



WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

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To: Colleagues
From: Geoff Thale
Re: International Assistance in Responding to Youth Gang Violence
in Central America
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Youth gang violence is a serious and growing problem in Central America. Public security concerns and public opinion both are compelling Central American governments to develop visible and effective responses to the problem. In addition, the international aspects of youth gangs – the cross-border connections of some gangs, the links that some gangs may have to international organized crime, the threat that gang violence may pose to political stability in the region, and the role that migration and deportation policies may play in the spread of gang culture in Central America – are drawing the attention of international actors, who are debating what useful roles they could play in helping address the problem. This memo makes some preliminary suggestions regarding appropriate roles for the United States, and others in the international community, in addressing the problem.

The International Community's Interest in the Issue

Gang violence in Central America is an issue about which Central America's neighbors should be concerned. The problem should not be exaggerated; youth gang violence is not a more serious threat than organized crime, or drug trafficking, or other forms of violence. Still, unchecked, gang violence—like other forms of criminality—could threaten political stability in the region. Youth gangs can weaken and corrupt governments in the region if they collaborate with, or morph into, organized crime groups and drug-traffickers. The problem must be addressed.

At the same time, inappropriate and heavy-handed responses to gang violence by Central American governments could set back the gains made in establishing the rule of law and reforming police forces in the region. Indiscriminant incarceration of gang members, without reference to specific crimes, and instances of extrajudicial killing of gang members by police and other security forces in the region undercut the progress that has been made in professionalizing police forces, and weaken the long-term legitimacy of the police. Thus, Central America's neighbors, and those donors who supported police reform processes in Central America in the last decade have an interest in helping Central American governments address the problem of youth gang violence in appropriate ways that will maintain public security while continuing to consolidate police and judicial reforms.

Central American youth gang violence has some international aspects. Some gang members in Central America are deportees from the United States removed after serving prison time for criminal activities, including gang activities. There is movement of gang members, both through legal and illegal channels, between individual Central American countries, between Central America and Mexico, and between Central America and the United States. There are some

organizational ties between gangs in the region and gangs in Mexico and the U.S. These aspects should not be exaggerated, and one should be cautious in assessing how developed the links are. But there are international aspects to the problem, and because of them, the United States and Mexico have an additional interest in ensuring that the cross-border activities of youth gangs are identified and stopped.

A number of multi-lateral agencies have an interest in youth gang violence issues. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have a strong interest in youth violence prevention issues, because of the impact that youth violence (and crime generally) have on the investment climate and on development strategies. (The IDB in particular has a loan in place for youth violence prevention in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and loans under discussion with Nicaragua and with Guatemala.) The Pan American Health Organization sees youth violence prevention as a public health issue, and is involved in projects in a number of countries, as well as in research and policy development. The UN, through UNDP and UNICEF, as well as the OAS, are involved in discussions about how to respond to, and prevent, youth violence.

Policy Issues in Responding to Youth Gang Violence

The international community, including a number of U.S. government agencies, has begun to consider what roles it can play in assisting Central American governments and societies in responding to the problems of youth gang violence. Several general points should shape thinking about how to respond to youth gang violence.

- 1) Much of the research on youth gangs (most of it conducted on youth gangs in the United States and in Europe) suggests that youth gang violence is a difficult problem to address. There are no easy answers, in policing or in prevention programs. Most serious researchers believe that the emergence of youth gangs is related to broad social and economic phenomena (the social and economic marginalization of groups of young people, social dislocation, as well as domestic violence and family instability). These underlying problems are not easily or quickly solved. Policy makers should recognize that there are no quick fix solutions to the problem of youth gang violence. Both appropriate law enforcement and social programs are needed to address the problem; both can help to manage and to reduce the problem, but there is no “magic bullet” that will end the problem of youth gang violence.
- 2) While youth gangs are a serious problem that must be addressed, policy makers need to carefully assess the nature and the extent of the problem. There is a sense among researchers that “youth gang violence,” like the “drug epidemic,” is a cause for public concern that comes in cycles, often driven by press or political agendas, rather than careful empirical evidence about the realities on the ground. (In Central America, everyone agrees that the problem is serious, but there are clearly both press and political agendas at work. In general, officials lack reliable data regarding the number of gang members, the percentage of crimes committed by gang members, and the kinds of crimes that gang members are prone to commit, and have little reliable intelligence about how organized gangs are, how national and international their structures are, how seriously they are involved in trans national crime or drug trafficking, etc.) There is much speculation, but little evidence. This is not to diminish the seriousness of the problem, or the need for a comprehensive response. But it is important to recognize that any approach that attempts to address the problem, while it must be sensitive to the political situation that governments face, should start from some knowledge base about the nature and extent of youth gang violence, rather than from public fear exacerbated by the media.
- 3) Most of the approaches to dealing with youth gang violence that have been implemented in the United States have not been carefully evaluated. Proponents of particular

approaches extol the virtues of prevention programs, or of community policing, or of zero tolerance, or of targeted suppression efforts. But most of these approaches have not been carefully evaluated, and there is very little serious research that shows that some programs are more effective than others. Dr. Malcolm Klein, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Southern California, generally considered the “dean” of studies of youth gangs, has been very clear in recent interviews that there is little empirical proof that any particular approach is effective in reducing youth gang violence. New law enforcement initiatives and new social programs need to be introduced, but they should be introduced with some humility, and with a willingness to evaluate and to change.

- 4) Even given the caveats above, there are some clear elements that a government should include in its efforts to address youth gang violence. Most importantly, governments need comprehensive policies, which contain strategies for youth violence prevention in general, for targeting at-risk youth, for policing, and for rehabilitation (including programs for youth who want to leave gangs, and programs for incarcerated youth.) Governments are often tempted, for political reasons, and out of habit, to emphasize the law enforcement aspects of their response to youth gang violence, and to put little effort, thought, or financial resources, into the other elements, sometimes referring to them dismissively as “soft side” programs. But governments must give adequate attention to the prevention, at-risk youth programs, and rehabilitation programs; without them the law enforcement programs will have at best only a short term impact.
- 5) Governments should not treat any of these elements in isolation, but should develop comprehensive national policies that include them all. At the national level, comprehensive youth gang violence programs need to be multi-sectoral, planned with the involvement of national education, health, and social service agencies, and relevant NGOs, along with public security agencies. At the local level, task forces on youth gang violence need to be formed that include police, school officials, community-service agencies, churches, and NGOs.

Given these general considerations, the international community ought to do what it can to encourage Central American governments to approach the problem of youth gang violence comprehensively rather than narrowly (i.e., with a comprehensive focus that includes prevention, at-risk youth programs, and rehabilitation, rather than just a focus on public security and policing). They ought to encourage governments to base their approaches on serious research about the extent and nature of the problem, and they ought to encourage governments to recognize that they can reduce and manage the problem of youth gang violence, but that “solving” it is a long-term challenge that requires economic and social changes.

The international community ought to look at support for research on the nature and extent of youth gangs, at supporting general youth violence prevention programs, targeted programs aimed at at-risk youth, and rehabilitation programs, both for those leaving gangs and for those in prison. The international community ought to consider a range of study, exchange, and training activities.

This memo touches briefly on possible cooperation on prevention and rehabilitation issues. (They will be addressed at greater length in subsequent memos.) Much of the memo discusses policy dialogue with Central American governments about the need for a comprehensive policy, and then discusses law enforcement cooperation, because these are topics that policy makers are currently discussing.

Cooperation in Prevention

Youth violence prevention programs often target children long before they are at risk of becoming involved with gangs. Data suggests that investment in prevention is far more cost effective than investment in intervention and rehabilitation. Many programs focus on reducing family and domestic violence, given the strong correlation between childhood exposure to domestic violence and the likelihood of involvement in criminal violence later in life. UNICEF, UNDP, and PAHO have all supported experimental programs in Central America to reduce the likelihood of domestic violence. Churches and NGOs that work with families have important roles to play here. Donors could help identify model programs in Latin America and other parts of the world, and support their implementation more widely in Central America.

Schools and education are crucial to youth gang violence prevention. First of all are efforts to ensure that schools are available to all students, and efforts to ensure that students attend school. Often this means identifying the factors that create obstacles for young people to attend school (school fees, shoes and clothing, lunches, need for family income) and helping families and young people to overcome them. Along with programs that make schools available, and that encourage attendance, are programs to incorporate anti-violence training, anti-gang and conflict resolution training, into school curricula. USAID has particularly focused on efforts to strengthen school systems, education ministries, and teachers in Central America, although this has not been done, to date, from the perspective of the impact it might have on youth gang violence. Donors could look at model programs and best practices in Latin America, and in Latino communities in the United States.

Programs to provide after-school and evening activities for young people, including the development of community centers, recreational facilities, etc., are also important. The IDB has supported research in this area, and provided funding for community centers, recreational facilities, etc., as part of violence prevention programs. These violence prevention programs help keep young people from becoming disaffected and marginalized in ways that make them more likely to join gangs. They also help send a positive message that many young people, even under difficult family and community circumstances, do stay out of criminal and gang activity.

In addition to these kind of programs directed at young people in general, there is a need for specific programs targeted at youth identified as “at risk” for involvement in gang violence. “At risk” prevention and intervention programs have been developed in the United States, but they have not been implemented in any significant way in Central America. Studies of the U.S. experience by Central American researchers and policy makers might be fruitful, and exchanges between those who work with Latino young people in the U.S. and their counterparts in Central America could be helpful. Support for drug and alcohol abuse prevention programs would also be important as part of prevention programs.

Finally, some consideration should be given to the issues related to the impact of U.S. deportation policies that have been in place since 1996. Both legislation and policy have significantly increased the number of Central Americans deported after completing prison sentences for criminal activity. Some of this increase has been hardened criminals; some of it has been young men with convictions for less serious crimes, but with potential sentences long enough to make them eligible for deportation. Many of them are young men who have lived in the United States for much of their lives. The impact in Central America of returning significant numbers of young men, many of whom were gang-involved in the United States, to weak economies where job opportunities are limited, is substantial. The United States ought to give greater consideration to what can be done to ameliorate this impact. This involves not only greater attention to notifying Central American countries prior to deportations, but some consideration to re-integration programs for deportees.

Cooperation in Law Enforcement

On the police side, there is some general agreement about elements of policing that are important. These include:

- a) Intelligence gathering. In areas where gangs are present police should have an anti-gang unit, which collects information about gang members, gang structures, etc. That unit needs specialized training in understanding gangs, information collection and analysis, etc. In areas where gangs are not a clear and present danger and/or where there is little likely hood gangs will take hold police must have adequate means of communication and updated information on gangs and gang members, particularly leadership.

There are significant human rights concerns that must be addressed in the intelligence gathering process. Intelligence units in public security forces in Central America have a bad history from the 1980s, when intelligence information, much of it not reliable, was used to extrajudicially detain, torture, and execute suspects. Oversight mechanisms to prevent abuses, and to respond to citizen complaints are crucial, and international cooperation in anti-gang law enforcement should insist on the establishment, and effective functioning of these mechanisms, as a fundamental aspect of the process.

This is a particular concern because of recent allegations in Guatemala and Honduras about the extra-judicial execution of young men involved in gang activity. Some human rights activists have raised the fear that gang intelligence gathered by police anti-gang units could be leaked to or used by people involved in extra-judicial executions. Donors and technical assistance providers need to assure that mechanisms are in place to prevent this possibility; they also need to assume the responsibility to investigate any allegations that gang intelligence gathering that results from international training is being used to target people for extra-judicial execution.

In addition, intelligence gathering itself can be problematic. For example, in both El Salvador and Guatemala, police have engaged in sweeps that pick up hundreds of young men in high crime neighborhoods. Some sources report that police conduct these sweeps, knowing that most of those arrested will be released without charge, because the arrests allow them to gather information from each arrestee. This is troubling from a civil liberties perspective. It is troubling too because some part of the abuse committed by police and security forces in the 1980s was based in the ability of the police to arbitrarily detain people, based on suspicion, and without solid evidence. Police reform and professionalization in the 1990s sought to reduce the power of the police to arrest arbitrarily and on suspicion. The practice of arresting young people without evidence of a crime in order to gather gang intelligence undermines some of this progress.

International training and assistance focused on gang intelligence units ought to include sections on institutional controls and oversight, and human rights issues, as well as on the technical aspects of intelligence collection and analysis.

In addition to training for specialized units, international donors out to offer training to patrol officers, who also need to be trained in information gathering and awareness about gangs, and need to pass that information along to anti-gang units. Again, training in respect for privacy, civil liberties, and human rights, needs to be built into this training process, along with an emphasis on the importance of the creation of institutional oversight mechanisms.

- b) Differentiating among gang members. “*Mano dura*” approaches in Central America, and their counterpart in “zero tolerance” approaches in the U.S., tend to treat all young

people, or all young people who fit some criteria, as gang members or potential gang members. Another approach, one employed in the Operation Ceasefire (the Boston Youth Violence Initiative), and used by the Northern Virginia Anti-Gang Task Force, focuses on identifying serious criminals within youth gangs, and tries to treat other gang members in a way that does not consolidate their involvement in criminal activity, but reduces it. Patrol officers as well as Gang Task Force officers need to be trained in this approach. (Reports from Central America suggest that the indiscriminat approach that has been carried out as part of the *mano dura* approach in the last year has had the unintended effect of strengthening some gangs, as their members band together under siege.)

- c) Distinguishing youth gangs from organized crime. There's a tendency in much of the international discussion about youth gangs to conflate youth gangs with organized crime. While youth gangs can turn into organized crime groups (and some have, although how many have is a question that should be answered by serious research and police intelligence, rather than by anecdotally driven speculation), the two are separate, and need to be treated separately by police. Training ought to help police officers and anti-gang specialists understand the distinction, and employ it in their dealings with young people.
- d) Understanding the social origins of gangs. Police – both at the level of patrol officers, and in anti-gang detective units – need some training that helps them better understand that young people have many reasons for joining gangs, and that not all are hardened criminals who need to be taken off the streets. While police should not be expected to become sociologists, or social workers, they do need enough understanding to help them approach their work in a sophisticated way.
- e) Community Oriented Policing. Local police – patrol officers and their superiors, as well as detectives and specialized units -- ought to receive some basic training in community oriented policing. This approach, in which police officers seek to know and to respond to particular communities and their concerns, and in which police officers help identify and resolve community problems, fits well with the need to understand and address the problem of youth gangs in particular communities.
- f) Training in respect for the presumption of innocence and due process. Increased awareness of the presumption of innocence, and respect for due process concerns, are among the most important advances in police and judicial reform in Central America in the last decade. In combating youth gang violence, police are under a great deal of pressure to achieve results, often measured by the number of arrests they make, and the number of gang members taken off the streets. *Mano dura* approaches tend to increase this pressure further. In this context, regular training for officers on respect for the presumption of innocence and for due process, and the institutionalization of procedures based on those norms, are extremely important.

If the United States or other donors offer training to Central American law enforcement agencies in dealing with youth gangs, they should do so in a transparent manner, permitting some kind of civilian oversight of the process, and making the curriculum available for review.

In addition to programs directed at law enforcement training and cooperation, there may be potential areas for training and assistance in relation to criminal prosecution. The U.S. and some other countries have developed legislation targeting criminal enterprises which have been used effectively against organized crime, and might be effective in combating some street gangs. Some of these statutes have been challenged on civil liberties grounds, and international donors ought to be cautious about promoting these approaches in Central America. But there may be

useful lessons for Central American governments about how to proceed with criminal prosecutions, particularly of gang leaders.

Cooperation in Intervention and Rehabilitation

Many of the community based efforts to address youth gang violence in Central America are intervention programs for young people who want to leave gangs. This memo touches only briefly on this topic; subsequent memos will examine the issue more fully.

The Catholic Church in Central America has been very active in intervention and rehabilitation programs, and both CARITAS and Catholic Relief Services have sponsored programs for young people who want to leave gangs. Evangelical churches have been active as well. Many of these programs are designed to respond to the needs of young people who, on their own initiative, have decided to end their involvement with gangs, and who are seeking alternatives. Programs provide counseling and job training, “de-tattooing,” and other services. Prison ministries have worked with incarcerated young men, seeking to offer them alternatives after they leave prison.

There is a need to review prison and penal conditions and programs, given prison overcrowding, riots, and fatal fires in Central America in recent years. Issues include how gang members are assigned to prisons, the nature of prison supervision, and the existence of rehabilitation and training programs.

Donors ought to support efforts to identify best practices in the United States and in Latin America, support interaction and exchange between those programs and potential counterparts in Central America, and ought to explore what kind of funding might be available.

Policy Dialogue

While there is much that is not yet known about effective programs for preventing and suppressing youth gang violence, research can begin to identify best practices. Donors can provide technical assistance, and explore funding options for programs. Previous sections of this memo have identified some areas for cooperation. But more than research, training, and technical assistance, there is a need for policy dialogue. Donors in discussions about youth gang violence with government, the media, and civil society in Central America, ought to:

- a) **Emphasize that the problem requires a comprehensive approach**, including prevention and rehabilitation, along with law enforcement. It cannot be approached in a one-sided way that focuses only on the use of the police or the military;
- b) **Urge political leaders to understand youth gang violence in perspective**, to see it as a problem that needs to be addressed, not a crisis that requires calling out the Armed Forces and throwing aside due process and human rights protections;
- c) **Remind officials and civil society groups that the problem is long-term**, and one for which there are no magic solutions;

In discussions about law enforcement training possibilities, donors ought to emphasize that training is not simply technical training in intelligence gathering on youth gangs, but a program that helps police be more effective in combating gang violence while respecting human rights and due process of law.