

Helpdesk Research Report

Organised violence and its impacts in Central America's northern triangle

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Question

What are the impacts of violence conducted by gangs and criminal organisations in Central America, particularly in the northern triangle countries (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala), on individuals, society and public institutions?

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1. Overview

A range of criminal organisations¹ operate in Central America's northern triangle.² Violence conducted by criminal organisations is one manifestation of a broader culture of violence that is endemic to many Central American societies (UNODC, 2007).

At the personal and societal level:

- The extensive loss of life through **homicide** is the most obvious humanitarian outcome of violence in Latin American and Caribbean cities (UNODC, 2007; Muggah and Nouvet, 2013).

¹ Groups involved in transnational organised crime include territorial groups (who maintain control over a geographic area) and trafficking groups (known as *transportistas*). Street gangs known as *maras* are a type of territorial group and have little connection with the transnational drug trade, focussing instead on extortion and local power struggles. See UNODC (2012, 11-13) for more information.

² The northern triangle area includes: Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala

- The presence of criminal organised violence contributes to a **culture of violence that is self-reinforcing**, and results in an increasing social-legitimacy of high violence levels (Marilena Adams, 2011).
- **Men and women experience violence differently:**
 - Young men, aged 15 to 34, are both the perpetrators and victims of violence and account for the overwhelming majority of homicide victims in Central America (World Bank, 2011).
 - Women are present in youth gangs in numerous roles and are often subject to physical, psychological and sexual violence (Umaña & Ridders, 2012).
 - In urban settings, the police, vigilante groups, gangs and organised crime groups resort to gendered armed strategies, including systematic sexual crimes, femicide and forced displacement (Gratius et al, 2012)
- Violent crime acts as a kind of **anti-development** by undermining financial, human and social capital. Furthermore, fear and the perception of crime restricts mobility, which interferes with social and economic interaction, as well as education, access to health care, and other development services (UNODC, 2007; Imbusch et al (2011).
- The every-day tension, fear and uncertainty that exist in contexts of chronic violence have systematic effects on **psychological and physical health** (Marilena Adams, 2011).
- **Irregular migrants³** are vulnerable to being trafficked and being victimised by criminal organisations through robbery, kidnapping and exploitation (UNODC, 2012).

At the institutional and state level:

- The **cumulative impacts of individual trauma** stemming from victimisation have wider implications for public institutions and **state resources**. For example, violent crime increases the number of patients admitted to hospitals with injuries (UNODC, 2007).
- **Violent crime impedes economic development:**
 - Countries afflicted by violent crime are deemed **unsafe for foreign and domestic investment**. Crime also increases the costs of conducting business through direct losses and increased insurance costs (World Bank, 2011).
 - Crime appears in all Central American countries as one of the main **constraints to productivity and growth**. This occurs through the **diversion of resources** to crime prevention and **the loss of worker productivity** resulting from the fear or threat of violent crime (World Bank, 2011).
- Crime victimisation can **erode public confidence in the ability of the state** to combat violent crime. Citizens of northern triangle countries tend to have less trust in the criminal justice system, are more likely to approve of taking the law into their own hands, and have less respect for the rule of law (World Bank, 2011; Ten Velde, 2012).

³ Irregular migrants in this case refers to those that migrate illegally overland from Central America to the United States.

- Increased violence has a **direct negative effect on public support for democracy**, with a significant portion of Central American citizens believing that high crime rates would justify a military coup (UNODC, 2007; Marilena Adams, 2011).
- The northern triangle has seen the **emergence of ungovernable areas**, where the police have been ejected and drug traffickers offer goods and services to the public to ensure protection of their activities (UNODC, 2012).
- Organised violence **hampers the work of humanitarian and development agencies** by impeding access to communities and increasing expenditure on security measures (Nouvet & Muggah, 2013).

In addition to organised violence, such as that committed by street gangs or drugs traffickers, violence can also be inter-personal or committed by state security authorities. It is a result of wider historical, cultural, governance and developmental issues. Therefore, although the existence of street gangs and drug traffickers remains a critical concern, the stated impacts of violence in the literature cannot be solely attributed to criminal organisations.

2. The impacts of violent crime on individuals and societies

Violence conducted by criminal organisations manifests itself through injuries, homicide, victimisation, kidnapping, harassment, the exploitation of vulnerable segments of society (such as irregular migrants), and sexual exploitation. The World Bank (2011) states that drug trafficking is an important driver of homicide rates in Central America and the main factor behind rising violence levels in the region. For example, drug trafficking areas tend to have 100 per cent higher crime rates than non-trafficking areas.

Homicide

Muggah and Nouvet (2013) contend that the extensive loss of life is the most obvious humanitarian outcome of violence in Latin American and Caribbean cities. Youth violence and gangs, also known as *maras*, are a critical concern. There are more than 900 *maras* operating in Central America today, with an estimated 70,000 members (Muggah and Nouvet, 2013). Whilst gangs are a major contributor to crime in the northern triangle, the limited evidence available suggests that they are only responsible for the minority share of violence and perhaps only 15 per cent of homicides (World Bank, 2011). UNODC (2012) explains common public targets include drivers, security officers and passengers on public transport.

Most of Central America's violence is concentrated in the northern triangle (Muggah and Nouvet, 2013). The World Bank (2011) states that El Salvador has the highest homicide rate in Latin America, 58 per 100,000 inhabitants. Guatemala and Honduras are among the top five in the region and have homicide rates of 45 and 43 per 100,000 inhabitants respectively. In some areas of the northern triangle, homicide rates approach 100 per 100,000 inhabitants. According to UNODC (2007), El Salvador and Guatemala rank amongst the most dangerous countries in the world in terms of murder rates. Furthermore, the availability of firearms and the role of the drug-trade are evident in the murder figures.

Robbery, burglary and victimisation

According to the World Bank (2011), for the period 2007 to 2008, robbery, burglary and overall victimisation rates in Central America were lower than homicide rates. Even so, Guatemala and El

Salvador have robbery rates above the Latin American average, whilst those of other Central American countries are below the average. In contrast, all Central American countries have burglary rates below the Latin American average. With respect to victimisation rates, which measure crime without specifying its type, El Salvador and Guatemala have rates that are slightly higher than the Latin American average.

The gendered impacts of violence

In most cases, young men are both the perpetrators and victims of violence. Men between the ages of 15 and 34 account for the overwhelming majority of homicide victims in Central America, and also comprise the majority of membership in youth gangs (World Bank, 2011).

Even though youth gangs are mainly comprised of men, women are present in numerous roles, including as gang members, partners, friends, mothers or sisters. Physical, psychological and sexual violence against women is common within youth gangs. Masculine power is legitimised through violence, and male gang members exercise domination over women's bodies. Women receive unequal treatment within gangs; men are not punished for sexual infidelity, whereas women are, sometimes with death as a punishment (Umaña & Ridders, 2012).

Gratius et al (2012) argue that women experience unique effects of small arms related violence in urban settings. In such contexts, the police, vigilante groups, gangs and organised crime groups resort to gendered armed strategies, which range from 'systematic sexual crimes, femicide and forced displacement, to the manipulation and perversion of the perceptions of the roles of women and men with bellicose aims'. Guns play a significant role in the perpetration of violence against women, either at home or in public, and often involving sexual assault at gunpoint. Firearms are particularly dangerous to women if they are accessible at home to someone known to the victim (Gratius et al, 2012, 14). In addition to causing direct harm, often in cases of domestic violence, guns are also used to threaten women. Marilena Adams (2011) states that the links between violence at home, on the street, and within gangs are well documented.

The impact of violence on personal and household assets

Imbusch et al (2011) argue that violence undermines physical, human and social capital. Furthermore, violence disproportionately affects the poor and erodes their livelihoods and assets. UNODC (2007) states that violent crime in Central America acts as a kind of 'anti-development', destroying the trust relations on which society is based. Violence also indirectly affects households and communities.

Financial losses

There are a number of ways in which violent crime can cause direct and indirect financial losses. Death, disabilities and injuries resulting from violent crime can deprive households of income earners or reduce household income through the loss of productivity and the costs of medical and legal services (UNODC, 2007). El Salvador has the highest health costs of crime and violence (as a percentage of GDP) in Central America and ranks 12th worldwide. Guatemala and Honduras are ranked 21st and 36th respectively (World Bank, 2011).⁴ Violence can also impact on incomes when it limits access to jobs in contexts of insecurity and instability (Imbusch et al, 2011).

⁴ This indicator is based on a technique - called the 'disability-adjusted life years lost' or DALYs - which computes the health costs associated with violent crime associated with crime and violence. The DALYs provide an estimate of years lost due to premature mortality and disability (see World Bank, 2011, 5)

Limited access to productive and educational activities

The indirect impacts of violent crime on poor people are extensive. Victimisation or the fear of victimisation can cause people to withdraw from social interaction as a means of risk minimisation. This increases the opportunity costs to individuals of going out at night or using public transport, which may limit access to productive and educational activities (UNODC, 2007).

Community trust and cooperation

Moser and McIlwaine (2006) argue that violence erodes social capital in terms of reducing trust and cooperation within communities. In Guatemala, for example, armed conflict has resulted in widespread social fragmentation with little trust between local people. In some urban locations, this has led to a low level of diversity in civil society organisations.

Psychological and health-related impacts

Marilena Adams (2011) argues that the every-day tension, fear and uncertainty that exist in contexts of chronic violence have systematic effects on psychological and physical health. These include: chronic distress, psychosomatic symptoms, substance abuse, despondency and depression, hypertension and depressed immune systems. In particular: 'Social silence and amnesia, social forgetting and attitudes of indifference or avoidance are all common responses to fear...These are strategies that enable people to eclipse memories or knowledge too painful or unmanageable to maintain active on the surface' (Marilena Adams 2011, 27). In areas controlled by gangs or drug traffickers, this silence is often imposed from above. Drug and alcohol use are also coping mechanisms, which both act as a cause and effect of violence in daily life.

Dudley (2011) states that there is evidence to suggest that increased drug consumption, in particular powder and crack cocaine, correlates to the activity of drug trafficking organisations. *Transportistas* in Central America are paid in product and distribute it themselves or via street gangs. This has given rise to a phenomenon known as *narcomenudeo*, or the small-scale sale of drugs (Dudley, 2011). Once local gangs receive cocaine, they have to create a local market in order to earn cash. In El Salvador, this has led to violence between different gangs for control over neighbourhoods and street corners (Farah, 2012).

Societal acceptance of the legitimacy of violence

Criminal organised violence contributes to a culture of violence that is self-reinforcing. Marilena Adams (2011, 24) argues that 'high levels of violence go hand-in-hand with its growing social legitimacy'. This is evident in the increased use of vigilantism and private security and increasing levels of domestic violence.

The victimisation of irregular migrants

More people from the northern triangle migrate irregularly to the United States than from elsewhere in Central America. Irregular migrants (those migrate illegally and overland through Mexico) are vulnerable to trafficking and victimisation by criminal organisations through robbery, kidnapping and exploitation. Smuggling is one of a number of options used by irregular migrants, who often pay large sums to a single network of *transportista*-type organisations (sometimes referred to as *coyotes*) to be smuggled across borders. Migrant smuggling also involves a range of other criminal organisations, including territorial groups, predatory groups, and street gangs. Territorial groups, particularly those situated along border crossings (such as the Zetas who control Mexico's northern border with Texas) often tax the income of

professional smugglers, charge them protection fees, or simply assume the whole operation themselves. Furthermore, irregular migrants frequently carry their life savings in cash and are prime victims for robbery (UNODC, 2012)

Women, who constitute 20 per cent of the irregular migrant pool, are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The problem is particularly concentrated along the Guatemala-Mexico border. Victims are either kidnapped, forced into prostitution by their smugglers, or are lured into the sex trade after having been robbed or running out of money. Once involved, many women find it difficult to escape; brothel owners may threaten them with violence or exposure to the law (UNODC, 2012).

3. The impacts of violent crime on public institutions and the state

The cumulative impacts of individual trauma upon the state

UNODC (2007, 74) argues that the cumulative impacts of individual trauma stemming from victimisation have wider implications for the state and public institutions. For example, violent crime increases the number of patients admitted to hospitals with injuries such as firearm wounds. In El Salvador, an estimated 2580 people were treated in hospitals during 2003 for firearm wounds. Of these, 2400 were treated in public hospitals at a cost to the state of USD 7.4 million, which constituted just over seven per cent of the health budget.

The impacts of violent crime on economic development

The business climate

Countries afflicted by violent crime are deemed unsafe for foreign and domestic investment (UNODC, 2007). As the World Bank (2011, 5) states: 'The high costs of crime...act as a drag on competitiveness, reduce profit margins, and can make the difference in whether a company survives or fails'. Crime also increases the costs of conducting business through direct losses and increased insurance costs. For example, the total security related costs and losses of Central American companies in 2006 averaged 3.7 per cent of sales, which is substantially higher than the Latin American and Caribbean average of 2.8 per cent. The actual figure for El Salvador and Honduras was 4.5 per cent, and for Guatemala was 3.9 per cent (World Bank, 2011).

Economic growth

Crime appears in all Central American countries as one of the main constraints to productivity and growth through: (1) the diversion of resources from productive activities to crime prevention; and (2) loss of productivity resulting from the fear of crime, which increases absenteeism or limits working hours to periods when workers are not concerned with personal safety (World Bank, 2011). UNODC (2012) argues that the costs of combatting crime undermine local development through the diversion of resources. The northern triangle region remains dependent upon remittances, and the loss of human capital in reaction to perceived crime rates further undermines progress against poverty.

Econometric models show that reductions in violence levels in Central American countries could potentially produce very large economic gains. For example, a ten per cent drop in the homicide rate

could boost per capita income by one per cent in El Salvador, and by 0.7 per cent in Honduras and Guatemala (World Bank, 2011).

The impacts of violent crime on state legitimacy and the rule of law

Crime victimisation, or the fear of it, can erode an individual's confidence in the way authorities confront crime. Crime victims tend to: (1) have less trust in the criminal justice system; (2) are more likely to approve of taking the law into their own hands; and (3) have less respect for the rule of law. Furthermore, these feelings are greater in countries with higher levels of violence and with pre-existing concerns over the quality of governance, as is the case in the northern triangle (World Bank, 2011).

Police and military legitimacy

Crime, or the perception of crime, has been used in some Central American states to justify heavy-handed responses. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, a wave of public security responses in Central America known as *mano dura* emphasised more assertive state security and justice-based approaches to crime and violence. These included heavily punitive responses, increased rates of police training and deployment with an accompanying relaxation of selection standards, the use of the military for the maintenance of internal security, stricter penalties, harsher sentences, increased incarceration, and the weakening of laws aimed at protecting civil liberties. In El Salvador, troops have been used to protect coffee crops from theft and in anti-drugs campaigns. Similarly, in Guatemala, a citizen security squad was created in 2006 comprised of 2400 military personnel assigned to joint patrols with the police. Honduras has also deployed military personnel to patrol the streets (UNODC, 2007; Muggah and Nouvet, 2013). Ten Velde (2012, 22) notes how, 'all three Northern Triangle countries have in recent years implemented 'crisis measures' to grant law enforcement institutions unprecedented power in searches and seizures'.

These approaches have challenged the criminal and justice systems of many Central American countries, which have been unable to cope with the increased demands. These approaches have also challenged the legitimacy of the police and military, and have raised questions as to whether the military is adequately prepared to assume domestic functions and coordinate with police forces (Muggah and Nouvet, 2013). UNODC (2007) argues that the use of the military to suppress crime works against the development of democratic policing measures, and does nothing to treat the causes of violent crime. Furthermore, increasingly militarised approaches mean that increasing state resources are being diverted to military budgets (Ten Velde, 2012).

Private security and vigilantism

UNODC (2007) states that increased rates of violent crime have led to the more prevalent use of private security by the wealthy. Private security officers outnumber the police in all six Spanish speaking Central American countries. In 2007, there were an estimated 235,000 private security guards active in Central America, which translates to a ratio of 611 per 100,000 inhabitants, compared with just 187 police officers per 100,000 (Ten Velde, 2012).

In contrast, the poor in Central America have tended to organise in associations, brigades and self-defence groups (Muggah and Nouvet, 2013). Ten Velde (2012) reports that in Guatemala, incidences of vigilantism have increased by 400 per cent since 2004, some of which are directly related to the fight against drugs.

Authoritarian nostalgia

Increased violence has a direct negative effect on support for democracy because people do not believe that the government can protect them from crime (Marilena Adams, 2011). UNODC (2007, 79-80) argues that when the state fails to ensure the security of citizens, or is seen to be complicit in criminality, citizens may cease to take democracy seriously. For a variety of historic and cultural reasons, citizens in Central America may be susceptible to 'authoritarian nostalgia' and may view military regimes as being more effective against crime. The World Bank (2011, 3) states that more than 50 per cent of Central American citizens believe that high crime rates would justify a military coup. In Guatemala, opinion polls show that 56 per cent would approve of a coup under conditions of high crime (Marilena Adams, 2011).

Ungovernable areas and parallel polities

UNODC (2012) reports that in Guatemala, 58 out of 332 municipalities have been declared to be 'ungovernable'. In a number of these areas, the police have been ejected or detained as a result of trying to enforce unpopular laws against drugs smuggling. Many are situated on the border with Mexico, and are run by organised groups, including drug traffickers. Ironically, these are not the most violent areas of the country, but levels could spike if the state attempts to recover these territories. While criminal actors may operate in these areas with little violence, it undermines democracy.

Marilena Adams (2011) states that the emergence of these 'parallel polities' is a classic strategy used by drug traffickers, whereby they seek to ensure the protection for their activities by offering goods and services to communities where they are operating. These polities can gain significant legitimacy with local populations because they supply protection and services that the state does not provide. In extreme cases, drug trafficking organisations can establish control over local populations and provide government-like social services.

Political infiltration

Organised crime presents a challenge to political institutions and structures in El Salvador, which are vulnerable to corruption. Cartels have infiltrated the political leadership and have pumped resources into local and municipal elections in order to ensure that specific trafficking routes are protected. For example, the *Perrones Orientales*, a drug transportation organisation based in El Salvador, maintains a sophisticated intelligence network through the police and other state officials, and in parts of the country the local political system relies on them. In 2008, several senior police officials and powerful politicians in the San Miguel area were arrested for their ties to the criminal group (Farah, 2011).

4. The impacts of organised violence on humanitarian and development agencies

Nouvet and Muggah (2013, 1) state that 'organised and interpersonal violence impede humanitarian access, alter the quality and quantity of aid, and lead to more expenditure on security outlay'. A survey amongst humanitarian and development agencies in Central America reveals that Guatemala and El Salvador are among the countries they perceive to present the most acute threats to their operations through collective and interpersonal violence. Violence hampers their work through threats and attacks against programme implementation partners or through the paralysis of work. This includes direct threats to beneficiaries, threats to practitioners and restricted access to vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the costs of violence are high, including expenses associated with containing and responding to violence

in relation to private security, security training, and the design of safety measures on route to and inside beneficiary areas.

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Key websites

- Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: <http://www.unodc.org/>
- The World Bank – Latin America and Caribbean: <http://go.worldbank.org/F7T4DTVE20>

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Further information

The following GSDRC topic guides may also be of interest:

- GSDRC (2012) *Topic Guide on Security Sector Reform* (GSDRC Topic Guide), Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/SSR_TG.pdf
- Crichton, J., Scott, Z. and Haider, H. (2012) *Topic Guide on Justice*. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/justice.pdf>

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