

Gangs in central america



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Gang activity has transcended the borders of Central America, Mexico and North America. Especially in Central America and Mexico, gang activity poses a threat to national security. A multi-national plan to attack the growing gang network is needed. In this research project I plan to: (1) Analyze roots causes, (2) Examine the transnational and regional nature of gangs in Central America and Mexico and (3) Evaluate policies and programs aimed to decrease gang activity in Central America, Mexico and the United States.

The root causes for gangs The gang phenomenon is of a cyclical and transnational nature which is a result of a multitude of contributing factors as shown in The cycle begins with limited access to education and job opportunities that forces youth into gangs in order to maintain a decent standard of living through criminal activities. In addition, being part of a gang brings youth a sense of belonging that they generally do not get from their families and community.

The cycle continues as gangs members have easy access to drugs and firearms that allows them to maintain their criminal activities, an inefficient United States deportation system that sends gang members to their original country that already have overpopulated prisons, and an overwhelmed ineffective justice systems on Central America and Mexico that allows gang members to get in an out of prison without proper rehabilitation. 1] An article in the New York times summarizes the latter issue of gangs members coming back after being deported: " Part of the reason is that after deportation without federal prosecution, gang members are generally not subject to penalties in the countries to which they are expelled, officials say. "They get a chance to hang out in another country for a while, and then come right

back," often having recruited new members, Mr. Hearnberger said. "[2]

Examine the transnational and regional aspects of gangs in Central America

Gang members and gang networks are not homogenous in Central America and Mexico.

The two main gangs operating in Central America, Mexico and the United States are "18th Street Gang" (also known as M-18) and their main rival "Mara Salvatrucha" (also known as MS-13). However, gangs tend to share a common development pattern:[3] 1) First Generation of Gangs: The gangs begin as an organization that provides "protection" to its members. 2) Second Generation of Gangs: As the gang develops it shifts to drug trafficking, and smuggling people, body parts, armaments, and drugs.

Basically, these gangs act as mercenaries for larger and better organized criminal organizations such as drug cartels. 3) Third Generation of Gangs: Finally, the gangs proceed to expand their geographical and commercial territory as they support the long established transnational criminal organizations. Gang expansion brings more violence and more regional instability and insecurity. Gangs challenge national security of Central American and Mexico in at least four ways:[4] (1) By overwhelming the police and legal system through numbers, gangs limit the government capacity to maintain order. 2) Gangs act as alternative governments in ungoverned areas of each country. (3) Gangs dominate the informal economic sector through the establishment of small businesses that compete with legitimate business. Gangs establish these business using violence and coercion of government authorities. (4) They infiltrate nongovernmental organizations and police to further their goals. Ultimately,

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the gangs contribute to the process of state failure in which a state cannot control its national territory or the people in it.

Basically, it is a game in which the gangs along with transnational criminal organizations are the winners, and the rest of society loses. Furthermore, the longer the failed state persists, the more gangs and their regional spillover effects endanger regional security. The regional spillover of gang influence can be seen from Central American and Mexico to the United States. The U. S. Congress has acknowledged that some gangs in Latin America have damaging effects on national security such as increasing domestic crime levels and facilitating drug trafficking. 5] Evaluate policies and programs oriented to decrease gang activity in Central America, Mexico and the United States As for now, the programs oriented to solve the gang phenomenon across Central America, Mexico and the United States have been disjointed and attacked by each country individually; thus, the programs have fallen short for failing to recognize the transnational nature of gang activities. The following results show each country's agenda current agenda concerning gang containment: " El Salvador has a serious problem with international gangs, a harsh anti-gang law, and an emphasis on a law enforcement approach.

It has modestly applied NGO and government prevention and intervention approaches. • Honduras has a serious problem with international gangs, and has a harsh anti-gang legislation. Due to its poor economic condition, Honduras has limited funds for the application of prevention and intervention approaches. • Mexico has a largely unacknowledged problem with international and local gangs, and no anti-gang laws. Recently, Mexico has

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emphasized in law enforcement, and has applied some government prevention and intervention approaches to the gang problem. Guatemala has a localized gang problem but a limited international gang presence. Guatemala is considering anti-gang law, and is focusing primarily on law enforcement with some application of prevention and intervention approaches. • Nicaragua has a minor, largely localized gang problem with no international gangs. In Nicaragua anti-gang law were considered but not adopted; Rather, Nicaragua emphasizes on prevention and intervention approaches integrated with law enforcement. [6] • United States has gang presence in the ghettos in LA and other US cities.

The approach United States Congress has taken to deal with gang members since 2007 comprises five areas: diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity enhancement, and prevention. [7] However, the repatriation policy has not been efficient as deported gangs member often manage to make their way back. [8] Recently, United States has taken an even more active role in combating the gang phenomenon through The Merida Incentive. One of the goals of The Merida Incentive is to financially support Mexico and Central America to help combat the gangs in Central America and Mexico.

Disbursement of funding under Merida began in late 2008, and is initially foreseen as a three-year package. [9] The following table shows the Merida Incentives funding: [10] [pic] In addition, some of the regional efforts that support anti gang enforcement: 1) Organization of American States (OAS). For the last three years, the OAS has held conferences with the countries affected with the gang phenomena to promote inter-American cooperation in dealing with gangs.) Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence:

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The IACPV members are the OAS, World Bank, the Pan American health Organization (PAHO), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), USAID, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The IACPV has helped municipalities in Central America with technical and financial assistance to combat the gang problem. 3) Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

The IDB has given significant financial loans to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to promote programs to reduce violence and crime. 4) Regional Security Meetings. There have been regular meetings between Central America, Mexico, and United States to improve ways to coordinate security and information about gang members. 5) Central American Integration System (SICA) Summit. In 2007, the US promised to give Central America \$4 million to help a regional anti gang strategy. At the same time, the Central American states that they would need between \$600 and \$800 million to fund law enforcement to maintain regional security.

Despite recent cooperation, regional initiatives are hindered by the absence of a coherent and comprehensive trans-border security strategy. Each national government, and elements within those governments, has different priorities and approaches to anti-gang policy. Consequently, the gang phenomenon requires a comprehensive, regional strategy within and among the countries of Central America, Mexico and United States that takes in account the following parameters: 1) Law enforcement coupled with prevention and intervention efforts are needed to confront the gang problem.

Law enforcement alone will not work as seen in the failed anti-gang policy, Mano Dura, of President Maduro who solely focused on law enforcement. By focusing only in law enforcement, the anti-gang policy failed to provide sufficient alternatives for struggling youth to avoid falling back into gang membership. [11] 2) Direct engagement of law enforcement agents (either military or police agents) is necessary to effectively contain gang violence. Gang activities should be concentrated on the direct “ hot spots” in each country.

The United States should support and cooperate with the governments of Central America and Mexico. Recently, the US is taking steps on aiding Public Security and Law Enforcement through the Merida Program. In the year 2008, the Merida Plan requested \$12. 6 million to implement the U. S. Strategy for Combating Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico, including support for diplomatic efforts, funding for the electronic travel document (eTD) system to provide biometric and biographic information on CRS-5persons being deported from the United States. In addition, it asked for another \$11. million to provide specialized police training and equipment. (3) Prevention and Rehabilitation programs must be assessed in each country. The latter programs exist in Central America and Mexico; however, they are underfunded and are not able to provide services that will allow gang members to earn a decent living by legal and non-violent means. A model to consider would be anti-gang plan implemented in Nicaragua which worked with the police, government ministries, and private business, to disarm gang members, convince them to be a positive role and find jobs.

The program implemented in 2004 has placed gang members in public work, in factories, and even as security guards. However, the results of this plan would have to be reevaluated with the current United States economic crisis which has increased unemployment rates in Mexico and all Central America.

(4) Accurate information on the number of gang member and their activities is current needed. Currently, information of gangs is based on speculations. However, the Merida Program, sponsored by the US, is working in giving accurate information of gang activity by supporting programs in Mexico and Central America.

The Merida Plan requested the United States Administration for funds to modernize the Mexican immigration agency's database and document verification system. In addition, it requested funds to improve database interconnectivity; and data management for Mexican. In Central America, the Merida Plan proposed in 2008 to spend \$7. 5 million to support the Central American Fingerprinting Exploitation (CAFE) initiative to facilitate information-sharing about violent gang members and other criminals, to improve and to expand sensitive investigation police units do. 5) In addition, programs strengthening the judicial, and criminal justice systems need to be strengthened throughout Central America and Mexico. In Central America and Mexico the structural weaknesses in their judicial, criminal justice, and that contribute to the gang problem. The Merida plan proposed in 2008 fund for improving court management and prosecutorial capacity building; reforming prison management; supporting community policing programs, and providing assets forfeiture capacity training in Central America and

Mexico. (6) Although controversial, consideration should be taken in the proposal of legalizing drugs.

The drugs cartels fuel the development of the gang phenomena. If the drug cartels are categorized as legal, the drugs cartel would probably limit their financial funds to gangs. Conclusion The gang phenomenon that affects Central America and Mexico will not be solved at any point in the future. In fact, the prognosis for many of the Central American countries is actually for worsening of the gang problem as Mexican cartels current violence against government security crackdown and the use of gangs to fight the government spills over the Central American countries.

In addition, intervention and prevention programs will be largely underfunded even with outside assistance due to the current economic downturn in 2009. Nevertheless, through the implementation of law enforcement, prevention and intervention outlined before, it is expected to keep the gang phenomena from blowing out of proportion, prevent gangs from developing to a third generation gangs and prevent countries in the region to plunge into anarchy due to gangs and drug cartels.