

**Central American Gangs:  
An Overview of the Phenomenon  
in Latin America and the U.S.**

by  
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**Origins of the Problem**

Beginning in the 1980's nearly a million Central American youth and their families from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras migrated to the U.S. to escape the hardship and violence associated with longstanding civil conflicts within the region (Cevallos, 2005; Triplett, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2004; Sullivan, 2005). Finding themselves out of their culture, living in poverty, and marginalized by other immigrant groups many Central American youth became involved with gangs in the U.S. Some of these youth formed gangs in Los Angeles (Campo-Flores et al, 2005)—most notably the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13)—while others joined existing gangs, primarily 18<sup>th</sup> Street, an established Hispanic gang that had been a feature of the Southern California gang scene for many years prior to the wave of Central American immigration. By the early 1990s MS13 had established itself and begun to challenge 18<sup>th</sup> St. for supremacy, and while no clear winner emerged (Rosenblatt, 2004) this rivalry ushered in a new era of Central American gang criminality and violence which continues today.

It was also during the early 1990s, partially in response to increasing levels of criminal gang activity, that the U.S. began mass deportations of youth back to Central America (Ribando, 2005; Swedish, 2004); a policy which officials would later realize contributed significantly to the proliferation of gangs in the region. According to the director of the FBI MS13 Task Force, it was following the implementation of this deportation policy that gangs became formalized and organized (Logan, Bain, and Kairies, 2006). Many of these young deportees were traumatized by early exposure to war, had no ties to family or community within their countries of origin, spoke little or no Spanish, and had significant criminal gang experience in U.S. (Arana, 2005; Cevallos, 2005; DeCesare, 1998; Garland, 2004; Johnson, 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005; Mahler, 1998; Ribando, 2005; Trujillo, 2005).

Arriving on deportation flights from the U.S., deportees were left to fend for themselves, as regional governments had no support programs in place to assist them during the transition back to their home countries (USAID, 2006). In fact Central American officials have been largely unaware of who these individuals were because only recently has the U.S. made efforts to disclose information regarding criminal deportees, and those practices are still not standardized (USAID, 2006). Consequently, seasoned gang members and youth at extraordinarily high risk for gang membership poured into the region by the thousands where for years they operated under government and law enforcement radar screens. Quite predictably, there was a phenomenal increase in the prevalence of gangs throughout the region during this period.

It was not youth alone that created the problem, however. As civil wars came to an end throughout the region, thousands of demobilized guerrillas and former military personnel found themselves unable to reintegrate into society. Many of these ex-combatants began forming gangs (Mahler, 1998), which, in addition to providing a home for the region's "feral" and otherwise at-risk youth, also served as a foundation for what would become today's sophisticated, transnational criminal networks. An important element in the unfolding of the Central American gang phenomenon was the fact that the region was awash in weapons leftover from decades of civil conflict and as former combatants, members of these emerging gangs were well versed in their use, desensitized to violence, and prepared to employ terror as a tactic when necessary.

In addition to these factors a number of other variables have contributed to the social, economic and political climate that has given rise to the Central American gang problem including: (a) extreme poverty and

chronic unemployment, (b) high levels of intra-familial dysfunction and violence, (c) social disorganization, (d) lack of government investment in young people, (e) a concentration of marginalized youth in urban areas, (f) corruption among police and public officials, (g) weak and corrupt justice systems, (h) media sensationalism and mismanagement of the gang phenomenon, (i) the absence of political will to address the problem in a holistic manner, (j) draconian anti-mara (anti-gang) laws that have exacerbated the problem, and (k) elected officials' decision to ignore the problem in its early stages and focus instead on political and economic reformation (Arana, 2005; Cruz, 2005; Garland, 2004; Johnson, 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005; Quesada, 2005; Ribando, 2005; USAID, 2006). Along with the variables already described, this noxious combination of factors created an ideal breeding ground for the proliferation of gangs, and underlies the transnational crisis that exists today.

### **Current Situation**

*Maras* and *pandillas* (gangs), the majority of which are affiliated with MS13 and 18<sup>th</sup> St., are ubiquitous in urban areas in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Additionally, in part because tough Mano Dura (tough hand) laws in Central America sent gang leaders and members off in search of new territories in which to operate, MS13 and 18<sup>th</sup> St. are now active in several Mexican states, a circumstance the Mexican government regards as a national security threat (Cruz, 2005; Rogers, 2005; Swedish, 2004). With wildly varying membership estimates that range between 70,000 (Trujillo, 2005; Ribando, 2005) and 300,000 (Campo-Flores et al., 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005), gangs are commonly portrayed by government officials and the media—correctly or incorrectly—as the principal threat to the region's international image and economic growth (Cruz, 2005) and main contributor to its high rates of crime and violence.

Within the region, gangs currently exist in two distinct but interrelated forms: First, youth gangs that engage in robbery, extortion, street level drug dealing, and other opportunistic crime but which lack significant criminal sophistication or well established linkages to gangs outside their own neighborhoods. Similar to the U.S., membership in these gangs includes a range of individuals from peripherally involved youth to hardcore members, both male and female. Second, highly organized adult-driven *clicas* (individual gangs) and networks with direct connections to organized crime and corrupt public officials which, in addition to the crimes listed above, also engage in international trafficking in narcotics, weapons, stolen vehicles, and persons (Arana, 2005; Campo-Flores et al, 2005; Johnson,

2005; Ribando, 2005; Rosenblatt, 2004; Swedish, 2004; Trujillo, 2005; U.S. State Department, 2005). As in the U.S., there is overlap between these manifestations of gang culture, as youth gangs are often used by their adult counterparts in relationships of convenience and to ensure the future viability of the gangs and network.

Both youth and adult gangs engage in extreme levels of violence, including high profile acts such as machete attacks, torture-rape, and decapitation of victims (Arana, 2005; Campo-Flores et al, 2005; Garland, 2004; Thompson, 2006) and are viewed with great antipathy by the public. In Central America, a region with a homicide rate nine times that in the U.S. (USAID, 2006), gangs are alleged to be responsible for up to 60 percent of all murders in El Salvador and Honduras (Ribando, 2005), and 20 percent in Guatemala (Johnson, 2005). Tragically, crime and violence in the post-conflict era are estimated to be as high as during the decades of civil war (Thompson, 2006), and while few reliable statistics exist to document gangs' contribution to the problem it is reasonable to conclude that it is significant.

Central America gangs' crime and violence has also spread beyond the region. In Mexico MS13 has turned human trafficking into an increasingly violent enterprise that routinely results in the extortion, robbery, rape, torture and murder of *campesinos* (peasants) as they travel northward toward the U.S. (Andersson, 2005; Arana, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Trujillo, 2005; U.S. State Department, 2005). As one MS13 member put it, "Migrants should know we rule here" (in Swedish, 2004). Mexican officials report that gangs are responsible for as many as 200 murders in the southern border state of Chiapas alone (Rogers, 2005). In Tapachula, a small Mexican town on the Guatemalan border which serves as a funneling point for northbound migration, residents live in continual fear, as the city has been paralyzed since its virtual take over by gangs (Sullivan, 2005).

Unfortunately, the effect of the phenomenon is not limited to Mexico and Central America. Within the U.S., law enforcement officials estimate that between 8,000 and 10,000 Central American gang members are operating in roughly 33 states, with particularly high concentrations in southern California, Texas, and the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area (Arana, 2005; Campos-Flores et al., 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005; Rosenblatt, 2004). And, as in Central America and Mexico, the criminality and high profile violence associated with these gangs has captured the attention of government officials, the media and the public. According to U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Assistant Secretary Julie Myers, "Transnational street gangs pose a growing public safety threat to urban and rural communities throughout the United States. Their violence,

sophistication, and scope have reached intolerable levels” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, 2006).

Aside from their obvious impacts on these communities, a largely unrecognized outcome associated with Central American gangs in the U.S. relates to their effect on innocent Latino immigrants and Latino-serving community agencies. Gangs prey on undocumented immigrants who are unlikely to report their activities to police, and extort them by threatening to harm family members still living in Central American and Mexico (USAID, 2006). In addition, members also undermine gang reduction efforts in the U.S. by targeting immigrant youth to join gangs and by intimidating gang outreach workers, who they perceive as threatening the expansion of gangs’ criminal activities and networks.

### **The Revolving Door**

Clearly, one of the most troubling aspects of the Central American gang phenomenon relates to its transnational implications. Not only do gang members move freely across Central American and Mexican borders, but there exists a “revolving door” between the region and the U.S. This undocumented migration results from a combination of factors which, in addition to efforts to extend their influence into new areas, includes gang members’ attempts to avoid criminal charges in one country by fleeing to another, and to escape the dangers associated with widespread “social cleansing” practices in Central America, i.e., extrajudicial executions carried out by vigilante death squads, rogue police units, clandestine military squads, and organized crime (USAID, 2006). Complicating the phenomenon even further is the fact that migration also occurs for reasons that are independent of gang membership such as rejoining family in other countries and seeking viable employment opportunities.

Attempts to respond to this “revolving door” phenomenon have thus far been hampered by conflicting political agendas and have resulted in unintended negative consequences. For example, from the standpoint of U.S. officials, it is imperative to maintain an aggressive policy of deporting gang members in order to protect American citizens and others living in this country. From the vantage point of Central American authorities, however, U.S. deportation policy only exacerbates an already out of control problem. According to Oscar Bonilla, director of the Salvadoran National Council for Public Security, “These deportations are a time bomb. When a gang member is deported from the United States, it destroys in one month what we’ve achieved in a year of gang prevention work” (Campo-Flores et al, 2005). One of the most adverse outcomes associated with the “revolving door”

phenomenon is that it strengthens existing criminal networks by facilitating a continual flow of gang members back and forth across international borders (USAID, 2006; U.S. Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 2005).

### **The Trap of Gang Membership**

Unlike the U.S. where despite the commonly accepted but *generally* erroneous belief that attempts to leave gangs are likely to result in death, this risk is a day to day reality for many Central America gang members who attempt to leave gangs. During recent interviews with the author, Central American government and police officials, gang specialists, human rights advocates, and gang members consistently reported that members attempting to extricate themselves from gang lifestyle face a range of potentially grave risks over which they exert little control.

First, youth are routinely injured and killed by members of their own *clicas* if they participate in intervention programs or attempt to leave the gang. Second, because a significant percentage of members are heavily tattooed on the body and face, they are easily identified and victimized by other gangs and shadowy elements in society that engage in “social cleansing” practices. Third, upon learning that members have left their gang, police often attempt to force disclosure of information about their former gang’s activities. If they refuse to comply they risk potentially violent interrogation and incarceration. If they do comply it is often tantamount to a death sentence with members of their former gang.

In addition to these immediate risks they face, members desiring to leave gangs bear the burden of having been stigmatized as “social pariahs” with no willingness or capacity to change, so there is essentially no public support for investing in these youth. On a personal note, the author’s experience on a recent trip to Honduras contrasted sharply with this commonly held public perception. During the six week evaluation of a gang rehabilitation and reinsertion program, I met with former gang members so committed to change that they had resorted to using battery acid to remove tattoos from their arms and faces, which unfortunately resulted in hideous scarring but did little to conceal these prominent gang identifiers. Several had become ordained or lay ministers and were now working in church sponsored gang prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion programs, oftentimes alongside former rivals. Others, both male and female, were placing themselves at tremendous risk by working as street outreach workers in gang affected areas, including neighborhoods of their former rivals.

Because of the levels of stigmatization, coupled with the security concerns described previously, former gang members desiring to change are

rarely able to enroll in school, gain legal employment, or participate recreational or other prosocial opportunities. Consequently, many who do successfully leave gangs become prisoners in their homes or are restricted to sheltered environments such as gang rehabilitation programs or churches. For example, fearing vigilante violence a number of gang members in Guatemala recently renounced their gang affiliations and became members of a born-again style evangelical church, believing this to be the only path out of gangs which affords them any security (Blue, 2006).

### **International and Regional Response**

A flurry of activity has occurred recently in response to the Central American gang crisis. Numerous international summits have been convened involving the Organization of American States, Central America presidents, regional and U.S. law enforcement officials, international development organizations, and Latin American and U.S. gang specialists. The U.S. Congress has identified the issue as one of significant national concern and representatives from the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other non-governmental organizations have testified in front of the Congressional Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere regarding the threat gangs pose to hemispheric political and economic stability (Ribando, 2005; USAID, 2006). The Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence—which includes representatives from World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, Pan American Health Organization, USAID, the Center for Disease Control and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—has as one of their primary objectives a reduction in the staggering levels of violence associated with gangs.

Despite the input of this diverse group of stakeholders, overall the response is still characterized primarily by law enforcement and repression strategies (Arana, 2005; Bermudez, 2005; Cevallos, 2005; Cruz, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005; Ribando, 2005; Rogers, 2004; Sullivan; 2005). El Salvador and Honduras have enacted *Mano Dura* legislation which emphasizes law enforcement and repression to the near exclusion of prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion (Cevallos, 2005; Creedon, 2003). Under *Mano Durisma*, gang membership itself is a crime punishable by up to twelve years in prison for “Illicit Association” and police have the right to make arrests on solely on suspicion of membership (Garland, 2004; Rogers, 2004). Guatemalan officials have considered, but not yet formally enacted *Mano Dura* laws; however, like El Salvador and Honduras, under the government’s *Plan Escoba* (Clean Sweep) the primary

response involves deployment of law enforcement and military personnel with only scant resources dedicated to prevention, rehabilitation or social reinsertion programs (USAID, 2006).

Similarly in the U.S., despite recognizing the need for a strategy that addresses the root causes of the problem (U.S. Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 2005), the response thus far has also focused primarily on law enforcement measures. These include: (a) Central American police training; (b) development of shared law enforcement databases; (c) inter-agency intelligence sharing; (d) creation of an MS13 task force and FBI field office in El Salvador; (e) the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's "Operation Community Shield," (f) new anti-gang and enhanced sentencing legislation (e.g., HB 1279); and (g) continued deportation of gang members back to Central America.

With respect to internationally sponsored non-law enforcement measures, the U.S. and other donors have, for many years, funded projects that one could argue may *indirectly* impact the problem by addressing some of its root causes. Examples include programs such as economic development, education, health care, rule of law, conflict resolution, crime and violence prevention, etc. Given the overall social, political and economic climate within the region these efforts are of great importance, but it is readily apparent that these traditional aid programs do not fully address the causes of gang proliferation, nor do they constitute a comprehensive or adequate response to the crisis.

What is needed, in addition to the type of international responses cited above, is a strategy designed to impact *directly* upon the current crisis that includes gang prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion efforts. Unfortunately, U.S. and international involvement and experience in this area are very limited. USAID is sponsoring a number of small-scale programs in Guatemala and is planning to support activities in El Salvador. The United Kingdom office of Save the Children recently closed out a five-year gang rehabilitation and social reinsertion program that focused on the two major urban areas of Honduras: Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The Inter-American Development Bank is supporting efforts in Honduras to develop micro-enterprises employing former gang members. In 2005, the Pan-American Health Organization, Washington Office on Latin America, and the Due Process of Law Foundation co-sponsored a conference called the "Voices from the Field" which brought together gang specialists and experts from a number of fields including law enforcement, human rights, public health, education, and rule of law. One of the outcomes associated this event was the establishment of the Central American Coalition for the Prevention

of Youth Violence. Additionally, with very limited funding and geographic reach, a few local churches and religious organizations are providing direct support to youth, plus various domestic and international human rights organizations are attempting to change public perception of gangs and gang members and influence government policy.

In terms of direct Central American government support for prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion programs, to the extraordinarily limited degree that these programs exist at all, their scope and effectiveness are undermined by grossly inadequate funding and a lack of political will. This circumstance is well illustrated in Honduras. Recognizing the need for an integrated approach to gangs, in 2001 the Honduran legislature approved the *Programa Presidencial por la Prevencion, Rehabilitacion, y Reinsercion Social de Personas Vinculados a Pandillas* (The Presidential Program for the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Social Reinsertion of People Connected with Gangs), also known as *la Ley Especial* (the Special Law). The role of the *Programa Presidencial* is to (a) support development of public policy, organizational capacity, and institutional alternatives that favor prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion of gang members; and (b) act as a coordinating entity for prevention, rehabilitation, and social reinsertion efforts throughout the country.

In spite of the upbeat language contained within this act, two problems plague the actual implementation of the model: First, in an interview with the author, the director of the *Programa Presidencial* stated that although the legislation was approved in 2001, no funds were appropriated until 2004 (by which time the problem was significantly worse) and funding levels have been insufficient to address the program's mandate in any meaningful way. Second, and possibly more important, in 2003, President Maduro—who was elected on an anti-crime, anti-gang platform—instituted *Mano Dura* legislation that put the intent of the *Ley Especial*, with its emphasis on prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion, into direct conflict with government policy which focuses almost exclusively on repressive measures. The recent election of President Manuel Zelaya, who in contrast to President Maduro promotes a more comprehensive approach to addressing gangs, holds promise but it will be some time before the effects of his influence can be assessed.

Within the U.S. there currently exists a very limited number of non-governmental rehabilitation and social reinsertion programs positioned to address the issue, and like their counterparts throughout Central America, these programs are seriously underfunded and unable to adequately address the extensive and complex needs of this population. Further, the small-scale

few U.S.-based programs that do exist are located in areas where the problem is the greatest, leaving the vast majority of affected small to mid-sized communities and rural areas with no programmatic resources to assist with the problem.

### **Outcomes Thus Far**

To date, the outcomes associated with these regional and international efforts have produced few positive or enduring benefits. The failure to produce long-term positive outcomes is rooted in the fact that (a) the phenomenon is seriously understudied and not well understood, (b) none of the regional or international stakeholders are positioned to address the problem in a comprehensive manner, (c) collaboration across organizations has proven difficult, (d) the scope of the problem overwhelms existing government, law enforcement and social service resources and expertise, (e) there exist competing conflicting domestic and international political agendas that block decisive action, and (f) there is no commitment on the part of governments to meaningfully address the root causes of the problem. As such, current strategies are best characterized by piecemeal measures that target symptoms (Johnson, 2005) and which are rooted in a combination of “Moral Panic” (for a review see St. Cyr, 2003) and elected officials’ efforts to demonstrate a “get tough on gangs” stance (Rogers, 2004).

Residents in gang-affected areas of Honduras reported to the author that immediately following the implementation of anti-mara laws there was a significant decline in the level of gang crime and violence. Following police sweeps gang members’ demands that store owners, bus drivers, and other small entrepreneurs pay “war taxes” or risk being killed decreased significantly. President Maduro claimed that homicides dropped 57 percent (Swedish, 2004) and informants reported that San Pedro Sula, an area of intense gang activity, experienced a dramatic decline in what had become a rampant kidnap-for-ransom enterprise. Unfortunately, according to these same informants, many of these gains were short-lived, and in the long-run the police response has simply shifted the problem to other areas or intensified it by causing gang members to become more clandestine and savvy. Additionally, in manner that was both unanticipated and horrendous, gangs in Honduras and Guatemala responded to *Mano Dura* laws by leaving the bodies of tortured and decapitated victims in the streets with notes attached to the bodies warning governments to cease persecution of gang members (Swedish, 2004). According to Emilio Goubaud, who works with gang members in Guatemala, “If they [the government] continue with this attitude these groups are going to become underground insurgents, and they

will generate a war against the police” (in Swedish, 2004).

Within the climate of *Mano Durisma*, thousands of known and suspected gang members have been killed through “social cleansing,” and numerous regional and international human rights groups have expressed grave concerns about the implications of governmental support for this approach (Arana, 2005; Cevallos, 2005; DeCesare, 1998; Garland, 2004; Ribando, 2005; Thompson, 2005). Honduran government and police officials acknowledged during interviews with the author that in that country alone over 2,800 suspected gang members were the victims of extrajudicial executions between 1998 and 2005, and it was not until 2003—under pressure from domestic and international human rights groups—that police even began investigating these deaths. According to Ricardo Rolando Diaz, director of the Honduran Security Ministry charged with investigating the deaths of minors, “Death squads patrol the neighborhoods frequented by gang members, seize suspects, and take them to the outskirts of the cities to kill them” (in Bermudez, 2005). Similarly, in the same article, Guatemalan human rights prosecutor Sergio Morales complained of a “social purge” that is in effect in his country which results in frequent extrajudicial killings of suspected gang members. Thus far attempts to identify the perpetrators of these killings and deconstruct the clandestine groups that commit them have been impeded by government cover-ups and corruption, so prosecutions have been rare (Logan, Bain, and Kairies, 2006; Thompson, 2006).

Also in response to anti-mara laws, thousands of Honduran and Salvadoran youth and adults have been arrested for the crime of “Illicit Association,” oftentimes based on nothing more than association with suspected gang members, or congregating in the gang affected neighborhoods in which they reside (Logan, Bain, and Kairies (2006). In El Salvador during the first three months after adopting *Mano Dura* laws in 2003, approximately 3,000 suspected members were arrested in neighborhood police roundups, with 80 percent eventually being released for lack of evidence of gang affiliation (Creedon, 2003). By 2004 the number arrested on suspicion of gang membership in that country had grown to approximately 8,500 (Garland, 2004) but by spring of that year only 425 had been convicted and formally sentenced to prison, in part because judges were refusing to implement these repressive laws (Swedish, 2004). A particularly heinous phenomenon has been the mass killings of incarcerated gang members. In Honduras and Guatemala, a number of highly publicized prison fires resulted in the deaths of hundreds of gang members who suffocated or burned to death in their cells. Also, in at least two instances prison riots broke out where members of one gang mysteriously came to be in possession of

firearms and machetes attacked and massacred rivals. In both the fires and riots, investigators found evidence of complicity on the part of corrections officials.

Aside from the obvious human rights issues associated with such laws and policies, other concerns exist. For instance, mass arrests of known and suspected gang members has caused prison populations to balloon, and Central American correctional facilities now serve as little more than “gang finishing schools” (Arana, 2005; Bermudez, 2005; Cevallos, 2005; Johnson and Muhlhausen, 2005; Ribando, 2005). Additionally, while several Honduran mareros (gang members) acknowledged to the author that anti-mara laws influenced them to try to leave gangs (one of whom has since been killed as a result), the majority stated that they have become more committed to gang lifestyle because Mano Durisma emphasizes repression to the virtual exclusion of rehabilitation and social reinsertion programs that could provide them the assistance they need to leave gangs and create a more positive future, an observation also noted by Garland (2004).

### **Law Enforcement and Social Service Response Capacity**

In terms of the current response capacity of law enforcement agencies, the situation is not favorable. Long defined by a history of corruption, lack of professionalism, and serious budget constraints few Latin American police agencies are positioned to address the phenomenon effectively. A small but important group of influential law enforcement officials in the region understand the gang phenomenon from a macro-level perspective and are attempting to change police culture and increase levels of professionalism, but they acknowledge that this represents a long term endeavor and progress has been slow. Support from the U.S. has been helpful in assisting gang investigators and community policing officials, but generally speaking police are still poorly funded, under trained, out-gunned, and amenable to corruption because of abysmally low salaries.

With respect to social service capacity, there exists great passion on the part of program personnel but effective linkages between churches, civic organizations, gang programs, human rights groups, and law enforcement are weak or non-existent. Communication and cooperation occur between some of these programs within and between countries throughout the region, but the collaborative structures necessary to increase efficiency and improve outcomes are seriously under developed or are not yet in place. Moreover, there are few well established linkages between regionally-based organizations and programs targeting Central American gang members in affected U.S. cities.

### **Current Research-Based Understanding of the Phenomenon**

Despite its significant regional and transnational implications, the Central American gang phenomenon has been the subject of precious little empirical research and data on gangs is unreliable and inconsistent (USAID, 2006). A limited number of studies have been conducted by Latin American researchers, but this research has been hampered by the dearth of reliable data and findings have not been made readily available in English. Consequently, most of what is known about the phenomenon is anecdotal or based on investigations conducted by the media, human rights organizations, and various international development agencies with a stake in the region. And while informative, findings from these investigations are descriptive in nature and do little to enhance our empirical understanding of the problem and its many complex dimensions.

Many fundamentally important questions have yet to be addressed by researchers. For instance, there are presently no reliable statistics regarding the (a) number of gang members, (b) gangs' actual contribution to crime and violence within the region or in the U.S., (c) dimensions of Central American gang violence (e.g. intra and inter-gang, extrajudicial executions, public victimization), (d) effects of regional and U.S. laws and policies, (e) factors that affect gang member migration, (f) networks that facilitate that migration, or (g) components of effective prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion programs and how to best implement those efforts.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As illustrated by Central American gangs' increasing numbers, influence, and geographic reach, it has become increasingly clear that current strategies have intensified the Central American gang problem by minimizing the need to support law enforcement measures with prevention, rehabilitation, and social reinsertion components and by de-emphasizing even the most fundamental human rights. Of particular concern is the fact that the strategies thus far employed in Central America mirror policies and practices that have proven ineffective over the past several decades in the U.S. as we struggled with our own gang problem (for a review see Howell, 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). Given the gravity of the problem and tenuous economic and political conditions which characterize the region, it is clear that neither the Central American nor U.S. governments can afford to invest in strategies that result in marginal or counterproductive outcomes.

At this point, only a commitment on the part of Central American and U.S. officials to develop an empirical understanding of the problem and

embark upon efforts to create and implement a coordinated transnational strategy that includes a balance of law enforcement, prevention, rehabilitation and social reinsertion strategies offers hope for positive outcomes. But accomplishing this objective will require a long-term commitment on the part of the U.S. to support change agents within Central American civil society with the expertise and desire to address the root causes of the crisis. We will also have to work with Central American and U.S.-based gang programs and human service organizations to build organizational capacity and develop transnational professional networks capable of addressing the complex needs of this population. Unfortunately, despite the urgency associated with this issue and past rhetoric, there exists little evidence to suggest that this type of long term commitment and support is likely to be forthcoming in the immediate future.

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### **About the Author**

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