

Testimony of Lainie Reisman

Before the  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
Hearing on  
“Violence in Central America”

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to with you today regarding violence in Central America. My name is Lainie Reisman and I work with the Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence. The Coalition is a diverse group of bilateral and multi-lateral agencies working in the field of violence prevention including the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Pan-American Health organization (PAHO), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank. The Coalition was formed in 2000 to promote a new paradigm in which prevention is viewed as a particularly effective means to address violence and crime in the region of the Americas. I would like to clarify that my testimony today does not represent the opinions of the Coalition member organizations.

Before entering into a discussion of youth gang violence which I understand is the primary interest of the Subcommittee, I would like to situate the issues of youth gang violence within a broader context. Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world. While accurate, reliable and comparable data is virtually impossible to obtain, an analysis of intentional homicide rates nonetheless puts Central America on the top of the global scale, with both El Salvador and Guatemala widely regarded to have the dubious distinction of being high on the top-ten list.

While the topic of today's discussion is Central America, it is likewise important to keep in mind other highly violent regions of the Americas. In particular, violence is a major issue for the Caribbean, which is often overlooked due to its diverse, relatively small, and widely dispersed population. In fact, in a recent study published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, states that while traditionally Colombia and South Africa have reported the highest homicide rates, "it is now likely that Jamaica presently has the highest recorded intentional homicide rate among all countries for which reliable data are available, with El Salvador coming a close second." (UNODC, 2007). I also want to draw attention to the fact that Central America is not unique in having a proliferation of

gangs. Gang activity is common throughout the region of the Americas, notably in Jamaica, Haiti, and Brazil. However, there are clear reasons why the Central American situation has developed differently which I will subsequently address.

It also bears noting that homicide statistics capture but a small percentage of violent acts. Central America, with its conflictive past and extremely high levels of income inequality, is marked by persistent and recurring forms of violence, which perhaps not as publicized as gang violence, nonetheless have a much broader impact throughout the populace.

These include high levels of child abuse, inter-family violence, sexual abuse, and self-directed violence and suicides. Taking into account the impacts of violence in terms of costs to treat victims, lost productivity, long-term emotional and psychological damage and other related issues violence becomes perhaps the biggest, and most complex, challenge facing the region. The levels of violence in the region have led the public health sector to deem the existence of a violence pandemic. And I would be remiss if I did not state for the record my extreme concern regarding the reports of femicide in Guatemala and extra-judicial killings of young men and women throughout the region.

At this point I would like to turn my attention to the subcommittee's specific request to discuss violence carried out by youth gangs in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala – which for simplicity sake I will collectively refer to as Central America although noting they are but three out of the seven Central American countries and that the notorious Central American gangs have a presence well beyond these three countries, stretching throughout the hemisphere and indeed the world.

In the remainder of this testimony, I would like to emphasize three main points: First, the Central American gangs are not newly formed threats, however the rise in their visibility, increasing use of violence, and cross-border presence are characteristics of an increasingly sophisticated structure. Second, the hard-line responses favored by several Central American governments and to some extent our own have not proved to be effective in reducing gang violence. And third, to be able to truly address gang violence in Central America, as well as in our own country, we need to have greater cross-border

and cross-sectoral collaboration in addition to increased resources to support tested prevention strategies.

### **1. Why the sudden alertness to Central American gangs?**

In discussing Central American gangs, reference is typically made to the two major transnational gangs of *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS13) and *Calle 18* (18th Street). Of course these are but two of the myriad of gangs with ties to, or physical presence in, Central America. Nonetheless, these two have emerged as leaders of the pack and competition between MS13 and 18 Street contributes to the growth of gangs and their increasing violent nature. Both MS13 and 18 Street were formed in the United States, more specifically in Los Angeles. MS13 traces its roots back to the early 1970s when the flows of refugees and displaced peoples from Central America began to peak and MS13 formed to protect the Salvadorean immigrants from the entrenched LA gangs. It is believed that MS13 now has a presence in up to 30 countries worldwide and is notorious in the United States for having orchestrated the violent murder of witness Brenda Paz, who was scheduled to testify in multiple murder cases against her MS13 friends. In Honduras, MS13 claimed responsibility for a deadly bus massacre in which 28 civilians were killed in 2004. The 18th Street Gang actually predates MS13 and ties go back as far as the 1940s, but its formation is characterized by being an alternative to the well established Mexican gangs. It too has a long list of deadly and violent crimes attributed to its members.

So if the gangs have been around for decades, why the sudden dramatic increase in visibility over the past few years? I posit that there are three main contributing factors. The first relates to the vacuum in power created as a result of the end of the internal armed conflicts and the establishment of new civilian security forces. While the demobilization processes in Central America were relatively quick and successful, the establishment of a professional police corps, working independently, has been one of the biggest challenges to the consolidation of peace in the region.

The lack of adequate funding continues to be a major factor, with meager police salaries eclipsed by money to be made in both the legitimate private sector as well as the ever-present temptation of criminal activities. Corruption is considered to be a major burden for all of the security forces in the region, and the continued official role of the military in domestic crime issues is not only in direct contradiction to the peace accords of the region but also in a more practical sense, has not helped solve internal security problems. Central America is further characterized by a flourishing and profitable private security industry, with up to three times as many private security guards as police officers. It is thus at this moment in time, with a weak police force that is under-resourced and exposed to temptation and a booming industry developing around private security, that the gangs begin to consolidate their strength and control.

The second contributing factor has to do with an increased visibility of the gangs and gang activities in the press and in political campaigning. Through its often excessive and sensationalist coverage of the gangs, the media has actually contributed to a climate of fear and insecurity in the region, which in turn has led the public to support drastic responses. On an anecdotal level, while speaking with media leaders in the region I was told in no uncertain terms that images of gang members, dead or alive, but best if covered in tattoos, help to sell newspapers. Added to the perverse role of the press is the tendency of many Central American politicians, notably in the case of El Salvador and Honduras, to use the gang threat as a tool for political campaigning. Given that crime and insecurity is considered to be the number problem for the three countries in mention, and many others, as cited by Latinobarometro in 2006, it enters into the political agenda in every country. However, the specific gang threat is often overstated and manipulated to serve political interests. For example, the former Security Minister of Honduras blamed the gangs for the bulk of the criminal activity in Honduras; however, government data suggests that less than 5 percent of all crime is committed by people less than 18 years of age (UNODC). This climate of fear, partly inculcated by the governments of the region, culminated in the President of El Salvador suggesting links between MS13 and Al Qaeda, although this was shortly thereafter dismissed by the FBI. With limited time, I will not enter into details on the politicization of the gang threat, but I do explore this in my

article “Breaking the Vicious Cycle: Responding to Central American Youth Gang Violence” which is attached to this testimony.

The third contributing factor is indeed related to the international flows of young people across borders. Many in Central America are quick to blame the U.S. deportation policy for the spread of the California based gangs to their countries of origin. Another common critique is that the governments of Central America are unable to provide adequate services and opportunities to their populace. The high degree of social and economic exclusion in Central America, coupled with an overall lack of educational and employment opportunities, fuel migration to the United States and a very small percentage of these immigrants turn to gang activities when they encounter no other viable alternatives. Both supporters and opponents of U.S. immigration policy reform have strong opinions as to the relationship between immigration and gang activity. Regardless of where we stand on these contentious issues, and I personally find a certain degree of merit in all of the above, the simple fact of the matter is that Central American gangs operate internationally. And at the point in which a strong presence was felt in the United States, and more specifically in the greater Washington D.C. area, the gang issue transformed from a local or national problem to something transnational in its scope and therefore deserving of a transnational response.

## **2. Hard-handed or “*Mano Dura*” policies have not been effective at reducing gang activity.**

The term *Mano Dura*, translated into English as hard or firm hand, emerges in El Salvador in 2003, during the build up to a heated presidential election campaign. It is generally used to refer to law enforcement approaches aimed at incarcerating gang members involved in criminal activity. Specific activities typically attributed to *Mano Dura* policies include mass arrests of young men using illicit association charges in addition to changes in legislation to extend prison terms and exact harsh sentencing and additional punishment for gang members. While *Mano Dura* matured into *Super Mano Dura* in El Salvador, Guatemala adopted its own *Plan Escoba*, (Sweep Plan) and Honduras its Zero Tolerance policies and Anti-Gang Laws. After the strong international

criticism, particularly by the human rights community, these plans were later augmented with prevention and intervention oriented initiatives with correspondingly softer names like *Mano Amiga*, which means friendly hand, and *Mano Extendida* or extended hand.

While these initiatives were launched with great fanfare and strong public support, there is a widespread acceptance amongst a wide range of actors, including high level government officials in all three of the countries mentioned that these heavy-handed approaches simply have not worked. In addition to the fact that the justice sector, and more specifically the penitentiary systems, simply are unable to cope with the thousands arrested, perhaps more worrisome has been the indications that the gangs have reacted by actually stepping up their own surveillance and sophistication, infiltrating public and private sector entities. Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the UNODC noted in his preface in the 2007 report entitled Caught in the Crossfire: Drugs, Crime and Development in Central American and the Caribbean that “Heavy handed crackdowns on gangs alone will not resolve the underlying problems. Indeed, it may exacerbate them. Gang culture is a symptom of a deeper social malaise that can not be solved by putting all disaffected street kids behind bars. The future of Central America and the Caribbean depends on seeing youth as an asset rather than a liability.” In the text of the report, the UNODC takes this one step further stating “Heavy handed crackdowns will leave the children of the poor languishing in jail, while the key drug traffickers remain protected by corruption.” I wholeheartedly agree with the UNODC assessment, particularly in its implicit underscoring of the need to target the bosses, the top of the pyramid in terms of criminal elements, as opposed to the profile of an at-risk youth.

I firmly believe that the appeal of gangs is related to the poor underlying social conditions at the community level and that the marginalization and exclusion of youth is what gives rise to, and eventually sustains, gang membership. In recognizing this, it follows that a solution lies in a development agenda that provides alternative opportunities for disaffected youth, rather than confines them further through incarceration.

**3. Increased coordination and resources, with equal weight given to prevention and law enforcement efforts, are urgently required to address the gang issue.**

Important Role of Coordination - If we want to make serious strides in decreasing levels of gang related violence at home and abroad, there needs to be increased coordination and information sharing between distinct sectors. There are some promising initiatives that follow this model. The Inter-American Coalition brings together a wide variety of actors with very different approaches to violence prevention. CDC and PAHO clearly place violence in a public health framework. The World Bank and the IDB have made important advances in focusing attention on the economic costs of violence and the need to include citizen security loans, with strong prevention components, as part of the development portfolio. USAID, through its innovative development programming and the OAS, through its political and diplomatic role, have both identified the issue as being of utmost importance to development and security. The Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence, whose roots are tied to the Inter-American Coalition, is an innovative initiative bringing together government and civil society representatives that could serve as a model for other regions.

I strongly support U.S. Government efforts that bring together a variety of different agencies to design a balanced and comprehensive strategy to address gang violence. Specifically, I am referring to the work of the ad-hoc Inter-Agency Working Group consisting of representatives of USAID, DOJ, INL, NSC, State Department and others which is an important step forward. All of these agencies have done their own internal studies on the Central American gangs, and I personally served as the senior technical advisor for the USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment conducted in 2006, but this new attempt to bring a diverse group of players together and create a common strategy is something that should be supported and replicated in the Central American countries.

Justification for Increased Resources for Prevention- In the time that I have been working directly on the issues of Central American gang violence, I have seen an impressive



change in discourse, both at home and abroad, regarding the importance of a balanced response to gang activity and the aforementioned are but a few examples of increased coordination. However, while the discourse might have changed, the resource allotment has not. The budget for law enforcement continues to dwarf the resources being put into prevention activities. Perhaps more difficult to measure results, perhaps not providing a quick result, prevention nevertheless remains the key to reducing the underlying factors which manifest themselves in gang violence. Numerous studies, most notably conducted by the RAND Corporation, conclude that interventions aimed at preventing violence not only have a greater impact, but also are significantly more cost effective. Taking one example, an analysis of the California three-strikes policy shows that a variety of prevention oriented activities, such as foster treatment care, therapy, and mentoring are up to 100 times more cost-effective at averting repeat felony arrest (Greenwood, 2002).

The argument for increased resources for prevention activities becomes yet more persuasive after reviewing the costs of violence to society. In a study conducted by the CDC, the total costs associated with nonfatal injuries and deaths due to interpersonal and self-directed violence in the U.S. in 2000 were calculated to be more than \$70 billion. Most of this cost (\$64.8 billion or 92 percent) was due to lost productivity. However, an estimated \$5.6 billion was spent on medical care for the more than 2.5 million injuries due to interpersonal and self-directed violence. A widely cited study conducted by UNDP in El Salvador concludes that the costs of violence are in the range of 15 percent of GDP. Notwithstanding the colossal costs of violence, resources targeting youth violence prevention in the United States are minimal and even less available in the resource strapped countries of Central America.

Knowledge Transfer - In addition to providing increased financial resources for prevention activities in Central America in order to combat gang violence, we also need to be more strategic helping others learn from our own experiences. We have a tremendous wealth of knowledge and experience in violence prevention here in the United States, having made great advances in both research and programming in the area

of youth violence - which has actually been on the decline in our country since 1993. Government led domestic efforts, such as prevention initiatives implemented by CDC, NIH, and the Office of Juvenile Justice of DOJ, are an important part of the process. However we must think more broadly of resources, human and financial alike, to include the private sector, religious groups, and community organizations. We need to share our knowledge and experience with other countries and help adapt the methodologies to their local conditions. We also need to involve the immigrant communities in the United States in this process, understanding their unique circumstances.

Cross-Border Responses - Finally, we must recognize the transnational nature of the Central American gang problem and find ways to work with the countries in the region to promote integrated and comprehensive strategies that respect human rights. The Organization of American States, in its General Assembly earlier this month, adopted a Resolution regarding the Promotion of Hemispheric Cooperation in Dealing with Gangs Involved in Criminal Activity. Cooperation among the countries of the region, involving the multitude of distinct sectors involved, is a prerequisite to resolving the gang problem. The gangs are fluid organizations and have shown themselves to be capable of relocating in areas of opportunity. One country working independently will be unable to solve the problem.

In closing, I would like to cite the 2001 Surgeon General Report on Youth Violence, in which it is concluded that, “*The most urgent need is a national resolve to confront the problem of youth violence systematically, using research-based approaches, and to correct damaging myths and stereotypes that interfere with the task at hand.*” Six years after its publication this statement is still very relevant for our own country as well as others around the world. Simply put, the United States must lead by example.

Thank you.