Executive Summary[1][1]

Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the United States

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I. Summary of Key Findings:

In recent years, Central American youth gangs known as "*maras*" have caught the attention of the media, national governments, academic researchers and civil society. Reports from some national security experts and in the media have painted youth gangs as an increasingly serious threat to public order in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (the "Northern Triangle"), as well as in southern Mexico and parts of the United States. These perceptions about the growth and seriousness of the problem are fed by frequently sensationalized and unfounded reports of the transnational spread of youth gang violence, and of ties between gangs and organized crime such as narco-traffic, terrorism, human trafficking and arms dealing.

However, current research shows that while a growing and complex problem, the transnational and criminal nature of youth gangs is quite limited. Additionally, research indicates that efforts to address the problem exclusively from a national security focus are less fruitful than approaching youth gangs as a social (i.e. human rights and/or public health) problem tied to structural (legal and economic) failures of the State. The following are key insights drawn from a recent study of youth gangs in Central America, Mexico and the United States:

► The research suggests that youth gangs are a serious public security problem in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, although the nature of the problem is different in each country. At the same time, youth gang—though a real problem that demands serious attention—are a much smaller problem and threat in Nicaragua and Mexico. In the Washington D.C. area of the U.S., youth gangs composed of Central American immigrants are active in "hot zones" but are not a critical problem for public security.

► Youth gangs are dynamic; they change and grow and should not be treated as a static phenomenon that is the same in all localities. As such, it is hard to find reliable data on the number of gang members. Policies and recommendations that address youth gangs and violence and public security have to be based on in-depth analysis of the nature of the problem, not based on myths, anecdotes or speculations.

► The profiles of youth gang members are diverse in terms of how and why they end up joining gangs; however there are a number of commonalities: Gang members in general tend to be from weak and/or violent family backgrounds, don't do well in or have been expelled from school and/or are unemployed, and are attracted to gang life at relatively young (ages 10-12).

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► The study shows that while gang-related violence is a problem it is not tightly linked to narco-traffic and organized crime. Additionally, within all the countries, the primary victims of youth gang-related violence are other youth, both gang and non-gang involved.

► The study shows that only a small minority of gang members in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, possess transnational ties with other gang members, or ties with organized crime and/or narco-trafficking.

► A surprising finding is that, despite alarmist rhetoric, youth gangs composed of Central American immigrants linked to the *Mara Salvatrucha* or *Calle 18* have not expanded into Mexico in an organized manner. However, there are numerous youth gangs, composed of Mexican youth and not linked to *Mara Salvatrucha or Calle 18*, as well as criminal gangs related to narco-trafficking in Mexico, that are a serious public security problem.

► In El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, where the problem is serious, government responses have focused on repressive techniques. This strategy has been counterproductive. The evidence shows that gangs have become more organized and less visible in response to "*mano dura*" policies, and public security has not improved.

► The investigation shows that there are "best practices" in Central America and the U.S. that should be explored, and could give better results than current programs and policies. These include comprehensive and community-specific prevention efforts conducted by the authorities in Washington D.C., prevention programs that involve the police as in the case of Nicaragua, and community-based responses in locales throughout Central America. These lessons should be considered in Mexico where there is a need to develop and coordinate youth violence prevention programs.

► There are four central areas of concern for developing future prevention efforts: 1) The need to develop and ensure opportunities for ex-gang members to find work opportunities and a meaningful place in society; 2) Investigation of factors, such as social capital, influencing "at risk-youth" who do <u>not</u> enter gangs to identify and understand preventative factors for building future interventions; 3) The cultivation of and support for opportunities for youth to become involved in activities (traditional education, sports, vocational training in computers, electronics, etc.) that provide self-esteem and alternatives to gang-related activities; 4) The need to investigate and eliminate the involvement of police authorities in gang-related activities and in human rights violations of youth (or activists who work with youth).

II. Justification and Description of the Study and Report

Youth gang violence in the sub-region of Central America, Mexico and the U.S. is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. At present, there is little research that provides a clear understanding of the phenomenon transnationally. Although many relevant and rigorous studies of youth gangs have been done in Central America, comparative transnational studies are needed to examine the intersection of the dynamism of the maras with a post 9-11 scenario and governmental anti-gang and anti-immigration policies. These complex forces present a changing reality which needs to be better understood.

In particular, evidence suggests that the "state of emergency" *mano dura* (iron hand) responses adopted by some Central American governments have not been effective in reducing gang-related crime and violence. Responses to the problems of youth gangs and gang violence in the sub-region need to be comprehensive, addressing prevention and rehabilitation, and human rights, as well as police and law enforcement approaches. This report summarizes the preliminary findings from the first comparative, transnational study and analyzes the local and transnational dimensions of the maras phenomenon in the highly migratory sub-region composed of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Washington D.C. area.

The project has three principal goals:

1) Study the prevention practices and responses developed by governments and civil society;
2) Craft a series of recommendations for decision makers in order for them to implement comprehensive policies beyond confrontation and "*mano dura*";
3) Generate transnational networks that contribute to a closer and more informed dialogue between researchers, policy makers and decision makers in Central America, Mexico, and the United States.

Based on the study objectives, the report is organized into the following topic areas:

1) A brief overview of the historical context for each country case study;
2) Key demographic aspects of maras and youth gangs in each country;
3) The relationship between youth gangs, violence and public security;
4) Government and civil society responses, and policy/program recommendations.

III. Context in which Maras emerged in Central America, the U.S., and Mexico

The first expression of what is known as Central American "maras" emerged not in Central America, but in Los Angeles after the migration of Salvadorans to the U.S. during the civil war (1979-1992). Upon arrival in Los Angeles, a city with a significant presence of gangs, including Chicano gangs, disenfranchised Salvadoran youth joined already existing gangs, such as *Barrio 18*, and also created new gangs such as *Mara*

Salvatrucha (based on their national identity) in order to defend themselves in the hostile environment. By the mid 1990's, many youth began to return to El Salvador because their families returned at the end of the military conflict or because they were deported due to gang activities or immigration infractions due to changes immigration laws in the U.S. This "reverse" migration of youth to Central America facilitated contact between the new gangs and older local gangs, and the cross-fertilization led to Central American gangs adopting the cultural model of gangs in Los Angeles. During the last half of the 1990s, youth gangs in Guatemala and Honduras were largely affiliated with one or the other of the *Mara Salvatrucha* or *Barrio 18*. By the year 2000 the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* had a presence in Washington, DC in the U.S. northeast. What began in the 1980's as a series of small differentiated local gangs became by 1993 two larger and generally loosely associated trans-national groups of gangs extending between the US and Central America.

► Honduras and Guatemala:
Like El Salvador, during the 1980's and 1990's Guatemala and Honduras experienced high levels of political violence due to civil wars and military conflicts, which led to high rates of urbanization and migration to the U.S. (and Mexico) where youth were exposed to the gang culture that had emerged in the U.S. As in El Salvador, the lack of adequate development policy and the cultural and economic marginalization of youth in Guatemala and Honduras led to the proliferation of local gangs that began to dominate poor neighborhoods. These gangs were highly differentiated and local. Youth were drawn to the gangs in search of protection, respect, identity and support that was so often lacking in their lives. Deportations and other forms of reverse migration, along with contact with youth in El Salvador, contributed to the development of these gangs.

► Nicaragua:
The case of Nicaragua is different from the Northern Triangle countries. Like the wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, the Contra war, or the civil war between the Sandinista government and their internal opponents, pushed many Nicaraguans to migrate out of the country. Like the other Central American countries, Nicaragua had high migration rates; however the migrations patterns were different. Nicaraguans were more likely to migrate to Costa Rica rather than the U.S. Those Nicaraguans who migrated to the U.S. were concentrated in Florida rather than Los Angeles. Additionally, Nicaraguan migrants have not been deported (or incarcerated) at the same rates that migrants from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala were. Consequently, while Nicaraguan *pandillas* do have a problem with interpersonal violence and drug use, without the cross-fertilization with U.S. and Salvadoran gangs, Nicaraguan youth gangs are not affiliated with the *Marasalvatrucha* or *Barrio 18* but rather are highly local. Additionally, because of the relative lack of availability of arms (guns) in Nicaragua and the work of community-based police, youth gangs are less violent than are gangs in the Northern Triangle. However, despite the lower levels of involvement in violence, Nicaraguan youth gangs are involved—as "pushers" and "capos"—in the local small-scale production and sale of crack cocaine.

► **Mexico:**
In Mexico, the four urban centers in the study (Tijuana, Mexico City, Morelia and Tapachula) did register significant youth gang activity and high levels of violence and drug use, but did not register a strong presence of Central American gangs. The data suggests that Mexican social and cultural identity and community networks establish limits to gang activity, and have contained youth gangs in some ways. This has prevented Central American gangs from gaining a foothold in Mexico or among Mexican youth. Also, in part, organized crime in Mexico occupies most of the "social space" for illicit activity and thus does not allow the *maras* to establish themselves.

► **Washington, DC:**
In Washington DC, from the year 2000 to 2003, the Hispanic population has risen by 19.4%. Hispanics now make up 9.3% of the total population of the D.C. area, according to the Census, and almost half the Latino population is composed of people whose national origin is Central American; 31% come from El Salvador alone. Central American migrants face major challenges as one in three has trouble communicating in English and are less likely to have access to health care, education and employment. An anti-immigrant backlash in the region, tied to larger anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States as a whole, has emerged recently with campaigns against undocumented workers and those who hire them as well as support for local police as enforcers of federal immigration laws. This can further marginalize Central American youth, and increases the risk that they fall into youth gangs as a source of identity and support.

While Central American military conflicts and migration flows between Central America and the U.S. may have played a role in their emergence, the more recent growth of Central American gangs can be linked to U.S. deportation/anti-immigrant policies and Central American anti-gang/*mano dura* policies (*Plan Escoba*, Guatemala; *Plan Mano Dura*, El Salvador; *Libertad Azul o Cero Tolerancia*, Honduras). As noted below, gangs have not been disrupted by these strategies; instead, they have increased their levels of organization and clandestinity. Additionally, because *mano dura* policies have lead to the incarceration of growing numbers of gang members and youth, they have created prison conditions that facilitate the organization of prison gangs, and that increase youths' risk for continuing involvement in gang-related activities.

IV. Key Demographic Aspects of Maras and Youth Gangs

► **El Salvador:**
According to 2002 National Civil Police statistics there are 10,500 adult members and 309 *clicas* of *maras* concentrated in the central part of El Salvador. The primary gangs are the *Mara Salvatrucha* (55% of *clicas*) and Barrio 18 (33%). Gang presence is concentrated in the central part of the country and in San Salvador, followed by the eastern part of El Salvador. *Mano dura* policies have resulted in the incarceration of many gang leaders and members in the prisons of El Salvador, where the *mara*s have undergone a process of consolidation and institutionalization. It is possible that the concentration of gang members in prisons has strengthened its internal networks and

group identity. However, the data shows that very few gang members have transnational ties or links to organized crime and narco-traffic. Interestingly, data collected from a survey of 316 gang members in the *Centros Penales y de Internamiento para Menores* (where 3,602 youth and adult gang members are incarcerated) indicates that even though just over half (52.2%) said they knew fellow gang members in North America, the vast majority (85.8%) said they had no contact with fellow gang members outside the country and only between 5.7 and 8.5% had even traveled to the US or Mexico. Finally, it seems that within the prison-based population of *maras* members, the minority with transnational contact(s) tend to be those that have a leadership position in the *mara* organizational structure.

► Guatemala:
Data obtained from in-depth interviews indicates that many different types of gangs exist in Guatemala, ranging from the most well-known gangs—the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18*—to local neighborhood gangs (Rockers, Cholos, Latin Kings, etc.). According to the National Police statistics, there are 340 *pandillas* (or *clicas*) with 8,114 members nationwide. It is significant that geographically, the *mara* presence is concentrated in the west of the Guatemala and Guatemala City, whereas narco-trafficking is concentrated in the east. Recently, gang members have been erasing their tattoos to make themselves less visible to police and authorities. Finally, it is important to mention that governmental initiatives have been less repressive in Guatemala than in the rest of the Northern Triangle.

► Honduras:
Like Guatemala, there are many different types of youth gangs, ranging from local neighborhood gangs (*los Roqueros, los Cholos*) to school-based gangs (*la Raza, los Osos*), however *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* are the principle gangs in Honduras. Official statistics indicate there were between 32,000-35,000 gang members nation-wide in 2000-2001. But the credibility of these figures has been challenged; other sources put the total at 4,621. Data show that the age range of gang members varies from 21-25 in the north, where gangs first developed, to 16-20 years old in the center of the country where gangs are "younger". Of note is that gangs in northern Honduras have become less "territorial" and more migratory as a response to *mano dura* policies that promote persecution of gang members; gangs in Tegucigalpa, by contrast are still sedentary and territorial. Finally, as in Guatemala and El Salvador gang members are erasing tattoos to make themselves less visible to authorities.

► Nicaragua:
In Nicaragua youth gangs are not highly organized or affiliated with the *Mara Salvatrucha* or *Mara 18* nor are they linked very strongly to organized crime or narco-trafficking; rather they are locally organized and highly differentiated. However, members of youth gangs do exhibit high levels of drug use, particularly the consumption (and small-scale local production) of crack cocaine. A review of recent statistics from the National Police indicates an increase from 62 gangs with 1,058 members in 2003 to 89 gangs with 2,227 members in 2005. However, statistics also show that youth groups classified as "at high risk" for joining a gang are declining from 255 groups with 3,147

members in 2003 to 77 groups with 988 members in 2005. It is unclear whether the reduction in numbers of "youth at risk" is due to simply joining gangs or to leaving the gang lifestyle altogether. Finally, the statistics show that the age range of gang members has shifted from 18-25 years to 16-18 years of age, and that the size of gangs has diminished from 70-80 members in a single gang to 10 members. The reliability of these statistics has been called into question; some sources argue that the Nicaraguan National Police have an interest in maintaining the impression that violence and gangs in Nicaragua are diminishing.

► **Mexico**:
In Mexico, it is difficult to accurately measure the numbers and types of youth gangs because they have not been viewed as a serious problem by the National Police and so statistics have not been systematically collected. However, based on existing data, youth gangs do exist in Mexico but they don't exhibit the same characteristics as in Central America and the U.S. In the four cities selected for this study—Tijuana, Mexico City, Morelia and Tapachula—there are many locally differentiated and highly territorial *pandillas*, but no significant presence of gangs such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* or *Mara 18*.

These findings are in striking contrast to the information offered by the Secretariat of National defense, Secretariat of Navy, CISEN, the Secretariat of Public Security of Chiapas and the FBI, who argue that approximately 5,000 *mareros* exist in Mexico, with presence identified in 25 states. According to these sources, more than 80 percent of gang members are located in the state of Chiapas, distributed in 25 of 130 municipalities. Within Chiapas, these sources state 762 gang members belong to *Barrio 18* and 520 to *Mara Salvatrucha* (data is not available for the rest). These sources argue that Tapachula was the main point of operation for *maras*, however due to the destruction of migration transportation routes as a result of the hurricane Stan, the center of operations has moved to Tenosique, Tabasco.

It is not clear what explains these strikingly different findings. Some have argued that Mexican youth are engaged in what has been called "*clonación social*"; Mexican gangs do not have direct contact with *maras* in Central America but they reproduce its practices, codes and values, and so are sometimes identified as part of the transnational network of *Mara Salvatrucha* or *Calle 18*.

In general, the research shows that while most gangs are involved in violence, drug use and criminal activities, those with higher concentration of adults (25 years or older) are more likely to be involved in more severe criminal and violent activities. It is notable that in Mexico City, youth gangs are generally more "mixed" (with both adults and youth), whereas in Tijuana, Morelia and Tapachula gangs are largely comprised of younger members. Additionally, the type of drugs consumed in each area varies. For example, in Tijuana heroin is more widely used, whereas in DF crack (*piedra) and glue sniffing* (*cemento)* are more common. Additionally, while criminal activity is common, the evidence shows that gangs are only responsible for a relatively small proportion of total criminal events that occur. For example, in DF, of 5,408 reported crimes, *pandillas* were

responsible for only 0.3%, and in Baja California only 1.3%; however in Chiapas the proportion is significantly higher – 24.3%.

► Washington, DC:
The FBI traces the presence of Latino gangs in the D.C. area back no further than 1993, however statistics on the actual numbers of Latino gang members are unreliable as communication between jurisdictions in the D.C. area is uncommon and no standardized method of information gathering regarding gang activities, arrests and membership exists. Washington D.C. Area "Gang Task Force Reports" estimate that there are 3,600 Latino gang members in Maryland, Virginia and D.C., and that there are nine major gangs and more than 100 additional "crews," neighborhood based youth gangs. By some accounts, the *Mara Salvatrucha* is the most organized and most violent of the D.C. area Latino gangs. But other police officers have stated that *Mara Salvatrucha* is not a significant security threat in their jurisdiction. While the issue of youth violence and drug use in Latino gangs is a concern in the D.C. case, research suggests that most youth involved in so-called Central American gangs are not involved in organized crime or narco-trafficking but rather spend most of their time "hanging out" in the street engaged in non-criminal activity. It is important also to note that information is gathered on gangs based on ethnicity (i.e. Latino, African American, Asian, Caucasian) which distinguishes the maras in the U.S. context from in the context of Central America or Mexico. There are many local Latino gangs that are not associated with *maras* and, significantly, there are African American gangs, also known as crews, that have a long history of gang activity in the region. Additionally there are racially mixed gangs that have members of various races/ethnicities.

V. Gangs, Violence and Public (In)Security

From a political perspective, youth gangs are often described as a grave problem of national and public security in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Because a minority of gang members and local gang cliques do have ties to drug-trafficking and organized crime, and because media accounts have painted sensationalized accounts of the links that exist between youth gangs and organize crime, youth gangs are increasingly becoming "criminalized" and viewed as a new modality of organized crime. Due to transnational influences (migration and deportation) and ongoing local problems with State governance in Central America, youth gangs have inevitably become incorporated into national and transnational agendas as a public security issue.

Clearly, transnational migration flows are real: there are high levels of population mobility between Central American countries, Mexico and the U.S. (largely due to struggling Central American economies and the pull of economic opportunities in the north); natural disasters such as hurricanes have disrupted populations and encouraged mobility; and U.S. anti-gang and anti-immigrant policies that result in the incarceration and deportation of Central Americans have generated reverse migration. This feeds into a perception, for which there is very little hard evidence, that gangs have strong and well-developed transnational links. While there are suggestions in the evidence that some

cliques, and some ex-gang members, do go on to develop links with already existing organized criminal groups, this does not appear to be the dominant pattern.

Data from the Guatemala case study provides insight into the relationship between gangs, organized crime and narco-trafficking. While national data shows an increase in homicides from 2000-2004, the highest homicide rates are registered in parts of Guatemala, where there is the least presence of gangs and much greater presence of organized crime and narco-trafficking. This suggests that while gang-related violence is a problem, it is not as tightly linked to organized crime and narco-trafficking as the media and State previously represented. Additionally, this data is in sync with the data from Mexico, which shows a correlation between the presence of organized crime and the *absence* of the maras.

It is important to recognize that gang members and youth are not just perpetrators of violence, but victims of violence as well. In addition to being targets for other rival gangs, youth are victimized by the justice system and police. For example, evidence shows that in some cases authorities have justified social cleansing, extrajudicial executions and the violation of legal rights of youth held up to six months without being charged or given due process of law. In addition, there are corrupt police that engage in extortion of gang members and the sale or rental of arms. In some cases, the police have become part of the *maras* problem, participating in their criminal activities. In general, *maras* should be viewed largely as a threat to the public security of Central American youth (both gang-involved and not) as youth themselves are the primary victims of violence associated with gang activities.

VI. Government & Civil Society Responses, Policy Recommendations

As stated above, the relatively recent rapid transnational growth of Central American gangs can be linked to U.S. deportation/anti-immigrant policies and Central American anti-gang/*mano dura* policies including *Plan Escoba* in Guatemala, *Plan Mano Dura* in El Salvador, and *Libertad Azul/Cero Tolerancia* in Honduras. Contrary to the intentions of government authorities, the combination of anti-*mara* policies and the institutional weakness of the U.S. and Central American penitentiary systems have resulted in the transnationalization and criminalization of *maras* and generated an incentive for the professionalization of violence, making *maras* more organized and sophisticated.

► Government Responses:

Mano dura policies are a characteristic of vulnerable and weak States that do not have the capacity to develop and employ lasting tools of containment, such as social and economic prevention policies and programs. In addition, the lack of reliable information on the part of the police on the type of criminality or delinquency in which the gangs are involved, as well as police involvement/collaboration with gang-activities, limits the possibilities of an effective containment of *maras* by State programs and agencies. Also, the distrust and lack of communication and coordination between apparatuses of justice of the involved countries helps to perpetuate the *maras* phenomenon. What is undeniable is the constant

violation of the human rights of youth that is occurring in all the countries as a result of disinformation and confusion with respect to youth gangs.

► Civil Society Responses:

The project has documented a wide range of civil society organizations (NGOs) working with youth gangs. The social, political or religious focus of NGOs determines the nature (and limitations) of an organizations activities in terms of gang prevention, harm reduction, rehabilitation, etc. For example, an increasing number of NGOs focus on gang rehabilitation supported by the Church (Catholic and Evangelical). Such rehabilitation efforts have met with limited success, because by their nature they focus at the individual—not social or economic or political—level. Additionally, prevention programs can sometimes be highly sectarian and so may generate fragmentation of gang prevention and rehabilitation programs instead of promoting the reconciliation and the coordination of efforts to avoid the practices of violence, drug consumption and delinquency in the long term. Sectarianism is also generated by competition for scarce resources; many programs are small and resource-challenged and unable to respond to the magnitude of need. Additionally, the informal internal organizational structures of many NGOs can limit the possibilities of weaving and of fortifying connections at the external level with the private and public sectors, other NGOs and the larger community in general. NGO leadership and organizational capacity must be strengthened (professionalized) in order for civil society organizations to be successful in rehabilitating and/or preventing youth from joining gangs in the long term. Also, particularly in the case of the Northern Triangle, there is an enormous distrust between civil society organizations and policy makers. The lack of dialogue among these sectors impedes the development of better strategies with which to face the problem.

However, a number of NGOs have had success in promoting the gang prevention/rehabilitation issue by focusing on cases of police abuse of the fundamental and civil rights of the children and young people involved with gangs by making arbitrary arrests and using irregular procedures outside legitimate legal processes. These NGOs are acting as mediator between the gangs and the institutions of the State, by giving voice to the demands of active and inactive members of gangs within mainstream institutional channels. These NGOs have been particularly successful at constructing their own transnational networks of exchange of information and experiences at the regional level.

► Best Practices:

To date, there have been few studies that evaluate gang prevention and rehabilitation programs in region under study. (Aside from a 2006 report published by the University of Central America, the Pan American Health Organization will publish the first such study in 2007.) However, it is clear from this study that there are a number of successful prevention and rehabilitation programs from which “best practices” can be drawn to address the problem of youth gang violence.

Examples of successful programs that employ "best practices" include:

APREDE (Alianza para la Prevención del Delito) in Guatemala, which has developed a model that stresses community participation and which combines prevention, intervention and re-insertion strategies.

JHAJA (Jóvenes Hondureños Adelante, Juntos Avancemos) is an organization in Honduras that has a successful rehabilitation and re-insertion program that provides work opportunities for ex-gang members.

In El Salvador, Homies United and the Centro de Formación y Orientación Padre Rafael Palacios are organizations that also work with at-risk youth and gang members to provide them with marketable work skills and employment.
In the case of the United States Operation Ceasefire in Boston is an example of a successful prevention program that combines community policing and arms control to reduce gang violence by 70%. As well, Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles (founded in 1988), under the motto "Jobs, not jails," has promoted employment as a way to rehabilitate former gang members.

The Gang Intervention Partnership is another successful example from Washington D.C. which combines the efforts of schools, community health and social services, police, and community leaders in prevention, intervention and repression strategies. After a period of crisis of Latino gang related violence, and since GIP was implemented in October of 2003, the District of Colombia has not seen a Latino-gang-related homicide.

In general, best practices are strategies that are developed with the collaboration of the affected community. Prevention intervention and repression efforts must be specific to the particular community they are targeting, and there must be buy-in from leaders from all sectors, as well as the population in general. When effective, these efforts foment a culture of peace and respect for human rights and provide youth with vocational and educational opportunities that lead to meaningful labor.

VI. Recommendations

There is no magic formula that will solve the problem of youth gangs and violence in the Americas, but governments and civil societies can take steps to address the problem. Some possible steps include the following:

1. Focusing on building school and community-based prevention programs that are also peer-based;
2. Developing appropriate, targeted law enforcement efforts that are specifically developed to deal with gangs, and that respect human rights and due process of law, in coordination with school and community programs;
3. Promoting support—both political and financial—for both harm reduction and rehabilitation programs;

4. Developing incentive and alternatives for youth who want to leave gangs;
5. Transforming the discourse around gangs from 'criminality' to 'human rights abuses' in order to mobilize civil society in less negative and more structured and organized ways;
6. Institutionalizing a reliable and standardized method of monitoring and collecting data on youth gangs in the US, Mexico and Central America;
7. Institutionalizing transnational, regional, national and local-level multi-sectoral forums for exchanging information and resources, and implementing policies and programs, to address the problems associated with the growth and transnationalization of youth gangs;
8. Supporting the involvement, growth and professional capacity of civil society organizations working with youth gangs and at-risk youth;
9. Conducting research to better understand the impact of migration on the incidence f gang violence. Examine the impact of deportations in the Central America-Mexico-US sub-region, on the crime rates and incidence of gang violence in both the deporting and receiving countries.
10. Increasing awareness among journalists and mass media in general about the ethical responsibility of "de-sensationalizing" the treatment of gang-related issues.

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