Order Code RS22141
Updated January 11, 2007

CRS Report for Congress

Gangs in Central America

Clare M. Ribando
Analyst in Latin American Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

The 110th Congress is likely to continue to be concerned about the effects of crime and gang violence in Central America, and its spillover effects on the United States. Since February 2005, U.S. officials have arrested more than 1,274 members of the violent Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang, raising concerns about the transnational activities of Central American gangs. Governments throughout the region are struggling to find the right combination of suppressive and preventive policies to deal effectively with the gang problem. Many analysts predict that illicit gang activities will accelerate illegal immigration, drug smuggling, and trafficking in persons and weapons to the United States. Some maintain that tough law enforcement approaches will help solve the gang problem, while others assert that unless the root causes of gang violence — poverty, joblessness, ineffective judicial systems, easy access to arms, and the social exclusion of at-risk youth — are addressed in a holistic way, the problem will continue to escalate. This report will be updated periodically.

Background

Although many Latin American countries are facing serious crime problems associated with gangs (*maras)*, the largest and most violent gangs in the region operate in Central America and Mexico. Some analysts believe these gangs could pose a serious threat to the region's stability. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are at the epicenter of the gang crisis, with some of the highest murder rates in the world. In 2004, the estimated murder rate per 100,000 people was 45.9 in Honduras, 41.2 in El Salvador, and 34.7 in Guatemala. In the United States, the corresponding figure was 5.7. High murder rates have persisted in 2005 and 2006, with gang-related violence reportedly accounting for up to 50% of violent crime in each of those countries. Estimates of the number of gang members in Central America vary widely, but the U.S. Southern Command has placed that figure at around 70,000. The gangs are involved in human trafficking; drug, auto, and weapons smuggling; and kidnaping. In the last two years, more than 1,100 gang members have been arrested in Mexico, many of whom were charging migrant smugglers to let their groups pass, or working with Mexican drug cartels. MS-13 members are

reportedly being contracted on an ad-hoc basis by Mexico's warring cartels to carry out revenge killings. Regional and U.S. authorities have confirmed gang involvement in regional drug trafficking. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has found no credible evidence of a connection between Central American gangs and Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups.[1]

Central American Street Gangs. The major gangs operating in Central America with ties to the United States are the "18th Street" gang (also known as M-18), and their main rival, the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13). The 18th Street gang was formed by Mexican youth in the Rampart section of Los Angeles in the 1960s who were not accepted into existing Hispanic gangs. It was the first Hispanic gang to accept members from all races and to recruit members from other states. MS-13 was created during the 1980s by Salvadorans in Los Angeles who had fled the country's civil conflict. Although FBI officials have described MS-13 as a loosely structured street gang, it is expanding geographically throughout the region and becoming more organized and sophisticated. U.S. government figures place the total number of MS-13 and 18th Street gang members in the United States at roughly 38,000.[2]

Factors Contributing to the Gang Problem. Several factors have contributed to the problem of gang violence in Central America. Scholars have identified income inequality as the strongest predictor of violent crime rates.[3] Central American countries (aside from Costa Rica) have some of the highest income inequality indices in the world. Some scholars have noted that, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, the enduring effects of prolonged civil conflicts, including the widespread proliferation of firearms and explosives since those conflicts ended, have contributed to the gang problem. Other factors that may worsen gang violence in many countries include extreme poverty; families broken up by violence or migration; growing youth populations facing stagnant job markets; and an absence of political will to fight crime in a holistic manner.

Some analysts argue that U.S. immigration policy has exacerbated the gang problem in Central America. By the mid-1990s, the civil conflicts in Central America had ended and the United States began deporting undocumented immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the region. Between 2000 and 2004, an estimated 20,000 criminals were sent back to Central America. Others, especially organizations working directly with gang members, have asserted that social exclusion and a lack of educational and job opportunities for at-risk youth are perpetuating the gang problem. They assert that offender reentry is a major problem, as tattooed former gang members, especially returning deportees from the United States who are often native English speakers, have difficulty finding gainful employment. Some have also noted that sensationalist media

---

[1] Sources include "Criminal Gangs in the Americas," *Economist*, January 5, 2006; "Gangs Undermine Security, Democracy," *Miami Herald*, March 30, 2006; "Marked Men," *Dallas Morning News*, October 29; 2006; Testimony of General Bantz J. Craddock, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2005.

[2] Arian Campo-Flores, "The Most Dangerous Gang in America," *Newsweek*, March 28, 2005; USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, April 2006. Available at [http://www2.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/gangs.html].

[3] D. Ledermann et al., "Determinants of Crime Rates in Latin America and the World," *World Bank*, October 1998.

coverage of gang violence in the region may have inadvertently enhanced the reputation of the gangs portrayed. Finally, a recent study by a human rights group argues that, rather than ameliorating the gang problem, the repressive policing techniques adopted by many Central American governments have partly contributed to the gangs "becoming more organized and more violent."[4]

Country and Regional Responses to the Gang Problem

Most gang activity in Central America has occurred in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Honduras and El Salvador have enacted aggressive anti-gang laws, whereas Nicaragua and Panama — two countries in which the gang problem has yet to pose a major security threat — have adopted youth crime prevention strategies. The Guatemalan government, which has yet to enact comprehensive gang legislation, supports both strengthening law enforcement capacity to combat criminal gangs, and expanding gang prevention programs. An April 2006 USAID assessment found that current country and regional efforts to address gangs in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua are "fragmented, disjointed and [that they] further underscore the need for coordinated action and leadership."

Honduras. In 2003, Honduras passed tough anti-gang legislation that established stiff prison sentences for gang membership. While the initial crackdown reduced crime significantly and was popular with the public, it was opposed by human rights groups concerned about abuses of gang suspects by vigilante groups and police forces, and its effects on civil liberties. There has also been ongoing concern about the laws' effects on already poor prison conditions. In May 2004, 104 inmates, predominantly gang members, were killed in a fire in an overcrowded prison. In January 2005, another 13 inmates were killed at another prison as a result of clashes between rival gangs. President Manuel Zelaya initially announced measures to use dialogue to convince gang members to give up violence and re-integrate into society, but has thus far relied on private groups to run most rehabilitation and offender reentry programs. Zelaya generally prefers to address gang violence as part of the overall problem of violence in Honduras. His government funds a small anti-gang office in the National Police, and has used joint police and military patrols in high-crime areas. Those patrols arrested more than 1,200 gang members in early September 2006 alone.[5]

El Salvador. In July 2004, El Salvador's Congress unanimously approved President Tony Saca's *Super Mano Dura* ("Super Firm Hand") package of anti-gang reforms despite vocal criticisms by the United Nations and others that its tough provisions violate international human rights standards. In 2005, El Salvador's legislature tightened gun ownership laws, especially for youths, and President Saca initiated joint military and police patrols in high-crime areas. The Saca government also began to allocate 20% of

---

[4] Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005; Mary Helen Johnson, "National Policies and the Rise of Transnational Gangs," *Migration Policy Institute*, April 1, 2006; USAID, April 2006; "Youth Gangs in Central America," *Washington Office on Latin America*, November 2006.

[5] President Softens Stance on Gangs," *Miami Herald*, April 13, 2006; "Northern Triangle Faces Serious Security Threats," *Latin American Caribbean and Central American Report*, September 19, 2006.

anti-gang funds for prevention and rehabilitation programs. Despite those efforts, El Salvador recorded 3,697 murders in 2005, 34% more than in 2004. An estimated 10,000 of 14,000 suspected gang members arrested in 2005 were released for lack of evidence, revealing weakness in the country's judicial system. In May 2006, President Saca identified gangs as the principle cause of El Salvador's high murder rates. In order to combat gangs and other violent criminals, he has created a new Ministry of Public Security and Justice, increased joint military and police patrols, and unveiled a draft law against organized crime.[6]

Guatemala. In December 2005, President Oscar Berger announced that he would deploy joint military and police forces to contain gang-related violent crime. These joint forces were necessitated by rank depletion within the Guatemalan police, as more than 4,000 officers had been dismissed by the end of 2005 for irregular or criminal activities. The Guatemalan Congress has approved "organized crime" legislation criminalizing racketeering and enabling law enforcement to use modern investigative tools such as wiretaps and undercover operations. Other measures pending before the legislature would reform the penal code and regulate private security firms. Many analysts maintain that prison reform must also be addressed as gang warfare in the prison system resulted in 53 inmate deaths in August and September 2005. The Guatemalan interior minister has recently attributed many of the country's 5,629 murders in 2006 to inter-gang conflict. While law enforcement solutions have been the immediate focus of the Berger government, prevention programs are also being created to assist disadvantaged and vulnerable youth, especially former gang members. [7]

Panama and Nicaragua. Although their efforts have received considerably less international attention than El Salvador and Honduras, several other Central American countries have developed a variety of programs to deal with the gang problem. In September 2004, Panamanian President Martin Torrijos launched *Mano Amiga* ("Friendly Hand"), a crime prevention program that provides positive alternatives to gang membership for at-risk youths. Aimed at children aged 14-17, the government program, which is supported by a number of domestic and international non-governmental institutions, seeks to provide access to theater and sports activities for some 10,000 Panamanian youth. Nicaragua has also adopted a national youth crime prevention strategy that, with the active involvement of the police, focuses on family, school, and community interventions. Some 550 former gang members have successfully reintegrated back into society with the assistance of another Nicaraguan government intervention.

Regional Efforts. On June 7, 2005, the OAS passed a resolution to hold conferences and workshops on the gang issue and to urge member states to support the creation of holistic solutions to the gang problem. Central American leaders and officials have regularly met, often accompanied by their U.S. counterparts, to improve ways to coordinate security and information-sharing on gang members. Presidents Saca of El Salvador and Oscar Berger of Guatemala agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol

---

[6] "El Salvador: Murder Rate Soars in 2005," *Latinnews Daily*, Jan. 4, 2006; "Saca: Pandillas Son Principales Causantes de Homicidios en El Salvador, *Agence France Press*, May 15, 2006; "El Salvador: Crime Busted?" *Economist Intelligence Unit*, Dec. 18, 2006.

[7] "Anti-crime Drives Fail to Contain Rising Violence," *Latin American Weekly Report*, December 13, 2005; "Ten Years On, Peace Remains Distant," *Latin News Weekly Report*, January 4, 2007.

gang activity along their common border. Berger and other leaders have also called for assistance from the United States to create a regional "rapid-reaction force" to tackle drug traffickers and gangs. Regional law enforcement efforts are already underway. In September 2005, 6,400 law enforcement officers from the United States, Mexico, and Central America carried out a coordinated gang raid that resulted in the arrest of 650 suspects.[8] In October 2006, the governments of the Central American Integration System (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua) and the Dominican Republic proposed legislation to make a local felony into a regional felony and pledged to improve intelligence-sharing within the region.

U.S. Efforts

Over the past two years, Congress has expressed ongoing concerns about the problem of transnational gangs. In the 109th Congress, legislation was introduced — S. 853 (Lugar) and H.R. 2672 (Harris), the North American Cooperative Security Act — that included provisions to increase cooperation among U.S., Mexican, and Central American officials in the tracking of gang activity and in the handling of deported gang members. Similar provisions were included in both House and Senate versions of broader immigration legislation, H.R. 4437 (Sensennbrenner) and S. 2611 (Specter), which were considered but not enacted.

Several U.S. agencies have been actively engaged on both the law enforcement and preventive side of dealing with Central American gangs. On the law enforcement side, the FBI created a special task force focusing on MS-13 in December 2004, and, in April 2005, it opened a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts. The gang task force has introduced new regulations that would allow U.S. officials to provide information to Central American authorities about the criminal records of future deportees. In the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has created a national anti-gang initiative called "Operation Community Shield" that, in addition to arresting suspected gang members in the United States, works through its offices overseas to coordinate with foreign governments that are also experiencing gang problems. Since February 2005, ICE has arrested more than 1,274 suspected MS-13 members. These law enforcement agencies have coordinated their efforts with State Department officials responsible for supporting law enforcement and counter-narcotics programs in Central America.

On the preventive side, USAID worked with the Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) to create a community policing program in some 200 municipalities in El Salvador, and is implementing a similar community crime prevention program in Villa Nueva, Guatemala. In Guatemala, USAID is funding the creation of a model "youth home" for disadvantaged youth, including former gang members, and providing educational and employment opportunities for at-risk youth. In April 2006, USAID published an assessment of the gang problem and programming initiatives needed to confront its root causes throughout Central American and Mexico. The assessment found that "donors and local service providers are absent in neighborhoods that...pose high security risks ... [resulting in] huge

---

[8] "Central America's Crime Wave Spurs Plan for a Regional Force," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2005; "Gang Crackdown Nets 650 Suspects," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2005.

gaps in service provision..."[9] USAID and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are part of the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence (IACPV). The IACPV is a multilateral group that has helped municipalities in Central America develop violence prevention plans, hosted a major conference on gang prevention, and helped form the Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence. The U.S. State Department has also launched a school-based "culture of lawfulness" program to help youth resist gangs and drugs. Finally, the IDB is executing significant violence reduction loans in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In Honduras, a $32 million IDB loan has provided support for infrastructure, as well as micro-entrepreneurship training for former gang members.

The National Security Council (NSC) created an inter-agency task force to develop a comprehensive, three-year strategy to deal with international gang activity. The strategy, which is now being implemented, states that the U.S. government will pursue coordinated anti-gang activities in five broad areas: diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity enhancement, and prevention.

Policy Approaches and Concerns

Most analysts agree with the March 15, 2005 testimony of General Bantz Craddock, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, that finding regional solutions to the gang problem is "absolutely essential." At the same time, many analysts argue that in order to effectively reduce gang-related crime, a holistic approach to the problem must be developed that addresses its root social, political, and economic causes. Analysts disagree, however, as to what mix of preventive and suppressive policies needs to be put in place in Central America to deal with the gangs, and what U.S. agency is best equipped to oversee those anti-gang efforts.

Proponents of law enforcement solutions maintain that Central American law enforcement officials lack the capacity and the resources to target gang leaders effectively, conduct thorough investigations that lead to successful prosecutions, and share data. While most U.S. observers argue that the State Department and the FBI should take the lead in assistance to improve law enforcement capacity, others see a possible role for the U.S. Southern Command in training regional security forces. Critics of U.S. military involvement in anti-gang efforts have noted that it is the State Department's role to provide security assistance to foreign governments, subject to human rights and democracy concerns. Other proposals for increased U.S. involvement in police training are likely to contain significant anti-gang components.

Proponents of prevention assert that USAID and the Inter-American Foundation (IAF) could take the lead on increasing gang-prevention programs in the region. Both agencies' efforts have been hindered in recent years, however, by limited budgets for development programs. Further, some assert that, regardless of U.S. efforts, gang prevention programs may not show immediate results, and will require a sustained high-level commitment by Central American leaders to attack the underlying factors of poverty and unemployment that have contributed to the rise in gang activity.

---

[9] USAID, April 2006.