



# The Central America Regional Security Initiative in Honduras

Working paper prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Center

Aaron Korthuis<sup>1</sup>  
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## CARSI ASSESSMENT PROJECT:

This “working paper” is part of a yearlong Wilson Center study of the Central America Regional Security Initiative that examines U.S. security assistance in the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The full report including chapters on each country, an in-depth analysis of homicide in the region, an overview of U.S. security policy and strategy, and a series of policy options for policy makers to consider will be published Fall 2014. Any comments or questions for the author or the Wilson Center’s Latin American Program, and requests to cite this work, should be directed to [eric.olson@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:eric.olson@wilsoncenter.org).

## THE PUBLIC SECURITY SITUATION IN HONDURAS

In November 2013, Hondurans headed to the election polls for a second time since the 2009 coup d’état that destabilized the country and left unchecked a problem that the country has long failed to address: violence and organized crime. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) latest homicide report, Honduras continues to struggle with the highest homicide rate in the world.<sup>2</sup> The seriousness of the security situation has provoked travel warnings from the U.S. Department of State and infamy in the international

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank U.S. officials in both the U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and USAID at the Embassy in Tegucigalpa for their openness and willingness to help arrange a close look at CARSI projects in Honduras. Additional thanks is due to the various current and former Honduran government and civil society officials interviewed for this project, whose help and information proved invaluable in understanding CARSI’s work.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014), [http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014\\_GLOBAL\\_HOMICIDE\\_BOOK\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf).

press tied to the violence experienced in Honduran cities and the abuses perpetrated by state security forces.<sup>3</sup> Over the past decade, drug trafficking through the country has surged, making it the “favoured northbound route for cocaine from South America” for many years.<sup>4</sup> Given the country’s historically weak law enforcement institutions, persistent problems with corruption, and poverty, as well as a continued U.S. appetite for cocaine, these problems are hardly a novelty—and present grave problems for the country’s leaders.

Unsurprisingly then, this problem was consistently featured in the leading presidential candidates’ discourse and public debate, and was undoubtedly a major factor in the final outcome. National Party candidate and eventual victor, Juan Orlando Hernández, called for a heavy-handed approach to security that relied on a newly created military police, while LIBRE<sup>5</sup> candidate Xiomara Castro’s voice resounded on public airwaves calling for Honduran soldiers to return to their barracks and their traditional role.

These starkly divergent views stem from a Honduran population tired of years of violence, organized criminal activity, declining security, and increasingly accustomed to the military’s involvement in traditional policing.<sup>6</sup> Alarming, only 27 percent of Hondurans expressed any confidence in the civilian police in August 2013, while 73 percent disagreed with the idea that the military should remain in the barracks (and by extension, presumably refrain from involvement in policing efforts).<sup>7</sup>

Efforts to address burgeoning organized crime and violence and instigate reform of Honduras’ security and justice institutions have consumed the country over the past few years and feature prominently in President Hernández’s plans. Yet, at best, these efforts have produced mixed results, and at worst have resulted in a depressingly stagnant landscape.

The United States, through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), seeks to strengthen and improve Honduran initiatives through law enforcement cooperation, capacity building, and prevention programs. These programs persist amidst Honduras’ difficult political environment and staggering problems, and success remains isolated, although hope remains that reform may finally gain momentum.

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<sup>3</sup> United States Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs, “Honduras Travel Warning,” December 24, 2013, <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/honduras-travel-warning.html>. See also Alberto Arce, “Effort to Clean Up Honduran Police Force Stalls,” *The Associated Press*, June 11, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/honduras-police-cleanup-efforts-stall>.

<sup>4</sup> “Full circle,” *The Economist*, May 24, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21602680-old-route-re-gains-popularity-drugs-gangs-full-circle>.

<sup>5</sup> The Libertad and Refundación (LIBRE) party is made up of the followers of ousted President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya. A large portion of its membership came from Zelaya’s former party, the Liberal Party, which split after the President was removed from office in the 2009 coup. LIBRE also includes a number of grassroots organizations and labor movements that rallied around Zelaya after his ouster.

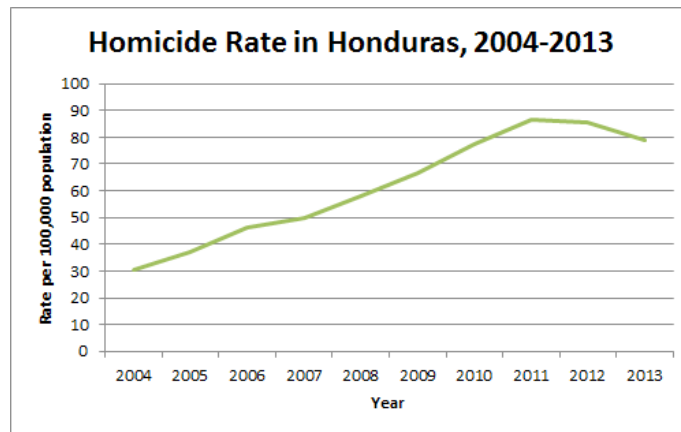
<sup>6</sup> Such involvement is also a legacy of the 1970’s and 1980’s, when the military was heavily involved in maintaining the country’s internal security.

<sup>7</sup> “Encuesta Nacional de Opinión Pública Agosto 2013.” This survey was undertaken by the Honduran polling company Le Vote for the Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa.

## Organized Crime and Violence

### Homicides

The fitful pace of Honduran reform stems in part from the complexity of the security situation. Several international and domestic studies suggest that the country's homicide rate is among the world's highest, although consensus does not agree on the exact number. According to the latest UNODC report the rate per 100,000 inhabitants stood at 90.4 in 2012, the most recent year available. Other Honduran reports using official reports find that the rate was 79 in 2013, declining slightly from a high of 86 in 2011.<sup>8</sup>



Source: Instituto Universitario de Democracia, Paz y Seguridad, "Boletín del Observatorio de Violencia, Edición 32," February 2014, 4, <http://iudpas.org/pdf/Boletines/Nacional/NEd32EneDic2013.pdf>.

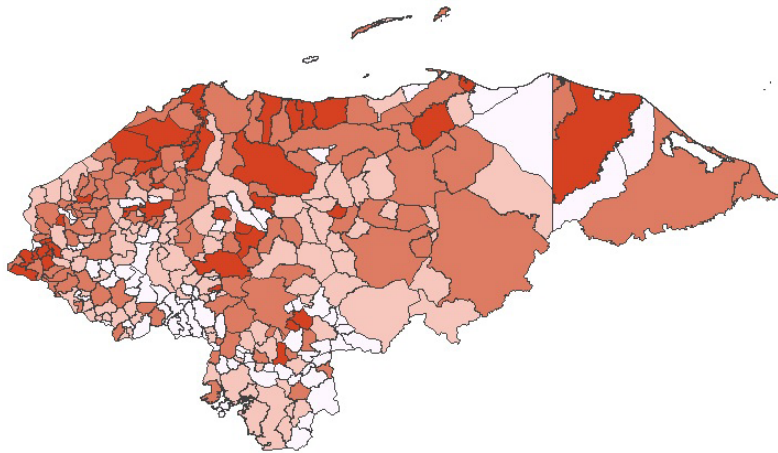
A number of indicators suggest that this violence stems in large part from drug-trafficking activities and urban-based criminal groups such as gangs. First, homicides remain heavily concentrated in Honduras' largest cities and across its northern corridor leading to the Guatemalan border, where drug trafficking routes and groups are ubiquitous. In the provinces of Cortes and Atlántida, 2013 homicide rates reached 133 and 115 per 100,000 citizens, significantly above the national average.<sup>9</sup> Other statistics—such as the fact that 83.3 percent of homicides are committed with firearms, and *at least* 13 percent of homicides appear to be *sicariato*, or assassin-style, murder for hire killings—point to gang and organized criminal activity.<sup>10</sup> The violence is also heavily concentrated among the population group most commonly involved in gangs or drug-trafficking activities: young adult males. Shockingly, in 2013 the homicide rate for males ages 20-24 was 318.3 per 100,000, revealing how crime and violence affect certain parts of the population particularly hard.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Instituto Universitario de Democracia, Paz, y Seguridad, "Boletín del Observatorio de Violencia, Edición 32," February 2014, 2, <http://iudpas.org/pdf/Boletines/Nacional/NEd32EneDic2013.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Instituto Universitario de Democracia, Paz y Seguridad, "Boletín del Observatorio de Violencia," 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Seventy percent of homicides have no known possible motive, according to the Violence Observatory, suggesting that the 13 percent figure could be much higher in reality.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Essentially, this means a 20-24 year-old male has a 0.32 percent of dying due to violence every year from the ages of 20-24, roughly equivalent to one in every 300 males this age every year.



This map shows homicide rates per 100,000 population in each *municipio* in Honduras in 2013. Source: Created by Carlos A. Mendoza, using data from the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH)'s Violence Observatory and the University Institute on Democracy, Peace, and Security (IUDPAS - Instituto Universitario en Democracia, Paz y Seguridad).

### Drug Trafficking

Mexican cartels and local *transportista* groups contracted by cartels operate with seeming impunity in the country's northern region, bringing drugs into the country via an array of sea, land, and air routes.<sup>12</sup> The operations of such groups exploded in recent years, especially in the wake of the country's 2009 coup, producing a sort of "cocaine gold-rush" according to the UNODC, and exacerbating an already challenging situation in which the government's ability and willingness to ensure the rule of law was declining.<sup>13</sup> As Honduras became a focal point for drug trafficking over the last decade, competition between these trafficking groups and the virtual lack of state presence in some of their operation areas provided an environment ripe for skyrocketing violence and all sorts of other organized criminal activity, such as human trafficking and illegal firearms transfers.<sup>14</sup>

Today, the situation remains acute.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Department of State estimated in 2013 that 87 percent of drug-laden flights originating in Colombia and Venezuela first make landfall in Honduras.<sup>16</sup> Recent statements by the Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, William Brownfield, suggest that this phenomenon may be changing; in February 2014 he reported

<sup>12</sup> James Bosworth, "Honduras: Organized Crime Gained Amid Political Crisis," in *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle*, eds. Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), 62-103, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/node/19779>.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment*, (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012), 19, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC\\_Central\\_America\\_and\\_the\\_Caribbean\\_english.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Bosworth, "Honduras: Organized Crime Gained Amid Political Crisis," 62-103.

<sup>15</sup> In an interview, Minister of Security Arturo Corrales asserted that drug-trafficking remains the country's primary security problem, especially because of its strategic location. Interview with Minister of Security Arturo Corrales, April 29, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "Honduras," *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, March 5, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2013/vol1/204050.htm>.



that drug flights to Honduras were down 80 percent during 2013.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Honduran media reports point to a shift in trafficking patterns—flights from South America first land in remote Nicaragua, and then conduct short, low altitude flights over the Honduran border so as to avoid radar detection.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis in the Honduran media and counter-trafficking strategy on these flights may be misplaced though. A U.S. Embassy official recently indicated that the United States places a priority on intercepting the “80 to 90 percent of illegal drugs that enter Honduras via maritime routes,” meaning that only 10-20 percent of drugs enter Honduras via the air or land.<sup>19</sup> According to statements made by General John Kelly of U.S. Southern Command, drug traffickers use “go-fast” boats to move cocaine from Venezuela and then assimilate by using local boats once they arrive on the northern Honduran coast, where they eventually unload their expensive cargo.<sup>20</sup>

Once in Honduras, drugs normally transit the northern corridor, a region long marked by its widespread impunity. Recent developments, however, suggest the government may finally be taking serious action against major trafficking syndicates. Traffickers have traditionally enjoyed ease of movement in this region, given that some parts of Western Honduras “are completely under the control of complex networks of mayors, businessmen and land owners” rather than the central government.<sup>21</sup> The December 2012 murder of a mayor in Western Honduras, allegedly by soldiers, highlights the extent to which authorities in the region are also involved in illicit trafficking and are victims of its violence.<sup>22</sup> This is further underscored by frequent allegations that politicians and elections are tainted by drug money and receive it to finance their campaigns in a decidedly opaque electoral financing environment.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this reality, over the past year, the Honduran government has taken actions that point towards a genuine willingness to combat drug-trafficking and the state of impunity, although in many cases the results leave much to be desired. A number of examples highlight this contrast between will and results. For example, following the placing of infamous individuals and groups like “Chepe” Handal (a former political candidate) and the “Cachiros” on the U.S. Drug “Kingpin” list in 2013, Honduran authorities took significant legal action. In April 2013, authorities

<sup>17</sup> Michael Lohmuller, “Are Honduran Drug Flights Down 80% as Officials Claim?,” *Insight Crime*, March 26, 2014, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/are-honduras-drug-flights-down-80-as-officials-claim>.

<sup>18</sup> “Descubren artimañas de narcos para evadir radar móvil en Honduras,” *El Heraldo*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Descubren-artimanas-de-narcos-para-evadir-radar-movil-en-Honduras>.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Lamothe, “Shady Honduran Military Won’t Get Help from the U.S. to Shoot Down Drug Planes,” *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2014, <http://atfp.co/1kEBhyA>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> UNODC, *Transnational Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Ramsey, “Honduran Mayor Killed by Gunmen ‘in Military Uniforms,’” *Insight Crime*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/honduran-mayor-killed-gunmen-false-military-uniforms>.

<sup>23</sup> “Narcos ofrecen dinero a candidatos en Honduras,” *La Prensa*, February 9, 2012, <http://www.laprensa.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/LaPrensa/Honduras/Apertura/story.csp?cid=329017&sid=267&fid=98>.

seized a number of Handal's properties.<sup>24</sup> Later, in September, a major operation took place against the *Cachiros*, allegedly seizing \$800 million in assets.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, both these operations were ultimately marred by the targets' evident anticipation of such actions: in the case of Handal, many possessions had already been removed from his houses, while in the *Cachiros* case, some of the bank accounts turned out to be empty.<sup>26</sup> Finally, in late March 2014, Honduran officials captured "El Negro" Lobo, a drug-trafficker at the top of the list for extradition to the United States.<sup>27</sup> "El Negro" was extradited to the United States in May, and was the first Honduran citizen to be handed to U.S. authorities since Honduras changed its laws in recent years to allow the practice of extradition.<sup>28</sup> U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kubiske applauded the government's action, saying on her Twitter account that it sends a clear signal to organized crime syndicates that Honduras does not belong to them.<sup>29</sup>

## Gangs

Drug trafficking and organized crime—which President Juan Orlando Hernández has identified as the country's main security problem—exist amid a web of other worrying criminal phenomena that contribute to the country's violence and instability. Honduras' estimated 12,000 gang members continue to pose a threat in major urban areas, extorting businesses and running local drug networks.<sup>30</sup> Cities like the capital, Tegucigalpa, remain stricken with gang-related violence. Extortion practices utilized by gangs regularly paralyze the cities' transportation system, as terrified bus and taxi drivers protest the violence they suffer by refusing to drive. In 2012 alone, 84 taxi drivers were murdered.<sup>31</sup> Preliminary talks exploring the possibility of a gang truce similar to that announced in El Salvador appear to have had little effect in taming Honduras' violence—and certainly has not produced the dra-

<sup>24</sup> "Fiscalía incauta tienda y hacienda de Chepe Handal," *La Prensa*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/policiales/365695-98/fiscal%C3%ADa-incauta-tienda-y-hacienda-de-chepe-handal>.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Parkinson, "\$800 Mn Cachiros Seizure 'End of Phase One': Honduras Police," *Insight Crime*, September 26, 2013, [http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/\\$800m-cachiros-seizure-end-of-phase-one-honduras-police](http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/$800m-cachiros-seizure-end-of-phase-one-honduras-police).

<sup>26</sup> "Allan casas de 'Chepe' Handal en SPS," *El Heraldo*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Sucesos/Allanan-casas-de-Chepe-Handal-en-SPS>. See also "OABI no encontró dinero en 70 cuentas," *El Heraldo*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/ElHeraldo/Pais/story.csp?cid=583577&sid=299&fid=214>. This article reports that the group's bank accounts were empty and many assets removed from those sites targeted by the operation. A U.S. official with knowledge on the matter asserted that not all of the frozen accounts were empty. Email correspondence with U.S. official, July 1, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Marguerite Cawley, "Honduras Arrests Drug Trafficker 1st in Line for Extradition," *Insight Crime*, March 28, 2014, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/honduras-arrests-drug-trafficker-1st-in-line-for-extradition>.

<sup>28</sup> "Honduran accused drug trafficker extradited to U.S.," *Reuters*, May 9, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/09/us-honduras-drugs-usa-idUSBREA480C620140509>.

<sup>29</sup> "Crimen organizado está avisado: Honduras no les pertenece," *El Heraldo*, May 9, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/inicio/707596-331/crimen-organizado-est%C3%A1-avisado-honduras-no-les-pertenece>.

<sup>30</sup> UNODC, *Transnational Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> Red de Seguridad y Defensa en América Latina, *Índice de Seguridad Pública: Centroamérica: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá*, (Buenos Aires: RESDAL, 2013), 93, <http://www.resdal.org/libro-seg-2013/honduras-indice-2013-esp.pdf>.

matic decline in homicide rates seen early on in El Salvador's gang truce.<sup>32</sup> In part, this may be due to the more disparate and disperse nature of Honduras' gangs, which are more numerous and less centralized than El Salvador's.<sup>33</sup>

Honduran violence has reached such unbearable levels that the United Nations has specifically identified it as a growing cause of emigration, asserting that many recent emigrants from Honduras have been motivated by threats related to gangs (and other organized criminal activities).<sup>34</sup> The recent child immigrant crisis in the United States further highlights the role this violence plays in displacing Hondurans and disrupting society.<sup>35</sup> Alarming, while many Hondurans leave due to violence, deportations from the United States feed the ranks of gangs and other organized criminal groups. In 2012 alone, 43.7 percent of the 32,500 Hondurans deported from the United States had criminal records.<sup>36</sup> Fragile social conditions—from unemployment to vast inequality—underlie this precarious situation, putting youth and returning emigrants (especially those with criminal records) alike at risk of joining Honduras' violent gangs.<sup>37</sup>

### *Violence Perpetrated by State Security Forces*

In addition, violence perpetrated by members of state security forces continues to pose a serious problem, and corruption remains endemic among the security and justice apparatus, especially among members of the National Police. According to the National University's (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras—UNAH) Violence Observatory, 149 people were killed by Honduran police officers during 2011 and 2012, although some have challenged these numbers as being inflated or incorrectly calculated.<sup>38</sup> In early 2014, *El Heraldo*, one of Honduras' main dai-

<sup>32</sup> James Bargent, "Murders in Honduras Rising Despite Gang Truce," *Insight Crime*, August 5, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/murders-in-honduras-rising-despite-gang-truce>. The gang "peace process," that was announced in May 2013 from a prison in San Pedro Sula, was led by a Catholic priest, with support from the Organization of American States. It is important to note that a truce was not officially reached, but rather the announcement in Honduras allegedly marked the beginning of a "peace process" that would address the country's (and even the region's) unbearable violence, according to *The Washington Post*. Unfortunately, since the May 2013 announcement, little visible progress has occurred, and the government's commitment to such efforts appears to be notably lower than that (previously) expressed by the El Salvadoran government. See Nick Miroff, "Honduran gangs offer peace from prison," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/honduran-gangs-offer-peace-from-prison/2013/07/24/6fb3b8e6-dd1c-11e2-a484-7b7f-79cd66a1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/honduran-gangs-offer-peace-from-prison/2013/07/24/6fb3b8e6-dd1c-11e2-a484-7b7f-79cd66a1_story.html).

<sup>33</sup> James Bosworth, an analyst in the region, correctly notes this in his article "Can Honduras Mirror El Salvador's Successful Gang Truce?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2013/0529/Can-Honduras-mirror-El-Salvador-s-successful-gang-truce>.

<sup>34</sup> Centro Internacional para los Derechos Humanos de los Migrantes, "Desplazamiento Forzado y Necesidades de Protección, generados por nuevas formas de Violencia y Criminalidad en Centroamérica," (unpublished paper drafted at the request of the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Refugees, May 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Frances Robles, "Fleeing Gangs, Children Head to U.S. Border," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/world/americas/fleeing-gangs-children-head-to-us-border.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/world/americas/fleeing-gangs-children-head-to-us-border.html?_r=0).

<sup>36</sup> Clare Ribando Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," Congressional Research Service, February 20, 2014, 7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7.

<sup>38</sup> Instituto Universitario de Democracia, Paz y Seguridad, "Boletín Especial Edición No. 5: Criminalidad Policial," December 2012, [http://iudpas.org/pdf/Boletines/Especiales/BEP\\_Ed5.pdf](http://iudpas.org/pdf/Boletines/Especiales/BEP_Ed5.pdf). Some suggest that the numbers may be inflated because they rely heavily on questionable police statistics and media reports. Further, they may fail to differentiate between legitimate uses of force and unsubstantiated killings by the police. While such

ly newspapers, published a series of articles highlighting the relentless corruption that typifies the Honduran police. Internal police documents obtained by the newspaper include the names of nearly 200 active police officers (many of them senior-level) involved in drug-trafficking and robbery, among other activities.<sup>39</sup> Civil society and human rights groups have also denounced the corruption that characterizes the police, noting that purges of police officials have focused on lower level officers and neglected to investigate more senior officers and their assets.<sup>40</sup>

## Security and Justice Institutions: New Reforms, Old Problems

### *Reform Efforts with Few Results*

Despite the problems with state security forces, the Honduran government has yet to take the problem of reform and the need for thorough vetting seriously. In mid-December 2013, Minister of Security Arturo Corrales announced the purging of 161 police officers from the National Directorate for Criminal Investigation (DNIC, for its Spanish initials), lauding the action as an important step forward in strengthening the country's corrupt and battered police force. Yet in subsequent days, the Minister's action became the focus of fierce criticism.<sup>41</sup> Among those purged were individuals vetted by the U.S. Embassy and recognized as clean, dedicated members of the police; officers who had received extensive foreign training; and others recognized by their peers as exceptionally dedicated to their work.<sup>42</sup> Despite their training and reputation, the officers were fired without access to the protections police officers are entitled to as public servants. The handling of their dismissal was so questionable that even Ramón Sabillón, Director General of the National Police, admitted in an interview that good officers had been purged, and that it was affecting the police's investigative work.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, a month after this purge, 35 high-ranking police officers were "honorably discharged," despite the widespread suspicion among civil society groups, the media, and others that many of these officers were closely tied to criminal bands known to be operating in the police.<sup>44</sup>

Such is the nature of Honduras' nascent and hesitant security sector reform. In-

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concerns are legitimate, it is important to acknowledge that the report may also fail to account for unreported instances of police violence, a factor also crucial to assessing this number's veracity and reliability.

<sup>39</sup> "Honduras: La lista de policías vinculados a delitos es escafofrante," *El Heraldo*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Al-Frente/Honduras-La-lista-de-policias-vinculados-a-delitos-es-escafofrante>. See also "Honduras: Redes de narcotráfico penetraron a altos oficiales," *El Heraldo*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Al-Frente/Honduras-Redes-del-narcotrafico-penetraron-a-altos-oficiales>.

<sup>40</sup> Dagoberto Rodríguez, "Más de L57 millones van gastados en la fracasada depuración policial," *La Prensa*, January 14, 2014, <http://www.laprensa.hn/lasultimas24/442674-97/mas-de-l57-millones-van-gastados-en-la-fracasada-depuracion-policial>.

<sup>41</sup> "Honduras: Polígrafo deja fuera a 161 de la DNIC," *El Heraldo*, January 16, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Sucesos/Poligrafo-deja-fuera-a-161-agentes-de-la-DNIC>.

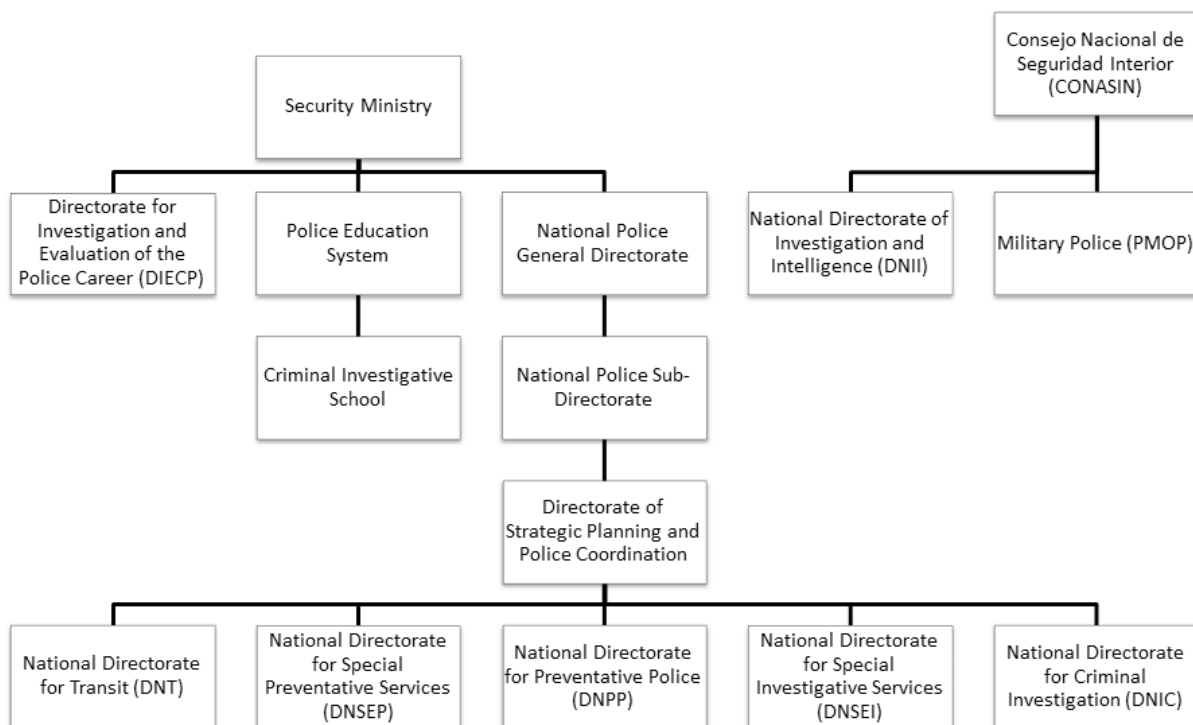
<sup>42</sup> German H. Reyes, "Oficiales de policía aseguran que las autoridades quieren desaparecer la DNIC," *Revistazo*, March 26, 2014, <http://www.revistazo.biz/web2/index.php/nacional/item/844-oficiales-de-polic%C3%ADa-aseguran-que-las-autoridades-quieren-desaparecer-la-dnic>.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Director General (Honduras' national police chief) Ramón Sabillón, May 5, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> See January 29, 2014 press release from the Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia: <http://alianzapazyjusticia.com/index.php/descargas-de-documentos-categorias/category/4-comunicados#>.



stitutional weakness is rife and corruption remains rampant and without consequence. And yet, security sector reform has remained a central public issue in Honduras since late 2011 when the death of the son of Julieta Castellanos (Rector of Honduras' National Autonomous University—UNAH in Spanish) at the hands of police officers, and the assassination of Alfredo Landaverde, a high-ranking public official working on security issues, shocked the country. Yet, despite the outrage these tragedies provoked, efforts to enact change since then remain uncoordinated and often isolated from one another, marked by limited successes and misplaced priorities.



Source: Created based on Honduran Ministry of Security, "Republica de Honduras. Organigrama de Secretaria de Seguridad," n.d., <http://www.seguridad.gob.hn/images/organigrama.jpg>, with additional information provided by Honduran officials in conversation with the author and Honduran embassy officials in conversation with Eric Olson, July 2014.

Media and public clamor has resulted in little meaningful action to address corruption. In April 2013, hearings in the National Congress and civil society pressure revealed that the use of polygraph tests, drug tests, and financial background investigations by the Directorate for the Investigation and Evaluation of the Police Career (DIECP) had led to the firing of only seven officers since the Directorate's creation in late 2011—and of these seven, some were allowed to once again join the police after being fired.<sup>45</sup> The U.S. Department of State noted a similar lack of progress, stating that 407 of 687 abuse or corruption reports received by the Di-

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2014: Honduras," <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/honduras?page=1>.

rectorate in 2012 remained “in investigation” as of July 30, 2013.<sup>46</sup> As noted above, various sectors have questioned recent efforts to purge Honduras’ police, arguing that the Ministry of Security’s efforts lack transparency and fail to punish police officers genuinely involved in crime.<sup>47</sup>

The toxic mix of violence, corruption, impunity, and organized crime suggests that Honduran authorities continue to face grave internal and external challenges. Unfortunately, Honduras’ ability to respond to these challenges remains weak and fragmented, despite isolated instances of improvement in all three security and justice sector institutions: the police, the public prosecutor’s office, and the judiciary.

### *The Police (and Military)*

Following congressional hearings in April 2013, Minister of Security Pompeyo Bonilla was fired in what was widely understood to be a response to his poor performance and inability to promote reform and address corruption. He was replaced by Arturo Corrales, the Foreign Minister at the time.<sup>48</sup> Corrales launched a series of new initiatives, taking an unprecedented census that confirmed the police force was comprised of about 13,000 officers (the exact number was previously unknown even to the force’s leadership). The Ministry of Security also supplied patrol cars with new GPS units, created a new Operations Center to monitor and coordinate police movements, and opened an emergency call center using the 911 number. Further, it launched a crime database center, known as the Online Police Statistic System (Sistema de Estadística Policial en Línea, or SEPOL) that publicizes Honduran crime data down to the *barrio* (neighborhood) level, and has launched some 30 municipal level violence observatories to monitor homicide statistics.<sup>49</sup> Such reforms suggest possible progress towards creating a more professional and responsive police force. Other isolated initiatives, such as local community policing projects and a joint civil society and police/prosecutor project that has aided in dramatically lowering homicide rate in its target neighborhood also demonstrate the possibility of transforming a weak and corrupt Honduran police, and provide an important possible template for reform at the national level.<sup>50</sup> Despite these programs, Honduras’ police force arguably remains the worst in

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013: Honduras,” 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=220453>.

<sup>47</sup> January 29, 2014 press release from the Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia, <http://alianzapazyjusticia.com/index.php/descargas-de-documentos-categorias/category/4-comunicados#>.

<sup>48</sup> “Informe de la Comisión Especial de Seguridad del Congreso Nacional,” (unpublished government document, April 15, 2013). See also “En 30 días estarán creados nuevos observatorios,” *La Tribuna*, April 23, 2014, <http://www.latribuna.hn/movil/2014/04/23/en-30-dias-estaran-creados-nuevos-observatorios/>.

<sup>49</sup> Arturo Corrales, “Primer 100 días,” Presentation to government officials, civil society members, and international representatives, August 12, 2013. For information about SEPOL, see <https://www.sepol.hn>.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Ungar, “Community Policing in Honduras: Local Impacts of a National Programme,” *Policing and Society* 22.1 (2012): 31-34. See also Nicholas Phillips, “In Honduras, Going From Door to Door to Prosecutors,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2014, sec. A9.

the region. Corruption among high-level officers and police violence against civilians comes as little surprise given the institution's lack of staff, training, and the resources it needs to undertake its work. At 142 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants, the per capita police ratio is the region's lowest (despite the highest rates of violence), and far below the regional average of 268 per 100,000.<sup>51</sup> Most police officers make less than \$500 a month, working often grueling shifts with uniforms and bullets purchased out of their own salary, making the allure of bribes or other money-making schemes tantalizing.<sup>52</sup> In interviews done for this paper, one U.S. official repeatedly lamented the Honduran government's tendency to fund new security forces such as the Military Police rather than invest in the underfunded existing police force.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly, under-investment in civilian police reform cannot be explained away simply as a result of the Honduran state's dire financial situation, or the new president's commitment to trimming the central government's size and budget. The state spends heavily on security and has large sources of funding available through multilateral organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank. Instead, the government has channeled many resources towards its new National Directorate for Intelligence and Investigation (Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia e Investigación, DNII) and the Military Police (Policía Militar del Orden Público, or PMOP).<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, the Hernández government introduced a plan to civil society working groups that includes many police reform elements and commitments to continue initiatives designed to strengthen the institution, such as the purchase of technological tools, extensive purging, and reforms to the Ministry of Security's structure, among others.<sup>55</sup>

While it is still a bit early to fully judge the actions of the new government, it does not appear that the new government is using all available resources to transform the police, and, thus far, the above-mentioned plans may exist only on paper. Instead, it appears that the new security entities created by the government receive exceptional attention, even while they may confuse the roles of the police and

<sup>51</sup> Average calculated by the author based on statistics provided by the OAS Security Observatory for Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama, using data from the "Organization of American States Hemispheric Security Observatory," available at <http://www.oas.org/dsp/observatorio/database/countries.aspx?lang=en>.

<sup>52</sup> Red de Seguridad y Defensa en América Latina, *Índice de Seguridad Pública: Centroamérica: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá*, (Buenos Aires: RESDAL, 2013), 99, <http://www.resdal.org/libro-seg-2013/honduras-indice-2013-esp.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with U.S. official, February 14 and 26, 2014. The official made clear the United States provides no support to this military police unit. Director General Ramón Sabillón also made clear in a May 5, 2014 interview that a primary difficulty for the police was the lack of resources needed to undertake its work.

<sup>54</sup> These investment practices have led some to argue that the Hernández government wants to dismantle the current investigative police body (and perhaps even the entire civilian police force) and replace it with alternative bodies, like the new military police. See German H. Reyes, "Oficiales de policía aseguran que las autoridades quieren desaparecer la DNIC."

<sup>55</sup> "El Plan de Todos para una Vida Mejor: Pacto por Honduras," Mesa #1: Recuperar la Paz y la Seguridad de las Familias Hondureñas, (unpublished government document, February 2014.)

military, redirect resources away from a police force that requires serious reform, and in the worst of cases, represent a misguided approach to combating crime that threatens to violate human rights and replace long-term stability with short-term gain.<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, the DNII, the PMOP, and a new investigative unit within the Public Ministry (or Public Prosecutor's Office) all have a mandate to conduct criminal investigation, further splintering a process already characterized by poor coordination and chronic weakness.<sup>57</sup> Notably, Honduran and U.S. officials alike cited this proliferation of parallel investigative and inter-institutional units as a major problem that divides and disperses law enforcement efforts.<sup>58</sup>

Further, large chunks of the state's discretionary security budget, which comes from a new tax that is derived primarily from financial transactions and for which there is no reliable oversight mechanism, has been designated for equipment purchases for the new military police, and expanding Honduras' military by an additional 1,000 soldiers—this, despite the police force lacking the equipment it needs.<sup>59</sup> Additional purchases from this discretionary security fund include expensive military-grade radars obtained, for around \$30 million, to detect incoming drug flights from Colombia and Venezuela, despite the fact that the U.S. Southern Command has offered assistance in this area for years.<sup>60</sup>

Soon after the acquisition of these radars, the Honduran Congress adopted a new law in early 2014, essentially allowing the Honduran military to bring down unknown planes in Honduran airspace using whatever means necessary, including shooting down unresponsive planes.<sup>61</sup> This, along with the 28 remote landing

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<sup>56</sup> Ample evidence exists that the government has not yet taken seriously the need for reform of the civilian police force. The creation of parallel (often military) entities has diverted resources from fixing a broken and under resourced institution. For example, while new vehicles transport the country's Military Police, a recent report published by the Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa described the situation in the province of Comayagua, where six investigators have one vehicle between them to cover a province in which 400 homicides occurred between 2010 and 2012. Unsurprisingly, the investigators completed only nine percent of investigations during these years. A second example comes from the way police reforms proposed by the Public Security Reform Commission, which sought to improve the institution's focus on the local community, were completely ignored. Finally, the purging example described above, in which good police officers were fired while corrupt ones walked free with benefits, sends completely the wrong message to the civilian police about what is expected from police officers.

<sup>57</sup> See "Decreto No. 168-201: Ley de Policía Militar del Orden Público." See also "Decreto 211-2012: Ley de Inteligencia Nacional." See also "Con más de 50 agentes iniciará la Agencia de Investigación del MP," *El Heraldo*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/702386-214/con-más-de-50-agentes-iniciará-la-agencia-de-investigación-del-mp>.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 14, 2014 and interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014.  
<sup>59</sup> "Nuevos operadores de seguridad absorben 138 millones de lempiras," *El Heraldo*, September 20, 2013, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Economia/Nuevos-operadores-de-seguridad-absorben-138-millones-de-lempiras>.

<sup>60</sup> "Radares estarán listos en primer semestre de 2014," *El Heraldo*, January 2, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Sucesos/Radares-estaran-listos-en-primer-trimestre-de-2014>. U.S. aid in this area was suspended for a time in 2012 following an incident involving U.S. anti-drug agents, Honduran security forces, and civilians in the Mosquitia in May of 2012 and an additional incident involving the shooting down of a suspected drug flight, perhaps prompting the government to pursue its own source to detect incoming flights.

<sup>61</sup> The passage of this law prompted the United States to stop providing radar information to Honduras regarding suspicious planes. "Honduras instala radar y EEUU deja de dar datos sobre trazas de aviones," *El Heraldo*,

strips destroyed by the Honduran military in 2013, signals that the Honduran government is placing an exceptional, and perhaps misplaced emphasis, on detaining drug flows using aviation routes.<sup>62</sup> For example, recent shifts in drug trafficking methods emphasize shorter low altitude flights from Nicaragua across the border into Honduras meaning that Honduras's new radar may neither detect nor deter flights from landing in the country's ungoverned wilderness.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the increased use of the military to perform police functions threatens the long-term transformation of Honduras' police, as well as its present ability to combat crime. Worryingly, the original 1,000 members of the PMOP in August 2013 received only one month of specialized training beyond their basic military training before being deployed. While an additional 1,000 members added in May 2014 received up to four months of training, questions remain about the adequacy of the curriculum and whether the time spent in training is adequate.<sup>64</sup> This cursory training leaves PMOP members ill-prepared to undertake the criminal investigations that already present serious problems for the country's police, and by dividing investigative functions across organizations the introduction of the PMOP has further weakened the police's capacity to effectively undertake and collaborate on investigations.<sup>65</sup> To date, the PMOP's primary task has been supporting "Operation Francisco Morazán," an effort announced by President Hernández during his January 2014 inauguration. The operation has focused on entering dangerous neighborhoods of the country's largest cities in the hopes of dismantling criminal bands.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, despite isolated instances of progress, the evidence continues to suggest that Honduras' civilian police remain chronically weak. Although the Honduran government has not abandoned its police force outright it does not appear to be investing the resources needed to ensure the force's transformation, preferring instead to strengthen new institutions that are publicly popular, like the Military

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March 31, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/ElHeraldo/Pais/story.csp?cid=703246>.

<sup>62</sup> "Informe de Logros- Año 2013," Secretaría de Defensa Nacional. Minister of Security Arturo Corrales explained these efforts as part of a larger push to create a "shield" against drugs entering by air, land, and sea, but the evidence suggests that the government is placing exceptional emphasis on stopping drug flights. Interview with Minister of Security Arturo Corrales, April 29, 2014. The questionable nature of this emphasis is best understood by remembering that U.S. officials estimate that 80-90 percent of drugs enter via the sea (not to mention land routes via Nicaragua).

<sup>63</sup> "El narcotráfico cambia su ruta para introducir drogas a Honduras," *El Heraldo*, 7 April 2013, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Al-Frente/El-narcotrafico-cambia-su-ruta-para-introducir-drogas-a-Honduras>.

<sup>64</sup> See "1,000 agentes más a la Policía Militar," *El Heraldo*, May 6, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/706847-214/1000-agentes-más-a-la-polic%C3%ADa-militar>. By the end of 2014, the Honduran government hopes to have 5,000 military police members. See also Charles Parkinson, "Honduras duplicará la presencia de la Policía Militar en San Pedro Sula," *Insight Crime*, March 27, 2014, <http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-del-dia/honduras-duplicara-policia-militar-en-san-pedro-sula>.

<sup>65</sup> "Honduras: Selecto grupo de soldados ya se entrena como policías," *El Heraldo*, September 6, 2013, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Honduras-Selecto-grupo-de-soldados-ya-se-entrena-como-policias>.

<sup>66</sup> See Karla Zabłudovsky, "Who's Fighting your Drug Wars," *Newsweek*, February 28, 2014, 7-22.



Police, or to invest in technology that a poorly trained and under-educated police force may struggle to effectively utilize.

### *The Public Ministry*

Honduras' Public Ministry faces institutional challenges similar to those at of its crime fighting partner, the National Police. The institution suffers from weakness in both resources and capacity, and has not undergone the profound reform needed to create a more professional, capable institution with the ability to address Honduras' overwhelming violence and organized crime. This crisis came to a head in mid-2013 when the Public Minister (roughly equivalent to an attorney general) resigned following immense pressure from civil society groups and others in response to a lengthy expert evaluation revealing the institution's weaknesses.<sup>67</sup> Congress then installed an Intervention Commission (Comisión Interventora) in the Public Ministry to oversee the institution, and in late August 2013 Congress elected a new Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General. The National Human Rights Commissioner Ramon Custodio, UNAH Rector Julieta Castellanos, and civil society groups heavily criticized the election process for its lack of transparency after political interests, rather than merit, appeared to play a determinative role in the election process. Despite this rough beginning, the arrival of new leaders at the helm of the Public Ministry has led to a number of important initial gestures and actions that appear to steer the institution in the right direction, while other problems continue to go unaddressed.

In particular, recent actions by the Ministry's new leaders to hire additional prosecutors, to create a special unit for investigating and prosecuting crimes in the Bajo Aguan region, and to prosecute emblematic cases stand out as important initiatives.<sup>68</sup> Honduras' low prosecutor-to-inhabitant rate of 6.4 per 100,000 (neighboring El Salvador has 13.4 and Costa Rica has 10.2) poses similar personnel problems to those faced by overburdened police in responding to the country's elevated levels of violence and organized crime.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the recent addition of 21 prosecutors (due to a considerable budget increase) and the intention to hire more represents an important basic step in strengthening the Public Ministry.<sup>70</sup> The creation of a Bajo

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<sup>67</sup> "Evaluación del Ministerio Público de la Republica de Honduras," (unpublished document, January 2013). Three experts contracted by the U.S. Embassy—a Mexican, an El Salvadoran, and a Costa Rican—undertook this institutional evaluation to identify weaknesses and offer recommendations to improve the Public Ministry.

<sup>68</sup> The Bajo Aguan region is home to some of Honduras' most serious human rights abuses and social conflict, due to a dispute between a large corporation and local residents. A report from Human Rights Watch recently underscored the government's failure to address this situation, demonstrating that extremely few cases have been investigated, much less prosecuted. According to an April 23, 2014 interview with a senior Public Ministry official, the U.S. government offered to provide financial support to this new Bajo Aguan unit, but due to the Public Ministry's desire to quickly introduce the unit, it was not able to do so.

<sup>69</sup> Asociación Interamericana de Defensoría Públicas, "Diagnóstico de la Defensoría Publica en América," 2012. Rates were calculated by the author based on the population and prosecutor numbers provided in the report.

<sup>70</sup> "Ministerio Público cuenta con 21 nuevos fiscales," *El Heraldo*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Ministerio-Publico-cuenta-con-21-nuevos-fiscales>.

Aguan unit—that has at least a two-year mandate—also represents a positive step towards resolving Honduras’ most divisive social conflict and one that represents the seriousness of Honduras’ human rights situation.<sup>71</sup> Finally, the recent convictions of Alfredo Landaverde’s assassin and the police officers who murdered Julieta Castellanos’ son demonstrate that the institution can successfully prosecute crimes—even in sensitive cases of symbolic importance.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, Honduras’ government and the Public Ministry’s leadership must deal with an institution plagued by many longstanding problems. Chief among these is the weakness in criminal investigation capacity. An analysis conducted by regional experts in early 2013 revealed that the Public Ministry’s role in directing and overseeing criminal investigations requires serious strengthening. The fact that the police only complete around 20 percent of investigations in cases where the Public Ministry requests an investigative report underscores the depth of the problem.<sup>73</sup> Security for prosecutors represents another major challenge for those working on sensitive cases, as demonstrated by the murder last year of a leading organized crime prosecutor.<sup>74</sup> Other problems include the lack of witness protection, training for prosecutors, a shortage of material resources (such as vehicles), and weakness in attorney supervision and discipline for inappropriate or criminal behavior.<sup>75</sup> Finally, excessive caseloads represent another debilitating burden; for example, in 2012, the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights was responsible for 7,000 cases, while the office was only assigned 16 prosecutors: this works out to be 437 cases per prosecutor.<sup>76</sup> Simply put, much work awaits Honduras’ Public Ministry if it hopes to address the country’s staggering security problems.

### *The Judiciary*

In December 2012, four members of the Constitutional Chamber of the Honduran Supreme Court of Justice were dismissed by the National Congress following a

<sup>71</sup> “Equipo investigará crímenes en el Aguán,” *El Heraldo*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Equipo-investigara-crimenes-en-el-Aguan>.

<sup>72</sup> See “Sentencia de 66 años de reclusión para asesinos de hijo de la rectora,” *La Tribuna*, December 9, 2013, <http://www.latribuna.hn/2013/12/09/sentencia-de-66-anos-de-reclusion-para-asesinos-de-hijo-de-la-rectora/>. See also “Condenado a 22 años, asesino de Alfredo Landaverde,” *La Tribuna*, January 10, 2014, <http://www.latribuna.hn/2014/01/10/condenado-a-22-anos-asesino-de-alfredo-landaverde/>.

<sup>73</sup> Case statistics from “Evaluación del Ministerio Público de la Republica de Honduras,” 9. The Public Ministry requests investigations from the police in nearly 77 percent of cases that are reported to it, according to statistics provided in the report from 2008-2012.

<sup>74</sup> Marguerite Cawley, “Honduras’ Top Anti-Money Laundering Prosecutor Murdered,” *Insight Crime*, April 19, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/honduras-top-anti-money-laundering-prosecutor-murdered>. The seriousness of this situation is underscored by the fact the Attorney General at the time, Luis Rubi, had assigned armored vehicles to his “protocol chief,” while high-level prosecutors working on sensitive such as the organized crime prosecutor mentioned here used personal vehicles for transport.

<sup>75</sup> “Evaluación del Ministerio Público de la Republica de Honduras.” The Public Ministry sends reports of crime to the police, which are then charged with returning it with an investigation that the prosecutors can use to pursue the case.

<sup>76</sup> Kaitlin Owen, *Honduras: Journalism in the Shadow of Impunity*, eds. Carmen Cheung et al., (Toronto: Pen International, 2014), 37.

controversial decision related to the use of polygraph tests for police vetting.<sup>77</sup> Judged unconstitutional by many legal scholars, some have expressed concern that the dismissals were an attempt by National Party leaders to “exert control over the Supreme Court,” raising serious concerns about the possible political manipulations of the judiciary, its polarization, and its independence as a branch of government.<sup>78</sup>

More recently, the Honduran judiciary launched an expansive effort to remove members and personnel accused of releasing drug-traffickers and other criminals from jail.<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, the effort has been characterized by a lack of transparency, bringing into question its motives and veracity.<sup>80</sup> As with the police and Public Ministry, the institution requires serious reform that will allow Hondurans to more easily access judicial services and help improve the discharge of justice, both needs noted in recent justice and security sector policy plans created with help from the United Nations Development Program and the European Union.<sup>81</sup>

### Other Institutions

In early 2012, the National Congress created a promising Public Security Reform Commission to diagnose, define, and lead the security sector reform process and certify the vetting process for civilian police. Nevertheless, the same Congress that created the Commission also dissolved it in January 2014 after the government failed to consider the legal reforms the Commission proposed and drafted.<sup>82</sup> The Commission’s failure led to widespread criticism of the Commission’s work and suggests that security and justice reform in Honduras is politically divisive, conflictive, unorganized, and ultimately extraordinarily difficult. It is not yet clear that the Hernández government will be able to move beyond these difficulties to address the country’s chronic problems.

<sup>77</sup> James Bosworth, “Honduran lawmakers fire four Supreme Court judges,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2012/1212/Honduran-lawmakers-fire-four-Supreme-Court-judges>.

<sup>78</sup> Peter J. Meyer, “Honduras-U.S. Relations,” *Congressional Research Service*, February 5, 2013. Additionally, it should be noted that current President Hernández was President of Honduras’ unicameral legislature when the Justices were dismissed.

<sup>79</sup> “Consejo suspende a dos jueces más,” *El Heraldo*, February 26, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Consejo-suspende-a-dos-jueces-mas>.

<sup>80</sup> In a series of meetings to which the author was privy for reasons unrelated to this paper, actual and former judges complained that the current process of firing judges was based on shaky legal reasoning, that the motives for many firings were unclear, and that the labor rights of judges were not being respected. This is underscored by the manner in which the body leading this purge has acted: press conferences or interviews with the press are given announcing the number of judges fired, but the justifications for the firings are rarely made public. Finally, the independence of this body authorizing and overseeing these firings is seriously questioned, due to the manner in which its members were elected. See for example, “Consejo de la Judicatura aún no informa suspensión a jueces,” *El Tiempo*, December 11, 2013, <http://www.ella.hn/portada/noticias/consejo-de-la-judicatura-aun-no-informa-suspension-a-jueces>.

<sup>81</sup> Honduras’ *Política de Seguridad Ciudadana y de Convivencia Social*, written in conjunction with experts from the United Nation Development Program, is a good example of one such document.

<sup>82</sup> “Desaparece Comisión de Reforma a la Seguridad Pública,” *El Heraldo*, January 20, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Pais/Desaparece-Comision-de-Reforma-a-la-Seguridad-Publica>. It is important to note that the Commission’s mandate included not only police reform, but also the ability to draft reforms for the Public Ministry and the Judiciary. Civil society groups also criticized the Commission for failing to mount an effective campaign to press the Congress to consider its proposed reforms.

## Conclusion

Honduras' justice and security institutions show some nascent signs of progress due to actions pushed by their leaders and successful, isolated projects that appear to have lowered levels of crime and changed the way individuals, such as the police, do their work. Despite this, serious problems persist. Homicide levels remain alarmingly high, even if lower than in the past, and organized crime continues to operate with seeming impunity across the country's northern corridor. Gangs terrorize urban populations, and the state's own security forces have yet to rid themselves of corruption and abuse. Further, the advent of the Military Police confuses the roles of the police and the military in a dangerous way, while criminal investigation has become increasingly dispersed between different agencies. Institutions remain weak, and once again, poor criminal investigation suggests that coordination is a chronic problem. Finally, despite the existence of policies and plans drafted with the help of international donors, reform efforts lack the necessary investment by the Honduran government, thus further worsening coordination. President Hernández seeks to improve this via his "Pact for Honduras," a master plan drafted with the input of civil society, the private sector, and others, but its adoption and effects remain to be seen.

## U.S. CARSI STRATEGY IN HONDURAS

The extreme violence in Honduras and government actions targeting crime and drug trafficking fill, if not dominate, the country's daily newspapers and televised news cycles. Inevitably, these dynamics have also commanded the attention of foreign governments and institutions—especially the United States. As a result, United States' aid to Honduras, including CARSI funding, is primarily oriented towards dealing with the security challenges outlined above.

The last five-year Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) for Honduras was launched in 2009, and outlined planned U.S. activities through 2013.<sup>83</sup> Much of these centered on security-related matters, and they appear to have remained generally consistent despite the country's 2009 coup. At the time of this writing, the next five-year strategy is still being drafted and had not yet been publicly released.<sup>84</sup>

### The U.S. and the Public Security Context

Interviews with U.S. officials and a review of the 2009-2013 CAS provide a complex picture of the problems that U.S. CARSI assistance seeks to address in Hon-

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<sup>83</sup> CAS documents are created by USAID in coordination with other relevant agencies, and include all U.S. government foreign assistance programs and resources provided to the country in question, with the goal of creating a longer-term plan against which annual operations can be compared. Honduras was a pilot country for the CAS project. USAID, "Country-Specific Foreign Assistance Strategies," [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pcaab761.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pcaab761.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> Author requests to view the draft were denied.

duras.<sup>85</sup> Broadly speaking, they identify three primary problems whose solutions include a wide variety of CARSI-backed programs: drug trafficking/organized crime, weak institutions—especially in terms of low capacity to investigate and prosecute crimes—and finally, social ills that exacerbate and undergird Honduran crime and violence.

Drug trafficking represents one of the most serious problems identified by the United States, and an overriding and primary concern for the CARSI aid received in Honduras. The 2009-2013 CAS cites Honduras' location at the heart of Central America as a reason for its abundant drug trafficking and other associated crimes, such as money laundering. The strategy document makes clear that these illegal activities in turn help to produce the country's high levels of violence. Complicating this situation is the fact that resource shortages, a porous border, and a lack of control over the country's remote northeastern area further encourage the use of Honduras as a landing point for South American cocaine shipments.<sup>86</sup> According to the CAS, the violence from these criminal activities "fuels illegal immigration and threatens regional stability and U.S. national security interests."<sup>87</sup> This emphasis on drug trafficking and its effects as a major problem remains a guiding feature of U.S. CARSI policy in Honduras five years later. One U.S. official noted that the top U.S. priorities in the country were drug-related investigations, cocaine interdiction, and the investigation of homicides, highlighting the important focus drugs continue to play in determining U.S. policy.<sup>88</sup>

Weak institutions and limited capacity to address crime stand out as a second major problem area identified by both strategy documents and U.S. officials. Chief among the causes of weak institutions is corruption. A recent paper by the Inter-American Dialogue noted that the problem of widespread corruption increasingly concerns U.S. officials.<sup>89</sup> Interviews in Honduras suggested a slightly more favorable view of the Honduran Police Force: some U.S. officials stationed in the country acknowledged the need for purging corrupt officers, but did not emphasize corruption as a primary cause of weakness.<sup>90</sup> Despite this, the fact that many, if not all, U.S.-vetted police units in Honduras remain isolated from the rest of the police suggests that U.S. officials may fear the leaking of information compiled in criminal investigations due to corruption.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> United States Agency for International Development, "Honduras Country Assistance Strategy: Fiscal Years 2009-2013." The strategy refers to the "Mérida Initiative" regularly in relation to security issues, given that it was drafted while the program was still known by this name.

<sup>86</sup> These problems are also reiterated in Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issue for Congress," Congressional Research Service, May 7, 2013.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 14, 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Hector Silva Avalos, "The United States and Central America's Northern Tier: The Ongoing Disconnect," Inter-American Dialogue Central America Security Working Paper, March 2014, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, February-March 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Vetted units and their role in CARSI's strategy in Honduras are discussed in more detail below.



Beyond the risks of criminal infiltration, the 2009-2013 CAS and the author’s interviews with U.S. officials did identify a variety of other institutional and capacity-related weaknesses that undermine Honduras’ ability to address crime and violence. The CAS addresses institutional weakness in broad terms, pointing to poor training and a lack of equipment as serious problems.<sup>92</sup> Interviews suggested additional problems, such as confusion caused by overlapping mandates for criminal investigations in at least four different law enforcement institutions, low education levels among police, a lack of basic equipment (such as police uniforms), minimal long-term institutional planning capacity, and a simple (but drastic) shortage of personnel in the police force.<sup>93</sup>

<b>CARSI Institutional Reform and Institutional Strengthening Projects in Honduras</b>				
<b>Police</b>	<b>Fiscalia/PM</b>	<b>Judiciary</b>	<b>Prisons</b>	<b>Other Law Enforcement - Based Prevention</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support for Honduran National Police Financial Crimes Task Force and the Violent Crimes Task Force</li> <li>- Courses on Human Rights and on basic and advanced investigation at the Honduran Criminal Investigative School</li> <li>- Support police-reform laws</li> <li>- Improve Honduran National Police internal affairs and support establishment of Administrative Division as well as Intelligence, Computer Forensics, Fugitive Recovery, and Monitoring and Evaluation Units</li> <li>- Model Police Precinct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional legal adviser to enhance prosecutorial capacity of Trafficking in Persons investigations</li> <li>- Assist with justice reform strategy</li> <li>- Advance professional responsibility policies and procedures</li> <li>- Support cross-organization collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anti-gang-focused capacity building</li> <li>- Increase collaboration with the police and the Public Ministry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthen local and national violence observatories</li> </ul>

Sources: U.S. Department of State, “FY 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Spending Plan: Mexico, Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic,” n.d.; U.S. Department of State, “FY 2009 Appropriations Spending Plan: Mexico, Central America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic,” n.d.; U.S. Department of State, “FY 2010 Appropriations Spending Plan: Central America—Central America Regional Security Initiative,” n.d.; U.S. Department of State, “Congressional Notification Transmittal Sheet,” August 11, 2011; U.S. Department of State, “Fiscal Year 2012 Congressional Spending Plan: Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI),” n.d.; U.S. Department of State, “FY 2013 Spend Plan—Central America Regional Security Initiative,” September 10, 2013; and U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, “CARSI INL Supported Projects Outline,” April 16, 2014.

Finally, the Country Assistance Strategy (which is not limited to security issues) and U.S. officials noted a number of other basic problems that guide U.S. policy in Honduras. Low trust in public security institutions and a lack of accountability and rule of law feature prominently among those problems acknowledged in relation

<sup>92</sup> USAID, “Honduras Country Assistance Strategy,” 7.

<sup>93</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, February-April 2014.

to security and justice sector institutions.<sup>94</sup>

Gangs also present a significant challenge for the country's security, controlling many urban areas and serving as the "foot soldiers of the drug trade."<sup>95</sup> Their control of neighborhoods leaves youth in many *barrios* with the choice of staying indoors or joining the gangs right outside their doors (a problem cited by officials).<sup>96</sup> Gangs, in addition to other organized criminal activities, represent a major component of the country's violence problems, and thus efforts to target their existence and operations feature prominently in the strategy.

The complex problems identified by the 2009-2013 CAS lead to the important conclusion at the document's end that "Peace and Security and the need for the Government of Honduras...to address problems such as drug and weapons trafficking, decreasing gang activities, and improving the Honduran police is the number one priority."<sup>97</sup> Five years later, this "number one" status continues to define and guide U.S. identification of problems and policy in Honduras, given the ongoing gravity of the country's problems.

### **The Three Pillars of CARSI-Honduras: Law Enforcement, Capacity-building, and Prevention**

In order to combat crime and violence, reduce drug trafficking, and strengthen institutions, the United States employs a strategy with three main pillars that seeks to address these problems at various levels. While this three-pronged approach is not explicitly stated in the 2009-2013 CAS, at least one document summarizing Honduran CARSI aid and one U.S. official defined the strategy in this way, and it accurately reflects the various aspects of CARSI implementation in Honduras.<sup>98</sup>

The law enforcement pillar of U.S. CARSI strategy in Honduras contains two components that often overlap, yet represent distinct elements of the strategy: drug interdiction and vetted law enforcement units.<sup>99</sup> Although the aggregation of CARSI budget reporting makes it difficult to determine the specific funding amounts for these items, it is reasonable to assume they are at the core of CARSI's Honduras strategy, given the weight placed on these issues in the CAS and in interviews with U.S. officials. Such attention is also expected given the perception among

<sup>94</sup> USAID, "Honduras Country Assistance Strategy," 4-5.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>96</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, March-April 2014.

<sup>97</sup> USAID, "Honduras Country Assistance Strategy," 38.

<sup>98</sup> Author interview with U.S. official, February 14, 2014. See also U.S. Department of State, "The Future of CARSI in Honduras," March 12, 2012, [http://photos.state.gov/libraries/honduras/23248/pol/carsifuturehn\\_eng.pdf](http://photos.state.gov/libraries/honduras/23248/pol/carsifuturehn_eng.pdf).

These three areas are also identified in Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issue for Congress," May 7, 2013.

<sup>99</sup> A vetted unit is a law enforcement body whose members have been investigated by U.S. authorities for ties to corruption or human rights abuses, have been the recipient of a U.S.-applied polygraph task, and work with the aid of U.S. law enforcement advisers.

some that CARSI is merely “the sum of already existing bilateral programs... masterminded mainly from the law enforcement perspective and focused heavily on drug interdiction, repression of youth gangs, counter-narcotics intelligence sharing, and the strengthening of military, naval, and air force equipment.”<sup>100</sup>

This reality seems to hold especially true in Honduras, where not only federal agencies such as the FBI, DEA, and the Department of Homeland Security have vetted units (not unlike in other high-crime, high-violence countries), but where the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) section of the Embassy also oversees a number of task forces (similar to, but distinct from vetted units) to investigate and prosecute crimes.<sup>101</sup> These units primarily respond to the problems of violence and drugs by investigating and prosecuting crimes and thereby contribute to lower levels of crime and the reduction of impunity. They are generally comprised of prosecutors and vetted police officers, as well as U.S. and other foreign advisers (mainly Colombians) who help to guide the process of investigation and prosecution. Vetted units also receive material support to ensure their capacity to resolve cases. In Honduras, a number of different vetted units and/or task forces are currently in operation under the supervision of the following agencies:

- FBI
- Drug Enforcement Agency
- Department of Homeland Security/ICE
- Customs and Border Protection
- State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Violent Crimes Task Force (formerly Special Victims Task Force)
  - Financial Crimes Task Force (with support from the Office of Technical Assistance of the U.S. Treasury Department)<sup>102</sup>
  - National Anti-Gang Unit

These units respond to various criminal activities in Honduras, though the emphasis tends to be on high impact crimes or organized criminal activity. Although the long-term goal is a “feeder-system” in which vetted units provide an opportunity for building institutional capacity, personnel turnover in these vetted units is very low.<sup>103</sup>

Another major aspect of law enforcement activities in Honduras is the specific focus on drug interdiction. While some of this aid comes through non-CARSI sources such as support given through U.S. Southern Command, vetted units and

<sup>100</sup> Hector Silva Avalos, “The United States and Central America’s Northern Tier,” 12.

<sup>101</sup> According to a U.S. official, this is mandate that is unique to INL in Honduras.

<sup>102</sup> U.S. Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “CARSI INL Supported Projects Outline,” April 16, 2014, (unpublished document obtained from INL for this paper). Also confirmed in interviews with a U.S. official, February 14 and 26, 2014.

<sup>103</sup> Interviews with U.S. official and Honduran police officials, February-March 2014.

equipment are important CARSI contributions.<sup>104</sup> A 2012 document detailing some of CARSI's initiatives in Honduras refers to a Joint Maritime Vetted Unit that was the recipient of 20 refurbished go-fast boats, as well as other equipment, as a part of narcotics interdiction efforts. It also points to the training of 100 border agents as an important step in improving the ability to intercept drugs in Honduras.<sup>105</sup> Other operations, such as the aforementioned operations against *Chepe* Handal, the *Cachiros*, and the "Negro" Lobo (operations supported by U.S. vetted units) also reveal the preeminent role drug-related issues play in CARSI-Honduras strategy.<sup>106</sup>

Capacity building of Honduran law enforcement institutions is the second major pillar of CARSI strategy in Honduras. One important element of this strategy is the use of vetted units. In theory these units serve to professionalize a select group of Honduran officers who receive specialized training and thereby can demonstrate their ability to undertake sensitive operations effectively. Additionally, it is believed that the carefully selected and specially trained members of the vetted unit will have a positive influence on their institutions when they leave they return to their normal duties. But some question whether vetted units contribute to institutional strengthening as a whole.<sup>107</sup> There is no documented empirical evidence that would support the contention that Honduran members of U.S. vetted units have returned to their original law enforcement agencies to have an impact on the institutions' professionalism and functioning.<sup>108</sup> Further, beyond this "positive influence" ideal, it is not clear what the actual strategy is to use vetted units as a means to larger institutional reform. Neither U.S. nor Honduran officials appeared to be clear on what this "institutional reform" strategy aspect of vetted units is or how it is to be brought about, further bringing into question whether such impact actually exists.

Beyond the vetted units, training programs and the presence of Colombian and other foreign security advisers are additional elements intended to address the problems of institutional weakness and low capacity identified by the Country Assistance Strategy and U.S. officials.<sup>109</sup> For example, in the area of training, the U.S. started a Criminal Investigation School with Colombian instructors that provides basic and specialized classes to not only police and prosecutors, but also to judg-

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<sup>104</sup> Among other things, U.S. Southern Command has provided support in interdicting drugs via the U.S. airbase at Soto Cano, in outlining drug-flight patterns for the Honduran government, and in strengthening maritime interdiction efforts through the presence of destroyers in the region. For more, see Thom Shanker, "Lessons of Iraq Help U.S. Fight a Drug War in Honduras," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/world/americas/us-turns-its-focus-on-drug-smuggling-in-honduras.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/world/americas/us-turns-its-focus-on-drug-smuggling-in-honduras.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). See also "Con buques de guerra de EEUU combatirán a narcos en Honduras," *El Heraldo*, March 13, 2014, 10.

<sup>105</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The Future of CARSI in Honduras."

<sup>106</sup> Parkinson, "\$800 Mn Cachiros Seizure 'End of Phase One': Honduras Police."

<sup>107</sup> Interview with former Honduran police officials, February 20 and March 27, 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Specifically, no studies or reviews were made available to show the impact officers have upon the institution after leaving their unit. Most likely, such studies simply do not exist because police officers rarely leave the vetted units they are in, suggesting that a broader impact upon the institution is highly unlikely.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 14 and 26, 2014. For a more in-depth look and understanding of the use of Colombian advisers in Honduras and other CARSI beneficiaries, see Arlene B. Tickner, "Colombia, the United States, and Security Cooperation by Proxy," The Washington Office on Latin America, May 2014, <http://www.wola.org/files/140318ti.pdf>.

es, border officials, and firefighters.<sup>110</sup> The United States also provided support for Colombian experts to advise and strengthen the new Directorate for Investigation and Evaluation of the Police Career (DIECP), an independent unit created to investigate and vet police officers. This support was later suspended due to frustrations over the pace of efforts to improve police vetting.<sup>111</sup>

Further, U.S. and Colombian advisers help to strengthen both the police and Public Ministry by drawing on their own experience and training, and imparting it to the Hondurans with whom they work. Interviews and documents obtained by the author reveal 75-80 Colombians are on site in Honduras serving with various agencies, as well as to help the Ministry of Security and police directors draft a new law and regulations for the police force.<sup>112</sup> Other examples of Colombian support will be discussed in further detail throughout this chapter, including training and advising special units.

The final pillar of CARSI strategy in Honduras consists of a wide range of prevention programs overseen by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (and in some instances supported by INL). According to both an internal USAID paper and a U.S. official providing a general overview of CARSI projects managed by USAID in Honduras, a number of “levels” of prevention exist that help conceptualize the institution’s prevention work.<sup>113</sup> The first level of prevention is that of “primary prevention,” or “universal, population- and location-based programs for youth and families in high-risk areas.”<sup>114</sup> In Honduras, this form of prevention comes through youth outreach centers that operate in many of the nation’s highest-risk neighborhoods. The centers are the first point of entry for USAID into the violent communities they target, and offer a number of programs and services to the community’s youth, such as internet cafes, soccer fields, and gyms as a means to keep youth off the streets, and hopefully, out of gangs. Other CARSI programs which fit under this “primary prevention scheme” include the GREAT program (The Gang Resistance Education and Training Program is drug-prevention program akin to DARE in the U.S., and is administered by INL, not USAID), alternative education programs and teen pregnancy programs, which seek to address the lack of opportunities for youth to find work, as well as the alarmingly high

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<sup>110</sup> U.S. Department of State, “The Future of CARSI in Honduras” and interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014. Since its inception in May 2011, the school has trained “2924 police, prosecutors, judges and other security actors in over 27 different skill areas.” U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “Criminal Investigation School Fact Sheet,” n.d. (unpublished document obtained by author).

<sup>111</sup> Russell Sheptak, “US suspends aid to Honduras police cleanup,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2013/0606/US-suspends-aid-to-Honduras-police-cleanup>.

<sup>112</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials February-March 2014 and documents obtained by author, listing Colombian police advisers and their assignments within the country’s police force from May 2013. Over the course of the Colombian support program in Honduras, nearly 200 Colombian National Police officers have provided assistance to Honduras. Email correspondence with U.S. official, July 1, 2014.

<sup>113</sup> USAID, “Non-paper on Crime Prevention,” (unpublished document, n.d.). Interview with U.S. official, March 2014.

<sup>114</sup> USAID, “Non-paper on Crime Prevention,” 1.



teen pregnancy rates that creates a youthful, but volatile, population.<sup>115</sup>

“Secondary prevention” more selectively identifies and seeks to address the risks associated with individuals who are very likely to become engaged in criminal activity. The YSET (Youth Services Eligibility Tool), currently a small pilot project in Honduras, provides a good example of such prevention. Essentially, it helps to identify whether youth are in danger of joining gangs or other criminal bands, and outlines a family intervention plan for those whose situation is judged precarious.<sup>116</sup> The tool, originally deployed with success in Los Angeles, is just being launched in Honduras; consequently, its results and success remain to be seen. An implementing organization in Honduras noted that few secondary programs are currently being employed in Honduras, representing a definite area for future strengthening.<sup>117</sup>

A third level of prevention, known as “tertiary prevention” seeks to address issues of juvenile justice and recidivism among offenders. USAID has sought to improve prevention at this level through reforms to the juvenile penal code and a restorative justice program for juveniles that provides alternatives to prison (which, according to many Hondurans, are prime gang-recruiting grounds). Another program seeks to prevent adults from reoffending by providing both group counseling and job opportunities or loans to open small businesses.<sup>118</sup>

Finally, “situational prevention” is built on the premise that a “built environment can not only deter crime but also effectively increase public perception of security.”<sup>119</sup> USAID possesses a small program in this area, seeking to strengthen municipal governance and community participation as a means to encourage use of public spaces, rather than turning them over to gangs, a problem noted in the Country Assistance Strategy.<sup>120</sup>

USAID’s Honduras strategy also includes additional programs that do not fit immediately within this prevention framework, but may be more properly labeled what the internal paper calls “Rule of Law and Citizen Security Policies.” In this respect, the Office of Transitional Initiatives within USAID and INL have launched a community-policing program in Tegucigalpa along with Japan’s development agency that is to function as a “model precinct.” A U.S. official noted that this program was important given the distrust Hondurans have in the police (a problem also noted in the CAS), and that it seeks to “build a bridge” between the police and community to help resolve this.<sup>121</sup> Through a three to four day training course that touches on issues from how to treat citizens to the use of statistics and planning, the program looks to both improve policing and citizen trust at the local level.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>115</sup> USAID, “Honduras Country Assistance Strategy,” 3.

<sup>116</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials and representatives of implementing partner organizations, April 2014.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with an implementing organization director, April 2, 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> USAID, “Non-paper on Crime Prevention,” 2.

<sup>120</sup> USAID, “Country Assistance Strategy,” 7.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Also based on interview with U.S. official, February 14, 2014.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

USAID officials noted that some of these programs, such as YSET, have been or remain pilot projects (for example, YSET began in October 2013), but are likely to form a more integral part of the new consolidated strategy the agency is developing. Of similar importance is the fact that these programs employ a coordinated geographical focus, a fact that U.S. officials sought to make clear. According to these officials, outreach centers serve as a gateway into violent communities, and open the door to coordinate the provision of other services, such as teen pregnancy programs or alternative education.<sup>123</sup> Implementing partners interviewed by the author noted that they worked in specific “CARSI” communities, and sought to coordinate their efforts and services with the other organizations working with CARSI by inviting them to events or using outreach center facilities.<sup>124</sup>

### **What are CARSI’s expected results in Honduras?**

The 2009-2013 CAS lists a number of expected results that are directly related to many of the projects described above. The stated goals include increased transparency and better rule of law, as well as helping to form a more “accepted and respected [police] force.”<sup>125</sup> Other CAS goals focus on improving law enforcement capacities and results, such as better police investigation and intelligence, improved police communications, better-trained police officers, and the interception of illicit drugs.<sup>126</sup> Through USAID’s prevention efforts, CARSI seeks to build “strong and resilient communities that can withstand the pressures of crime and violence.”<sup>127</sup> Specifically U.S. officials added a number of desired and complementary results, including the lowering of crime rates in the short term, helping to prevent high-risk youth from entering gangs, lowering recidivism among offenders, building capacity for community organizing and project management in target neighborhoods, providing skills that youths can use to find employment, and building partnerships with the private sector and government so as to promote long-term sustainability.<sup>128</sup> These desired results, as well as the above programs, are also to be understood within the larger five-goal CARSI framework.

### **CARSI in Honduras: A Strategy in the Making?**

The United States’ CARSI strategy in Honduras clearly includes a wide variety of activities centered on the core idea of improving citizen security. Encouragingly, these efforts respond to many levels of needs: law enforcement, institutional reform, prevention, and community building, among others. \$16.5 million was designated for USAID-run projects in both fiscal years 2012 and 2013, suggesting that

<sup>123</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.

<sup>124</sup> Interviews with implementing partner organizations, April 2014.

<sup>125</sup> USAID, “Country Assistance Strategy,” 8.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8.

<sup>127</sup> “Honduras/CARSI Performance Management Plan,” (an unpublished USAID document provided to the author by the USAID mission in Honduras).

<sup>128</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, February-March 2014. See also “Honduras/CARSI Performance Management Plan.”

prevention is not mere rhetoric in Honduras—it represents an important and significant aspect of U.S. policy in the country.<sup>129</sup> USAID’s projects showed evidence of coordination between organizations and along geographical lines, although this certainly can be improved. This effort to approach problems of violence in a holistic should be noted and commended—while recognizing that much room for improvement remains.

Yet this framework and holistic approach belies a reality that was made evident both in interviews and in looking at CARSI’s implementation in Honduras. This reality is what Hector Silva identifies as CARSI’s “piecemeal approach:” the crafting together of various existing programs into one overall funding stream called CARSI, but without a rigorous strategy to make it especially effective.<sup>130</sup> In interviews, U.S. officials suggested a similar understanding of CARSI’s beginning back in 2008 as the Mexico-focused Mérida Initiative: a funding stream for existing projects and new projects with a general focus on citizen security, but without an integral strategy.<sup>131</sup>

This lack of overall strategy presents a major problem not only for CARSI in Honduras, but also for the overall initiative. Five years in, common goals and programs are well-established, but an overarching and comprehensive strategy oriented towards the reduction of crime and violence and improvement in citizen security appears to be lacking. A disconnect seems to exist between the law enforcement and capacity building aspects discussed above, given that those serving in vetted units rarely leave to form a regular part of the institution that employs them. Further, despite the assertion that weekly meetings are held to coordinate efforts between INL, USAID, and others, it remained unclear how the offices coordinate on strategy in order to make CARSI more effective (beyond trying to build a “model precinct”). How such meetings and reporting on individual projects foster cooperation and produce a set of joint priorities based on shared analysis of the Honduran circumstances and capacities is even less clear, suggesting that integrated coordination and cooperation across projects is limited.

U.S. strategy in Honduras, beyond these internal difficulties, also faces marked challenges regarding compatibility with the Honduran government’s strategy and priorities for citizen security. Consensus between the U.S. government and the Honduran government and agreement on priorities appears to diverge in some areas and coincide in others (an understandable reality), presenting difficulties for certain aspects of U.S. CARSI programming.<sup>132</sup> The recent public disagreement

<sup>129</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Fiscal Year 2012 Congressional Spending Plan: Central America Regional Security Initiative,” September 9, 2012; U.S. Department of State, “FY 2013 Spend Plan—Central America Regional Security Initiative,” September 10, 2013.

<sup>130</sup> Hector Silva Avalos, “The United States and Central America’s Northern Tier,” 22.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 26, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> In an interview, Minister of Security Arturo Corrales openly noted this fact, saying that because they work and come from different contexts, the U.S. and Honduras at times understand things differently. As an example, the Minister pointed to the controversy over the shoot-down of airplanes and U.S. support of airborne

over Honduras' new law authorizing the shoot-down of suspected drug flights and the subsequent U.S. suspension of facilitating radar data highlight this departure from the "close cooperation" that has often characterized relations.<sup>133</sup> One U.S. official also expressed concern that the Honduran government does not place sufficient emphasis on improving and reforming its police, leading to a lack of clarity over where U.S. CARSI funding will best have an impact.<sup>134</sup> In other areas though, the Honduran government appears to be adopting, if not wholeheartedly embracing, programs first pushed by USAID. The government of Honduras recently promised \$1 million of its own money to open ten new community outreach centers, while local governments and organizations have taken it upon themselves to help sustain others, thus pointing to an instance of government willingness to expand a prevention program it views as successful.<sup>135</sup> Even so, the government's long-term commitment to sustaining prevention projects is unclear. The \$1 million designated for outreach centers comes from a discretionary fund, rather than Congressionally-established long-term funding, and the many other projects funded by USAID do not necessarily have potential sponsors to continue funding their work.

This suggests a deeper problem that the CARSI strategy does not address but may which ultimately determine the effectiveness of CARSI in Honduras: political will. Rachel Kleinfeld convincingly argues that the successful rule-of-law assistance in developing nations depends, in part, on the country's broader political context and the willingness of authorities to elevate respect for the rule-of-law above the narrow privileges of economic and political elites. In the context of Honduras, then, technical assistance programs such as support for security and justice sector reform and professionalization must be placed within the broader political context, especially given the apparent unwillingness of authorities to address basic problems.<sup>136</sup>

In particular, reliance on vetted units to tackle sensitive cases, an unwillingness to vet the police, and limited Honduran government commitment to prevention programs suggests that the political conditions do not yet exist to create a lasting and sustainable rule of law through U.S. aid. For example, internal and external mechanisms to combat corruption within and abuse by the police are weak and have not received the political commitment necessary to force a genuine purge of the institution, bring about legal and structural reforms, while regular and reliable support from the Honduran Congress for prevention programs have not materialized. Failing to address these issues means that CARSI's efforts are both isolated in time (they occur while funding exists) and unsustainable over the long term, due to both funding limitations and a lack of attention to corruption. As CARSI moves

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helicopter operations to capture drugs landing in Honduras from illegal drug flights. Interview with Minister of Security Arturo Corrales, April 29, 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issue for Congress," 28.

<sup>134</sup> Interviews with U.S. official, February-March 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.

<sup>136</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld, *Advancing the Rule of Law Abroad: Next Generation Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 30.

past its first five years and plans for another five years strategy are under consideration, U.S. officials must prioritize the difficult task of encouraging Honduras to demonstrate the political will to undertake fundamental reforms that will increase accountability, root out corruption, and elevate the importance of the rule of law.

In the next section, we will look more closely at one program from each of the CARSI's pillars: law enforcement, capacity-building, and prevention, pointing to both success and challenges for these programs in improving Honduran public security.

## **“TASK FORCES” AND VETTED UNITS IN HONDURAS: INVESTIGATION IN ISOLATION?**

### **The Importance of Vetted Units and Task Forces in Honduras**

The “task force” plays a central role in Honduras’ CARSI funding, and represents an innovation on a much older and commonly used way of supporting law enforcement efforts in Latin America: the vetted unit. Both types of units seek to improve the operational capacity of Honduran law enforcement agencies by building specialized units to carry out sensitive operations, while also improving the institution’s overall capacity overtime by rotating personnel in and out of the special units. In Honduras, the *fuerza de tarea* (task force) has emerged as a defining feature of such efforts, with at least two such units created in 2011 and 2012 with CARSI support (via INL). Their unique attributes and visible role in Honduras make them an important area of focus for understanding CARSI’s impact in Honduras.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand the structure and definition of vetted units and task forces. Both types of units possess two defining characteristics: 1) they are “vetted and polygraphed units,” and 2) they receive the assistance and support of U.S. advisers to conduct their operations.<sup>137</sup> Generally speaking, these units operate under specific mandates to investigate and resolve certain types of crime, and receive support from individual U.S. government agencies on the basis of the type of crime the unit investigates.<sup>138</sup> To better understand the specific differences between vetted units and a task force in definition and in practice, see Text Box 1.

As was highlighted in the section on strategy, a number of vetted units and task forces exist in Honduras to target various but sometimes overlapping areas of high impact crime. Of particular importance are the Violent Crimes Task Force and the Financial Crimes Task Force, given their focus on major problems in Honduras as well as their recent formation.

<sup>137</sup> See U.S. Department of State, “CARSI INL Supported Projects Outline.”

<sup>138</sup> Interview conducted by Eric Olson with U.S. officials, March 28, 2014.



### Text Box 1: Vetted Units and Task Forces

U.S. support to Honduran law enforcement units generally takes two forms: the “vetted unit” and the “unit that is vetted,” also known as the “task force.” While they share some similarities, there are also significant differences:

- Level of U.S. involvement:
  - Vetted units can be “defined as vetted and polygraphed units that conduct[s] police operations with a U.S. law enforcement advisor.”<sup>139</sup>
  - A “unit that is vetted” (a category that includes task forces) can be “defined as vetted and polygraphed units that receive[s] the assistance of a U.S. advisor and/or training, but do not conduct police operations.”<sup>140</sup>
  - The subtle difference in wording here marks an important difference: task force advisers participate in field activities less directly and frequently than their vetted unit adviser counterparts.<sup>141</sup>
- Ratio of local law enforcement personnel to U.S. advisers:
  - Department of State guidelines specify an “ideal” ratio of 1 U.S. law enforcement adviser to 15 officers in a vetted unit.<sup>142</sup>
  - There is no established ratio for a task force, which may be larger and made up of representatives from several Honduran agencies. Task forces may include one or more U.S. advisers who do not participate directly in operations.
- Agencies involved:
  - Vetted units include only police investigators and members of the prosecutor’s office.
  - Task forces tend to involve multiple law enforcement agencies.
    - For example, in Honduras, the Financial Crimes Task Force includes members of the police, the National Banks and Insurance Commission, and the Public Ministry. It also works closely with members of the Office of Administration of Seized Goods and Honduras’ financial crimes judge.<sup>143</sup>

Despite these differences, in both cases, the units pursue similar goals including ensuring results in criminal investigations and prosecutions, in theory helping to provide an example that stimulates reform and better performance in the institution as a whole.<sup>144</sup>

The Violent Crimes Task Force was created in 2011 to focus on crimes affecting the historically vulnerable LGBT population, which, in the wake of Honduras’ 2009

<sup>139</sup> U.S. Department of State, “CARSI INL Supported Projects Outline.”

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> This was also noted in interview conducted by Eric Olson with U.S. officials, March 28, 2014.

<sup>142</sup> This advised ratio can be found in a U.S. State Department cable entitled “INL Vetted Unit Support Policy.” This information was facilitated by a State Department official, May 29, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with U.S. official, March 19, 2014.

<sup>144</sup> Interview conducted by Eric Olson with U.S. officials, March 28, 2014.

coup had experienced a noticeable increase in homicides.<sup>145</sup> The task force began with three police investigators and help from one member of the Public Ministry, with the support of two U.S. advisers: a Chicago homicide detective and a former state and federal prosecutor.<sup>146</sup> Over the next few years the unit expanded, adding additional detectives and prosecutors from the Public Ministry, as well as both Colombian and U.S. advisers. The expansion of membership (now up to at least 42 individuals) led to an expanding mandate. By January 2014, the task force officially became the “Violent Crimes Task Force,” and now investigates the murders of LGBT persons, journalist, as well as of foreigners and other “high-profile” murders where help is requested by the Honduran government.<sup>147</sup>

The formation and growth of the Financial Crimes Task Force reflects a similar trajectory. Following the passage of a new asset forfeiture law in 2010, INL sought ways to improve the Honduran government’s ability to prosecute such cases and manage seized assets. The first major aspect in this regard concerned the Office of Administration of Seized Goods (Oficina Administradora de Bienes Incautados, or OABI in Spanish), an office that U.S. officials now assert is a regional example due to its excellent performance.<sup>148</sup> The Financial Crimes Task Force was launched soon thereafter in order to train personnel and improve Honduran capacity to enforce the country’s new asset forfeiture law. Thus, at the outset, the work of the task force focused on work in the Asset Forfeiture Division of the Organized Crime Office in the Public Ministry, but when the office was merged to form a larger financial crimes unit within the Organized Crime Office, this mandate grew to include money laundering and tax crimes.<sup>149</sup> The task force appears to be more diversified than other vetted units, with a focus on work in the Public Ministry, but also includes at least 12 police officers and some members of the Financial Investigation Unit of the National Banks and Insurance Commission (Comisión Nacional de Bancos y Seguros).<sup>150</sup> The unit also benefits from the help of 16 different foreign advisers—one from the U.S. and a number of Colombians and Costa Ricans.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Jordan Baber, “LGBT community in Honduras, invisible no more,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 11, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2013/0311/LGBT-community-in-Honduras-invisible-no-more>.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* Also verified in an interview with Public Ministry prosecutor, May 6, 2014.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with U.S. official, March 19, 2014. According to the official, this office has greatly improved its management of assets, in large part by taking and maintaining a full inventory of what it has seized (and continues to seized). Its 27 members are vetted, and work with the aid of a full-time U.S. adviser. Asset management has also improved when it concerns cash; money that may have disappeared immediately into the hands of government officials before is now put on deposit with the bank to earn interest until court cases are decided, after which the money is used to strengthen law enforcement and prevention efforts in the country. Finally, the office is completely self-sustainable—likely the only office of seized goods in Latin America to be so, according to the same U.S. official.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<b>Vetted Units Supported by CARSI in Honduras</b>		
<b>Police/FBI</b>	<b>DEA</b>	<b>DHS/ICE</b>
Honduran Anti-Gang Unit (FBI vetted unit)	DEA-SIU vetted unit	DHS vetted unit

Source: Created based on information from U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "CARSI INL Supported Projects," April 16, 2014.

In general, the CARSI-supported task forces operate with similar structures and work practices. Advisers—U.S., Colombian, and otherwise—aid the work of the task forces at various levels. First, embedded advisers work day to day alongside the police officers and prosecutors investigating the cases taken by these special units. Interviewed officials made clear that these foreign advisers do not participate directly in investigations or operations. Nevertheless, U.S. advisers can accompany the police in the field, observing their activities and strengthening their investigative work. On the basis of these observations, they can provide advice to Honduran members of the task force and help to walk the unit through cases. But U.S. officials interviewed for this report asserted that neither the advisers nor their U.S. superiors choose which cases the task forces investigate.<sup>152</sup> Honduran officials supported this claim, although one noted that the United States obviously has an interest in what cases are being investigated (as does the Honduran government).<sup>153</sup> Above the embedded advisers are higher-ranking U.S. INL officials who also provide support and advice to the units, and coordinate the CARSI support provided to them via the INL section of the U.S. Embassy. On the Honduran side of things, a police officer with the rank of *Comisario*, roughly equivalent to a captain or precinct commander, acts as a liaison between the vetted units and the Director General of the Police, and the units are under this officer's supervision.<sup>154</sup>

Select members of the Honduran civilian police or Public Ministry investigators (and at times, new recruits) form the ranks of these task forces.<sup>155</sup> Depending on the unit, prosecutors may or may not receive full-time assignments to task forces: in the Financial Crimes Task Force, prosecutors are not assigned to the unit full-time, while in the Violent Crimes Task Force prosecutors receive permanent, exclusive assignments to the unit.<sup>156</sup> In order to become part of a task force, all personnel must undergo thorough vetting and background investigation, although only those carrying a weapon (generally, the police) must complete the more rigorous Leahy vetting requirements (see Text Box 2 for more information regarding the vetting process).<sup>157</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 26, 2014. In large part, this was corroborated in interviews with Honduran officials.

<sup>153</sup> Interviews with Public Ministry officials, April 23, April 25, and May 7, 2014. As a further example to support this point, a prosecutor working with the Violent Crimes Task Force asserted that that the task force's mandate was clear, and that "high impact" cases that were assigned to the unit were decided by the Public Ministry, and not by interference from U.S. officials.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Director General of the National Police of Honduras, Ramón Sabillón, May 6, 2014.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014. The official explained doing so would not be justified, given that those prosecutors would have a significantly lower caseload than their counterparts.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

### **Text Box 2: Vetting in Honduras and the Leahy Law**

As is the case with all countries receiving U.S. security assistance, stringent vetting requirements, commonly known as the Leahy Law provisions, are in place for aid to the Honduran security sector.<sup>158</sup> In the specific case of Honduras, the government conducts its own vetting process for potential recipients of U.S. security assistance. This may include testing (such as polygraph or drug tests) and a background check for possible abuses or human rights violations. The U.S. Embassy conducts a second review, checking for reports or intelligence information linking the candidate to possible involvement in criminal activity or violations of human rights. Finally, the Department of State in Washington, using databases and information collected there, run a final check before allowing the officer to become a recipient of U.S. aid—in this case, CARSI aid.<sup>159</sup> Once vetted, officers are deemed eligible to receive various forms of U.S. assistance, such as material support, participating in a vetted unit, or receiving training such as attending the Criminal Investigation School.

Once the vetting process reaches completion, approved officers benefit from a wide variety of U.S. support offered to the Violent Crimes and Financial Crimes Task Forces. CARSI funds provide logistical equipment, such as vehicles, computers, phones, cameras, and other items for the task forces (including money to cover travel expenses on investigations), a means of aid that one U.S. official described as an “untraditional” role for INL.<sup>160</sup> These resources meet important needs for the units given that the Honduran government rarely provides the logistical material police investigators need to perform their work.<sup>161</sup> As a result, and in contrast to their counterparts assigned to National Directorate for Criminal Investigation (Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal—DNIC), the investigative arm of the police, task force members have at their disposal all the equipment they need to conduct an investigation.<sup>162</sup> This equipment belongs exclusively to the task force, and the presence of U.S. advisers helps to ensure that it does not leave the task force or fall into the hands of non-vetted police officers.<sup>163</sup> A former Honduran police official who worked closely with the Violent Crimes Task Force underscored

<sup>158</sup> For a detailed review and understanding of the Leahy vetting process, see Nina M. Serafino et al, “‘Leahy Law’ Human Rights Provisions and Security Assistance: Issue Overview,” Congressional Research Service, January 29, 2014, 7-12. For more detailed information on the specific human rights conditions placed on U.S. aid to Honduras, see Peter J. Meyer, “Honduras-U.S. Relations,” May 30, 2014, 20-22.

<sup>159</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 26, 2014 and interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014. For examples of this type of support, see U.S. Department of State, “The Future of CARSI in Honduras” from March 2012, describing some of the logistical equipment offered to Honduran law enforcement bodies. According to the U.S. official, this type of INL assistance is in large part unique to Honduras.

<sup>161</sup> Such support was identified as important in interviews with Police Director General Ramón Sabillón and Public Ministry officials, April 23 and 25, May 6 and 7, 2014.

<sup>162</sup> Director General Ramón Sabillón noted repeatedly in his interview with the author that a lack of resources was a fundamental and central problem of the police’s weakness in Honduras, especially in the area of investigation. Interview with Director General Ramón Sabillón, May 6, 2014.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

this fact, saying that control and use of the U.S. funded equipment was strictly enforced and respected.<sup>164</sup> Despite this—and as is discussed in more detail below—the allocation of resources and benefits to vetted officers often generates resentment among police officers not receiving such aid, suggesting that isolated, rather than comprehensive, reform of the Honduran police institution is all that is occurring through such aid.

U.S. support also extends to formal trainings, beyond the logistical and advisory support detailed thus far. Once vetted, task force members can receive trainings via the Criminal Investigation School (discussed in the next section). The Financial Crimes Task Force has also received joint training with the various members of the task force—the Police, the Public Ministry, and the National Banks and Insurance Commission—as a means to strengthen coordination and cooperation between members.<sup>165</sup> A senior Public Ministry Official, police officials, and a former member of a vetted unit (not from a task force) who had attended trainings in Honduras and internationally affirmed that the trainings were high quality and beneficial.<sup>166</sup> Another Public Ministry official with close ties to the vetted units and task forces noted that training and advice provided by the Embassy did not always respond to the Honduran context and Honduran procedures, especially if those imparting the trainings or assessment had spent little time in Honduras. The official affirmed that longer term advisers provide much better assistance, given their long-term presence and understanding of the situation.<sup>167</sup>

Task force members and their work remain noticeably separate from the rest of police operations.<sup>168</sup> The aforementioned member of a vetted unit asserted that the U.S. Embassy in Honduras greatly distrusts the Honduran Police, which may contribute to the isolation characteristic of both vetted units and task forces in Honduras.<sup>169</sup> Task force members and advisers keep nearly all information regarding investigations internal, without disseminating information to outside members of the police. For example, a police officer working alongside the Violent Crimes Task Force noted that he usually did not know what cases the unit was working on (despite his position of authority), nor did he have control over the investigators that were theoretically under his command. Frequently, he found out about the status of investigations after the task force submitted an investigative report to the Public Ministry.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official, March 27, 2014.

<sup>165</sup> Interview with U.S. official, March 19, 2014.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official, February 20, 2014, interview with Public Ministry official, April 23, 2014, and interview with Director General Ramón Sabillón, May 5, 2014.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014.

<sup>168</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, March 18 and 19, 2014. This information was further verified through author email correspondence with U.S. officials on April 21, 2014. Public Ministry operations are not separate—they remain in the offices of the Public Ministry.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official from vetted unit, February 20, 2014.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official, March 27, 2014.



In part, this separation and guarded approach appears to be due to legitimate fears of corruption that are pervasive within the police—the same police officer from the vetted unit cited above again noted that he knew many fellow officers (outside the vetted unit) involved in organized crime, and that he treated all his personal and investigative information with special care, telling no one outside the vetted unit.<sup>171</sup> The separation, or quarantine of vetted units, also stems from the need for the units to focus on the delicate cases assigned to them, thus improving their ability to investigate thoroughly the criminal bands or groups selected for investigation.<sup>172</sup> Police members of task forces and vetted units apparently operate out of separately rented houses, where they remain isolated from the rest of the institution's work.<sup>173</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that turnover of task force personnel seldom occurs.<sup>174</sup> One U.S. official spoke of the vetted units and task forces creating a “feeder-system” in which officers would be provided two years of training to strengthen their law enforcement skills then would be returned to their non-vetted units where they would begin the training process again and have a positive professional influence on their particular law enforcement agency. But the evidence of this appears to be far different.<sup>175</sup>

A former vetted unit member noted that during his 19 months with the unit, not a single individual was rotated in or out except for himself.<sup>176</sup> Task force members receive an extra stipend in addition to their salary, and the added benefits of prestige and sufficient equipment make working for a vetted unit a desired post and difficult to give up.

Additionally the financial and professional benefits enjoyed by special unit members can also provoke jealousy among those within the broader law enforcement agency that do not receive similar benefits.<sup>177</sup> These factors, combined with the investment required to train and prepare police officers capable of undertaking the delicate investigations, create an incentive for little personnel turnover, and they bring into question the narrative that such units impact the larger transformation of the institutions in which they operate.

### **Task Force Impacts and Institutional Transformation: Success and Challenges for CARSI**

Vetted units and task forces have a mixed record in Honduras. While on the one hand they produce important and comparatively better results in criminal investigation, their impact on the larger institution—a stated goal of CARSI—is not evi-

<sup>171</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official from vetted unit, February 20, 2014.

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official, March 27, 2014.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with U.S. official, February 26, 2014.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official from vetted unit, February 20, 2014.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official, March 27, 2014.

dent. These realities are manifest both in publicly available statistics regarding cases falling under the mandate of the task forces studied here, and in the numerous interviews conducted with those working closely with the task forces.

To begin, it is undoubtedly true that the lack of personnel turnover, as well as the training and equipment characteristic of the task forces, ensures their increased capacity to investigate crimes relative to their non-vetted unit counterparts within the police. Public Ministry officials noted that investigations produced by the U.S. supported task forces and vetted units produced better investigations, although this is in part due to the fact that they simply have more time and people to dedicate to a smaller number of cases than their counterparts (see more on this below).<sup>178</sup> In this sense, task forces make an important contribution to building capacity, albeit in a manner isolated from the rest of the institution.

According to senior Honduran officials, the result has been increased criminal convictions, investigations into high-level organized criminal activities, and a reduction in impunity in high-stakes cases.<sup>179</sup> Since its inception, the Financial Crimes Task Force has won 41 out of 45 cases, addressing a long backlog of cases that were never investigated, while also taking on a number of new cases.<sup>180</sup> These successes further enhanced the unit's capacity to carry out investigations because of the public's growing confidence and willingness to confide in and aid units backed by the U.S. Embassy, thus building trust in law enforcement within the Honduran population. U.S. officials also pointed to a massive September 2013 operation against the *Cachiros*, a Honduran drug-trafficking organization, as an example of the success of task force units.<sup>181</sup> This operation, which was led by the Financial Crimes Task Force, produced the purported seizure of \$500 million in assets, and represents an important step towards addressing Honduran organized crime.<sup>182</sup> Public Ministry and police officials stated that without U.S. support, the investigation of recent sensitive cases such as those involving the *Cachiros* criminal network and the arrest of drug-trafficker "*Negro Lobo*" would simply not be possible, demonstrating that U.S. supported units produce important results in the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking.<sup>183</sup>

Finally, as was mentioned above, trainings help to build capacity and, in theory, promote institutional reform by spreading skills throughout the police and Public

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Public Ministry officials, April 25 and May 6, 2014.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Director General Ramón Sabillón, May 5, 2014. The former Honduran police official that served in a vetted unit asserted that his unit's work was definitely disrupting organized criminal activity within Honduras.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with U.S. official, March 19, 2014.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. A Public Ministry official also pointed to the case as an example of successful coordination between the U.S.-backed task forces and vetted units. Interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014.

<sup>182</sup> U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "Country Report, Honduras," *2014 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2014/vol1>.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014 and interview with Director General Ramón Sabillón, May 5, 2014.

Ministry. Yet because personnel rarely leave vetted units, the goal of using vetted units as a “feeder system” to transform the institution remains distant.<sup>184</sup>

On the other hand, the claimed results and impacts do not entirely coincide with external analysis and statistics. As discussed above, the isolation, the lack of information sharing, and the very low turnover in personnel make it difficult to understand how these units might have much effect beyond the cases they investigate and prosecute, reaffirming the narrative expressed by various Honduran police officers.<sup>185</sup> Further, intelligence and information produced in the course of task force investigations are not disseminated to other investigators, possibly impeding their work, or at the very least, slowing their progress.<sup>186</sup> Given regulations and requirements about who can benefit from U.S. aid, as well as legitimate concerns about leaking information to organized crime, the isolation and information sharing practices are understandable, and perhaps in many cases required by U.S. law. Yet, paradoxically, they may be inhibiting the police’s ability to investigate cases in some instances, worsening a cycle of impunity.

Further, these practices suggest a greater, more fundamental challenge to the hope that vetted units and task forces can contribute to institutional transformation: they operate in a vacuum, isolated from an institution plagued by both petty and high-level corruption. Reintegrating vetted officers into this corrupt environment presents a problem (to the point that it can endanger their lives). It may also be unrealistic to expect that reintegration will not affect their performance, and more significantly, their morals and relations with the public. This suggests the need for internal and external control mechanisms. Unfortunately, the U.S. has already tried to provide such support in Honduras, only to suspend it in May 2013 following disappointment with the results, due in large part to the lack of political will to address police corruption.<sup>187</sup>

Beyond this, the data pertaining to the cases overseen by the Violent Crimes and Financial Crimes Task Forces suggests that success in investigating and prosecuting actual cases is limited (although admittedly better than in non-vetted units). A report by Cattrachas, Honduras’ leading LGBT organization, paints a nuanced picture. Of the 120 homicides of LGBT people that have occurred since the 2009 coup, at least 33 cases have entered judicial proceedings, and nine cases have

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<sup>184</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>185</sup> Interviews with former Honduran police officials and with Public Ministry official, February 20, March 27, and April 25, 2014.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with former Honduran police official, March 27, 2014. For example, the police officer detailed an instance in which the FBI-led anti-gang unit came to help with an investigation, and simply showed up, took pictures, and left, without sharing any of the information with those charged with investigating the homicide that had taken place.

<sup>187</sup> Adriana Beltran and Geoff Thale, “Police Reform in Honduras: Stalled Efforts and the Need to Weed out Corruption,” Washington Office on Latin America, August 26, 2013, <http://www.wola.org/commentary/police-reform-in-honduras-stalled-efforts-and-the-need-to-weed-out-corruption>.

resulted in sentencing.<sup>188</sup> The organization concludes that “the results are undeniable, the investigations are having an effect, and impunity is lowering,” but it also notes that much remains to be done.<sup>189</sup> While these results reflect better performance than other parts of the Honduran justice and security system, they also show that the Violent Crimes Task Force is far from resolving all the cases that fall under its mandate, despite the fact that U.S. officials stated they now have the capacity to handle all LGBT cases.<sup>190</sup>

Cases of violence against journalists represent an even greater concern. The rate of impunity in homicide cases of journalists in Honduras remains high, despite the Violent Crimes Task Force’s expanded authority to investigate such cases. For example, the International Human Rights Program at Toronto University noted in an extensive report that since 2003 only nine arrests and two convictions have occurred for the 38 homicide cases in which Honduran journalists were victims.<sup>191</sup> Even accounting for convictions in two more cases since the report’s publication, the 95 percent impunity rate in such cases documented by the authors is alarming, and highlights the limited nature of the task force’s successes.<sup>192</sup>

In relation to the Financial Crimes Task Force, one particular case calls into question the success of the unit. In mid-September 2013, the Honduran government, in conjunction with the United States Embassy, announced a major operation against the drug-trafficking group *Los Cachiros*, which had been designated a significant narcotics trafficking group in accordance with the U.S. Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act earlier that year. The operation, led by the Financial Crimes Task Force, deployed hundreds of police officers, prosecutors, and other government officers in a multi-agency effort to seize the *Cachiros*’ assets.

Notably, however, the operation fell short in one important area. Some of the *Cachiros*’ 71 bank accounts frozen in the operation were later found to be completely empty, while other assets were removed from seized properties before the operation was conducted. According to the Director of OABI, these disappointing results likely resulted from a leak from within the police.<sup>193</sup> But as a U.S. official pointed out, the *Cachiros* operation deployed at least 200 individuals, providing ample opportunity for the powerful drug trafficking group to be tipped off.<sup>194</sup> Even so, the original results claimed by the U.S.-supported task force certainly turned out to be far less, calling into question the success—and perhaps the unques-

<sup>188</sup> Indyra Mendoza and Gabriel Mass, “Informe Casos Judicializados por Muertes violentas a personas LGBTTI en Honduras (2009-2013),” *Catrachas*, January 20, 2014, 3-5.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 (author’s translation).

<sup>190</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>191</sup> Kaitlin Owen, *Honduras: Journalism in the Shadow of Impunity*, eds. Carmen Cheung et al., (Toronto: Pen International, 2014), 24. Thirty-two of these homicides have occurred since the 2009 coup.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>193</sup> Charles Parkinson, “Cachiros Knew About Honduras Police Operation: Official,” *Insight Crime*, October 10, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/cachiros-knew-about-honduras-police-operation>.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with U.S. official, March 19, 2014.

tioned reliability—of task force units.

On a separate note, other practices employed by task force and vetted unit advisers help to explain their improved performance when compared with other non-vetted units, and according to a Honduran police official, generate resentment among fellow officers. This is the result of a number of factors: the fact that only the best investigators are chosen for the task force further dilutes the pool of investigators remaining with the police force, their caseload volume when compared to the general workload, and the number of investigators employed in the task force. For example, one complaint registered by a police official reflected some of these concerns with the Violent Crimes Task Force. Out of 56 investigators assigned to the homicide unit in Tegucigalpa, at least eight of them—nearly 15 percent—were assigned to the task force.<sup>195</sup> Considering that about 86 homicides occur in the city every month, this represents a significant drain on investigative resources.<sup>196</sup> Further, while from the beginning the task force utilized new recruits to fill its ranks, it quickly began to draw away some of the Tegucigalpa homicide unit's best investigators, a scarce and important resource in a unit overwhelmed by violent crime.<sup>197</sup> Finally, investigators belonging to the task force fall outside of quota requirements established for most police investigators that demand a certain number of investigations each month. While this encourages quality work that will produce convictions (certainly a better long-term practice for the police), it generates resentment among other police officers who must conduct more investigations with fewer resources.<sup>198</sup>

Finally, vetted unit and task force proliferation, and by extension, related problems with coordination and information sharing pose a serious challenge.<sup>199</sup> In an interview, a Public Ministry official noted with worry the growing number of special units like those financed by the U.S. Embassy. The official asserted that the sheer number of new units disperses limited resources across more agencies, which may weaken units or task forces with a longer history of successful work.<sup>200</sup> Task forces and vetted units, like their North American counterparts and advisers, often fail to share information and end up investigating the same cases and groups, suggesting a worrying lack of coordination.<sup>201</sup> As noted by the Public Ministry official, the United States—and the Honduran government—would likely benefit from a consolidation and strengthening of already existing units, so as to help improve coordination and build upon the successes of these units.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> IUDPAS, "Boletín Enero-Diciembre 2013," 5.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. The interviewed officer noted that a joke among police officers is to call those investigators working for the task forces "dolls" (*muñecas*) because of their lighter workload.

<sup>199</sup> The United States is not the only one creating such units. The Honduran government has recently created a number of new units (FUSINA and TIGRES, to name a few), thus exacerbating the problem.

<sup>200</sup> Interview with Public Ministry official, April 25, 2014.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.



These considerations seriously call into question the narrative of institutional reform through vetted units and task forces in Honduras. While vetted units and task forces produce important results for groups that traditionally suffer extreme impunity, both the claims of widespread success and the stated goal of promoting institutional reform provoke doubt upon close inspection.<sup>203</sup> This, in turn, produces questions of sustainability: if vetted units and task forces, a crucial aspect of CARSI programming, are not transforming the Honduran police, will their improved performance in addressing crime continue in the absence of U.S. funding? CARSI's reliance on such operational activities in Honduras must take these considerations into account, and look for constructive ways to utilize such units as a catalyst for stimulating institution-wide change, so that once funding is no longer available, improved performance persists and impunity continues to fall. Further, and closely related to this, is the fact that CARSI *must* recognize that these law enforcement successes, as well as achieving the goal of institutional reform cannot be separated from the government's political will to overhaul the police and transform the institution. Contributing to the formation of this political will presents a key challenge for the sustainability of Honduran vetted units and task forces, but without it, the institutional reform CARSI seeks to promote will not occur.

### **TRAINING AS CAPACITY BUILDING: HONDURAS' CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION SCHOOL**

While task forces and vetted units also enhance capacity building in so far as they build the skills of police officers, prosecutors, and others connected to the special unit, trainings offered through the U.S.-backed Criminal Investigation School provide an example of broader CARSI-backed initiatives to build capacity generally within Honduran law enforcement agencies. The school, which began in 2011, now serves as Honduras' primary center for the ongoing training of police and continues to expand its work and scope, often incorporating other members of the justice system.

The school emerged following a 2011 needs and capacity assessment by INL that identified serious shortcomings in continuing training opportunities for police, and concluded that efforts to reinforce and enhance police preparedness needed to start from scratch.<sup>204</sup> A Honduran police official articulated a similar understanding of the school's origins: it started due to the need to improve the police's skills and provide ongoing training to its members.<sup>205</sup>

<sup>203</sup> It is important to emphasize the INL Section's attention to groups that are disproportionately victims of violence in Honduras, and who have been unduly affected by the worsened state of impunity following the 2009 coup. It is commendable and noteworthy that INL has sought to respond to these needs directly, responding to outcries by groups in both the United States and Honduras.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Hector Ivan Mejía (Police Commissioner and Rector of the Police Education System), April 17, 2014.



The Criminal Investigation School, located in Tegucigalpa, opened in 2011 using CARSI funding, with the goal of improving police officers' skills and allowing for continuing education within the police force.

At the outset, four U.S. instructors staffed and led the newly formed Criminal Investigation School.<sup>206</sup> Course offerings initially focused on improving basic investigation skills and enhancing specialized skills to tackle crimes related to criminal gang activity, homicides, and other high impact crimes.<sup>207</sup> With the passage of time though, the school's instructors and course offerings quickly diversified. With U.S. (CARSI) funding, Colombian police officers began to take over the teaching of many courses, while other specialized courses became part of the school's regular schedule. Eventually, select Honduran police officers began to shadow the Colombian instructors, and now all seven of the school's instructors are Honduran.<sup>208</sup>

Today, courses range from community policing and policing in rural areas, to investigation of drug trafficking, money laundering, and kidnappings, to broader topics, such as transit procedures, interview techniques, and securing crime scenes.<sup>209</sup> The Rector of the Police Education System hopes the school will eventually become a regional resource for continued police training and learning, providing courses to police officers all over the region.<sup>210</sup>

Choosing the police officers to be trained at the school involves a lengthy process that requires the application of Leahy vetting (see Text Box 2). At the beginning of an education cycle, the Police Education System announces course offerings to regional police chiefs, specifying that all prospective students must be nominated five weeks before classes begin in order to complete the required vetting procedures. Once the names are received, a vetting process is undertaken to determine

<sup>206</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Hector Ivan Mejía, April 17, 2014.

<sup>208</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014. According to the U.S. Department of State document "The Future of CARSI in Honduras" (March 12, 2012), the Criminal Investigation School was slated to transfer entirely to Honduran instructors by October 2012.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Hector Ivan Mejía, April 17, 2014.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

eligibility for the courses (see Text Box 2).<sup>211</sup> Officers taking courses at the school must complete the vetting process on an annual basis in order to take additional classes in later years as is always the case with vetted individuals that continue to benefit from U.S. aid.<sup>212</sup>

A senior Honduran official identified this vetting process as a crucial aspect of strengthening Honduras' police over the long term, and as a means to root out the corruption and neglect that characterized the police for many years. According to him, an "A List" and "B List" of Honduran police officers serves as the basis of a process designed to remove corrupt or tainted elements of the police, and strengthen those vetted and identified as meeting the institution's standards. The "A List" of vetted and committed officers can freely proceed to take classes at the school, while the "B List" (essentially, those that do not meet the vetting requirements) cannot receive trainings and will eventually be forced out of the police force.<sup>213</sup>



Criminal Investigation School students work in a mock crime scene as part of their training.

CIS courses average two to four weeks, although some can last for a couple of months. Training includes the use of mock crime scenes in order to simulate real life pressures, as well as a focus on team building and cooperation, which seeks to address the chronic weakness of poor coordination in the justice and security sector.<sup>214</sup> Outside instructors, such as judges and prosecutors, also cycle through

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>213</sup> Interview with Hector Ivan Mejía, April 17, 2014.

<sup>214</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

the school in an effort to improve inter-institutional coordination, and in some cases members of the justice system as well as firefighters also receive classes at the school.<sup>215</sup>



The Criminal Investigation school uses mock crime scenes to simulate the pressures officers face in real-life investigations, and to promote a focus on team building and cooperation among the students.

Beneficiaries of the school's training become a part of the school's extensive database that records the kinds of training each participant receives as well as the grades they received. U.S. officials noted that this database helps to identify possible candidates who would benefit from and meet the prerequisites for advanced classes. Nevertheless, the practice of assigning police to specific units on the basis of their preparedness and training (i.e. taking advanced courses from the school) remains limited, despite the existence of the database.<sup>216</sup> A Honduran official suggested that some unit assignments were made on the basis of trainings given, but this may just be the case insofar as those attending the CIS already work in the specialty areas in which they receive additional training.<sup>217</sup>

Officials identified a number of successes resulting from the school's work. Since its opening, the school has imparted training to nearly 3,000 separate members of the police, Public Ministry, and others in over 27 subjects.<sup>218</sup> The school's most essential course, "Basic Criminal Investigation," provided training to over 700 police officers between 2012 and 2013.<sup>219</sup> U.S. officials assert that the school now

<sup>215</sup> Ibid. U.S. officials noted that training for firefighters is crucial due to the fact that they often arrive first to a crime scene, and need to know how to protect the crime scene and secure evidence.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with Hector Ivan Mejía, April 17, 2014.

<sup>218</sup> INL, "Criminal Investigation School Fact Sheet," n.d.

<sup>219</sup> INL, "Country Report, Honduras." *2014 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*. See also INL, "Honduras," *2013 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*. To put this in context, Honduras has about 13,000 police officers, meaning a little over 5% of Honduran police officers have received this basic introductory course.



commands respect and considerable interest among the Honduran police, to the point that the various directorates of the police now request the school add many specialized courses to its curriculum that span the spectrum of police work. The school is also reportedly seeking international certification and Honduras hopes it can become a regional center for police training.<sup>220</sup>

Yet beyond mere evidence of demand for its training, it remains difficult to determine the Criminal Investigation School's impact on building the capacity of the Honduran police, and more generally, security and justice institutions. Most evidence appears to be anecdotal: for example, Director General of the National Police, Ramón Sabillón, stated the school is providing quality investigators. In addition, the Rector of the Police Education System cites as evidence of the School's success a higher numbers of captures, an improved rate of bringing cases to trial, enhanced response and activity against certain crimes like drug-trafficking, and more emphasis within the police on community-based policing.<sup>221</sup> U.S. officials also pointed to other anecdotal evidence of the impact and effect the CIS can have upon its graduates.<sup>222</sup>

But, while these stories and assertions of accomplishments and improvements are encouraging, they also highlight a similar impact assessment problem identified in other areas of CARSI programming. While anecdotes hint at limited success, a lack of systematic measurement of the courses' impact beyond the number of beneficiaries is lacking. U.S. officials said that they hoped to begin to remedy this situation with the launching of a special website that would provide former students with the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss how their training translates to in-the-field successes.<sup>223</sup> Even so, more thorough tracking of graduate performance and periodic review of where the school's graduates end up (whether in leadership, outside the police force, or even engaged in criminal activity including corruption) should be an important priority for INL's CARSI program. Furthermore, assessing the impact of training on law enforcement institutions as a whole is a more difficult but equally important task. Evidence that demonstrates whether training is making the agency more effective and less corrupt seems important if further training assistance is to be justified.

While today the Criminal Investigation School in Honduras appears to be experiencing an uptick in interest among law enforcement leaders and institutional growth, it has faced a number of challenges along the way. Chief among them appears to be the vetting requirements. While all agree on the importance of vet-

<sup>220</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Hector Ivan Mejía, April 17, 2014. Because police performance statistics are not widely disseminated, it is impossible to verify this information. Further, determining causation—whether the Criminal Investigation School has caused these assumed improvements in police performance—would present additional difficulties.

<sup>222</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*





ting and the need for thorough background checks of the school's students, U.S. officials noted that the CIS often must rely on the small cadre of Leahy-vetted officers to provide trainings.

Additionally, the five weeks required to vet a potential student often resulted in many being turned away because their superiors failed to provide sufficient lead-time for them to be properly vetted before the candidate is eligible to enroll in a training course.<sup>224</sup> Another difficulty emerged during the school's first months, when it lacked the reputation it possesses today. In these early days, students were hard to find, suggesting that at the outset, the school did not command the police's buy-in and ownership as it does today. Finally, the suggestion from Honduran authorities that they might relocate the school presents a constant threat, and with good reason: in recent months, the Ministry of Security completely changed the location of Honduras' traditional headquarters, generating serious resentment among police officers and officials.<sup>225</sup>

## Training and Police Reform

The Criminal Investigation School in Honduras boasts some clear successes. Its reputation and use by the police, as well as ownership of and investment in the school by Honduran authorities suggests that the police see it as an important tool for improving their own institution. Many students have now received classes through the school's programs, and it is one reason for claims of improvement in police performance.

Nevertheless, a few questions remain for the school. First and foremost, as a "capacity building" initiative providing training for the Honduran police, the program's impact on genuine reform of the larger institution is limited. The police certainly do need training, but in an institution that suffers from widespread and high-level corruption, a lack of resources and public mistrust, they require considerably more than training-based capacity enhancement. In order to better understand the impact that the school produces and to ensure its positive effect upon the institution as a whole, more rigorous tracking of graduate careers and performance is necessary, rather than simply relying on promising anecdotes or the observations of Honduran police superiors overseeing the school.

Further, the Honduran experience underscores the need for CARSI programs to adapt to environments marked by exceptional corruption, looking for ways to build capacity without having to rely on isolated units or training programs that may

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> U.S. officials noted that the Ministry of Security has threatened to relocate the school multiple times (interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014). See also "Empleados y docentes de la Universidad de Policía protestan ante orden de desalojo," *El Tiempo*, November 20, 2013, <http://tiempo.hn/portada/noticias/empleados-y-docentes-de-la-universidad-de-policia-protestan-ante-orden-de-desalojo>. The resentment stemmed from the lack of warning provided to the affected police officers and the need to fund their move to the new site.

benefit individuals but do not transform the institution as a whole. INL in Honduras has sought ways to do this (mentioned in the U.S.-CARSI Strategy section of this chapter) by supporting legal and structural reforms and the involvement of Colombian advisers, but these efforts are undermined by the lack of political will among Honduran authorities to prioritize institutional reform and promote greater accountability.

Second, the Criminal Investigation School's limited geographic scope presents difficulties in reaching police officers at the national level. Up until 2014, classes only took place in Tegucigalpa, limiting the participation of potential candidates based in other regions, including the violent northern corridor. The two-to-four week length of most courses has made it difficult for already over-extended local police offices to spare officers, especially for investigators who are absent from duty to attend courses at the school in the capital. Given that Tegucigalpa, the site of the school, already boasts the best allocation of resources and personnel, local police officers' easier access to the learning provided at the school may reinforce the unfortunate disparity that characterizes police, human, and material resource deployment.<sup>226</sup> The launching of classes outside the capital in 2014 marks an important step towards correcting this imbalance, and provides the opportunity for officers in other regions to benefit from the school's expanding offerings and presence. U.S. officials ought to continue to pursue methods to offer classes in other regions, perhaps developing satellite campuses in violent hotspots like San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba in order to better equip police officers and improve the police's performance at the national level.

Finally, disconnecting training from police assignment practices and patterns poses a serious weakness for the current Criminal Investigation School training scheme. While it is important to acknowledge and applaud the existence of a database tracking officers' educational records, this information is most useful if it can be harnessed to make decisions about where and how police should be deployed. The institutional impact and impact on crime would likely be significant if a mechanism could be created to allow Honduran police leaders to more effectively assign personnel on the basis of their preparedness. While officials assert this is the long-term goal, addressing it in the short term should be a priority for capacity building efforts in Honduras.<sup>227</sup>

## **Strengthening Training, and Looking Beyond**

As with the other programs discussed in this chapter, the Criminal Investigation School provides many benefits to the Honduran police, and by their own account,

<sup>226</sup> For examples statistics acquired by the author from a police slide presentation show that Tegucigalpa possesses 60 investigators and 20 cars to investigate homicides, while San Pedro Sula has a mere 30 investigators and six cars for such cases. This disparity becomes dramatic when one considers that San Pedro Sula suffers from nearly twice as many homicides per month as Tegucigalpa.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, March 18, 2014.

helps to increase and improve the police's capacity and performance. Emphasis on matters such as community policing suggest that it also contributes to reform and transformation within the police.

Even so, CARSI support for the police needs to go beyond a training center in the country's capital. Other reform-oriented CARSI projects do exist in the country—such as support for reforming laws pertaining to the police and improving the police's structure, the placement of Colombian advisers in select areas, and aid in developing new units such as police intelligence—but the Criminal Investigation School remains a primary feature of Honduran INL programs.<sup>228</sup> Expanding the school's reach, as well as integrating its database into a larger police assignment scheme, will complement and further strengthen these larger reform efforts, and provide more long-lasting capacity building for the Honduran police.

## **OUTREACH CENTERS: THE POSTER CHILD FOR PREVENTION IN HONDURAS**

CARSI's Honduras strategy, discussed above, makes clear that prevention in Honduras encompasses a variety of programs. USAID's outreach centers are emblematic of the prevention efforts employed in Honduras. The three or more years of their existence, and their prominence both in Honduras' violent communities and in the discourse of U.S. officials made them the obvious choice for further inspection and reflection in this chapter. While USAID must face the challenges of ensuring sustainability and measuring program impact, it appears that outreach centers are somewhat helpful outposts for public services that at a minimum provide recreational and vocational training opportunities for at-risk youth.

The outreach center program began in earnest in 2011 through funds provided to Alianza Joven Regional-SICA (Regional Youth Alliance), which later formed a Honduran chapter called Alianza Joven Honduras (Honduras Youth Alliance, or AJH for its Spanish initials). In that year and ensuing years, the Regional Youth Alliance/AJH began 40 different outreach centers throughout the country using CARSI funds from USAID.<sup>229</sup> The criteria for identifying the sites focused on two primary issues: high risk/violence and high need. Such factors were assessed via statistics provided by official sources, such as the UNAH Violence Observatory, the country's most respected source of violence data.<sup>230</sup>

In order to enter a community, USAID and its implementing partner must be invited to work in the local community by those living there.<sup>231</sup> A focus on community

<sup>228</sup> "CARSI INL Supported Projects, April 16, 2014."

<sup>229</sup> Luis Mazariegos et al, "Sistematización: Centros de Alcance "Por Mi Barrio" Honduras," Alianza Joven Honduras, January 2014, 5.

<sup>230</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. While U.S. officials made clear that that invitation by the community is the outreach center program model, it is not clear whether the existence of the outreach center program creates the self-perceived need within the community for the center, thus prompting the invitation. This possibility is quite likely and should not be ignored, given that the program and funding for outreach centers exists and is promoted by USAID/AJH.

ownership and presence represents a crucial aspect of the outreach center model: previous efforts to create something similar with *casas jóvenes* (youth houses) in Guatemala had failed because they were located outside the community and so were not practical for the poor, at-risk youth they sought to serve.<sup>232</sup>

Individuals running one outreach center in Tegucigalpa who were interviewed for this report reinforced the importance of community ownership as vital to a center's performance. In their opinion, the success of an outreach center depended fundamentally on its presence in the community and commitment to that same community.<sup>233</sup> Most often, a local church will request the creation of an outreach center in a community. Churches possess special inroads into violent communities, and their members often have a special ability to move around violent communities in ways that others may not. Further, churches provide one of the very few socially acceptable means by which former gang members can leave behind their dangerous cohorts.<sup>234</sup> Other examples of the local organizations that run outreach centers include local community councils and the U.S. faith-based relief and development agency, World Vision.<sup>235</sup>

Once the invitation is extended, those involved in launching the new center work to identify a site. Sometimes, the community chooses to utilize an otherwise derelict building and reclaim it for community use. For example, in Nueva Capital, a poor community on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa and a site visited by the author, the outreach center building was once built by the city then abandoned and marred by gang graffiti, but later reclaimed by the community and USAID in order to create the center.<sup>236</sup> According to one U.S. official, each new center costs around \$22,000.<sup>237</sup> Others though, have suggested that the actual cost is much higher, and that USAID programming only provides minimal help in supplying and furnishing the center.<sup>238</sup> Supplies that support the Center's programs can represent a significant financial burden that USAID generally does not cover.

Once in operation, a full-time paid coordinator runs each outreach center, while volunteers meet the center's other needs. This is where the need for a strong organization, church, or community council becomes especially important, given that

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<sup>232</sup> Interview with Salvador Stadthagen (Director for Alianza Joven Honduras, a project of Creative Associates, based in Washington D.C.), April 2014.

<sup>233</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Interview with U.S. official, April 9, 2014.

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Nueva Capital outreach center coordinator and volunteer, April 9, 2014.

<sup>237</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.

<sup>238</sup> Interview with the director of an organization that started and continues to operate an outreach center, May 27, 2014. (Hereinafter "interview with outreach center implementing organization director"). The individual interviewed further noted that much of the equipment provided—foosball and pool tables, for example—broke within weeks of its provision to the outreach center.



a volunteer network is often required to keep the center running.<sup>239</sup> Once again, USAID's support for these coordinators appears to be limited: initially, the salaries are covered, but once the outreach center has been in operation for a year or two, funding for these positions is eliminated, undermining the model's sustainability unless other sources for these funds are located.<sup>240</sup> This declining funding was a notable critique offered by various parties: aid is significantly reduced in the years following the more generous funding of the outreach's center's first year of operation, even while the demands for performance and impact remain the same.<sup>241</sup>



Outreach centers are intended to provide a refuge to at-risk youth by providing various community services. The centers receive initial funding from USAID but must rapidly become self-sufficient.

An outreach center provides a number of services to the local community, in theory acting as a refuge for vulnerable youth in poor and at-risk communities. When asked about the profile of youth in the community, Nueva Capital's outreach center coordinator responded that 90 percent of the children passing through its doors come from fragile or disintegrated families (for example, from families where there was not a father figure present).<sup>242</sup> In contrast, individuals working with an outreach center in another community suggested that many of the children from more stable families frequented the outreach center alongside their more vulnerable and at-risk counterparts.<sup>243</sup>

<sup>239</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. In theory, outside sources such as municipal governments or other organizations would pick up the funding for these positions.

<sup>241</sup> Interview with outreach center implementing organization director, May 27, 2014, and interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Nueva Capital outreach center coordinator, April 9, 2014. This statistic should be not be seen as authoritative—it was simply a rough estimate provided by the coordinator.

<sup>243</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.



To keep the youth occupied, services provided in the centers include gyms, Internet service, soccer fields, and a variety of classes designed to improve youths' skills and ability to find a job.<sup>244</sup> Some services perform dual functions: for example, internet access, game consoles such as Wiis, or a soccer field act as ways to attract youth into the center and introduce them to its other services, like capacity-building classes.<sup>245</sup> Others, like the gym or a soccer field, where usage fees are charged, serve as a mechanism to generate revenue for the outreach center, and therefore, a means to contribute to the goal of long-term sustainability.<sup>246</sup>

The Nueva Capital outreach center offered a number of different classes designed to both build youth capacity and address physical and emotional needs. Volunteers teach six computing classes a day, which are the center's most popular service. Other services included a number of classes for beauticians (or simply young girls wishing to learn how to do their hair or makeup), electricians and small electric appliance repair, gym classes, and the teaching of virtues and morals at the beginning of some classes or through the viewing of movies. The Center also has an after-school "learning reinforcement" program for problematic children at the local school. Finally, alternative online secondary education programs will soon form a part of the Center's services, providing an opportunity for older youth to finish their secondary education.<sup>247</sup>



Students participate in an after-school class, one of many services offered to youth at an outreach center.

<sup>244</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, Salvador Stadthagen, and outreach center coordinator and volunteer, April 2 and 9, 2014.

<sup>245</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials and Nueva Capital outreach center coordinator and volunteer, April 2 and 9, 2014.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Nueva Capital outreach center coordinator, April 9, 2014. Some similar programs and workshops were also mentioned in the interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

Other actors questioned the sustainability of these services and programs noting that funding for them is not permanent and is drastically reduced after the outreach center's first year of operation.<sup>248</sup> Furthermore, they also questioned the actual impact of the programs and classes offered through the outreach center, instead suggesting that programs must orient their focus on mentoring and providing services and opportunities to high-risk youth in special danger of joining criminal bands.<sup>249</sup> The outreach center's focus on recreational programs, they assert, has a doubtful impact upon violence because it does not properly and thoroughly engage this more vulnerable population.<sup>250</sup>

In addition, outside organizations that also receive CARSI funding from USAID will at times offer their services through outreach centers. For example, the Youth Against Violence Movement (Jovenes Contra la Violencia) implements an anti-bullying program at the Nueva Capital outreach center, and both the teen pregnancy program and alternative education program METAS (both funded by USAID CARSI funds) have implemented their programs there.<sup>251</sup> USAID funds given to the Fondo Hondureño de Inversión Social (FHIS—Honduran Social Investment Fund), a government agency, are also brought to bear on communities in which CARSI works and in support of outreach centers.<sup>252</sup> While this demonstrates an encouraging amount of coordination between various programs that seek to target the "primary prevention" level, another outreach center coordinator who was interviewed noted that only the teen pregnancy program ever arrived at the center he coordinated during his extensive time there.<sup>253</sup> Finally, a pilot "secondary prevention" program seeking to target especially at-risk youth also attempts to integrate outreach centers, churches, and schools, into efforts to identify youth at risk of sliding into violence and crime.<sup>254</sup>

To keep these programs and services running, officials noted repeatedly the importance of sustainability in funding and management. The centers operate a number of schemes to help generate funding for their programs such as selling gym passes/memberships, setting up a bakery to make and sell baked goods, candle-making, vegetable canning, and clothes sales.<sup>255</sup> Yet despite this plethora of microenterprises, AJH admits that using this model to sustain the centers is problematic because it fails to sustain them as originally envisioned. In its study of the outreach center program, instilling the importance of the entrepreneurial values in outreach center coordinators remains an important objective in order to make these microenterprises more effective. According to the document, AJH's

<sup>248</sup> Interview with outreach center implementing organization director, May 27, 2014.

<sup>249</sup> In USAID terminology, this would be "secondary prevention." According to the interviewed persons, these programs have a much more proven and effective track record.

<sup>250</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>251</sup> Interview with Nueva Capital outreach center coordinator, April 9, 2014.

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Honduran government official from FHIS, April 9, 2014.

<sup>253</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Salvador Stadthagen, April 2, 2014.

<sup>255</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.

new strategy focuses simply on using gyms as means to generate revenue for the centers, although it is unclear how successful this attempted refocus will be.<sup>256</sup>

Even with gyms, outreach centers are unlikely to become “sustainable” in the sense of being self-financing and putting in doubt the longevity of the entire outreach center project.<sup>257</sup> Outside funding remains a constant need. USAID and its partners are looking to make the programs sustainable by identifying other sources of funding so as to ensure their long-term existence once USAID can no longer provide funding for them. This comes in various forms: volunteer work (thus minimizing salary expenses), donations from the local community and partners (e.g. the church), municipal governments, the national government, and private sector partnerships.<sup>258</sup> Potential private-sector partnerships merit special attention given the priority placed on these partnerships in interviews and across the spectrum of all USAID-CARSI programs. Examples of such support include the provision of free Internet to the outreach centers through Tigo, one of Honduras’ largest cell-phone service providers, and a *maquila* (factory) in San Pedro Sula that built and maintains an outreach center in a poor community where many of its workers live.<sup>259</sup>

U.S. officials also maintain that the Honduran government has demonstrated commitment to the outreach center methodology. Using funds from the aforementioned “Security Tax,” President Hernández’s administration committed \$1 million to strengthen the outreach center program by opening a number of new centers.<sup>260</sup> Municipal governments have also found the program beneficial, and in some places now pay the coordinator’s annual salary, although AJH’s review of the program notes that local government support has not materialized as hoped.<sup>261</sup> Other donors have also adopted the outreach center model: the European Union’s mission in Honduras now provides funding for a few centers.<sup>262</sup> Furthermore, in San Pedro Sula and Choloma, a regional NGO will soon take over the financing and oversight of all outreach centers in the region, without USAID support, possibly ensuring longer term viability.<sup>263</sup>

While efforts to provide outside funding to outreach centers are visible, ensuring sustainability should be a preeminent concern and a top-priority for USAID, and represents a serious challenge. Gym memberships might cover miscellaneous

<sup>256</sup> Luis Mazariegos et al, “Sistematización: Centros de Alcance “Por Mi Barrio” Honduras,” 42.

<sup>257</sup> In the interview with Salvador Stadthagen on April 2, 2014, he noted that the center were never likely to be self-financing.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.

<sup>260</sup> “L 20 millones para centros de alcance,” *El Heraldo*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/Sec-ciones-Principales/Sucesos/L-20-millones-para-centros-de-alcance>.

<sup>261</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014 and Luis Mazariegos et al, “Sistematización: Centros de Alcance “Por Mi Barrio” Honduras,” 6.

<sup>262</sup> Email correspondence with Salvador Stadthagen, June 2, 2014.

<sup>263</sup> This viability is not guaranteed. Should the NGO fail to find the funds necessary to keep the outreach centers going, they will simply close, providing a poignant example of the worries expressed regarding sustainability in this section.

expenses such as the utilities and water bill, but it is doubtful whether it will cover the capital investments all outreach centers need or even the coordinator's salary. Further, while the private sector (and for that matter, municipal governments) might be willing to give their support freely to the outreach centers while USAID is involved, this willingness might diminish without its leadership and image once the organization pulls its support. In the end, sustainability will depend upon the Honduran government—a questionable partner when it comes to sustaining prevention projects. While a hopeful sign, the \$1 million the government dedicated to new outreach centers does not guarantee the sustainability of already existing centers, and the source of the money—a discretionary fund—means that long term funding is not ensured.

In terms of results and impact, it is noteworthy that both U.S. officials and their implementing partners consider the outreach center program a success, a fact evidenced by the numerous examples of positive impacts that were cited throughout interviews conducted by the author. Chief among them were the number of beneficiaries served via the centers: officials asserted that between 15,000 and 17,000 separate children and youths have benefited with the help of over 700 volunteers since the program's inception.<sup>264</sup> The individuals receiving these resources often come from communities with high demand for services that are otherwise unavailable. For example, in Nueva Capital, 536 youth signed up to receive classes or participate at the center the day after its inauguration, highlighting the need for such centers and the success they can have.<sup>265</sup>

Beyond this, USAID officials, implementing partners, and coordinators and volunteers provided a number of anecdotes highlighting success stories of individual youths that had been transformed by the outreach center and its programs.<sup>266</sup> They talked about previously quiet or problematic youth who were transformed over the course of a class, or how young people were able to find a job as a result of the training and classes they received via the outreach center. Other vocational program facilitators from the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS), which also provides job training in the community (through the outreach center), similarly cited anecdotes of trainees who had work lined up after receiving FHIS certification

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<sup>264</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials, February 26, 2014 and April 2, 2014. In order to qualify as a beneficiary, a youth must have spent at least 10 hours in the outreach center. It is important to note that 10 hours in an outreach center over the period of weeks, months, or even years suggests very little about whether outreach centers are preventing youth from engaging in violence, or joining a gang, and much less about their ability to return at-risk youth to school or to create employment opportunities.

<sup>265</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014. This success must be qualified though. An interview conducted with the outreach center coordinator in Nueva Capital revealed that the center had at most the capacity to serve a total of 200 youths even though 400 were currently signed up. Thus far, some 500 kids have been served. While it shows the center is certainly being used, it appears that those launching the center probably did not anticipate the demand that would exist. Further, given the large size of the Nueva Capital neighborhood, the appearance of 500 kids to sign up for services should not be overly surprising, and tempers the assertions of success by U.S. officials.

<sup>266</sup> USAID, "JuvénClubs: Rescuing youth from violence by promoting their interests and talents."



at an outreach center.<sup>267</sup> Unfortunately though, no reliable and readily accessible data (beyond number of beneficiaries) is available to systematically determine the program's effect on employment, representing another serious challenge for the outreach center program.<sup>268</sup> USAID officials noted that when the outreach center programs originally began, they employed indicators such as homicide rates in the community, but that these were quickly discarded once it was recognized that outreach centers could not have an impact on such problems without a simultaneous improvement in law enforcement efforts.<sup>269</sup>

## USAID Prevention in Honduras: Challenges amidst Violence

This leads to one of the difficulties and weaknesses of CARSI's prevention efforts in Honduras. Measurements of the success and impact of outreach centers in constructing "strong and resilient communities that can withstand the pressures of crime and violence," are evidently lacking, calling into question the program's overall impact, despite evidence that it is possible to provide such monitoring and assessment.<sup>270</sup> This is not to say that the output and work of the centers is not monitored: officials and implementing partners outlined a number of ways this is done. First, basic indicators like youth served and services provided are regularly recorded and provided through quarterly reports from the implementing partner, AJH. Youth arriving regularly at the outreach centers for classes or other activities receive a survey in which they are asked to indicate basic information about themselves, including whether they go to school or whether they work.<sup>271</sup> Beneficiaries of the center are also asked to sign in and out in order to keep track of attendance. Second, USAID officials also conduct both announced and unannounced visits to the outreach centers to check-in on their work. Officials fill out a form detailing their observations, and also seek to talk to the youth regarding their perceptions and experience at the center. Success indicators now also include sustainability measures, such as private sector and NGO partnerships.<sup>272</sup>

Even so, impact monitoring that goes beyond immediate project indicators, such as the number of beneficiaries, is undoubtedly lacking. This is worrying, given that some of those interviewed for this chapter question the model's impact in the

<sup>267</sup> Interview with FIHS vocation program facilitators, April 9, 2014.

<sup>268</sup> This must be viewed in light of the Honduran economic situation: few formal sector jobs are available, especially for youth attending public schools in poor urban neighborhoods.

<sup>269</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials and Salvador Stadthagen, April 2, 2014.

<sup>270</sup> For an example of how to measure community resilience and to understand factors that contribute to building it, see Matthew C. Ingram, "Community Resilience to Violence: Local Schools, Regional Economies, and Homicide in Mexico's Municipalities," in *Building Resilient Communities in Mexico: Civic Responses to Crime and Violence*, eds. David A. Shirk, Duncan Wood, and Eric L. Olson (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the University of San Diego Justice in Mexico Project, March 2014), [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Resilient\\_Communities\\_Mexico.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Resilient_Communities_Mexico.pdf), 25-62.

<sup>271</sup> Survey obtained by author at outreach center site entitled "Centros de Alcance 'Por Mi Barrio': Ficha de Datos del Beneficiario."

<sup>272</sup> Interview with U.S. officials, April 2, 2014.



communities they serve.<sup>273</sup> In part, this lack of monitoring may not be the fault of USAID or of those implementing the project; such indicators present measurement challenges. For example, following up with young people who participated in a vocational program a month or two after its completion might be difficult in marginalized and violent neighborhoods (but that does not mean it cannot be tried). More likely, measuring more holistic results will reveal an unimpressive and disappointing reality regarding program impact, perhaps providing a disincentive to pursue such data. This reality stems from the fact that few formal employment opportunities are available and that the youth living in dangerous communities have few alternatives to the reality in which they live. Admittedly, anecdotes suggest methods that might prevent youth from becoming engaged in criminal activity and ways to shape youth to become a positive force in the community, but they remain just that—anecdotes. To better target a community's needs and ensure CARSI's positive impact, systematic monitoring and follow-up with beneficiaries from the outreach centers through surveys should be undertaken.<sup>274</sup> In this way, the survey results can be used to strengthen the prevention programs and the community's continuing and evolving needs identified.

And while this monitoring and impact assessment could be improved, it is noteworthy and laudable that USAID has sought to lead the way in assessing the long-term impact of its programs through a scientifically rigorous survey with targeted and control neighborhoods in Central America and Mexico. With the help of Vanderbilt University (which has a long history of providing polling data in the Latin American region), USAID seeks to use victimization and perception surveys to determine what impact USAID-CARSI prevention has had, which will in turn inform the future of the outreach center program and others discussed in the CARSI strategy section of this chapter. Thus, while the evidence above suggests there is room for improvement, USAID's assessment efforts represent a significant step in the right direction, and serves as a model for other CARSI programs that do not benefit from such impact analysis.<sup>275</sup>

Coordination and cohesion between USAID's numerous CARSI programs—of which the outreach center is the focal point—merits special attention as well. On the whole, when questioned about coordination, implementing partner employees revealed genuine efforts to guarantee that USAID-funded services arrived at local outreach centers and the communities in which USAID focuses its efforts.<sup>276</sup> This is encouraging and commendable. Yet the sheer number of projects that USAID is implementing and the apparent duplication in some of these programs remain a cause for concern.

<sup>273</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>274</sup> For example, interviews with the beneficiaries a few months after receiving after a class or attending the outreach center regularly could help to determine if they found a job or have begun attending school or even church. Without such information, the impact of the outreach center program remains in question.

<sup>275</sup> Author requests to view the draft of this assessment were denied.

<sup>276</sup> Interviews with numerous implementing partner organizations, April 2014.



For example, multiple projects from different organizations receiving funding from USAID focused on “community-organizing”-like efforts, and at least two (or possibly more) have alternative education programs that appear to provide degrees with similar functions. While it is difficult to determine whether program duplication has also resulted in redundancy at the community level, consolidation of the most effective programs would seem to be a prudent course of action. This is especially true when one considers that USAID is a single (major) donor working alongside many others that may also be duplicating functions. Thus program proliferation suggests the need for better coordination—with the appropriate focus given by USAID in coordinating services through a place like the outreach center.

Another potential area for USAID programming improvement concerns the “secondary prevention” scheme that forms part of USAID’s overall strategy. Outreach centers, with their classes, programs, and additional services offered by other USAID programs (teen pregnancy, alternative education, etc.) provide a myriad of primary prevention opportunities for the community. But it is the “higher risk kids from higher risk areas” who need more attention, a strategy that produces better results according those working in an outreach center that seeks to provide this type of focus in its work.<sup>277</sup> The YSET pilot program, which trains outreach center coordinators and volunteers, as well as others (e.g. teachers) to identify high-risk youth and recommend them for counseling, represents a step in the right direction in this respect, and if consolidation takes place in the numerous primary prevention programs already in place, this would certainly leave resources to strengthen programs on other prevention levels.

Similarly, tertiary prevention—or namely, prevention that seeks to prevent recidivism—would also benefit from additional focus and resources. Prisons in Honduras are commonly known as gang recruiting centers that merely produce criminals, and so prevention efforts targeting former offenders presents a special challenge, and requires more opportunities and counseling for those exiting prison. While USAID has launched some limited programs to help former offenders and to provide avenues to restorative justice for youth, they appear, like the YSET program, to be quite limited in scope.<sup>278</sup> In part, this may be due to the politically sensitive nature of such funding, as well as legal restrictions due to the designation of MS-13 as a transnational criminal organization by the Obama administration.<sup>279</sup>

Finally, all the stakeholders interviewed identified elevated violence in outreach

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<sup>277</sup> Interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014.

<sup>278</sup> In an interview with a U.S. official, the author was told about a program in Tegucigalpa designed to help find jobs for former inmates or provide money for small businesses. About 50-60 individuals had received money to fund a small business at the time of the interview. USAID has also supported juvenile justice reform, supporting efforts to change the penal code and offer youth alternative to incarceration in order to pay their dues. Interview with U.S. official, February 26, 2014.

<sup>279</sup> “Treasury Sanctions Latin American Criminal Organization,” press release from the U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 11, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1733.aspx>.

center communities as an additional challenge for the program. This is not a program weakness—the outreach centers seek to address this very problem. But it has affected program operations. In one community, stolen equipment prompted the permanent shutdown of the outreach center, while in another it has affected the success of the microenterprise used to support the center.<sup>280</sup> Other outreach centers have closed temporarily due to violence in the community stemming from inter-gang warfare. Rather than being a weakness, this confirms that the outreach centers truly are placed in Honduras’ most violence-stricken communities; similarly, it also suggests that violence remains a challenge worth noting in order to understand the outreach center program.

### **Conclusion: CARSI and Prevention in Honduras**

USAID’s outreach center program addresses a long neglected need in poor and violent Honduran communities: programs that provide alternatives for youth who often must choose between staying indoors or joining the violent criminal bands that rule the streets. The centers offer opportunities in neighborhoods where schools are faced with problems of over-capacity, giving youth a chance to explore possible alternative educational programs in manual labor or in learning basic computer skills. Some basic impacts are evident: the enthusiasm with which other organizations and the private sector have supported the program suggests it touches a nerve within Honduran society.

Yet the outreach center program, as well as USAID’s CARSI programs in general, suffers from two serious weaknesses that require immediate attention: impact measurement and sustainability. By improving success indicators that measure outcomes and community resilience, and by following up with more youth, the program’s true impact can be more fully determined. This is a crucial need, given the vast investment inserted into the program and its undetermined subsequent impact. Further, special attention must be paid to the sustainability of these programs in order to ensure community strengthening over the long term. As it stands, the program’s long-term viability without USAID support is questionable. Given these concerns, USAID needs to learn from the past five years of CARSI implementation to strengthen and consolidate those programs with *measured and proven* results while guaranteeing their long-term sustainability.

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<sup>280</sup> Interviews with U.S. officials and Salvador Stadthagen, April 2, 2014 and interview with outreach center supervisor and former outreach center coordinator, June 4, 2014. Officials also noted that the local partner in the community where the outreach center was closed was not fully committed to the project, in part motivating the decision to close the center.



## **CARSI IN HONDURAS: FIVE YEARS LATER**

More than five years after CARSI's inception and the associated rise in justice and security sector funding, Honduras faces even more pronounced difficulties in addressing problems of violence and crime. Drug-trafficking remains rampant, corruption continues to taint not only the police, but also the Public Ministry and the Judiciary, and urban violence continues unabated. Despite this, some encouraging trends have emerged. Limited reforms are taking place within the police and Public Ministry, and law enforcement efforts have produced actions against leading drug-traffickers in the country.

U.S. assistance and support, in large part suspended following the 2009 coup, increased in earnest in 2011 and following years, and resulted in the launch of task forces, a new criminal investigation school, and community outreach centers, among a myriad of other programs. Today, the legacy of these efforts is mixed: a number of successes certainly are evident, while difficulties in the models employed suggest the need for adaptation and revision.

In particular, a few challenges stand out for CARSI's future in Honduras. First, coordination between the numerous programs funded by INL and USAID can and should be improved. This applies at many levels: coordination and information between task forces is noticeably absent, but seeking to improve coordination between law enforcement and prevention efforts is also needed, and would likely produce more dramatic results in the areas that it targets.

Coordination would also improve if CARSI were to address another problematic area: program proliferation. A large number of vetted units and task forces operate within Honduras, in addition to numerous new special entities created by the Honduran government, producing confusion and duplication of efforts. In prevention, USAID boasts a plethora of programs, but a number clearly overlap and provide similar services, suggesting that consolidation of some programs, while expanding secondary prevention programs that focus on gang members would result in more holistic prevention efforts.

Third, CARSI strategy and goals need to be reassessed based on their impact on rule of law institutions. Despite the stated goal of supporting and promoting broader institutional reform, the formation of vetted units and specialized task forces has produced questionable results within the larger institution, and, at times, has been counter-productive even while their impact on specific investigations and crime fighting efforts may be positive. The emphasis on law enforcement training provided by the Criminal Investigation School, which is designed to improve performance, is also unverifiable and its contribution to broader institutional reform



is questionable. Consequently, U.S. efforts to aid legal reform of the police and support entire offices (like police intelligence) should be sustained, and perhaps expanded, as a means to slowly reform the larger institution.

But beyond that, the U.S. government must seek to ensure and, at times, help to create the political will required to produce comprehensive institutional transformation and sustain prevention efforts. As Kleinfeld notes, improving the rule of law—including security and justice sector reform—requires that the U.S., and in this case Honduras, recognize that long established interests and privileges may be affected by reform and, thus, make the process of reform very difficult.<sup>281</sup> Treating reform as a technical or legal manner without recognizing the political dimensions will continue the cycle that has characterized CARSI in Honduras to date: inaction and stalemate on much needed long-term comprehensive institutional transformation. The failure of the current and former governments to vet Honduras' police, pass meaningful legal reforms or provide a long-term budget for prevention efforts, as well as their reliance on military police forces for public security functions suggests that political will continues to present serious challenges for CARSI in Honduras. This is a matter that U.S. officials cannot ignore.

Finally, the United States needs to improve indicators and measurement of success in order to better determine the impact of CARSI. This applies to all the areas explored in this chapter. Reporting on task force performance should be more transparent, so that Honduran and U.S. taxpayers alike better understand the sensitive support the U.S. is providing. The Criminal Investigation School should seek ways to follow up with students, learning from their experiences and determining whether the skills taught are appropriate to the task and being applied in the field. And USAID needs to move beyond basic indicators like the number of beneficiaries served towards more integral measurements, such as job placement, to better assess the success of prevention efforts. On top of all this, accounting of public resources used for security purposes *must* be more transparent and readily available so that the measured results can be compared with the investment by the United States.

As many interviewees made clear, United States security assistance in Honduras provides important and indispensable contributions to law enforcement and prevention efforts. Results are evident, and should be recognized. But revisions to the country strategy, as well as an acknowledgement of the program limitations and impacts, should be made, with the hope of further improving a situation of crime and violence that continue to severely debilitate Honduras.

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<sup>281</sup> Kleinfeld, *Advancing the Rule of Law Abroad*, 10.



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Aaron Korthuis is currently a student at Yale Law School. Prior to law school he spent nearly two years working in Honduras with the Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa and the Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia, where he supported their efforts to promote reform of Honduras' police and justice sector. During his time in Honduras he contributed to several reports including a paper on U.S. funding to Honduras in the context of the 2009 coup, analyses utilized by the Honduran Congress, and reports distributed to Members of the U.S. Congress regarding security and justice issues in Honduras.

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