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“Anti-Gang Efforts in Central America: Moving Beyond *Mano Dura*?¹”

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Background

In the past few years, policymakers throughout Central America and the United States have been grappling with how to confront the problem of violent transnational youth gangs or *maras*. The major gangs operating in Central America with ties to the United States are the 18th Street gang and its main rival, the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13).²

¹ The author is an analyst with the Congressional Research Service (CRS), Library of Congress. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of CRS.

² 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. 18th Street and MS-13 increased their presence in Central America in the 1990s after the United States began deporting large numbers of

These gangs have been blamed, sometimes erroneously, for the rising violent crime rates in Central America.³ The initial government reaction to the gang problem in El Salvador, Honduras, and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala, was to adopt tough law enforcement or *mano dura* (firm hand) approaches. Emphasis appears to have shifted in the last year, at least on a theoretical level, towards recognizing the need for more comprehensive anti-gang approaches.⁴ In mid-December 2007, for example, Salvadoran President Tony Saca opened a summit of the Central America Integration System by stating that the gang problem had underscored the importance of coordinated anti-crime efforts, with the most important being prevention.⁵ It remains to be seen, however, whether this apparent shift in rhetoric is followed by a real change in policy.

In April 2006, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) published a Central America and Mexico gang assessment in which it concluded that an “integrated approach is the only true long-term solution to the gang problem.”⁶ USAID recommended that law enforcement and prevention programs should receive adequate emphasis and funding, and that intervention programs should be creatively constructed with community involvement, responsive to local conditions, and closely evaluated. The assessment also emphasized the importance of having informational exchanges between Central American policymakers and U.S. officials involved in anti-gang efforts.

In December 2007, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) organized a four-day delegation of U.S. local officials, police, and other federal officials to El Salvador and Honduras. The trip aimed to provide these officials with an opportunity to exchange gang-prevention experiences with their Central American counterparts. The delegation included representatives from Washington D.C., a city that has successfully staved off Latino gang violence by engaging community leaders and law enforcement in a Gang Intervention Partnership.⁷ It also included representatives from Los Angeles, a city that is in the process of shifting from a suppressive approach to gang violence towards a more integrated anti-gang approach. One goal of the exchange was to enable Central American officials to glean lessons from the anti-gang initiatives that some U.S. cities are implementing to apply them, when relevant, to their own context. This article draws on my experience as a participant in that delegation.

What is *Mano Dura*?

Mano Dura is a term used to describe the type of anti-gang policies put in place in El Salvador, Honduras, and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala in response to popular demands

undocumented immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the region, particularly after the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996.

³ The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) attributes rising crimes rates in Central America more to drug traffickers and cartels than to youth gangs. See: UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire*, May 2007.

⁴ A comprehensive anti-gang approach might entail prevention, suppression, and rehabilitation programs.

⁵ “Centroamérica revisa estrategias para luchar contra pandillas,” *Agence France Presse*, Dec. 13, 2007.

⁶ USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment*, April 2006.

⁷ “Evaluation Report: Gang Intervention Partnership,” Center for Youth Policy Research, September 2006. Available at: http://mpdc.dc.gov/mpdc/lib/mpdc/publications/researchreports/gip_1106.pdf.

and media pressure for these governments to ‘do something’ about an escalation in gang-related crime. *Mano dura* approaches have typically involved incarcerating large numbers of youth (often those with visible tattoos) for illicit association, and increasing sentences for gang membership and gang-related crimes. A *Mano Dura* law was passed by El Salvador’s Congress in 2003, followed by a *Super Mano Dura* package of anti-gang reforms in July 2004. These reforms outlawed gang membership, enhanced police power to search and arrest suspected gang members, and stiffened penalties for convicted gang members. Similarly, in July 2003, Honduras enacted a penal code amendment that made *maras* illegal and established sentences of up to 12 years in prison for gang membership. Changes in legislation have been accompanied by the increasing use of joint military and police patrols to round up gang suspects. Guatemala introduced similar legislation in 2003, but the legislation never passed. Instead, the Guatemalan government has launched periodic law enforcement operations to round up suspected gang members.

What Have Been the Effects of *Mano Dura* Policies?

Mano Dura reforms initially proved to be a way for Central American leaders to show that they were getting tough on gangs and crime, despite objections from human rights groups about their potential infringement on civil liberties and human rights. Early public reactions to the tough anti-gang reforms enacted in El Salvador and Honduras were extremely positive, supported by sensationalist media coverage demonizing the activities of tattooed youth gang members. In fact, Tony Saca was elected to the presidency of El Salvador largely on the basis of his promises to crack down further on gangs and crime. *Mano Dura* enabled police to arrest large numbers of suspected gang members, including some 14,000 youth in El Salvador between mid-2004 and late 2005. In addition, according to Salvadoran officials, even though many suspects were eventually released, gang detainees provided law enforcement officials with invaluable sources of intelligence information that those officials have since used to design better anti-gang strategies.

Despite the early apparent benefits of *Mano Dura* policies, their effects on gangs and crime have been largely disappointing. This may be because a large percentage of violent crime in Central America is not actually gang-related. Five years after the implementation of *mano dura* policies, it has become apparent that:

- Violent crime levels have remained high in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, making them among the most violent countries in the world.
- Most youth arrested under *mano dura* provisions have been subsequently released for lack of evidence that they committed any crime. Salvadoran police estimated that more than 10,000 of 14,000 suspected gang members arrested in 2005 were later released.⁸
- Some youth who were wrongly arrested for gang involvement have come into contact with gang leaders while in prison who have recruited them into the gang life.

⁸ “Most of 14,000 Gang Members Arrested in El Salvador Were Released,” *EFE News Service*, December 27, 2005.

- Gang roundups have exacerbated prison overcrowding, and inter-gang violence within the prisons has resulted in several inmate deaths.
- There have been credible reports that extrajudicial youth killings by vigilante groups have continued since *mano dura* went into effect, including assassinations of gang suspects and gang deportees from the United States.
- Finally, in response to *mano dura*, gangs are changing their behavior to avoid detection. Many gang members are now hiding or removing their tattoos, changing their dress, and avoiding the use of hand signals, making them harder to detect and arrest.

Is Popular Support for *Mano Dura* Waning?

In 2007, there were some indications that Central Americans were becoming dissatisfied with the results of *mano dura* policies because they had failed to curb violence and crime in the region. In the November 2007 presidential elections, Guatemalan voters elected Álvaro Colom, a businessman who espoused a holistic approach to addressing crime, over Otto Pérez Molina, a retired general who supported *mano dura* policies. In El Salvador, 52% of Salvadorans polled by the University Public Opinion Institute at the Central American University mistakenly thought that violent crime had increased during 2007 (despite government crackdowns) and agreed that creating jobs would be the best way to reduce the country's elevated crime levels.⁹ Some analysts posit that the opposition candidate that is leading the early polls for the March 2009 presidential elections in El Salvador may be benefiting from popular disillusionment with President Saca's *mano dura* policies.¹⁰ In Honduras, President Manuel Zelaya ran on a platform emphasizing the importance of using dialogue to convince gang members to give up violence and reintegrate into society, but has not delivered on his campaign promises. Support for Zelaya has fallen dramatically since his inauguration in 2006, which some have attributed to the failure of his anti-crime policies.

Why and How is Los Angeles Moving Away From its own Version of *Mano Dura*?

Los Angeles, the birthplace of MS-13 and the 18th Street gangs, has long been the epicenter of gang violence in the United States. In recent years, gang homicides have accounted for more than half of the murders committed in Los Angeles. Jails are filled to two and three times their capacity and, despite years of aggressive law-enforcement efforts, gang membership and gang violence are still at high levels. These problems were starkly identified in a 2006 report by the Advancement Project for the Los Angeles City Council that found that the City's police efforts lacked targeting and coordination, and that its prevention programs were mostly small, isolated, and under-funded. It recommended that the mayor create a powerful city entity to coordinate the investment of

⁹ Preliminary figures from the Salvadoran National Police indicate that there were roughly 3,476 murders in El Salvador in 2007, down slightly from the 3,761 recorded in 2006.

¹⁰ "El Salvador: Funes Leads Early Polls," *Latin America Caribbean and Central American Report*, December 13, 2007.

at least a billion dollars in prevention and intervention programs in high-crime neighborhoods.¹¹

In April 2007, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced a new Gang Reduction Strategy targeting prevention, intervention, re-entry, and suppression programs for specific high-crime neighborhoods labeled as “gang reduction zones.” He dedicated \$168 million of city funds to support the strategy in fiscal year 2007, a \$15 million increase over the previous fiscal year. The strategy took into account the findings of the Advancement Project report and was modeled after a federal demonstration project in Boyle Heights, a high-crime neighborhood in the city that has reduced gang crime in that area by 44% since 2003.

The Los Angeles Gang Reduction Strategy, like the Boyle Heights project, emphasizes: (1) identifying the needs of individuals, families, and communities affected; (2) conducting an inventory of existing resources and filling in gaps that are identified; (3) applying research-based programs where appropriate; and 4) encouraging coordination and pooling of resources among local, state, and federal entities.¹² In August 2008, the mayor named the Rev. Jeff Carr as Deputy Mayor for Gang Reduction and Youth Development, entrusting him with coordinating and implementing the city-wide strategy. Carr is an evangelical pastor with prior experience directing gang prevention programs in central Los Angeles as the executive director of a community center for at-risk youth. While reaction to the plan has been generally positive, some gang experts in Los Angeles are concerned that the approach may be merely replicating previous strategies, and that it seems not to focus enough attention on intervention, a key element of any successful anti-gang effort.¹³

If the Los Angeles gang reduction strategy is successful, it could provide Central American leaders with some ideas about how to shift from an anti-gang policy emphasizing primarily suppression, to one that places equal emphasis on prevention, intervention/rehabilitation, and targeted police efforts. The strategy would have to be modified to fit the Central American context, where government budgets are more limited and fighting transnational gangs is a relatively new phenomenon. Government programs would likely need to be supported, at least initially, with significant funding from the United States and other international donors.

Central American Government Efforts in the Area of Prevention/Rehabilitation

Throughout Central America, government-sponsored gang prevention programs have generally been small-scale, ad-hoc, and under-funded. Governments have been even less involved in sponsoring rehabilitation programs for individuals seeking to leave

¹¹ The Advancement Project report is available at: <http://www.advanceproj.org/>.

¹² City of Los Angeles Gang Reduction Strategy, April 18, 2007, available at: http://www.lacity.org/mayor/myrhspold/mayorindexright243044714_04222007.pdf.

¹³ Intervention refers to efforts to support and positively address the needs of individuals attempting to leave a gang and efforts to encourage dialogue and peacemaking among rival gangs. Many successful intervention workers are former gang members.

gangs. Most rehabilitation programs are supported by church groups or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Government-sponsored youth crime prevention efforts have been most well-developed in Nicaragua and Panama, two countries in which the gang problem has yet to pose a major security threat. Among the northern triangle countries, the government of El Salvador has implemented the most gang prevention and rehabilitation programs, with international support from the European Union and other donors, (which will be discussed below). Even in the case of El Salvador, far fewer youth have been reached by government prevention and rehabilitation programs than by the government's *mano dura* policies.

The Guatemalan and Honduran governments have (thus far) not made significant investments in gang prevention or rehabilitation programs. During the government of Oscar Berger (2004-2008), Guatemala adopted a National Policy on the Prevention of Youth Violence and organized a council on that topic, but officials could not agree on how to manage the funds from an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) loan aimed at supporting the council's efforts. The governments of Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006) and Manuel Zelaya (2006-present) in Honduras have left most gang prevention efforts and rehabilitation programs to churches and NGOs. For example, Honduras's National Gang Prevention Program, launched in 2006, has no budget to sponsor its own prevention or rehabilitation programs, but exists to support, coordinate, and strengthen existing civil-society efforts. Most of its limited budget is reportedly spent on administrative costs and overhead.

In the last four years, El Salvador's National Council on Public Security has sponsored prevention projects in 27 of the most violent municipalities in the country. Those projects have included developing community violence-prevention plans; providing training for youth, parents, and teachers in violence prevention; and building sports and recreational facilities. Some have praised these projects as models for other countries to follow, while others have dismissed them as more show than substance. Critics say that some projects have been placed in communities for political reasons, i.e. to shore up support for the Saca government.

Rehabilitation efforts in El Salvador have tended to involve significant government resources that benefit relatively few individuals. The government has provided some counseling, job training, and recreation activities for gang members who are still in prison. It has also sponsored a program to provide job training and counseling to former gang members who then participate in community service activities. The Salvadoran government also sponsors a tattoo-removal program for rehabilitated gang members. These programs, though commendable, have benefited just a few hundred individuals. In fact, the government's flagship rehabilitation program, the so-called "Farm School," which provides several months of integrated services to rehabilitate gang members, has graduated fewer than 100 youth since 2005.¹⁴

¹⁴ Although estimates vary, the USAID gang assessment cites 10,500 as the estimated number of gang members in El Salvador.

Obstacles to Implementing Comprehensive Anti-Gang Policies in Central America

Several factors have inhibited the development of more holistic gang policies in Central America. Government officials have generally cited budgetary limitations as a major factor limiting their ability to implement more extensive prevention and rehabilitation programs, yet the political will necessary to adopt those types of programs has also been lacking. In many countries, sensationalist media coverage of youth gang members has continued, with little time or attention given to positive actions taken by former gang members or to successful prevention or rehabilitation programs. Particularly in El Salvador, the politicization of the issue of gangs and crime has hindered the current government's willingness to work with the opposition on developing holistic gang policies. As a result, policies are developed more for short-term, political expediency, rather than for long-term efficacy and sustainability.

Most research shows that any successful anti-gang effort will have to involve governments working in close collaboration with civil society, the private sector, mayors, and local community groups.¹⁵ In all three “northern triangle” countries, there has been a historic mistrust between government and civil society, which has increased after *mano dura* policies were implemented. NGOs and human rights groups are particularly concerned about repressive policing, military/police patrols, and the involvement of government security officials in extrajudicial youth killings. With the exception of Guatemala, the private sector in Central America has generally been reluctant to provide any significant training, mentoring, or job opportunities for former gang members. There has also been a lack of involvement by many local government and community leaders in gang prevention and rehabilitation efforts, even though most research shows that the most successful interventions are locally designed and implemented.¹⁶

U.S. Support for Holistic Anti-Gang Efforts in Central America

If Central American governments choose to design and implement more holistic anti-gang policies, U.S. assistance — both technical and financial — could be important for the success of those efforts. Gang prevention and rehabilitation programs have been a part, but not the central focus, of U.S. international anti-gang efforts in Central America. Most U.S. assistance has focused on providing technical assistance and training to Central American law enforcement officials. However, some support has been devoted to community crime prevention programs, outreach centers for at-risk youth, and rehabilitation and reinsertion programs for former gang members. Additional U.S. support for prevention programs has occurred indirectly as a result of USAID and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's participation in the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence (IACPV).¹⁷ Since 2000, the IACPV has helped

¹⁵ USAID Gang Assessment, 2006; José Miguel Cruz, *Street Gangs in Central America*, San Salvador: UCA Editors, 2007.

¹⁶ Cruz, p. 100.

¹⁷ Other members of the IACPV include the Organization of American States, World Bank, Pan American Health Organization, Inter-American Development Bank, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. For more information, see: <http://www.iacpv.org>.

municipalities in Central America develop violence prevention plans, hosted a major conference on gang prevention, and provided technical and financial assistance to help form a counterpart organization in the region, the Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence.

It may be difficult, but not impossible, to increase U.S. funding for prevention and rehabilitation programs in Central America given current budgetary constraints and recent cuts in development assistance to the region. Since prevention programs are generally more cost-effective and widely supported than rehabilitation programs, the Bush administration seems to be focusing its assistance on that area, at least for the time being. Prevention is one of five key areas for action identified by the National Security Council's Anti-Gang Strategy announced in July of 2007. In addition to funding provided through the regular budget process, the Bush administration notified Congress in September 2007 that it was devoting some \$4.5 million in unspent Andean Counterdrug Initiative funds to gang-prevention and drug-demand-reduction programs in Central America. The Mérida Initiative, a new aid package for Mexico and Central America introduced in October 2007, includes roughly \$12.5 million for gang prevention programs in Central America. Many of the prevention programs to be supported by U.S. funding seek to leverage public and private funds. This funding, though limited, could be complemented by support from other multilateral organizations, the European Union and other donors, churches, and the private sector.

Outlook

On a theoretical level, some governments in Central America appear to be moving away from *mano dura* anti-gang strategies towards more comprehensive approaches to gangs and gang-related crime. Although the resources the U.S. government may be willing to commit are somewhat limited, it appears willing to support more gang-prevention and rehabilitation programs in Central America. Other donors are likely to follow suit. Questions still linger, however, about whether the Central American governments will be willing to commit the resources and political will necessary to implement holistic anti-gang strategies.

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