



CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE

How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved

PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

Based on a year-long study of the United States' security assistance program known as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras the Wilson Center's Latin American Program reached the following conclusions:

CARSI does not represent a security strategy but rather a number of programmatic initiatives with laudable goals that operate largely independently of each other. At times, United States supported programs contradict or undermine these goals.

The problems of crime and violence in society are often conflated with the threats of international drug trafficking. Counter-narcotics operations often take precedence when broader institutional reform goals, such as professionalizing the police or justice sector, are unsuccessful or do not enjoy the strong backing of the host government.

By focusing too narrowly on counter-narcotics, the United States and host countries become bogged down in a traditional approach to drug law enforcement that prioritizes arrests over community based approaches to reducing crime and violence.

U.S.-supported specialized law enforcement units, known as vetted units, succeed in creating competent and elite units capable of carrying out sensitive operations but fail to contribute to

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 Negron via defenseimagery.mil; Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, by Flickr user Walking on Tracks

PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

broader law enforcement reform and professionalization. Vetted units tend to become isolated within the broader institutional framework, can create resentment and unnecessary competition within their institution, and, because of their sensitive nature, have been accused of undertaking operations that contradict or undermine other law enforcement priorities.

The long term sustainability of CARSi programs and, thus, its ability to reach its stated goals is in doubt when U.S. priorities are not shared by host countries. Countries are generally enthusiastic recipients of traditional security assistance including equipment, specialized law enforcement training, and participation in coordinated law enforcement operations; but much less so when it comes to implementing broader institutional reforms, undertaking anti-corruption measures, expanding violence prevention programs, and making significant financial contributions of their own.

As violence increases, countries tend to fall back on a more traditional anti-narcotics anti-gang strategy for dealing with crime and violence by relying heavily on increased security force presence in violent neighborhoods, and focusing primarily on arrests, especially leaders of criminal organizations.

Prisons and criminal justice systems are unable to process and adequately dispose of the elevated volume of arrests leading to high rates of impunity (around 95 percent). Serious prison overcrowding ensues due to extensive pre-trial and long-term detention. Criminal justice systems throughout the Northern Triangle are overburdened and breaking down, allowing prisons to become an active part of the criminal enterprise by supplying new recruits for gangs and criminal networks, with criminal organizations operating out of the relative safety of prisons.

CARSi programs have, with a few exceptions, lacked adequate evaluations. Current evaluations tend to focus on measuring inputs—how many police were trained, or how much cocaine was seized—and not on the impact and outcome of the project.

USAID's crime and violence prevention programs are one bright spot for U.S. efforts. USAID has carried out extensive impact evaluations that show a significant improvement in perceptions of crime and violence in neighborhoods where programs are implemented. The evaluations were carried out over three years by the well-respected Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University and included base-line surveys of randomly selected high-violence communities, as well as extensive quantitative and qualitative field work over a three year period.

A primary challenge for USAID, and U.S. policy overall, is how to expand programs where there is clear evidence of success but where host government commitment is not strong. Additionally, current prevention programs are unnecessarily limited to a focus on at-risk youth (primary prevention) and need to include more direct work with criminally active youth (secondary prevention).