



Examining US-Involved Gang Prevention Efforts in the Northern Triangle Central America

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Examining US-Involved Gang Prevention
Efforts in the Northern Triangle Central America

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A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, gang-related violence and control has plagued the Northern Triangle: the Central American (NTCA) countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. This gang-related behavior has propelled the countries to exhibit some of the highest homicide rates per capita globally, contributing to state fragility and mass emigration – most notably to the United States and Mexico. Mitigating such gang influence can be taxonomized into two areas: anti-gang activities focusing on recruitment prevention efforts, and counter-gang operations centered around disrupting, dismantling, or denying gang activities via law enforcement efforts. Scholars and subject-matter experts on gang influence both overwhelmingly agree and exhort that reducing gang membership remains a key factor in lessening a gang’s impact in a given area, as well as potentially yielding a more effective outcome than solely relying on the disruption provided by counter-gang operations.

In view of this consensus, the scope of this study focuses specifically on gang-prevention efforts in the economic, community outreach, and law enforcement sectors over the past two decades, while concurrently examining US-involved programs and their impact from a qualitative perspective. Most prior academic work on the topic consists of an overarching view of the totality of the programs. As such, this study either increases, updates, or combines the research conducted by the US government, academic community, field researchers, as well as the author’s original research conducted in either the NTCA or with officials inside the respective countries. As a result, this study confirms and furthers reasoning for the existing consensus, and moreover, coalesces the wide-ranging research

existing in academia, US diplomatic efforts, and Guatemalan government efforts, as well as delving into program specifics.

EXAMINING US-INVOLVED GANG PREVENTION EFFORTS IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE CENTRAL AMERICA

SECURITY THROUGH
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
& PUBLIC WORKS
IMPROVEMENT

LAW ENFORCEMENT & PRISON
CAPACITY BUILDING & REFORM

Guatemala

Honduras

El Salvador

YOUTH EDUCATION
& COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT

ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
& POVERTY
REDUCTION

Kin Y. Ma

Frontispiece Designer – James Johns in collaboration with Kin Y. Ma

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Definitions

Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) [2008-2012]: CARSI is an all-encompassing security assistance initiative that focuses on Central America, CARSI's focus remained on supporting the Merida Initiative – a similar initiative for broader Mexico and Central America, but with increased focus on the counter-narcotics mission. When separated from the Merida Initiative, CARSI also focused on socioeconomic conditions driving a deteriorating security condition, even though the majority of CARSI's focus remained on supporting law enforcement efforts (Meyer and Seelke, 2011).

Alliance for Prosperity (A4P) [2014 to Present]: Similar to the Merida Initiative and evolutions of CARSI, A4P focuses on enhancing security, but places more emphasis on “promoting prosperity” through a series of actions intended to increase economic development and improve governance. The plan outlines four strategic pillars: 1) fostering a productive sector, 2) developing human capital, 3) improving citizen security and access to justice, and 4) improving transparency and institutional strength. The foreign policy strategy also assists several neighboring Central American countries besides El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (DOS, n.d.).

Chapter I.

The Evolving Security Situation in the Northern Triangle of Central America

This chapter examines the situation of mass emigration from the Northern Triangle of Central America, including its root causes, and how gang development and foreign assistance offered to affect those root causes.

Mass Emigration

The three Northern Triangle – Central America (NTCA) countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have each witnessed large migration levels and human-capital outflow over the past three decades. In recent years, Northern Triangle migration has only exacerbated the larger humanitarian crisis the region faces. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars of US aid injected into the Northern Triangle through various programs, which temporarily slowed heavy migration, the problem resurged in 2014 and continued after under the Trump administration's transition in 2016.

Such mass emigration from the Northern Triangle causes legal, interpersonal, and economic destabilization at the southern border of the United States (henceforth, 'US'), as well as inside Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. That destabilization naturally propels migration issues: Northern Triangle asylees represented approximately 25% of all US-asylum admittances during 2015 – 2017, according to the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics (2019). In 2017, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that approximately 500,000 people from the Northern Triangle fled their own respective countries and entered Mexico, searching for improved living conditions.

While many migrate further to the United States or Canada through the legal process of obtaining refugee or asylee status, many others opt to migrate by illegally remaining in the country by overstaying a visa (Brookings Institute).

The same MSF (2017) report highlighted that the situation echoes those of the worst wars in the world, yielding victims of sexual violence and persecution who inexorably suffer through the process of violent displacement and forced repatriation. Women and children often undergo the most risk for exploitation and violence, and the survivors often suffer from psychological issues related to the trauma. For example, femicide – the purposeful homicide of women – accounts for approximately 10 deaths per 100,000 women in the three Northern Triangle countries (CAELC, 2018). This figure may seem slight, but compared to other Central American countries, El Salvador ranks first, Honduras second, and Guatemala fifth for highest femicides per capita. Many who choose to stay in the Northern Triangle must face terror, violence, and trauma that fails to cease upon fleeing to Mexico. In fact, during the process of migration, many experience further victimization by criminals while remaining unprotected by government authorities; some migrants may face robbery, abuse, and even torture. In the wake of migration, most will continue to suffer trauma and pain for decades (MSF, 2017, p.1).

Root Causes of Mass Emigration

Two gangs – Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and its primary rival the 18th Street (a.k.a., “18 Barrio”) gang – operate as organized crime syndicates to dominate El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In those same countries, MS-13 and 18th Street continue to undermine the Guatemalan government’s authority through corruption

associated with government officials and security forces, and creating criminal enterprises that oppose law enforcement publicly and target civilians. In the Northern Triangle, gang-related violence perpetuated through brutal tactics and indiscriminate targeting of men, women, and children contributes to extremely high homicide rates relative to other countries (Seelke, 2016).

Through the 2008 Merida Initiative and Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the United States continues to focus on the resultant, negative effects upon state stability stemming from gang-related crime and violence (Seelke, 2016). The 2008 Merida Initiative is a Mexican/American agreement and initiative to combat violence and organized crime, which perpetuate as transborder issues. The Merida Initiative framework consists of “four pillars of cooperation: (1) Disrupt Capacity of Organized Crime to Operate, (2) Institutionalize Capacity to Sustain Rule of Law, (3) Create a 21st Century Border Structure, and (4) Build Strong and Resilient Communities” (DOS, n.d., p.1). In light of these pillars, the US Congress appropriated \$2.3 billion dollars to the initiative, with \$1.4 billion being spent from 2008-2015. In addition to the 2008 Merida Initiative, the Central American Regional Security Initiative spans across Central America, supporting Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. The \$979 million USD program seeks to focus on three major areas; the three “major areas are: first, CARSI assists law enforcement and security forces in confronting narcotics and arms trafficking, gangs, organized crime, and border security deficiencies, as well as to disrupt criminal infrastructure, routes, and networks; second, CARSI expands and reinforces the capacity of law enforcement and the justice sector to serve citizens and address regional threats; advances community policing, gang

prevention, and economic and social; third, CARSI programming for at-risk youth and communities disproportionately affected by crime” (DOS, 2017, p.1).

In addition to CARSI, the US continues to examine the prominent “role that gang-related violence has played in boosting migration flows” (Seelke, 2016, p.2) to the US, including asylum seekers consisting of both families and unaccompanied alien children (or ‘UAC’) (Seelke, 2016). The most recent and current US policy initiative is Alliance for Prosperity (also referred to as ‘A4P’) which has existed since 2014 and focuses on several areas to address emigration – including country-specific gang-prevention efforts while also building upon the efforts conducted through CARSI.

In addition to direct gang activity, across the Northern Triangle violence, corruption, and weak systemics in both the political and judicial areas remain the major, interrelated, driving factors behind mass emigration. To echo similar root causes, a late 2018 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report found that in El Salvador, US policy emphasizes three main objectives: advancing economic development, strengthening the internal security apparatus, and supporting political institutions and governance. While corrupt politicians siphon funds from foreign aid or government revenues, they also consistently remain susceptible to influence or bribery from gangs. This lack in both the rule of law and adequate penal system behavior allows gangs to organize, develop, and metastasize – even while members are incarcerated.

The mass emigration arising from these countries also accelerates deteriorating conditions and creates instability. Resultantly, drains on both human capital and skilled labor negatively impact the economy. Moreover, regarding foreign direct investment

(FDI)¹ funneled to the Northern Triangle, strain in the labor pool for industries such as call centers, where English is used, may discourage future FDI.

A widebody of research strongly suggests violence and organized crime conducted by gangs (including cartels) remain the primary drivers behind the instability, while at the most fundamental level, these drivers also remain the cause of further violence and insecurity. Definitively, areas constituting violence include the high homicide rates, gross extortion, pervasive corruption, highly-developed and organized drug trafficking, and high levels of domestic abuse, assault, torture, and rape. While several ways exist to counter gang development and operations through bilateral assistance and joint law enforcement initiatives, one solution is the prevention of gang recruitment.

Gang Development: The Past Thirty Years, From the US to the NTCA

The late-twentieth century civil wars in Central America led to a normalization and habituation of violence, with the resultant understanding by the populace that power controls territory and income. As vulnerable citizens emigrated to the United States to seek a better life for economic and security reasons, they settled in California and the greater Los Angeles area. During this time, the US offered immigration protection via the designation of “Temporary Protected Status,” extending this status to some Central American states (USCIS, 2020). This decision would also engender an influx of immigrants. The Central American diasporas gravitated towards Hispanic-dominant neighborhoods. From the 1960s-1990s, as Central Americans integrated into the

¹ Foreign direct investment is when an organization or individual makes an investment in another country.

established Mexican neighborhoods (“Mafia of the Poor,” 2017), the Central Americans at times suffered marginalization, disenfranchisement, and discrimination. Some of the established Mexican-Americans – and farm workers from the Bracero Program (1940s-1960s) who settled a few decades earlier (“Bracero History Archive,” 2020) – possessed significant cultural differences with these Central American immigrants, and a competition for resources such as jobs existed (in-person communication, 2020). In Los Angeles, Mexican gangs already proved prevalent, and as a counter to any discrimination or exploitation, some elements of the Central American diaspora banded together and themselves joined gangs – such as 18th Street and MS-13, which formed as early as the late 1970s (“Mafia of the Poor,” 2017). The individuals who chose this path used violence and skills gained from the civil wars to compete for territory (a.k.a., “turf”) and power. As time progressed, these gangs increased in organizational structure, members, and violent acts. To counter overall surging gang violence nationwide, the Clinton administration implemented a concerted effort to disrupt, prosecute, incarcerate, and (if appropriate) deport gang members. This led to a major shift in immigration reform, and in 1996, Congress passed the notable Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act – which allowed for en-mass deportation of gang members, including gang leaders and senior gang members. As these deportees returned to their country of origin, they continued in a violent lifestyle, such that the law enforcement and the criminal justice system lacked capacity to effectively counter the criminal behavior. From the 1990s to the present, Central American penal systems have experienced a deficiency of resources with prisoned gang members strengthening their criminal operations and the leaders still enacting operational decisions while incarcerated.

Foreign Assistance to Address Root Causes

In short, US foreign assistance in the Northern Triangle Central America (NTCA) upholds a united dedication to preventing crime and violence among youth. The high levels of poor governance, corruption, poverty, and human rights violations in these countries propagate criminal activity. The US government (henceforth 'USG'), with foreign assistance, thus plays a crucial role in assisting efforts by civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote unity and combat crime through improving governance, promoting regional economic integration, and enhancing security in the Northern Triangle (Meyer, 2018; Gracia, 2016).

In terms of application areas for the aforementioned foreign assistance, a late 2018 Congressional Research Service report found that in El Salvador, US policy emphasizes three main objectives: advancing economic development, strengthening the internal security apparatus, and supporting political institutions and governance. These three goals purport to address the “root causes” of emigration. The same concepts hold true for Guatemala and Honduras.

Following the directives and intentions of US policy, two major regional initiatives encompass the Northern Triangle countries: CARSI, which aims to improve security conditions, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation compact (MCC), which emphasizes improving economic conditions (CSRS, 2018). CARSI specifically aims to assist the Northern Triangle countries in addressing high levels of violence, including murders, that have fueled migration. More specifically, CARSI (established in 2008) exhibits a deliberate design to fight organized crime, functioning as one of several initiatives addressing security issues. According to the United States Department of State

(DOS), CARSI seeks to both assist the countries' response to threats and also supplement local strategies (DOS, n.d). Drawing from a fund of \$979 million established in 2008, CARSI thus performs three main functions. First, the organization assists law enforcement and other security forces in disrupting narcotics trafficking and usage. Second, the organization strengthens or reinvigorates the capacities of both local law enforcement and the justice system. Finally, CARSI promotes community policing and gang prevention, while creating social and economic programs for the youth primarily targeted by gangs and traffickers (United States Department of State, n.d.). While the Obama administration recognized that CARSI somewhat bolstered its targeted areas, that administration concluded that these programs failed to create sustained, broad-based improvements. As evidence, the major aims of improving governance and stability remain – namely, spurring economic development, good governance, and maintenance of both the rule of law and security. Consequently, these three more specific niches share a symbiotic relationship.

Chapter II.

Guatemala

This chapter examines the security situation in Guatemala, and the impact of US-involved programs, such as community improvement projects, model prisons and police stations, and tip hotline.

Security Conditions in Guatemala

Six years after the 1996 Peace Accords (which marked the end of the Guatemalan Civil War), the United States began funding both national and local anti-gang initiatives in Guatemala. Such gang prevention efforts in that country have ebbed and flowed in terms of focus, funding, efficacy, and scope. Since inception, US-funded programs have sought to support those efforts. In general, the initiatives have effectively generated gradual progress, with notable improvement in accelerating project completion since 2017. While several factors contribute towards that calculus, two prominent policies most likely propelled success. The shift in 2017 derived first from a Guatemalan national prevention strategy focused on three areas: home, school, and community. The second factor consisted of the US foreign policy to “enhance” existing efforts between CARSI and the Merida Initiative,² which together became the Alliance for Prosperity and

² Both the Central American Regional Security Initiative and the Merida Initiative are US foreign policy initiatives focused on security and stability in Mexico and Central America respectively, but the focus and funding gravitate towards different functional areas that improve security.

encompassed economic concerns. As such, the Trump administration's Alliance for Prosperity (2016), working as part of the larger US strategy for the Northern Triangle, provides funding for security initiatives in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Functionally, a majority of the funding appropriated to USAID and DOS projects also supports the Guatemalan national government's vision and strategy. This funding continues in 2020, with a few areas needing to increase in effectiveness. While these areas receive due and ample explanation later, the major areas consist of Civil National Police (*Policía Nacional Civil* [PNC]) reform, community centers, and prison reform.

While funding is an important consideration, of likewise necessary import is evaluating and accounting for the historical foundation of such gang prevention policies. A historical foundation does exist for such gang prevention policies in Guatemala over the past 20 years, but that foundation also extends to include some concepts drawn from the United States over the past 30 years. In more recent times, particularly in 2006, USAID outlined an approach to mitigate socioeconomic risks through reducing youth unemployment, education of the impoverished, and weak social capital. In 2011, the World Bank provided policy options for the Guatemalan government that centered on "an integrated, comprehensive, holistic and cross-sectoral prevention strategy" (World Bank, 2011, p. 24), and listed measures presumed effective in reducing gang and youth violence taxonomized as societal, communal, interpersonal, and individual. Such advice proves particularly important, as the World Bank considers social structure as a vital factor to that should be part of the calculus when enacting policy and solutions.

Focusing on Gangs as a Root Cause

Anthony Fontes, author of *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City*, conducted years of field work in Guatemala during the 2010s. He noted that

some scholars have tied the rapid spread of gang culture to deep socioeconomic inequalities. While absolute levels of urban poverty are not significantly greater than in prior epochs, widespread access to globalized media has made poor youths keenly aware of their position on the proverbial totem pole. Gang membership can provide a “pathway to manhood” for ambitious youths with few options of finding dignified, licit employment. Children growing up in poor urban neighborhoods have plenty of other reasons to join gangs: for self-protection, for revenge, to make money, to become desirable, to gain a sense of belonging, to survive. (Fontes, 2019, p.8)

Original research by the author consisted of personal field work and interviews. These interviews consisted of several notable ones, including conversations with one of the original members of the 18th Street gang, a prison director, and other Guatemalan criminal investigators. All of this work confirmed Fontes’ findings. One aspect worth highlighting consists of Fontes’ (2019) mention of what he described as “the factor of desirability,” likely referring to or building on social desirability – how others view us. According to this assertion, those seeking gang membership who want to gain prestige, power, and elevated standing exhibit one aspect of this desirability factor – but just as much, if not more, this factor proves true for juveniles, particularly in households with absent parents (regardless of the reason) as these juveniles seek belonging in a family or close social group. Moreover, the absence of parental figures also allows older gang members to coerce juveniles into membership more easily. While extreme poverty pervades in other countries throughout the world, the gang situation proves not as prevalent, so lack of employment and deep socioeconomic inequalities do not form the

only contributing factors. As such, the desirability factor may explain a significant portion of gang growth and sustenance, as revealed during author-conducted interviews.

Author-conducted interviews transpiring in March 2020 with Guatemala City government officials, academics, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Guatemala, and prison officials echo that the current policy strategies still prove appropriate and effective. As such, this report contends that the focus on socioeconomic factors remains a prudent way forward, and a sociocultural perspective should receive consideration to aid efficacious improvement during the monitoring and evaluation phases of a program or initiative.

The programs, in their totality, address the following concerns or aims: improving living conditions, strengthening the rule of law, and improving economic conditions. To wit, the matrix in Table 1 highlights some of the notable policies, programs, and initiatives (PPI) addressing sociocultural and socioeconomic factors.

Table 1. Guatemala Gang Prevention Efforts and Programs

Policies, programs, initiatives	Primary Focus Area	Sociocultural Factors	Socioeconomic Factors
Consortium for Crime Prevention (APREDE)	Community	Inclusiveness	
Prosperous Neighborhood (<i>Vecindario Prospero</i>)	Community	Inclusiveness	
Law enforcement: "Tell it to Waldemar" reporting hotline	Community	Cultural change through increased empowerment	
Law enforcement reform: model police precinct	Community		
Prison reform: model prisons	Community, School, Individual	Attitudes/Behavior, Ethnic values shift	Wage increase (Poverty reduction)
Law enforcement reform: pnc professionalism	Community	Restoration of a social contract (trust in the government)	
Crime prevention through environmental design projects: parks and public-private partnerships for beautification and creation of districts for shopping/dining/entertainment	Community	Increase in civil society, increase in social capital and civic orientation	
Community centers offer tutoring, language skills, computer skills, and art projects	Community, School	Ethical values shift	
Foreign direct investment: call centers	Community, Individual		Poverty reduction

As outlined in Table 1, the aim of improving community infrastructure projects includes the following initiatives: Consortium for Crime Prevention (APREDE), Prosperous Neighborhood, public private partnerships, civic engagement, and urban

revitalization efforts with Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. Each of these PPIs will receive detailed discussion in the following paragraphs.

Consortium for Crime Prevention (APREDE)

Now an NGO, APREDE (*Asociación para la Prevención del Delito*) originally existed as a consortium or working group that facilitated meetings between key stakeholders, holding roundtable discussions and meetings with government officials, leaders in both academic and business arenas, and prominent gang members (or *mareros*). The organizers of these meetings sought to discern possibilities for providing positive, socially constructive opportunities to children. Even so, decreasing crime existed as both the aim and the end goal of the consortium. The program ended due to police corruption, and information as to specifics is absent. However, the initiative could be reinstated upon successful efforts to professionalize the National Police (*Policía Nacional Civil de Guatemala*, known as the PNC).

Prosperous Neighborhood (*Vecindario Prospero*)

Similar efforts continue under the joint project *Vecindario Prospero*, with partnerships involving the US Embassy and Guatemala City government. Including gangs in such projects may seem counterintuitive, or even counterproductive. However, oftentimes programs focusing on key security concepts—such as the “Broken Windows Theory” and “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design,”³ or other aims such as

³ The International Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) Association defines CPTED “as a multi-disciplinary approach to crime prevention that uses urban and architectural design and the management of built and natural environments. CPTED strategies include reducing victimization, deterring offender decisions that precede criminal acts, and building a sense of community

revitalizing areas and beautification projects—benefit everyone and sometimes require the involvement of gangs controlling affected areas. The capital of Guatemala also receives input regarding revitalization efforts from the community. This input gathering includes gang members and their families, and such input produces significantly positive results. One of many park improvement projects provides justification. The city government completely razed and renovated a well-known dilapidated park, which at first contained a small shack where gang members would congregate to sell drugs. Following renovation, the park functioned as a common place for the community’s children to play. Another notable example is a major park in downtown Guatemala City which provides soccer fields for people to join teams or spontaneous games. These fields also provide a joint area for individual activities (i.e., running or jogging) and other group activities (i.e., group dance, yoga, or exercise). This approach has proved effective, even in areas considered moderately dangerous by locals, such as Villa Nueva, where communal practices of dance or other exercise has experienced an increase popularity. These projects—sometimes described with the key phrase “safe neighborhood”—play a critical role in reducing violence and providing activities as an alternative to gang membership.

This project is agreeable by law enforcement, the community, and gang members alike, since everyone benefits. In an author-conducted interview with a notable former-18th Street gang member, Augustin Coroy, he stated “that religion and being connected to the community are important” (Augustin C., personal communication, March 2020). As this statement reveals, some Prosperous Neighborhood projects have tacit gang approval, and the gang members’ families participate in the process of creating design concepts. In

among inhabitants so they can gain territorial control of areas, reduce crime, and minimize fear of crime” (International CTPED Association, 2020, p.1).

one highly gang-controlled area, the city hosted a ‘design and feedback’ event, where community members congregated in a dilapidated park. Gang members ensconced at the corners of the park to observe the activities, but allowed the event to occur nonetheless. The community members, including gang members’ children, participated in both drawing and coloring their own visions of the ‘ideal park.’

Public-Private Partnerships

Other efforts have included public-private partnerships, wherein corporations assume responsibility for a particular geographic area to aid in beautification, ultimately resulting in shared value (as presented in Figure 1).

Figure 1. Public-Private Partnerships Resulting in Constructed Plazas for Guatemala



Note. These projects provide a haven for entertainment, dining, residence, and employment, increasing the attractiveness for foreign investment. This image was adapted from a city government (Guatemala City) presentation (2020).

More specifically, corporations profit because the area increases in both attractiveness and safety, while the number of employees needed and customers frequenting businesses in the area increases. The city experiences positive results, as well, as such programs decrease the funding otherwise necessary without private involvement, while the citizens ultimately benefit from more opportunities for employment or residence in key places of the city. Not all such projects involve injected funds from the United States; however, they represent a key opportunity to strengthen bilateral commercial ties through Foreign Direct Investment.

Community Centers

Community centers primarily function as learning centers where minors receive myriad opportunities, such as school-subject tutoring, supplemental learning, English language classes, computer skills, and projects involving arts and crafts. The community centers, as seen in Figure 2, thus provide several important advantages by keeping children socially and academically engaged in productive activities. This results in both academic success and ultimately keeping minors ‘off the streets.’ Moreover, Guatemalans who learn English eventually earn an average income measuring nearly 300% of the national average. Using a place-based strategy,⁴ only a few of these community centers currently exist, and their size is relatively small on average. Despite this, however, attendance at the community centers is high, and attending children’s parents (even those associated with gangs) understand the educational benefits available to the children. In an author-conducted March 2020 interview and tour of the facility with an instructor at one

⁴ A place-based strategy is an analytical approach to determine where efforts will occur geographically, based on a set of criteria to exert the most impact given finite resources.

of the community centers, the instructor discussed the ways art projects and computerized learning provide a more diverse learning experience than youth receive in school, while also reinforcing school learning. In strengthening the initiative's potential, the government aims to maintain the centers' affordability, which in turn will promote higher attendance and enrollment rates. Importantly, the tuition remains minimal, equating to a few US dollars every quarter per student.

Figure 2. A Community Center in El Exodo, Villa Nueva, Guatemala City



Note: A March 2020 visit to the Community Center in El Exodo, Villa Nueva, proved beneficial in understanding the efficacy of the program from the perspectives of students, parents, and the instructor. The image shows the author with a group of students and the instructor.

The success of community centers almost always proves difficult to statistically measure or assess, since at least a decade needs to pass for some of these students to matriculate from the centers and subsequently enter the workforce. Despite such a lengthy process, the Guatemalan government, USAID, or an NGO could collect metrics

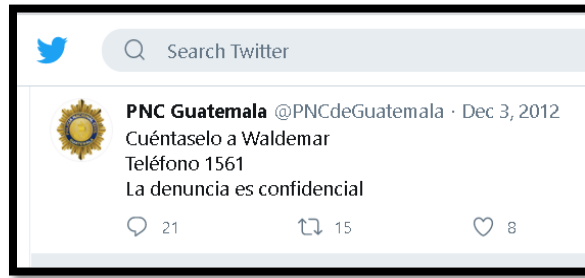
to track community center students' academic progression, especially in areas prone to increased violence. This approach could prove useful in analyzing future place-based strategy decisions. As a prime example, the community center in El Exodo, Villa Nueva is in a "red zone" – or a particularly dangerous area. Gathering metrics in this location could assist in determining and refining success in other place-based strategy locations. Author-conducted interviews transpiring in March 2020 with non-profit leaders, criminal investigators working with child gang members, and a reformed gang leader from the 18th Street gang all suggest that these community centers play an integral role in preventing juveniles from joining gangs. The reformed gang leader, criminal investigators, non-profit leaders welcomed discussions about their past, as well as future endeavors.

Anonymous Tip Line - Tell it to Waldemar

In 2008, the Guatemalan National Police started an anonymous tip line, which is similar to the ubiquitous "If You See Something, Say Something" reporting hotline and campaign in the United States. Guatemala entitled their program "Tell it to Waldemar" (*Cuéntaselo a Waldemar*).⁵ See Figure 3 for a tweet announcing the program hosting details.

⁵ The website for 'Tell It to Waldemar' exists at the following URL: <https://cuentaseloawaldemar.blogspot.com/p/denuncia.html>

Figure 3. Tell It to Waldemar



Note: The "Tell it to Waldemar" campaign has changed its number to 1518, hosting a website platform for reporting as of May 2020. This image is adapted from a 2012 Twitter posting.

This community-based intelligence program allows anonymous “tipsters” to report violent criminal activity (e.g., extortion and domestic violence) often associated with gangs, without the fear of retaliation—a primary reason for underreporting. A program such as this empowers individuals to exercise a personal voice and stake in the community’s welfare, as well as aiding cultural change at a neighborhood level. According to a mid-2020 interview conducted by the author with a former PNC homicide/criminal investigator, the hotline has proven successful, but more widespread promotion of the program needs to occur on radio, social media, and similar venues. Not much is publicized about the cataloging, archiving, analysis (either manual or automated), and dissemination of the information obtained by the hotline among law enforcement, military, and intelligence agencies. Thus, regarding potential areas for program improvement, increasing program-level promotion could improve transparency. Increased transparency may engender both improved outcomes and data sharing among law enforcement agencies, as well as advancing multi-country law enforcement efforts.

Model Police Precinct/Station and Model Prison/Correctional Programs

The US Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) pursues the goal of furthering community police integration efforts through a program called the 'Model Police Precinct.' More specifically, this program's aim is expanding professionalized police presence to high-risk communities using a 'place-based strategy.' The tactic seeks to reduce both gang recruitment and the influence of narcotics dealers or human traffickers. Likewise, the program aims to improve prosecution of domestic violence and extortion cases — crimes resulting in most violent deaths, as identified by the local populace. In all precincts in which this policy has jurisdiction, full-spectrum policing efforts include community policing. The Model Prison program therefore uses a similar concept. More specifically, as of early 2020, US-funded efforts have assisted Guatemala in creating both a model juvenile detention center and a model women's prison, and future plans exist for developing a model men's prison. The model juvenile prison houses those who committed crimes as juveniles, but who may serve longer sentences – such as a six-year sentence for homicide. Success in lowering recidivism and achieving reintegration into society remains heavily dependent on prison funding, prison officers' training quality, and the vocational/technical training each inmate receives.

Figure 4. A model prison and intermediary house



Note: The juvenile/adult prison is for those with longer sentences, likely due to violent crimes in gangs, where they age out of the traditional juvenile prisons. This model allows them to receive both training and occupational skills or trades to obtain employment once released from the system. The photo depicts the different houses through which the prisoners progress, easing and restrictions giving more flexibility and responsibility in the prison. The image on the far right depicts the author with the prison administration and INL advisor.

For example, the Model Prison project currently underway aims to change inmates' behavior and attitude by occupying the inmates' time with work, focusing on teams and interpersonal relationships, and providing computer skills, bakery classes, and construction courses. One specific obstacle with the construction courses is shortage in materials and financial resources. For example, a local company will at times provide training but not supplies, and no budget can currently be maintained for supply needs. A lack of funding in this type of training program will likely produce only marginally successful results, and inmates may return to gang activity to create viable incomes. As an alternative to the prison model in a financially restrictive environment, non-profits already operating in Guatemala could offer training and curricula concerning job skills.

Utilizing and applying these programs, team-building experiences, and technology could potentially destabilize the ingrained cultural factors of hyperaggressive machismo (which emerge as invariably typical in *mareros*) and warrior mentality, providing a future without the need for violence. To further highlight the reasonable nature of such a postulation, during 2014, the Department of Justice’s Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) performed a review of “asylum and related protections for aliens fearing gang and domestic violence” (CRS, 2019, p. 3). This important review of asylees and their immigration protections in the United States helps determine whether individuals fleeing from other countries can receive an immigration benefit of asylum, which is similar to a refugee but one who seeks protection at a US port of entry or inside the United States. While examining these cases, in particular during the *Matter of A-R-C-G*, the BIA concluded “evidence that Guatemala has a culture of machismo and family violence” (CRS, 2019, p. 3).

Within the Model Prison, more people than the prisoners undergo a lifestyle transformation – such as the prison staff administration and the colloquially known officers or guards. Staff members once named “monitors” now operate with the title of “security and safety officers,” and the senior officers and trainers (as well as some of the leadership staff) receive training in the United States or the Dominican Republic, where they learn about conflict resolution and the importance of seeking first to rehabilitate the inmates rather than to punish, and perpetuate and foster a violent environment. While the United States is generally not a model for an ‘ideal prison’ system that focuses on rehabilitation and reintegration into society, attempts at such a focus do exist in the country, such as in the state of Missouri with their juvenile detention system. Along with

other similar new prisoner reform systems in Central and South America (i.e., Dominican Republic and Argentina), that system in Missouri informed Guatemalan leaders and US advisors in their creation of a model prison system in Guatemala. Similar to the minimal investment of approximately 1 million USD dedicated to the juvenile model prison, a slight increase in vocational training could deliver a substantial, proportional increase in results. Comparative to other funding for law enforcement and prison efforts, such funding for the juvenile model prison remains a small portion, as PNC reform and assistance subsume the majority of funding. The prison system reformation projects are protracted due to the extensive training of staff, the individual prisoner programs implementation (i.e., cooking or computer classes), and then for the prisoner to develop routines and develop while serving out the sentence.

Law Enforcement Reform and PNC Professionalism

The US initiated the CARSI as a foreign policy program aimed at curbing narcotics use and distribution, while concurrently strengthening law enforcement efforts in Central America. The roots of Guatemalan community-oriented policing (COP) thus emerged from both CARSI and the Merida Initiative. While a large body of scholarly work and statistical data overall reflect that the COP approach results in felt benefits, such as public trust and improved attitude towards law enforcement, the strategy ultimately failed because of police corruption. Police involvement extended to acts of extortion, as well as cooperation with the military and employment of the *mano dura* approach that haunts the Guatemalans –particularly the indigenous population. Even though the stance of the National Police (PNC) on *mano dura* philosophy has ebbed and

flowed, and may not be as overt since 1996, the harsh policy remains a stark reminder of the human rights violations committed from the late-nineteenth Century through the 1980s. For example, in 2005, while inspecting a national police facility, auditors found millions of archived records outlining massacres and extrajudicial killings. To wit, the public perception of police corruption has not disappeared, and when this type of historical stories emerges, past actions become inextricably associated with the contemporary organization. One aspect of police corruption is extortion of both the populace and gang members; in this way, some police commit very crime they hold a commission to investigate and cease. While efforts are underway to improve professionalism, the effort will likely a concerted focus over the next decade, to build and restore trust with the community.

Extortion, acceptance of bribes from gangs, and *mano dura* operations of the military have exerted an antagonistic effect upon the populace over the past eight years. While diplomatic efforts have also ebbed and flowed in terms of focus on PNC professionalism over the same timeframe, Guatemalan and US leaders remain cautiously optimistic that renewed effort will engender tangible results if anti-corruption measures, community policing, and positive marketing campaigns succeed. From a cultural perspective, the lesson here proves readily inferable: interpersonal relationships allow for trust to develop enough to overcome public suspicion of the PNC, and its root cause police corruption. That suspicion remains one of the most hindering factors for counter-gang and anti-gang prevention efforts. As such, in addition to increasing PNC professionalism, other police reform efforts seen in other countries increases the efficacy of law enforcement.

In terms of scholarly elucidation, Hochmüller and Müller (2017) astutely addressed the militarization of the PNC and related counterinsurgency efforts. One possible solution to increase the brand image of the PNC, according to Hochmüller and Müller (2017), consists of separating the special forces and SWAT DIFEP from the PNC while maintaining the more militaristic branch as a quasi-ministerial entity separate from the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, similar to the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service. While the dynamics between gangs and terrorists have some differences, the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service example serves as a successful model, and could be tailored to the Northern Triangle countries' governance structures. The primary concept would be that the military's role would thus be limited to external defense, the PNC would function solely in regard to interior policing operations, and the DIFEP would serve as a means for direct action with an independent civilian Inspector General (or caucus of congressional oversight) to monitor for human rights violations. The DIFEP would thus assume responsibility for direct action and counter-gang operations to detect and disrupt gang activity, while the PNC would assume responsibility for anti-gang operations focused on diverting and deterring gangs.

As a natural part of the focus on professionalizing the PNC, US initiatives emphasize training through curriculum development, evaluation, equipment, and advisors. One key example of impactful US-advisory assistance exists as a zero-casualty incident involving a standoff with gang members. In early 2019, the PNC conducted a series of raids in southern and western Guatemala, against corrupt police officers that were assisting gangs either as hitmen or drug dealers – a network known as *Los Patrones*

(Rainsford, 2019; personal communication with an INL advisor). This high-profile incident gained national media coverage, generating positive publicity for the PNC.

Nevertheless, US funding for Guatemala's strategy to prevent gangs proves consistently and incredibly difficult to determine, since budgets derive from bilateral initiatives (including the DHS, DOS INL, USAID, and others), as well as multilateral initiatives. Additionally, a lack of transparency exists. One non-profit organization, the Guatemala Human Rights Commission USA, highlighted in one of its 2010 fact sheets that the United States provided 70.17 million USD for police and military training in Guatemala between 2000 and 2010. Staggeringly, in 2017, the INL budget consisted of approximately 45.8 million USD in funding. In sum, the drastic—and politically influenced—decrease in funding requirements still presents marked difficulty in wholly pursuing this anti-gang method.⁶ While there is a lack of transparency in documentation, interviews have highlighted that USG funding has increased and started flowing down to the individual programs.

Guatemala: National Program Impact and Conclusion

By way of conclusion, an important note remains that policymakers in NTCA have a wide spectrum of programs at their disposal to prevent gang recruitment efforts. As such, practically speaking, “governments should seek to design an integrated, comprehensive, holistic and cross-sectoral gang prevention strategy” (World Bank, 2011, p.24). In addition to highlighting specifically effective programs, improved harmonization could exist among US efforts, Guatemalan government officials, and

⁶ Author's Note: FOIA Requests are still pending with DOS and USAID on budget allocation.

NGOs. In terms of the measurable efficacy of these suggestions, USAID conducted a rigorous and comprehensive study regarding “the three-year impact of its CARSI-funded, community-based crime and violence prevention programs” (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2014). Vanderbilt University researchers funded by USAID focused on 120 high-crime urban treatment and control communities in the Northern Triangle, as well as Panama. The study’s results ultimately reveal that crime victimization lessens and public perception of security raises in those communities receiving CARSI funding. Even so, for the majority of their respective existences, USAID and DOS/INL sought to serve in separate municipalities without seeking to cooperate. Further supporting the clear benefit to partnering across organizational lines and coordinating activity, the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime’s Regional Office for Central America and the Caribbean in Panama (ROPAN) has also highlighted positive benefits and means by which NGOs can find integration with preventative measures, particularly in prison reform (Philip de Andrés, 2014). Essentially, Philip de Andres presents a working paper on how NGOs should approach prison systems to show the value and overall propitious outcomes of NGO engagements with prisons (Philip de Andrés, 2014).

While evaluating the effectiveness of gang prevention measures, the sociocultural impact should also be considered. The mere fact that evaluation and monitoring remain difficult to analyze qualitatively should not deter continued efforts to stem violence if the outcome means an extended sustainable achievement of decreasing gang recruitment and violence. A substantial amount of policy research and academic studies have been conducted on Guatemala, gang issues, and law enforcement reform. In fact, some of the very ideas and policy prescriptions mentioned here have been raised by the same

institutions; however, given finite resources, only those projects and initiatives which will exact the most significant long-term impact should receive attention. The findings of this report focused on past success, and highlighted current projects based on their resource-dependent success. Training in prison, continued funding and enhanced curricula to include teenagers in vocational training, and professionalizing the PNC are currently the top three avenues for incorporating and addressing both socioeconomic and sociocultural factors tailored to Guatemala.

Despite these positive shifts, the views of general public populations external to Guatemala concerning Guatemalan crime and violence remain overwhelmingly negative – with validity based on crime statistics. The Guatemalan citizens’ perspective, however, is that violence is more concentrated in some areas, and thus generally speaking, this violence is tolerable. Security conditions have both improved and deteriorated (i.e., ebbed and flowed) over the past 20 years, but the recent decade has seen an overall increase in security, with the past 3 years exhibiting improvement. Efforts should be taken to maintain the momentum and continue improving. While this study shows that the situation is more nuanced than public awareness would reflect, those involved in gang prevention must consider the ways in which well-intentioned programs manifest in the real world, as well as opposing views that such programs prove insufficient. However, the overall picture of Guatemala is not one of total chaos, gang rule, and extreme homicide rates in all areas. Tourists, NGOs, and others that visit and travel in Guatemala, generally do so without fear in the safer metropolitan or tourist areas. Likewise, the City of Guatemala City is remarkably progressive and expresses visions of city management, public utilities, and design similar to the more successful cities in the United States.

Despite this, NGOs and human rights activists understand the gravity of the conditions in the country. As demonstrated in this piece, the positive influences on gang prevention programs in Guatemala deserve increased attention in research due to the high level of crime per capita, and pocketed areas where gangs flourish.

Across several centuries, Guatemalans have shown extreme resiliency, fortitude, and ingenuity to counter challenges. Following this pattern, the government of Guatemala currently focuses on leading efforts to minimize the impact of gangs, while USG and NGO assistance help hasten the efforts and result in shared value among Guatemala, the US, the private sector, and NGOs. For the USG, the diplomatic partnership hopes greater stability in Guatemala, fewer migration-related issues at the border, and fewer asylum cases. For the NGOs,⁷ the partnership means improving the lives of Guatemalans, reducing homicides, stemming trafficking, and decreasing child abuse. Regardless of the perspective, each side benefits in ways not otherwise possible without the involvement of the other parties, proving that healthy international relationships lead to healthier individual nation-states.

⁷ A 2020 interview with an NGO worker inside Guatemala described that the NGO community operating in Guatemala, consists of hundreds of organizations; however, the vast majority are unregistered with the Guatemalan government for various reasons – one of which is to avoid paying bribes to government officials to process their applications.

Chapter III.

Honduras

This chapter examines the security situation in Honduras and the impact of US-involved programs, such as community economic programs, youth engagement, and law enforcement reform.

Security Conditions in Honduras

Honduras exists as a Central American nation with a population amassing more than 9 million, while concurrently maintaining strong diplomatic relations for decades with the United States. Nevertheless, current security statistics in the region suggest that Honduras suffers a high rate of crime and violence (Meyer & Seekle, 2015). Compared to other nation-states in modern history, Honduras proves one of the riskiest countries in which to survive, reporting a murder rate of 44.8 per 100,000 as of 2019. That translates to 13 homicides every day, imparting a reputation to Honduras as one of the most violent locations globally (Goodrum & Dalrymple, 2019). Notably, street gangs have contributed significantly as a catalyst for this violence for decades, particularly in the form of both 18th Street and MS-13 gangs – which have received attention as perhaps the most ruthless in the country and the world at-large.

A variety of interconnected factors appear to significantly contribute to impaired security in the country. The main factors significantly increasing the likelihood of the public, particularly the youth, joining these gangs include a marked level of poverty in the

country, displaced and fragmented families, high levels of illiteracy, and significant levels of unemployment (Cossich, 2020). Exploiting these conditions for their own gain, these gangs often participate in drug deals and extortion, as well as other activities that challenge ordinary citizens' ability to live peacefully and securely. To wit, these criminal groups hold responsibility for the elevated homicide rates in the region and the disruption of regular public activities such as education (Nazario, 2016).

Suffering not merely from gang-related crime, the country also serves as one of the leading drug-trafficking corridors in the modern world. The geographical location of Honduras – between cocaine-manufacturing nations in South America, particularly Colombia, and significant markets in the United States – highlights Honduras as a perfect target for cartels. Vigorously equipped and overwhelmingly well-financed drug dealing groups have in fact brazenly sought to wrest away control of the country, a status which would allow them to control the drug trade both throughout Central America and in the United States (Beeton & Watts, 2016). Unfortunately, to bolster their power and dissuade resistance against them, most of these organizations maintain political or economic ties with political and economic elites who significantly depend on illegal accounts to finance their political races and/or secure their businesses' competitiveness and revenues. As a result, increasing challenge has arisen for Honduras in addressing their security issues, irrespective of received, ongoing technical and financial assistance from the United States. Furthermore, Honduran law enforcement and justice systems have, over the course of many decades, lacked personnel, resources, tools, and technical abilities proving essential for proficient response to increased crime in the region (Cooley et al., 2020). In fact, Honduras

as a whole has likewise battled entrenched corruption emerging from certain sectors of the economy which themselves benefit from criminal associations or private interests.

US-Involved Gang Prevention Efforts in Honduras

Over several decades, the US has initiated and pioneered programs or initiatives in Honduras directed at reducing the number of people joining drug-associated gangs while concurrently reducing the country's social and economic instability. These initiatives find leadership in USAID and the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the latter of which is an organization meant to improve security in the NTCA (US Embassy Tegucigalpa, 2016). In point of fact, the US and Honduras have cooperated on a number of issues, to include on regional security, a diplomatically significant period of time (Meyer, 2020). As a specific example, Honduras has provided a base for US activities to counter formerly Soviet and now generally foreign impact in the area since the 1980s (Meyer, 2020). Consequently, USAID has utilized CARSI assets to execute an assortment of crime-and-violence prevention projects (US Embassy Tegucigalpa, 2016).

USAID interventions can broadly be grouped into three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Each category focuses on a particular group of people, thus implementing unique activities directed at reducing the country's criminal activity. For example, the primary prevention initiatives forge a conducive environment for the general public's safety and social functioning (Berg, 2014). Secondary prevention activities focus on identifying youth at risk for gang recruitment, encouraging them to participate in behavior-change therapy, which consequently reduces the probability of youth joining the gangs. Finally, the tertiary prevention programs enable and foster opportunity for juvenile offenders to comfortably settle into society after completing

incarceration, thus reducing the risk of recidivism. Based on a 2014 report on the impact of these activities in the country, in areas where USAID spearheaded and managed these programs, the local populations experienced a 36% decrease in robberies, a 43% decrease in murders, and a 58% decrease in extortion – underlining the significant impact wrought by these programs in fighting ongoing crime within the nation’s borders (Rosales, 2015).

In their totality, these programs address the following national safety aspects: security initiatives, government-citizen relations, youth empowerment, education, and community development. The matrix in Figure 1 highlights some of the leading programs and initiatives established by the USG to aid in fighting regional crime.

Table 2. Honduran Gang Prevention Programs

Projects and Programs	Primary area of focus	Socio-cultural factors	Socio-economic factors
The Model Police Precinct (MPP)	Police force: Provides the necessary training, resources, and tools to counter gang-related violence in Honduras	Enhances inclusiveness and community engagement in intelligence collection	
Violence Prevention and Youth Engagement	Students: Promotes gang-resistance education and training in the school curriculum	Promotes positive behavior change among students	
National Service for Entrepreneurship and Small Business (SENPRENDE)	Entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises: Provides a	Inclusiveness	Provides better economic opportunities to all members of the community

	platform for more economic opportunities through e-commerce		
CARSI GENESIS	Youth: Seeks to empower urban youth Outreach Centers (OC).	Empowerment, thus promoting independence	
CARSI Secondary Violence Prevention (PROPONTE Más)	Youth: Identifies those at the risk of joining gang activities and provides counseling	Inclusiveness and empowering youth to carve their future	
ACCESS to Markets Activity (MERCADO)	Community: Improves agricultural investments and provides financial assistance		Empowers local farmers to enhance their economic opportunities and independence
Police professionalization and education	Law enforcement: Provides extra training for addressing gang-associated activities	Inclusiveness and empowerment to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in fighting crime	
CARSI School-Based Violence Prevention	Students: Encourages collaboration in the education sector to retain students in school	Inclusiveness and empowerment to enhance decision making.	

The Model Police Precinct (MPP)

As mentioned earlier, CARSI plays a significant role in funding programs and initiatives in Honduras – all of which aim to improve the security of the region. Notably, apart from focusing on the community, CARSI-funded programs are also implemented to support law enforcement and strengthen Honduras’ institutions based on the rule of law. One such effort occurs through the US Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which aims to protect all domestically-residing American citizens by addressing global insecurity, illicit drugs, and violence in various other nations (DOS 2020; Slutzker, 2015). INL attains this objective by helping countries abroad convey justice and fairness through fortifying police power, courts, and correction frameworks. As a natural consequence, therefore, these endeavors fundamentally inhibit crime and illicit drugs aimed at the US populace. Owing to these motives, INL partners directly with the Honduran authorities to fight crime in the region by providing the necessary training, resources, and tools to counter gang-related violence (Berk-Seligson, 2015). Across Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, INL has help establish 10 community policing/model police precinct programs since 2014 (Seekle, 2016).

Limited information exists regarding program growth in the NTCA since 2014. However, one of the notable programs initiated by the INL to facilitate Honduran law enforcement’s national activity is intelligence-led community policing, widely known as the Model Police Precinct (MPP). The program stresses the significance of community involvement and crime prevention through collecting intelligence, performing targeted investigation, and hotspot policing – an approach which dedicates law enforcement

resources and activities where crime most prevalently emerges. The program's primary objective remains substantially reducing violent crimes, especially homicides, and minimizing the impact of drug cartels, especially MS-13 and 18th Street, in communities (Berk-Seligson, 2014). Through the program, representatives from various branches of Honduran law enforcement receive training in the US to involve the community in intelligence collection and utilization to fight crime. These officers thus bear the expectation of inspiring and educating the rest of Honduran law enforcement in turn, as they strive to ensure Honduras' status as a safe place for all (Berk-Seligson, 2014).

Effectiveness of hotspot policing (a.k.a., 'place-based strategy' or 'PBS') was highlighted by the former US Ambassador to Honduras during 2014-2017, James D. Nealon (Fornes, 2018). In an October 2018 American Foreign Service Association Journal, former Ambassador Nealon evaluates PBS in the following way:

PBS is designed specifically to reduce violence in the most violent communities. Has it done that?

Let's look at the three pilot communities—all in San Pedro Sula, where PBS was first implemented in 2014. In Chamelecón, there were 287 homicides in 2014 and 43 in 2017. In Satellite, there were 370 homicides in 2014 and 133 in 2017. And in Rivera Hernandez there were 330 homicides in 2014 and 119 in 2017.

Let's compare those dramatic numbers to other extremely violent communities in Honduras. In La Lima, where INL runs programs but USAID does not, there were 99 murders in 2014 and 73 in 2017. In Choloma, where USAID manages programs but INL can't because of police vetting issues, there were 194 homicides in 2014 and 216 in 2017. Clearly, the PBS can play a dramatic role in reducing violence.

Sustainability is, of course, crucial to the long-term success of PBS. As the Honduran government and other communities across Honduras saw the success of PBS, they clamored to adopt the model elsewhere. As the newer neighborhoods adopt and adapt the successful model of the three pilot communities, USAID and INL can gradually reduce their roles. Members of the Honduran National Police now learn the community

policing model at the academy, not from US trainers. Local ownership of PBS was and remains the goal.

All of the cities which Nealon describes, including their statistical data, exist as specific examples to prove that both USAID and INL efforts, in conjunction with the host nation, can notably impact the Honduran social structure.

Violence Prevention and Youth Engagement

Previously discussed, one of the main factors that increases the risk and likelihood of youth joining gangs in Honduras is a lack of adequate education. Through CARSI, USAID acknowledges that the only way to obtain desirable results in fighting crime remains integrating gang-resistance education and training in school curriculum. As evidence for this assertion, the existing literature shows that teens in gang-controlled areas find attending classes both challenging and physically dangerous (Schrader, 2017). While some young people desire to join a gang and some experience personal compulsion, others feel compelled by impersonal circumstances. In response, the USG, through the Gang Resistance Education and Training (or ‘GREAT’) program, trains security officers to serve as educators in recruitment hotspots. The status of teachers as law officers encourages more students to attend classes, as they feel safer given the consistent presence of someone authorized to uphold the law against gangs. In addition to training law enforcement officers, the program boasts an accurate description as a school-based anti-gang program for students between the fourth and ninth grades (Beeton & Watts, 2016).

The program creates a platform through which law enforcement officers in the country can instill critical skills regarding decisions and leadership in children. As a

primary example, the effort seeks to provide the students with gang-associated knowledge and statistics in order to enable them to choose critically sound decisions when encountering the possibility of joining, or passing the opportunity, to join gangs. According to the most recent available statistics, since the program's introduction in 2012 (Cooley et al., 2020), it has changed the lives of more than 346,215 students, and it is projected to continue consistently so as to reach more than 110,000 young people by the end of 2019 (DOS, 2020).

An excellent example of such a project in the country is a school in a gang-contested area, situated in a barrio on the suburbs of El Progreso, Honduras's fourth-largest city. This school has over 4,000 students ranging from middle-school through high-school levels (Berg, 2014). All the lessons in the school are split into morning, afternoon and night shifts so as to accommodate all the students in the region. With a population amassing 150 students and administrators, the school has been described as one of the largest public secondary schools in the country. Likewise, being located among heavily stigmatized neighborhoods vulnerable to violence, the school received designation as a perfect location to implement the GREAT program.

The institution is located in an area contested by MS-13 and 18th Street. As a result, people commonly find markings of 18s, 13s, XVIIIIs, and XIIIIs throughout the school, especially on seats, seats, desks, and entryways. The role of police through this program is to prevent violence in the school by conversing with the students, concerning gang-affiliated activities and the dangers associated with joining a gang (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2014). Instead of arresting the students involved in gang-associated activities, the police force in the school seeks to reduce the number of students joining various gangs in

the region by showing the students that they have a choice and thus control their own lives. In the process, the program enhances the relationship between law enforcement, students, educators, and the general public (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2015).

National Service for Entrepreneurship and Small Business (SENPRENDE) and Youth Alliance Group

A lack in economic opportunity, especially employment, in Honduras remains one of the primary underlying factors often prompting youth to join gangs in the region (USG employee, personal communication, 2020). As a result, the USG – in collaboration with the Organization of American States (OAS) and with the support of the Honduran government’s National Service for Entrepreneurship and Small Business (SENPRENDE) – launched a program to allow entrepreneurs and small-to-medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) to register their companies via the Internet, completely free and in less than 15 minutes, thus harnessing the tools of digital technology (Cossich, 2020). National Service for Entrepreneurship and Small Business (SENPRENDE) provides guidance and assistance to former gang members and those at a higher risk of joining gangs. The program seeks to provide technical skills through training, as well as critical equipment and mechanisms, to adapt to post-gang life. (Meyer, 2015). The program has offered second chances for former gang members by providing them with 30,000 USD from Youth Alliance Honduras, as well as the government’s Security Tax Trust Committee contribution of another 30,000 USD (Beeton & Watts, 2016). With a capital amount of \$60,000 to change their lives, former gang members are slowly becoming financially independent, hence acting as mentors and role models to those who desire and

yearn to live an independent life away from gang activities. Therefore, SENPRENDE and Youth Alliance Group are improving the financial independence of the public, thus reducing their dependence on gang-affiliated activities in the country and, in the process, reducing gang membership.

For more context regarding relevance, OAS focuses on promoting economic, military, and cultural cooperation among its member states. Given the close ties between the US and Honduras, Honduras is one of the leading and essential member states. Therefore, the program (SENPRENDE) possesses as a matter of course a two-fold purpose: allowing civilians in the country to exploit globalization and digital apparatuses and supporting entrepreneurs in their strategic use of technology (Goodrum & Dalrymple, 2019). OAS feels that bridging the digital divide in the country, particularly with increased e-commerce in the business world, will provide ordinary citizens in Honduras with increased economic opportunities, thus reducing the likelihood of those citizens joining gangs for financial reasons. Furthermore, OAS understands that the programs seek to train these entrepreneurs to recognize and utilize the best functions of the Internet to attract both local and international customers (Nazario, 2016). Current studies on e-commerce in Honduras indicate that consumers in the country are purchasing medium- and high-priced products and services over the web, including daily goods such as food and groceries, highlighting e-commerce as one of the most beneficial investment opportunities in the country. As a result, all companies and organizations offering customers the possibility and opportunity to pay for their goods and services over the web, irrespective of the industry or the price of the products, stand to benefit from the current digital trend (Rosales, 2015). In turn, such marked development significantly

reduces the level of unemployment in the country, thus reducing gang-related activities (particularly homicides and extortions) along with it.

While the Youth Alliance program remains separate from SENPRENDE, the Youth Alliance focuses on entrepreneurship, as well. The projects and programs, such as “Second Opportunities for Our Youth,” focus on giving former gang members training in both business concepts and soft skills, such as entrepreneurship, life planning, business management, conflict management/resolution, and resilience skills (USAID, 2015). The individuals also receive a small grant to help start and boost their business.

An excellent illustration as to how these funds have changed the life of former gang-members is the case of Chuy (Rodriguez, 2015). Chuy lives in one of the most at-risk neighborhoods in the capital of Honduras (Rodriguez, 2015). Chuy won \$5,000 USD in the ‘Honduras Emprende’ – a Tegucigalpa Chamber of Commerce and Industry-sponsored entrepreneurship contest which is held annually (Rodriguez, 2015). Chuy once engaged in drugs, drinking, and other destructive habits until chose to start living positively by starting a business selling hamburger patties and fried potatoes (Rodriguez, 2015). With the additional capital of \$5,000, he plans to expand his business (Rodriguez, 2015). Therefore, with assistance from the USAID-funded program called Youth Alliance Honduras (*Alianza Joven Honduras*), the Honduran government engages those at a higher risk for gang involvement and provides them second opportunities in life (Rodriguez, 2015).

Figure 5. A Youth Alliance Participant Preparing a Meal in his Burger Business



Note: To provide an income for his family, Chuy aims to average daily sales of 20 burger meals. This image is adapted from the joint project funded by USAID and managed by Creative Associates International. Credit for photo and description is to David Snyder (2015) with Creative Associates International.

Reformed gang members, especially those living in the same gang-dominated areas (or barrios), often experience stigmatization when applying for employment opportunities. Often times, an employer will not even hire someone from one of the gang-dominated areas, owing to the probability of a potential employee's gang associations. Moreover, gang members find leaving the gang alive a difficult prospect. As such, those individuals usually must move to a different neighborhood or city to survive to avoid retribution for leaving the gang.

CARSI GENESIS – Outreach Centers

Prominent as a theme in prior discussion, CARSI has exhibited significant involvement in almost every program in the region. This involvement is not without due motive: the organization seeks to stabilize the region and create a safer world for everyone. One way CARSI has sought to achieve this purpose is through GENESIS and the Outreach Centers (OCs), similar to the Community Centers in Guatemala.

The GENESIS program arose from the efforts of the *Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo de Honduras* (FUNADEH) in 2015, seeking to strengthen the connection and collaboration between community members, religious organizations, diverse neighborhood partners, and local governments by creating sustainable urban youth OCs with USAID (Schrader, 2017). As such, GENESIS exists as a specialized youth program that focuses on reaching people below 29 years of age, lacking in both education and employment, necessitating support through government-run services. The program provides Honduran youth with support and enhances their capability to progress in life with little or no dependence on gangs.

The OCs focus on nine areas, as delineated below in Table 3.

Table 3. GENESIS Youth Program Activities

Dream my life challenge:	Methodology for the construction of goals, Values, cinemas, debates.
Creative use of free time:	Sports, cultural, artistic activities, music classes, games and board games.
Training for work in:	Computing, English, costume jewelry, wood workshop, Furniture making, etc.

School and education reinforcement:	Online research, tutorials in school subjects, strengthening the capacities of children and young people.
Volunteering:	Young Youth Mentors, Volunteers, Youth as Agents of Change in their Community
Opportunity management:	Scholarships and internships.
Formation of values:	In the Outreach Centers we practice virtues throughout the year.
Microenterprises:	Growth opportunities through the generation of Microenterprises.
This table is a direct adaptation from fundehgenesis.org, and was translated using Google Translation software from Spanish into English. It is ended to be block quoted. (FUNDEHGENESIS, 2020)	

Since the introduction of GENESIS as a multi-country initiative in 2015, the USG has invested more than \$5 million in approximately 50 OCs. As a result, the OCs reduce the risk factors for violence and enhance resilience among youth by imparting income-generating opportunities (Berg, 2014). To further this aim, USAID has consolidated and expanded the OC framework by transitioning approaches, the directive board, and infrastructure of the system to FUNADEH’s control in order to establish services for youth in high-risk regions – particularly Choloma, La Ceiba, San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, and Tela (Berg, 2014).

Figure 6. Outreach Centers of the GENESIS Program



Note: This figure depicts children engaging in different computer-based learning activities in the outreach centers that provide a ‘second home’ for learning and engaging in society. This image is adapted from the USAID/GENESIS/FUNDEH program.

CARSI Secondary Violence Prevention (*Proponte Más*)

The majority of US-Involved initiatives to reduce gang violence in the region is focused on reducing gang membership. However, some efforts aim to urge gang members to leave their respective organizations. Reasoning behind such efforts proves consistent: the USG believes that reducing the quantity of members of the respective gangs will weaken them, thus allowing the members of the community to control the country and express their own collective will regarding the security of the region (Berk-Seligson, 2014). Along that line, the *Proponte Más* program, which Creative Associates implemented, seeks to identify youth with the greatest danger of violence or gang

inclusion and to lessen risk factors by closely working with both the youth and their families. The leading interventions under this initiative include family therapy and risk-reduction services (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2015). To wit, the identified youths and their families receive counseling regarding gang-related violence and methods to either avoid joining these gangs or protect themselves by participating in activities that further their talents and interests.

This program has invested close to 20 million USD focusing on high-risk regions in the country such as Choloma, La Ceiba, San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, and Tela, (Edwards, 2015a). An excellent example of this program changing the lives of the members of the community is the case of Carlos Guity, a father of two sons, Wilson and Irvin. The Guity family lives in Corozal, but the lack of economic opportunities in his hometown forces him to visit Panama in search of employment. As a result, Carlos spends the majority of his time in the construction industry in Panama (Edwards, 2015a).

While Carlos migrates for work, their mother Ronna Ballesteros performs housekeeping jobs to provide for her sons and their younger sisters (Edwards, 2015a). Based on an analysis of nine risks parameters of a family, at both peer and individual levels, Wilson, 11, and Irvin, 13, were categorized as youths at a higher risk of joining gang-associated activities. As a result, they received selection to join the program. Before their participation, the boys regularly skipped school; they often engaged in fights with their friends and relatives. They also exhibited disrespect towards their mother and other relatives (Ingram & Curtis, 2015). They had developed a notion that because their parents were always away, the parents did not love the children. However, after joining the program, the family is now experiencing closer bonds. This, in turn, reduces the risk of the

boys joining gang activities. Such an example reflects other experiences, underscores the impact and effectiveness of this program in this community.

Expanding upon this example, *Proponte Más* mainly targets areas marked and identified as hot spots based on increased violence reports, particularly homicides and extortion. In the course of providing these therapeutic services, USAID also focuses on training local professionals and lay counselors on ways to best address the problem of youth recruitment by gangs (Meyer, 2015). According to the USG, the majority of the youth in the country possess a psychological notion that the only way to progress successfully in life or enjoy security in the country is through membership in a gang. As a result, in collaboration with the Honduran government, USAID focuses on changing this mentality by showing youth that a healthy and happy life can exist beyond gang membership. The government has already invested more than 20 million USD in reinforcing the local support network and referral system to include more families (Berk-Seligson, 2015). Through counseling, the identified youth and their families are expected to exhibit positive behavioral change and abstain from participating in crime, brutality, and unpredictable migration.

ACCESS to Markets Activity (MERCADO)

The USG judges that collaboration among all Honduras' stakeholders increases the likelihood of success in the fight against gang-associated crimes and activities in the country. As a result, the USG, through USAID, has invested over 24 million USD in the MERCADO program, which focuses on reducing destitution, stunting, and food instability in Honduras – particularly the western part of the country (Nazario, 2016). The program aims to recognize the critical role the traditional Honduran woman plays in

improving the quality of life of their families and the community. With poverty increasingly becoming one of the leading risk factors that pushes youth to join gangs or participate in crime, the program believes that caring specifically for low-income families and integrating their social safety net by reducing poverty and increasing food security will increase positive outcomes. The investment has transitioned more than 10,000 families out of poverty, reducing childhood hunger by 20% in targeted communities and enhancing the quality of life of community members (Berg, 2014). Under this initiative, efforts include improving horticultural efficiency and access to innovations that expand production, while also broadening conventional crops and livestock.

Since agriculture is one of the principal economic activities in the region, investments in the agricultural industry improve food security and reduce poverty. Investment also enhances employment in the region, as more community members become self-employed. This significantly reduces the risk of joining gangs, as more community members establish independence and financial stability (Goodrum & Dalrymple, 2019). Additionally, these investments are expanded to incorporate basic monetary services, reduce malnutrition in children under five, and upgrade sanitary conditions and community sustenance – as well as healthcare quality. According to the impact evaluation reports, this program increases employment, off-farm business opportunities, and access to financial assistance – particularly for women and children most vulnerable to gang-violence in Honduras. As a result, the program prioritizes economic opportunities for women and gender equity. For example, the program has adopted agricultural extension and financial services (Berg, 2014). One of the main areas that the program has concentrated as it seeks to improve food security is the utilization of drip irrigation. The women in the community,

and some men, receive instruction regarding the most effective and efficient way of distributing water to crops, thus saving time and energy spent on irrigation. Fintrac Incorporated, which is responsible for rolling out and managing this program, has created a meaningful and accessible training and develops creative and practical solutions to challenges faced by women (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2015). Notably, the program is tailored to the ‘Zone of Influence’ communities, where it identifies the particular challenges faced by women in that community and determines to address these problems.

Additionally, the program has prioritized the provision of eco-friendly stoves. Fintrac Incorporated recognizes that most of the rural families in the country substantially rely on traditional wood-burning stoves for food preparation. As a result, women in this community have to spend most of their time collecting firewood, considering that cooking remains one of their roles and responsibilities in the community. Using firewood to prepare food not only depletes the environment in which they live, thus leading to food insecurity, it significantly contributes to overwork for women (Bissonnette, 2019). This leaves them with little or no time to participate in economic activities. Therefore, by providing these eco-friendly stoves, the program increases local capacity to focus on food security through agriculture and engage in other economic activities to enhance Hondurans’ quality of life (Cruz, 2016).

Police Professionalization and Education

Even given the efforts to serve youth and their families, other factors undermining the fight against gang-associated crime in Honduras are corruption in the police force and lack of adequate training and education. Therefore, the USG, through the INL and in collaboration with USAID, introduced programs in Honduran law enforcement agencies

that focuses on improving the degree of professionalism in the Honduran National Police (HNP) and other related criminal justice institutions. This is achieved through bolstering continued education and training, sometimes at US-based training facilities, which in turn enhances the quality of police performance in the country (Schrader, 2017).

An excellent example of a program improving police professionalization and education is the Criminal Investigation School (EIC) initiated in 2011 (Cruz, 2016). In terms of gang prevention, the EIC trains the police force on improving their relationship with community members (Bissonnette, 2019). In terms of counter-gang operations, the EIC supports criminal investigations and specialized operations training by instilling proper behavior regarding the gaining of intelligence on gang activities, planning and executing raids and, above all, extracting information from the gang members regarding their operations – including actions which lead to sting operations against them (Bissonnette, 2019; Cooley, 2020). The presence of police officers from the neighboring countries in the facility has improved cross-border collaboration, thus allowing the entire region to fight against increased gang activities and violence. In 2018 alone, the facility supported the Colombian National Police (CNP) advisors, who delivered more than 28 courses to more than 850 participants, thus underscoring the importance of this program in fighting gang violence in the country and the whole NTCA in general (Beeton, 2016).

Since the 2011 introduction of this program, through major support from the Criminal Investigation School (EIC), more than 15,200 HNP officers and representatives from other justice institutions have graduated. These graduates, over time and through their own relationships, introduce the changes necessary in the police force to more appropriately and effectively fight crime. Additionally, continued investment in the

program is expected to attract thousands of patriotic participants. Those involved in perpetuating the program want to make Honduras a safe place for its citizens and other foreigners interested in investing or living in the country. Notably, the best-in-class EIC office in Honduras serves as the center for training the HNP. This location of the EIC functions as a territorial training and education office for the NTCA, primarily focusing on training for criminal investigations and tactical and special operations, as well as improving cross-border collaboration (Beeton & Watts, 2016).

CARSI School-Based Violence Prevention

One of the significant impacts of continued violence in the country is the disruption of both middle- and high-school education. When more students relinquish the benefits of an education, the risk of increasing gang membership proves higher, especially considering that most youth experience a temptation to join their friends in the gangs. As a result, the USG, in collaboration with the local authorities, introduced the School-Based Violence Prevention program. The program, which falls under CARSI, is tailored to forestall school-based violence by dealing with practices and conditions that diminish access to, maintenance of, and learning in the educational system (Cooley et al., 2020). Notably, school-based violence is particularly common in high-risk areas, often reporting the highest number of homicides and extortions. USAID has therefore invested more than 20 million dollars in this program and mainly collaborates with government-funded institutions, the ministry of education, citizens, and different benefactors on the federal, metropolitan, and neighborhood levels.

The program maintains an interest in reducing violent behavior among the student population, behavior which proves an early sign that a particular student is likely to participate in gang-associated events. Sensitive to context, this program has significantly invested in the most violent regions in Honduras. Likewise, the government strives to retain students in school as long as possible, which in turn deters students from violence and helps create a new life path apart from crime (Meyer, 2015). Regions influenced by this program include Choloma, Tegucigalpa, La Ceiba San Pedro Sula, and Tela. The investments made by the USG create a platform whereby all stakeholders in the education sector develop shared goals and work as a unit towards sustaining student attendance, reducing violence, designing and implementing violence prevention systems, and collaborating with community education centers to create and develop positive behavior among high-risk young people (Berk-Seligson, 2014).

Honduras: National Program Impact

The next three subsections discuss programs dealing with prosecuting corrupt leaders and reducing crime, homicide and gang membership.

Prosecuting Corrupt Leaders

According to a 2015 Congressional Research Service report (Meyer), Honduras has strived significantly in tackling relatively high levels of insecurity and crime. The efforts have started to produce positive results. For example, with increased aid from the USG, public prosecutors now more effectively combat high-level corruption through both the Model Police Precinct (MPP) and Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). Perhaps owing to the breadth of this corruption, the USG believes

that with some members of the Honduran government heavily involved in corruption and gang activities, achieving these aims remains challenging (Berg, 2014). As a result, with the help of Honduras's specialized anti-corruption prosecution unit, public prosecutors have moved quickly to ensure that corruption does not jeopardize the fight against gang-associated activities and violence. By December 2019, MPP and MACCIH had introduced 11 corruption cases, prompting the indictment of over 112 individuals – among them 80 cabinet ministers, lawmakers and other senior personnel. These results belie significant progress in a positive direction, considering that these programs first existed in 2016 (Berk-Seligson, 2015). Program officials feel that by prosecuting most influential figureheads they will have significant success in reducing, if not eliminating, gang activity, considering that gang leaders use corrupt government officials to further gang-related interests in the country. As evidence of both the extent of the problem and success of the programs' work, in the first corruption case in the country, the former first lady Rosa Elena Bonilla de Lobo (2010-2014) received a sentence of 58 years in prison for exploiting over \$800,000 in public property for personal aims (Berk-Seligson, 2015). With these two programs exploring 20 further lines of investigation, Honduras currently exhibits promise for progress.

Reducing Crime and Homicide Rates

Another significant impact of this progress is improving investigative and prosecutorial capacity as the USG continues to equip the Honduran police force with skills and knowledge to tackle organized crime. A grim picture still exists in Honduras: since 2004, the homicide rate in the country was 30.7 per 100,000 residents, but this

number skyrocketed over the next decade as gang-associated activities in the country substantially increased. As a result, by 2011 and 2012, the homicide rate exhibited its most significant increase, with 86.5 of 100,000 members of the public losing their lives to gang violence (Cooley et al., 2020). However, according to the country's current homicide rates, these programs have evidentially aided in once again securing Honduras by reducing that number to 44.7 in 2019 (Meyer, 2015).

Halving the homicide rate between 2012 and 2019 can be attributed to efforts by the USG in collaboration with local authorities. Room for improvement still exists with current rates. However, results prove encouraging, providing a foundation on which future activities and efforts can flourish. For example, one of the main obstacles the justice system faces in the country is the lack of adequate resources, considering that only 1% of the Honduran budget is allocated to the public prosecutor's office – an amount presenting a significant challenge to hiring personnel and utilizing tools to prosecute criminals. Encouragingly, however, 24% of the homicides committed in 2017 were prosecuted, resulting in convictions for 13% of these cases. This exhibits a substantial improvement, considering that in 2010, only 14% of the homicides were prosecuted and only 4% of them resulted in convictions (Nazario, 2016).

Reducing Gang Membership

Another significant impact of US-Involved activities in the country is the reduction of gang membership in the country. Through organizations such as GREAT and CARSI School-Based Violence Prevention, the government educates the youth regarding the dangers of joining and participating in gang-associated activities.

According to CARSI reports, these programs exhibit a moderate impact in lessening the number of gang members. In point of fact, the probability of becoming a gang member proved 39% lower for those who had participated in these programs, as compared to students who did not participate (Slutzker, 2015). By providing the students with facts and knowledge about the disadvantages—especially among the youth—of joining gangs, the government improves youths’ ability to correctly and securely decide the direction of their lives. Furthermore, the programs also exert a significant positive impact on attitudes and social skills towards police. In fact, the program improves positive attitude towards police by 27%, creating a platform and opportunity for collaboration in fighting crime and maintaining personal safety (Berk-Seligson, 2014). Additionally, the programs improved gang-refusal skills by 23%, allowing youth to resist the peer pressure to join gangs, exhibit a less self-centered attitude, and express less positive behavior towards gangs and their activities. This, in turn, reduces gang membership by 21%, thus making those gangs significantly weaker. As a result, authorities and citizens both experience increased ease in fighting gang activities and influence in the country.

Honduras: Conclusion

Based on the above-detailed discussion, Honduras still bears a reputation as one of the most insecure states today. Increased gang-associated activities in the country increase insecurity by significantly increasing homicides and extortion. However, the story is improving. The collaboration between the United States government (with USAID) and the Honduran government (through CARSI) has led to municipal and local authorities implementing programs to reduce gang-associated crime and activities. Notably, increased unemployment, lack of adequate education, corruption, lack of

economic opportunities, and impaired leadership in the country exist as the main risk factors contributing to crime. As a result, these US-Involved initiatives focus on preventing gang-associated crime at the local, municipal, and national levels through primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies. These strategies include The Model Police Precinct (MPP), Violence Prevention and Youth Engagement, National Service for Entrepreneurship and Small Business (SENPRENDE), CARSÍ GENESIS, CARSÍ Secondary Violence Prevention (Proponte Más), ACCESS to Markets Activity (MERCADO), Police Professionalization and Education, and CARSÍ School-Based Violence Prevention.

These efforts focus on promoting inclusivity and participation of all community members and empowering them to express independence and mature volitional skill regarding gang-associated activities. Notably, women, youth, and students suffer a higher risk of joining these gangs or becoming the primary victims of a gang's criminal activities. As a result, the initiatives are tailored to ensure that students remain in school while acquiring gang-associated training and education, women access financial services and training regarding financial independence, and youth receive more economic opportunities through urban youth outreach centers. This, in turn, greatly reduces gang-associated crime in the country. Simply stated, these programs have significantly and positively affected gang-membership and gang activities in the region. Organizations such as GREAT and CARSÍ School-Based Violence Prevention have particularly reduced gang membership by 21%, while the prosecution of corrupt leaders has increased and the homicide rate has been halved. Together, these facts indicate that the state

continues to progress in a safe and prosperous direction, encouraging more positive expectations for the future.

Chapter IV.

El Salvador

This chapter examines the security situation in El Salvador and the impact of US-involved programs, such as community economic programs, youth engagement, and law enforcement reform.

Background and Relations

The historical context for diplomatic relations between the United States and El Salvador involves significantly controversial activities and decisions committed by the USG, dating to the Banana Republic era; however, recent events in the past 30 years have contributed perhaps even more directly to the current societal structure and negative fruition of gang development. Such notable controversies in this relationship involve the 1979-1992 Salvadoran Civil War and Salvadoran 2004 presidential race — both of which belie heavy US involvement. Irrespective of these controversies, the American relationship between American and El Salvador remains, nevertheless intimate, albeit slightly tenuous, in many regards on both sides (Cruz, 2016). A plethora of evidence suggests this relationship remains beneficial – mostly to the United States, but increasingly for El Salvador, given the country's contemporary social and economic developments. For example, the USG significantly improves the standard of law, implementation of new laws, and exercises of non-military personnel and police in an attempt to improve the security and welfare of both citizens and foreigners – especially Americans. As of 2018, El Salvador boasted a populace of 6.42 million, generally

comprising those of European descent, Native American heritage, or a mix of the two (Menjívar, 2018). Unfortunately, despite its rich, vibrant, and diverse history, El Salvador currently receives almost universal designation as one of the world's most dangerous countries today, primarily stemming from increased gang activity and violence.

Security Conditions in El Salvador

El Salvador's security situation proves quite similar to that of its neighboring countries: Honduras and Guatemala. According to the current USAID, both El Salvador and its neighbors suffer from high rates of violent crime (Ingram, 2015). As a key piece of evidence, in 2012, the homicide rate in the country reached an all-time high of 105 homicides per 100,000 residents. As a result, the country's markedly shocking crime rate has earned El Salvador a highly undesirable reputation as the most unsafe location on Earth. Perhaps inferable given prior content, gang violence particularly contributes to this reputation. However, disparagingly, gang violence itself has increased in intensity; in fact, the gang culture in the country has changed over several recent decades, displaying increasing degrees of aggression. Likewise, the pervasiveness of gang activity is now vast: the Salvadoran Department of Defense has suggested that more than a half-million individuals in the country exhibit consistent involvement in gang-associated violence, either by directly participating in gang-activities or by suffering compulsion to partake from relatives or friends. As a result, more than 8% of the country's population conduct involvement in gang activities to some measurable degree (Macías, 2018).

Perhaps obviously, then, given the level of citizen involvement, the country is characterized by the pervasive viciousness and particular severity with which such

violence is committed. El Salvador, however, remains one country among many others, and after the homicide rate exceeded 100 deaths per 100,000 individuals in 2015, the international community described El Salvador as a country held hostage by illegal-drug-associated gangs (particularly the MS-13 and 18th Street) – a state of oppression which substantially affects all aspects of civilian experience in the country (Edwards, 2015a). Notably, almost all the murders in the country for the last 20 years have stemmed one way or another from a triangulated war between the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Barrio 18 (a.k.a., 18th Street), and military personnel as the government strives to regain authority and create some sense of safety and security for civilians and foreigners. The conflict can display an inexorable brutality after firearms, machetes prove the most frequently employed weapons. The overall objective of perpetuating such overwhelming levels of violence in the country consists of an attempt to achieve dominance by psychological intimidation, whether against the government or rival gang, through victims' suffering and mutilation (Edwards, 2015b). The existing literature and studies regarding the country's security situation suggest that the rise of a mind-boggling gang culture portrayed by uniquely tailored conventions, rules, and societies is gradually transforming the act of murder in the nation into a custom, imbued with perversion and diabolism. As such, recordings and other accounts of these murders have invoked a paralyzing fear among Salvadoran communities. That level of insecurity in the country can be underlined by the normality with which public executions occur, contributing to more than 40% of all homicides (Perea, 2019).

US-Involved Gang Prevention Efforts in El Salvador

US policy concerning the country mainly focuses on improving economic propensity, enhancing security, and strengthening governance by following a specific US strategy for engagement in Central America. To wit, the USG has significantly improved its foreign aid to the country in response regarding American involvement in the rise of gang wars during 1990s-2000s, as well as due to increased MS-13 crimes in the US and mass emigration at the US southern border during the 2010s. Under both the Reagan and Carter administrations, the USG provided significant aid to the Salvadoran administration – including training, funds, and weapons to fight uprisings – thus effectively establishing a platform, even if unintended, for the rise of continually warring gangs (Bissonnette, 2019).

In an attempt to more recently address current global instability related to gang violence, since the 2016 fiscal year, the USG has allocated more than \$2.6 billion for the strategy globally, with at least \$410 million allocated for actions in El Salvador (Meyer, 2020). Currently, the Trump administration is furthering US activities in the country by requesting an additional \$45.7 million for implementing its strategy through the fiscal year ending 2020, with the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) spearheading the initiatives proving propitious to effectuate security in the region (DOS, 2019). The USG, through CARSI, continues to focus on increasing collaboration with local communities and organizations to enhance the country's security.

El Salvador Gang Prevention Programs

In specific, the gang prevention programs center around identifying and addressing the root causes of increased gang membership. As a result, the programs address significant root issues in the country, such as security initiatives (in collaboration with local law enforcement), youth outreach, youth empowerment, education, corruption, and improved community opportunities for all community members (Bissonnette, 2019).

Table 4, below, contains specifics for these programs.

Table 4. El Salvador: Gang Prevention Efforts and Programs

Programs and projects	Primary area of focus	Socio-cultural applications	Socio-economic applications
Youth Gang Prevention Programs	Students: Integrating gang resistance instruction and training in educational planning	Promote a positive behavioral change among the students	
Police Athletic League (PAL)	Youth and Police: The program seeks to improve the relationship between youth and police by creating soccer leagues and other sports spaces, wherein both law enforcement officers and community members can interact positively and respectfully	Inclusiveness and youth empowerment	
Anti-Extortion Units	Police force: The program seeks to empower the police, giving them the skills and knowledge to fight organized crime and extortion	Empowerment, thus promoting accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency among security officers	
Bridges for Employment	Community: This program identifies those at-risk of joining gang activities and provides economic opportunities by improving private and public cooperation		Inclusiveness and empowering the youth to responsibly plan their future and live more securely

Domestic Resource Mobilization	Government: This method improves revenue collection and resource allocation, prioritizing security and human rights		This method empowers the government to increase tax revenue and public expenditure through budgeting and resource planning
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Youth Gang Prevention Programs

As in the neighboring countries of Honduras and Guatemala, the USG (under USAID) has introduced the GREAT program to curb ongoing gang-associated crime in El Salvador. GREAT exists as a school-based program targeting youth, specifically to enhance their ability to resist participation in gang-associated activities. Police officers involve themselves in the program’s lessons, which include classroom instructions and a variety of learning activities – such as acting on informed decisions either under pressure or when encountering a tough choice (Mundt, 2019). The police officers involved and participating in this program have to undergo specialized training, wherein they receive education regarding ways to address the various needs of their students, particularly gang-associated fear, to ensure that the students can resist the urge to join gangs while concurrently identifying and combatting criminal behavior. These uniquely trained officers thereby possess an enhanced ability to both recognize gang members and work with them and their families to effectuate their renunciation of gang membership and reparation of their lives (Cruz, 2016). Additionally, these officers gain referral knowledge so as to ensure that they effectively convince and direct high-risk young people to seek outreach programs focusing on youth-specific empowerment. Most importantly, these officers function as positive role models for the students, streamlining the process of

convincing students that a positive alternative exists to joining gangs or participating in criminal activities (, 2019).

The GREAT program in El Salvador, directly imported from US curriculum, upholds as focal points reducing teen criminality, brutality, and gang contributions, while also building a constructive relationship with security officers, families, and youth, thus creating a safer community for all. For many students in El Salvador, education is often influenced by continued gang activities in the country and the region. The GREAT program first emerges in the youths' experience in both middle school or high school to deliver information, ultimately aiming for results in attitudinal and behavioral changes (Perea, 2019).

An excellent example of a school implementing this program successfully is Yaritza's elementary school. The school is located in a high-risk area known as Caserio El Pital neighborhood inside the Colon municipality, one of the most violent regions in the country. The Colon municipality received designation as one of the murder capitals of the world, given the high numbers of homicides in the area. Irrespective of this negative reputation, the USG, with help from the Salvadoran government, has introduced GREAT to enlighten the local population regarding gang activities and uphold a positive image and status for the police force, thus improving police collaboration (Meyer, 2015).

Specific examples exist at this school regarding the program's effectiveness and necessity. Yaritza, an 11-year-old Salvadoran girl participating in the program, once stood in front of her fifth-grade classmates with a US provided workbook. One of the questions in the book concerns gang-related activities. Upon hearing the educator ask the students what they have heard about gangs and violence recently in their country, innocently,

Yaritza answered that she heard of many homicides (Ingram, 2015). Although this is an understatement regarding the number of murders in the country, such anti-gang lessons and activities, especially among younger children, will significantly help to reduce crime by stopping such children from joining and participating in gang-affiliated activities. In another instance, a fully armed police officer, Henry Vladimir Melgar Amaya, part of the gang prevention unit in the Salvadoran police force, has led a lesson at an elementary school in Lourdes. This instance proves that the program seeks to promote the relationship between the students, police officers, and local community (Goodrum, 2019). Such promotion is achieved by creating awareness of the adverse impact of joining gang activities, while at the same time showing youth that they can carve paths in life away from gang-affiliated activities.

Considering that more than 500,000 individuals in El Salvador participate in gang activities, directly or indirectly, mitigating the increased criminal activities remains a significant challenge (Mundt, 2019). However, by reducing the membership (for example, to 100,000 individuals), the government could gain the ability to manage and monitor gang activities. Therefore, through educating and training young people to avoid gang pressure and youth violence, while also providing better opportunities for a high-quality life, the USG substantially addresses gang violence in El Salvador (Menjívar, 2018).

Police Athletic League (PAL)

As noted earlier in the discussion, the increase in homicides in El Salvador finds significant attribution with increased conflict between those gangs, rival gang members,

and government forces. However, the USG believes that by improving relationships between community members and the police forces, the Salvadoran government can significantly reduce the number of homicides in the country (Macías, 2018). As a result, the government has introduced the Police Athletic League (PAL) under the stewardship of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the National Civilian Police (PNC), and the Patria Unida Foundation. Through the program, the government intends to teach and train children for a life beyond gang violence and activities. By keeping the children occupied through sports, the government hopes to reduce their interest or desire to join gang activities. The program thus centers around creating and adjusting recreational areas for children and youths throughout the country – areas where they engage in various sporting, educational, and artistic activities.

An excellent example of this program in El Salvador exists in the implementation of PAL in Zacatecoluca. Here the program contributors oversaw the creation of the stadiums where the children play, provided training equipment and gear, organized tournaments, and inspired children to venture into other avenues in life apart from gang activities. More specifically, the commissioned league in Zacatecoluca organizes matches and tournaments in different sports such as soccer, basketball, American football, swimming, and volleyball between teens and youths from different regions – especially those controlled by rival gangs (Cooley, 2020). The success of the program in other areas such as Lourdes-Colon, Ciudad Delgado, San Luis La Herradura, Usulután, and Santa Ana prompted the USG to open another league in Zacatecoluca, with significant success.

Two crucial aspects of these efforts consist of violence prevention and personal skills development (Ingram, 2015). The program mainly targets municipalities and

regions with the highest crime rates, improving the relationship among various groups of Salvadorans as they work towards solving their problems. Notably, the program seeks to unify community members, the police force, and other security stakeholders (who all play a significant role in improving the country's security) by keeping youth physical active and mentally engaged through sports. (Edwards, 2015a ; Berk-Seligson S. O., 2014).

A separate and distinct part of the program also seeks to provide the National Civilian Police (PNC) with equipment and resources directed at fighting crime and violence in the country. This provision proves almost desperately necessary, since a corrupt government creates a challenge for law enforcement to acquire the necessary resources and equipment to match those of the gangs. In fact, studies indicate that gang control of the most significant part of the country has resulted in extortion, such that small businesses ultimately experience compulsion to pay two or three dollars daily to the gang either for either protection or allowance to operate in a particular region (Menjívar, 2018). This, in turn, generates millions of dollars annually for the gangs. As a result, law enforcement has always encountered relative hardship in fighting such well-funded criminal activity. However, with the USG providing \$500,000 in tactical gear, motorcycles, and vehicles to patrol the country through the program, desirable outcomes arise more frequently. Notably, in Zacatecoluca alone, the program has provided more than 20 motorcycles, 10 pickups, minivans, and 400 bulletproof vests to the police delegation, thus intensifying the efforts against these gangs (DOS, 2019). While certainly not a primary objective, an indirect benefit is that the improved relationship between the police force and the public further promotes enhanced intelligence collection and intelligence-based investigation (Edwards, 2015a). Moreover, force projection and

tactical capability also provide operational advantages in both preventing and countering gang violence.

Anti-Extortion Units

The Salvadoran government, with the help of the USG, has identified that increased financial power for the rival gangs in the country gives them more power and control. Notably, the majority of these funds and resources emerge through extortion, for example by requiring businesses and individuals to pay daily taxes to the gang members (Cruz, 2016). Even so, according Salvadoran government's ability to fight continued violence in the country remains the lack of training among the security forces entrusted to fight crime, particularly extortion, and protect the people. As indicated earlier, one of the many ways gangs in El Salvador have increased in clout and wieldable power over the last several decades consists essentially of committing this extortion against the local populace (i.e., store owners, bus drivers, etc.), through which they forcibly obtain money to enact their desires through violence and control the country's politics. This widespread financial terrorism of individuals and businesses has in fact received citation as El Salvador's primary security concern.

Current statistics indicate that since 2011, the country has suffered more than 3,000 extortion cases, thus overburdening the police force. Furthermore, the units seek to boost public cooperation to enhance the government's ability to collect intelligence – which can, in turn, be used to investigate and prosecute extortion suspects (Bissonnette, 2019).

As a result, the Salvadoran government, aided by members of the USG and trained by the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), has introduced anti-extortion units in the form of the Business Crimes Task Force and the Transit Crimes Task Force (DOS, 2019). The two entities exist to combat the high levels of extortion in the country (DOS, 2019). The main objective of training these anti-extortion units consists of increasing police accountability, professionalism, transparency, and – as well as officers' ability to follow extorted money and apprehend gang members (Meyer, 2015). The cause of this success is not particularly secret, the FBI offered to help train these anti-extortion units directly, which focuses entirely on investigating and dismantling the country's existing extortion network (Cruz, 2016).

According to those in charge of the training and these units, most of the extortion rackets and system operated by 18th Street and MS-13 receive their coordination and leadership from prison, by gang leaders serving their sentencing terms. As a result, the best way to obtain favorable and desirable outcomes remains targeting those in prison operating the extortion schemes and tracing these leaders' behavior to apprehend all involved individuals. By targeting the more prominent leaders or facilitators exerting a significant of influence, these units often achieve a greater level of operational success compared to targeting those on the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy in the street (Ingram, 2015). An excellent example of an operation carried out by these units focused on reducing (if not eradicating) extortion in the country is Operation Jaque, which resulted in the arrest, prosecution, and conviction of 61 members of MS-13 notoriously involved in extortion.

Bridges for Employment

Bridges for Employment is a Salvadoran government-led project employing USG assistance and centering around learning opportunities for out-of-school youths and youth opportunities for income generation. At-risk youths in the country often face substantial challenges that prevent them from fully participating in the community and local economy. The most common obstacle is increased cases of violence in school, which creates a significant challenge for the youths to continue with studies and instead increases instances of violence in the workplace (Berg, 2014). In response, the Salvadoran government, with help from the US government, introduced Bridges for Employment. This program increases access to primary social resources of work, knowledge, security, and social capital among the youths at risk, especially women more vulnerable to violence compared to their male counterparts. The project aims at improving social inclusion by increasing employment opportunities for these youths both in the public and private sector (Goodrum, 2019).

Since its introduction in 2015, the program has improved a more positive environment by promoting workforce development of the target population through the provision of technical and professional training for those not attending school. It has also improved the quality of workforce development services through enhanced training and education to effectively enhance the chances that at-risk youths will secure employment in the service industry, which has been described as one of the fastest-growing and developing sectors in the country. Finally, the program has improved workforce readiness by providing formal training to the targeted group regarding personal conduct in the workplace, irrespective of the increased pressure from gangs (Slutzker, 2015). In terms of results, the

program has experienced a higher level of success by directly working with the youths to enhance their employment opportunities and experience, especially those related to self-employment. In the process, the program has reached more than 20,000 youths who have secured a job in the private and public center, thus giving them new opportunities to lead a life free from gang influence (Slutzker, 2015).

In terms of financial specifics, the USG has invested more than 42.2 million USD in a program that seeks to empower citizens, increasing their ability to enact independent decisions about life without the influence of gang activities. Functionally, CARSI underpins specialized instruction and training, common society associations, and the private sector in order to improve job opportunities for in-danger adolescents living in hotspots identified by the Salvadoran government under Plan El Salvador Seguro. The aim of the program remains enhancing both the proficiency and general knowledge of youth to improve their ability to create or obtain sustainable jobs, thus improving the quality of life for both them and their families (Macías, 2018). Additionally, the program also trains specialists to convey all-encompassing support services to youth and teens at high risk for engaging in criminal or violent behavior. The program increases employment opportunities for young people in El Salvador by promoting, facilitating, and streamlining the relationships between major players in the private sector and coaching stations, to create and maintain a constructive relationship in the long-run, tailored towards training the youth to seize existing opportunities in the private sector (Edwards, 2015a).

El Salvador: National Program Impact

The next two subsections examine the national impact in terms of extortion networks and homicides.

Dismantling of Extortion Networks

The continued, integrated relationship between the US and El Salvador has substantially improved El Salvador's currently negative environment. One such notable impact resulting from this relationship is the successful dismantling of some of the extortion networks in the country. Specifically, the San Salvador BCTF has effectively destroyed four extortion schemes primarily associated with MS-13 and 18th Street (DOS, 2019). To underscore the impact and significance of this achievement, the government managed to attain a 96% conviction rate for the extortionists. In more detail, an excellent example relaying these units' contribution to the improvement of security in the region remains the significantly pivotal role these units have played in Operation Jaque⁸ – the first significant effort by the government to directly fight the gangs, particularly MS-13, by attacking and dismantling the gang's financial structure (Cruz, 2016). Operation Jaque was a pivotal case, where law enforcement amassed intelligence against MS-13. This intelligence gathering led to understanding organizational structure, their command and control, leadership decision-making, and more specifically how the gang operates its criminal activities like extortion. Additionally, in 2018 alone, the organized crime court prosecuted and incarcerated 61 members of MS-13, providing a glimmer of hope for the

⁸ The Mara Salvatrucha-focused Operation Jaque in El Salvador is distinct from the notable 2008 Operation Jaque that occurred in Colombia and focused on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

public that more positive livelihoods lay ahead. Notably, by dismantling financial structures and extortion networks in the country, the government now exerts the power to significantly cripple the activities of these gangs, considering that they operate in a limited capacity with reduced finances to fund their activities and projects – such as equipping their members with modern firearms and advanced weaponry such as anti-tank missiles.

Significant Reduction in Homicides

For more than three decades, El Salvador has struggled with increasing homicides and other crimes perpetrated by various criminal groups such as cartels, drug traffickers, and gangs. Irrespective of government efforts to reduce murder, however, the gangs have experienced marked success in overcoming government forces. In El Salvador alone, “members of the Salvadoran police have been killed by the dozens in each of the past three years [2015-2018], most in attacks that investigators and experts blame on MS-13, an international street gang. At least nine officers were killed in the first month of this year [2019]” (Seiff, 2019, p. 1). Nevertheless, with increased cooperation between the USG and the Salvadoran government, the country's crime rate has steadily reduced since 2015 (Ingram, 2015). Current statistics indicate that in 2015, crime hit an all-time high, with more than 105 homicides a day. This proved a significant increase over 2014, representing 60 deaths for every 100,000 residents. However, since 2015, the homicide rate has reduced to less than 40 cases per 100,000 individuals in 2019. This reduction has remained steady, with the rate first significantly dropping to 82 in 2016, 62 in 2017, and finally 56 in 2018 (Menjívar, 2018). Notably, the significant fall in homicides in the

country in 2019 coincides with the new president's election. In 2019, the country elected a new president promising to fight crime in the country by ameliorating corruption at the national and municipal level, improving education opportunities, reinvigorating the country's economy, and seeking investments from the US (as opposed to assistance). To wit, his efforts have begun to bear healthy fruit (Mundt, 2019). As a result, both the community members and international community maintain high hopes for this president, who seems independent and determined to change the country's fortunes.

El Salvador: Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned, detailed discussion, El Salvador clearly and evidentially remains a dangerous region. Since its civil war, the country's crime significantly increased to an all-time high in 2015, with 105 homicides per every 100,000 individuals. However, since 2015 that trend has reversed, and while direct attribution, causation, and at times sometimes correlation proves difficult, the sheer totality of programs and other US efforts have enacted some measurable success in building both capacity for crime fighting activity and community relations between law enforcement and the populace. To prove this, in 2019, the homicides lowered to 31 per 100,000 people (Pasquali, 2020). Another possible indicator of program success could be the precipitous decline of approximately 19% in affirmative asylee claims at the US southern border from NTCA countries (Mossad, 2019, p. 6). Reports from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Immigration (OIS) in 2019 also showed a decrease in defensive asylum claims from El Salvadorans (DHS OIS, 2020). Causes of immigration do still persist, as the two most significant gangs in the nation, MS-13 and 18th Street, still

remain in control of a significant part of the country through extortion, kidnapping, and murder, thus spreading fear among the public (Mossad, 2019, p. 7). Like other countries in the region, however, the USG exerts significant involvement in combatting the gangs' violence and other corrupt activities. Specifically, through USAID and a CARSI-funded program, the USG has introduced multiple initiatives and projects in El Salvador, all of which remain directed at reducing gang membership and gang violence. Considering that increased gang membership in the country finds root cause in poverty, lack of employment opportunities, limited education, lack of resources for policing, and mostly absent economic opportunities, these programs together address national issues directly or indirectly, to foster and uphold an independent society. In specific, the programs include youth gang prevention programs, the Police Athletic League, anti-extortion units, Bridges for Employment, and domestic resource mobilization. Notably, these programs have reduced the murder rate to less than 40 per 100,000 inhabitants through dismantling extortion networks and financial structures of the specific, violent gangs plaguing the region.

Chapter V. Overall Area Impact and Trends

The Northern Triangle is a region consistently devastated, but not currently without hope. The vast majority of the citizens in the countries are law-abiding citizens. From a violence risk perspective, the respective countries' citizenry, foreigners working or visiting in the country, can live without fear, barring some areas. Under the stewardship, funding, and guidance of CARSI initiative, governments in NTCA have introduced various programs that focus on addressing risk factors of different groups in the community. For example, MERCADO targets women in the community while GREAT targets at-risk-youths. The programs seek to provide increased and equal economic opportunities for all, improve their academic and technical skills, and create a positive relationship with law enforcement. Therefore, the collaboration between the US government and local governments in NTCA countries has resulted in a measurable level of success in fighting crime, based on recent reports regarding the crime rate in Central America. Sustained, well-funded efforts will be needed to maintain or improve the effectiveness of these programs. These projects and initiatives thus aim at identifying those most at risk, providing assistance and helping to reduce their probability of joining gangs while concurrently extending a second chance to former gang members. Therefore, this section of the study will quantify the impact and effect of the individual programs in reducing crime in the region. As such, the following sections primarily rest upon qualitative data, with some preliminary statistics to draw reasonably inferable correlations.

Most Impactful Programs Based on Qualitative Measurement

The next four subsections discuss the most impactful programs based on qualitative measurements.

Proponte Más (Honduras) and Community Centers (Guatemala)

Proponte Más has significantly influenced the lives of the members of the community in Honduras that the program has been able to serve, similar to the Community Centers in Guatemala. Both programs acknowledge that the youths in the country are the primary victims and perpetrators of the violence and high homicide rate witnessed all over the respective countries. Therefore, through USAID in collaboration with the Honduran government, *Proponte Más* has identified and worked with more than 800 families, particularly those with youths aged between 8 and 17 who are more likely to join gangs (Meyer, 2015). Through the application of the Youth Service Eligibility Tool (YSET), those at risk of becoming either victims of the increased violence in the country or perpetrators of crime receive an assessment based “on a series of nine, primary risk factors at a family, peer, and individual level” (Creative, 2020, p.1). The severity of these risk factors determines the level of intervention necessary to change the negative behavior among the target population and improve their welfare (Cruz, 2016). The current results regarding the impact of the program in Honduras indicate that the program has substantially reduced youth risk factors, including a 78% reduction in the crime and substance abuse risk factor and a 79% reduction in antisocial behaviors (Beeton, 2016).

In Guatemala, the concept of community centers resonates with non-profit organizations. Some non-profits and non-governmental organizations operating

independently of the Guatemalan and US governments have established these centers in other areas outside of Guatemala City and Antigua. One notable example is a group starting an automobile repair workshop for teenagers, so they can engage in non-gang related activities and learn a vocational trade to provide an income for themselves and their families in the future.

Additionally, through family-centered therapy, community centers in Guatemala focus on uniting families, considering that family unity significantly reduces the risk of children and youths developing negative behavior or, more specifically, joining in criminal activities. In the process, the program has trained and certified 50 family counselors who aim at reaching more than 700 youths at higher risk of being involved in the gang-related violence (whether first-time offenders or nonviolent juvenile offenders). Based on the above statistics, the program has evidentially exerted a substantial influence on preventing crime in the region (Berg, 2014). Unfortunately, limited resources and funds have adversely affected the ability of the program to reach more families and individuals. However, with additional support and resources, the program will have more impact on society.

Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT)

One of the programs exerting an impact on all Northern Triangle countries is GREAT. The program, which seeks to improve the relationship between law enforcement and the members of the public (especially those from high-risk areas), has substantially changed the behavior of a significant number of youths in the region by showing the real, achievable possibility of a positive life beyond gang activities (Rosales, 2015). The current

statistics regarding the performance of the program indicate that more than 30,000 students have graduated from the program in over 50 learning institutions in El Salvador, joined by an additional 1,000 students in Honduras in 2015 alone, thus underlining the significance of the project to the communities in this region. Notably, the program targets children and youths in high-risk areas and teaches behaviors they can employ to reject gang activities and violence, with lessons integrated into their school programs (Beeton, 2016). Through such an approach, the children grow up understanding the negative impact of gang violence on their respective families, communities and the country at large. Such awareness streamlines government activity through different agencies to encourage such youths to seek positive, alternative means of living.

Further statistics from USAID have suggested that since the introduction of the program in 2012 in Honduras, it has reached to more than 350,000 youths. While Program administrators hoped to reach a total of nearly 550,000 in 2012, there is a lack of current information to determine if that goal was reached. Further statistics indicate that between 2011 and 2013, 1,261 certified police officers and more than 326,000 students downloaded GREAT materials, thus reducing the probability of students' participatory involvement in gang activities. Simply stated, this activity underscores the importance of the program in the region (US Embassy Tegucigalpa, 2016).

Irrespective of the program's demonstrated, significant impact in the region, the program has also received considerable criticism from various institutions that feel that the United States withholds from the public a hidden agenda with its increased intervention and activities in the NTCA. For example, studies on the impact of these suggest marked challenge from some. These teachers feel that although increased gang violence in the

region is a matter requiring urgent attention from all relevant stakeholders, the US will only reveal the facts that would contribute to a positive global image, in collaboration with the region's governments (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2014). For example, teachers in Honduras with the region's governments are unconvinced of the United States' true intentions in the country given the history between the two. They claim that the Obama administration supported a military coup in 2009 that gave power to conservative elites. Likewise, they claim that the Trump administration interfered with contested results of the 2017 presidential election that resulted in Juan Orlando Hernández winning, irrespective of the continued accusation of his contribution to the drug trade and trafficking in the country (Bissonnette, 2019).

Also, given the participation of the USG in the Salvadoran civil war, those opposed to the USG presence in the region feel that the US government should not interfere with the political or social environment of the area. They remain skeptical of the USG's intentions following the introduction of American-created curriculum in the region, law enforcement officers receiving training in the US, and the US funding almost every program. Besides these concerns, the teachers question the motive behind involving police officers in teaching the students given their history of using force and violence to repress widespread protests in the region (Goodrum, 2019). Teachers also contend that these officers target youths and children not at risk, considering such youths are in school, instead of focusing on those who are at home or associated with gang activities.

The Police Athletic League (PAL)

Another program exerting meaningful influence on crime prevention in the region consists of the Police Athletic League (PAL). The PAL program in El Salvador stems from a similar program that began in Santa Ana, California (United States) in 2007, now called Police Athletic and Activity League (Santa Ana POA, 2018). The PAAL program in Santa Ana provides tutoring, school supplies, and fitness activities (KABC, 2015), and while on a smaller scale than El Salvador, has benefited over 150 youth (KABC, 2015). One success story is a kid who later achieved acceptance into Columbia University, attributing his success to the program (KABC, 2015).

The replication of that program in El Salvador has reaped benefits. As of 2018, the El-Salvador-based PAL program served “19,495 at-risk youth across all 19 police delegations” (DOS, 2019, p,1). Data from 2018-2020 is unavailable. Through this program, the Salvadoran government provides recreational facilities and spaces for children to participate in different sports, such as soccer and basketball. In the course of providing recreational facilities, the government has also provided the national police force with tactical gear worth more than 450 thousand USD, 20 motorcycles, 10 pickup trucks and minivans, and finally 400 bulletproof vests in Zacatecoluca. Such equipment increases the ability of the government to fight violence in El Salvador (DOS, 2016).

Bridges for Employment and Anti-Extortion Units

Anti-extortion units, for their part, have managed to attain a 96% conviction rate, thus substantially dismantling all extortion networks and systems created by MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs. Since 2018, after Operation Jaque, these units have arrested over 2,000

gang members mainly associated with extortion network in the region. In the process, the government has dismantled gang cells across the NTCA, thus bringing a sense of security to locals, foreign investors, and visitors (Ingram, 2015). Finally, Bridges for Employment has reached more than 20,000 vulnerable youths, giving them a second chance in life by providing education and employment opportunities for those exposed to continued gang violence (Meyer, 2015).

Due to a lack of public information on the programs – Police Professionalization and Education and domestic resource mobilization – an impact assessment cannot yet be accurately quantified, creating a challenge to identifying and evaluating their respective influence in the region.

Marginally Successful Programs Requiring Additional Resources

The next two subsections describe two marginally successful programs that require additional resources.

SENPRENDE

Another project positively impacting the lives of Northern Triangle community members is the National Service for Entrepreneurship and Small Businesses (SENPRENDE). The project is mainly tailored towards providing economic opportunities to members of the public, particularly those at high risk of joining gang activities, through employment training. Unfortunately, the project needs more funds and resources to exert a substantial influence on the lives of the people (Cruz, 2016). The current reports indicate that through the L.I.S.T.A. project, under SENPRENDE, the government focuses on building and enhancing the financial capacity of individuals in the community with limited

resources and conditional cash transfer program participants. As of December 2019, the program had provided training and skills to more than 210,000 individuals. The training and skills provided, prove instrumental in helping community members commit to informed, responsible, and independent financial decisions, thus creating a platform and an opportunity for youths to lead a healthy life away from the influence and interference of the gangs.

In the coming years, the program aims at reaching 16 of the 18 departments (US state equivalent) in Honduras. Additionally, the program aims to train more than 300 public officials on financial management and inclusion, who in turn are expected to attract and teach more individuals, especially the youths at a higher risk of participating in gang activities (Cooley, 2020). Notably, the program mainly targets the rights and inclusion of historically excluded communities. As a result, allocating more resources to the program to ensure it reaches more people all over the country proves essential. Improved knowledge, especially financial knowledge and increased employment opportunities, increases financial independence and the ability of the community members, particularly the youths, to commit informed decisions (Bissonnette, 2019). In the process, they realize that life outside of gang activities, thus enhancing their resistance to join gang activities.

ACCESS to Markets Activity (MERCADO)

Another program exhibiting a positive impact in the region, though the impact is adversely affected by limited resources and fund, is ACCESS to Markets Activity (MERCADO). The program focuses on improving community members' public life by breaking the cycle of hunger and poverty through the provision of education, better

technology, tools, equipment, and mechanisms, through which the members of the public can improve their lives (Beeton, 2016). The primary objective is to increase the growth of the agricultural industry as well as the nutrition of the dry corridor in the country, especially in Santa Bárbara, Copán, and Ocotepeque. The project was introduced in 2015, targeting around 15,000 families living in the region (Bissonnette, 2019).

Through the proper management of the provided funds, the program has exceeded this number. As of 2019, the program had reached more than 20,500 homes in the southern region of Honduras, which is relatively drier compared to the other areas. The programs delivered various activities and services tailored towards improving the incomes, employment opportunities, productivity, financial service, and maternal and nutrition services to the families (Rosales, 2015). As noted earlier in the discussion, this program has provided eco-friendly stoves to the women in this region, as it focuses on helping them to save more time, which is then used in economic activities in the area. In the process, the program has reached more than 40,000 women, including young ladies who tend to spend more time doing household chores instead of engaging in economic activities (Slutzker, 2015).

The program transfers technology to these women to maximize production, and enhances rural incomes by increasing market access and employment opportunities. Currently, the program has brought more than 20,000 hectares of land under improved practices, with more than 11,000 families exceeding their income increases (Cooley, 2020). Additionally, the program has improved the quality of life of the majority of people in the region, particularly children, considering more than 92% of the children under six months are now exclusively breastfed after their mothers received education regarding the

importance of breastfeeding (Beeton, 2016). Notably, increased income among women increases financial independence of families, community and the country at large, thus reducing the risk of participation in gang activities.

Common Trends and Patterns

Since the programs' inception, they have provided measurable gains that tend to fluctuate, both lose and gain ground from year to year due to various reasons – whether due to a bolstering of violence, a decrease in support, political reasons, or other factors. Despite the volatility in measuring levels of gang violence, one of the notable trends in the past ten years in the region is a significant reduction in the level of crime, which underscores the importance of these programs in the Northern Triangle region. The current security statistics indicate that the homicide rate per 100,000 residents in El Salvador reduced from 105 in 2015 to 36 in 2019. In Honduras, it decreased from 85 in 2011 to 41 in 2019. In Guatemala, it reduced from 42 in 2009 to 22 in 2019 (Bissonnette, 2019). These programs thus enhance individual ability to decide rightly when considering the act of joining gangs or participating in gang activities. Through economic and academic empowerment, the government has significantly reduced gang membership. As the membership significantly reduces, these gangs increasingly weaken, streamlining government efforts to combat them (Cooley, 2020). Therefore, the government has witnessed an increase in cooperation and integration of efforts between the police forces and the members of the community, thus streamlining the police force's efforts to collect intelligence and use the information to make arrests, gather evidence, and prosecute the offenders. Not all of the programs have had equal success, and some

have been modified, to achieve even greater success, such as the place-based strategy for enhanced police presence and childhood development/engagement community centers.

According to the World Bank (2020), the global COVID-19 (SARS-COV-2) pandemic has greatly impacted the economy, and may counter decades of economic growth and stability. The World Bank estimates a decrease of 3% of the economy, with a number of job losses in tourism, construction, services, and transport and commerce—also impacting females the most. Poverty and inequality will likely increase, and motivate some to attempt to emigrate north to Mexico, the US, and Canada. Additionally, gangs in El Salvador were exploiting the situation, as governmental forces shifted their focus from gangs to the Coronavirus (BBC, 2020).

Another notable trend in the region, however, is the continued efforts even among gang members to improve the peace of the community. For example, in the case of El Salvador, the rival gangs called for a truce. They decided to conduct their independent operations and businesses without interfering with the activities of the opposing groups. This, in turn, has created a certain level of stability in the country (Berk-Seligson S. O., 2014). Although the level of homicide in the country and the region has not entirely ceased, a significant reduction in the murder rate has resulted from such a truce clearly indicates that even society is tired of the violence and seeks peace (Cooley, 2020). Therefore, with continued intervention from the government through its various agencies, the community collectively expresses hope that it will one day enjoy peace.

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