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Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions

By Dennis Rodgers, Robert Muggah, and Chris Stevenson

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AAPW	Academic Associates PeaceWorks
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
IANSA	International Action Network on Small Arms
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IPPNW	International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War
IUDOP	Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
REDCEPAZ	Red Centroamericana para la Construcción de la Paz y la Seguridad Humana
SGPVP	Small Grants Programme for Violence Prevention (World Bank)
SICA	Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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Introduction

Violence is on the upswing in Central America, with the region currently exhibiting some of the highest rates of reported criminal violence in Latin America and indeed the world (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). The recent *Global Burden of Armed Violence* report estimates the annual global homicide rate to be around 7.6 per 100,000, yet in the Americas the figure exceeds 20 per 100,000, and in Central America it is almost 30 per 100,000 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008). Not surprisingly, perhaps, homicide is described as one of the primary regional public health issues (WHO, 2008a; Briceño-León, 2005, p. 1629). Many factors have shaped this particular panorama of violence, which is both heterogeneous and dynamic. The World Bank, for example, attributes the rise in Central American violence to 'a complex set of factors, including rapid urbanization, persistent poverty and inequality, social exclusion, political violence, organized crime, post-conflict cultures, the emergence of illegal drug use and trafficking and authoritarian family structures' (World Bank, 2008a, p. 3). The UN Office on Drugs and Crime, for its part, emphasizes the role of geography and weak institutions as aggravating rates of violence; with almost 90 per cent of the United States' cocaine supply inevitably passing through weak Central American states from Andean production centres, it is little wonder that organized crime violence is deeply entrenched (UNODC, 2008, p. 38).

Most of this regional violence tends to be perpetrated and experienced among young men between 15 and 34 years of age.[1] These statistics are not necessarily surprising considering that the most prominent aspect of the new landscape of Central American violence is the gang phenomenon. Although gangs have long been a feature of Central American societies, they have come to the fore in the region in an unprecedented manner since the early 1990s.[2] Estimates of the total proportion of contemporary regional violence attributable to gangs vary widely—from 10 to 60 per cent[3]—as they have been accused of a whole slew of crimes and delinquency, ranging from mugging, theft, and intimidation to rape, assault, and drug dealing. There have even been attempts to link

Map Central America
Los Angeles
UNITED STATES
MEXICO
Gulf of California
PACIFIC OCEAN
Mexico City
Gulf of Mexico
Miami
CUBA
Yucatan Peninsula
Campeche Bay
JAMAICA
Caribbean Sea
Belmopan
BELIZE
HONDURAS
Guatemala
Tegucigalpa
GUATEMALA
NICARAGUA
San Salvador
Managua
EL SALVADOR
San José
Panama
COSTA RICA
PANAMA
Gulf of Panama
COLOMBIA
International boundary
National capital
Other city
0 km 500

them to revolution and global terrorism. A 2005 US Army War College publication, for example, contends that Central American gangs constitute a 'new urban insurgency' that has as ultimate objective 'to depose or control the governments of targeted countries' through '*coups d'street*' (Manwaring, 2005; 2006).[4] Along similar lines, Anne Aguilera, head of the Central America office of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs branch of the US State Department, asserted in an interview published in the Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* on 8 April 2005 that gangs were 'the greatest problem for national security at this time in Central America' (Bruneau, 2005). Although gangs are unquestionably a significant contemporary concern in the region, such sensationalist pronouncements suggest that they remain profoundly misunderstood.[5] The purpose of this Occasional Paper is to debunk some of these myths and present a balanced assessment of the causes, costs, and interventions relating to Central American gang violence.

Gangs of Central America

Reliable information about Central American gangs is extremely scanty, with official statistics particularly problematic due to chronic underreporting, deficient data collection, and issues of political interference.[6] Official figures suggest that there are some 70,000 gang members operating in Central America, but other estimates suggest that there might be as many as 500,000 (UNODC, 2007, p. 60). Even the lower figure would mean that gang members outnumber military personnel in Central America, as Nicaragua and Honduras have armies of about 12,000 soldiers each, El Salvador has 13,000 soldiers, and Guatemala has 27,000 (Millett and Perez, 2005, p. 59). At the same time, even if trustworthy quantitative data is limited, more and more qualitative studies collectively suggest that gangs constitute primary actors within the contemporary regional panorama of violence.[7]

These qualitative studies also highlight the fact that there is great diversity among countries in the region. At this writing, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are clearly experiencing much greater levels of gang violence than Costa Rica and Nicaragua.[8] It should be noted, however, that the distribution of violence within these countries varies greatly, even if the overwhelming majority of gang violence occurs in urban areas, and particularly in the capital cities. To a certain extent, this is not surprising. Gangs are very much urban manifestations, partly because it is necessary to have a critical demographic mass of youth in order for a gang to be able to emerge.

Up to 15 per cent of youth within gang-affected communities can reportedly end up joining a gang—although most studies suggest that on average the figure is somewhere around 3 to 5 per cent.[9] Gangs tend to have between 15 and 100 members, although the average size generally hovers between 20 and 25 members.[10] Gangs are not evenly distributed within cities, however; they are more likely to emerge in poor areas, although the correlation between poverty and gang violence is not necessarily causal or systematic. Indeed, this is true of violence more generally, as a recent UNDP study in Guatemala high-

lights, finding that municipalities falling within the bottom quartile in terms of impoverishment suffered less violence than neighbourhoods falling within the second-to-last quartile (UNDP, 2007, p. 29).

The vast majority of gang members are male,[11] even if female gang members do exist, and there is some evidence of all-female gangs operating in Nicaragua and Guatemala (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 286; Winton, 2007). The age range of gang members is highly variable, although a 2001 study finds that the average gang member in El Salvador was 20 years old and that the mean age of entry into the gang was 15 years of age (Santacruz Giralt and Concha-Eastman, 2001). These findings are based on almost 1,000 interviews with gang members conducted by researchers at the Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP). Nicaraguan gang members have been found to fall between 7 and 23 years of age (Rodgers, 2006a), while the age range of Guatemalan and Honduran gang members is between 12 and 30 years of age (ERIC et al., 2001).

In response to the IUDOP study's inquiry about a gang member's reason for joining a gang, 40 per cent of respondents said they had done so in order to 'hang out', 21 per cent because they had gang member friends, and 21 per cent in order to get away from family problems. The study also reveals a partial correlation between youth unemployment and gang membership, as only 17 per cent of gang members were employed, and 66 per cent actively characterized themselves as 'unemployed' (Santacruz Giralt and Concha-Eastman, 2001). Generally, however, most studies of Central American gangs have highlighted the difficulties of systematically pinpointing specific factors explaining gang membership. Stereotypical 'determinants' such as family fragmentation, domestic abuse, or a particular psychological makeup are not consistently significant, and the only factor that has been reported as systematically affecting gang membership is religious, insofar as evangelical Protestant youths in Nicaragua tend not to join gangs (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 273).[12]

Gangs can of course be linked to a range of structural factors, including the pervasive machismo that characterizes Central American societies (many gang codes are clearly expressions of a heightened masculinity); high levels of social exclusion and inequality; the long regional history of war and its aftermath;[13] the unregulated availability of weapons (it is estimated that more than two million small arms in Central America are unregistered);[14] as well as the wide-

spread absence of the state and concomitant 'local governance voids' that gangs seek to fill as 'micro-political' social forms.[15] Considering that these factors affect Central American youth universally, but not all youths become gang members, they have to be seen more as contextual variables than determinants.

A more significant structural variable is migration. Even if there is frequently a tendency to talk about Central American gangs generically, a distinction has to be made between *maras* on the one hand, and *pandillas* on the other. *Maras* are a phenomenon with transnational roots, while *pandillas* are more localized, home-grown gangs that are the direct inheritors of the youth gangs that have long been a historic feature of Central American societies. *Pandillas* were initially present throughout the region in the post-conflict period but are now only significantly visible in Nicaragua—and to a lesser extent in Costa Rica (where they are often called *chapulines*)—having been almost completely supplanted by *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[16]

The contemporary manifestation of the *pandilla* phenomenon has its origins in the aftermath of the signing of peace accords during the 1990s, when demobilized combatant youths in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala returned to their home communities and found themselves facing situations of heightened uncertainty, insecurity, and socio-economic flux. Drawing institutionally on a traditional organizational vehicle for collective youth action, some of these young men formed *pandillas* as localized vigilante-style self-defence groups in an attempt to provide a measure of order and predictability for both themselves and their local communities. From relatively fluid and organic beginnings, they rapidly began to develop specific behaviour patterns, which included engaging in semi-ritualized forms of gang warfare that were regulated by strict codes and expectations, including, in particular, the protection of local community inhabitants (Rodgers, 2006a). As such there were clear parallels with past gangs insofar as these often emerged as informal defence organizations in illegal squatter settlements.

The *pandillas* of the 1990s, however, were much more numerous and also more violent than their predecessors, partly due to the legacy of war and insurrection, which provided youth with unprecedented martial skills. Unlike gangs of the past, which generally tended to be generationally ephemeral, they became much more institutionalized, giving themselves long-lasting names—

such as los Dragones, los Rampleros, or los Comemuertos in Nicaragua—and developing hierarchies and rules that persisted over time, despite gang member turnover.[17] To this extent, *pandillas* can be seen as localized institutional responses to the Central American post-conflict circumstances of insecurity and uncertainty, although it is important to note that there were significant variations both among and within different societies.

The *maras,* on the other hand, can be directly linked to particular migratory patterns. Formally, there are just two *maras,* the Dieciocho (Eighteen) and the Salvatrucha, which currently operate only in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras within the region, although they have reportedly begun to extend into southern Mexico as well. The origins of the *maras* lie in the 18th Street gang in Los Angeles, a gang founded by Mexican immigrants in the Rampart section of the city in the 1960s, although it rapidly began to accept Hispanics indiscriminately. The 18th Street gang grew significantly during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the influx of mainly Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, who sought to join the gang in order to feel included as outsiders in the United States. In the latter half of the 1980s, a rival—possibly splinter—group founded by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees emerged and became known as the Mara Salvatrucha (a combination of *salvadoreño* and *trucha,* meaning 'quick-thinking' or 'shrewd' in Salvadoran slang).[18] The Dieciocho and the Salvatrucha rapidly became bitter rivals and frequently fought each other on the streets of Los Angeles (UNODC, 2007, p. 59).

The two groups were also heavily involved in the violence and looting that accompanied the 1992 Rodney King riots, which led the State of California to implement strict anti-gang laws. Prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults instead of minors, sending hundreds to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. In 1996 the US Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, whereby non-US citizens sentenced to one year or more in prison were to be repatriated to their countries of origin. Even foreign-born US felons could be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they had served their prison terms. As a result, between 1998 and 2005 the United States deported nearly 46,000 convicts to Central America, in addition to 160,000 illegal immigrants caught without the requisite permit (UNODC, 2007, pp. 40–42).

Three countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—received more than 90 per cent of the deportations from the United States (USAID, 2006, pp. 18–19). Many of these deportees were members of the 18th Street and Salvatrucha gangs who had arrived in the United States as toddlers but had never secured legal residency or citizenship; they had joined the gangs as a way to feel included in a receiving country that often actively impeded their integration. On being sent back to countries of origin that they barely knew, deportees reproduced the structures and behaviour patterns that had provided them with support and security in the United States. They swiftly founded local *clikas,* or chapters, of their gang in their communities of origin; in turn, these *clikas* rapidly attracted local youths and either supplanted or absorbed *pandillas*.[19]

Each *clika* is explicitly affiliated with either the Mara Dieciocho (as the 18th Street gang is known in Central America) or the Mara Salvatrucha, and *clikas* from different neighbourhoods affiliated with the same *mara* will often join together to fight other groupings claiming allegiance to the opposing *mara.* Yet contrary to sensationalistic media projections, neither gang is characterized by a federal structure, and much less by a transnational one. Neither the Dieciocho nor the Salvatrucha gang answers to a single chain of command; their 'umbrella' nature is more symbolic of a particular historical origin than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action. Although the *maras* can be conceived of as loose networks of localized gangs, they do not necessarily communicate or coordinate with each other, either within or between countries. In many ways, the federated nature of the *maras* is more of an imagined social morphology than a real phenomenon, based on the fact that the steady flows of deportees from the United States share a common language and reference points. Certainly, there is little evidence of any active cooperation between *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, and even less with the original putative 'mother gangs' in Los Angeles. Rather, the ties that exist are more akin to a sense of identity, founded organically on individuals' common experience of gangsterism in the United States, deportation, and stigmatization in Central America (Barnes, 2007; Demoscopía, 2007).

The migratory origin of the *maras* is a crucial factor explaining why Nicaragua does not have *maras*. The country has a very low deportation rate from the United States—fewer than 3 per cent of all Central American deportees

are Nicaraguan. Furthermore, Nicaraguans who have emigrated to the United States have settled mainly in Miami. US Census data shows that only 12 per cent have settled in Los Angeles, where they account for just 4 per cent of Central Americans, while they represent 47 per cent in Miami. Unlike the more 'open' gangs of LA, Miami's local gang scene is dominated by highly exclusive African–American and Cuban–American gangs, which do not let Nicaraguans join them (Rocha, 2006a). This factor may also help explain why Nicaraguan *pandillas* are not as violent as *maras*, and, by extension, why El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are more violent than Nicaragua. The transnational transposition of US gang culture to the northern three Central American countries has arguably had much more brutal results due to the fact that it is less embedded within a local institutional context than traditional Central American *pandilla* culture, and therefore less rule-bound and constrained. At the same time, it is important to note that the *mara* phenomenon is not simply a foreign problem imported by deportees, but rather that it has evolved and grown in response to domestic factors and conditions.

In contrast to the numerous sensationalist accounts linking Central American gangs to migrant trafficking, kidnapping, and international organized crime, it is clear from the various qualitative studies of Central American gangs that both *pandillas* and *maras* are mainly involved in small-scale, localized crime and delinquency such as petty theft and muggings (although these can often result in murder).[20] These are most often carried out on an individual basis, although the *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are also increasingly involved in the extortion of protection money from local businesses and the racketeering of buses and taxis as they go through the territories they control.[21]

Both *pandillas* and *maras* make use of weaponry that includes firearms such as AK-47s and explosives such as fragmentation grenades, often with dramatic consequences (Rodgers, 2006a, p. 275). The 2001 IUDOP survey of Salvadoran gang members reveals that 25 per cent of respondents admitted to having committed a murder in the past year, while another 25 per cent refused to answer the question (Santacruz Giralt and Concha-Eastman, 2001). At the same time, however, most *pandilla* and *mara* violence is quite circumscribed, tending to occur in the poorer, local communities from which the gangs emerge rather than richer neighbourhoods. In fact, the majority of gang violence is

usually directed against rival gangs, as was starkly illustrated by the occurrence of tit-for-tat prison warfare between rival incarcerated gang members in Guatemala. On 15 August 2005, newly imprisoned members of the Dieciocho *mara* attacked members of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Hoyón prison near Guatemala City, killing 31 and leaving more than twice that number seriously wounded. A retaliatory attack by members of the Salvatrucha in the San José Pinula juvenile detention centre on 19 September 2005 killed at least 12 and wounded another ten (UNODC, 2007, p. 34).

There is clear evidence that both *pandillas* and *maras* have become more and more involved in drug trafficking and dealing over the past decade.[22] This is perhaps not surprising considering that the consumption of drugs has long been associated with the gang lifestyle and that Central America has become a transit point for more than 80 per cent of the total cocaine traffic between the Andean countries and North America (UNODC, 2007). Drug trafficking in Central America tends to be decentralized, however, with shipments passing from one small, local cartel to another, with each taking a cut in kind in order to make a profit as the drugs are passed from the much more organized Colombian cartels to the Mexican cartels. The role that gangs—both *maras* and *pandillas*—play in this process is mainly as the local security apparatus of these small cartels, or as small-time street vendors informally connected to them. Gangs are involved neither in the large-scale, transnational movement of drugs, nor in wholesaling, although certain studies suggest that the leaders of these small, local cartels are often ex-gang members who have 'graduated'. At the same time, there is strong evidence to suggest that involvement in drug trafficking and dealing is leading to both types of gangs evolving towards more violent behaviour patterns.[23]

This latter transformation is also linked to the fact that increasingly large swathes of the urban poor in Central America are finding themselves able to access fewer and fewer legal economic opportunities and thus have to resort to 'ruthless Darwinian competition' in order to survive, with their fighting 'for the same informal scraps, ensur[ing] self-consuming communal violence as yet the highest form of urban involution' (Davis, 2004, p. 28).[24] Such processes are reinforced by new patterns of segregation and exclusion that have emerged in Central American cities as a result of their market-led urban remod-

elling, for example through the proliferation of gated communities and closed condominiums, as well as the transformation of transport networks.[25] Such patterns of segregation and exclusion are also related to the emergence of new forms of state governance. At the urban level this has involved patterns of regular police patrolling in rich areas of the city and on the new roads on the one hand, and the unpredictable, arbitrary, and violent patrolling of slums and poor neighbourhoods on the other, in order to precipitate localized conditions of terror and symbolically demonstrate the power of the elite-captured state (Rodgers, 2006b). The most visible facet of this new approach is the implementation of a 'war on gangs' that has been implemented by Central American states since 2003.[26] This aspect is considered in detail in the next section of this Occasional Paper.

Mano Dura: the war on gangs

The opening salvo of the 'war on gangs' that is currently raging in Central America was El Salvador's adoption of a Mano Dura (Iron Fist) policy in July 2003. The plan advocated the immediate imprisonment of gang members simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public, which became punishable with two to five years in jail and applicable to gang members from the age of 12 onwards (Faux, 2006, p. 73). Between July 2003 and August 2004, 20,000 *pandilleros* were arrested, although 95 per cent were eventually released without charge when the Mano Dura law was declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court for violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Faux, 2006, p. 76). As a result, the Super Mano Dura package of anti-gang reforms was rapidly pushed through. It respected the provisions of the Convention but stiffened the penalties for gang membership to up to five years in prison for ordinary gang members, and nine years for gang leaders (Faux, 2006, p. 77). Although under the new law the police must have proof of active delinquent behaviour in order to arrest an individual, El Salvador's incarcerated population increased dramatically, from some 4,000 prisoners to more than 12,000, with this population 'heavily weighted with gang members' (USAID, 2006, p. 52).

Almost simultaneously, in August 2003, Honduras implemented a comparable policy called Cero Tolerancia (Zero Tolerance), which was partly inspired by Rudy Giuliani's (in)famous eponymous policy in New York City. Among the measures that this package promoted was the reform of the penal code, the adoption of legislation that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership—a penalty that was later stiffened to 30 years—and provisions for better collaboration between the police and the Honduran army in urban patrolling (Faux, 2006, p. 71). Likewise, Guatemala adopted its Plan Escoba (Operation Broomsweep) in January 2004. Although not a formal law, and not as draconian as the Salvadoran Mano Dura or the Honduran Cero Tolerancia, the plan still led police to treat minors as adults and ushered

in heightened practices of violent repression, which were soon met with accusations of state-sponsored extra-judicial killings (WOLA, 2006, p. 12; USAID, 2006, p. 79). Similarly, Nicaragua has regularly implemented a range of anti-gang initiatives since 1999, although these have been of a significantly 'softer' nature.[27] These crackdowns have been very popular with the general public in all the Central American countries, but they have also been vigorously opposed by human rights groups that are concerned about the potential abuse of gang suspects. More ominously, organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have presented evidence—corroborated by the US State Department in 2005—of the existence of paramilitary death squads in Honduras and El Salvador that are deliberately targeting gang members, and often youth more generally—and that in collusion with state authorities (Rodgers, 2007, p. 44).

Central American states have also begun to engage in unprecedented forms of regional cooperation in order to deal with gangs, which a September 2003 summit of heads of state declared to be 'a destabilizing menace, more immediate than any conventional or guerrilla warfare'. On 15 January 2004, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua agreed to lift legal barriers to the cross-country prosecution of gang members, whatever their nationality, while on 18 March 2005, presidents Tony Saca of El Salvador and Oscar Berger of Guatemala agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol gang activity along their common border. The Central American states have also sought to involve the United States, which was resistant to participating in anti-gang initiatives until June 2004, when the Honduran minister of security, Oscar Álvarez, rather ludicrously claimed that a suspected Saudi member of Al Qaeda, Yafar Al-Taya, had arrived in El Salvador in order to meet with gang leaders (Faux, 2006, p. 122). Although the assertion was unfounded, by December 2004 the FBI had created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs, and in February 2005 the Bureau announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information sharing and anti-gang efforts (Faux, 2006, p. 139). Following a new (and no less ludicrous) claim by Álvarez to have thwarted a Colombian FARC–*mara* plot to kill President Ricardo Maduro in April 2005, the region's military leaders formally called on the US Southern Command for assistance in the creation of a multinational force to

tackle organized crime and youth gangs, although this has yet to be implemented (Faux, 2006, p. 122).

Such heavy-handed policies have been widely supported by the public owing to their visibility.[28] But while it has been reported that the anti-gang initiatives initially reduced crime quite significantly, the evidence suggests that this was a temporary state of affairs, if ever true. New reports increasingly argue that the widespread repression of gangs is leading them to become more organized and more violent (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006, p. 42).[29] This view was corroborated by the tit-for-tat violence that certain *maras* engaged in with the Honduran authorities following the implementation of Mano Dura. On 30 August 2003, one month after the promulgation of the new anti-gang legislation, gang members attacked a bus in the northern city of San Pedro Sula in broad daylight, killing 14, wounding 18, and leaving a note to President Maduro ordering him to withdraw the law. The following month, in the town of Puerto Cortés, a young woman's head was found in a plastic bag with a note addressed to Maduro saying that this was a response to the extra-judicial assassination of a gang member by the police. Over the course of the following year, more than ten decapitated corpses were left in various cities with messages from gang members to the Honduran president, each time in response to a putative extra-judicial killing. On 23 December 2004, in Chamalecón, gang members again attacked a bus and killed 28, once again leaving a message claiming revenge for the May 2004 death of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire (Faux, 2006, p. 118). Similarly gruesome events have been widely reported by the media in El Salvador and Guatemala.

The 'war on gangs' has reportedly led *maras* to change their behaviour patterns in less violent ways as well. More and more studies suggest that gangs are attempting to become less conspicuous. For example, gang members in El Salvador have begun to use less obvious signs and symbols, removing tattoos and abandoning the short-trimmed *rapado* hair style in order to avoid being picked up by the police. They have also become more mobile and less connected to a specific local community, to the extent that Central American *maras* have reportedly been moving into southern Mexico (Aguilar and Miranda, 2006, p. 49). While these developments might be interpreted as suggesting that the gangs are losing ground vis-à-vis Central American states—their spread to

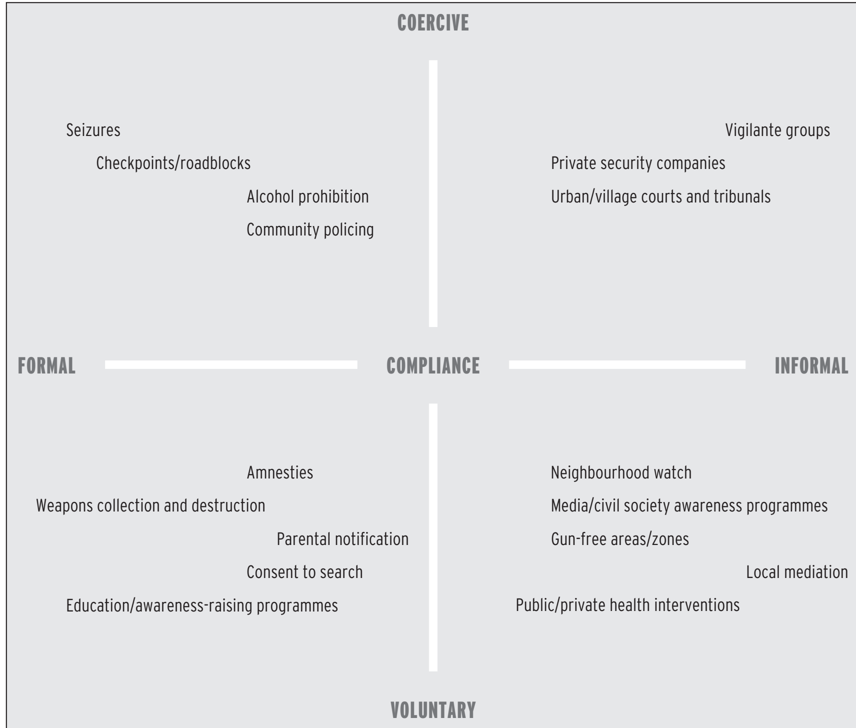
Mexico could plausibly be seen as a desperate attempt to escape the Mano Dura repression—the underlying evolutionary trajectory of the gangs suggests otherwise. The transformation of Nicaraguan *pandillas* is a case in point. What began as institutions attempting to create localized forms of social order in the early 1990s gradually changed into organizations promoting highly parochial forms of drug dealing by the early years of the next decade. Rather than protecting local neighbourhood inhabitants, gangs implemented local regimes of terror to ensure the proper functioning of emergent local drug economies, solely in the interests of their members and associated local dealers, who were usually ex-gang members themselves (Rodgers, 2006a; 2007a; 2007b). By the end of the decade, *pandillas* seemed to be beginning to disappear altogether, however. Most gang members were 'retiring' and were not being replaced by a new generation; instead, a small minority was joining more professional and deterritorialized criminal organizations that had emerged around the increasingly organized drug trafficking networks (Rodgers, 2009; n.d.).[30] This process of professionalization is extremely ominous—insofar as the corrosive role that organized crime can play in developing contexts is well-known (Glenny, 2008)—and clearly has much more wide-ranging social consequences than youth gangsterism.

From first- to second-generation gang violence reduction policies

While a tendency towards heavy-handed responses persists in Central American countries, there appears to be an evolution from what could be dubbed 'first-' to 'second-generation' policies. First-generation initiatives such as Mano Dura can be characterized as *enforcement-first*, combining aggressive crackdown operations with increased penalties to deter gang membership. Interventions are executed by the state security apparatus alongside reforms of the judicial and penal systems; in many cases, extra-judicial killings also take place.[31] The frequent absence of rehabilitation programmes in such strategies contributes to the stigmatization of gang members, prevents their reform, and ultimately thwarts their reintegration into society. In the wake of the significant criticism that such activities have generated, Mano Dura programmes are being increasingly complemented—but not replaced—by Mano Amiga (Friendly Hand) and Mano Extendida (Extended Hand) interventions focused on incentivizing demobilization from gangs. These second-generation activities are typically more *compliance-oriented and voluntary*, combining carrots with sticks to address the risks and symptoms of gang violence.[32]

Second-generation activities come in a range of shapes and sizes (see Figure 1).[33] Programmes and projects launched in municipal centres in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and elsewhere beginning in the 1990s adopted a host of activities including voluntary weapons collection, temporary weapons carrying restrictions, temporary alcohol prohibitions, environmental design in slums, and targeted interventions for at-risk youth and single female-headed households, for example (see Table 1). Second-generation initiatives tend to adopt a more evidence-led and holistic approach to violence prevention and reduction. Because action plans tend to be formulated by municipal authorities in concert with public and private security actors, academic institutions, and civil society, they also adopt a more participatory and integrated approach. These interventions also purposefully seek to build up confidence and legitimacy from below through

Figure 1 **Conceptual typology of violence reduction and arms control strategies**



Source: Small Arms Survey (2007, p. 180)

the deliberate engagement of local actors. Yet they are largely dependent on the engagement of comparatively robust and credible local public authorities and civil society—institutions that may be weakened by prolonged periods of chronic violence.

A key innovation of second-generation interventions is their appreciation of the way local context shapes violence rather than the other way around. Second-generation community-based demobilization and reintegration, security sector reform, and civilian weapons collection emphasize the importance of building on local values and norms associated with gang violence, for example. This bottom–up approach is intimately connected with the identification of local security needs and requirements and focuses on community and people-centred security promotion rather than exclusively on national institutions or

Table 1 **First- and second-generation violence prevention in Central America**

	First-generation interventions	Second-generation interventions
Costa Rica		Development of national commission to implement small arms controls; weapons collection initiatives; community policing activities; increased NGO and civil society participation in arms transfer controls such as violence monitoring/surveillance programmes, risk education, television advertisements, and advocacy materials.
El Salvador	Mano Dura, Anti-Maras Act (2003), Super Mano Dura (2004)	UNDP-supported initiatives targeting at-risk youths involved in narcotics trafficking; interventions focusing on children associated with armed groups; urban programmes such as Municipalities without Weapons; public and private population health programmes targeting risk factors for violence; legislative reforms associated with international arms controls and civilian possession; and the National Commission of Citizen Security and Social Peace.
Guatemala	Plan Escoba (2003) and Mano Dura	Debate over a national arms control policy; UNDP-led interventions focusing on at-risk youth; municipality-level conflict resolution committees; community policing targeting high-risk areas; national commissions to investigate threats received by representatives working in the field of violence and its impacts; NGO and civil society participation in armed violence programmes (working with at-risk youth, awareness-raising programmes, protection, and judicial reforms).
Honduras	Cero Tolerancia and Operation Thunder (2003)	UNDP-organized small arms control and security and justice reform project; violence monitoring database; and NGO participation in armed violence programmes (including awareness-raising and judicial reforms).
Nicaragua	Anti-gang campaigns	UNDP-supported at-risk youths and violence reduction programmes in pilot sites; legislative reform on international and domestic arms control; establishment of national guidelines for arms storage/stockpile management and civilian possession; targeted community policing; and public health projects focusing on armed violence risks and symptoms.
Panama		UN and government efforts to promote the empowerment of civil society/NGOs working against and researching armed violence; faith-based awareness raising of the risks of arms among at-risk youth; and legislative reforms associated with arms controls.

the protection of territory. Important dividends may be reaped from community policing and investment in careful stakeholder analysis, prudent partnerships, and the development of well-trained and trusted security providers who deliberately work in cooperation with legitimate local-level authorities. When partnerships with the public are developed in undemocratic or factional ways, the marginalized may be further excluded, and partnerships themselves may fall under the sway of more powerful local groups and political associations that seek to exert their influence.[34]

Although some of these initiatives have been locally generated, international development agencies have played a key role in the design and implementation of softer responses to gang violence in Central America. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the International Committee of the Red Cross, and many others have dedicated missions to the needs of the Central American region and Mexico; these have helped shed light on progress to date. For example, UNDP supports small arms control, armed violence reduction, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes in Central America (UNDP, 2005, p. 24). Notable examples of second-generation programmes include regional small arms programmes of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA) and UNDP,[35] the Small Arms Control and Security and Justice Reform project in Honduras, and the Goods for Guns programme in El Salvador. In El Salvador, UNDP was particularly instrumental through the development of an estimate of the economic costs of violence and assisted with the design of national arms control policies and related awareness (see Box 1).

In 2005, the World Bank launched the Small Grant Programme for Violence Prevention (SGPVP) as part of its wider crime and violence prevention initiative. The SGPVP is an example of an innovative intervention targeting subnational institutions. It supports municipal-level initiatives that advance community-based perspectives focused on reducing the number of weapons in circulation, altering the attitudes and behaviour of those who might potentially use them, or strengthening public and private institutions that address security and good governance. In 2006, 11 out of 100 project grants were received in Honduras and Nicaragua to prevent violence and empower vulnerable

Box 1 Second-generation violence reduction in El Salvador

The UNDP office in San Salvador, in collaboration with its local partners, was instrumental in laying the foundations for second-generation gang violence reduction efforts in El Salvador. In 1998, UNDP–El Salvador sought advice from local and international experts on the problem and how to address it. By 2000, UNDP–El Salvador and the National Council for Public Security commissioned research to document the scope, magnitude, and cost of armed violence in the country.[36] These efforts provided the basis for the creation of an inclusive coalition known as Sociedad sin Violencia (Society without Violence). This network linked civil society, the business community, academia, public health and medical practitioners, government representatives, and personally affected civilians in a participatory and comprehensive process aimed at reducing gang violence. Funded by UNDP, the coalition aimed to reach its objective of reducing violence by limiting the number of weapons carried by civilians.

The coalition advanced a strategy and public awareness campaign comprising research, dialogue, capacity building, and advocacy. This campaign generated additional initiatives, including an emphasis on judicial and political reforms, as well as the incorporation of social, medical, and academic perspectives on addressing violence. Although largely inactive today, Sociedad sin Violencia served as an institutional reference point for many small arms control activities and functioned as a monitoring and advocacy mechanism in El Salvador.[37]

Source: Interview with Marcela Smutt, UNDP, San Salvador, 17 August 2007.

urban communities. The following are among the projects selected by the World Bank (Muggah and Stevenson, forthcoming):

- *A Smile without Violence* (Honduras);
- *The Strengthening of Productive Businesses Belonging to Former Gang Members* (Honduras);
- *Promoting Peaceful Living and Conflict Negotiation in Schools with the Participation of Girls, Boys and Adolescents* (Nicaragua); and
- *Looking for a Change: Violence Prevention Contribution in Five Municipalities of Chinandega* (Nicaragua).

Local and municipal actors—such as governments, civil society, NGOs, the private sector, and academic institutes—oversee the implementation of the grants. Likewise, the IADB has supported large-scale citizen security and crime

prevention interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean since the late 1990s and developed considerable expertise in this field.

Public health agencies such as the WHO and others are also playing an increasingly active role in armed violence prevention and reduction.[38] The TEACH-VIP curriculum, developed by WHO and a network of injury prevention experts in 2004, and TEACH-VIP Youth, developed by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), serve as key training components for medical professionals, students, and partners in El Salvador in terms of violence prevention and care (WHO, 2008b).[39] Likewise, in Central America, the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence was launched in 2000. Composed of a network of international and regional agencies, the Coalition seeks to develop strategies and solutions for the growing crime and violence in the Americas (IACPV, 2008).[40]

Finally, other regional and national initiatives have emerged from among NGOs to address increasing gang violence. For example, the Coalición Latinoamericana para la Prevención de la Violencia Armada/Latin American Coalition for the Prevention of Armed Violence (CLAVE), a subnetwork of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) in Latin America, was created in 2006; the coalition includes members from Latin American NGOs working in the fields of armed violence, security, arms controls, and related research and provides a mechanism for collaboration. Similarly, the Red Centroamericana para la Construcción de la Paz y la Seguridad Humana (REDCEPAZ) is a network of partner NGOs throughout Central America working and collaborating on themes related to weapons, security, armed violence, and national and subregional policy.[41] These entities, among others, work nationally, regionally, and often with international networks. In spite of limited resources, they generate considerable data to enhance awareness and understanding of armed violence.

It remains unclear to what extent such second-generation initiatives represent a transformation in Central American policy culture, however. In a detailed study mapping out the incentives governing the institutional and organizational framework regarding youth violence reduction in Nicaragua, José Luis Rocha traces how the government's promotion of second-generation policies is in many ways highly cosmetic, and principally aimed at pleasing potential donors and raising international funds. On the ground, government action

remains much more first-generation in nature (Rocha, 2007c). Similar dynamics are evident in other Central American countries (Hume, 2007, p. 746), and there is little empirical evidence that second-generation approaches are actually achieving major social change (Barnes, 2007, p. 9).

Conclusion

Gangs constitute a very real but much misunderstood feature of the Central American panorama of violence. While there is no doubt that a significant proportion of regional violence is attributable to the phenomenon, gangs are relatively local-level security issues rather than the transnational threat that the media and some policy outlets make them out to be. Although they are clearly linked to certain deep-rooted issues such as the long legacy of war, machismo, and the availability of small arms in the region, they are also the consequence of increasing inequality and exclusion, and as such a reflection of the deeply iniquitous Central American social landscape. Certainly, a careful appraisal of the origins of gangs, as well as of their evolution over time, suggests that although they may often emerge in post-conflict contexts, such environments are not necessarily the primary determinants contributing to their emergence. Instead, most research on gang formation emphasises the role of social and economic variables such as marginalization, rapid and unregulated social change, and lack of meaningful opportunities.

Seen in this light, it is perhaps not surprising that the predominantly repressive approach to gangs adopted by Central American governments is not working. Not only has it exacerbated the problem, precipitating a tit-for-tat spiral of violence and radicalizing the gangs, but it also fails to remedy the underlying problems that generate gangs in the first place. Although second-generation initiatives potentially represent a huge improvement in this respect, they have had mixed results. While there have been some limited successes, there is little empirical evidence that this new approach is achieving major change of any sort, largely due to a lack of political will to properly implement it. The basic problem in this respect is that social policy will inevitably reflect the political landscape from which it emerges, and the biggest obstacle to dealing coherently with Central America's gang violence is thus the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of societies in the region. Many Central American governments appear to be using their highly publicized crackdowns on gangs

to avoid taking action on key issues such as exclusion, inequality, and the lack of job creation. In other words, gangs have become convenient scapegoats on which to blame the region's problems and through which those in power attempt to maintain a particular status quo. At the same time, however, they also embody the risk of violent bottom–up social action, which attempts to preserve unjust forms of social organization inherently generate.

Endnotes

1 A worrying spike in violence directed against women is also emerging. For example, Guatemala reported more than 560 cases of female homicides in 2005, while in Honduras, more than 195 women were murdered during the same period and almost 80 in 2006. See Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers (forthcoming).

2 Gangs are by no means an uncommon social phenomenon. They can be found in societies all over the world, although the vast majority of groups that are identified as 'gangs' are often little more than ephemeral bands of youths who gather on street corners and engage in behaviour that is frequently labelled 'anti-social'. In the proper sense of the term, gangs are more clearly defined social organizations that display an institutional continuity independent of their membership at any given time. They have fixed conventions and rules—which can include initiation rituals, a ranking system, rites of passage, and rules of conduct—that make the gang a primary source of identity for members. Gang codes often demand particular behaviour patterns from members, such as adopting characteristic dress, tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, and slang, as well as regular involvement in illicit and violent activities. Such gangs are also often associated with a particular territory, and their relationship with local communities can be either oppressive or protective (indeed, this relationship can change from one to the other over time). Central American gangs clearly correspond to the protective type of institution. For further general, definitional, and comparative information about gangs, see Hagedorn (2008); Kontos, Brotherton, and Barrios (2003); and Mohammed and Mucchielli (2007).

3 UNODC (2007, p. 61).

4 A follow-up report by the same author published in 2008 further contends that gang violence constitutes 'another kind of war [conflict] within the context of a "clash of civilizations" . . . being waged . . . around the world' (Manwaring, 2008, p. 1).

5 See Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2006a).

6 For more on the reliability of violence data for Central America, see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2006b, pp. 8–13).

7 For an overview, see Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2006b) as well as Liebel (2004). The most comprehensive overview study is undoubtedly the three-volume report produced by a conglomerate of Central American research institutes; see ERIC et al. (2001; 2004a; 2004b). Recent overview studies also include USAID (2006); Demoscopía (2007); and reports by CEPI (n.d.). The country that has been studied in greatest depth is unquestionably Nicaragua; see Rocha (2000a; 2000b; 2003; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c); Rocha and Rodgers (2008); Rodgers (1997; 2000; 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2008, 2009).

8 Using a rough scale of 1 to 100, where 100 reflects the most gang violence in a country, 'guesstimating' on the basis of qualitative studies would place El Salvador at 100, Honduras around 90, Guatemala around 70, Nicaragua around 50, and Costa Rica around 10.

9 See, for example, ERIC et al. (2001).

10 See Rodgers (1999, p. 3; 2006a, p. 285) as well as the more general case studies presented in ERIC et al. (2001).

11 The fact that most gang members are young men—and that Central America suffers the highest male youth homicide rates in the world (Pinheiro, 2006, p. 357)—indirectly supports the notion that gangs are an important factor within the regional panorama of violence.

12 One explanation for this resilience may be that the totalizing nature of evangelical Protestantism is such that churches constitute a complete organizational framework that is institutionally equivalent to that provided by a gang.

13 Despite the introduction of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes in the wake of various peace agreements, large numbers of ex-soldiers and -militia were only partially reintegrated into civilian life. See, for example, Muggah (2009) for a review of DDR programmes.

14 See Godnick, Muggah, and Waszink (2002, p. 4).

15 See Kruijt and Koonings (1999, p. 12); Koonings and Kruijt (2004, p. 3; 2007, p. 17).

16 See Rodgers (1999) for a historical overview.

17 'Maturing out' is a universal feature of youth gangs (Rodgers, 2000, p. 142). Evidence suggests that this is not quite as clear-cut in the case of *maras*, which are widely reported to have gang members up to 30 years of age, and from which it is said to be very difficult to 'retire'. See Demoscopía (2007); International Human Rights Clinic (2007).

18 The origins of the word *mara* are unclear. It has been widely suggested that it is derived from the word *marabunta*, a term used to describe a particularly vicious ant species in certain South American countries. The fact that these do not include El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras makes it an unlikely proposition, although considering the US origins of the *maras*, it might be speculated that the term derives from the classic US horror film *The Naked Jungle* (1954), in which an army of *marabunta* ants devastates a plantation in Brazil despite the best efforts of Charlton Heston. The film was remade for television in the early 1980s. It is interesting to note that, although purely speculative, this putative link was also mentioned in the first study of gangs ever carried out in Central America (Levenson et al., 1988).

19 This seems to have occurred almost universally in El Salvador and Honduras. Guatemala still is home to more localized *maras*, whose origins go back to the mid-1980s, and who are arguably closer in nature to *pandillas* (Levenson et al., 1988). The general trend, however, is for these *maras* to be increasingly absorbed within Dieciocho and Salvatrucha *mara* structures (Ranum, 2006). Deportee gang members are now becoming a minority as the rate of deportation from the US declines; they are taking on 'veteran' roles, influencing *mara* behaviour through their prestige rather than actually taking part in gang activities (Demoscopía, 2007, p. 49).

20 According to Ribando: 'gangs are generally considered to be distinct from organized criminal organizations because they typically lack the hierarchical leadership structure, capital, and manpower required to run a sophisticated criminal enterprise. Gangs are generally more horizontally organized, with lots of small subgroups and no central leadership setting strategy and enforcing discipline. Although some gangs are involved in the street-level distribution of drugs, few gangs or gang members are involved in higher-level criminal drug distribution enterprises run by drug cartels, syndicates, or other sophisticated criminal organizations'

(Ribando, 2007, pp. 1–2). As Geoff Thale, the Program Director of the Washington Office on Latin America, has testified before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, gangs are just one example of a 'broad spectrum of violence in Central America', which also includes intra-familial violence, street crime, politically motivated crimes, drug-related violence, traditional organized crime, state violence, and human rights violations (Ribando, 2007, p. 3).

21 The Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce and Industry claims that 80 per cent of its membership is being extorted by *mara* groups, and that some businesses are presently paying as much as USD 1,200–USD 1,400 per month in protection money (UNODC, 2007, p. 64).

22 See International Human Rights Clinic (2007); Rodgers (2006a); Rocha (2007a).

23 See Aguilar (2006); International Human Rights Clinic (2007); and Rodgers (2006a; 2007b; 2009).

24 See Rodgers (2006b; forthcoming).

25 Managua's notoriously abysmal road infrastructure, for example, was transformed in the space of just three years through a massive concentrated investment in the constitution of a highly selective network of good-quality, high-speed roads that connect the spaces of the rich—the international airport, the presidential palace, the gated communities, the malls—and have no traffic lights but only roundabouts, meaning that those in cars avoid having to stop (and risk being carjacked) but those on foot risk their lives whenever they try to cross a road. See Rodgers (2004; 2008).

26 See Aguilar (2006); Hume (2007); and Rodgers (forthcoming).

27 Although Nicaragua has become known for focusing on 'preventative' rather than 'repressive' anti-gang policies, the evidence of practices on the ground tends to belie this reputation (Rocha, 2007c). Yet overall, the police response to gangs has not been as violent as in other Central American countries, partly because of the less violent nature of the *pandillas* compared to the *maras*.

28 See, for example, Forter (2004), a study that surveys citizens in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

29 The Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence has shown that *Mano Dura* policies can be linked to a dramatic surge in youth violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—up to 40 per cent in the first three years of implementation (Gutiérrez, 2006).

30 One potential explanation for this decline in Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* is that the rise of these criminal organizations has arguably left no sociological 'space' for youth gangs (Rodgers, n.d.).

31 In Honduras, NGOs such as London-based Amnesty International and Casa Alianza have reported that death squads are killing youngsters suspected of belonging to gangs, often merely because they have tattoos. Casa Alianza has documented 2,778 murders of young people under the age of 23 between 1998 and July 2008. Most of the victims were members of *maras.* Because these murders are usually not investigated, the perpetrators enjoy total impunity, although there is no evidence pointing to the direct participation of the state in the ongoing killings. See Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers (forthcoming).

32 See Colletta and Muggah (2009) for a review of conventional security promotion and interim stabilization and second-generation approaches.

33 Examples of such programmes include Alianza para la Prevención del Delito (APREDE) in Guatemala, which stresses community participation and combines prevention, intervention,

and re-insertion strategies; Jóvenes Hondureños Adelante, Juntos Avancemos (JHA-JA), a rehabilitation and re-insertion programme that provides work opportunities for ex-gang members; and *Homies Unidos*, an organization of ex-gang members in El Salvador that works with youth and gang members to provide them with marketable work skills and employment.

34 See Muggah and Jütersonke (forthcoming).

35 Under the auspices of the SICA, and led by UNDP in Nicaragua, Central American states are undertaking diagnostics on armed violence and development. The analysis encompasses Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama and focuses on mapping ongoing armed violence interventions and programmes; the economic, social, and cultural impacts of armed violence; and existing legislation relating to weapons. It also includes a national survey on perceptions of security and armed violence for each country in the sub-region. See Muggah and Stevenson (forthcoming).

36 This study provides information on the causes of violence, key actors, important risk factors, the health and social costs of violence, and violence-related legislation. It also offers a baseline for understanding the problem and developing programmes to reduce armed violence. See Muggah and Stevenson (forthcoming).

37 See UNDP (2005, p. 27).

38 For example, UNDP and WHO launched the Armed Violence Prevention Programme, which includes pilot projects in El Salvador to understand the causes, nature, and impacts of armed violence (WHO and UNDP, 2005). In 2001, the group International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) launched Aiming for Prevention, an international campaign on preventing injuries from small arms and light weapons (IPPNW, n.d.).

39 Interview with Emperatriz Crespin, director of the IANSA/IPPNW Latin American Public Health Network and Independent consultant for PAHO in El Salvador/Programa Fomento del Desarrollo Juvenil y Prevención de la Violencia, San Salvador, 14 August 2007.

40 This project facilitates partnerships and collaboration among coalition members and civil society with the aim of reducing armed violence. Current members include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, IADB, the Organization of American States, PAHO, UNESCO, USAID, and the World Bank.

41 Key members of this network include the Arias Foundation in Costa Rica; Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD) in El Salvador; Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH) in Honduras; Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP) and Centro de Estudios Internacionales (CEI) in Nicaragua; Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES) in Guatemala; and Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ) in Panama. This tight-knit group of organizations often shares tasks, funding, and priorities, as well as national and technical expertise. Publications, information exchange, meetings, and other forms of collaboration are central to REDCEPAZ.

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