

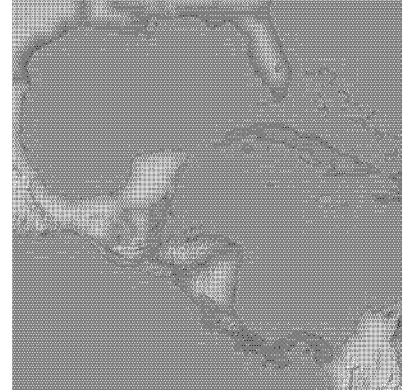


Central America: Violent Crime Overwhelming Governments

Office of Asian Pacific, Latin American, and African Analysis

Limited security resources and entrenched corruption in law enforcement have contributed to the failures of governments in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to curtail violent crime, committed primarily by youth gangs.

Homicide rates in this region are among the highest in the Western Hemisphere, and opinion polls consistently cite the inability to provide public security as the governments' biggest problem.



— [redacted] Central American leaders emphasized to Mexican counterparts that they were completely overwhelmed by the bleak security situation, citing a lack of resources to improve their public security infrastructure, [redacted]

— Security services in Guatemala have lost public confidence to the common view that their senior officials were complicit in the killing of three Central American Parliament members in February. President Berger last month dismissed more than 500 corrupt police, but his efforts may be called into question by his selection of a new Minister of Government with ties to a consultant accused of masterminding extrajudicial killings of criminals, [redacted]

Escalating crime is raising costs for the private sector, prompting public demonstrations, and encouraging the formation of vigilante groups to execute gang members. The direct and indirect costs of violent crime in El Salvador—estimated by the UN at \$1.6 billion, or 11.5 percent of GDP—pose the most significant challenge to the country's economic growth, [redacted]

— Salvadoran law enforcement officials are frustrated by the challenge of investigating and prosecuting gang members who extort small business owners, and several death squads have formed in El Salvador to target extortionists, [redacted]

— Public frustration boiled over last fall when Salvadoran bus drivers shut down public transportation over the killings of 80 workers [redacted]

— The Honduran public perceives President Zelaya's administration as indifferent to violence against ordinary citizens [redacted]

Government leaders in the region increasingly are turning to military forces to restore law and order; in Guatemala and El Salvador public opinion generally favors using the military to confront gangs, [redacted]

[redacted] Human rights groups are concerned, however, that the military will be drawn into internal security matters and will commit abuses.

— An adviser to El Salvador's President Saca has advocated military involvement in law enforcement to combat violent youth gangs due to police incompetence [redacted]

— Private transportation companies have asked for a robust military presence on Guatemalan buses to deter extortion from gang members, and Guatemalan press reports say the Minister of Government has requested a study on using the military to support the National Police. [redacted]

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WIRe [redacted] Central America: Violent Crime Overwhelming...

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Governments slowly are beginning to consider more comprehensive anticrime policies that focus on prevention, law enforcement, and rehabilitation. Central American countries endorsed the Transnational Anti-Gang Initiative proposed by the US Attorney General in February and agreed during a regional antigang conference last month to enhance information exchange [redacted]

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Central American Gangs' Drug Role Limited, but Potential for More Serious Threat Looms [redacted]

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Central American gangs—notably Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (Calle-18)—in recent years have been involved in various drug-related activities in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and the US. Gang members protect drug shipments, sell drugs at the retail level, and do for-hire work—such as assassinations or stealing cocaine loads—on behalf of larger drug-trafficking groups, [redacted]

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— Available all-source information suggests their activities remain localized and in the lower, less-profitable stages of the drug trade. [redacted]

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— Drug revenues probably are an important funding source for the gangs, [redacted] Honduran officials, for example, assess that the gangs spend their excess money on subsistence goods and parties, rather than investing or saving. [redacted]

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If Central American gangs became better organized and more deeply involved in drug trafficking, however, their revenues could grow significantly—increasing their ability to corrupt officials and control territory within Central America. Possible indicators that would suggest their participation in the drug trade is rising include: increased collaboration or competition between the gangs and other drug smuggling organizations—particularly Mexican groups; an increasing presence of gang members in key Latin American zones of drug production and transit; and a rise in violence directed at smuggling groups operating within Central America without the gangs' approval.

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— In addition, increasing detection of drug shipments [redacted] may signal greater Central American gang involvement in drugs [redacted]

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