

# Latin America Policy Research Guide - Spring 2007

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# WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA

## Mission, History, and Key 2007 Programs

### What is WOLA?

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) promotes human rights, democracy, and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. We monitor regional developments and U.S.-Latin American relations from the perspective of these concerns, and we provide policy analysis and recommendations to U.S. officials, Members of Congress and their staff, the media, and concerned citizens.

We maintain contact with government officials, non-governmental organizations, and civil society groups in Latin America, and regularly host visitors from Latin America. We work to enable Latin Americans to present their own points of view about developments in their country and in the region, and on U.S. Latin American relations.

Founded in 1974, by a coalition of religious and civic leaders, WOLA is a non-profit non-governmental and non-partisan organization that has worked for more than thirty years to convey the voices and the realities of Latin America, and to advocate for policies that promote human rights, democracy, and social justice.

### What do we offer?

**WOLA staff produce regular memos on key issues in Latin America** and in U.S.-Latin American relations, which are distributed to Congressional offices and others, and available on our website, [www.wola.org](http://www.wola.org).

**WOLA hosts regular events in Washington at which Latin American politicians, human rights activists, religious leaders, and academics talk about current events in Latin America.** In addition, we arrange meetings for Latin American visitors with interested Congressional offices, Administration officials, and others.

**WOLA publishes briefs, reports, and books on issue of importance in U.S.-Latin American relations, and distributes them to policy makers and others.** In the last year, WOLA has published a report on drug-related violence and corruption in Mexico, a report on youth gangs in Central America, and a report on the future of the free trade debate in Latin America. In previous years, we have published reports on the failure of drug control strategies, U.S.-Cuban relations, human rights in Peru, violence against women in Mexico, the impact of organized criminal groups on democracy in Guatemala, and other issues.

**WOLA organizes fact-finding delegations to examine issues in Latin America.** Over the years, WOLA staff have taken Members of Congress, Congressional staff, academics and researchers, activists, and others on fact-finding trips to Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela, and other countries.

**WOLA staff, as country and thematic specialists, provide up-to-date information in response to questions from policy makers, Congressional offices, the media, and others.** WOLA staff talk frequently with Administration officials, from the State Department and USAID, the Defense Department, and other agencies. Staff meet regularly with Congressional staff and interested Members of Congress, answer phone queries and provide background material, and testify before Congressional committees. WOLA staff provide background to journalists, are quoted frequently in the media, and appear on television and radio on Latin America issues. WOLA staff regularly brief religious and activist groups, and speak at foreign policy forums on Latin America issues.

## Why should Members of Congress pay attention to Latin America, when there are pressing problems at home, and problems like Iraq and terrorism abroad?

There are some political hotspots in Latin America (Cuba, Colombia, and Venezuela for example), and some hot button issues related to Latin America (such as trade, drugs, and immigration). But it's true that most Latin America issues aren't the stuff of front-page news. Nonetheless, there are reasons that Members of Congress should take an interest in Latin America issues:

- 1) **The countries of Latin America are our neighbors in this hemisphere, and what happens in them may affect us.** Problems associated with underdevelopment, inequality, and undemocratic governments – such as crime, drugs, and political unrest -- have effects, direct and indirect, on the United States, as the Central American wars of the 1980s demonstrated. We have an interest in reducing poverty and inequality, and promoting democratic development in Latin America.
- 2) **Ties between the United States and Latin America are strong and growing.** Trade flows between the United States and Latin America are more than \$350 billion a year. We buy oil, minerals, agricultural products, and manufactured goods from Latin America. We sell agricultural products and manufactured goods. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens travel to Latin America every year, and Latin Americans in similar numbers visit the United States. The number of U.S. citizens of Latin American origin continues to grow, and U.S. residents from Latin America send billions of dollars back to relatives at home.
- 3) **There are real issues about human rights, democracy, and social justice in Latin America, and U.S. foreign policy--** while not dictating to the governments of Latin America-- should promote human rights and democracy. Human rights abuses, while not at the levels of the 1980s, continue to be concerns in many Latin America countries. Democratic institutions are weak, and need to be defended and strengthened. Poverty and inequality continue to plague the region. While the United States cannot solve these problems for Latin America, and shouldn't be giving orders about how other countries should solve their problems, our foreign policy should be consistent in urging governments to respect human rights, deepen democracy, and pursue democratic development, and we should be offering assistance to countries to move in those directions.
- 4) **Constituents care about Latin America issues.** The growing Hispanic community in the United States is concerned about U.S. relations with Latin America, and how the U.S. approaches the region. Many churches and religious communities in the United States have strong relations with sister churches and communities in Latin America, and have Latin America issues on their U.S. advocacy agenda. Human rights activists in Congressional districts and states follow issues in Latin America, and raise their concerns with Members of Congress.
- 5) **This Congress will address some high visibility Latin America issues.** Issues about U.S. relations with Cuba and Colombia will certainly be on the agenda of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress. Latin American leaders like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela will capture media attention in the United State, and spur debate about how the U.S. should respond. Continuing concerns about drug production and trafficking, and about managing immigration to the United States, and continuing efforts by the Bush Administration to advance its conception of a free trade agenda, will lead to Congressional debate and action. Members of Congress will need to take informed positions on these issues.

# Colombia

## *Plan Colombia, Human Rights in Colombia, and Paramilitary Demobilization*

By Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli, Senior Associate for Colombia

“...after six years and some \$5 billion in U.S. aid, coca cultivation appears to be at least as high now as it was before Plan Colombia began.”

**P**lan Colombia is the U.S. sponsored program, launched in 2000 with bipartisan congressional support, that seeks to significantly reduce cocaine production and trafficking from Colombia. Aerial herbicide spraying of coca plants (fumigation) has been the centerpiece of this effort.

**After six years and some \$5 billion in U.S. aid, coca cultivation appears to be at least as high now as it was before Plan Colombia began.** Moreover, despite increased seizures, cocaine supplies remain robust and readily available, with U.S. and European street prices at all time lows. Lacking viable economic alternatives to coca farming, impoverished Colombians targeted by fumigation have had little choice but to move and replant their coca fields, spreading cultivation to new areas. Unless genuine economic alternatives are in place, more aerial spraying will simply perpetuate a failed approach, deepening the misery of poor farmers and their families and reinforcing their dependence on coca.

**When legislation financing or re-authorizing Plan Colombia comes up, the new Congress should recognize that fumigation has had every chance to succeed but has proven to be a dead-end, not a quick-fix.** Rather than throw good money after bad, the new Congress has the opportunity to put U.S. drug control policy on more

realistic footing, by recognizing that there are no quick fixes, and by emphasizing investments in alternative livelihood strategies that can actually help farmers reduce their reliance on coca.

### **Human Rights in Colombia**

Congress can also take important steps to improve the humanitarian and human rights situation in Colombia. Colombia contains the second largest population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world after the Sudan. Internal displacement is not just a humanitarian problem; it is also a serious human rights challenge. Displaced persons

often lack protection from harm by illegal armed groups and criminal gangs in the areas where they have sought refuge. Many women and children, who make up a large portion of the internally displaced, are unable to meet their basic needs.

In addition, forced displacement has led to the loss of lands by Afro-Colombians and indigenous rural communities, which has devastated these communities and is destroying their traditional way of life. Integration into Colombia's cities and shantytowns is difficult and the option to return to areas of origin is not a safe one for many. Illegal armed groups have often seized and continue to control territories from which Afro-Colombian, indigenous and campesino communities were displaced.

Threats, attacks, and other forms of intimidation remain a serious concern for human rights defenders, IDP leaders, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, journalists, and labor activists.

**The new Congress can act to ensure that U.S. assistance to Colombia respects the rights of internally displaced persons and supports durable solutions for the many people whose lives were ripped apart by armed conflict.**

### **Paramilitary Demobilization**

Although over 31,000 of Colombia's paramilitaries, notorious for their abusive tactics, have demobilized, they have not fully dismantled their operational structures. As a result, former paramilitaries remain active and some have re-grouped. The demobilization process has yet to adequately address truth, justice and compensation for the many victims of paramilitary crimes, and paramilitaries continue to exert political, economic and social control throughout the country. **The new U.S. Congress can play an important role in monitoring this process, ensuring that U.S. support is conditioned on seeing that paramilitary operational structures are fully dismantled, perpetrators are brought to justice, and victims' rights are respected** ■

# Trade, Human Rights and Poverty

## *Free Trade Agreements, Development, and Foreign Assistance*

By Vicki Gass, Senior Associate for Rights and Development

One of the priorities of the 110 Congress will be to discuss and vote on trade issues such as U.S. bilateral trade agreements with Colombia, Peru, and Panama, and whether or not to renew the President's "Fast Track" authority to negotiate trade agreements. These issues merit careful consideration. Critics of the trade agreements negotiated in the last few years (such as NAFTA and CAFTA) are frequently attacked as protectionists or anti-trade. Characterizing people as open and liberated versus closed and backward ignores the complexity of trade issues and closes off debate on these issues.

Clearly, U.S. trade policies are made to benefit U.S. producers, consumers, and workers. Since 2002, WOLA's Rights and Development Program has advocated for policies that also foster sustainable rural development in Latin America, ensure the protection of labor rights and strengthen pro-democracy policies.

Over 55% of all Latin Americans live in poverty or in extreme poverty, with women and indigenous populations affected the most. **Latin America has the world's most unequal distribution of wealth, with the richest 10% earning 48% of total income while the poorest earn just 1.6%.** The market liberalization policies promoted by Washington over the last two decades have exacerbated these inequalities and shown that **trade is not a development strategy.**

In fact, development research indicates that economic growth and development occur in a country when it pursues a mix of open trade and policies that protect local businesses and industries. We believe that fair trade programs should recognize that reality, rather than seeking to impose a single, uniform, and across-the-board model. Latin America needs a new trade and development model and as a Member of Congress you can be instrumental in making this happen.

### **What's wrong with Free Trade Agreements?**

Congressional concerns about recent trade

agreements have centered largely on the lack of clauses in the trade agreements that protect labor rights. Labor conditions in Central and South America have been and continue to be precarious due to increased labor flexibility, an informal labor sector that sometimes reaches 80% of the workforce, and daily minimum wages ranging from one to five dollars. In Colombia, at least 55 union members were assassinated in 2006, bringing the total of labor organizers assassinated in the last 12 years to well over 2000. When trade agreements ignore these realities, they permit employers and investors to profit from the abuse of workers and violations of labor rights.

Yet, there are other problems with the trade agreements that Congress needs to take into consideration, as well:

- **Impact on small farmers:** Free trade agreements negatively impact millions of small to medium farmers throughout Latin America. In the North American and Central American trade agreements (NAFTA and DR-CAFTA), the U.S. insisted that Latin American markets be opened to U.S. food products, while maintaining subsidies for its own agricultural producers and limiting access to the U.S. market for Latin American products. Since NAFTA was implemented, 1.5 million Mexican farmers and farm workers have been forced off their land. The Colombian and Peruvian trade deals are similar. These are unfair agreements, and the resulting economic and social dislocation increases poverty, instability, and migration pressures in Latin America. Opening new markets to subsidized U.S. agricultural exports may benefit some agricultural interests, but the resulting social dislocations are not in the long-term interest of the United States.
- **Impact on affordable health care in Latin America:** Stringent intellectual property rights in the

**"Over 55% of all Latin Americans live in poverty or in extreme poverty, with women and indigenous populations impacted the most."**



“Trade can be a win-win situation,... but only when the rules of trade protect vulnerable sectors of the population and when linked to equitable development strategies.”

free trade agreements benefit some big pharmaceutical companies, but restrict access to affordable, life-saving medicines in Latin America.

- **Unfair procurement rules:** Agreements on procurement rules that determine how Latin American government agencies obtain goods and services often favor foreign suppliers over domestic ones, negatively impacting local development.

These unfair trade rules thwart the development of decent jobs and access to basic services and lead to the abandonment of rural areas, threatening food security. Together, these factors contribute to out-migration to neighboring countries and to the United States. The lack of sustainable development alternatives increases the likelihood of illicit drug production and violence that destabilizes democratic institutions.

#### Trade and Development

Trade can be a win-win situation, benefiting U.S. consumers, workers, and producers, and serving as an important poverty reduction tool in Latin America, but only when the rules of trade protect vulnerable sectors of the population and when linked to equitable development strategies.

Trade agreements must recognize the need for governments to have flexibility in

developing policy, particularly with regard to food production, development strategies and public health. Latin American governments must have the right to employ measures to protect local agriculture such as excluding key crops from trade negotiations, applying import controls, and providing internal support to emerging entrepreneurs and small and medium producers. As mentioned above, the countries that have employed a combination of free trade and state interventions have experienced the greatest economic growth.

Trade policies must also even the playing field, reducing asymmetries. The European Union, for example, provided support and allowed special and differential treatment for the less developed countries of Spain, Portugal and Ireland – allowing them to develop to a level where they were able to compete within the European market. The U.S. ought to take a similar approach to trade relationships in the Western Hemisphere.

Latin Americans want trade but they want a trade structure that provides jobs, security and decent living conditions. **As a member of Congress you can vote for “free” trade, or you can support the construction of a pro-development fair trade policy. WOLA urges you to take the lead in rebuilding a bipartisan program for a pro-development trade agenda where economic opportunity and development benefits everyone in the Americas.**

#### U.S. Foreign Assistance



In the Administration's FY 2007 Foreign Operations budget, they proposed a 20% cut in core development assistance for Latin America. The Continuing Resolution that will come to the floor shortly mirrors the steep cuts in core development assistance. To reverse this trend and support development in the region Congress can approve Senator Menendez's Social Investment Fund, legislation he will soon introduce. This bill will provide the region with \$2.5 billion over 5 years for programs designed to reduce poverty and inequality. As you consider the FY 08 budget, WOLA believes that higher development assistance is required to address the high levels of poverty and lack of development in the region.

# Mexico

## *The problem of drug-related violence*

By Maureen Meyer, Associate for Mexico, [mmeyer@wola.org](mailto:mmeyer@wola.org)

One of the key issues on the bilateral agenda between Mexico and the United States is the increasing insecurity and violence in Mexico, particularly linked to organized crime. In 2006, it is estimated that drug-related violence took the lives of at least 2,000 people in Mexico, many in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

Mexico's President Felipe Calderon has repeatedly stated that the priorities for his government will be public security, combating poverty, and job creation. After the first four months of his administration, it is evident that combating organized crime, as part of the country's public security problems, is on the top of the list. In December 2006, the Calderon Administration launched a joint police-military operation in the state of Michoacán to respond to the drug-related violence afflicting the state. Similar operations, with a total of over 24,000 soldiers and police, have followed in other Mexican states considered hotspots for organized crime. WOLA is concerned by the increasing role that the Mexican military plays in these operations. The task of maintaining public order and combating crime belongs to civilian institutions, not the armed forces; the presence of the military is unsustainable in the long-term; and past cases illustrate that members of the military are not free from the corruption that has plagued the Mexican police forces.

At the same time, while the Mexican State has a responsibility to respond to organized crime and drug-related violence, these operations should be seen as only one step in combating this problem. Without a comprehensive strategy, the operations themselves are ineffective, generating only short-term solutions, and in many cases more violence. There is a pressing need for police and judicial reforms to address issues such as corruption and impunity, which facilitate drug trafficking in the country.

The U.S. Congress can play an important role in urging and supporting

Mexico in its efforts to design and implement these reforms, which would include creating mechanisms for oversight and accountability, incentives for good practices, and a judicial system that guarantees due process and adequate criminal investigations.

The United States shares responsibility for the drug-related violence afflicting Mexico due to the demand for illicit drugs in our country, which fuels violence and creates a lucrative market. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, the number of people 12 years and older that depend on or abuse cocaine in the United States increased from 1.49 million in 2002 to 1.55 million in 2005.

Congress can contribute to reducing U.S. demand for drugs through programs that ensure a wider implementation of evidence-based prevention strategies and improved access to high-quality treatment programs.

Congress can also encourage the Calderon Administration to ensure that its public security policies and initiatives are implemented with respect for human rights. Since assuming office, President Calderon has made little mention of human rights, and no comprehensive human rights policy has been implemented. While there is a need to assure citizen security in Mexico, any policy or initiative to address this should not be at the expense of human rights or due process guarantees.

*"The task of maintaining public order and combating crime corresponds to civilian institutions, not the armed forces."*



Photo: Laurie Freeman



# Security Issues

## *Defense Spending, Military and Policing Roles*

By George Withers, WOLA Senior Fellow, [gwithers@wola.org](mailto:gwithers@wola.org)

“...the training and equipping of foreign forces should be kept within the purview of the State Department, with careful congressional oversight at every stage.”

One of Congress’s top responsibilities with regard to Latin America will be oversight of U.S. military programs. Latin America has slipped on the U.S. priority list since the start of the global war on terror, but the region still plays a pivotal role on security issues. Colombia ranks fifth in the world as a recipient of U.S. military aid, behind Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Egypt. The United States trains military personnel from almost every country in the region.

### **Military and Police Assistance Trends**

In thinking about security in Latin America, it is important to understand where the main threats are and where they are not. The Bush Administration has never reported finding any credible evidence of Al-Qaeda cells in Latin America. In terms of potential terrorist threats, the Administration has identified a few areas in the region where profits from smuggling or other illicit activities may be given to Hezbollah.

Over the past ten years, counter-narcotics activities have been the driving force behind U.S. military assistance to Latin America. That will likely continue to be the case in coming years. In assistance to Colombia, the region’s largest recipient of U.S. security aid, counter-narcotics and counter-terror objectives have coalesced as drug traffickers are now considered “narco-terrorists.”

Since the Foreign Assistance Act was passed in 1961, the State Department has been primarily responsible for training and equipping foreign forces. In 1991 Congress made the Defense Department the single lead agency for the detection and monitoring of drugs coming into the United States.

Since that time, the Defense Department’s role in funding U.S. military activities in the region has increased steadily. It now accounts for about 25 percent of all aid to Latin American military and police. Military

training in Latin America is now funded mostly by the Defense Department, with 74 percent of trainees in Latin America trained in 2005 with money from Defense.

This trend has undermined the important, long-term U.S. policy objective of support for democratic institution-building in Latin America. This is because restrictions on U.S. aid to human rights abusers and dictators relates only to the Foreign Assistance Act, not programs funded directly through the Defense Department.

WOLA believes that the training and equipping of foreign forces should be kept **within the purview of the State Department, with careful congressional oversight at every stage.** These decisions should be made by people with a broad, long-term view of U.S. relationships with Latin America. Our standing in Latin America has been damaged by our past support for dictators. We should be try to repair that damage, not exacerbate it.

### **Military Assuming the Role of Police**

This erosion of civilian control over programs in Latin America is paralleled by events in Latin America itself. Public security is one of the main problems in Latin America. In Mexico and Central America, militaries are increasingly being brought into civilian policing roles.

We believe that this expansion of the military into crime-fighting in Latin America could pose serious problems for the maintenance of civilian institutions and democracy. Police are trained to use minimal force to protect citizens; they are part of civilian society. Militaries are taught to defeat an external enemy. In many countries, they have a long history of undermining political institutions with the goal of taking wider powers.

U.S. Members of Congress should keep the military-police distinction in mind as they vote on security assistance for Latin



America. Some problems lend themselves to military solutions, but most problems now facing Latin America require professional law enforcement personnel along with the presence of a sophisticated system of justice.

Support for the militarization of police activities in Latin America also runs counter to our own, 150-year legal tradition of posse comitatus, or the prohibition against using regular military troops in police roles. Instead, the United States should offer

appropriate aid for law enforcement and improvements in criminal justice systems.

Temporary authority for the Defense Department to train and equip foreign forces was put into the Defense Authorization bill two years ago. It is known as Section 1206. Congress should oppose making Section 1206 permanent law and keep decisions about our assistance programs with foreign security forces in the hands of State

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# Cuba

## *A Strategic Time for Change*

By Elsa Falkenburger, WOLA Program Officer, [efalkenburger@wola.org](mailto:efalkenburger@wola.org)

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**“[T]he majority of Cuban Americans who are registered to vote in Florida do not approve of current U.S. policy toward Cuba.”**

**A**mong the many issues which you will be presented with in your first months, an issue that will be of strategic importance to U.S. policy this year is Cuba.

### **Changes in Cuba**

While there have been some ups and downs, U.S. – Cuban relations have been at a standstill since 1961, when the embargo was put into effect. In July of 2006, Fidel Castro passed the leadership over to his brother Raul due to illness. This transition of power has been free of turmoil and rebellion as many in the current Administration had anticipated. While this signals that Cuba is not likely to experience any dramatic changes in the near future, there is a strong desire by Cubans (domestically and abroad) for a more democratic future.

The recent developments on the island demand immediate attention and present a strategic opportunity for the United States. Cuba is in the midst of a gradual transition. Continuing a policy of disengagement will only ensure our irrelevance to the future of Cuba.

### **Changes in the Cuban-American community**

In addition to changes on the island, the majority of Cuban Americans who are registered to vote in Florida do not approve of current U.S. policy toward Cuba. (<http://www.fiu.edu/~ipor/cuba8/> and [www.ndn.org/hispanic/memos/CubaPoll](http://www.ndn.org/hispanic/memos/CubaPoll)) U.S. policy ought to reflect this important reality which is so often misunderstood. Cuban-American Members of Congress have long fought to maintain the embargo. Their views do not represent those of the majority of Cuban-Americans. According to the poll conducted by Florida International University of 1000 Cuban-Americans in Miami:

- 55% support unrestricted travel to Cuba for all U.S. citizens
- 65% support establishing a dialogue between the U.S. and Cuba (including governments)
- 76% believe that the US Embargo on Cuba has been a failure

### **Restricting rights in the US to promote rights in Cuba**

As the current realities in Cuba and South Florida evolve, U.S. policy has remained stagnant. Plans for future

“Restricting the rights of U.S. citizens cannot possibly be the best way to promote rights and democracy in Cuba.”

engagement with Cuba, as dictated by the State Department’s Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, include provisions for only the most unlikely of scenarios. The Helms-Burton law ties the hands of the President and of Congress. And while the Administration has cut back on academic, religious, and family exchange with Cuba, it is proposing dramatic increases in funding for boondoggle programs like TV Marti and “democracy building” programs which were recently the subject of a highly critical GAO report. If we continue to pursue this path, the U.S. will remain largely irrelevant to Cuba’s future and only continue to distance ourselves more from the rest of Latin America.

It is time to leave behind the ineffective 45 year old policy of isolation from our neighbor only 90 miles to the south of the coast of Florida. In order to play a positive role in Cuba’s future, we need to support policies of engagement whether it is family relationships, agricultural trade, academic exchange or faith based relationships. Restricting the rights of U.S. citizens

cannot possibly be the best way to promote rights and democracy in Cuba. There are a number of bills before Congress which would restore U.S. citizens’ right to travel to Cuba. Contact between regular people in the U.S. and Cuba is a valuable resource. Here are a few reasons to support legislation related to opening the lines of communication:

- ☉ The same policy has been in place for nearly 50 years and has achieved nothing
- ☉ Cuba is the only country in the world to which US citizens cannot travel
- ☉ Enforcing the embargo drains resources from real priorities like anti-terrorist efforts
- ☉ Restricting Cuban Americans to visiting family in Cuba only once every 3 years with no exceptions for death, illness or other emergencies is inhumane and defies family values
- ☉ If trade with Cuba were fully opened, food sales alone could total \$750 million dollars a year
- ☉ Restrictions on religious travel infringe on freedom of religion and are discriminatory
- ☉ Engagement and dialogue are more likely to promote openness and change

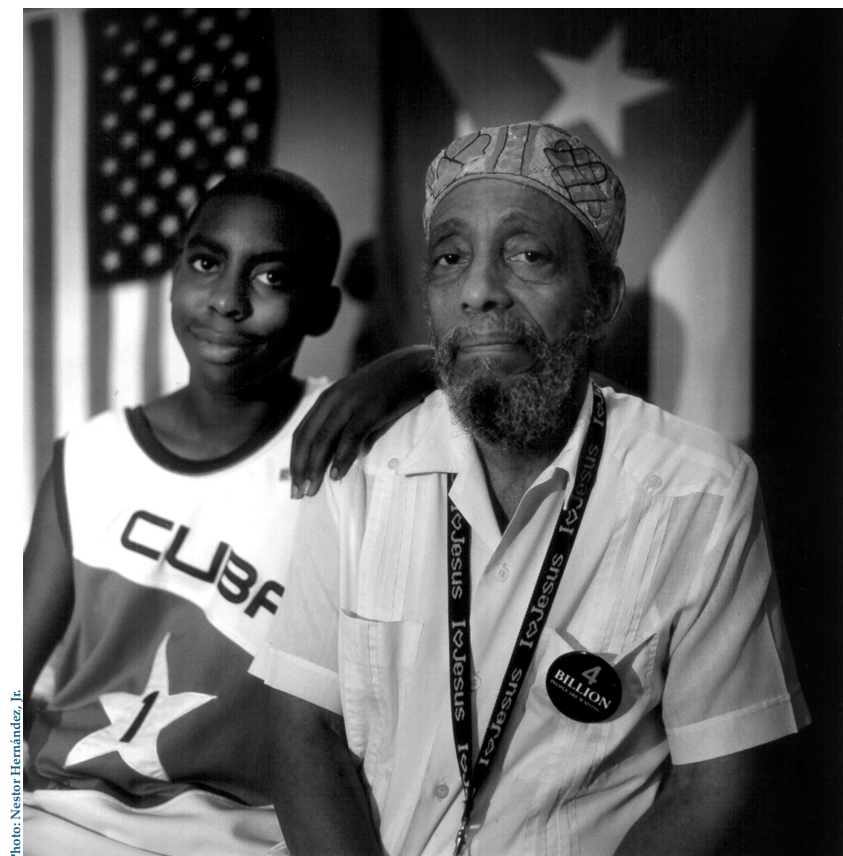


Photo: Nestor Hernández, Jr.

# Gangs

## *Comprehensive Responses to Central American Youth Gangs*

By Elsa Falkenburger, WOLA Program Officer, [efalkenburger@wola.org](mailto:efalkenburger@wola.org)

**Y**outh gang violence is a serious and growing problem in Central America as it is in the United States. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, youth gangs engage in violent rivalries, and participate in criminal activities ranging from petty theft to extortion and murder. Central American governments have responded with repressive policing strategies often called *Mano Dura* (or iron fist) approaches that have resulted in widespread arrests and significantly increased prison populations, but have failed to reduce gang violence or criminal activity.

Some politicians and analysts have argued that youth gangs in Central America are a matter of concern for the United States because: 1) they threaten the stability of our Central American neighbors, 2) they have become transnational organized crime networks with links to gangs in the United States, or 3) they may be involved in drug smuggling, human trafficking, or support for terrorism.

Though there are cases of coordination between gang members in Central America and gang members in the U.S., most Central American youth gangs are local, not transnational phenomena. Research by WOLA and other groups has suggested that concerns about youth gangs as threats to national security in Central America—or as transnational enterprises involved in international criminal activity, are exaggerated and based more on media stereotypes than on any concrete knowledge. Research shows that youth gangs, while a serious problem for citizen security in Central America, are not major players in the drug trade or other forms of cross-border smuggling.

### **U.S. Interests in the Issue**

Nonetheless, we believe the United States should be concerned about the phenomenon

of youth gang violence in Central America and should assist Central American governments in responding to the problem in ways that emphasize prevention and due process of law.

First, the United States has an interest in consolidating democracy in Central America, and should be concerned that hard-line policing strategies may be undermining these reforms. Through much of the 1990s, the U.S. invested in police and judicial reform in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, seeing the consolidation of the rule of law as key to peace and stability in the region after the wars of the 1980s. Repressive anti-gang strategies that give the police extraordinary powers to arrest youth and involve the military in patrolling the streets weaken evidentiary standards and due process and are steps backwards in the consolidation of the rule of law. **The U.S. should be urging Central American governments to combat gang violence by employing civilian policing strategies that respect due process and human rights.**

Second, the U.S. has an interest in supporting citizen security in neighboring countries. Youth gangs are only one part of the violence and crime that plague Central America; focusing on youth gangs to the exclusion of other kinds of criminality (such as drug trafficking and organized crime) would be a mistake. But Central American governments do need to address the problem of youth gangs, and the United States should support these efforts in a productive manner.

Effective policing is one essential element of any government program to respond to ----gangs. But as the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has documented, a comprehensive approach that emphasizes youth violence prevention is necessary. Prevention efforts address the issues which lead youth to join gangs. Prevention is



“The United States should be encouraging Central American governments to develop comprehensive responses to youth gang violence, including a commitment to youth violence prevention...”

effective and cost effective. The United States should be encouraging Central American governments to develop comprehensive responses to youth gang violence, including a commitment to youth violence prevention, and should look at successful U.S. violence prevention programs.

Third, the U.S. has an interest because the emergence of youth gangs in Central America is tied to migration patterns and U.S. deportation policies. Central Americans, especially Salvadorans, came to the United States in large numbers in the 1980s, fleeing war and political violence. MS-13 and the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang developed, not in Central America, but in Los Angeles, among mostly immigrant youth living in neighborhoods where youth gangs were already a serious problem. Stepped up deportations in the 1990s sent gang-involved youth back to Central America, spreading MS-13 and the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang, and the style of U.S. youth gangs back to Central America. MS-13 and 18<sup>th</sup> Street are today loose confederations of local youth gangs, not a single, centralized criminal structure directed from either Los Angeles or San Salvador. But globalization and migration patterns between the United States and Central America mean that we have an interest in seeing that the problem of youth violence in Central America and in immigrant communities in the U.S. is effectively addressed.

### **U.S. Congress and Legislation**

The Administration needs to take the lead in urging Central American governments to address youth violence in a comprehensive way. Congress can play a crucial roll in supporting this process by encouraging the Administration in private discussions and

Congressional hearings to develop a sound inter-agency process which coordinates the anti-gang programs of the Departments of State and Justice as well as our embassies abroad.

Congress is likely to take up legislation addressing gang violence in the U.S. this year. Being tough on crime is politically appealing and plays an important role in making communities feel more secure. Yet the key to ensuring that crime is truly controlled in the long term is to include suppression efforts but to make prevention the priority. This is true both in the U.S. and in Central America.

*Constructive elements in legislation related to Central American youth gangs include:*

- Balanced emphasis on a comprehensive approach that stresses prevention and smart policing
- Coordinated efforts between regional, national, and local level plans
- Focused attention on community-lead responses and best practices

*Negative elements of gang legislation include*

- Approaches that blur the differences between youth gangs and other kinds of organized criminal activity (drug traffickers, human smugglers, etc)
- Enhanced penalties for crimes committed by youth simply because they are deemed to be gang members
- Overly broad definitions of what constitutes a “criminal street gang” ■■

## WOLA STAFF

Please use these brief staff biographies to help you find the person best equipped to answer your questions regarding Latin America.

**Joy Olson**, Executive Director.

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Ms. Olson is a Latin America human rights expert who has directed non-governmental human rights organizations for more than a decade. A policy strategist and a partner in dialogue with U.S. policy and opinion makers in both Washington DC and Latin America, Ms. Olson's many achievements include campaign leadership to end U.S. government efforts to deport refugees who fled from civil war in El Salvador to the U.S. a successful advocacy effort to lift the ban on food and medicine sales to Cuba. She leads WOLA's overall efforts to advocate for human rights, democracy, and social justice in Latin America, and focuses particularly on military and security policy issues.

**Geoff Thale**, Program Director and Senior Associate for Central America and Cuba

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As Program Director, Mr. Thale coordinates a program on alternative approaches to Latin America. He oversees the Central America team, which follows issues of human rights and democratization in the region as well as citizen security issues, including police reform, gang violence, responses to gang violence, and the rule of law; organized crime and its impact on democratization; and issues of impunity in relation to violence against women. He directs the Cuba program which works to improve relations between the U.S. and Cuba, as a more sensible and effective approach to strengthening human rights and democracy on the island. Mr. Thale has followed Central America issues for twenty years, and Cuba policy issues for more than ten. Before coming to WOLA, he served from 1989 to 1995 as Director of the El Salvador Policy Project.

**Roger Atwood**, Communications Director

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Mr. Atwood worked in Latin America as a journalist throughout the 1980s and 1990s for the news agency Reuters and wrote a book, *Stealing History* (2004), about the history of looting and antiquities smuggling in Peru. He has written for many publications in North America, Europe and Latin America on Latin American politics, culture and art, and he was the recipient of an Alicia Patterson Fellowship and a Knight International Press Fellowship, with which he taught journalism in Venezuela in 2005. At WOLA, he is responsible for outreach to media and the public.

**John M. Walsh**, Senior Associate for the Andes and Drug Policy

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Mr. Walsh works on issues within the Andean region related to strengthening the rule of law, promoting respect for human rights, and bolstering democratic institutions. He closely follows U.S. drug control efforts, monitoring their effectiveness, and their impact on democratization in the region. Previously, he served as director of research at Drug Strategies, a policy research group that builds support for more pragmatic and effective approaches to U.S. drug problems (1995-2003).

**Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli**, Senior Associate for Colombia and Haiti

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Ms. Sanchez monitors human rights issues in Colombia with a particular focus on Afro-Colombian communities, internal displacement and organized crime. She is currently developing WOLA's Haiti program. Prior to joining WOLA, Gimena was the U.S. Representative for Peace Brigades International's Colombia Project where she worked to ensure the political protection of human rights organizations and peace communities. From 1999-2004, Gimena served as Senior Research Analyst at the Brookings Institution-Johns Hopkins SAIS Project on Internal Displacement.

**Vicki Gass**, Senior Associate for Rights and Development

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Ms. Gass established WOLA's program on rights based development which focuses on rural development and labor rights, and which analyses the impact of trade agreements on poverty and inequality in the region. She has been working on Central American social and economic justice issues since 1988. She just recently returned from two years in Iraq

where she was leading advocacy efforts for women's constitutional rights. Prior to her time in Iraq, she carried out post-Hurricane Mitch region advocacy work in Central America with WOLA and Oxfam America.

**Adriana Beltrán**, Associate for Organized Crime and Violence Against Women

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Ms. Beltrán coordinates WOLA's program on organized crime as a threat to democracy; she focuses on supporting efforts to establish a UN commission to investigate illegal armed groups, or clandestine groups, in Guatemala. Additionally, she oversees WOLA's work on overcoming impunity for violence against women, with a focus on Guatemala. She has been working at WOLA for over seven years with the Central America Advocacy Training Program and the Guatemala Program. She also coordinated WOLA's press work for four years.

**Maureen Meyer**, Associate for Mexico and Central America

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Ms. Meyer covers human rights issues and elections in Mexico and Central America, including Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Before joining WOLA, Maureen lived and worked for five years in Mexico City, primarily with the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center. She moved to Mexico after having completed her time as an International Development Fellow with Catholic Relief Services in the Dominican Republic.

**Elsa Falkenburger**, Program Officer for Cuba and the Central American gangs program.

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Ms. Falkenburger works on U.S. policy toward Cuba and Central American youth gangs. Prior to this, she worked as development assistant and program assistant at WOLA for three years. Before coming to WOLA, she completed an internship at Physicians for Human Rights and studied abroad in Ecuador.

**Connie McGuire**, Research and Outreach Coordinator for the Central American Youth Gangs Project

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Ms. McGuire is part of the Central American gangs program. She does education and outreach with political asylum advocates, partly in response to the many requests WOLA receives for expert testimony for gang-related asylum cases. She also conducts research on Central American gangs in the D.C. area as a member of a transnational team of researchers looking at the gang phenomenon in Mexico, Central America, and the D.C. area. Connie also worked on the "USAID Central America and Mexico Gangs Assessment," the first serious evaluation of the phenomenon produced by a U.S. governmental agency.

**George Withers**, Senior Fellow for Security

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Mr. Withers monitors U.S. military and security issues in Latin America. He retired from his staff position on the House Armed Services Committee in February of 2003. In the 25 years he worked on Capitol Hill, he served as a legislative assistant, legislative director and press secretary. He then worked as the press secretary to the House Armed Services Committee and as the Chairman's spokesperson covering U.S. military issues in Latin America.

**Coletta A. Youngers**, Senior Fellow for Bolivia

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Ms. Youngers is an analyst of human rights and political developments in the Andean Region of South America and of U.S. foreign policy toward the Andes. She is also an expert on U.S. international drug control policy and is co-editor of *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005). Ms. Youngers was the Director of WOLA's Drug Policy Project from July 2001 to May 2004 and was a Senior Associate at WOLA for 16 years.

**Rachel Neild**, Senior Fellow

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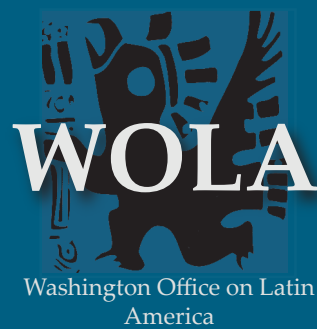
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Ms. Neild was WOLA's Public Security Reform Program Director (through December of 2003) working on issues of international police assistance and democratic police reforms in Haiti, Central America and Mexico, with a particular focus on the role of civil society in defining new citizen security debates. She now works as a consultant for the Inter-American Development Bank and the Open Society Institute's Justice Initiative.





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