

This conference report is dedicated to the late Margaret Popkin. Her contributions to this conference and her dedication to finding an effective and lasting solution to the problem of gang violence will live on in her memory.



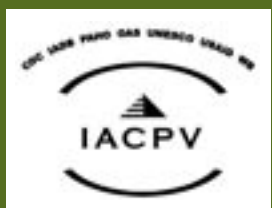
Professor Malcolm Klein, keynote speaker at the conference from the University of California.

## ***Voices from the Field:***

# Local Initiatives and New Research on Central American Youth Gang Violence

On February 23, 2005, more than 275 people came together in the auditorium of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in Washington, DC for a conference entitled, “Voices from the Field: Local Initiatives and New Research on Central American Youth Gang Violence.” The conference was sponsored by the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence (IACPV), the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the Due Process of Law Foundation (DPLF), and the Pan American Health Organization. The sponsors were conscious of the growing problem of youth gang violence in Central America, convinced that youth violence is a public health and social policy issue as well as a public security issue, and concerned that some of the hard-line approaches to the problem being advocated in Central America were likely to be ineffective and violated principles of human rights and the due process of law.

The conference aimed to bring together “voices from the field”—current practitioners in the field of youth violence prevention, intervention, and suppression—in a forum that would encourage discussion, exchange, and collaboration among those involved in the international and regional response to youth violence. The audience included a wide range of social service providers and community activists, academics, U.S. and





Lainie Reisman, Coordinator of the Inter American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence, presented the opening remarks at the conference.

“The increase in gang criminal activity and violence has caused regional leaders to begin to develop a comprehensive plan to address the gang issues in our region. This approach and discussion caused all stakeholders to realize that gangs are not just a law enforcement problem.”

—Northern Virginia  
Regional Gang  
Task Force

Central American government officials—involved in law enforcement, criminal justice, and public health—representatives of international organizations and the NGO community. The conference was covered by print, radio, and television journalists in both

Spanish and English from the U.S. and Central America. “Voices from the Field” was a first step in establishing an ongoing transnational and multi-sectoral dialogue process committed to crafting effective and rights-respecting strategies for youth gang violence prevention and intervention.

Along with generating dialogue among the diverse actors involved in youth gang violence prevention and intervention, “Voices from the Field” provided a platform for the presentation and discussion of innovative programs underway in Central America, with the hope that others could learn from and build on the success of these programs.

## The Problem of Youth Gang Violence

Over the past decade, youth gangs have grown throughout Central America—estimates of the number of youth gang members in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala range from a low of 30,000 to a high of 250,000. In the United States as well, gangs made up of Central American immigrant youth, or of the U.S.-born children of Central American immigrants, are growing, with reports of gang activity in longtime immigrant communities in cities such as Washington DC and Los Angeles, as well as in smaller communities with more recent Central American immigrant populations.

Gangs provide a social space for their members. Too often, they also engage in illegal activities, including drug use; engage in violent behavior directed at other gang members; and take part in criminal activities, including theft and robbery, extortion of neighborhood residents and store owners, and drug dealing. Gang members sometimes become involved in organized crime.

The violence and insecurity generated by youth gangs themselves, combined with instances of inflammatory media reports, have fueled popular fears both in Central America and in the United States. (Many media reports have sensationalized the behavior of youth gang members, portraying them all as violent and brutal delinquents and blaming them for all crime. Other reports by media and government representatives have gone as far as linking youth gangs to international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, with no evidence supporting their claims). The result has been to encourage public support for heavy-handed policing strategies in Central America, especially in Honduras and El Salvador, rather than to build support for a more balanced strategy that combines appropriate law enforcement with public health and violence prevention programs.

## The Conference

“Voices from the Field” was organized around two major panels. The first panel, *Promising Local Initiatives*, included presentations from a mix of Central Americans involved in anti-gang initiatives. Speakers represented Homies Unidos, a group active in both El Salvador and Los Angeles; the Alliance for the Prevention of Crime/APREDE, an NGO active in Guatemala; *Jovenes Hondureños Adelante*, *Juntos Avancemos*, a group that works with young people in Honduras; and the Youth Unit of the Nicaraguan National Police. The second substantive panel, *Emerging Sectoral Approaches*, included

speakers from four different sectors discussing youth violence and possible approaches to the problem. The speakers included local law enforcement officials from the United States, a public health specialist, a Central American sociologist, and representatives of a private sector organization that employs former gang members.

The conference also featured keynote addresses by Professor Malcolm Klein of the University of Southern California, a well-known academic specialist on youth gangs in the U.S. and Europe, and Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, Special Rapporteur on children's rights for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) and United Nations Independent Expert on violence against children. A series of brief introductory presentations were made by the organizers including WOLA, DPLF, and members of the Inter American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence (PAHO, IDB, USAID, CDC, World Bank), a coalition that seeks to advance violence prevention in the Americas. This report summarizes the conference proceedings, including the open sessions focusing on conclusions and next steps. It is not a verbatim transcript, but rather an effort to capture the main ideas of the panelists.

Professor Malcolm Klein opened the conference. He argued that any approach to youth gang violence must begin with a clear, workable definition of what is a "youth gang." Klein proposed a working definition of a street gang as, "any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its identity." He noted that youth gang violence is a specific subset of youth violence in general, and that there are distinctions to be made among different youth gangs—in membership, in structure, in leadership functions—which must be identified in order to create an effective approach to the problem.

Professor Klein outlined four key factors that must be part of any "effective approach" to the problem of youth gang violence. First, the approach must "target" well; it must identify who gang members and potential gang members are, including an understanding of the functional reasons for gang membership. Second, it must take into account the "cohesiveness" of youth gangs, being aware that the oppositional culture of gangs often causes groups to band together more tightly in the face of challenges. Third, it must understand the "structure" of the youth gangs it is attempting to deal with, recognizing that variations in gang structure require different programmatic approaches. And fourth, it must take into account the specific "community context" in which the youth gang operates, knowing the key characteristics of the community to understand why gangs form and how the community can be involved in the solution.

In the first panel, "Promising Local Initiatives in Central America", speakers from Central America described their own work, and outlined what they saw as major issues that need to be addressed.

Panelists discussed the political and social context in Central America in which gangs have emerged, and talked about government responses. A recurring theme was the adoption of "*mano dura*" policies by Central American governments. "*Mano dura*" or "heavy hand" approaches involve the wide-scale arrest of young people who appear to be gang members, rather than targeted arrests based on criminal behavior. They include tough sentencing laws, and relatively low evidentiary standards. They take gang members off the streets, and add to the overcrowding of Central American prisons. Speakers criticized "*mano dura*" approaches, noting especially that prison overcrowding has led to difficult conditions, prison riots, and a number of deaths. Speakers and audience members who work with young people noted that these policies often emerge in a climate of



Hamyn Gurdian of the National Police Youth Unit of Nicaragua

"In reality, in dealing with the gang violence issue, attention has primarily been focused on the war against gangs. Nevertheless, due to the failure of *mano dura* policies, the governments of Central America are now ready to consider focusing more on preventative strategies based on successful experiences of civil society initiatives."

—Jose Miguel Cruz

"The gang violence phenomenon is an international problem.

Only by working together at all levels of government and society can we give youth a chance."

—Emilio Goubaud

fear and media sensationalism, leading to a public in search of quick solutions and the approval of punitive, repressive measures. Speakers saw it as critical to understand the situation of young people themselves, and argued that the politicization of the gang issue has impeded the development of a clear understanding of the problem and the search for comprehensive solutions. Additionally, they argued that "*mano dura*" policies disregard due process of law issues, leading to violations of human and civil rights.

Speakers discussed their own work with young people and with gangs, and drew conclusions based on their work. They argued that in order to effectively address the gang problem, measures must be taken to invest in prevention and rehabilitation programs, moving away from a primary focus on repressive measures. It is essential for youth to have access to education, job training, recreation, and health services. The failure to address these needs is part of what leads some young people to join gangs in the first place.

Speakers also emphasized that all sectors involved and affected by the gang phenomenon must be involved in the creation and implementation of gang violence prevention and intervention programs. A multi-sectoral approach that involves government, police, communities, schools, churches, health care providers, the criminal justice sector, businesses, and the youth themselves, is vital. Community policing—in which local police meet with community groups and churches, school officials, local government

and NGOs, and seek to coordinate law enforcement with social programs—was cited as an example of how integrating various sectors in the creation of social initiatives can make a more significant and lasting impact on the level of gang activity and in the number of youth joining gangs.

Speakers recommended that significant funding for integrative approaches be provided to ensure a substantial and sustainable impact.

Also key to addressing the gang problem is an increase in available data, and greater information sharing between the sectors—police, public agencies, community groups, etc.—involved in dealing with youth gangs. A number of speakers noted that very little hard data has been collected to date on youth gangs in Central America. They noted wide variations in estimates of the total number of gang members in Central America which have ranged from 30,000 to 250,000. And they noted that crime statistics in the region often do not differentiate among different forms of violence; it is hard to tell what crimes can be attributed to youth gangs, and what crimes come from other sources including domestic violence, organized crime, and drug trafficking. A more realistic understanding of the problem and the extent of youth gang violence will depend on developing better data. It would be useful as well to have better breakdowns on crime, and on youth gang membership, that look at factors such as gender, age, ethnic background, etc.

The second keynote speaker was Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Special Rapporteur on children's rights for the Inter-American



**ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM:** Manuel Jiménez, president of Suspect Entertainment, a talent company in LA that provides job opportunities for former gang members in the entertainment industry. The company is a prime example of how the private sector can play a key role in prevention and rehabilitation.



Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS). He traveled to Central America in order to investigate violence against youth in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, in a visit supported by UNICEF. At “Voices from the Field,” Professor Pinheiro presented the soon-to-be published conclusions of his visit.

Dr. Pinheiro commented that youth gangs are ubiquitous throughout the region. He noted that they have emerged within a context of widespread stigmatization and discrimination against marginalized young people. He also noted that youth gang violence has emerged in a regional context that includes increased small arms trade, drug trafficking, and increased violence more generally. Gangs typically include males and females between the age of 15-25, have clear territories of domination, control, and rivalry, display symbols of recognition including clothing and tattoos, and have easy access to small arms and drugs. Members demonstrate an intense loyalty to the gang.

Dr. Pinheiro described what he found to be the root causes of gang membership and violence. He noted that the gang phenomenon tends to be prevalent in areas that are economically depressed and have a lack of education, housing, food, and healthcare. Often, gang members have been victims of domestic violence themselves and/or are part of a broken home. More generally, he sees all of these “root causes” and the gang problem itself, as direct and indirect results of the years of civil war that have ravaged many of the countries in the Central American region.

In order to improve respect for children’s rights in Central America, Dr. Pinheiro made several recommendations related to the youth gang issue. He highlighted the role of civil society in opposing unduly repressive measures and advocating for democratic, just procedures. Dr. Pinheiro also called for judicial reform that would

promote transparency, accessibility, and accountability of the judicial and security systems in the region. In line with the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), all states should craft policies that respect the “best interest of the child,” by protecting civil and political rights, ensuring liberty and dignity, and promoting children’s development to their fullest potential.

The second panel, “Emerging Sectoral Approaches”, examined issues related to youth gang violence from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Presenters came from different sectors: law enforcement, public health, sociology, and the private sector. Much of what was said by this panel was consistent with the morning’s presentations.

Discussions about the gang phenomenon often describe the problem as the result of the wars in Central America, U.S. deportation policy, or poverty. Behind these critical factors lie an even more complex set of economic, social and political factors. Panelists highlighted the ways in which a culture of violence, rapid uncontrolled urban expansion, insufficient community support and cohesiveness, family dysfunction, social exclusion, and identity conflicts for young people, all contribute to the gang phenomenon. These are difficult problems to confront, and there has been little political will to address them. Speakers emphasized that programs that seek to solve the gang problem must address these factors rather than focusing on short-term “quick fix” solutions which are largely ineffective, and invest in the development, evaluation and dissemination of effective practice in this area.

Speakers emphasized that, in addition to understanding *why* gangs exist in Central America, it is imperative to understand more about them in their current context, answering questions such as “Who



Alberto Concha-Eastman of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)

“Sensationalism of the gangs issue by the media blames youth as principally responsible for Central America’s level of criminal violence, criminalizing and stigmatizing the youth.”

—Ernesto Bardales



Juan Pacheco of Barrios Unidos, one of many youth participants who attended the conference.

belongs to gangs and why do they join?”, “What are the organizational structures of gangs?”, “What sort of activities (criminal and non-criminal) do gang members participate in?”, and “What are the recruitment strategies used to attract members and whether gang members can effectively leave gangs?” Speakers noted that there is little hard information about youth gangs, making it more difficult to formulate effective strategies. And they repeated the need for a clear, and uniform definition of what constitutes a gang, and gang violence.

A number of specific programs were mentioned. One model research project collected qualitative data on gang-involved young people in the United States who were themselves both victims and perpetrators of violence and who extricated themselves from a violent lifestyle. The 9-year study showed that many gang members have experienced painful personal losses due to violence, substance abuse, and prison, and mapped the way out of violence involvement, through a dynamic and iterative process, facilitated by changes in self-perception, the development of new skills and capacities, the transition to new roles and social contexts, and by social investment. The study determined that youth victims of violence need specific support structures (family, friends, community), rehabilitation to address feelings of helplessness and fear, and help to deal with the increased victimization risk that some youth may face when leaving some gangs.

This research can be useful to the communities, law enforcement, government, and schools in determining what elements might assist gang violence prevention and intervention programs foster pathways out of serious delinquency and violence.

Police officials from northern Virginia discussed the approach they take to the growing problem of youth gang violence. Several different police forces have created

a regional anti-gang task force, which coordinates prevention, intervention, and law enforcement with police and community members. The task force has made a concerted effort to include key actors such as the courts, correctional officers, school officials, and local organizations.

An emphasis was placed on the fact that rehabilitation programs need to treat young people with respect. Stigmatization by society and the community can be fatal. Gang members are eager for respect and belonging, and rehabilitation programs must recognize this, and listen to the voices of the youth themselves

Employment opportunities are key to both prevention and rehabilitation. Offering alternatives to gang membership, particularly stable long-term job opportunities, is critical.

Speakers emphasized three key components that must be included in comprehensive programs to deal with youth gang violence: prevention, law enforcement, and rehabilitation. There should be a focus on preventative measures to cut down on the need for law enforcement and rehabilitation programs which are costly and difficult to maintain.

Prevention programs are not only a key element of a well-balanced approach to gang violence, they are also cost-effective. A World Health Organization report states that billions of dollars are lost each year to preventable forms of violence. “A number of studies from the United States estimate that providing graduation incentives for high-risk youth and parent training for new parents are, respectively, between seven- and five-times more cost-effective in preventing violence than investing in increased legal enforcement and incarceration.” The full text of the report can be found at: [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/media/news/09\\_06\\_2004/en](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/media/news/09_06_2004/en).



Joan Serra Hoffman of the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

## Conclusions

Speakers at this conference came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Nonetheless, a number of common themes emerged from the presentations and the discussion.

First, youth gangs and violence emerged as a complex issue dependent upon a multitude of factors. Speaker after speaker emphasized the need for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach integrating law enforcement with non-governmental organizations, public health officials, and the community as the best strategy for preventing and intervening to reduce youth violence. Effective anti-gang efforts require cooperation between all sectors. A one-sided emphasis on law enforcement is a mistake. Participants commended conference organizers for bringing together diverse actors to focus on prevention for the first time.

Second, programs to address youth gang violence must recognize underlying factors of marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination. These can have dramatic impacts on the propensity of youth to join gangs. Social marginalization can be a risk factor for gang involvement. High school drop-out rates and high unemployment levels for young people increase the likelihood that youth will become involved with gangs. In order to address young people's needs, social marginalization and discrimination must be understood and addressed. Furthermore, existing myths around gang membership must be dispelled to effectively address the problem.

Third, speakers almost unanimously criticized "mano dura" style policing strategies, arguing that they stigmatized young people, were ineffective, and encouraged law enforcement practices that violate civil liberties and due process. Most speakers urged the development of "community policing" approaches as a way to deal with youth gang violence

that involves communities in prevention efforts.

Fourth, the nature and extent of youth gang violence is affected by the ready availability of illegal drugs and small arms, and by the growing regional trade in drugs and weapons. Drug and substance abuse pose significant risks to young people, and the wide availability of small weapons contributes to lethal youth violence. Reductions in the availability of drugs and small arms will have a positive impact on youth violence. Efforts should focus on the organized criminal networks involved in drugs and arms trafficking and distribution. Recent suppressive tactics employed by many Central American governments have disproportionately focused on youth gang members, while adults involved in drug and arms trafficking have received less attention.

Fifth, many speakers criticized the media sensationalism that contributes to the stigmatization of young people, and helps build a climate of fear and support for repressive policing strategies. One example raised was the media attention around alleged contacts between Central American youth gangs and Al-Qaeda agents. The U.S. FBI later told a Congressional committee it had found "no evidence" of such contacts.

Sixth, speakers recognized the need for further research on the issue of youth gang violence particularly in the Central American context. In addition to basic statistical information, research needs to be conducted on the nature, structure, membership, and rituals of gang members as well as the effectiveness of diverse programs and policies.

The conference ended with a call to address these issues, and with an appeal for more multi-sectoral discussions in Central America about the problem of youth gang violence.

## Conference Participants

### OPENING REMARKS

**Dr. Gina Tambini**, *Pan American Health Organization*

**Lainie Reisman**, *Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence*

### KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

**Professor Malcolm Klein**, *University of Southern California*

**Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro**, *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*

### PANEL ON LOCAL INITIATIVES

**Eduardo Linares, Silvia Beltrán, and Rocio Santa Cruz**, *Homies Unidos (El Salvador and Los Angeles)*

**Emilio Goubaud**, *Alliance for the Prevention of Crime (Guatemala)*

**Ernesto Bardales**, *Jovenes Hondureños Adelante, Juntos Avancemos (Honduras)*

**Comisionado Mayor Hamyn Gurdian**, *National Police Youth Unit (Nicaragua)*

### PANEL ON INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES:

**Margaret Popkin**, *Due Process of Law Foundation*

**Juana Salazar**, *Inter-American Development Bank*

**Alberto Concha-Eastman**, *Pan American Health Organization*

**Michael Maxey**, *U.S. Agency for International Development*

**Rodney Hammond**, *U.S. Center for Disease Control & Prevention*

**Geoff Thale**, *Washington Office on Latin America*

**Roberto Chavez**, *World Bank*

### PANEL ON SECTORAL APPROACHES:

**Chief Joseph Price and Chief Toussaint Summers**, *Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force*

**Joan Serra Hoffman**, *U.S. Center for Disease Control & Prevention*

**Jose Miguel Cruz**, *University of Central America, San Salvador*

**Manuel Jiménez**, *Suspect Entertainment*

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

**Rodrigo Guerrero**, *Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence*

## About the Organizers

**WOLA:** The Washington Office on Latin America is a non profit policy, research, and advocacy organization working to advance democracy, human rights and social justice in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**IACPV:** The Inter American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence consists of 7 member organizations (including PAHO, IDB, USAID, CDC, World Bank, UNESCO, and OAS) which promote the implementation of comprehensive strategies for crime and violence reduction based on prevention, education, and social capital-building in the region of the Americas.

**DPLF:** The Due Process of Law Foundation is a nongovernmental organization based in Washington, DC, that seeks to promote the reform and modernization of national justice systems in the Western Hemisphere to ensure that the rule of law becomes the hallmark of the justice system in each country in the region.

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For more information including reports and presentations from the conference, please visit us at [www.wola.org/gangs/gangs.htm](http://www.wola.org/gangs/gangs.htm). An electronic version of this report will be available.

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