



COUNCIL *on*  
FOREIGN  
RELATIONS

*Center for Preventive Action*

Council Special Report No. 64  
April 2012

Michael Shifter

# Countering Criminal Violence in Central America

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## Foreword

Violent crime in Central America—particularly in the “northern triangle” of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—is reaching breathtaking levels. Murder rates in the region are among the highest in the world. To a certain extent, Central America’s predicament is one of geography—it is sandwiched between some of the world’s largest drug producers in South America and the world’s largest consumer of illegal drugs, the United States. The region is awash in weapons and gunmen, and high rates of poverty ensure substantial numbers of willing recruits for organized crime syndicates. Weak, underfunded, and sometimes corrupt governments struggle to keep up with the challenge. Though the United States has offered substantial aid to Central American efforts to address criminal violence, it also contributes to the problem through its high levels of drug consumption, relatively relaxed gun control laws, and deportation policies that have sent home more than a million illegal migrants with violent records.

In this Council Special Report, sponsored by the Center for Preventive Action, Michael Shifter assesses the causes and consequences of the violence faced by several Central American countries, and examines the national, regional, and international efforts intended to curb its worst effects. Guatemala, for example, is still healing from a thirty-six-year civil war; guns and armed groups remain common. El Salvador’s inflexible response to widespread gang violence has transformed its prisons into overcrowded gang-recruiting centers while doing little to reduce crime. Even relatively wealthy countries like Costa Rica and Panama are threatened by poor police capacity and significant problems with smuggling and money laundering. Virtually all countries are further plagued by at least some level of public corruption.

While hard-hitting or even militarized responses to criminal violence often enjoy broad public support, Shifter writes, Nicaragua’s experience with crime prevention programs like community policing and job training for youth suggests that other approaches can be more

effective at curbing crime. Shortages of local funding and expertise remain problematic, however, and only large-scale, national programs can effectively address national-level problems with corruption or the quality of the legal system. Moreover, many of the root causes of the region's violence are transnational—the international trade in drugs, guns, and other contraband being only the most obvious example.

Multilateral organizations have stepped in to support national-level responses, as have Central America's neighbors. The UN's flagship effort, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, supports domestic prosecutions of organized criminal gangs and their allies in Guatemala's government. In recent years, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to efforts to improve regional collaboration on anticrime initiatives; last year they pledged \$1.5 billion more over the next few years. Colombia and Mexico have both provided advice and training for Central America's police services and judiciary. The United States is also contributing significant resources. Washington now provides about \$100 million annually, targeted mainly at drug interdiction and law enforcement, though some funding also goes toward institutional capacity building and violence protection.

Still, much more remains to be done, and Shifter offers several recommendations for U.S. policymakers. Strengthening the judiciary and law enforcement services should, he says, be a central goal; the region's ineffective and corrupt legal systems are severely hampering efforts to curb the violence. He also advocates rethinking U.S. policies that contribute to violence in Central America, including drug laws, gun control policies, and immigration rules regarding violent offenders.

*Countering Criminal Violence in Central America* provides important insights into the varied causes of criminal violence in the region. Its authoritative and nuanced analysis acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of ongoing efforts to address the problem, and it offers thoughtful recommendations on how those efforts might be built on and improved. Despite the daunting complexity of the challenges underpinning the region's growing violence, this report successfully argues that this trend can—and should—be reversed.

Richard N. Haass  
*President*  
Council on Foreign Relations  
April 2012

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**Michael Shifter**

## Acronyms

CARSI	Central America Regional Security Initiative
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CICIG	International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency
DOJ	Department of Justice
ECT	Economic Crimes Team
FAST	Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
HOPE	Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ILEA	International Law Enforcement Academy
M-18	18th Street Gang
MS-13	Mara Salvatruchas
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OAS	Organization of American States
OFAC	Office of Foreign Assets Control
SICA	Central American Integration System
SUIs	sensitive investigative units
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
UN	United Nations
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

# Map



Source: CIA World Factbook

*Council Special Report*

## Introduction

Central America is increasingly beset by spreading criminal violence. In the northern triangle—Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—insecurity is particularly severe and widespread. In 2010, these countries ranked among the highest homicide rates (per one hundred thousand people) in the world: Honduras with eighty-two, El Salvador with sixty-six, and Guatemala with forty-one; in comparison, the homicide rate in the United States was less than five.<sup>1</sup> The toll has been considerable, tallying nearly seventeen thousand murders in the northern triangle in 2011 and showing no signs of abating.<sup>2</sup> The other four Central American states have also witnessed both heightened domestic insecurity and rising rates of crime and violence.

The causes and consequences of rising criminal violence are manifold. The illicit drug trade, chiefly cocaine, is a critical dimension. Strategically located between the largest suppliers of cocaine and its major consumer, the United States, the region is particularly vulnerable to criminal violence. Indeed, although insecurity is a significant concern in much of Latin America—the serious situation in Mexico stands out—Central America's institutional and financial capacity to effectively deal with the problem is considerably more limited than elsewhere.

The deteriorating security conditions in Central America fundamentally challenge U.S. strategic interests in building stable democracies in the region. The underlying rationale for a strong and sustained U.S. response in Central America may be even more compelling in these neighboring nations than in Colombia between 1999 and 2000, when the United States adopted Plan Colombia to provide support in the face of a dire security situation.<sup>3</sup>

The United States has a special responsibility and capacity to adopt constructive policies to assist Central America in improving and controlling its security situation. Demography and history are powerful factors linking the United States and Central America. An estimated

three million Central Americans currently live in the United States. In several countries, remittances exceed 13 percent of GDP.<sup>4</sup> The ties are historic and profound, and will continue to deepen.

The United States also bears responsibility to reform and enhance existing policies because Central American states are highly sensitive to a number of U.S. policy decisions that have direct effects on their welfare. These include immigration and trade as well as the approach to illicit drugs, money laundering, and the illegal southward flow of arms. The American demand for drugs, which has remained consistently high, buttresses the case for increased U.S. responsibility. The often unhappy history of U.S. intervention in countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador is yet another argument for a more constructive posture. Regardless of the past, U.S. officials regard the current situation in Central America as of critical concern to U.S. national security, although a sense of moral obligation should inform and contextualize current policy thinking.

The United States has fundamental interests at stake in the region, such as its commitment to democratic governance, burgeoning demographic ties, and expanding trade relations, as well as the unique responsibility and capacity to prevent continued deterioration in criminal violence. But the U.S. government cannot solve the problem alone. It should act in concert with others to help restore some measure of security and social peace. Relatively modest resources, constructive and explicit guidance, and sustained effort can yield significant results.

An effective response would support the chief objectives of protecting the population and defending Central America's fragile democratic institutions. Even though responsibility should be shouldered mostly by individual governments, any successful effort should be highly coordinated either at the regional level or through hemisphere-wide multilateral mechanisms. Given that the mounting security concerns—especially organized crime—are inherently a transnational problem, genuine progress will depend on consistent support from other hemispheric governments, including Mexico and Colombia, as well as Europe. As the decade-plus experience of U.S. assistance to Colombia has demonstrated, enhancing state capacities to counter nonstate criminality is achievable.

## Nature of the Problem

Criminal violence in Central America manifests itself in multiple forms and stems from a number of political, social, economic, and historical causes. The region has not only suffered a surge in organized crime, but is also confronting a huge wave of common crime. As organized criminal syndicates strengthen their territorial grasp in parts of the region and threaten to associate with or incorporate violent local groups such as gangs, the trends are ominous.

Organized crime, defined as the illicit activities carried out by highly sophisticated and profit-driven nonstate groups, is one clear legacy of the region's war-torn past. Internal armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador featured counterinsurgency campaigns, carried out by military forces supported by paramilitary units and robust intelligence services. Subsequent efforts to build solid democratic institutions failed to dismantle these structures, which have turned to a host of illicit enterprises, including drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal adoptions, arms smuggling, and movement of other contraband.<sup>5</sup>

The failure to construct effective state institutions has enabled some criminal organizations to penetrate all levels of government and broaden their reach in the region. Police forces command few resources and scant public trust, often because of their extensive links to organized crime. Judicial institutions, such as courts and public prosecutors, are also systematically subjected to cooptation by criminal groups, leading to high levels of impunity.

Moreover, the inability or reluctance of Central American governments to marshal the necessary resources to strengthen institutional capacities and counter corruption further weakens state infrastructure. Average tax revenues in the region represent 17.2 percent of GDP, a lower burden than seen in sub-Saharan Africa; in Guatemala and El Salvador, tax revenues stand at 11.6 and 14.6 percent, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

The transnational drug trade, which has quickly become the most profitable organized criminal activity in the region, reaped significant benefits from state weakness throughout Central America. Flanked by the coca-producing countries of the Andes and the world's leading consumer of illegal drugs—the United States—Central America is a strategic choke point for illicit trade. Taking into account its vast ungoverned territories, deficient institutions, and abundant for-hire local groups, the region is fertile terrain for drug cartels, many based in Mexico, to establish trade routes to move illicit goods. Furthermore, evidence is mounting that Central America is no longer solely a transit and storage point, but is beginning to develop into a processing site for cocaine and, in some cases, synthetic drugs.<sup>7</sup>

The entrance of Mexican cartels, particularly the Zetas, has brought a new class of violence to Central America as the large drug trafficking organizations jockey with rival local rings for territorial control. On May 15, 2011, between thirty and forty alleged Zeta members killed twenty-nine peasants on a farm in the northern Petén region of Guatemala, an attack reportedly motivated by the theft of two thousand kilos of cocaine belonging to the cartel.<sup>8</sup> The massacre, prompted by competition between local criminal groups and a Mexican cartel, was cited as the worst attack since the end of the civil war. The rivalries among a number of Mexican cartels and groups have erupted in bloody episodes that have claimed many innocent lives.

In some instances, cartels have embedded themselves in the social fabric of Central American communities by coopting local governments and businesses, and providing basic services such as health care, education, security, and infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Some Central American governments are being increasingly displaced by organized crime as the guarantors of public order and security in the eyes of ordinary people. Although drug trafficking organizations in Central America do not harbor political motivations or seek control beyond trade routes to reach consumer markets, their growing tendency to permeate local communities and win popular allegiances is troubling and complicates anticrime efforts.

Soaring homicide rates and widespread perceptions of insecurity are also largely due to the proliferation of local gangs, which rose to prominence in the immediate aftermath of the Central American conflicts. Widely involved in illicit activities such as kidnapping, drug peddling, robbery, and extortion, an estimated seventy thousand gang members



are active in the northern triangle of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.<sup>10</sup> The large pool of demobilized and unemployed men with easy access to weapons has produced a surplus of potential gang recruits.

Mass deportations of Central American youths from the United States, where these gangs originated, add a transnational and circular dimension to the problem. The most prominent gangs, Mara Salvatruchas (MS-13) and 18th Street Gang (M-18), established by immigrant youth in American cities, have found willing recruits in the record number of deportees who returned to their home countries in the past five years.

Persistent poverty and the lack of educational and employment opportunities are among the factors enabling local gangs to broaden their base and extend their reach. Although the region has shown considerable improvement in human development, inequality ranks among the highest in the world and social and economic marginalization pushes youth toward a life of violent crime.<sup>11</sup> Even more worrisome are the developing ties among local gangs and more sophisticated organized criminal structures, although these links remain tenuous.<sup>12</sup>

## Country Assessments

Trends in the origins and nature of both organized crime and criminal gang activity pose a grave threat to governance in Central America. Yet the character of criminal violence manifests differently in each of the seven countries of the isthmus, generating a unique set of challenges for each government to confront.<sup>13</sup>

Guatemala, Central America's most populous country, is one of the most troubling cases. The internal armed conflict lasted thirty-six years, claimed roughly two hundred thousand lives, and ingrained a pervasive culture of fear and violence. The primary victims of the conflict, members of Guatemala's majority indigenous population, remain largely excluded from political, social, economic, and cultural life. This exclusion has engendered staggering poverty, making rural communities easy prey for criminal organizations that seek to establish local control. Rampant corruption within the legislative, judicial, and executive branches and resulting impunity have further hampered state efforts to eliminate parallel illegal structures and root out the influence of traffickers and other criminal groups. In January 2012, Guatemalans inaugurated their new president, former military general and head of intelligence Otto Pérez Molina, who has vowed to fight organized crime and delinquent activity with an iron fist. He has proposed a broad approach that includes a greater reliance on the military, a strengthened police force, and a variety of preventive measures.

Honduras, featuring a long Atlantic coastline and vast ungoverned territories, has witnessed increased organized crime and gang activity as a result of its own political crisis in 2009. The military coup—which ousted then president Manuel Zelaya—and subsequent two years of political turmoil diverted the attention and resources of state security forces from combating organized crime activity and led to the withholding of much-needed foreign assistance.<sup>14</sup> Honduras also boasts the largest criminal gang presence in the region, an estimated thirty-six thousand members belonging to as many as one hundred local and transnational

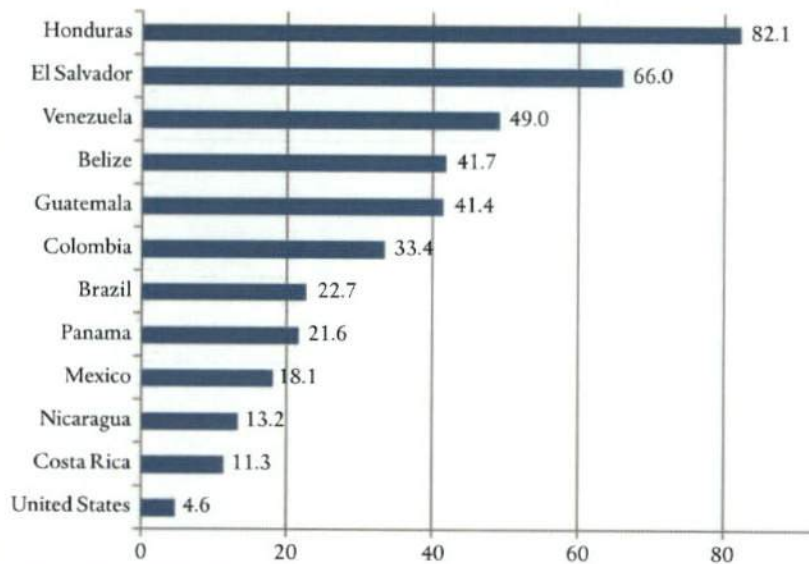
groups. High levels of deportations from the United States further aggravate Honduras's gang problem for national authorities.

El Salvador, which has the smallest area and the densest population in the isthmus, also has a widespread criminal gang presence. As the headquarters of MS-13, the most sophisticated transnational gang in the region, El Salvador is vulnerable to the collaboration between gangs and external drug cartels, which complicates state anticrime efforts. Policies implemented to curb delinquency, including those by current Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) president Mauricio Funes, have not yielded positive results. The mass incarceration of suspected gang youth has transformed prisons into recruiting centers for criminal groups. Until 2006, the ironfisted approach was the strategy of choice to combat gangs, but since then authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have experimented with innovative community policing and prevention programs to address poverty and scarcity of opportunities that contribute to increased gang activity.<sup>15</sup> However, the recent appointment of former military officials to high-level public security posts has raised concerns about a possible return to heavy-handed antigang policies.

Nicaragua, to date, has maintained a better record in ensuring physical security by strongly emphasizing community-based security solutions and professionalizing its police and military forces in the aftermath of its civil war.<sup>16</sup> Even though Daniel Ortega won a third presidential term in November 2011 by violating the constitutional ban on reelection and undermining the rule of law, Nicaragua remains safe compared with the northern triangle nations. Nicaragua's relative success in keeping criminal violence in check suggests that poverty and corruption are only partial explanations for insecurity. Still, its relatively uninhabited Caribbean coastline makes Nicaragua a major transit and storage point for drug cartels.

In Costa Rica—a regional anomaly by all social and democratic indicators—organized crime activity is also on the rise. Over the past five years, homicide rates have increased alarmingly, though they remain well below those of the northern triangle countries.<sup>17</sup> Because Costa Rica has no military to bolster public security efforts, concerns are deepening about the ability of the police to confront organized crime. President Laura Chinchilla, a recognized public security expert, has sought to stem the violence since taking office in 2010.<sup>18</sup> Given its relative prosperity and ability to curtail corruption and strengthen the judicial system, Costa Rica remains better equipped than its neighbors to tackle heightened criminality.

FIGURE 1: HOMICIDE RATES PER 100,000 INHABITANTS IN 2010



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide: 2011*.

Panama, known as the “mouth of the funnel” for its link between Colombia and Central America, plays a critical role in the transnational drug trade. The dense forests and unmonitored border have enabled traffickers to transport illicit goods with relative ease. Despite a booming economy, the country has seen a surge in violence. The homicide rate has almost doubled over the past five years, from eleven in 2006 to nearly twenty-two in 2010 (per one hundred thousand people).<sup>19</sup> Due to its sizable financial sector and large free trade zone, Panama has become the money-laundering hub of Central America. Although legislation passed in 2000 and 2011 granted the government enhanced authority to tackle financial crimes, not a single person has been sentenced under the new laws.<sup>20</sup>

Belize, with a population of barely 330,000 and often overlooked in regional discussions of criminal violence, has become another significant drug transit point along the Mexican border. Although the country has yet to experience the extreme levels of violence that consume its neighbors, U.S. officials fear that the critically under-resourced Belizean government would be unable to confront the criminal threat, should it escalate.<sup>21</sup>

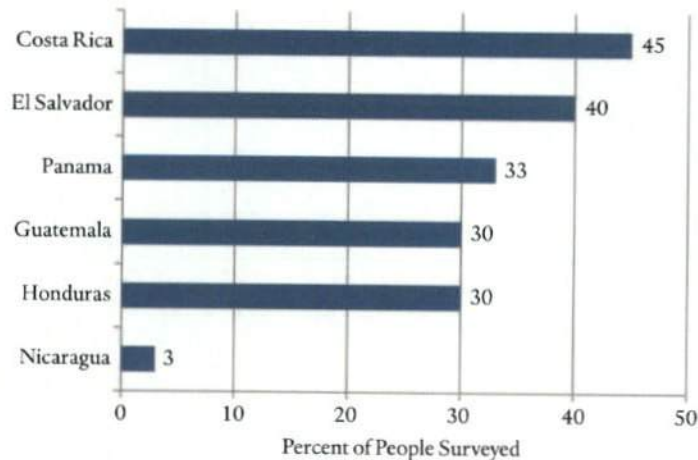
## National Responses

In countries experiencing the highest rates of criminal violence, national responses have featured tough ironfisted approaches, which criminalize gang membership, arrest those suspected of participating in illicit activity, and extend prison sentences for those convicted. Such “antiterrorism” legislation, granting the police unprecedented powers for searches and seizures, was enacted in Honduras in 2003 and in El Salvador in 2007.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, these policies have ultimately failed to ensure greater public security, because authorities often do not have enough evidence to bring the accused to trial, and have generated a crisis in penitentiary systems as overcrowding and corruption turn prisons into hotbeds of illegal activity and training grounds for gang recruits. Prisons have also enabled gang leaders to consolidate their hierarchy and develop strategies to evade law enforcement crackdowns.<sup>23</sup> The tragic fire in a Honduran prison in February 2012 that claimed more than three hundred lives, for example, also exposed an utterly broken prison system.

Widespread corruption and insufficient resources among regional police forces have led some governments to turn to military forces to deal with security issues. In April 2010, Honduran president Porfirio Lobo enacted an emergency decree that permitted the use of the military for domestic security purposes; in June 2010, the Honduran congress passed a law encouraging joint military-police action to combat organized crime.<sup>24</sup> In El Salvador, President Funes launched a similar military deployment that lasted until June 2011. In Guatemala, the expansion of cartel control prompted President Álvaro Colom to declare a state of siege and deploy military forces to police the streets in some areas.

Recourse to the military to deal with the internal security matters is not unusual in the region. The militarized approach enjoys broad popular appeal in many Central American countries due to mounting public

FIGURE 2: PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRIME AS THE GREATEST THREAT FACING THE COUNTRY



Source: Latinobamétre, *Informe Annual 2011*, October 28, 2011, pp. 65–66.

frustration with the deteriorating security situation (see Figure 2), as well as high levels of mistrust in the police.<sup>25</sup> Despite its popularity, troop deployments for internal security purposes have not produced sustainable results. The strategy has served as a stopgap measure that may increase the seizure of drug shipments and capture of organized crime leaders, but it is a partial solution at best and addresses neither the deficiencies in civilian law enforcement institutions nor the social and economic roots of criminal violence. Moreover, the human rights abuses that often accompany military intervention are of particular concern in societies where memories of mass atrocities perpetrated by the government remain fresh.

Another standard response to the surge in criminal violence has been the sharp increase in private security personnel. In 2007, there were an estimated 235,000 private security guards in Central America, approximately 611—versus only 187 police officers—per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the proliferation of private security, the absence of dependable law enforcement institutions has generated a spike in citizens' attempts to take the law into their own hands. Guatemala, for example, recorded a 400 percent increase in reported lynchings since 2004, 131 during the first nine months of 2011.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the ironfisted approach, repeated efforts at long-term

institutional reform face significant obstacles. There have been modest attempts to purge police forces of corruption, strengthen enforcement capabilities and internal and external oversight mechanisms, provide adequate training, and professionalize police forces. The political will to drive such reforms, however, remains limited.<sup>28</sup> Similar reforms of judicial institutions have stalled because of politicization, flawed implementation strategies, and a lack of necessary resources. The result was a 90 percent rate of impunity across the isthmus in 2009.<sup>29</sup>

Some regional governments have modestly sought to address the socioeconomic roots of criminality and to experiment with crime prevention and community policing programs. In Santa Tecla, a satellite city of San Salvador, authorities managed to reduce the homicide rate significantly by developing a participatory plan that incorporated various community actors and aimed to monitor high-crime zones, reclaim public spaces, and grant youth scholarships.<sup>30</sup> Skills and comprehensive job training programs in communities in Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala are promising.

Yet Central American countries are finding it difficult to implement institutional reforms and crime prevention measures because of insufficient funds and limited institutional capacity. Despite the dire need to increase tax revenues, regional governments have largely failed to convince the private sector to lend a greater hand. Costa Rica and Honduras stand apart, however, as two moderate success stories. In December 2011, the Costa Rican parliament passed a security tax on businesses, projected to raise \$70 million to support anticrime efforts.<sup>31</sup> Honduran lawmakers approved a similar measure to raise \$79 million per year to combat organized crime.<sup>32</sup> In September 2011, however, the Honduran congress voted—to appease a defiant private sector—to reverse parts of the law, cutting taxes on mining exports and shrinking the total projected revenue.<sup>33</sup> On the whole, Central American countries have resisted such measures, significantly limiting institutional resources to tackle growing criminal threats. The fiscal reform laws passed in Guatemala in February 2012, however, show promise for building consensus among diverse groups in an effort to fund state initiatives.<sup>34</sup>

## Regional and International Responses

As transnational crime continues to metastasize throughout the isthmus, authorities recognize that national mechanisms are no longer enough on their own, and should instead be integrated with a broader regional approach. Evidence of this pivot was witnessed at the June 2011 meeting of the Central American Integration System (SICA) in Guatemala City, which was attended by all the Central American leaders as well as top representatives from partner countries such as the United States, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile. The meeting included the presentation of strategic objectives and conceptual blueprints for twenty-two potential projects in the areas of law enforcement, crime prevention, rehabilitation and prisons, and institutional strengthening.<sup>35</sup> Central American authorities reached an agreement for eight of the projects to be top priorities for implementation at an estimated cost of \$323 million.<sup>36</sup> Despite these modest advances, assessments of SICA's capacities vary, because some experts question its ability to translate rhetoric into effective action.

Central American countries have received critical support from the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations, which played a significant role in some of the region's transitions to democratic rule. In recent years, the primary UN presence in Central America has been the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), a unique organization established to support the public prosecutor's office and law enforcement institutions in investigating parallel criminal organizations and bringing such cases to trial. Since its establishment in 2007, the CICIG has significantly bolstered the public prosecutor's office by launching high-profile cases against former government officials and top cartel members operating in Guatemala.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the CICIG pressured the Guatemalan congress to pass critical pieces of anticrime legislation, including wiretapping and asset seizure laws, and successfully blocked the appointment of an



attorney general with links to drug trafficking. Although the emblematic cases supported by the CICIG have strengthened the rule of law in Guatemala and prompted other countries such as Honduras and El Salvador to request UN support for similar institutions, considerable obstacles remain. Pervasive judicial corruption continues to thwart prosecution and convictions, and questions regarding the CICIG's sustainability persist, in that some critics have argued that the organization is not doing enough to transfer its technical capacities to Guatemalan counterparts to ensure that gains are not reversed when its mandate expires in September 2015.

Other multilateral organizations have also recognized the need to enhance regional collaboration within the isthmus. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, which respectively provided \$275 million and \$140 million between 2009 and 2011, pledged at the June 2011 SICA meeting a combined \$1.5 billion to the region over the next few years.<sup>38</sup> However, like many donor offers at the meeting, the bulk of the assistance takes the form of loans; it is unclear how much of the pledge is recycled from previously allotted but unused funds. Hemispheric organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS) are also focusing increased attention on regional security cooperation, albeit with few substantive results.<sup>39</sup>

Greater regional cooperation is vital to tackling the evolving transnational dimensions of criminal threats in Central America, but serious obstacles to a unified strategy remain. Each country not only confronts a unique set of circumstances and security challenges, but also has vastly different resources and infrastructure—legal norms, law enforcement agencies, and anticrime capabilities—that complicate the development of a coherent and coordinated regional strategy. In the absence of parallel agencies operating in sync, aligning anticrime strategies will remain difficult. Moreover, high levels of mistrust and political differences among countries limit the possibilities for information sharing and coordinated action.

Mexico and Colombia, two countries also afflicted with high levels of organized crime and trafficking violence, have provided significant support to Central America. Mexico, still consumed by its own bloody struggle with powerful drug cartels, may be a less willing partner than Colombia, which has managed to reduce much of the violence that wreaked havoc on the country during the late 1980s and the 1990s. Current Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos signed off

on assistance programs to train law enforcement agents and consult on anticrime operations, and even proposed a regional anti-money laundering organization.<sup>40</sup> Such bilateral support could be a critical lifeline to strengthen regional institutional capabilities to deal with security issues.

## U.S. Engagement With Central America

Toward the end of the George W. Bush administration and beginning of the Barack Obama administration, U.S. officials began to react to the worsening security situation in Central America. The region has welcomed Washington's initiative and growing attention. Originally, U.S. funding for security cooperation in Central America was bundled into the Mérida Initiative, an aid package due to provide \$1.6 billion—primarily to Mexico—between 2008 and 2010.<sup>41</sup> As drug trafficking and organized crime activity began moving southward from Mexico, however, the Obama administration responded vigorously. In 2010, it fashioned a regional strategy distinct from other hemispheric security efforts, and listed all Central American countries as major drug transporters or producers.

The resulting strategy, known as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), pledged to deliver \$301.5 million between 2010 and 2012; an additional \$107.5 million was requested by the Obama administration for 2013 (see Table 1).<sup>42</sup> At the June 2011 SICA donors' conference, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged \$300 million to bolster Central American security. However, much of this assistance includes previously appropriated, yet unassigned, funds. Additionally, such funding levels are dwarfed by the aid package to Colombia—which received approximately \$8 billion over ten years—during the late 1990s and 2000s when it faced major security challenges.

CARSI funds support three main activities: narcotics interdiction and law enforcement, institutional capacity building, and violence prevention. The largest share of U.S. security aid is directed toward narcotics interdiction and law enforcement, and emphasizes providing technical support, equipment, and training to enhance antinarcotics operations.

Within CARSI, the United States has created vetted units, which are elite cadres of Central American officials specially screened and trained

TABLE 1: FUNDING FOR THE CENTRAL AMERICA REGIONAL SECURITY INITIATIVE (CARSI; IN \$THOUSANDS)

Type of Assistance	FY2008 (Supplemental)	FY2009 (Actual)	FY2010 (Actual)	FY2011 (Actual)	FY2012 (Pending Approval)	FY2013 (Request)
ESF	25,000	18,000	23,000	30,000	45,000	47,500
INCLE	24,800	70,000	65,000	71,500	60,000	60,000
NADR	6,200	—	—	—	—	—
FMF	4,000	17,000	7,000	—	—	—
Total	60,000	105,000	95,000	101,500	105,000	107,500

ESF: Economic Support Fund; INCLE: International Narcotics and Law Enforcement; NADR: Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related programs; FMF: Foreign Military Financing

Sources: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2011; Meyer and Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative," 2011.

by U.S. law enforcement agents in investigative and counternarcotics techniques. Supported by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), sensitive investigative units (SIUs) operating in Panama and Guatemala and Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team (FAST) units—previously deployed to arrest traffickers linked to the Taliban in Afghanistan—have succeeded in capturing a number of cartel leaders and seizing drug shipments.<sup>43</sup> In Guatemala, these units helped authorities capture twice as many cartel operatives in the past two years as during the previous decade combined.<sup>44</sup> In addition, units supported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have also been created to contain gang violence. The Transnational Anti-Gang Task Force—the largest unit of which in El Salvador has forty-four vetted officers—facilitates information sharing on criminal gangs between Central American authorities and the United States.<sup>45</sup>

Although vetted units like the FAST and Transnational Anti-Gang Task Force are a useful step toward combating drug trafficking, they are, by design, small-scale efforts focused on producing immediate results—high-profile arrests and drug shipment interdictions—rather than the long-term objective of building modern and professional law enforcement institutions. If the specialized screening and training received by these few units are not scaled up significantly, the effort is unlikely to have a real impact on the levels of criminal violence in the region.

U.S. financial assistance is also funneled into programs aimed at strengthening the capacities of judicial and law enforcement institutions through training and technical assistance. The United States supports the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in El Salvador, which serves as a training institute for security agents and judicial personnel throughout Central America and is intended to facilitate greater regional cooperation. Furthermore, in mid-2011 the State Department proposed a \$1.5 million assistance package to support judge, witness, and prosecutor protection programs to bolster the region's fragile judicial systems.<sup>46</sup>

Such efforts to strengthen institutions will no doubt take longer, cost more, and require greater political will on the part of Central American leaders, who will not likely see the fruits of their efforts while in office. But if Central American institutions are to overcome their chronic weaknesses, short-term efforts should be supplemented by long-term institution-strengthening activities.

For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has supported a number of programs to help at-risk youth by involving community members in anticrime efforts. USAID's Community-based Crime and Violence Program, located in twelve municipalities in El Salvador, uses prevention councils to convene local government, civil society, and youth leaders to craft prevention plans by taking into account the diverse parties involved.<sup>47</sup> Programs also include vocational training and other educational projects to provide greater opportunities for vulnerable youth. Although such activities have grown, they are unlikely to have much impact without a substantial increase in funding. Other development-oriented efforts carried out by the U.S. Peace Corps were sharply reduced in Central America in December 2011, when volunteers were withdrawn from Honduras and new recruits destined for Guatemala and El Salvador were sent elsewhere out of safety concerns.<sup>48</sup>

Although U.S. security assistance to Central America has risen over the past few years, the pace and efficiency of its release have limited its effectiveness. As of March 2011, 88 percent of Mérida and CARSI funds were allocated to different projects, but only 19 percent was expended. However, U.S. agencies are beginning to address the lags in funding by leveraging existing bilateral funds to implement CARSI programs.<sup>49</sup>

U.S. officials have pressed Central American countries to shoulder greater responsibility and fund national and regional security initiatives. In her speech at the June 2011 SICA meeting, Secretary of State

Clinton urged regional business leaders to follow the lead of private-sector organizations in El Salvador, which have pledged to invest \$3 for every \$1 the U.S. government appropriates for crime prevention.<sup>50</sup> Direct exhortations by U.S. officials, however, are likely to meet stiff resistance from Central American officials and some elite sectors who believe such requests ignore the shared responsibility of the United States for drug-related crime.<sup>51</sup>

The U.S. government has also put nonbudgetary mechanisms to work to assist Central America in combating criminal violence. Extradition to the United States for drug-related crimes has helped ensure that prosecutions of organized crime leaders are uninhibited from the influences that obstruct judicial processes in Central America. However, not all Central American countries permit extradition.<sup>52</sup>

Through anti-money laundering assistance, the United States also supports efforts to attack the external resources of criminal groups. Historically, the Treasury Department, through the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), imposed economic sanctions on individuals involved in laundering illicit funds, and has blocked approximately \$16 million in U.S. assets belonging to Mexican cartel leaders since 2000. Further, the Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes and the Office for Technical Assistance have installed resident advisers, known as the Economic Crimes Team (ECT), in host institutions in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras to implement reforms and strengthen investigative capacities.<sup>53</sup> But these efforts are modest, remain sluggish, and face domestic backlash. Unless U.S. and Central American agencies can significantly increase the share of illicit funds blocked, criminal organizations will continue to operate with their external resources relatively untouched.

## U.S. Domestic Policies and Impact on Central America

U.S. domestic policies have significant consequences for criminal violence in Central America. The United States is the top consumer of illegal drugs in the world, yet focuses much of its attention and resources on the supply side of the equation through eradication and interdiction programs. Although federal funding for prevention and treatment has steadily increased, such measures still account for only 40 percent of the total drug control budget for 2012.<sup>54</sup> Senior officials have acknowledged shared responsibility for rising levels of violence fueled by American drug consumption, but the U.S. government has yet to significantly invest in demand reduction measures.

Lax gun regulations permit the flow of dangerous assault weapons southward, which may also undermine Central American security. In 2009, a Government Accountability Office report found that an estimated 87 percent of traceable arms seized in Mexico had originated in the United States. The extent that U.S. arms flow contributes to Central American violence is unclear, given that arms are widely available in the aftermath of civil wars. For Central Americans, however, the statistic is politically and symbolically significant because it illustrates that the United States is not doing its part.<sup>55</sup>

U.S. inaction on comprehensive immigration reform and a surge in deportations have the unintended consequences of adding strains to already weak Central American institutions, aggravating criminal violence and insecurity. Progress on comprehensive reform in the near term is not likely, however. Even modest changes have been rejected in the U.S. Congress.

Deportations from the United States, which have exceeded one million overall since cooperation between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement under the Secure Communities program expanded at the beginning of the Obama administration, have undermined the Central American security situation. More

specifically, the administration's increased focus on undocumented migrants with a history of violent crime has aggravated insecurity. Deportees, some of whom already have criminal records, find few alternatives to illicit activity when they return to their home countries.<sup>56</sup> Central American institutions are simply incapable of managing and mitigating the consequences of mass influxes of deportees.

The ability to address these problems is constrained by a sluggish U.S. economy. A tough fiscal climate weakens the economic performance of Central America and dims the prospects for greater U.S. financial assistance. In addition, a sustained reduction or reprioritization of U.S. foreign aid budgets could affect support for Central America. Despite these unfavorable conditions, the United States can and should do its part to manage limited resources to Central America in a way that both strengthens regional coordination and addresses long-standing domestic issues with far-reaching effects on its neighbors.



## Recommendations for U.S. Foreign Policy

*The United States should encourage the development of national strategies and support regional and international cooperation.*

The United States should have a policy that balances intervening to enhance anticrime efforts and allowing national and regional strategies to evolve under the leadership of partner governments. The ultimate solution to criminality should come from the Central American countries themselves, but positive external support and constructive guidance sensitive to local conditions can make a difference. How the United States manages this policy balancing act will be critical to the enduring effectiveness of any approach.

U.S. support for SICA illustrates this vision. While allowing Central American policymakers to take the lead in devising strategies to combat criminal violence, the United States can catalyze a coordinated multilateral approach by engaging regional actors and mobilizing the necessary resources from a number of them. Realistically, such a regional approach will be effective only when national capacities are improved and each government is able to contribute its share toward a coordinated effort. By carefully tailoring this regional strategy to the needs and priorities of each country, as determined by U.S. embassy country plans and consultation with national experts, the United States should assume a clear strategic focus, take the lead in a technical capacity, and encourage political goodwill among regional policymakers. Otherwise, many of the necessary reforms may languish.

The United States should facilitate the sharing of best practices and the collaboration of Colombian and Mexican agencies in Central American security initiatives. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement should coordinate with the Colombian National Police, which is experienced in counter-narcotics operations, to encourage training assistance and facilitate

law enforcement exchange programs. The United States should also strengthen frameworks for trilateral information sharing on transnational criminal groups among the United States, Central America, and Mexico. Although Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative do not provide blueprints for how best to tackle Central America's security challenges, they can be instructive for combating criminal violence. The principal lesson is that efforts aimed at drug interdiction and pursuing drug kingpins do not fundamentally affect the supply of drugs; it is wiser to direct scarce resources toward serious institutional reform. Substantially more resources would also be essential.

*The United States should focus on strengthening institutions—particularly police forces and judicial systems.*

The overarching emphasis of U.S. collaboration should be on strengthening institutions, in particular the police, court system, and public prosecutor's offices. This focus should be pursued through the reallocation of current assistance of \$300 million and new funding. CARSI funds should continue to go toward the professionalization of police forces through training and equipment to enhance state presence and capacity in ungoverned territories. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement should allocate two-thirds of its projected budget, approximately \$36.7 million, to such institution-building activities, rather than to drug interdiction, which has done little to diminish criminal violence.

However, simply reassigning funds to bolster institutions is not enough, in terms of both the magnitude of the problem and what is at stake. Even considering budget constraints and competing priorities, the total funding commitment to Central America should roughly double to \$600 million. The United States—through the State Department, FBI, and Department of Justice (DOJ) in cooperation with Central American governments—should use this increased assistance to expand the ILEA and develop other regional training hubs that address critical areas of national and regional concern. These agencies should also assist in planning and implementing prison reform to root out corruption, and develop faster trial processes and alternate confinement mechanisms to address widespread prison overcrowding.

Moreover, the State Department, in collaboration with the DOJ, should designate new funds to step up training and provide equipment

for judge, prosecutor, and witness protection programs. They should also continue to back regional reforms that seek to strengthen transparency in judicial selection processes, much like how the CICIG succeeded in Guatemala. Other areas of U.S. support, such as the DEA FAST units, will have minimal impact in the long term unless critical national institutions are improved and strengthened.

This effort will, under the best circumstances, be slow, difficult, and costly, but without a permanent capability to protect citizens and assert state authority, any short-term gains are likely to be easily reversed.

*The United States should support the creation of bodies similar to the CICIG to strengthen the rule of law.*

Using additional funds earmarked for institutional strengthening, cooperating agencies such as the DOJ should work with the UN to develop institutions modeled on the CICIG in El Salvador and Honduras that collaborate with public prosecutors' offices to secure the capture and conviction of high-profile organized crime leaders, train judicial personnel in modern investigative techniques, and pressure legislatures to pass necessary judicial reforms. Both of these countries have already expressed interest in acquiring similar commissions.<sup>57</sup> U.S. leadership on this issue is critical to providing the technical know-how and shoring up support among other international donors. Although the implementation of similar entities would not likely show significant results immediately, obtaining convictions in symbolic cases would send a clear signal that impunity will not be tolerated and thereby foster respect for the rule of law.

*The United States should facilitate scaling up successful local crime prevention initiatives by sharing knowledge and experiences.*

The role of establishing community prevention programs should fall primarily to Central American governments. USAID programs such as the Community-based Crime and Violence Prevention Project should collaborate with local entities to develop prevention strategies tailored to specific communities, taking into consideration successful plans that have been implemented elsewhere. Bilateral agreements, like the Partnership for Growth forged with El Salvador in 2011, are one way in

which U.S. agencies can play a constructive role in development initiatives and harness the support of the private sector. Local communities should own these programs to ensure that they respond best to local needs; U.S. efforts can be instrumental in defining best practices and transmitting ideas across communities.

It is critical that these activities keep pace with the law enforcement and interdiction operations carried out by other organizations, such as the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement. This ensures that U.S. strategy is balanced and shows a solid commitment to “soft-side” programs, which are important to preventing violence and reweaving the social fabric of vulnerable communities. Should counter-narcotics programs become dominant, U.S. assistance will risk mirroring the heavy-handed involvement seen in Central America’s past and alienating much-needed social support.

*The United States should minimize the role of foreign military assistance.*

U.S. policymakers should remain sensitive to history and limit enhanced foreign military funding or the involvement of U.S. military personnel in anticrime operations. Although demands for military assistance by Central American leaders, most notably the new Guatemalan president Otto Pérez Molina, have intensified, U.S. officials should respond cautiously.<sup>58</sup> Instead, the focus should be on enhanced training and professionalization within the police, judiciary, and public prosecutor’s office under the auspices of the DOJ, FBI, and DEA. Border and maritime interdiction efforts should be handled by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in collaboration with its Central American counterparts.

If military assistance is necessary, it should be granted only under the strictest of conditions. Currently, 15 percent of CARSII funds directed toward international narcotics and law enforcement and foreign military assistance are withheld until the U.S. secretary of state reports that the Central American governments have established independent commissions to receive police complaints, implemented reforms to strengthen the judiciary, and investigated and tried security agents accused of human rights abuses. These requirements should continue.<sup>59</sup> In Guatemala, additional stipulations for overturning the military assistance ban from 1978—continued cooperation with the CICIG, justice

for war violations, and judicial reform and support for the public prosecutor's office—should remain firm even in the face of regional political pressure. The State Department should strictly adhere to these guidelines and play a more proactive role in monitoring military efforts to prevent and investigate violations by enhancing existing annual country-specific human rights reports.

*The United States should strongly encourage national governments and private-sector leaders on tax reform to shore up anticrime efforts.*

The United States should continue to encourage national governments to implement tax reforms that would generate greater revenue to fight criminal violence, as well as reduce poverty and improve health services. U.S. officials should continue to make an effort to convince these national actors that, without greater internal resources, gains achieved through outside funding will be hard to sustain. The fiscal reform passed in Guatemala in February 2012, which demonstrated how to secure support from diverse parties to expand state resources, is an important step in the right direction. U.S. agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service should also provide technical support to their Central American counterparts to enhance tax collection efforts and strengthen institutional capacity.

*The United States should temper domestic policies that aggravate criminal violence in Central America.*

Although the deeply divided U.S. political climate and severe budget pressures will make progress difficult, even modest advances on the following domestic issues would help spur reforms and more effective cooperation with Central American governments.

- *Devise a more vigorous demand reduction strategy.* U.S. government agencies should seriously consider the role that Americans who consume illicit drugs play in fueling criminal violence in Central America, and devote greater attention to domestic demand reduction and drug rehabilitation programs. Increasing resources for prevention and treatment is a critical—and morally responsible—component to combatting and reducing drug-related violence.

The White House Office on National Drug Control Policy should coordinate with agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, DOJ, and Department of Education to establish best practices in prevention and rehabilitation and expand initiatives. Specifically, they should scale up relatively low-cost programs, such as Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) initiative, that have successfully rehabilitated incarcerated heavy-drug users. Although serious questions about the efficacy of current prevention and treatment programs remain, and even replicating successful ones is unlikely to have much short-term effect on criminal violence in Central America, it is still important to maintain a concerted effort and pursue policy options aimed at curbing domestic drug consumption, as detailed in the National Drug Control Strategy.

U.S. policymakers should also take into consideration strong regional demands to review national drug policy. The 2009 Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, chaired by former presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, César Gaviria of Colombia, and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, along with several current Latin American presidents, vocalized the need to reassess the current war-on-drugs approach and develop more effective, evidence-based alternatives.<sup>60</sup> The United States should become a more active participant in such ongoing discussions to improve regional partnerships and strengthen cooperation on antidrug initiatives. For example, the United States should consider the proposal of several Latin American governments to treat marijuana, the most used and least addictive drug, differently than other illicit drugs. The United States should also support efforts to collect and analyze credible data on this issue, which would serve as the foundation for a serious debate over policy options. By remaining unengaged, the United States loses credibility to promote its interests in the region.

- *Develop and implement greater controls and better diagnostics for dangerous arms moving south, especially through state and local legislation in border states.* The Bureau for Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives should take greater precautions, by enhancing background checks on all gun buyers and ensuring that information is properly transmitted to federal authorities, to prevent the most dangerous weapons from falling into the wrong hands. Because gun control is a contentious issue at the national level, policymakers should

pursue state avenues—particularly in border states, which are most susceptible to purchases by straw buyers funneling weapons south—to pass legislation banning the manufacture, import, and sale of assault weapons, much like the law passed in California in 1989.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, pending federal legislation that would enact tougher sanctions on states that do not fully comply with background check requirements should be passed. Without enhanced efforts to deter illegal arms from entering the region, Central Americans will continue to believe that the United States is abdicating its role to mitigate this shared problem.

- *Enhance information sharing on criminal deportees and support Central American reintegration programs for returned migrants.* To help mitigate the effects of criminal deportations on Central American governments, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, in collaboration with the FBI through the Criminal History Information Program, should strengthen information sharing on deportees' criminal backgrounds with regional governments. Such measures should include not only indicating which deportees have criminal histories, but also a full and detailed accounting of all criminal convictions. USAID should also collaborate with local agencies to implement rehabilitation and reintegration programs for deportees. Given the increased levels of criminal deportations to Central America under the Obama administration, such steps, although not a comprehensive reintegration strategy, would provide the critical information that national and local law enforcement need to understand the scope of criminality returning home and mitigate its risks. In addition, the Obama administration should grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Guatemalan migrants in the United States and extend it past 2013 for those from El Salvador and Honduras. This measure will enable migrants to work temporarily in the United States, providing relief to the northern triangle governments plagued by recent natural disasters and deepening security crises.

## Conclusion

Central America has become the locus of the drug trade and international criminal networks, and the effects on the social, political, and economic frameworks of the countries are significant and deleterious. The outlook is bleak: current trends suggest that criminal violence in the region will escalate. And even if Central America does significantly crack down on criminal violence, it would likely only displace the problem, as have most successful antidrug efforts in Latin America over the past few decades. Although U.S. officials are beginning to label criminal violence in Central America as the greatest threat facing the hemisphere today, some predict a shift back to the Caribbean, where the first major drug trafficking routes were established.<sup>62</sup>

If the regional governments remain unable to cope with the pressures and strains of spreading organized crime and violence, then the United States should be prepared to deal with the consequences. The Obama administration should implement sustained and nuanced policy initiatives that provide high-level guidance and financial and technical assistance, yet also recognize Central American strategic ownership. The need is enormous, but so is the opportunity: Central American governments are eager for greater cooperation with the United States. In the future, forging such partnerships in the region may be more difficult. Without a long-term U.S. commitment to strengthen institutions and coordinate regional action, the eventuality of conquering increasingly sophisticated and transnational criminal violence and safeguarding Central America's fragile democracies could well be in jeopardy. As Colombia demonstrated, success is possible where regional governments are open to collaboration and the United States sustains resources and attention to the problem.



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  48. Randal C. Archibold, "Peace Corps Cuts Back in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador," *New York Times*, December 21, 2011.

49. Meyer and Seelke, "Central America Regional Security Initiative," p. 26.
50. Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at the Central American Security Conference," U.S. Department of State, June 22, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/06/166733.htm>.
51. In a recent interview, Guatemalan president-elect Otto Pérez Molina proposed the reverse of Clinton's call for \$3 from Central American governments for every \$1 in U.S. assistance, citing the primary responsibility of the United States as the top consumer of illicit drugs trafficked through the region (José Meléndez, "Lanzaré kaibiles contra narcos: Otto Pérez," *El Universal*, November 9, 2011).
52. Only El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize allow the extradition of citizens to the United States. All Central American countries permit the extradition of foreign citizens (U.S. Senate Caucus, "Responding to Violence," p. 45).
53. *Ibid.*
54. According to the FY 2012 National Drug Control Budget, roughly \$1.7 billion will be directed to prevention efforts and \$9 billion to treatment. These figures represent 7.9 and 1 percent increases, respectively, from 2010. However, domestic law enforcement, interdiction, and international funding together is \$15.5 billion; see Executive Office of the President Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), "National Drug Control Budget: FY 2012 Funding Highlights," 2011.
55. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Firearms Trafficking: US Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges*, GAO-09-709, June 2009, p. 15; see also Dianne Feinstein, Charles Schumer, and Sheldon Whitehouse, "Halting U.S. Firearms Trafficking to Mexico," U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 112th Congress, 1st session, June 2011.
56. Among the northern triangle countries, those with criminal records represented a sizable share of deportees in 2010: in Honduras 41.5 percent of deportees had criminal records, while in El Salvador and Guatemala, these figures were 41.4 and 31.3 percent respectively. Coordination between U.S. and Central American authorities, moreover, to provide necessary information on criminal deportees remains weak; see Seelke, "Gangs in Central America."
57. Sandra Weiss, "Lucha contra impunidad inicia con 'intocables,'" *Contrapunto*, August 14, 2011.
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## About the Author

**Michael Shifter** is president of the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based policy forum on Western Hemisphere affairs. Shifter previously served as the organization's vice president for policy, and managed its programs on the Andean region and democratic governance. Since 1993 he has served as an adjunct professor of Latin American politics at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

Before joining the Inter-American Dialogue, Shifter directed the Latin American and Caribbean program at the National Endowment for Democracy and the Ford Foundation's governance and human rights program in the Andean region and the Southern Cone, where he was based in Lima, Peru, and then Santiago, Chile. Previously, he served as a representative at the Inter-American Foundation for the Brazil program. He is coeditor, along with Jorge Domínguez, of *Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America*, and a contributing editor to *Current History*. Shifter graduated summa cum laude from Oberlin College and received an MA in sociology from Harvard University.

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