60 million for Central America and divided the funds among the following accounts: INCLE; Economic Support Fund (ESF); Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, De-mining and Related Programs (NADR); and Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Congress allotted \$25 million in ESF funds for the creation of an Economic and Social Development Fund for Central America, \$20 million of which was to be administered by USAID and \$5 million of which was to be administered by the State Department to support educational and cultural exchange programs. Congress also allotted \$1 million to support the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).⁹⁸ The act required the State Department to withhold 15% of the INCLE and FMF assistance appropriated for the countries of Central America until the Secretary of State could report that the Central American governments were taking steps to improve respect for human rights, such as creating police complaints commissions, reforming their judiciaries, and investigating and prosecuting military and police forces that had been credibly alleged to have committed human rights violations.

FY2009 Appropriations

In the FY2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-8), Congress provided \$105 million in funding for Central America. It required that at least \$35 million of the funds appropriated for the region be used to support judicial reform, institution building, anti-corruption, and rule of law activities. The explanatory statement to the act directed that \$70 million of the funds for the region be provided through the INCLE account, that \$15 million of the FMF funds support maritime security programs, and that \$12 million in ESF support USAID's Economic and Social Development Fund for Central America. The FY2009 funds were subject to the same human rights conditions as the funds provided through the FY2008 supplemental.

FY2010 Appropriations

In the FY2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-117), Congress appropriated "up to" \$83 million for the countries of Central America "to combat drug trafficking and related violence and organized crime, and for judicial reform, institution building, anti-corruption, rule of law activities, and maritime security." After consultations with Congress, the Department of State allocated an additional \$12 million in ESF from funds appropriated to its Western Hemisphere Regional account to crime and violence prevention programs administered by USAID, bringing

⁹⁷ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Merida Initiative: Assessing Plans to Step Up Our Security Cooperation with Mexico and Central America*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., November 14, 2007, Serial No. 110-135 (Washington: GPO, 2008).

⁹⁸ For more information on CICIG, see the text box titled "The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala: A Regional Model?" in the "Law Enforcement Approaches" section above.

total FY2010 CARSI funding to \$95 million. The conference report to the act (H.Rept. 111-366) split Central America funding from the Mérida Initiative and placed it under a new Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). The Obama Administration embraced the change as a way to focus more attention on the situation in Central America and U.S. efforts in the region. In addition to subjecting CARSI funds to the same human rights conditions as previous years, the conference report to the act directed the Secretary of State to submit a report within 90 days of enactment detailing regional threats or problems to be addressed in the region, as well as realistic goals for U.S. efforts and actions planned to achieve them.

FY2011 Appropriations

After a series of continuing resolutions, the FY2011 Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-10) was signed into law on April 15, 2011. The legislation had no accompanying report and did not designate a funding level for CARSI. It did, however, direct the Obama Administration to report back to Congress within 30 days on its proposed allocations of the appropriated funds. After consultations with Congress, the Department of State allocated \$101.5 million for CARSI in FY2011.⁹⁹ The funds are subject to the same human rights conditions as previous years.

Programs

Through CARSI, the United States funds a variety of activities designed to support U.S. and Central American security objectives. U.S. agencies provide partner nations with equipment, technical assistance, and training to improve narcotics interdiction and disrupt criminal networks that operate in the region, as well as in the United States. CARSI-funded activities also provide support for Central American law enforcement and justice sector institutions, identifying deficiencies and building their capacities to ensure the safety and security of the citizens of the region. In addition, CARSI supports prevention efforts that seek to reduce drug demand and provide at-risk youth with educational, vocational, and recreational opportunities. Many of the activities funded by CARSI build on previous security efforts in the region. U.S. officials assert that although CARSI allows the United States to set up pilot programs that demonstrate potentially successful approaches to improving security conditions, it is up to Central American nations themselves to sustain successful programs and apply the lessons learned nationwide.¹⁰⁰

A number of U.S. and partner nation agencies are involved in developing and supporting CARSI activities. The U.S. agencies involved include the Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury; Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); Customs and Border Patrol (CBP); the U.S. Coast Guard; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); the Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT); and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).¹⁰¹ CARSI working groups within U.S. embassies include representatives of the relevant agencies present at each post and serve as the formal mechanism for interagency coordination in the field.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ FY2011 653(a) allocation data provided to CRS by the U.S. Department of State, August 2011.

¹⁰⁰ CRS interview with State Department official at the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, January 19, 2011.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Department of State, "The Central America Regional Security Initiative," January 25, 2011.

¹⁰² U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Mérida Initiative: The United States Has Provided* (continued...)

The U.S.-SICA dialogue serves as the forum for regional coordination, while bilateral coordination varies by country. Coordination is particularly close in Honduras, where a bilateral CARSİ task force, co-chaired by the U.S. Ambassador and President Lobo, convenes quarterly. The task force has established eight working groups, which undertake joint planning related to the security issues prioritized by the Honduran government.¹⁰³ Coordination with some of the other Central American nations, however, is less robust. Although the United States has good relations with many parts of the Salvadoran government, it reportedly refuses to work with the Minister of Public Security.¹⁰⁴ In Nicaragua, the United States has limited contact with many sectors of the government but works closely with the Nicaraguan Navy.¹⁰⁵

Narcotics Interdiction and Law Enforcement Support

The bulk of U.S. assistance provided through CARSİ provides Central American nations with equipment and related maintenance, technical support, and training to support narcotics interdiction and other law enforcement operations. In addition to the provision and refurbishment of aircraft, boats, and other vehicles, CARSİ provides communications, border inspection, and security force equipment such as radios, computers, X-ray cargo scanners, narcotics identification kits, weapons, ballistic vests, and night-vision goggles. Although the types of equipment and training vary according to the capabilities and needs of each Central American nation, in general, the assistance is designed to extend the reach of the region's security forces and enable countries to better control their national territories. For example, an aviation support program is providing Guatemala with helicopters that enable security forces to rapidly reach areas of the country that would otherwise be too difficult or dangerous to access, thereby limiting sanctuaries for DTOs. The program was launched in FY2009 and is expected to last four years, at which point the Guatemalan government would become responsible for sustaining it.¹⁰⁶

U.S. assistance provided through CARSİ also supports specialized law enforcement units that are vetted by, and work with, U.S. personnel to investigate and disrupt the operations of transnational gangs and trafficking networks. FBI-led Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) units, which were first created in El Salvador in 2007, are now expanding to Guatemala and Honduras with CARSİ support. According to the FBI, intelligence collected by the Salvadoran TAG unit has been used to convict criminals in both El Salvador and the United States.¹⁰⁷ DEA, ICE, and the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) also have vetted unit programs throughout Central America. Among other activities, they conduct complex investigations into money laundering, bulk cash smuggling, and the trafficking of narcotics,

(...continued)

Counternarcotics and Anticrime Support but Needs Better Performance Measures, GAO-10-837, July 2010, <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-10-837>.

¹⁰³ *INCSR*, March 2011, op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ The Minister of Public Security—who like many members of the current FMLN Administration in El Salvador fought against the U.S.-backed government during the country's civil war—is alleged to have played a role in the 1985 killing of four U.S. marines. Tim Johnson, "El Salvador's long-ago civil war still colors U.S. relations," *Miami Herald*, March 17, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ *INCSR*, March 2011, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of State, *FY 2010 Spending Plan for the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSİ)*, July 29, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ CRS interview with FBI attaché at the U.S. embassy in El Salvador, January 18, 2011.

firearms, and persons.¹⁰⁸ Although these units have produced some notable successes, they are small and difficult to maintain, given the broader context of corruption within many Central American law enforcement institutions. In El Salvador, for example, the DEA-vetted unit was reduced from 22 members to eight after polygraph tests demonstrated that nearly two-thirds of the officers were no longer suitable for the unit.¹⁰⁹

Institutional Capacity Building

In addition to immediate support for law enforcement efforts, CARSI provides funding to identify deficiencies and build long-term capacity within law enforcement and justice sector institutions. INL and USAID community-policing programs are designed to build local confidence in police forces by converting them into more community-based, service-oriented organizations.¹¹⁰ One such program, the *Villa Nueva* model precinct in Guatemala, is being replicated with CARSI funding as a result of its success in establishing popular trust and reducing violence.¹¹¹ To improve the investigative capacity of Central American nations, CARSI has supported assessments of forensic laboratories, the implementation of ATF's Electronic Trace Submission (eTrace) System to track firearms, and the expansion of the FBI's Central America Fingerprint Exchange (CAFE), which assists partner nations in developing fingerprint and biometric capabilities. CARSI also seeks to reduce impunity by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of Central American judicial systems. U.S. agencies provide training and technical assistance designed to enhance prosecutorial capabilities, improve the management of courts, and facilitate coordination between justice sector entities. Moreover, they provide training and technical assistance to improve prison management, which repeatedly has been identified as a major weakness throughout the region.¹¹²

Prevention

Beyond providing support for law enforcement and institutional capacity-building efforts, CARSI funds a variety of prevention programs designed to address underlying economic and social conditions that leave communities vulnerable to crime and violence. USAID asserts that Central American youth often see few alternatives to gangs and other criminal organizations as a result of the social and economic exclusion that stems from dysfunctional families, high levels of unemployment, minimal access to basic services, ineffective government institutions, and insufficient access to educational and economic opportunities. Through its management of CARSI funds allocated to the congressionally created Economic and Social Development Fund for Central America, USAID supports prevention programs designed to address these issues by providing educational, recreational, and vocational opportunities for at-risk youth.¹¹³

Although projects vary by country, nearly all are community-based and municipally led as a result of lessons learned through previous efforts in the region.¹¹⁴ In El Salvador, for example,

¹⁰⁸ *FY 2010 Spending Plan for CARSI*, July 2010, op. cit.

¹⁰⁹ CRS interview with DEA attaché at the U.S. embassy in El Salvador, January 18, 2011.

¹¹⁰ CRS interview with USAID officials in El Salvador, January 18, 2011.

¹¹¹ CRS interviews with Villa Nueva model precinct officers, January 19, 2011.

¹¹² *FY 2010 Spending Plan for CARSI*, July 2010, op. cit.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ CRS interview with USAID officials in El Salvador, January 18, 2011.

USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Project works in 12 municipalities to strengthen the capacities of local governments, civil society organizations, community leaders, and youth to address the problems of crime and violence. Prevention councils in each municipality analyze problems within the community and develop prevention plans to address those problems through activities ranging from vocational training to social entrepreneurship projects.¹¹⁵ USAID has expanded the reach of its CARSI efforts in many countries by supplementing the funds provided through the initiative with funds appropriated for bilateral assistance.¹¹⁶

Implementation

Some Members of Congress and Central American officials have expressed frustration over the relatively slow pace of implementation of CARSI.¹¹⁷ As of March 2010, only 25% of the funds appropriated for Mérida/CARSI had been obligated and 8% had been expended. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the slow pace is the result of a number of challenges faced by the agencies charged with implementing the initiative, including insufficient staff to administer programs, the time-consuming U.S. government procurement process, and legislative withholding requirements that prevent some funds from being released until certain reporting requirements are met.¹¹⁸ The need to negotiate agreements with seven different countries has also proved challenging. Changes in the governments of El Salvador and Panama, and repeated changes in top-level officials in Guatemala, required U.S. officials to restart negotiations and delay program implementation.¹¹⁹ In Honduras, the June 2009 ouster of President Manuel Zelaya led the United States to suspend assistance and cooperation with the country until the inauguration of a new President in February 2010.¹²⁰

Implementation appears to be accelerating now that agreements with partner nations are in place, initial planning is complete, and programs are under way. As of March 10, 2011, 88% of the funds appropriated for Mérida/CARSI had been obligated and 19% had been expended (see **Table 4**).¹²¹ U.S. agencies have helped expedite the process in several ways. Some posts in Central America reprogrammed existing bilateral assistance funds in order to initiate CARSI activities while waiting for CARSI funds to become available.¹²² Likewise, the Department of State is addressing staffing issues by creating up to 20 new INL positions in the region and setting up enhanced procurement support in Colombia.¹²³

¹¹⁵ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Project," News Bulletin, October 2010.

¹¹⁶ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)," Fact Sheet, June 17, 2010; CRS interview with USAID officials in El Salvador, January 18, 2011.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, *Assessing the Merida Initiative: A Report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO)*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., July 21, 2010, Serial No. 111-109 (Washington: GPO, 2010); CRS interviews with Central American embassy officials, October 25, November 3 and 9, 2010.

¹¹⁸ GAO, July 2010, op. cit. For more information on withholding requirements, see "Funding from FY2008-FY2012" above and "Human Rights Concerns" below.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *INCSR*, March 2011, op. cit.

¹²¹ Data provided to CRS by the State Department, March 28, 2011.

¹²² GAO, July 2010, op. cit.

¹²³ CRS interview with State Department official, February 25, 2011.

Table 4. Status of Assistance Appropriated, as of March 2011

(\$ in thousands)

Account	Amount Appropriated ^a	Amount Obligated	Amount Expended	Percent Obligated	Percent Expended
ESF	66,000	60,850	14,500	92	22
INCLE	159,800	134,930	28,230	84	18
NADR	6,200	6,200	5,160	100	83
FMF	28,000	25,900	1,410	93	5
Total	260,000	227,880	49,300	88	19

Source: U.S. Department of State data provided to CRS, March 28, 2011.

Notes: ESF = Economic Support Fund; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR = Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, De-mining and Related Programs; and FMF = Foreign Military Financing.

a. Includes all funds appropriated for Mérida-Central America/CARSI between FY2008 and FY2010.

Performance Measures

To measure the effects of CARSI, USAID is overseeing an impact evaluation of its crime prevention programs. The evaluation, conducted by Vanderbilt University’s Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), consists of five elements: (1) community surveys; (2) reviews of demographic data; (3) focus groups; (4) interviews with stakeholders; and (5) community observations. LAPOP will measure these citizen security indicators every 18 months, both in treatment communities where USAID crime prevention programs are in place and in control communities where no activities have been implemented. By tracking perception changes over time, USAID hopes to identify successful crime prevention programs and why they succeed so that resources can be dedicated to the most effective programs and best practices can be replicated throughout the region.¹²⁴

CARSI programs other than USAID’s crime prevention programs are generally measured in terms of outputs, such as the number of people trained or the amount of equipment delivered. The GAO asserts that these types of measures limit the U.S. government’s ability to assess the performance of CARSI programs since they do not measure the impact of the training or equipment or if it has been successfully employed.¹²⁵

Additional Issues for Congressional Consideration

Funding Issues

As Congress evaluates budget priorities and how to best utilize scarce resources, it is likely to consider the form of U.S. security assistance to Central America. When the Mérida Initiative was first announced, some Members of Congress questioned why the Bush Administration’s budget

¹²⁴ GAO, July 2010, op. cit.; USAID CARSI Fact Sheet, June 2010, op. cit.

¹²⁵ GAO, July 2010, op. cit.

request included only \$50 million for Central America, as compared to \$500 million for Mexico.¹²⁶ Then-Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon noted that it was an initial request and that the Administration hoped that it could work with Central American nations to build a larger program over time.¹²⁷ Although annual U.S. assistance provided to the region through Mérida/CARSI has increased by nearly 70% since FY2008, Central American leaders and some Members of Congress assert that the resources being provided are insufficient given the challenges facing the region.¹²⁸ Many analysts note that CARSI, at its current funding level, is unlikely to alter outcomes given the relatively weak positions from which most Central American nations are starting.¹²⁹ At the same time, some U.S. officials maintain that the region must move away from the mind-set that the United States is the fundamental solution to every problem, and that current CARSI funding demonstrates that the United States is committed to working in partnership with the region to address security challenges.¹³⁰

When debating future funding levels, Congress may consider the political will of Central American nations. Some analysts assert that even if the United States were to greatly increase the amount of assistance it provides through CARSI, it would do little good as long as Central American leaders lack the political will to tackle long-standing issues such as incomplete institutional reforms, precarious tax bases, and the lack of opportunities for young people.¹³¹ Despite frequent promises from leaders to address these issues, few have actually taken concrete steps toward doing so. For example, although the Presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have all pushed for fiscal reforms designed to increase revenues to fund security efforts, only Honduras has successfully enacted such a measure.¹³² Without greater commitment from partner countries to undertake necessary reforms and sustain current efforts, CARSI programs could meet the same end as previous U.S.-backed counternarcotics programs in the region, which simply faded away once U.S. assistance declined.¹³³

Another funding issue Congress may consider is resource coordination, both within the U.S. government and between the U.S. government and other international donors. In FY2011, Central American countries are scheduled to receive \$101.5 million through CARSI. This represents only slightly more than one-third of the \$290 million in total U.S. assistance being allocated to the region for security purposes during the current fiscal year.¹³⁴ While some U.S. embassies in Central America appear to be closely coordinating the use of CARSI, Department of Defense, and

¹²⁶ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Merida Initiative: Assessing Plans to Step Up Our Security Cooperation with Mexico and Central America*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., November 14, 2007, Serial No. 110-135 (Washington: GPO, 2008).

¹²⁷ Shannon testimony, November 2007, op. cit.

¹²⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps and Global Narcotics Affairs, *U.S. Policy Towards Latin America*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., February 17, 2011; Mary Beth Sheridan, "Central American leaders plead for more U.S. anti-drug help," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2010.

¹²⁹ Dudley, May 2010, op. cit.; Kevin Casas-Zamora, "Paying Attention to Central America's Drug Trafficking Crisis," *Brookings Institution*, November 1, 2010.

¹³⁰ CRS interview with State Department official in El Salvador, January 18, 2011.

¹³¹ Casas-Zamora, November 2010, op. cit.

¹³² "Honduras Approves New Tax to Boost Drug Fight," *Reuters*, June 23, 2011.

¹³³ GAO, August 1994, op. cit.

¹³⁴ Secretary of State Clinton, June 2011, op. cit; CRS discussions with State Department officials, June 2011.

bilateral USAID and Department of State assistance so that the activities receiving funding serve complementary purposes,¹³⁵ it is unclear whether this is true throughout the region.

Even if there is close coordination among U.S. agencies, U.S. assistance accounts for only a portion of the total security assistance being provided to the region. According to a recent study, international donors committed a combined \$1.7 billion in grants and loans to Central America for citizen security efforts between January 2009 and June 2011. Looking only at projects already being implemented, the United States accounts for approximately \$378 million (28%) of the \$1.3 billion provided by the international community. The study reveals a lack of coordination among the various donors' efforts, and indicates that, in some cases, donors fund programs that duplicate efforts or even support conflicting goals.¹³⁶ Improved international coordination could allow the United States to better focus its own efforts and thereby increase the impact of its programs. At the June 2011 SICA conference, Secretary of State Clinton asserted that the Obama Administration "intends to establish an ongoing, effective, high-level mechanism to ensure sustained coordination" among those involved in security efforts in Central America.¹³⁷

Human Rights Concerns

Congress remains concerned about how alleged human rights abuses committed by military and police forces in some Central American countries are investigated and punished, the transparency of judiciary systems in the region (particularly in Nicaragua), and whether security forces accused of committing past abuses are being held accountable for their actions (particularly in Guatemala).¹³⁸ As with Mexico, appropriations legislation that has provided funding for Mérida Initiative and CARSİ programs in Central America has contained vetting requirements (per Section 620J of the Foreign Assistance Act [FAA] of 1961)¹³⁹ and human rights conditions. Specifically, P.L. 110-252, P.L. 111-8, P.L. 111-117, and P.L. 112-10 have required that 15% of INCLE and FMF assistance be withheld until the Secretary of State reports in writing that the governments of the countries in Central America are taking action in three areas:

1. establishing police complaints commissions with authority and independence to receive complaints and carry out effective investigations;
2. implementing reforms to improve the capacity and ensure the independence of the judiciary; and
3. investigating and prosecuting members of the federal police and military forces who have been credibly alleged to have committed violations of human rights.

¹³⁵ CRS interview with the CARSİ Working Group in Guatemala, January 19, 2011.

¹³⁶ IDB and WOLA, June 2011, op. cit..

¹³⁷ Secretary of State Clinton, June 2011, op. cit.

¹³⁸ For a summary of recent human rights developments in each country, see U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/>.

¹³⁹ According to Section 620J of the FAA of 1961, units of a foreign country's security forces are prohibited from receiving assistance if the Secretary of State receives "credible evidence" that such units have committed "gross violations of human rights." In response to this provision, the State Department has developed vetting procedures for potential security force trainees.

Each of those appropriations bills has placed additional restrictions on FMF and international military education and training (IMET) assistance to Guatemala and limited them to certain parts of the Guatemalan military.

The State Department has submitted human rights progress reports to congressional appropriators for Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama for FY2011. It once again did not submit a human rights report for Nicaragua in FY2011 since it was unable to report progress.

Human rights organizations have generally lauded the inclusion of human rights conditions in Mérida/CARSI legislation, but some U.S. officials have privately complained about the number of restrictions and requirements placed on the assistance. When combined with the delay in appropriations legislation for each of the past several fiscal years, consultations with congressional appropriators related to the so-called “15% withholding requirement” reports mentioned above have contributed to significant delays in funds being released. While FMF funds can be spent over two fiscal years, INCLE funds must be spent in the fiscal year in which they are appropriated. In recent years, this has created challenges for embassies, which have not received some Mérida/CARSI funding until July or August that must be obligated by the end of the fiscal year in September.

Relation to Other U.S. Government Policies

An innovative component of the Mérida Initiative, as it was originally conceived, was the principle of “shared responsibility,” or the idea that all countries involved in the initiative—the United States, Mexico, and the seven countries of Central America—would take steps to tackle domestic problems contributing to drug trafficking and crime in the region.¹⁴⁰ The Mexican and Central American governments committed to address corruption and reform their law enforcement and judicial institutions. For its part, the U.S. government pledged to address drug demand, money laundering, and weapons smuggling.¹⁴¹ The importance of “shared responsibility” has been reiterated by President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and other Administration officials in meetings and public events with Mexican and Central American officials. The Obama Administration has also begun to address some Central American governments’ concerns about U.S. deportation policy. While Mexican and Central American officials have welcomed the new rhetoric, they have periodically challenged the U.S. government’s commitment to matching words with deeds, particularly with respect to U.S. gun policy and addressing drug consumption.¹⁴²

U.S. government efforts to address each of the issues mentioned above are carried out by several different domestic agencies. When debating future support for CARSI, Congress may consider whether to provide additional funding simultaneously for these or other domestic activities that would enhance the United States’ abilities to fulfill its pledges. The Obama Administration included an increased focus on reducing U.S. drug demand, particularly among youth, in its 2010 and 2011 National Drug Control Strategies and asked for slight increases in funding for

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State and Government of Mexico, “Joint Statement on the Mérida Initiative: A New Paradigm for Security Cooperation,” October 22, 2007.

¹⁴¹ For more information, see CRS Report R41349, *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea.

¹⁴² Fred Hiatt, “What Felipe Calderón Wants from the United States,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2011.

prevention and treatment programs in its FY2012 budget request.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the U.S. drug control budget remains largely focused on overseas supply-reduction programs and domestic law enforcement efforts.¹⁴⁴

In the past few years, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have worked together to increase operations against bulk cash smuggling and other forms of money laundering. CBP has increased southbound inspections of vehicles and trains for bulk cash flowing into Mexico and Central America. In December 2009, ICE opened a bulk cash smuggling detection center to assist U.S. federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in tracking and disrupting illicit funding flows. Despite these efforts, the vast majority of illicit monetary transfers and shipments continue to flow southward undetected.¹⁴⁵

The Department of Justice and its Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) have made efforts to staunch the flow of illegal guns from the United States to Mexico and Central America. They have stepped up enforcement of domestic gun control laws, and have sought to improve coordination with law enforcement bodies in the region. ATF maintains a foreign attaché in Mexico City and a Regional Firearms Advisor in El Salvador to support firearms-related investigations throughout the region. For example, ATF trains Central American law enforcement officers how to use the eTrace program, through which investigators are sometimes able to determine the origin and commercial trail of seized firearms, identify gun trafficking trends, and develop investigative leads.¹⁴⁶

In addition to the issues mentioned above, policymakers in Central America have expressed concerns that increasing U.S. deportations of individuals with criminal records are worsening the gang and security problems in the region.¹⁴⁷ The Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have received the highest numbers of U.S. deportations (after Mexico) for the past several fiscal years. Central American countries have typically had a lower percentage of individuals deported on criminal grounds than other top-receiving countries like Mexico, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. In FY2009 and FY2010, however, the percentage of Central Americans deported on criminal grounds increased significantly.

For the past several years, Central American officials have asked the U.S. government to consider providing a complete criminal history for each deportee who has been removed on criminal grounds, including whether he or she is a member of a gang. While ICE does not provide a complete criminal record for deportees, it may provide some information regarding an individual's criminal history when specifying why the individual was removed from the United States. ICE does not indicate gang affiliation unless it is the primary reason for the individual being deported. Law enforcement officials in receiving countries are able to contact the FBI to

¹⁴³ For more information on the National Drug Control Strategy and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, see CRS Report R41535, *Reauthorizing the Office of National Drug Control Policy: Issues for Consideration*, by Kristin M. Finklea.

¹⁴⁴ See Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Fact Sheet: Changes to the National Drug Control Budget," press release, February 2011, http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/pdf/fy12budget_fs.pdf.

¹⁴⁵ William Booth and Nick Miroff, "Stepped-up Efforts by U.S., Mexico Fail to Stem Flow of Drug Money South," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2010.

¹⁴⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, "U.S. Actions to Combat Trafficking in Arms in the Western Hemisphere," Fact Sheet, June 21, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Kate Joynes et al., "Central America, Mexico and the United States Formulate Shared Strategy to Fight Gang Violence," *Global Insight Daily Analysis*, April 9, 2008.

request a criminal history check on particular criminal deportees after they have arrived in that country. With support from the Mérida Initiative/CARSI, ICE and the FBI have developed a pilot program called the Criminal History Information Program (CHIP) to provide more information about deportees with criminal convictions to officials in El Salvador.

The U.S. government does not currently fund any deportee reintegration services programs for adults in Central America, although it has in the past.¹⁴⁸ As a result of budget shortfalls in many countries, the types of support services provided to deportees returning from the United States are very limited. The few programs that do exist tend to be funded and administered by the Catholic Church, nongovernmental organizations, or the International Organization for Migration.

Outlook

The seven nations of Central America face significant security challenges. Well-financed and heavily armed criminal threats, fragile political and judicial systems, and persistent social hardships such as poverty and unemployment contribute to widespread insecurity in the region. The United States has allocated \$361.5 million in security assistance to support Central America since FY2008 under what is now known as the Central America Regional Security Initiative; however, security conditions have continued to deteriorate. As Congress evaluates budget priorities and debates the form of U.S. security assistance to the region, it may consider the fact that many analysts think that improving security conditions in the region will be a difficult, multifaceted endeavor. Central American leaders will need to address long-standing issues such as incomplete institutional reforms, precarious tax bases, and the lack of opportunities for young people.¹⁴⁹ International donors will need to provide extensive support over an extended period of time.¹⁵⁰ And all of the stakeholders involved will need to better coordinate their efforts to support comprehensive long-term strategies that strengthen institutions and address the root causes of citizen insecurity.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Testimony of Maureen Achieng, Chief of Mission for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Haiti before the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, July 24, 2007. Although the U.S. government is not currently funding deportee reintegration programs for adults in Central America, it is providing small amounts of funding to IOM to assist unaccompanied minors who have been returned to El Salvador and Nicaragua. CRS phone interview with State Department official, December 2, 2010.

¹⁴⁹ Casas-Zamora, November 2010, op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ Villiers Negroponce, Spring 2010, op. cit.

¹⁵¹ Adriana Beltrán, "Stronger than the Iron Fist: Funes Administration Attempts a Different Approach to Crime and Violence in El Salvador," *WOLA*, March 18, 2011.

Appendix. Central America Social Indicators¹⁵²

Table A-I. Central America Development Indicators

Country	Human Development Index (HDI) Rank	Life Expectancy at Birth	Mean Years of Schooling (Adults)	Gross National Income (GNI) US \$ billions	GNI Per Capita US \$
	Out of 169 countries	2010	2010	2008	2008
Panama	54	76.0	9.4	21.0	6,180
Costa Rica	62	79.1	8.3	27.5	6,060
Belize	78	76.9	9.2	0.001	3,820
El Salvador	90	72.0	7.7	21.4	3,480
Honduras	106	72.6	6.5	13.0	1,800
Nicaragua	115	73.8	5.7	6.1	1,080
Guatemala	116	70.8	4.1	36.6	2,680

Source: HDI Rank, Life Expectancy at Birth, Mean Years of Schooling from the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2010*; GNI and GNI per capita from the World Bank, *World Development Report 2010*.

Definitions: HDI Rank is determined by using UNDP's Human Development Index, which is a composite measure of three basic dimensions of human development: health, education, and income. Calculated for 169 countries, with 1 = highest human development. Life Expectancy at Birth is the number of years a newborn is expected to live if patterns of mortality prevailing at its birth were to stay the same throughout its life. Mean Years of Schooling = average number of years of education received by people 25 years old and older in their lifetime. Gross national income (GNI) from World Bank Atlas Method is the broadest measure of national income. It measures total value added from domestic and foreign sources claimed by residents. GNI per capita is GNI divided by midyear population.

¹⁵² Prepared by Julissa Gomez-Granger, CRS Information Research Specialist.

Table A-2. Central America Poverty and Inequality Indicators

Country	Area in Square Miles	Population (2011 Estimate)	Population Below National Poverty Line (%)	Income Gini Co-efficients
Belize	8,867	319,000	n/a	n/a
Costa Rica	19,730	4,703,000	18.9 (2009)	48.9 (2007)
El Salvador	21,041	6,226,000	47.9 (2009)	46.9 (2007)
Guatemala	42,042	14,729,000	54.8 (2006)	53.7 (2006)
Honduras	43,278	7,773,000	68.9 (2007)	55.3 (2006)
Nicaragua	59,998	5,896,000	61.9 (2005)	52.3 (2005)
Panama	30,193	3,562,000	26.4 (2009)	54.9 (2006)

Source: Area from U.S. Department of State, *Country Background Notes*; Population and Population Below National Poverty Line from ECLAC, *Statistical Yearbook for Latin America and the Caribbean 2010*; Gini Co-efficients from UN Human Development Report online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>.

Note: Gini Co-efficient—a value of 0 represents absolute equality; a value of 100 represents absolute inequality.

Author Contact Information

Peter J. Meyer
Analyst in Latin American Affairs
pmeyer@crs.loc.gov, 7-5474

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs
cseelke@crs.loc.gov, 7-5229

Acknowledgments

Julissa Gomez-Granger, Information Research Specialist, contributed to this report.