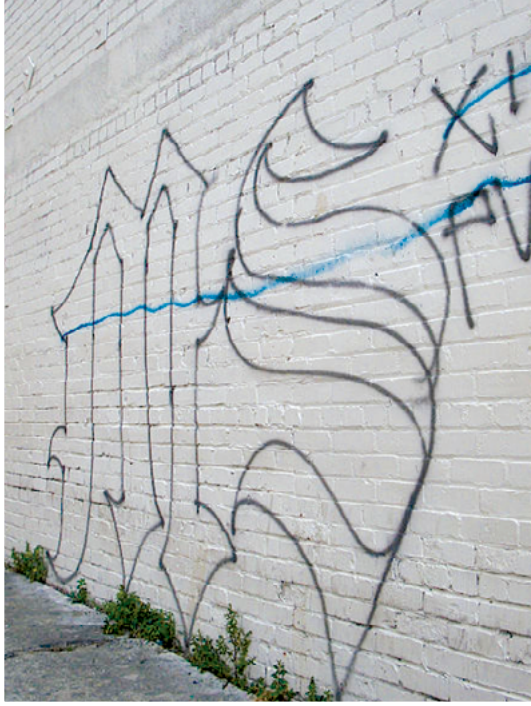

Policy Options for Future United States Security Assistance in Central America

from *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping,Hurting, and Can be Improved*

Eric L. Olson
December 2014

Faced with record levels of violence due, in large part, to elevated homicides rates caused by drug markets, youth gangs, kidnapping, extortions, sexual and domestic violence, the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras face the urgent need to adopt policies that will effectively reduce crime and violence, and enable them to develop into the thriving democracies of their aspirations. While each of these nations must lead the way to confronting the multiple causes of the violence afflicting their country, the United States also has both a strategic and humanitarian interest in addressing these problems. Failure to help address these challenges has already resulted in a regional crisis, growing pressures on Mexico, and a significant humanitarian crisis at the United States-Mexico border. Ignoring the security challenges in the Northern Triangle will simply exacerbate an already dramatic situation which could easily turn into a far greater crisis of un-governability and regime collapse that would pale in comparison with the current situation.

The fundamental question is whether the Northern Triangle countries are able to deal with these problems on their own or whether it will require significant and sustained support—financial, technical, and strategic—from the international community and especially the United States.

Photos (left to right): After school program in Honduras, courtesy of Honduran Youth Alliance/Alianza Joven Honduras; U.S. Border Patrol Agent training Guatemalan Police, by Miguel Negronvia defenseimagery.mil; Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, by Flickr user Walking on Tracks

The security crises all three countries are facing are the result of both external and internal threat. The external threats posed by trafficking organizations have become more serious in recent years as the international drug trade has shifted. Nevertheless, the drug trade alone does not explain the kinds of problems the region is experiencing. Historically week institutions such as police and justice systems, and week regulatory capacity have been exploited by criminal groups—both domestic and international—to further cripple the state and, at times, render it complicit in the crime and violence afflicting their people. A policy of aggressive deportation of criminals by the United States has further complicated the security landscape because receiving countries where poorly prepared to deal with the sudden return of thousands of young people with no real roots in their society and with a history of gang activity. It was easy for them to duplicate these criminal relationships in unfamiliar countries poorly equipped to respond.

Furthermore, the easy access to firearms from stockpiles left over from 1980s civil conflicts, and the abundance of firearms imported or smuggled into the Northern Triangle from the United States, Mexico, and Europe greatly exacerbates the level of violence and rates of mortality.

Finally, the steady and strong demand for illegal products—not just drugs, but exotic woods, precious metals and gems, petroleum products, and human labor (whether smuggled or trafficked) places the security crisis in the Northern Triangle in the broader context of illegal economies driven more by supply and demand than simply criminal individuals that need to be arrested and prosecuted. Together these factors provide convincing evidence that a multinational and multidimensional approach is needed to address Central America's security crisis, one that requires determined engagement by the nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras themselves but cannot be successfully waged alone and in isolation.

But agreeing to work together, either multilaterally or bilaterally, using various approaches and entry points to address the challenges outlined above does not guarantee success. The United States and its Central American partners have been working on many of these same problems for years—in some instances since the mid-1980s, spending hundreds of millions with little to show for it. There are some glimmers of hope, of course, but these are mostly isolated, often fading quickly when a new government is elected and the commitment to a sustainable state policy is non-existent.

As we've tried to demonstrate in this report, the explanations for the lack of progress are multiple. Key factors highlighted include a misguided analysis of the factors contributing to the countries violence—focusing too narrowly on international drug trafficking and traditional eradication and interdiction programs that miss the broader context of crime and violence in the region; the absence of an overall

strategy to address this broader violence landscape; failure to prioritize among policy options; lack of a strong U.S. and host country commitment to governance reform and implementing the rule of law even-handedly that could adversely affect the privileges of economic and political elites; the lack of adequate transparency, dialogue with civil society, and, most importantly, the lack of adequate impact evaluations that would help modify—or reaffirm—the strategy based on empirical evidence.

Sadly, the human face of the multiple security challenges and policy shortcomings turns out to be the thousands of young children that have fled the Northern Triangle. The influx of nearly 70,000 unaccompanied alien children (UACs) at the U.S.-Mexico border since January 2014 is the latest tragic manifestation that current strategies and policies are not working. These children are fleeing primarily because of conditions in their neighborhoods and communities, and the inability of their governments to guarantee their safety. While drugs—especially the retail market—is a factor, it is one among many and their flight can hardly be reduced to a discussion about international drug trafficking groups in Colombia and/or Mexico. In this context, it is appropriate to ask what policy approaches are needed to avoid simply repeating the well-intentioned but largely ineffective policies of the past. The following include a number of steps and proposals the U.S. government should seek to advance and a number it should seek to avoid as its wrestles with these issues.

Lessons from the Past for U.S. Security Policy in Central America

Given the opportunities, challenges, and risks of the current security landscape in Central America's Northern Triangle, the United Stated could benefit from an honest review of past experiences in security assistance to avoid past mistakes and expand on the positives. The following are a series of "dos and don'ts" the United States might consider as they move forward.

Counternarcotics efforts should not be the centerpiece of United States security policy in Central America. Past experience in Latin America has shown that a narrow approach on drug eradication and interdiction has enjoyed some short term success while spawning other longer-term problems. Colombia has experienced success in reducing the intensity of the internal armed struggle but limited success in reducing drug trafficking, and where success is evident drug production and trafficking has moved to neighboring countries. In Central America, trans-national drug trafficking is a factor in the region's increased violence but it is one of many historic and contemporary factors, and its relationship to the kinds of community level violence driving the migration of children is indirect and much more complex than often assumed.

International drug traffickers represent a serious challenge in some areas of the Northern Triangle and a focused law enforcement strategy for dealing with them must be developed, but drug policy in Central America—like in the United States—should not be limited to eradication, interdiction and incarceration policies. The problems of growing consumption of illegal substances in Central America should be dealt with differently than trafficking networks. As U.S. Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, Ambassador William Brownfield said at a press briefing in New York, "…whatever our approach and policy may be on legalization, decriminalization, de-penalization (of illegal substances), we all agree to combat and resist the criminal organizations – not those who buy, consume, but those who market and traffic the product for economic gain.[1]

The violence in Central America is predominately related to local criminal markets especially extortion, kidnapping, and local drug markets. Children and families are fleeing because conditions in their local neighborhoods have become so desperate.

The United States should not spend more money without a clear strategy. The United States has a framework for addressing security concerns in Central America called the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). It includes many well intentioned projects, some better than others. But it lacks an overall strategic framework that sets priorities and ensures that programs are complementary rather than working at cross purposes. At present, CARSI is simply a series of initiatives and programs with funding but not an effective strategy. While more resources are needed these should be tied to the articulation of an effective strategy that includes effective coordination and impact evaluations.

Require impact evaluations for all U.S. security assistance programs. While evaluations are often part of U.S. assistance programs these evaluations often measure the wrong thing. They measure inputs – like how many police or prosecutors have been trained—rather than measuring outcomes—like whether an initiative has resulted in some tangible change. Training alone is insufficient to turn the tide against corruption and criminal networks operating within government institutions. Aggressive anti-corruption and prosecution strategies are more immediately important. Traditional counter-narcotics measurements such as drug seizures and arrests are ineffective indicators of success when it comes to reducing crime and violence. Seizures are helpful indicators of where drugs are flowing but they do not provide an indicator of success for overall supply or demand for illegal drugs. Large numbers of arrests do not mean crime and violence will decrease since prisons are often incubator for criminal activity and many youth caught up in mass arrests are introduced to criminal activity while in severely overcrowded and inhuman prisons. Furthermore, mass arrests, severe prison overcrowding, elevated rates of pre-trial

1 "Trends in Global Drug Policy," William R. Brownfield, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. Statement at New York Foreign Press Center, October 9, 2014. http://fpc.state.gov/232813.htm#.VD1Vud9x8L0.twitter

detention are indicators of a dysfunctional justice system incapable of holding criminals accountable.

Security does not depend solely on law enforcement activities. Police and prosecutors have an important role to play but it should be targeted and specific, not broad and generalized. Increasing the size of security forces and better equipping them can be important but building trust between police and community should be a priority. Likewise, increasing police presence and patrols can be reassuring but will not have a lasting impact on crime. Additionally, putting more people in already overcrowded jails is not the answer. A well-coordinated and balanced program that includes both crime suppression and prevention is essential. Neither the United States nor Central America can arrest their way out of this problem.

The Agenda Going Forward: Reduce Violence, Fight Corruption, Build Capacity, and Integrate Economic Opportunity.

The United States already has a program—the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)—to address many of the same issues driving today's migration. The United States has been funding some of these same programs—rule of law promotion, police professionalization, and poverty reduction—in Central America for decades. Why, then, are we still experiencing the kinds of migration and dysfunctional state institutions that existed in the 1980s?

The answer is one of focus and prioritization. There are many good ideas and programs but the focus has been misdirected. To be successful the United States must prioritize its interventions in Central America, focusing like a laser on the following:

Reduce violence, build community resilience. United States efforts must focus on reducing the kinds of community level violence that is driving migration. This means pursuing community oriented programs in policing, crime and violence prevention, and promoting educational and economic opportunities that are attuned to the specific needs of the community. Focusing on local gangs and efforts to end extortions is central to this strategy.

Tie new United States resources to progress in meeting specific mutually agreed upon targets for reducing violence. The Northern Triangle's security challenges are enormous so additional resources are urgently needed. But existing and future U.S. security assistance should be repackaged within a negotiated strategic framework that sets specific targets and actions designed to reduce violence. These actions should include both targeted law enforcement efforts and prevention programs in the most violent communities. A robust and comprehensive impact evaluation process should be part of the endeavor with new resources made available when there is evidence of progress in meeting target outcomes. The agreed upon

outcomes, actions taken, and results of impact evaluations should be made public to increase accountability and forge a partnership with civil society.

Name a high-level coordinator or special envoy for U.S. security programs to ensure that a strategy is fully articulated and, more importantly, successfully carried out. This person should have the capacity to alter course and redirect resources (in consultation with Congress) when impact evaluations suggest programs are not being successful. At times the United States lacks the partners in the region to accomplish its goals. Political and economic elite often lack the political will to carry out difficult reforms, so the high-level coordinator should be senior enough to press for reforms and should have the authority to hold back assistance when the political commitment to implement needed and previously agreed unpon reform is not present.

Increase and expand prevention programs in targeted high crime areas. Evidence is mounting that crime and violence prevention programs can reduce crime and improve community resilience. These programs should be expanded geographically to include more neighborhoods, and the focus expanded beyond at-risk youth to include interventions with criminally active youth. Many experiences and studies in the United States have demonstrated that it is possible to work with gang members and move them toward less criminal, less violent activity.

Fight corruption. Building effective and professional police, prosecutors, and courts in the region is essential if Central American countries are to successfully resist crime on their own with minimal U.S. assistance. But the United States has been engaged in efforts to reform and strengthen these institutions in Central America for years, even decades. These efforts have failed for a variety of reasons including insufficient commitment from the economic and political elites in partner nations to tackle the problems of corruption and accountability. Instead, U.S. programs have focused too narrowly on training, equipment, and infrastructure, not on fighting corruption.

Prioritize anti-corruption efforts by strengthening mechanisms of transparency and accountability, supporting efforts to investigate and hold government officials accountable, and encourage not only vetting of law enforcement forces, but purging and prosecuting those engaged in corruption and criminal activities. Improved crime statistics and analysis, information on prison overcrowding and pre-trial detentions, prosecutions, and disposition of cases are essential to determining if security efforts are being successful. Failure to do so will undermine the public's already low confidence in state institutions and weaken other well-intentioned and well-designed programs.

Empower Civil Society. When corruption is elevated and governments are unwilling to make the tough decisions to hold people accountable, the United States should encourage civil society organizations to play that role and open spaces for policy debate with civil society. Civil society organizations can monitor

government programs and report on progress. The United States should also do more to encourage and nurture independent investigative journalism. Freedoms of expression and access to information are the essential building blocks of democracy so must be a priority in the U.S. strategy.

Make social investments and economic opportunity part of the security strategy. With the exception of El Salvador, which participates in the Partnership for Growth (PFG) program, the CARSI program does not include a social investment and economic development component. There is ample evidence that investments in education (Ingram and Curtis) and job training can have a protective effect on communities and enable them to better resist crime. Additionally, rapid population growth—often the result of rural-urban migration—can destabilize communities and increase the chances of community level violence. The United States should consider increasing the kinds of targeted social investments and economic development programs to both rural and urban communities that will help stabilize those communities and offer new hope for to roughly two million Central American young people who don't work and don't study.