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Gangs in Central America

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Summary

The *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and its main rival, the “18th Street” gang, continue to undermine citizen security and subvert government authority in parts of Central America. Gang-related violence has been particularly acute in El Salvador, Honduras, and urban areas in Guatemala, contributing to some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Congress has maintained an interest in the effects of gang-related crime and violence on governance, citizen security, and investment in Central America. Congress has examined the role that gang-related violence has played in fueling mixed migration flows, which have included asylum seekers, by families and unaccompanied alien children (UAC) to the United States. Since FY2008, Congress has appropriated funding for anti-gang efforts in Central America.

Central American governments have struggled to address the gang problem. From 2012 to 2014, the government of El Salvador facilitated a historic—and risky—truce involving the country’s largest gangs. The truce contributed to a temporary reduction in homicides but strengthened the gangs. Since taking office in June 2014, President Salvador Sanchez Cerén has adopted repression-oriented anti-gang policies similar those implemented in the mid-2000s, including relying on the military to support anti-gang efforts. El Salvador’s attorney general is investigating allegations of extrajudicial killings committed by police engaged in anti-gang efforts. Successive Honduran governments have generally relied on suppression-oriented policies toward the gangs as well, with some funding provided in recent years to support community-level prevention programs. The Guatemalan government has generally relied on periodic law-enforcement operations to round up suspected gang members.

U.S. agencies have engaged with Central American governments on gang issues for more than a decade. In July 2007, an interagency committee announced the U.S. Strategy to Combat Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico, which emphasized diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity enhancement, and prevention. Between FY2008 and FY2013, Congress appropriated roughly \$38 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds through a special line item for anti-gang efforts in Central America. Since FY2013, approximately \$10 million in Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) funding has been assigned to continue those anti-gang initiatives. Significant additional support has been provided through CARSI for violence-prevention efforts in communities affected by gang violence, as well as for vetted police units working on transnational gang cases with U.S. law enforcement. Recently, U.S. and Salvadoran officials have also targeted the financing of MS-13, which the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated as a Transnational Criminal Organization subject to U.S. sanctions in October 2012, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13581.

This report describes the gang problem in Central America, discusses country approaches to deal with the gangs, and analyzes U.S. policy with respect to gangs in Central America. Congressional oversight may focus on the efficacy of anti-gang efforts in Central America; the interaction between U.S. domestic and international anti-gang policies, and the potential impact of U.S. sanctions on law-enforcement efforts. See also CRS Report R41731, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, and CRS Report R43702, *Unaccompanied Children from Central America: Foreign Policy Considerations*.

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Introduction

Congress has expressed ongoing concern about the high rate of violent crimes committed by drug traffickers, organized criminal groups, and gangs in Central America, particularly in the “northern triangle” countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (see **Figure 1**).¹ Central American governments, the media, and some analysts have attributed a significant proportion of homicides to *maras* (gangs), many of which have ties to the United States. U.S. concerns about gangs are due in part to the role gangs have played in the violence, extortion, and forced recruitment that has fueled internal displacement, as well as the record-level emigration of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) and families to the United States.² The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has asserted that gang violence is contributing to a “refugee-like” situation in the northern triangle.³ Governments maintain that recent migration has been due to a number of factors and that their efforts are reducing violence and illegal emigration.⁴

In recent years, Congress has considered what level of U.S. assistance is most appropriate to help Central American countries combat gang activity and what types of programs are most effective in that effort. Members of Congress have also taken an interest in the impact on the gang problem of U.S. deportations of individuals with criminal records to Central America, as well as the evolving relationship between Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and the gangs. Congress is currently examining the degree to which governments in the region are taking steps to address gangs in a way that does not cause human rights abuses, as required by conditions included in the FY2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 114-113).⁵

This report describes the gang problem in Central America, discusses country approaches to deal with the gangs, and analyzes U.S. policy with respect to gangs in Central America. It concludes with possible questions for oversight that Congress may consider.

¹ The Central American countries include Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. This report focuses on the “northern triangle” countries of Central America, where the gang problem has been most acute: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The report refers to the other countries and governments in the region periodically for comparative purposes. For more information, see CRS Report R41731, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

² Sarnata Reynolds, “*It’s a Suicide Act to Leave or Stay*”: *Internal Displacement in El Salvador*,” Refugees International, July 30, 2015; Muzaffar Chishti and Faye Hipsman, *Increased Central American Migration to the United States May Prove an Enduring Phenomenon*, Migration Policy Institute (MPI), February 18, 2016.

³ U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “U.S. Announcement on Central America Refugees Highlights Seriousness of Situation,” press release, January 14, 2016; UNHCR, *Children on the Run*, March 2014; UNHCR, *Women on the Run*, October 2015. In 2014, the U.S. government established an in-country processing program for individuals in each of the northern triangle countries seeking asylum or parole who have parents lawfully present in the United States; the program was expanded in July 2016. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “U.S. Expands Initiatives to Address Migration Challenges,” July 26, 2016.

⁴ In some communities in Honduras, violence has been reduced with support from U.S.-funded programs. See Sonia Nazario, “How the Most Dangerous Place on Earth got a Little bit Safer,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2016. At a national level, the extent and reasons behind violence reduction are debatable. Mimi Yagoub, “What’s Behind Honduras’ 30% Drop in Murder Rates?” *Insight Crime*, February 19, 2016; E. Eduardo Castillo and Marcos Aleman, “El Salvador, Deadliest Nation in 2015, Sees Lull in Violence,” AP, July 3, 2016.

⁵ CRS In Focus IF10371, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Background and FY2017 Budget Request*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

Figure I. Map of Central America



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS).

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

Scope of the Gang Problem in Central America

Defining Gangs

Experts have long debated the formal definition of the term *gang* and the types of individuals that should be considered *gang members*. Generally, experts agree that most gangs have a name and some sense of identity, which can sometimes be indicated by symbols such as clothing, graffiti, colors, and hand signs that are unique to the group. Gangs are thought to be composed of members ranging in age from 12 to 24, but some gang members are older adults and others are younger, often forcibly recruited.⁶ These definitions are evolving. According to the U.S. National Gang Center, group criminality is the most important factor used to identify gang-related activity

⁶ Frank de Waegh, *Unwilling Participants: The Coercion of Youth into Violent Criminal Groups in Central America's Northern Triangle*, Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States, 2015. Hereinafter de Waegh, 2015.

in the United States, followed by displaying gang symbols.⁷ Gangs may be involved in criminal activities ranging from graffiti, vandalism, petty theft, robbery, extortion, and assaults to more serious criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, rape, and murder.

When referring to gangs in Central America, some studies use the terms *pandillas* and *maras* interchangeably, whereas others distinguish between the two.⁸ Studies that distinguish between the two types of Central American gangs generally define *pandillas* as localized groups that have long been present in the region and *maras* as a more recent phenomenon with transnational roots. For a variety of reasons discussed below, *pandillas* are more prevalent in Nicaragua, whereas *maras* are dominant in the northern triangle.⁹

Transnational Gangs in Central America

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).¹⁰ The 18th Street gang was formed in the 1960s by Mexican youth who were not accepted into existing Hispanic gangs in the Rampart section of Los Angeles. It was the first Hispanic gang to accept members from all races and to recruit members from other states. 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 but remain active in the United States. According to U.S. estimates by the Department of Justice in 2015, the 18th Street gang is reportedly active in 20 states, whereas the MS-13 is present in 46 states and the District of Columbia.¹¹

The expansion of MS-13 and 18th Street presence in Central America accelerated after the United States began deporting illegal immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the northern triangle region after the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA; P.L. 104-208) of 1996.¹² Many contend that gang deportees “exported” a Los Angeles gang culture to Central America (where local gangs were already present). Gangs have recruited new members from among vulnerable youth in poor neighborhoods and in prisons; forcible recruitment is common.¹³ Studies have shown that, as happened in the United States, gang leaders in Central America have used prisons to increase discipline and cohesion among their ranks.

Estimates of gang membership in Central America vary, with several widely cited estimates published in 2012. At that time, State Department officials estimated that there were roughly 85,000 MS-13 and 18th Street gang members in northern triangle countries.¹⁴ In contrast, the U.N.

⁷ See U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), National Gang Center, *National Youth Gang Survey Analysis*, at <https://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Defining-Gangs>.

⁸ See, for example, Demoscopia S.A., *Maras y Pandillas: Comunidad y Policía en Centroamérica*, October 2007, as opposed to Dennis Rodgers et al., “Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions,” *Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper* 23, May 2009.

⁹ Roberto Valencia, “Barrio Jorge Dimitrov,” *El Faro*, October 10, 2011.

¹⁰ James C. Howell, *The History of Street Gangs in the United States: Their Origins and Transformations*, (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2015); *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, eds. Thomas Bruneau, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).

¹¹ DOJ, Organized Crime and Gang Section, *About Violent Gangs, Criminal Street Gangs*, May 12, 2015; DOJ, U.S. Attorney’s Office, District of Massachusetts, “Fifty-Six MS-13 Members Indicted,” press release, January 29, 2016.

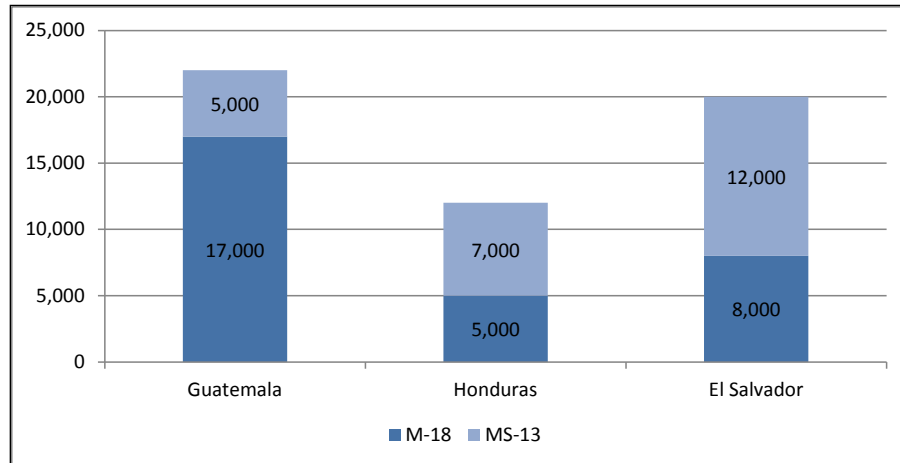
¹² The Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IRIRA; P.L. 104-208) expanded the categories of illegal immigrants subject to deportation and made it more difficult for immigrants to get relief from removal.

¹³ de Waegh, 2015.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Gangs, Youth, and Drugs—Breaking the Cycle of Violence,” Remarks by William R. (continued...)

Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated total MS-13 and M-18 membership in the region at 54,000 (see **Figure 2** below).¹⁵ According to UNODC, there were roughly 20,000 gang members in El Salvador; 22,000 in Guatemala; and 12,000 in Honduras. El Salvador had the highest concentration of gang members, with some 323 gang members for every 100,000 citizens, double the level of Guatemala and Honduras. In comparison, in 2007, UNODC cited total gang membership of some 64,500, with country membership totals of 10,500 in El Salvador; 14,000 in Guatemala; and 36,000 in Honduras.¹⁶

Figure 2. Estimated Gang Membership in the Northern Triangle of Central America, 2012



Source: U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: a Threat Assessment*, September 2012.

Nicaragua has a significant presence of local gangs, but comparatively few MS-13 and M-18 members. Many attribute this in part to the strength of social networks and community policing programs established by the Sandinistas during the 1980s.¹⁷ Nicaragua also has received far fewer deportees from the United States than the northern triangle countries. Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize also have gangs, although most of the gangs in those countries are more often described as *pandillas* than *maras*.

In recent years, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama have reported some MS-13 and M-18 presence in their countries.¹⁸ The increased presence in these countries could be occurring because of deliberate expansion efforts made by the gangs or because of gang members fleeing from rival gangs, or it could be a result of tough gang policies in countries such as El Salvador

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Brownfield, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, at the Institute of the Americas, press release, October 1, 2012.

¹⁵ U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: a Threat Assessment*, September 2012.

¹⁶ UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire*, May 2007.

¹⁷ Rodgers et al., 2009, op. cit.; Valencia, op. cit.

¹⁸ Mike LaSusa, "Are Mara Salvatrucha Gangs Expanding in Costa Rica?," *Insight Crime*, April 8, 2016; Martha Celia Hernandez, "How MS13 and Barrio 18 are Extending Their Reach to Nicaragua," *Insight Crime*, August 28, 2014.

driving gang members into neighboring countries. In April 2016, Panamanian police captured MS-13 members and deported them to El Salvador.¹⁹

Gang Activities in Central America

Although MS-13 and M-18 began as loosely structured street gangs, some evidence suggests that they have become more organized and sophisticated in some countries and that some *clicas* (cliques) may coordinate with cliques in other countries.²⁰ By 2008, U.S. law enforcement had found evidence suggesting that some MS-13 leaders jailed in El Salvador were ordering retaliatory assassinations of individuals in the Washington, DC, metro area, as well as designing plans to unify their cliques with those in the United States.²¹ More recent investigations have shown evidence of MS-13 leaders seeking to buy high-powered firearms in Mexico and Guatemala.²² Still, the term *transnational criminal organization*, or TCO, might be misleading when used to describe the *maras* across the region. Some researchers contend that the Central American gangs' primary focus continues to be on local issues, such as dominating a particular extortion racket or drug distribution area.²³

The northern triangle countries have among the highest homicide rates in the world (see **Figure 3**). Some Central American officials have blamed gangs for most of the homicides committed in their countries. Gang-related murders occur when gangs discipline their members or punish those who attempt to leave, dispute territory, confront law enforcement and their families, and punish those who fail to comply with their orders. Gangs have also targeted witnesses to crimes.²⁴

Gang experts have argued that, although gang members may be more visible than other criminals, violence perpetrated by gangs is part of a broader spectrum of violence in Central America. Child abuse and spousal rape are major problems in the three northern triangle countries. All three countries have among the highest rates of femicide (killing of women) in the world.²⁵ El Salvador and Guatemala also have the highest proportion of homicide victims under the age of 20.²⁶ Moreover, transnational criminal organizations, smugglers, and other violent groups are also prevalent.²⁷

The decline in homicides that occurred after the Salvadoran government facilitated a gang truce in March 2012 lends evidence to the assertion that gangs are responsible for a significant

¹⁹ Antonio Pérez, "Director de la Policía Confirma Presencia de Maras en Panamá," *Panamá América*, April 4, 2016.

²⁰ Douglas Farah and Pamela Phillips Lum, *Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: the Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil*, International Assessment and Strategy Center, 2013. Hereinafter Farah and Lum, 2013.

²¹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *Regional Gang Initiative: Assessments and Plan of Action*, July 1, 2008.

²² Mike LaSusa, "El Salvador's MS13 Gang Sought Big Guns in Mexico, Guatemala," *Insight Crime*, August 12, 2016.

²³ Insight Crime and Asociación para una Sociedad Más Justa, *Gangs in Honduras*, November 20, 2015.

²⁴ See, for example, Sarah Kinoshian, Angelika Albaladejo, and Lisa Haugaard, *El Salvador's Violence: No Easy Way Out*, Center for International Policy and Latin America Working Group, August 2016.

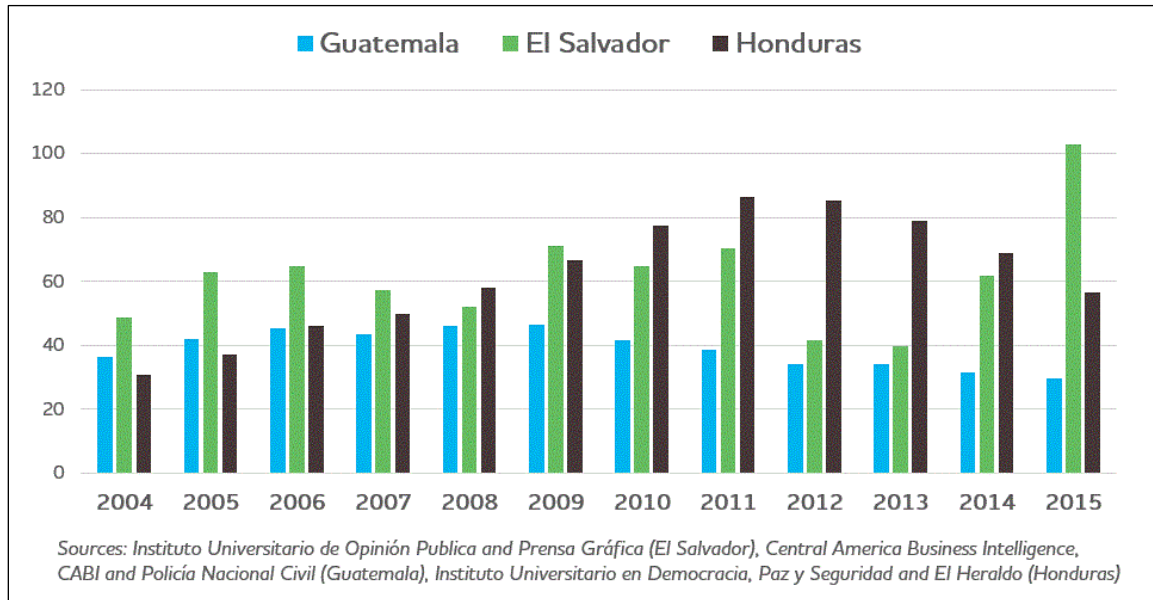
²⁵ Small Arms Survey, *Femicide: A Global Problem*, Research Note 14, February 2012.

²⁶ U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Hidden in Plain Sight: a Statistical Analysis of Violence Against Children*, September 2014.

²⁷ Steve Dudley, Briefing on Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle, Washington DC, July 6, 2016; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*, Latin America Report No. 57, July 28, 2016. Hereinafter ICG, July 2016.

percentage of violence in that country.²⁸ Some also maintain that recent reductions in homicides in El Salvador may be due more to a nonaggression pact among the gangs than to the “extraordinary measures” adopted by the government in March 2016.²⁹ Although gangs appear to be responsible for a significant percentage of murders in urban areas of Honduras and Guatemala, homicide rates also have been elevated in border regions and places where varying combinations of local groups transporting drugs, Mexican crime groups, and crime families are active.³⁰

Figure 3. Homicide Rates in the Northern Triangle: 2004-2015
(homicides per 100,000 inhabitants)



Source: Washington Office on Latin America, *Five Facts About Migration From Central America’s Northern Triangle*, January 15, 2016.

Women and children are often targets of gang violence in Central America. Gang initiations for men and women differ. Whereas men are subject to a beating, women are often forced to have sex with various members of the gang.³¹ After joining a gang, women are expected to commit crimes (such as serving as drug mules or carrying contraband into prisons), sometimes dressed like men, but also to perform household duties, such as cooking and cleaning for the group. Female gang members are expected to tolerate infidelity from their partners, but women may be murdered if they are unfaithful.³² Non-gang affiliated women and girls have been murdered as a result of turf battles, jealousy, and revenge. Those who have refused to help a gang or reported a crime are particularly vulnerable, as are those who are related to or have collaborated with the police.³³

²⁸ José Miguel Cruz, *The Political Workings of the Funes Administration’s Gang Truce in El Salvador*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2013.

²⁹ Since March 2016, the Salvadoran government has sent mid-level gang leaders to more secure facilities, blocked phone signals near jails, deployed military reservists, and secured legislative approval of loans for public security. Carlos Martínez, “Pandillas Caminan Hacia una Frente Común Ante Medidas Extraordinarias,” *El Faro*, July 5, 2016.

³⁰ Dudley, op cit. International Crisis Group, *Corridor of Violence: The Guatemala-Honduras Border*, June 4, 2014.

³¹ Interpeace Regional Office for Latin America, *Violentas y Violentadas Relaciones de Género en las Maras Salvatrucha y Barrio 18 del Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica*, Guatemala, May 15, 2013.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kelly McEvers and Jasmine Garsd, “The Surreal Reasons Girls Are Disappearing In El Salvador: #15Girls,” NPR, (continued...)

Gangs also engage in sex trafficking involving women and children, particularly in Honduras and in Guatemala City.³⁴ Threats and harassment by gangs have led thousands of youth to abandon school, including some 39,000 in El Salvador in 2015.³⁵

Gangs have been involved in a broad array of other criminal activities, as well. Those activities include extortion; money laundering; and drug, auto, and weapons smuggling. Gangs have increasingly been involved in extortions of residents, bus drivers, and business owners in major cities throughout the region. Failure to pay often results in harassment or violent reprisals. In 2014, some 179 bus, minibus, and taxi drivers were assassinated in Guatemala.³⁶ In July 2015, the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs in El Salvador threatened public transportation operators to go on strike or face reprisals. The operators complied with the gangs' threats, and the country's transport system remained paralyzed for three days. The Honduran government cracked down on the MS-13 gang's finances in February 2016 in an operation that seized more than \$1 million and several properties and businesses operated by the gang. In July 2016, the Salvadoran government arrested more than 70 people who had allegedly laundered the gang's money through motels, brothels, and other businesses.³⁷

Although some studies maintain that ties between Central American gangs and other organized criminal groups have increased, other studies have downplayed the connections.³⁸ Some gangs engage in local drug distribution, but gangs generally do not have a role in transnational drug trafficking.³⁹ A gang's role in the drug trade depends on the country and area in which it operates. Some *clicas* act as facilitators by, for example, allowing a transnational criminal organization to land drug shipments on a clandestine airstrip in their territory in exchange for payment. MS-13 members reportedly have been contracted on an ad-hoc basis by Mexico's warring criminal organizations to carry out revenge killings.⁴⁰

Factors Exacerbating the Gang Problem in Central America

Legacies of War and Authoritarian Rule: Arms and Violence

The northern triangle countries have long histories of armed conflict and political repression. A legacy of conflict and authoritarian rule has inhibited the development of democratic institutions and the rule of law. Protracted armed conflicts also contributed to widespread proliferation of

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October 5, 2015; Óscar Martínez, "El Salvador es un buen lugar para matar," *El Faro*, May 9, 2016; Christopher Sherman, "Gangs Declare War on Police as El Salvador Violence Rages," AP, April 13, 2016.

³⁴ "Niñas y Niños en Honduras son Sometidos a una Esclavitud Moderna," *El Heraldo*, October 11, 2015; UNICEF and the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), *Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation Purposes in Guatemala*, 2016.

³⁵ Jaimi López, "Deserción Escolar por Violencia se ha Triplicado en Últimos Dos Años," *ElSalvador.com*, July 19, 2016.

³⁶ Fred Rivera, "Persisten Acosos Contra Transportistas," *El Quetzalteco*, February 17, 2015.

³⁷ Sarah Esther Maslin, "El Salvador says a Brutal Gang Laundered Money Through Motels, Brothels, and Taxis," *Washington Post*, July 29, 2016.

³⁸ Farah and Lum, 2013, asserts that linkages are increasing. For a contrasting view, see Juan Carlos Garzon, "Rethinking the El Salvador Mara- Drug Trafficking Relationship," *Insight Crime*, April 3, 2014.

³⁹ Efen Lemus, "From Extortion to Investment: The Making of Barrio 18, Inc.," *Insight Crime*, October 2, 2015; Carlos García, "6 Common Misconceptions About the MS13 Street Gang," *Insight Crime*, February 25, 2016.

⁴⁰ "MS-13," *Insight Crime*, November 21, 2013.

illicit firearms, as well as a tendency to resort to violence as a means of settling disputes.⁴¹ Some 80% of homicides in Honduras between 2008 and 2015 involved the use of a firearm, the vast majority of which were unlicensed.⁴² Many current gang leaders grew up witnessing extreme violence in their homes and communities. Some were displaced to cities in the United States or neighboring countries (such as Costa Rica), whereas others were left behind by parents who died or fled during the conflict.

Poverty and a Lack of Educational and Employment Opportunities

In addition to war, authoritarian rule, and emigration, the social fabric in the northern triangle countries has been stressed by economic factors such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment, with few opportunities for growing youth populations. According to the World Bank, poverty is acute in Honduras, where 63% of people live in poverty, and in Guatemala, where 59% of people live in poverty. All three northern triangle countries are also characterized by inequality, with income disparities exacerbating the social exclusion of ethnic minorities and gender discrimination.

Poverty and inequality are reinforced by the lack of social mobility and persistent youth unemployment and underemployment.⁴³ In 2010, more than 25% of youth aged 15-24 in El Salvador and Honduras neither worked nor studied.⁴⁴ According to data from the Inter-American Development Bank, fewer than 45% of youth outside the highest income quintile graduate high school in those countries. High-school graduation rates are even lower in Guatemala, particularly among indigenous groups. Gangs target unemployed youth and, in the absence of family or community support, many of these youth have turned to gangs for social support, a source of livelihood, and protection.⁴⁵

Societal Stigmas

Societal stigmas against gangs and gang deportees from the United States have made the process of leaving a gang extremely difficult. Many organizations that work with former gang members, particularly those with criminal records, say that offender reentry is a major problem. Ex-gang members report that employers are often unwilling to hire them. Tattooed former gang members, especially returning deportees from the United States who are often native English speakers, have had the most difficulty finding gainful employment. Some gang members have gone through complete tattoo removal, a long and expensive process, to better integrate into society.

Prisons in Need of Reform

The implementation of aggressive anti-gang roundups has overwhelmed prisons in Central America. Prison conditions in the region are generally harsh, with severe overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and staffing shortages. Many facilities that were already overpopulated

⁴¹ UNODC, *Firearms Within Central America*, 2012; Tani Marilena Adams, *Chronic Violence and its Reproduction: Perverse Trends in Social Relations, Citizenship, and Democracy in Latin America*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, March 2012.

⁴² David Gagne, "80% of Homicides in Honduras Result of Gun Violence: Report," *Insight Crime*, July 7, 2016.

⁴³ Marc Hanson, *Migration, U.S. Assistance, and Youth Opportunities in Central America*, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), February 2016.

⁴⁴ Rafael de Hoyos, Halsey Rogers, and Miguel Székely, *Out of School and Out of Work Risk and Opportunities for Latin America's Ninos*, World Bank, Washington DC, 2016.

⁴⁵ Douglas Farah, "Central America's Gangs Are All Grown Up," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2016.

have been filled with thousands of suspected gang members, many of whom have yet to be convicted of any crimes. In El Salvador, some 31,148 inmates (including 13,868 current or former gang members) were being held in prisons designed to hold a maximum of 10,035 people in late 2015. In Guatemala at about the same time, 19,972 people were being held in facilities with a capacity of 6,742.⁴⁶

Gangs are often able to carry out criminal activities from behind bars, sometimes with assistance from corrupt prison officials. As discussed above, some assess that prison conditions have helped gangs to become larger, better organized, and more cohesive. Some observers have described prisons as “finishing schools” where, rather than being rehabilitated, first-time offenders often deepen their involvement in illicit gang activities.⁴⁷

U.S. Removals (Deportations) to Central America and the Gang Problem

Policymakers in Central America have expressed ongoing concerns that U.S. deportations of individuals with criminal records are exacerbating the gang and gang-related citizen security problems in the region. For more than a decade, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have received the highest numbers of U.S. deportees (after Mexico). Obama Administration officials have repeatedly asserted that a larger proportion of recent deportees were removed on criminal grounds, but a breakdown of criminal versus noncriminal deportations is not publicly available at a country level.

Table I. U.S. Deportations to Top Receiving Countries: FY2013-FY2015

Country	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015
Mexico	241,493	176,968	146,132
Honduras	37,049	40,695	20,309
Guatemala	47,769	54,423	33,249
El Salvador	21,602	27,180	21,920
Dominican Republic	2,462	2,130	1,946

Source: Prepared by CRS with information provided by the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Office of Enforcement and Removal. Figures include “removals” (deportations) but not voluntary departures (returns).

Notes: Criminal deportees have been convicted of a crime in the United States that makes one removable (i.e., eligible for deportation) under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-236). Not all individuals who have been deported on criminal grounds are gang members or violent criminals. Low-level drug convictions and some nonviolent offenses may result in a removal on criminal grounds. Noncriminal deportees have been removed because of a status violation (e.g., being in the country illegally or working without authorization).

Since the mid-2000s, Central American officials had been asking the U.S. government to consider providing a complete criminal history for each individual who has been deported on criminal grounds, including whether or not he or she is a member of a gang. Although U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) does not provide a complete criminal record for deportees, it may provide some information regarding an individual’s criminal history when specifying why

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of State, *2015 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: El Salvador*, April 2016.

⁴⁷ T. W. Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders: An Ethnography of A Salvadoran Street Gang* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the individual was removed from the United States. ICE does not indicate gang affiliation unless gang affiliation is the primary reason why the individual is being deported. However, in January 2014, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) signed an agreement to expand a Criminal History Information Sharing (CHIS) program. Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador participate in CHIS.

The types of support services provided to deportees returning from the United States and Mexico to northern triangle countries vary but are generally limited in size and scope.⁴⁸ Until recently, the few shelters and programs that existed to receive and reintegrate deportees in Central America tended to be funded and administered by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Catholic Church, or the International Organization for Migration. Guatemala appears to provide the most deportee assistance upon arrival, but all three countries have limited resources for reintegration services and for tracking deportees once they return.⁴⁹

Country Anti-gang Efforts

Country efforts to deal with gangs vary. In general, governments in the northern triangle have adopted more aggressive law-enforcement approaches than other Central American countries. Tough anti-gang approaches carried out in the mid-2000s failed to stave off rising crime rates in the region and resulted in negative unintended consequences. El Salvador's ill-managed truce (see "El Salvador's 2012 Gang Truce and Dissolution," below) has discouraged governments from negotiating with the gangs. Experts have urged governments to move away from enforcement-only policies toward "second-generation" anti-gang programs similar to the types of efforts that have been employed in U.S. cities such as Boston and Los Angeles. These approaches involve prevention of violence, intervention to prevent retaliatory violence, enforcement, and reentry of rehabilitated gang members.

Regional cooperation to address gang challenges is occurring among security and defense ministers, as well as attorney generals.⁵⁰ Prosecutors from the three northern triangle countries have signed an agreement pledging to work together to prosecute gangs. The three presidents have signed an agreement to create a regional task force to address the gangs that will facilitate intelligence sharing and extraditions among the three countries, among other aims.⁵¹

Mano Dura (Heavy-Handed) Anti-gang Policies

Mano dura is a term used to describe the type of anti-gang policies initially put in place in El Salvador, Honduras, and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala in response to popular demands and media pressure for these governments to "do something" about an escalation in gang-related crime. *Mano dura* approaches have typically involved incarcerating large numbers of youth (often those with visible tattoos) for illicit association and increasing sentences for gang membership and gang-related crimes. A *Mano dura* law passed by El Salvador's Congress in 2003 was subsequently declared unconstitutional but was followed by a *super mano dura* package of anti-gang reforms in July 2004. These reforms enhanced police power to search and arrest suspected gang members and stiffened penalties for convicted gang members. Similarly, in July 2003,

⁴⁸ Victoria Rietig and Rodrigo Dominguez Villegas, *Stopping the Revolving Door: Reception and Reintegration Services for Central American Deportees*, MPI, December 2015.

⁴⁹ ICG, July 2016.

⁵⁰ "Northern Triangle' Countries Boost Security Cooperation," *Latin News Daily*, August 15, 2016.

⁵¹ "Central America Leaders Agree on Joint Force to Fight Gangs," AP, August 23, 2016.

Honduras enacted a penal code amendment that made *maras* illegal and established sentences of up to 12 years in prison for gang membership. Changes in legislation were accompanied by the increasing use of joint military and police patrols to arrest gang suspects. Guatemala introduced similar legislation in 2003, but the legislation was not enacted.⁵²

Mano dura reforms initially proved to be a way for Central American leaders to show that they were getting tough on gangs and crime, despite objections from human rights groups about the leaders' infringements on civil liberties and human rights abuses (including cases of torture and extrajudicial killings of gang suspects). Early public reactions to the tough anti-gang reforms were positive, supported by media coverage demonizing the activities of tattooed youth gang members. *Mano dura* policies enabled police to arrest large numbers of suspected gang members, including some 14,000 youth in El Salvador between mid-2004 and late 2005. In addition, according to Salvadoran officials, even though many suspects were eventually released, gang detainees provided law-enforcement officials with intelligence information.⁵³

Despite the early results of *mano dura* policies, long-term reduction of gangs and related crime proved to be fleeting. 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 joined gangs while in prison. Gang roundups exacerbated prison overcrowding, and intergang violence within the prisons resulted in inmate deaths. Credible reports assert that extrajudicial youth killings by vigilante groups have continued since *mano dura* was implemented. In response to *mano dura*, gangs have also changed their behavior to avoid detection.

El Salvador's 2012 Gang Truce and Dissolution

Upon taking office in 2009, then-Salvadoran president Mauricio Funes initially sought to move away from *mano dura* and toward a focus on crime prevention. Two years into his term, crime rates remained at elevated levels and people became frustrated. Funes moved his minister of defense, David Munguía Payés, a retired general, to head the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. With Munguía Payés's backing, a Catholic bishop and a former legislator (who was the minister's aid in the Defense Ministry) brokered a secret truce between the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs. In March 2012, Munguía Payés agreed to transfer high-ranking gang leaders serving time in maximum-security prison to less secure prisons to facilitate negotiations. Munguía Payés denied his role in facilitating the truce until September 2012.⁵⁴

Between the time the prison transfers took place and May 2013 (when Munguía Payés was removed from his post for unrelated reasons), the Salvadoran government reported that homicide rates dramatically declined. Gang leaders pledged not to forcibly recruit children into their ranks or to perpetrate violence against women. Gang leaders also turned in small amounts of weapons and offered to engage in broader negotiations. The initial apparent success of the Salvadoran truce led the Honduran government to consider a similar initiative.

Although some, including officials from the Organization of American States, praised the truce, many others expressed skepticism, maintaining that disappearances increased after the truce took

⁵² Instead, the Guatemalan government has launched periodic law-enforcement operations to round up suspected gang members.

⁵³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), *Regional Gang Initiative Assessments and Plan of Action*, July 1, 2008.

⁵⁴ Carlos Martínez and Jose Luis Sanz, "The New Truth About the Gang Truce," *Insight Crime*, September 14, 2012.

effect and gangs garnered media attention and political power.⁵⁵ Gangs continued to conduct illicit activities using cell phones in the prisons and refused to give up control over their territories or to stop extortion. El Salvador's attorney general is investigating several officials who were involved in facilitating the truce for allegedly providing as much as \$25 million to gang leaders and their affiliates.⁵⁶

The truce began to unravel after then-president Funes withdrew support for the truce mediators and reduced communication between imprisoned gang leaders and gang members in the streets in mid-2013. By April 2014, average murder rates had risen to some nine murders per day; gang attacks on police also occurred with increasing frequency. These trends worsened considerably in 2015, as El Salvador posted the world's highest homicide rate.

Church leaders have voiced support for renewed dialogue with gang members; however, the Sánchez Cerén administration opposes negotiating with the gangs—directly or indirectly. Gang-police confrontations escalated after the government returned gang leaders involved in the truce to maximum-security prisons in early 2015. El Salvador's attorney general has recently begun investigating allegations of police involvement in extrajudicial killings that took place during an apparent massacre in March 2015.⁵⁷ Until mid-2016, the Salvadoran government had struggled to quell violence among the gangs, which became more fragmented and powerful after the truce.⁵⁸

Military Involvement in Public Security and Human Rights

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have deployed thousands of military troops to help their often underpaid and poorly equipped police forces carry out public security functions, without clearly defining when those deployments might end. Upon taking office in January 2014, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández ordered the military to conduct intensive patrols of high-crime neighborhoods in the capital with the police.⁵⁹ Among the units involved in the ongoing operation are two hybrid forces that Hernández helped to establish while he was the head of the Honduran Congress: the military police force, or PMOP (*Policía Militar de Orden Público*), which is under the control of the Ministry of Defense, and a military-trained police unit under the control of the police, the TIGRES (*Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad*). In May 2015, the Salvadoran government created three battalions to help police in anti-gang efforts; at that time, some 7,000 soldiers were already involved in public security efforts.⁶⁰ In March 2016, Salvadoran President Sánchez Cerén deployed hundreds of military reservists.⁶¹ Since taking office in January, Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales has

⁵⁵ Organization of American States (OAS), "OAS Secretary General Highlights Results from the First Year of Gang Truce in El Salvador," press release, March 11, 2013; Douglas Farah, "Central America's Gangs Are All Grown Up," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2016.

⁵⁶ Munguía Payés has denied any involvement in illicit payments to the gangs and remains in his post as El Salvador's minister of defense even though he has been interrogated by the attorney general's office. Héctor Silva Ávalos and Bryan Avelar, "Case Against El Salvador's MS13 Reveals State Role in Gang's Growth," *Insight Crime*, August 3, 2016.

⁵⁷ Other recent cases of extrajudicial killings allegedly committed by police have been documented but not yet investigated. Adriana Beltrán and Carolyn Scorpio, "Turning a Blind Eye to Police Abuse and Extrajudicial Executions?" WOLA, August 16, 2016.

⁵⁸ "El Salvador, Deadliest Nation in 2015, Sees Lull in Violence," AP, July 3, 2016.

⁵⁹ CRS Report RL34027, *Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted)

⁶⁰ Loren Riesenfeld, "El Salvador to Deploy Special Forces to Combat Gangs," *Insight Crime*, May 8, 2015.

⁶¹ Evan Ellis, "The New Offensive Against Gangs in El Salvador," *Latin America Goes Global*, May 2, 2016.

extended the mandate of some 4,500 soldiers organized in nine groups that were involved in domestic security efforts during the previous government.⁶²

The involvement of the military in domestic security has raised concerns regarding human rights in these countries. As in other parts of Latin America, deploying the military into the streets can be politically popular, but doing so usually fails to produce sustainable improvements in security conditions and often leads to human rights violations. According to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, there were credible reports of security forces' involvement in unlawful killings in all three countries in 2015. The Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights in El Salvador reported that from June 2014 to May 2015 it received 2,202 complaints of human rights violations, 92% of which were allegedly committed by the police and/or the military.

Approaches in Other Central American Countries

Although their efforts have received considerably less international attention than those of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, other Central American countries have developed a variety of programs to deal with their gang problems. In Panama, President Juan Carlos Varela started an initiative in 2014 called *Barrios Seguros* (Safe Streets), where gang members willing to abandon criminality and be reintegrated into society are offered amnesty and job training to reduce gang violence.⁶³ The initiative is currently active in seven provinces and has served more than 4,100 people.⁶⁴

Nicaragua has adopted a national youth crime prevention strategy that, at least on an official level, includes the active involvement of the police in preventive and rehabilitative efforts and focuses on family, school, and community interventions. With support from other countries and NGOs, the Nicaraguan National Police's Juvenile Affairs Division runs at least two anti-gang activities a month. The Ministry of the Interior is administering a five-year program, which is supported by the Inter-American Development Bank, to target at-risk youth in 11 different municipalities.

Prospects for Country Prevention and Rehabilitation Efforts

Central American leaders, including those from the northern triangle countries, appear to have moved, at least on a rhetorical level, toward more comprehensive anti-gang approaches than during the *mano dura* era of the mid-2000s. 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. Prevention is also a key component of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle plan launched in 2014 by all three countries for which the governments are seeking donor support to complement their budget outlays.⁶⁵

Despite this rhetorical shift, government-sponsored gang prevention programs in the northern triangle have thus far tended to be relatively small scale, ad hoc, and underfunded. Of the \$318.2 million collected through Honduras' security tax between 2012 and July 2016, just 6% was

⁶² "Guatemala: Military to Continue Civilian Security Tasks," *Latin News Security & Strategy Review*, July 2016.

⁶³ David Gagne, "Panamá Ofrece Capacitación Laboral y Amnistía a Pandilleros," *InSight Crime*, November 29, at <http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-del-dia/panama-ofrece-capacitacion-laboral-ammistia-pandilleros>.

⁶⁴ Erika Edith Quiñones, "Someterán a Revisión el Programa Barrios Seguros," *Panamá América*, January 24, 2016.

⁶⁵ For more information on the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, see the text of the plan at <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=39224238>.

allocated to prevention programs. El Salvador's security plan, *El Salvador Seguro* (Secure El Salvador), prioritizes prevention, but the government lacks the funding to implement the programs the plan proposes and must obtain legislative approval for multilateral loans to support the plan. The Salvadoran Congress has been reluctant to approve additional debt unless the debt is primarily aimed at supporting the military and police.

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 NGOs. Resource constraints and a reluctance to work with gang members have thus far limited such anti-gang programs. Nevertheless, pilot projects based on experiences in cities in the United States, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia have had some nascent success in Honduras.⁶⁶ Those projects have involved individual and family therapy for youth deemed most at risk for joining gangs, intervention efforts to prevent retaliatory violence, and rehabilitation programs for those seeking to leave gangs and for nonviolent offenders in prisons.⁶⁷

U.S. Policy

In the mid-2000s, U.S. officials and Members of Congress expressed serious concerns about gangs and violence in Central America and their spillover effects on the United States. For several years, however, concerns about gang-related violence were overshadowed by broader concerns about drug trafficking and organized crime in Central America, particularly after Mexico's aggressive anticrime efforts pushed Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) deeper into the sub-region. The failed truce in El Salvador and the escalating gang-related violence that has fueled illegal emigration from that country and parts of Honduras since 2014 has refocused attention on gangs in Central America.

Congressional Interest and Appropriations

Congress has expressed concern about the problem of transnational gangs and interest in the effectiveness of U.S. international anti-gang efforts. Since the 110th Congress, interest in the topic of gangs and violence in Central America has included concerns about the domestic and international criminal activities of the gangs, as well as the relationship between gangs and Mexican TCOs. Members of Congress have also expressed interest in the effects of U.S. deportation policy and *mano dura* approaches in the region on Central American gangs. As Congress has appropriated significant funding for anti-gang efforts, it has also conducted oversight of the efficacy of U.S. programs that affect Central American gangs.

Between FY2008 and FY2013, Congress appropriated roughly \$38 million in global International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds for anti-gang efforts in Central America. A regional gang adviser based in El Salvador has coordinated Central American gang programs since that time. The INCLE line item for Central American gang programs ended in FY2013. Since FY2013, approximately \$10 million in Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) funding has been assigned to continue specific anti-gang initiatives. Hundreds of millions more has supported broader law-enforcement and prevention efforts that have impacted the gang phenomenon.

⁶⁶ Sonia Nazario, "How the Most Dangerous Place on Earth got a Little bit Safer," *New York Times*, August 11, 2016.

⁶⁷ Thomas Abt, Christopher Winship, and Democracy International, Inc., *What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle*, United States Agency for International Development, February 2016.

Table 2. Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) Funding: FY2008-FY2017

(in millions of U.S. dollars)

Fiscal Year	ESF	INCLE	NADR	FMF	Total
FY2008	25.0	24.8	6.2	4.0	60.0
FY2009	18.0	70.0	0.0	17.0	105.0
FY2010	23.0	141.0	0.0	7.0	171.0
FY2011	30.0	71.5	0.0	0.0	101.5
FY2012	50.0	85.0	0.0	0.0	135.0
FY2013	50.6	95.6	0.0	0.0	146.2
FY2014	61.5	100.0	0.0	0.0	161.5
FY2015	100.0	170.0	0.0	0.0	270.0
FY2016	126.5	222.0	0.0	0.0	348.5
Total	484.6	979.9	6.2	28.0	1,498.7
FY2017 (req.)	100.3	205.0	0.0	0.0	305.3

Source: U.S. Department of State.**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.

Evolution of U.S. International Anti-gang Efforts

U.S. agencies have been engaged on both the law-enforcement and the preventive side of dealing with Central American gangs for more than a decade. In 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) created an MS-13 Task Force to improve information sharing and intelligence gathering among U.S. and Central American law-enforcement officials. In 2005, the Bureau of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within DHS created a national anti-gang initiative called “Operation Community Shield”; ICE also has a National Gang Unit. Also in 2005, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) undertook a comprehensive assessment of the gang problem in Central America and Mexico. USAID found that although a few U.S. programs addressed some aspects of the gang phenomenon, several new initiatives would be needed in the areas of prevention, law enforcement, and rehabilitation and reintegration.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, an interagency committee worked to develop a U.S. Strategy to Combat Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico, which was announced at a July 2007 U.S.-Central America Integration System summit on security issues.⁶⁸ The strategy acknowledged that, based on previous U.S. and regional experiences, future anti-gang efforts should be holistic, comprehensive, and regional in scope. It called for active engagement with governments and institutions in the region. The strategy stated that the U.S. government would pursue coordinated anti-gang activities in five broad areas: diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity

⁶⁸ 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. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, “Combating Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico,” July 18, 2007.

enhancement, and prevention. In January 2008, the State Department sent a regional gang adviser to El Salvador to coordinate the State Department's Central American gang programs. Those programs have included training and technical assistance to law-enforcement and corrections officials, anti-gang workshops and training at the International Law Enforcement Academy in San Salvador, and regional coordination efforts.⁶⁹

In April 2010, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report concluding that the U.S. government had developed and implemented an interagency anti-gang strategy that outlines the threats posed by Central American gangs and the activities each agency is doing to respond to those threats. However, GAO recommended that the strategy be revised to include better coordination mechanisms between the agencies and performance measures.

The U.S. government has expanded its citizen-security and law-enforcement programs in Central America beyond anti-gang efforts and antidrug programs through CARS, a regional security initiative for which Congress appropriated roughly \$1.5 billion from FY2008 to FY2016. CARS has five primary goals: (1) create safe streets for the citizens in the region; (2) disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband within and between the nations of Central America; (3) support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments; (4) reestablish effective state presence and security in communities at risk; and (5) foster enhanced levels of security and rule-of-law coordination and cooperation between the nations.⁷⁰

In 2015, the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars published a comprehensive assessment of CARS that raised concerns about the organization's lack of a comprehensive strategy to improve citizen security in the region, tendency to focus on combating drug trafficking with vetted units rather than on broader law-enforcement reform and professionalization, and weak program evaluation (aside from USAID's community-based prevention programs).⁷¹

State Department

The State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) manages CARS funding, with the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) implementing most State Department programs. INL has sponsored trainings and technical exchanges for police, prison officers, and justice-sector operators from across the region. INL has also provided training and equipment to vetted police units and intelligence analysts and established more than 50 community policing/model police precinct locations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁷² INL has trained hundreds of police officers, who have provided training to more than 200,000 youth through the Gang Resistance Education and Training program.⁷³ INL has embedded U.S. law-enforcement advisers and prosecutors with investigative units that are conducting money-laundering investigations targeting the leadership of MS-13 in El Salvador. INL is supporting gang-related research as well, including a study under way by Florida

⁶⁹ The International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) is based in San Salvador, El Salvador is one of four regional law-enforcement training academies funded by the State Department's INL Bureau. The ILEA in San Salvador offers training and technical assistance to law-enforcement officials from throughout Latin America, including courses in how to address gang-related crimes and prosecutions.

⁷⁰ For background, see CRS Report R41731, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

⁷¹ Eric Olson et al. *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policies are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Latin American Program, 2015.

⁷² U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Efforts to Advance Civilian Security in Central America's Northern Triangle," press release, June 2016, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/06/258635.htm>.

⁷³ Ibid.

International University to examine whether and how gang members in El Salvador can leave a gang without putting their lives at risk.

Additionally, WHA has transferred resources to the Department of Justice; the Department of Homeland Security, particularly ICE; and USAID to enable those agencies to counter the impact of gangs in the region. State Department funding is also supporting a regional corrections adviser, who is assisting with prison-reform programs in the region.

U.S. Agency for International Development

USAID has implemented a variety of country and regional gang-prevention programs. Under CARSI, USAID supports an approach to crime and violence prevention that directly targets at-risk individuals and communities while simultaneously helping municipalities to develop and implement crime-prevention plans. In Honduras, municipalities have received support in rehabilitating public spaces, installing street lighting, and procuring materials for schools and recreational facilities. National-level security and justice-sector reform efforts are designed to strengthen the institutions charged with enforcing and administering justice, including programs aimed at improving victims assistance, juvenile justice, and respect for human rights. USAID also produces and disseminates research on what works in crime and violence prevention.

USAID uses geographic and demographic risk factors to provide population-based interventions to individuals and communities at high risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of crime and violence. The creation of more than 200 youth outreach centers in high-violence communities has provided youth with safe places where they can study, participate in recreational activities, and receive job training and job placement assistance. USAID has built prominent public-private partnerships with local and multinational companies. For example, mobile phone providers Claro and Tigo deliver free Internet access to outreach centers in El Salvador and Honduras, and in El Salvador, Microsoft trains thousands of youth on software and information technology. Governments also support some programs. The Honduran government has provided \$3 million from its security tax to support USAID's violence-prevention programming.

Through Vanderbilt University, USAID concluded a rigorous three-year impact evaluation of its CARSI-funded community-based crime and violence-prevention programs in 120 high-crime urban treatment and control communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama. Final results demonstrated that crime victimization is lower and public perception of security is higher in USAID's CARSI treatment communities. Until recently, however, USAID and INL were working in separate municipalities and were not closely coordinating their efforts.

USAID and INL are now working to implement a "place-based" model in which prevention and policing programs are co-located and closely coordinated. USAID is providing community-resiliency programs in communities where INL is training law enforcement in community-based policing. The model is active in selected sites in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador and is based on evidence from Los Angeles, Ciudad Juárez, and Medellín that integrated prevention and law-enforcement efforts can have significant impacts in even the most violent communities. USAID and the State Department are in the process of obtaining a waiver from the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) to ensure that programming they have planned to support the rehabilitation of former gang members does not violate sanctions on MS-13 members. USAID and INL aim to expand the place-based model to more locations in the coming year.

Department of Justice

Within the Department of Justice (DOJ), the FBI is implementing several programs to improve the capacity of law enforcement in Central America to carry out investigations and share

intelligence on gang suspects. The FBI also focuses on developing and protecting witnesses who will testify in gang cases. The Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training (OPDAT) has provided training on prosecuting gang-related cases to judicial officials in the region. The deployment of a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) regional adviser to San Salvador is enabling ATF to support transnational gang investigations involving U.S.-origin firearms. FBI, OPDAT, and ATF programs are supported by CARSI or other State Department funding and are carried out in collaboration with INL. The programs include the following:

- **Central American Fingerprinting Exchange (CAFÉ):** A criminal file and fingerprint retrieval initiative that has incorporated thousands of fingerprints of gang members from Mexico, El Salvador, Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala into the FBI's Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System since 2006. The data are accessible to Central American police officials.
- **Transnational Anti-Gang (TAG) Units:** A program that began in El Salvador in October 2007 involving the creation of vetted police units that work with FBI agents stationed in San Salvador to investigate gang-related cases that have a nexus with the United States. TAG activities have been expanded into Guatemala and Honduras and have contributed to successful indictments of MS-13 members in major cities across the United States.
- **Central American Law Enforcement Exchange (CALEE):** A joint FBI-INL program that brings law-enforcement officials from Central America together with their counterparts from several large U.S. cities to share information and intelligence.

Department of Homeland Security

Since 2005, ICE's Operation Community Shield has led to the arrest of more than 32,200 gang members in the United States, including thousands of MS-13 and 18th Street gang members. In addition to Operation Community Shield, ICE formed an anti-gang task force in Honduras to gather intelligence to support gang investigations in Honduras and the United States. ICE special agents are also based at other U.S. embassies in the region, including in Guatemala and El Salvador. ICE supports Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIUs) in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Panama. The TCIUs focus on transnational investigations and border crimes, some of which have a nexus with gangs. As previously mentioned, the State Department and DHS signed an agreement in 2014 to expand the Criminal History Information Sharing (CHIS) program, which has been used to share information on criminal deportees with Mexican law-enforcement officials, to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

U.S. Treasury Department

On October 11, 2012, the Treasury Department designated the MS-13 as a significant TCO whose assets will be targeted for economic sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13581.⁷⁴ Issued in July 2011 as part of the Obama Administration's National Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime, E.O. 13581 enables the Treasury Department to block the assets of members

⁷⁴ The criteria established for declaring a transnational criminal organization (TCO) pursuant to Executive Order 13581 are available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/07/25/executive-order-blocking-property-transnational-criminal-organizations>. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Latin American Criminal Organization," press release, October 11, 2012.

and associates of designated criminal organizations and prohibit U.S. citizens from engaging in transactions with these individuals.⁷⁵ The Treasury Department worked with ICE to build evidence to support the designation of the MS-13 based on the gang's involvement in "drug trafficking, kidnapping, human smuggling, sex trafficking, murder," and other serious criminal offenses that threaten U.S. and Central American citizens. As of July 2016, eight individuals appear to have been designated as subject to U.S. sanctions.

Although evidence suggests that some MS-13 cliques collaborate with groups based in El Salvador, some analysts maintain that transnational collaboration is not the norm for the MS-13.⁷⁶ Salvadoran officials seemed surprised by the designation, with then-president Funes asserting that U.S. officials may be "overestimating the economic risk or financial risk resulting from the criminal actions of the MS."⁷⁷ OFAC officials have confirmed that the amount of money transferred out of the United States from MS-13 gang members or their families or affiliates is very limited.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, U.S. law enforcement is working with special police and prosecutors to investigate some of the designated MS-13 leadership for money-laundering offenses committed under Salvadoran law.

Possible Questions for Oversight

- **Evolving Gang Threat.** To what degree are the gangs in Central America becoming more organized and sophisticated? Are their concerns primarily local or transnational? What types of ties do these gangs have with other criminal organizations based in Central America and with Mexican TCOs? To what extent are cliques in the region communicating with groups in the United States?
- **U.S. Strategy.** Nine years after the adoption of an interagency strategy to combat the gangs, what have been the results of U.S. efforts? How is the success or failure of the strategy being measured? How are domestic and international efforts in support of the strategy being coordinated?
- **CARSI.** Analysts have criticized CARSI for lacking a comprehensive strategy and rigorous monitoring and evaluation. To what extent, if at all, does CARSI have a guiding strategy behind its programs? How has that strategy evolved over time? How are the successes or gaps in the implementation of that strategy being measured and adjusted?
- **Leveraging U.S. Assistance.** To what extent are U.S. anti-gang efforts being coordinated with those of other donors? Has the private sector stepped forward to complement any donor-led initiatives? Have any recipient countries been able to take over responsibility for programs that began with U.S. funding? How effective are regional anti-gang efforts?
- **New Tools.** To what extent are countries in the region using new tools—such as asset forfeiture and wiretapping—to go after the gangs? How has the Treasury designation of MS-13 as a TCO affected U.S. and Salvadoran efforts against that gang?

⁷⁵ The first four criminal organizations that received TCO designations were the Brother's Circle, the Camorra, Los Zetas, and the Yakuza. See The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Executive Order 13581—Blocking Property of Transnational Criminal Organizations," July 25, 2011.

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Ramsey, "Tracking El Salvador's Mara Salvatrucha in Washington, DC," *Insight Crime*, October 12, 2012.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Ramsey, "El Salvador President: US 'Overestimating' MS-13," *Insight Crime*, October 11, 2012.

⁷⁸ Phone interview with officials from the Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Asset Control, July 5, 2016.

- **Gangs as Terrorist Groups.** What are the implications of the government of El Salvador designating gangs as terrorists?

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