

Crime and **Violence** in Central America

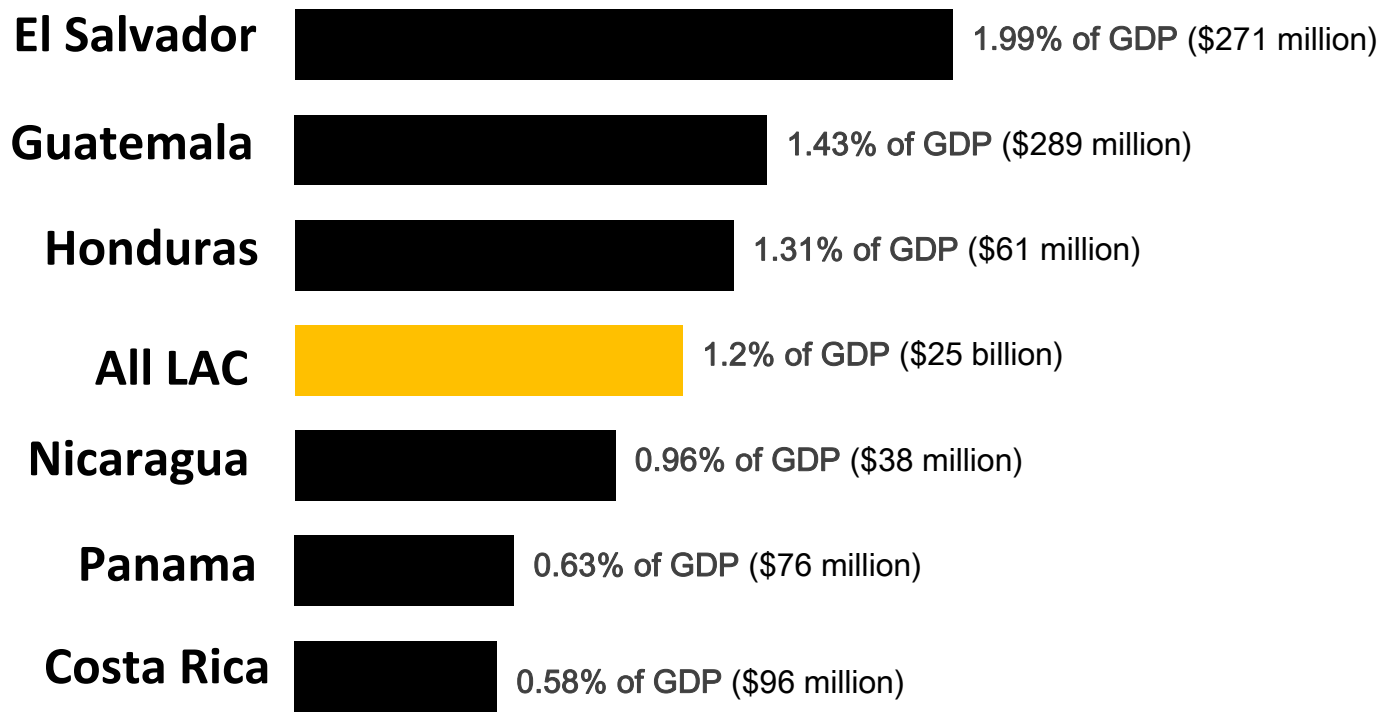
A Development Challenge

Woodrow Wilson Center
April 7, 2011.

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A cost on **welfare** and public and private **expenditures**

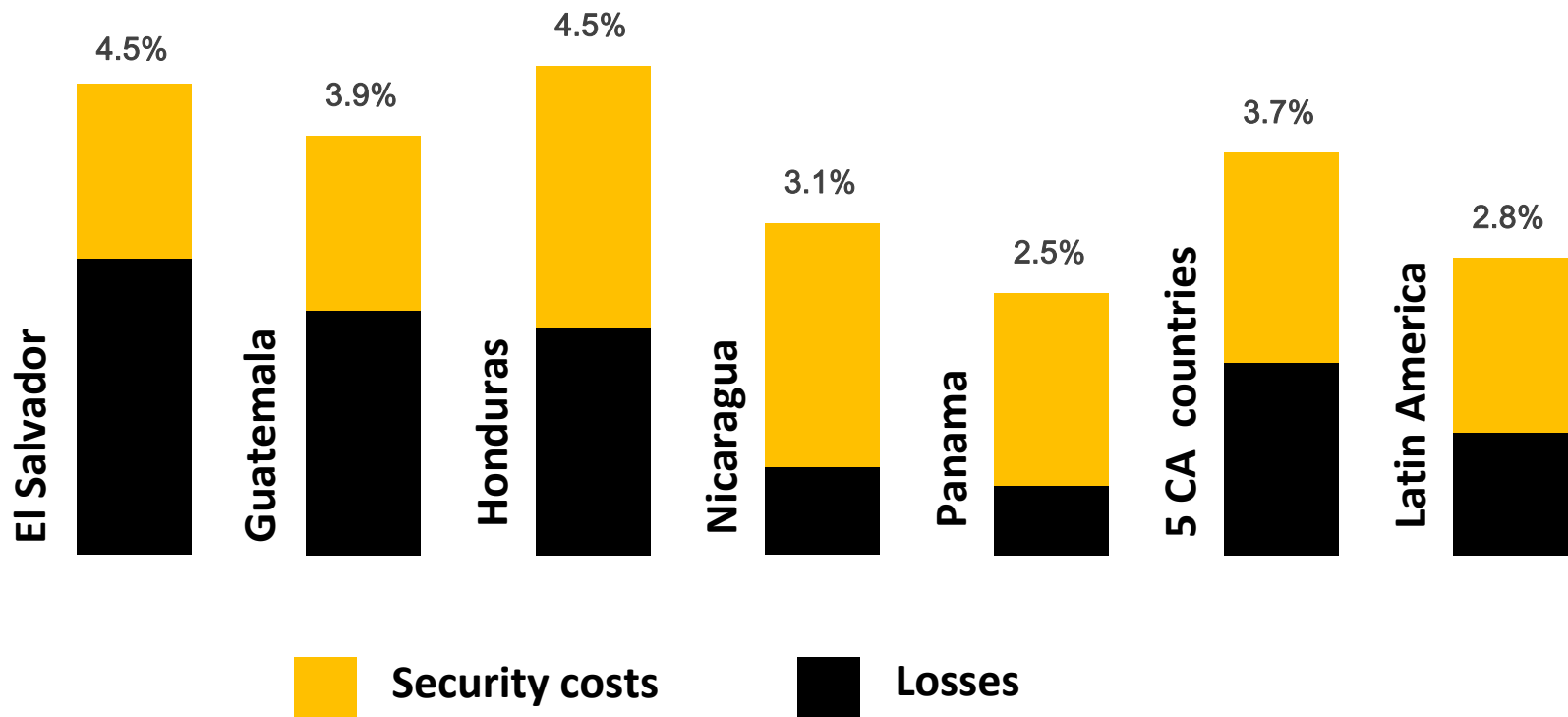
Health costs of crime and violence Value of disability – adjusted life years



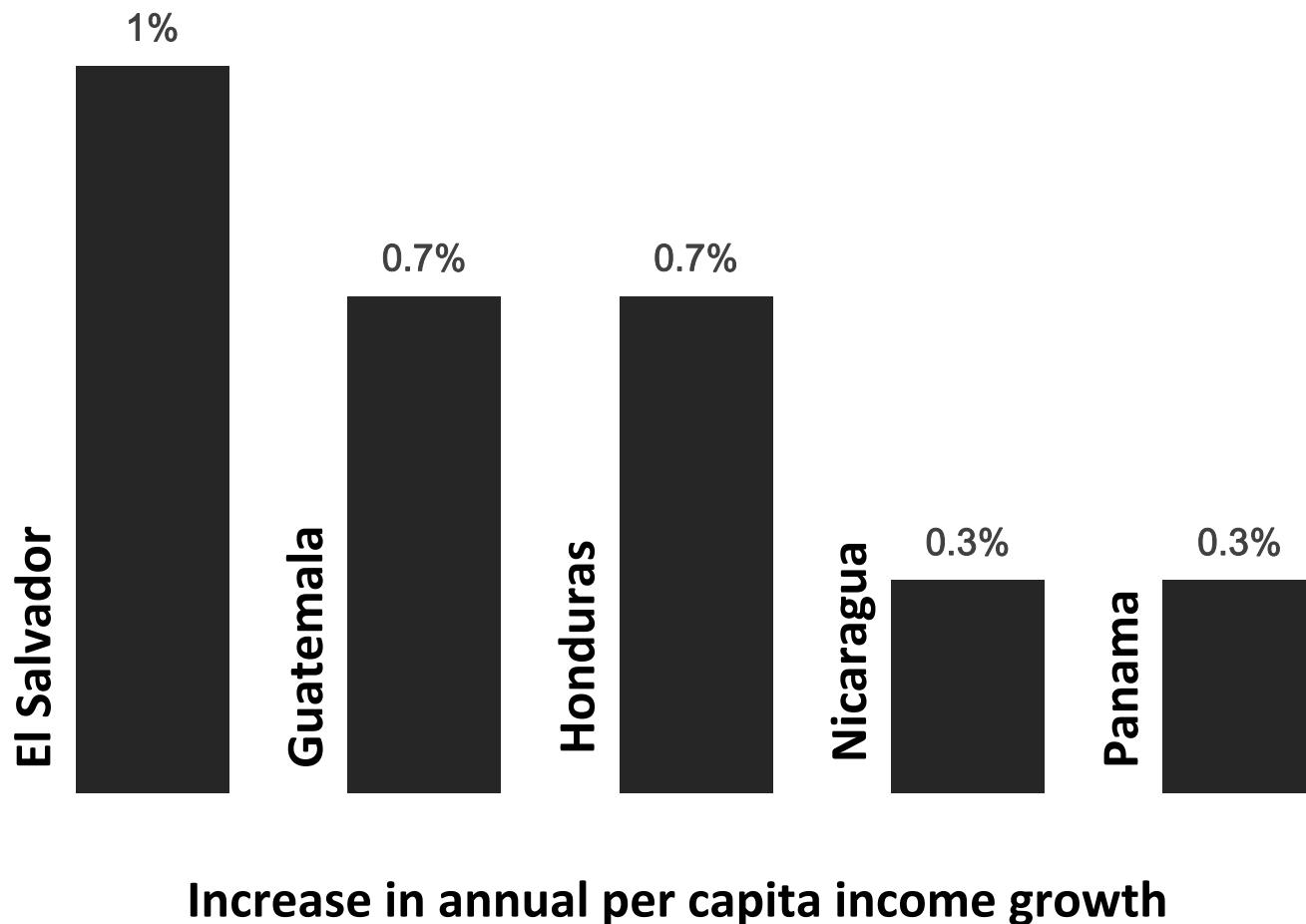
Source: authors' calculations

A cost to doing **business** and the **economy...**

Firms security costs and losses due to crime as percentage of firm sales (2006)



A **10% drop** in the homicide rate would boost per capita annual income growth **by 1%** in countries with highest homicide rates.



A cost to the **legitimacy** of government **institutions**

On average crime victims in Central America:

Have **■** less trust in the criminal justice system.

Are **■** more likely to approve taking the law into their own hands.

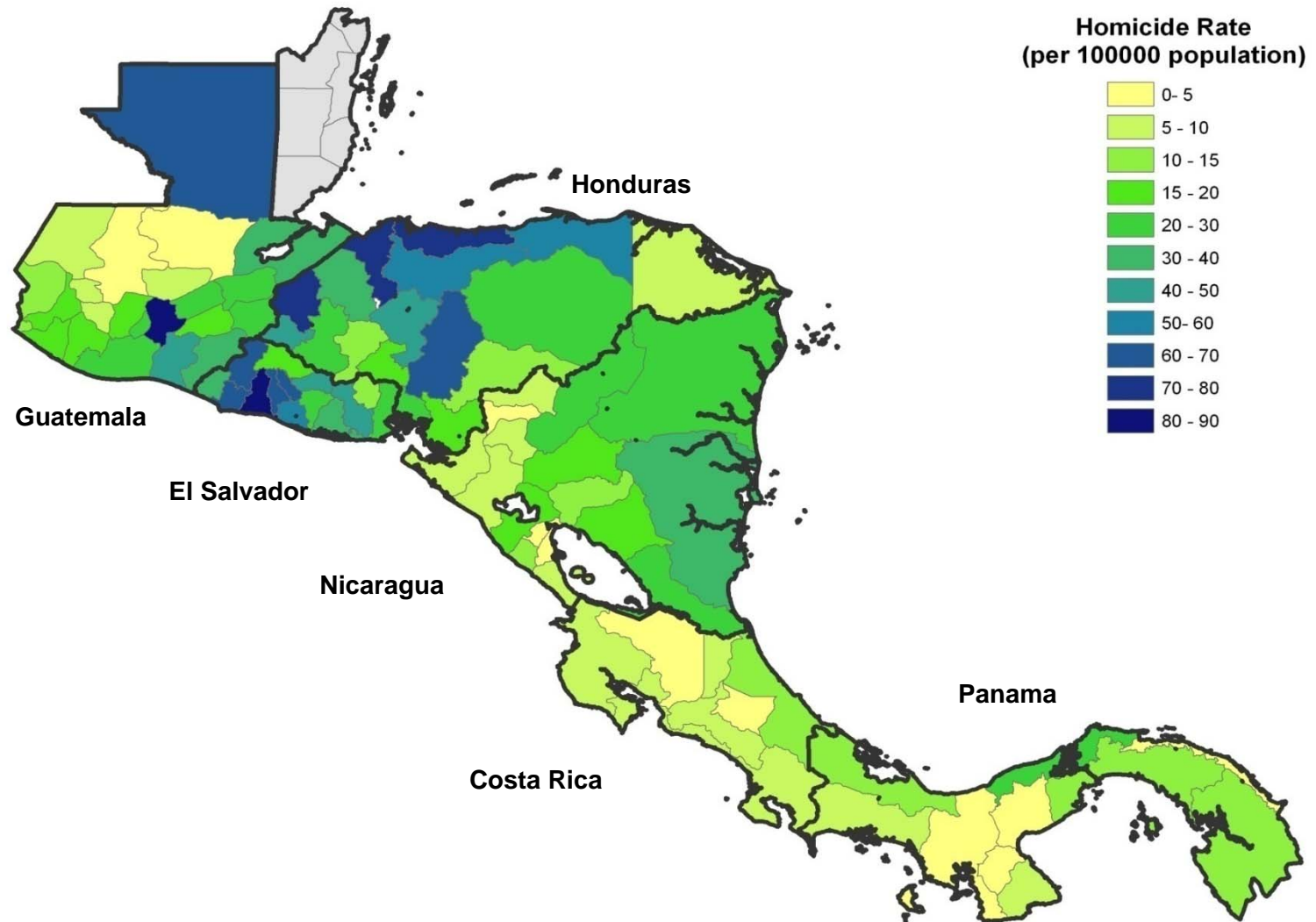
Believe **■** less that the rule of law should always be respected.

53% of Central Americans say a military coup would be justified when crime levels are high.

A growing **epidemic** across the region

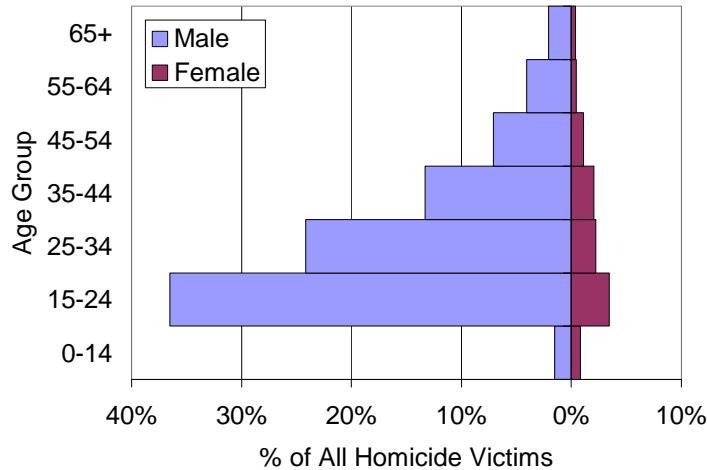
- Homicide rates in CA are **more than 40 times higher** than in countries with similar population.
- Countries of northern triangle are **reaching extreme levels of violence** that can destabilize governance.
- Countries in the south have **significantly lower rates** but there has been a steady rise in recent years.

Great variation **across and within** countries in levels of violence

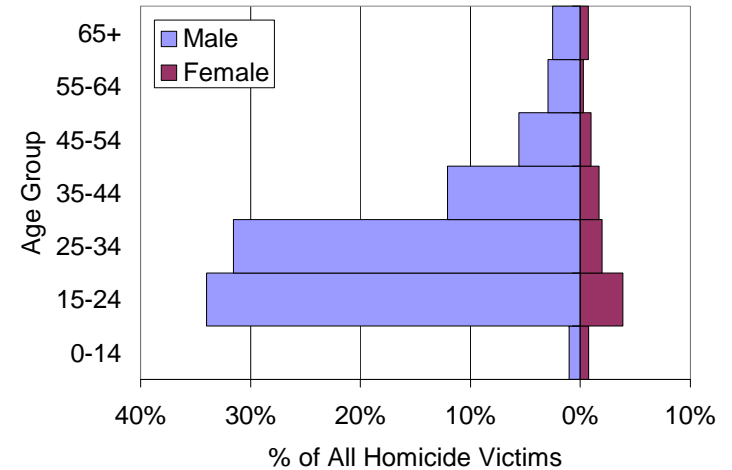


Victims (and perpetrators) of violence are overwhelmingly **young men**

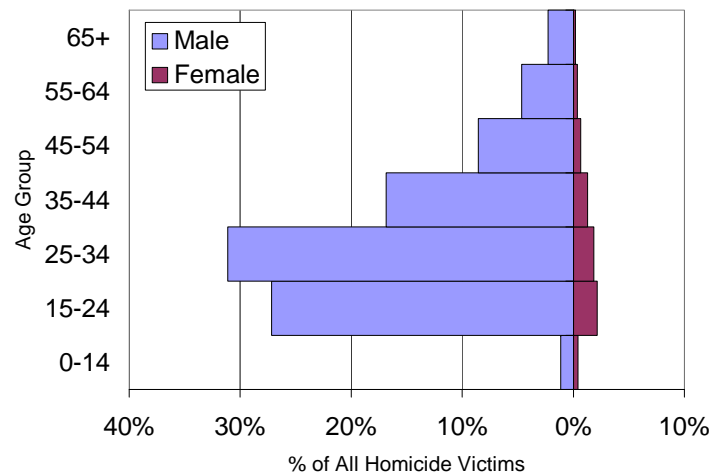
Guatemala



El Salvador



Honduras



Drivers of Crime and **Violence**

Drug Trafficking

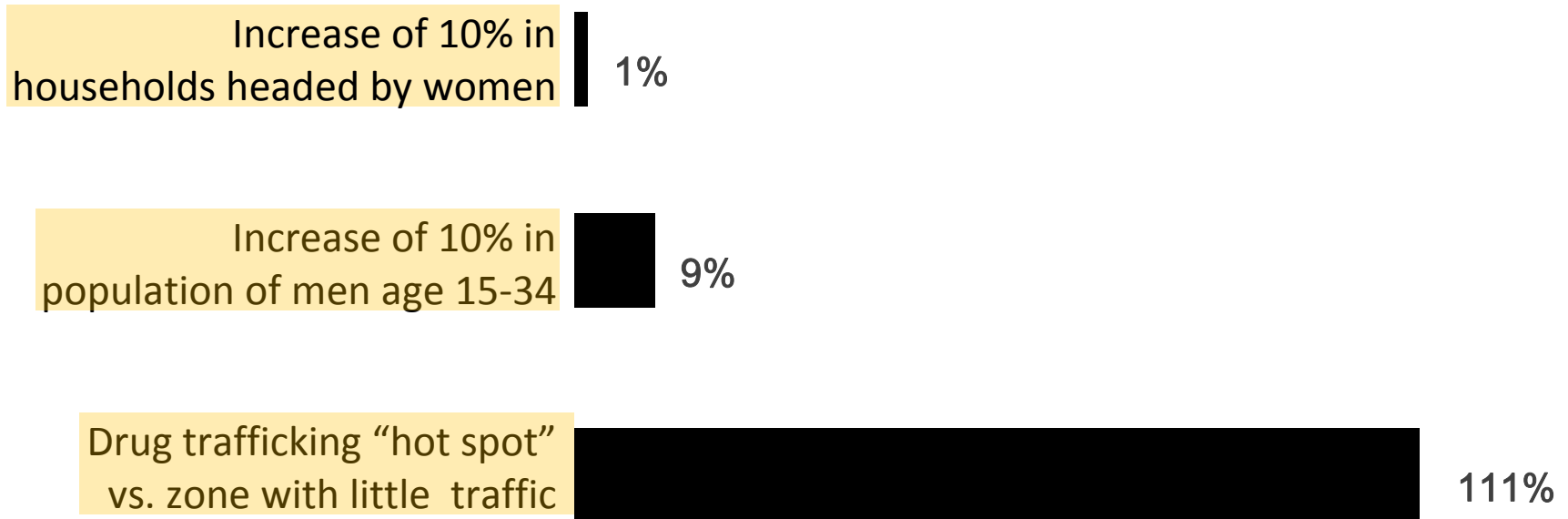
Youth and Gangs

Firearms

Weak Criminal Justice Systems

Drug trafficking and violence

Percentage increase in homicide rate associated with...



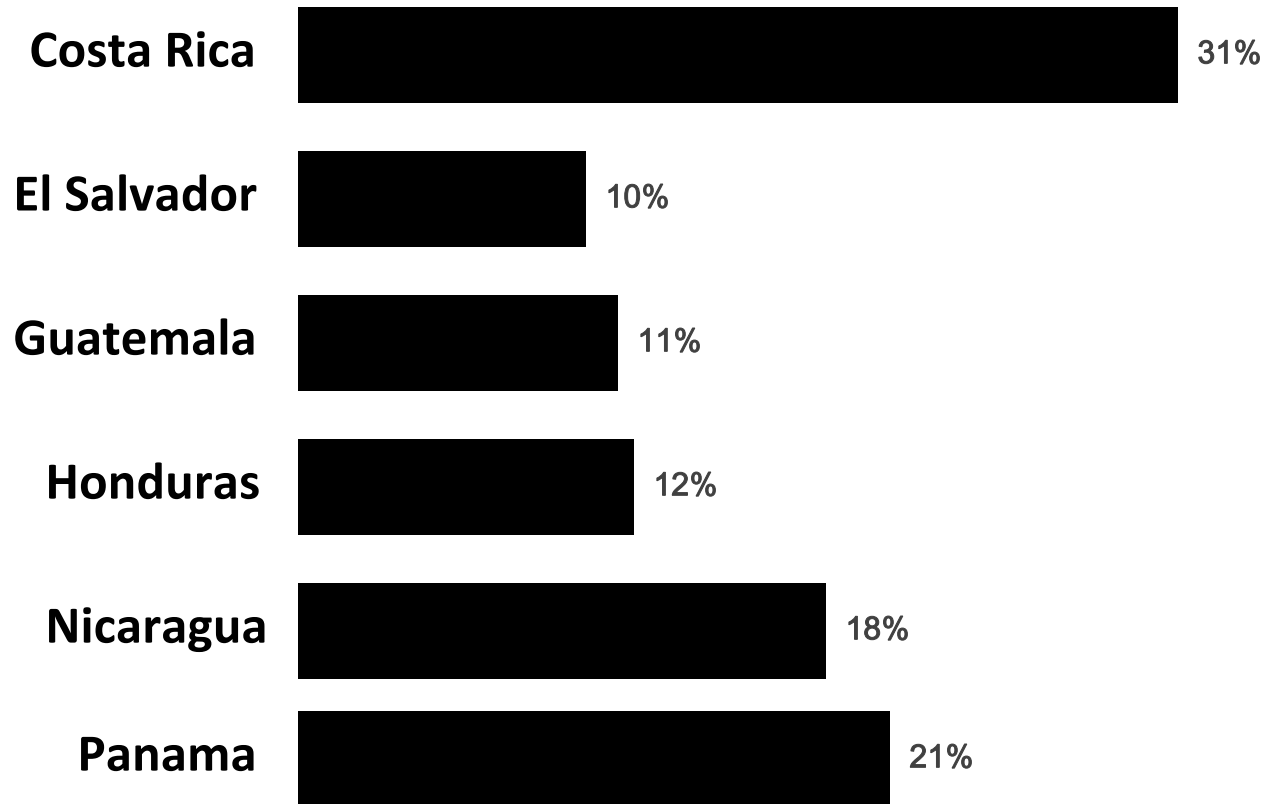
Source: Cuevas and Demombynes (background paper for the report)

Drug trafficking affects violence through **multiple channels**

- Through violence between and within trafficking organizations.
- Via diversion of criminal justice resources or corruption of criminal justice system.
- Via gun diffusion.
- Via enforcement of prohibition.

Drug availability might become a **greater risk factor** of violence

Percentage of adults who have seen someone selling drugs in their neighborhood in the past month (2008)



Youth and Violence

Areas with higher shares of young men in the population have higher homicide rates, controlling for other factors:

- A 10% rise in the population share of 15-34 year olds would lead to an increase in homicide rate of about 9%.

CA presents many of the risk factors and few of the protective factors associated with youth violence at:

- Individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels.

Gangs and Violence

- Though perceived as primary drivers of crime, the more reliable evidence casts some **doubt** about the extent of their impact (perhaps between 15% and 27% of violent crime).
- Of the more than 200,000 people **deported** from the US since 2004, at least a few thousand were gang members, contributing to gang activity. Still, large majority of deportees are not gang members.
- Gangs appear to be increasingly involved in **narcotics trade**.

Estimates of **gang membership** per country

Estimates vary
widely

Arbitrary definitions
of a “gang”, “gang
member” or “gang
crime”

Need for better
empirical
information

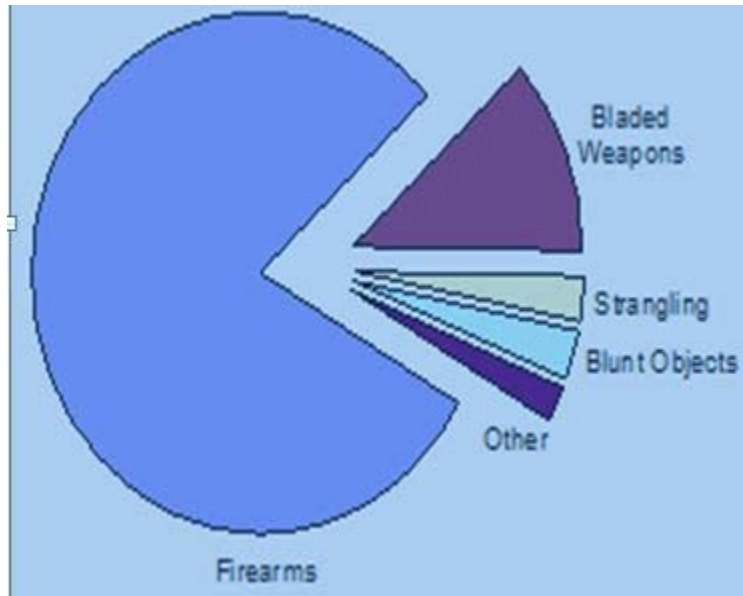
Country	Gang members	Number of Gangs
Honduras	36,000	112
Guatemala	14,000	434
El Salvador	10,500	4
Nicaragua	4,500	268
Costa Rica	2,660	6
Panama	1,385	94
Belize	100	2
Total	69,145	920

Source: Caribbean and Central America Commission of
Police Chiefs

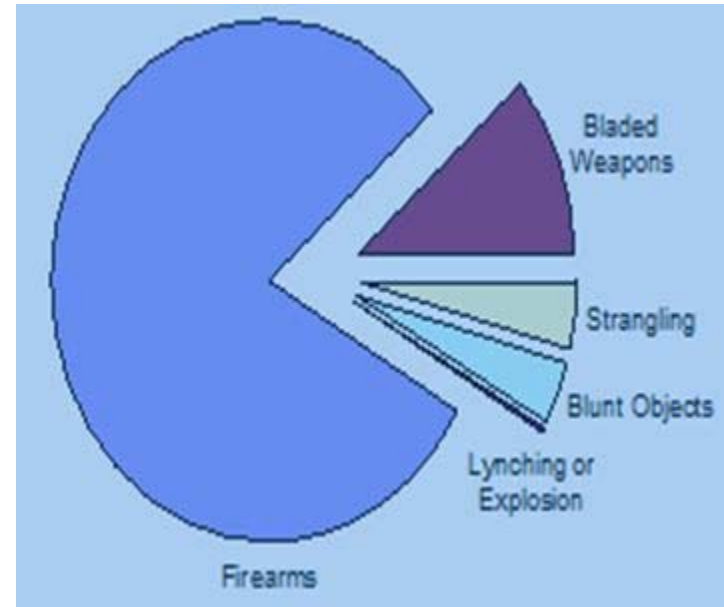
Firearms as a risk factor

Weapons used for homicides

El Salvador

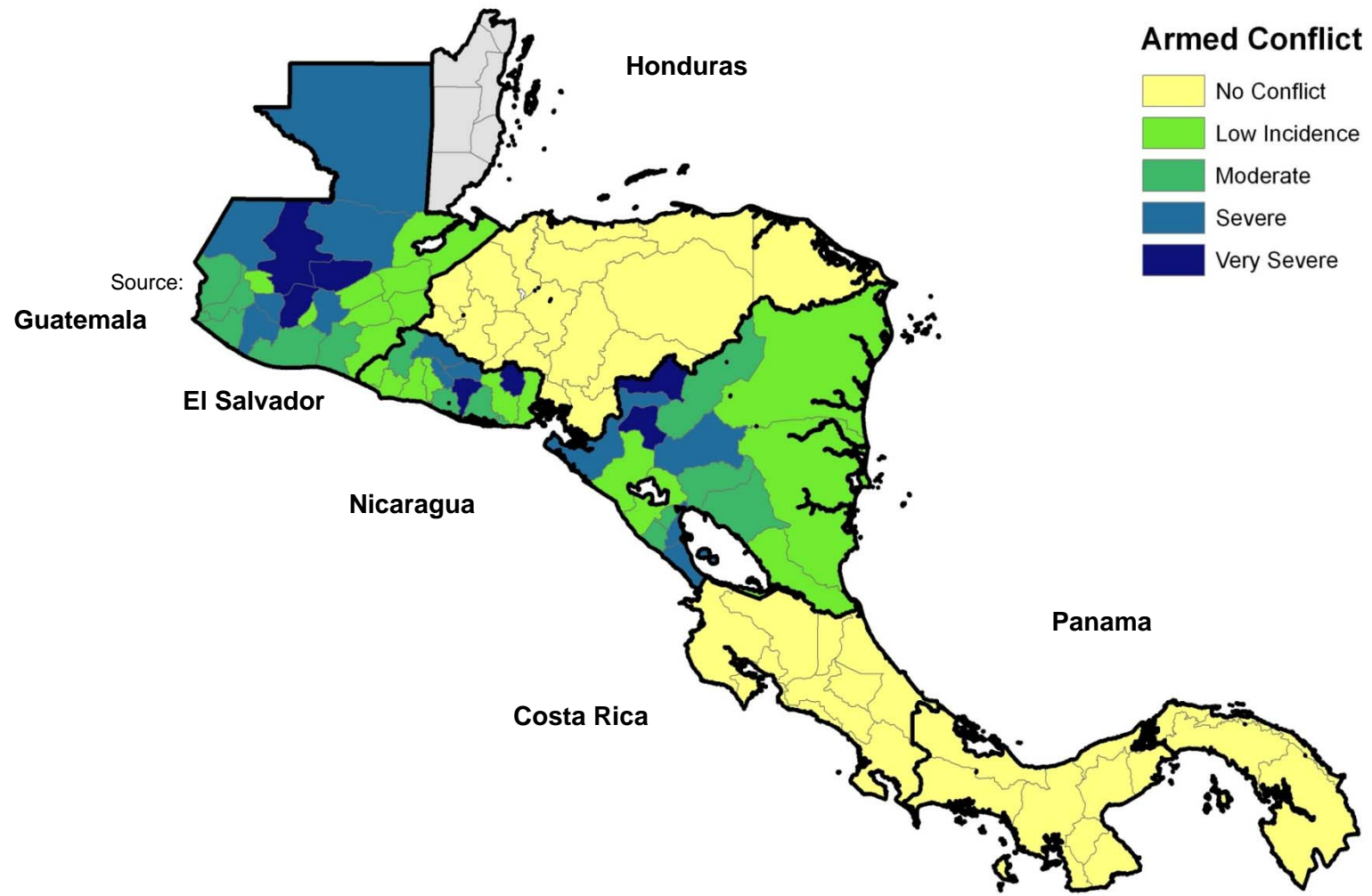


Guatemala

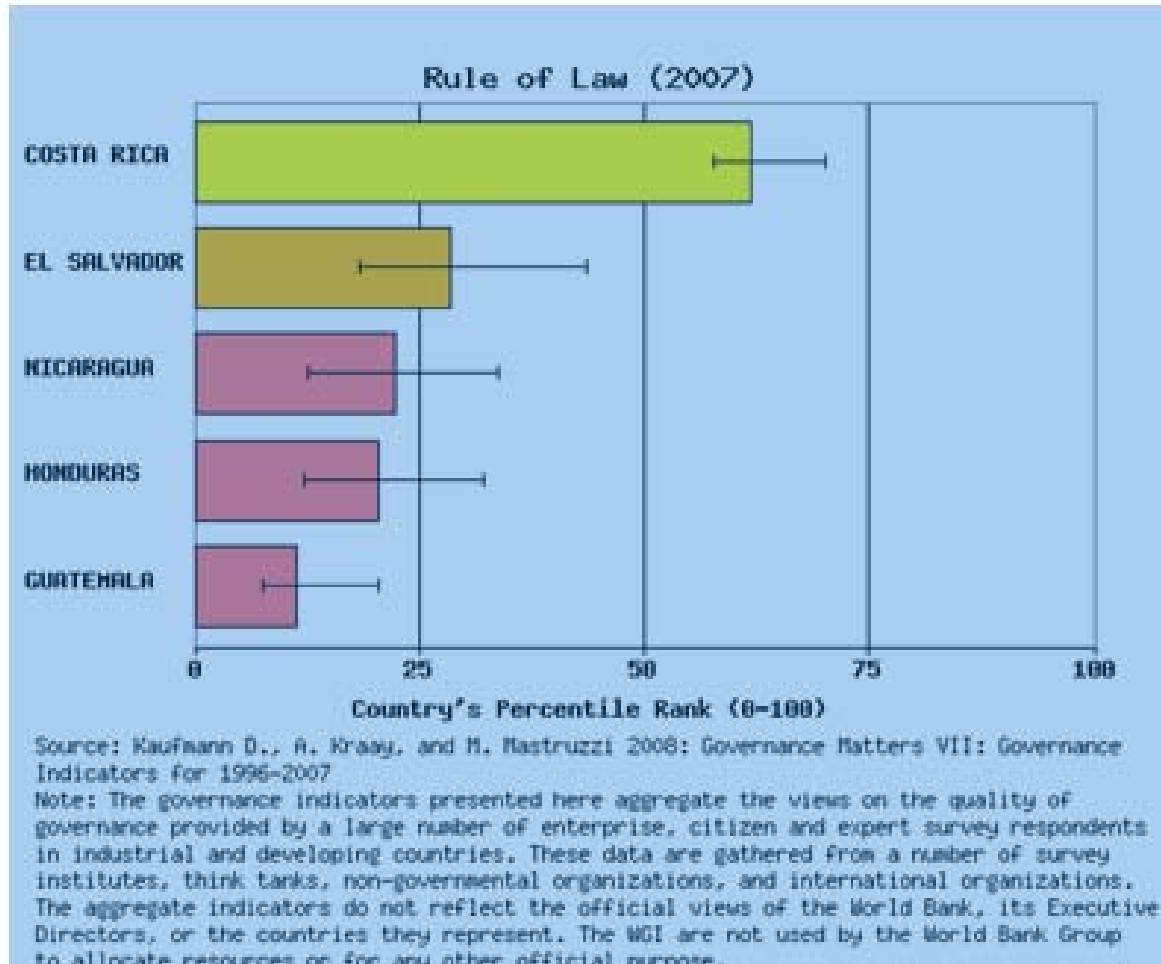


About **4 million** small firearms circulating in Central America, with the great majority of them **illegally owned**.

Varying intensity of armed conflict in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua does **not** explain within-country variation in current violence.



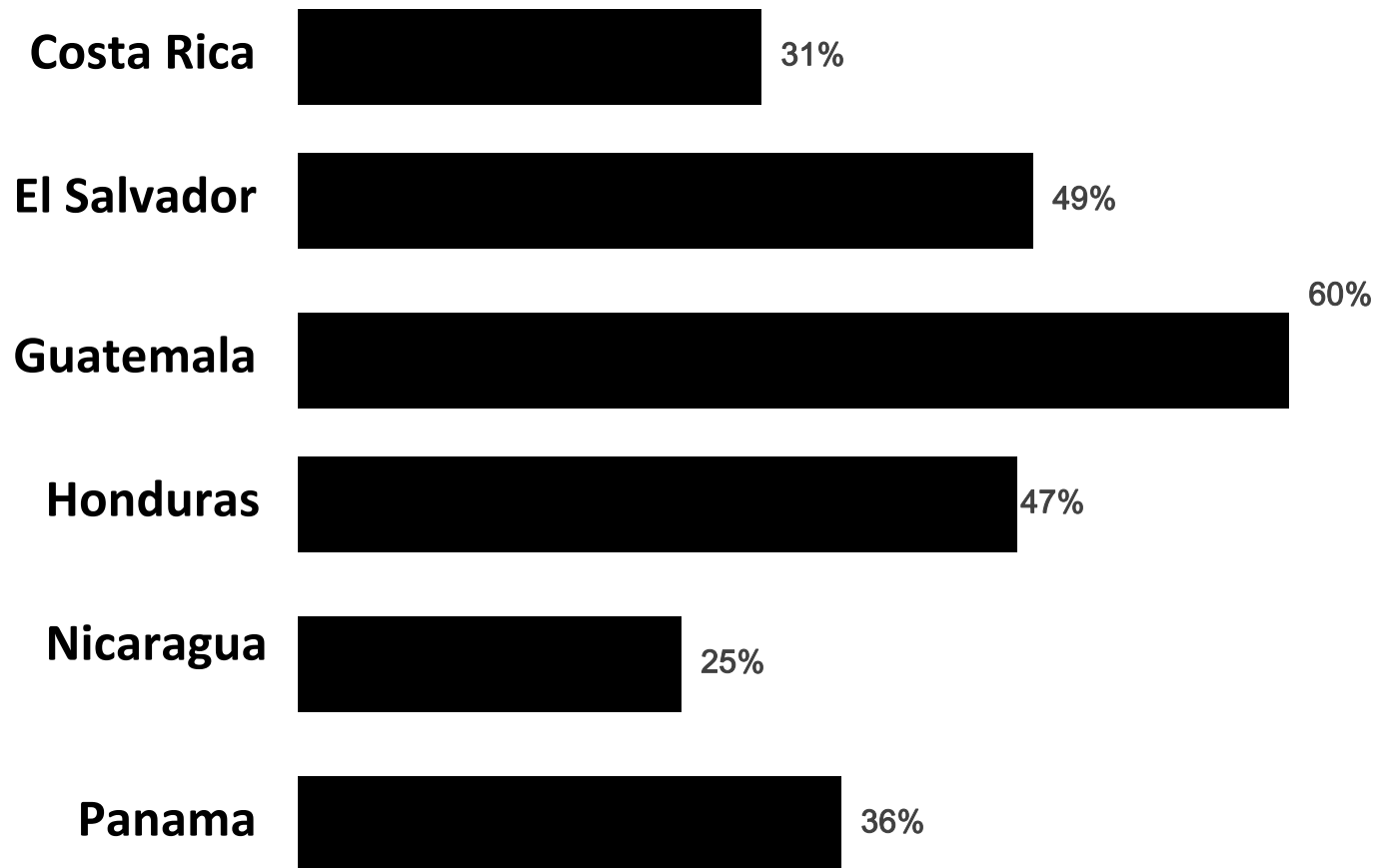
Weak criminal **justice systems**



- The *mano dura* (“iron fist”) approach has proven largely ineffective and possibly counterproductive.

Crime **weakens justice** institutions

Fraction of adults who say local police are **involved in crime:**



Weak Criminal Justice Institutions

“contribute” to Violent Crime

High levels of **impunity**

- In Honduras only 2% of criminal complaints filed in 2006 ended up in conviction and only 8% had formal or alternative resolution.

Large number of **pre-trial detainees** and **prison overcrowding**

- 60% of inmate population in Honduras and Panama is awaiting trial

Lack of reliable **statistics**

- Major obstacle for evidence based policy making.

Policy Recommendations

General guiding principles

- No single **'magic bullet'**
- Prevention and control are complementary
- Combine short term and long term measures
- Policies should be **integrated and cross-sectoral**
- Strengthen, but **avoid over-reliance** on criminal justice systems.
- Importance of accurate and reliable **data and information** to underpin solid diagnosis

Addressing **drug trafficking**

Any radical changes in drug policy must be done within **international framework**

Two most preferable options (not mutually exclusive):

- **Continue current approach**, emphasizing primarily drug interdiction, and devote further resources to enforcement
- Devote resources to addressing **domestic drug use** via a public health and harm reduction approach

Preventing **youth violence** and gangs

- Reallocate resources away from ineffective programs
- Implement **evidence-based** policies and programs
- Implement programs at national, municipal, and community **levels**
- Target societal, community, relationship, and individual **risk factors**

Firearms control

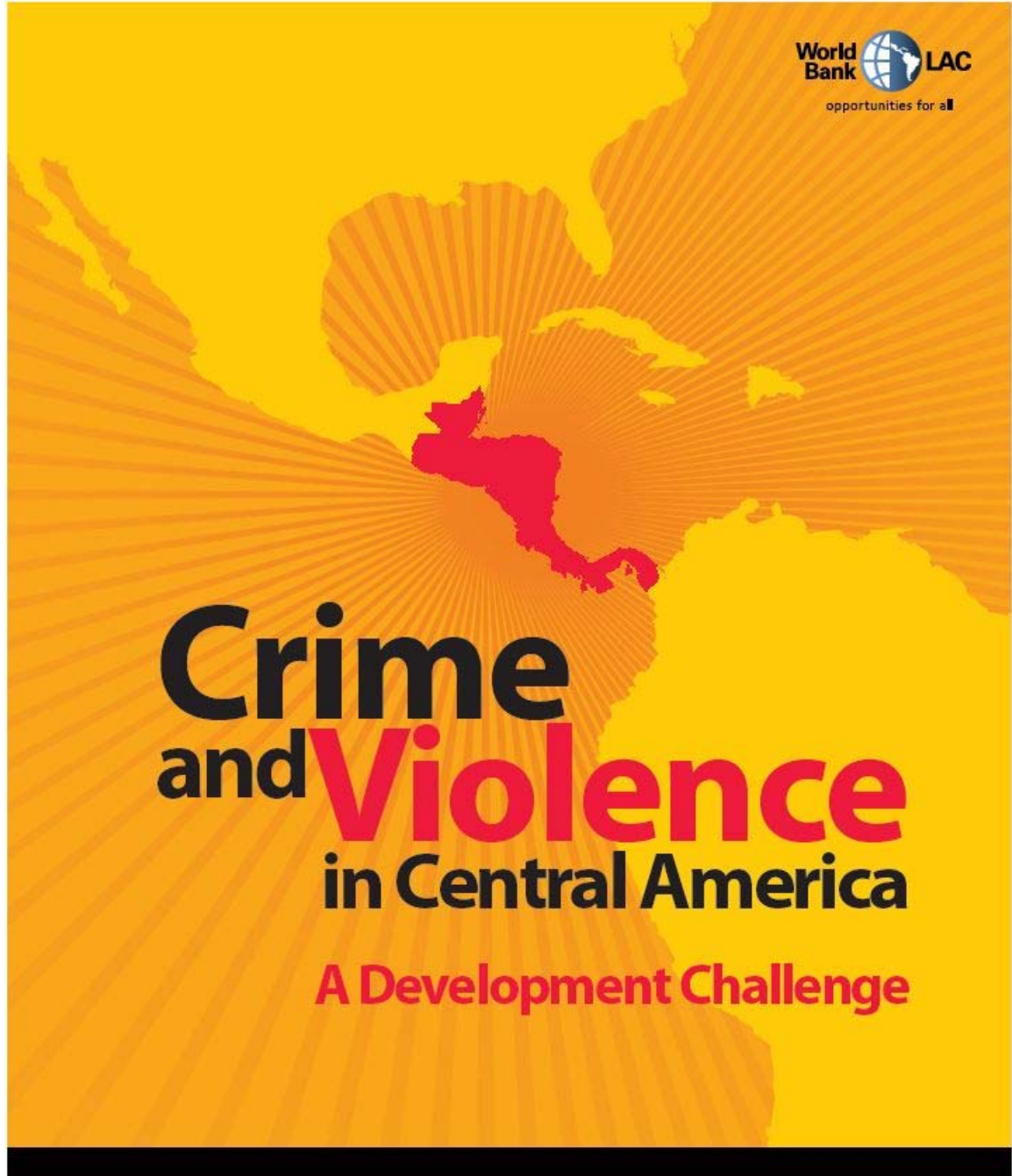
- **Enforce legislation** combined with supply-side measures
- Coordinated national, state, and local **data collection system** for tracking firearms-related injuries and deaths
- **Awareness** campaigns for firearms legislation
- Training for **police**/other justice institutions
- Need for international efforts to stem the flow of **contraband** weapons.

Criminal justice system

- Ensure strong accountability to citizens
 - Improve inter-institutional coordination and information-sharing mechanisms
- Institute performance-based management tools
- Ensure pre-trial detention and arrests meets national and international standards
- Strengthen coordination mechanisms with Financial Intelligence Units and other accountability offices
- Increase access to justice for vulnerable groups

The way **forward**...

- Citizen security is a **development issue** that should be mainstreamed across sectors
- We know enough to **make choices** about crime control and prevention.
- Need to conduct serious **program evaluations** to find out what works and does not work in Central America.



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