

THE REGIONAL MIGRATION STUDY GROUP

# CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA:

## AN EVOLVING BUT INCOMPLETE US POLICY RESPONSE

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## Executive Summary

Crime and violence have increased dramatically in Mexico and Central America in recent years, driven in part by a shift in cocaine-trafficking routes throughout the region and, in part, by the incomplete transition from authoritarian to democratic ways of upholding the rule of law. This public security crisis has been most noticeable in the Northern Triangle of Central America — El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where homicide rates are among the highest in the world — although the crisis has affected the Central American isthmus as a whole. Mexico has a comparatively lower homicide rate, but it has seen the sharpest relative increases in homicides and other forms of violent crime, especially since 2008.

Some of the rise in violence can be attributed to fights among the major Mexican organized-crime groups for control of the illegal drug trade and their push to establish a presence in Central America in order to preserve trafficking routes into the United States. Drug traffickers also depend on a network of smaller local crime groups that serve as their transporters, enforcers, and watchdogs, and that often engage in other forms of crime. Meanwhile, the rising violence associated with organized crime has also given cover to “unorganized crime,” as smaller, highly localized criminal groups and individuals that have long taken advantage of the climate of impunity to prey on civilians. In countries that have yet to build credible police forces, prosecutors, and courts, the interplay between organized and unorganized crime becomes particularly deadly.<sup>1</sup>

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### *Crime and violence have increased dramatically in Mexico and Central America in recent years.*

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The US government has significantly increased its attention to public security issues in the region since 2007-08, when it approved an extensive plan for security and economic assistance to Mexico, known as the Mérida Initiative, followed by the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) for Central America.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the US government has augmented its intelligence sharing with some governments in the region, supported the creation of specialized vetted units, and undertaken some efforts inside the United States to disrupt the activities of those organized-crime groups most responsible for the violence south of the border. It has also sought to coordinate with other international donors to fund security-related projects in Central America.

Three major obstacles have hampered the US policy response, however. First, in Central America, high levels of corruption, insufficient political will, and the lack of a broad societal consensus on the need to improve citizen security have hampered efforts at institutional strengthening and reform. Courageous leaders in and out of government who are committed to improving the region’s chronically weak institutions exist, but their numbers are still insufficient to effect the profound transformations required. Second, given the multiplicity of actors within the US government involved in US policy toward Central

<sup>1</sup> See Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson, eds., *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle*, Latin American Program Reports on the Americas #29 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), [www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP\\_single\\_page.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Initially, a small amount of Central American funding was included in the Mérida Initiative. Following congressional criticism that the amounts were insufficient given the magnitude of the problem, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) was established as a separate program in fiscal year 2010. The George W. Bush administration originally requested \$50 million in assistance for Central America as part of the \$1.3 billion request for the Mérida Initiative in 2008. For an excellent overview of both programs, see Diana Villiers Negroponte, “The Mérida Initiative and Central America: The Challenges of Containing Public Insecurity and Criminal Violence” (Working Paper #3, Foreign Policy at Brookings, Washington, DC, May 2009), [www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2009/05/merida-initiative-negroponte](http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2009/05/merida-initiative-negroponte).



America, the US response has been less coordinated and strategic than the growing violence warrants. Limited financial resources, coupled with limited absorptive capacity on the ground, make strategic thinking and the setting of priorities more critical than ever. The US approaches to Mexico and Central America (along with the Caribbean) have benefited from recalibration efforts to build institutional capacity, but coordination across agencies and between countries and subregions remains insufficient. Finally, the US policy response within its own borders, including efforts to reduce demand and address the flow of weapons and drug money, has been far less coherent than needed.

The US government has both a moral and a strategic imperative to work more effectively with Mexico and the Central American countries to stem the tide of violence. Although drug trafficking is only part of the story behind the crime wave, it is an important one. It is linked to other forms of transnational crime, including human trafficking, which fuel the larger problem of citizen insecurity. The United States remains the destination for the vast majority of drugs that pass through the region, and US consumers of illegal narcotics pump billions of dollars into the region's criminal enterprises. Even more important, the United States has a strategic interest in its neighbors being peaceful and prosperous. Trade with Mexico and Central America represents roughly 15 percent of US exports and contributes over 6 million jobs to the US economy.<sup>3</sup> Flourishing economies in the region would benefit not only local citizens but those of the United States as well. Moreover, the growth of transnational crime organizations so close to the United States raises legitimate concerns about US security.

Since we first began the research for this report in 2011, the emphasis of US policy has begun to shift in important ways. In the early years of the Mérida Initiative and CARSI, the tendency of US policymakers was to define the problem overwhelmingly as one of drug trafficking and transnational crime, thereby overlooking some of the more complex dynamics between organized and other forms of violent crime. This focus led to an overreliance on efforts to dismantle transnational crime groups, tighten border security, and stem the flow of drugs entering the United States, without sufficient attention to domestic criminal markets, crime prevention, and institution-building efforts to strengthen the rule of law. By the end of 2012, there was noticeably more attention to addressing the crisis of citizen security overall, so as to reduce the violence suffered by ordinary people. The shift in thinking was mirrored in a shift in resource allocation, such that there is now a greater balance between the “hard” and “soft” sides of US assistance programs. This is a welcome change.

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In this report, we first survey the causes for the rise of violent crime in Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America.<sup>4</sup> We then look at the US policy response to date. We conclude by offering a few suggestions on how the US policy response could be significantly improved in the short and medium term to respond better to the underlying challenges that the countries of the region are facing, problems in which our own country is deeply implicated.

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<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau, “US Trade in Goods by Country,” 2011, [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview for drug violence in Central America, see US Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, *Responding to Violence in Central America*, 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., September 2011, <http://drugcaucus.senate.gov/r-report-on-central-america-violence-9-22-11.html>.

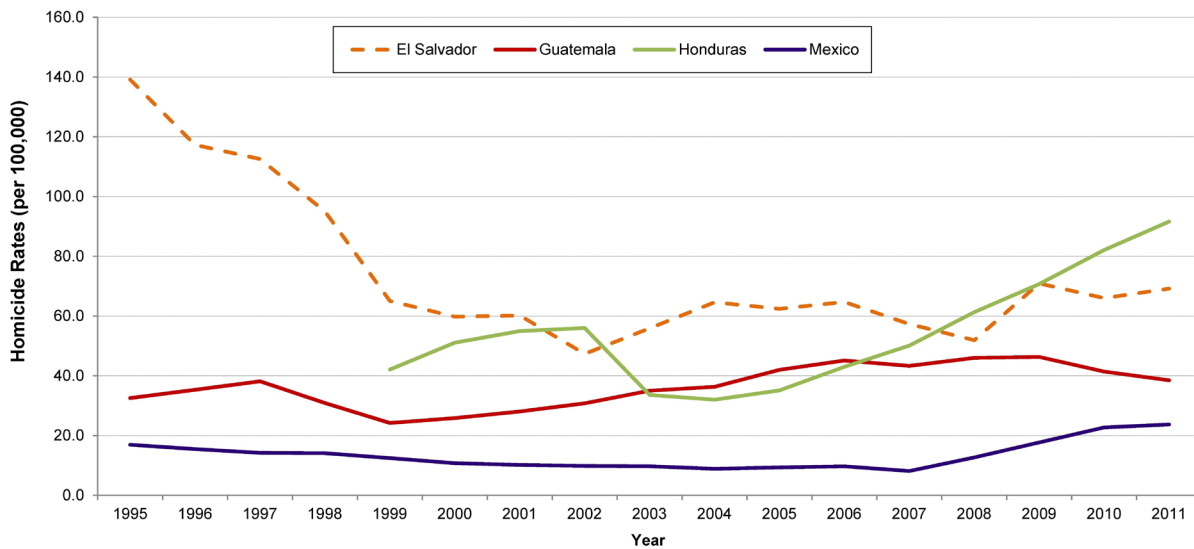


## I. The Dynamics of Rising Crime and Violence

Organized crime has clearly had a catalytic effect in rising crime rates in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador,<sup>5</sup> but it certainly does not account for all of the change, nor has the effect been the same in all four countries. Figure 1 shows the rise in homicides in the four countries. Several points are evident from these data: The three Central American countries have had high homicide rates for some time, long before the past decade's spike in drug-trafficking activity. Mexico has long had a lower rate, roughly half or less, than the other countries. El Salvador saw a noticeable improvement in crime after the signing of the peace accords in 1992, although the progress made in the late 1990s appears to have stopped and to have partially (but only partially) reversed since 2002.<sup>6</sup>

All four countries have seen an increase in common crime over the past decade, with a particularly noticeable increase over the past few years. However, with the important exception of Honduras, the increase in homicide rates has actually been more gradual than the current debate on drug trafficking would suggest. El Salvador has seen a decrease and then a leveling out of its extremely high homicide rate since the end of the war in the early 1990s, and Guatemala has seen a steady, but very gradual, increase in homicides since 1999 (although the figures for 2011 declined somewhat). Honduras, by contrast, has seen a rapid and terrifying increase in homicides since 2003, especially since 2007. Mexico, as noted, has a much lower homicide rate than the other three countries, but like Honduras, has seen a noticeable increase since 2007. These data do not support the argument made by some that the spike in homicides in the Northern Triangle is principally the result of violence spreading from Mexico; homicide rates in the Northern Triangle were high years before the spike in violence in Mexico started in 2007.

**Figure 1. Homicide Rates in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, 1995-2011**

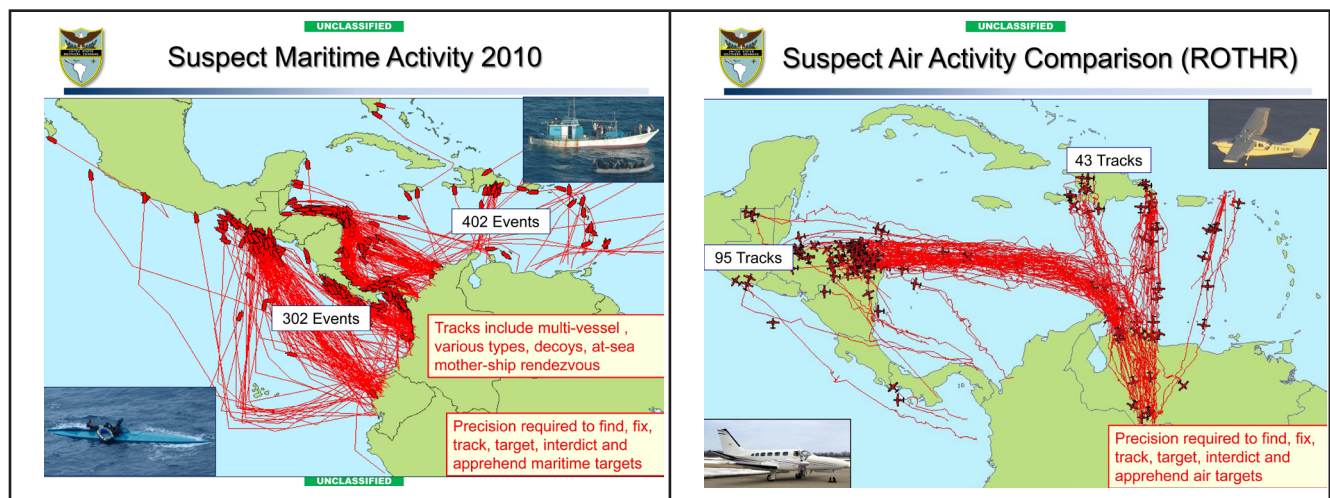


Sources: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide, 2011* (Vienna: UNODC); UNODC, "Homicide Statistics 2012," [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html).

- 5 The World Bank has identified drug trafficking as the "main single factor behind rising violence levels in the region." See the World Bank, *Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge* (Washington, DC: Sustainable Development Department and Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, World Bank, 2011), ii, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/FINAL\\_VOLUME\\_I\\_ENGLISH\\_CrimeAndViolence.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/FINAL_VOLUME_I_ENGLISH_CrimeAndViolence.pdf).
- 6 For a comparison of crime and violence trends in Central American and Mexico, see José Miguel Cruz, Rafael Fernández de Castro, and Gema Santamaría Balmaceda, "Political Transition, Social Violence, and Gangs: Cases in Central America and Mexico," in *In the Wake of War: Democratization and Internal Armed Conflict in Latin America*, ed. Cynthia J. Arnson (Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2012).

It is worthwhile to look at these crime trends in light of the shifts in cocaine-smuggling routes through Central America. The US Southern Command has made public a series of maps of “suspicious” air and maritime activity, which suggest that the principal transshipment points for cocaine trafficking from South America are through Central America. These maps suggest that since the mid-2000s Central America has, in fact, become the principal route for cocaine from the south on its way to the United States, with the Atlantic coast of Honduras and Nicaragua, and the Pacific coast of Guatemala, being the principal transshipment points. The State Department’s *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report for 2012* states that approximately 95 percent of the cocaine entering the United States from South America passes through Mexico and Central America, and nearly 80 percent stops first in a Central American country.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2. Suspected Trafficking Routes from South America**



Source: US Southern Command, “Precision Targeting: A USSOUTHCOM Perspective,” Unclassified, 2011, [www.dtic.mil/ndia/2011PSA\\_AnnualReview/Day2Droz.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/ndia/2011PSA_AnnualReview/Day2Droz.pdf).

If we then look at the homicide statistics generated by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) at a subnational level, they do reflect a significant rise in violence in areas that serve as transshipment routes in Central America, especially along the northern coast of Honduras.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Mexico the states with the highest rates of homicide are invariably ones in which drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) are engaged in major disputes over trafficking corridors, including Chihuahua (disputed by the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels), Durango (disputed by the Zetas and Sinaloa cartels), Baja California (disputed by the Sinaloa and Tijuana cartels), Sinaloa (disputed by the Sinaloa Cartel and remnants of the Beltrán Leyva Organization, its erstwhile ally), and Guerrero (disputed by several factions of the Beltrán Leyva Organization and the Zetas). Indeed, more recent maps of homicides in Mexico would show a shift away from some areas, such as Baja California, where these disputes have been partially settled and toward new areas of conflict, such as Tamaulipas (where a split between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel has become particularly violent).<sup>9</sup> In short, there is ample reason to believe that some part of the high homicide rate is directly attributable to disputes between DTOs over smuggling corridors.

In Central America, apparent cartel disputes over territory have also led to increased violence — for example, the massacre of 27 civilians in Guatemala’s Petén region in May 2011. However, some of the

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, “International Narcotics Control Strategy,” 2012, [www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2012](http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2012).

<sup>8</sup> For maps and a review of homicide rates at the subnational level in Central America for 2005 and 2010, with sources from national police, statistical offices, and criminal justice institutions, see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide, 2011* (Vienna: UNODC), 51.

<sup>9</sup> See Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Ríos, and David A. Shirk, *Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis Through 2011* (San Diego, CA: Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, March 2012), 17, <http://justiceinmexico.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/2012-tbi-drugviolence.pdf>.





highest homicide rates in Central America are in major urban areas, which are not believed to be major zones of conflict among transnational criminal organizations (TCOs.) These urban areas have experienced high levels of violence —especially youth violence — for some time, and have seen a slight increase in crime in recent years. This suggests that not all of the rise in crime can be directly attributed to the TCOs. It is certainly possible that the presence of well-funded and well-armed transnational crime groups in the country may have significant secondary effects on common crime, as they introduce high-caliber weapons into the country, often employ smaller criminal enterprises in their work, and pay operators in drugs — thus spawning a secondary retail market that can itself turn violent. Nevertheless, the evidence seems to suggest that the TCOs alone have not caused the spike in homicides, even if they may have played a catalytic role in the overall crime trends.<sup>10</sup>

## II. US Policy Responses

Faced with rising crime in a region of historic and strategic importance, the US government has recently developed a series of new policy responses in partnership with the governments of the region. The initial impulse for the increased security relationship was a meeting between Mexican President Felipe Calderón and US President George W. Bush in 2007 in which Calderón asked the US government to get more involved in addressing the rise of crime next door. The two leaders agreed on a package of assistance from the US government and began to develop a series of protocols for enhancing existing cooperation in intelligence and law enforcement. The assistance package, known as the Mérida Initiative after the city located near where the two presidents met, was eventually passed in 2008 by the US Congress; it included \$405 million for Mexico and an additional \$50 million for Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. In 2009, Congress created CARSI to increase the focus on security cooperation within the seven countries of Central America, and the Mérida Initiative has since been devoted exclusively to Mexico.

An overview of expenditures under these two initiatives indicates a sustained increase in funding for cooperative efforts to strengthen security in Mexico and Central America. For Mexico these funds have been overwhelmingly focused on antinarcotics and law enforcement efforts, with a recent growth of funding for community-related projects. Indeed, a more careful parsing of the funding would show that the Mérida Initiative focused primarily on heavy equipment (planes, helicopters, and scanners) in its first two years, and has since shifted toward greater support for training of the police and judicial sectors, software, and the construction of new court buildings.<sup>11</sup> For Central America, funding has been roughly one-quarter of that for Mexico and divided among all seven countries. CARSI's primary goals have changed over time, but by 2011 were focused on efforts to: (1) create safe streets for the citizens of the region; (2) disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband; (3) support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments; (4) establish an effective state presence and ensure security in communities at risk; and (5) foster enhanced levels of security and rule-of-law coordination among the nations of the region.<sup>12</sup> Over time, the program's funding has increasingly reflected greater balance between the law enforcement aspects and prevention and development programs, as demonstrated in Table 1a.

<sup>10</sup> Arnson and Olson, *Organized Crime in Central America*, especially the chapters by Steven Dudley, Julie López, James Bosworth, and Douglas Farah.

<sup>11</sup> Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, *US-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012), 14.

<sup>12</sup> US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "The Central America Regional Security Initiative: Citizen-Safety — A Shared Partnership," (Fact sheet, March 14, 2011), [www.state.gov/documents/organization/158462.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/158462.pdf). In 2009 the first stated goal of CARSI was to provide "law enforcement assistance to confront narcotics and arms trafficking, gangs, organized crime, border security deficiencies, as well as to disrupt criminal infrastructure, such as money laundering and trafficking routes and networks." US Department of State, "FY 2010 Appropriations Spending Plan, Central America—Central America Regional Security Initiative," undated mimeograph, 4, <http://justf.org/files/primarydocs/100930cars.pdf>.

**Table 1a. Funding for the Central America Regional Security Initiative, (\$ in thousands), FY 2008-13**

Account	FY 2008 (Actual)	FY 2009 (Actual)	FY 2010 (Actual)	FY 2011 (Estimate)	FY 2012 (Planned)	FY 2013 (Request)
ESF	25,000	18,000	23,000	30,000	50,000	47,500
INCLE	24,800	70,000	65,000	71,508	85,000	60,000
NADR	6,200	—	—	—	—	—
FMF	4,000	17,000	7,000	—	—	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>60,000</b>	<b>105,000</b>	<b>95,000</b>	<b>101,508</b>	<b>135,000</b>	<b>107,500</b>

Notes: ESF = Economic Support Fund; INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR= Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, De-mining and Related Programs; and FMF = Foreign Military Financing. Source: US Department of State, undated mimeograph, 2012, provided to the authors. Similar figures are reported by the Congressional Research Service. See Peter J. Meyer and Mark P. Sullivan, *US Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: Recent Trends and FY 2013 Appropriations* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012), 49, [www.fas.org/sqp/crs/row/R42582.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/row/R42582.pdf).

**Table 1b. US Assistance to Mexico by Account, (\$ in millions), FY 2007-13**

Account	FY 2007	FY 2008 <sup>a</sup>	FY 2009 <sup>b</sup>	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012 (Estimate)	FY 2013 (Request)
INCLE	36.7	242.1	454.0 <sup>c</sup>	365.0 <sup>d</sup>	117.0	248.5	199.0
ESF	11.4	34.7	15.0	15.0	18.0	33.3	35.0
FMF	0.0	116.5	299.0 <sup>e</sup>	5.3	8.0	7.0	7.0
IMET	0.1	0.4	0.8	1.0	1.0	1.6	1.5
NADR	1.3	1.4	3.9	3.9	5.7	n/a	n/a
GHCSf	3.7	2.7	2.9	3.5	3.5	1.0	0.0
DA	12.3	8.2	11.2	10.0	25.0	33.4	23.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>65.4</b>	<b>405.9</b>	<b>786.8</b>	<b>403.7</b>	<b>178.2</b>	<b>324.8</b>	<b>265.5</b>

Notes: GHCS=Global Health and Child Survival; DA=Development Assistance; ESF=Economic Support Fund; FMF=Foreign Military Financing; IMET=International Military Education and Training; INCLE=International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement; NADR=Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism and Related Programs.

<sup>a</sup> FY 2008 assistance includes funding from the *Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2008* (Pub. L. 110-252).

<sup>b</sup> FY 2009 assistance includes FY 2009 bridge funding from the *Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2008* (Pub. L.110-252) and funding from the *Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2009* (Pub. L.111-32).

<sup>c</sup> \$94 million provided under P.L. 111-32 and counted here as part of FY 2009 funding was considered by appropriators “forward funding” intended to address in advance a portion of the FY 2010 request.

<sup>d</sup> \$175 million provided in the FY 2010 supplemental (Pub. L. 111-212) and counted here as FY 2010 funding was considered by appropriators as “forward funding” intended to address in advance a portion of the FY 2011 request.

<sup>e</sup> \$260 million provided under a FY 2009 supplemental (Pub. L. 111-32) and counted here as FY 2009 funding was considered by appropriators “forward funding” intended to address in advance a portion of the FY 2010 request.

<sup>f</sup> Prior to FY 2008, the Global Health and Child Survival account was known as Child Survival and Health.

Sources: Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, *US-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012), 14; based on US Department of State, “Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations FY 2008-FY 2012, and Executive Budget Summary: Function 150 & Other International Programs,” <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/158949.pdf>.



What is perhaps most notable about the funding is the differing dynamics of cooperation among the United States, Mexico, and the Central American countries. US-Mexico cooperation on law enforcement and rule-of-law issues has existed for some time, but the scaling-up of current cooperation efforts since 2007 largely followed a decision by the Mexican government to engage with the US government more aggressively on security concerns, mirroring the rise in violence in that country. Indeed, the Mérida Initiative funding is only a small part of the overall security cooperation relationship between the two countries, which have developed a four-part framework to encapsulate their ongoing collaboration, often called “Beyond Mérida.” This framework includes efforts to (1) degrade organized-crime groups in both countries, including their supply networks for money and weapons in the United States; (2) build a rule of law (primarily in Mexico); (3) create a “21<sup>st</sup>-century border” that uses “risk segregation,” or management techniques to enhance security while ensuring a faster flow of people and goods; and (4) build “resilient communities” that can resist the onslaught of organized crime and forge a more livable future.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, not all of these aims have been realized, even in part, as is discussed in the next section, but the framework itself points to the reality that US-Mexico cooperation efforts go far beyond the programs embodied in the Mérida Initiative. Perhaps the most important efforts to date involve bilateral intelligence sharing that has helped identify and has led to the arrest or killing of key organized-crime leaders. Moreover, efforts to train and equip police, prosecutors, and the courts have included hundreds of people-to-people exchanges among attorneys general, judges, lawyers, and police officers and the provision of technical and scientific materiel, such as crime-scene investigation kits, necessary for improved operations of professional law enforcement agencies in Mexico. US and Mexican law enforcement agencies even embed a small number of their officers in fusion centers across each other’s border to better track the movement and networks of organized-crime groups. While the reality of cooperation certainly falls short of ideals, it is not without substance, and goes far beyond the funding mechanisms developed within the original Mérida Initiative. This suggests a newly cooperative dynamic between Mexico and the United States more generally,<sup>14</sup> and also that Mexican criminal justice agencies at both the federal and state levels have significant “absorptive capacity” for joint efforts with US counterpart agencies.

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By contrast, Central American countries, including those of the Northern Triangle, have a long history of law enforcement and (with the exception of Guatemala) military-to-military collaboration with the United States that predates the CARSII framework. Nevertheless, CARSII refocused those programs toward building greater institutional capacity for law enforcement, and investing in violence prevention programs for at-risk youth. The resources available through CARSII are modest at best and reflect problems of absorptive capacity on the ground. However, they are probably insufficient to meet the challenges in the region even if they do reverse a decline in US security assistance over the past decade (in contrast to the period immediately after the signing of peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala, when the international community provided significant resources).

<sup>13</sup> Eric L. Olson and Christopher E. Wilson, *Beyond Mérida: The Evolving Approach to Security Cooperation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010), [www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Beyond%20Merida1.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Beyond%20Merida1.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Selee and Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, “The Dynamics of US-Mexico Relations,” in *The United States and Mexico: The Politics of Partnership*, eds. Peter H. Smith and Andrew Selee (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming 2013).



President Obama announced a Central American Citizen Security Partnership during a trip to Latin America that included a visit to El Salvador in March 2011. The partnership encompasses all US government security programs in Central America, including CARSI, as well as programs funded directly by several US agencies, including the departments of defense, homeland security, treasury, and justice. (The CARSI program is primarily a Department of State program.)

The administration's Central American Citizen Security Partnership does not involve new initiatives or financial commitments — skeptics note that it initially repackaged existing programs — but highlights the multiple actors involved in the complex and diverse security relationships between the United States and Central America. According to a fact sheet issued by the White House, “the Partnership seeks to enhance US citizen security assistance in Central America, in close cooperation with regional leaders and the international community in support of the Central American Integration System (SICA) Security Strategy.”<sup>15</sup>

In June 2011 in Antigua, Guatemala, the SICA member countries met with donor nations and adopted a regional security strategy with four pillars: law enforcement; crime prevention; reinsertion and rehabilitation of youth; and institutional strengthening. The United States has publicly committed to supporting the SICA process, and international donor coordination appears to have improved since the 2011 meeting. Still, the SICA meeting did not produce a coherent strategy for attacking organized crime and violence, but, rather, a list of proposed projects. This, in turn, led to disagreement among donors over whether SICA is an implementing agency of a regional strategy, or a consultative mechanism for regional governments.

Although the bulk of US funding is managed and disbursed by the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), it is worth noting that the Department of Defense (DOD) also has its own longstanding programs in Central America. Some of these stem from the US military presence at the Soto Cano Air Base outside of Comayagua, Honduras. While US military personnel and equipment (such as helicopters) at the air base have, at times, been utilized in support of counternarcotics efforts, this is not their primary mission. The US presence has historically been geared toward the training of US — as opposed to Central American — personnel. It has also supported humanitarian missions and strengthened the disaster response capacity of the Honduran military. In the face of numerous calls by Honduran officials for the greater use of US assets in counternarcotics operations, the Pentagon has largely sought to provide its support for counterdrug efforts via other congressionally approved authorities.

While specifics about the Pentagon's counterdrug programs in Central America are not extensive, it is clear that the training of military and antinarcotics police forces, the sharing of limited and targeted intelligence, and mission support are taking place. For example, the US Southern Command provides real-time intelligence to Central American security forces regarding suspicious and clandestine flights — and maritime routes, by tracking “fast boats” and semi-submersibles. Additionally, the DOD carries out direct counternarcotics assistance programs under the authority provided by Section 1004 of the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991*, including the Counter-Drug Training Support (CDTS) program implemented in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, among other countries worldwide (see Table 2). In the case of Honduras, between FY 2008 and 2010 (the latest years for which information is available), this assistance was mostly for intelligence analysis, training, linguistic support, infrastructure, and information sharing. Other DOD programs, such as the Section 1206 “Train and Equip Authority,” have also been used in Central America, but in a more limited fashion and not always connected to fighting drug trafficking.

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15 The White House, Office of the Vice President, “Fact Sheet: The Central American Citizen Security Partnership,” (White House fact sheet, Washington, DC, March 6, 2012), [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/fact-sheet-central-american-citizen-security-partnership](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/fact-sheet-central-american-citizen-security-partnership).



**Table 2. Grants of Military and Police Aid under Authority of Section 1004 Counter-Drug Assistance, (in \$s), FY 2008-13**

Country	FY 2008	FY 2009	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013*
Mexico	12,171,000	34,164,000	89,749,000	71,674,000	75,508,000	75,508,000
Guatemala	2,479,000	2,478,000	9,152,000	16,709,000	9,145,000	9,145,000
El Salvador	1,035,000	1,538,000	4,291,000	4,715,000	2,173,000	2,173,000
Honduras	3,629,000	3,824,000	2,357,000	4,221,000	2,753,000	2,753,000

*Note:* \*Denotes requested amount, final action pending.

*Source:* US Department of Defense and US Department of State, "Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement Activities of Interest," various years, [www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/fmtrpt/](http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/fmtrpt/).

### III. Shortcomings and Opportunities

US security policy toward Mexico and Central America has expanded dramatically since 2007. Indeed, there has been an exponential increase in funding for joint initiatives and a notable increase in actual collaborative efforts to address shared transnational threats. These efforts, however, remain far more developed in relation to Mexico than to the Central American countries. This, in turn, reflects the greater assertiveness and absorptive capacity of the Mexican government, as well as the unique relationship between the United States and Mexico, two large countries that share a long common border. Major strides have been made in US-Mexico security collaboration as both countries have put aside past reservations and developed institutional mechanisms of coordination.

Conversely, the growing sense of urgency about the escalating violence and insecurity in the Northern Triangle have run up against serious problems of state weakness and/or penetration by organized crime, institutional incapacity and dysfunction, and lack of leadership. The nature of these deficits varies widely from country to country; in pointing them out, it is important not to lose sight of the public officials, along with groups and individuals within civil society, who are committed to reforms — often at considerable personal risk. It is discouraging, nonetheless, that over the many years since the end of the Central American wars, the very reforms embodied in peace agreements remain unfulfilled. Slow progress in the critical areas of law enforcement and judicial strengthening, not to mention the absence of social pacts toward more inclusive societies, are the backdrop against which today's crisis unfolds.

Within the US government, multifaceted programs such as CARSI and the Central American Citizen Security Partnership share laudable goals. A "whole-of-government" approach, emphasizing coordination between development and violence-prevention strategies on the one hand, and improved law enforcement and interdiction on the other, is the appropriate operational ideal. Efforts by the State Department, in particular the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, to coordinate the interagency process, must be recognized. But the challenges of ensuring the implementation of a coherent strategy across the entire US government (including the Drug Enforcement Administration, DOD, and Department of Justice, US Customs and Border Protection, etc.) are enormous, and do not receive the attention they deserve at the highest levels of the US government. Furthermore, coordination among donor nations and within Central America presents even greater challenges. For example, SICA's role in this process is still ambiguous. Will it become a conduit for international funding with the ability to implement programs, a capacity it does not possess at present? Is it even capable of assuming a more operational role? Or should SICA continue as a coordination mechanism between donors and recipient countries, leaving program development and management to others with existing capacity? Furthermore, clarifying which are the most effective law enforcement strategies and how to build capacity within existing institutional frameworks has yet to be achieved. Finally, in the absence of a coherent strategy, mechanisms for planning and evaluation are largely nonexistent.



Until recently, security cooperation with Central America focused overwhelmingly on addressing transnational crime. Given the high rates of common crime, including murder, which are not always attributable to transnational DTOs, there appears to be new recognition at the policy level that new strategies are needed to better address public insecurity, a weak rule of law institutions, and longstanding problems of gang violence. There is some evidence that this is already happening in the funding priorities of CARSI (as well as the Mérida Initiative), but involves a gradual shift in Washington; the degree to which it has been operationalized in US programs on the ground remains to be seen. Moreover, the composition of US assistance provided under CARSI has become more evenly balanced over time between community-based prevention programs and initiatives funded through the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement and USAID. US officials still need to do more, however, to coordinate strategy and set priorities at a regional level, and insist that partner governments do the same. It is certainly the case that the US government is, in many ways, well placed to address transnational crime threats that supply the US market with illegal narcotics, rather than to resolve internal weaknesses in countries' criminal justice systems. However, given the fragility of key rule-of-law institutions in some countries, it is unlikely that any strategy even to deal with transnational crime will work unless it includes a significant component of institutional strengthening and crime prevention.

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*US officials still need to do more... to coordinate strategy and set priorities at a regional level, and insist that partner governments do the same.*

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Finally, the US commitment to address transnational crime within its own borders — from the demand for illegal narcotics to the networks of distributors, firearms traffickers, and money launderers who fuel the trade — has so far been limited by unfavorable domestic political dynamics and an unwillingness to wage costly political battles in the face of other national and international challenges. The Obama administration's efforts during its first term to disrupt the southward flow of illegal firearms are laudable, especially the requirement to report multiple sales of long guns in border states; but comprehensive reform of firearms policies, difficult under normal circumstances, has become impossible in light of the “Fast and Furious” scandal.<sup>16</sup> Efforts to address money laundering have been scattered across agencies, with little central coordination or information sharing. Demand-reduction efforts, while better funded than before, also seem to lack a coherent strategy.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure, an uncertain link exists between (1) dismantling the operation of transnational crime networks in the United States and reducing drug consumption and (2) lowering the level of violence in Mexico and Central America. Cocaine consumption has been in a gradual decline in the United States for the past several years due, in part, to the aging of the heavy user population, but violence related to cocaine trafficking appears to be going up. Indeed, almost all of the violence in Central America tied to drug trafficking is related to cocaine, and this drug probably represents half or more of the profits of

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<sup>16</sup> Operation Fast and Furious was an undercover operation led by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) and designed to uncover firearms trafficking to Mexico. The operation was shut down when it was revealed that ATF agents had lost track of several hundred weapons they had allowed to pass into the hands of traffickers in a botched effort to observe the trafficking process. It is reported that many of those firearms have been found at crime scenes in Mexico where people have been killed, and that one of the firearms was found at the scene where a US Border Patrol officer, Brian Terry, was killed. This last incident and the entire operation were the subjects of a major investigation by the Department of Justice inspector general and by congressional investigators.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Reuter, “How Can Domestic US Drug Policy Help Mexico?” in *Shared Responsibility: US-Mexico Policy Options for Confronting Organized Crime*, eds. Eric L. Olson, David A. Shirk, and Andrew Selee (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center and Trans-Border Institute, 2010).



the Mexican DTOs as well.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, efforts to reduce consumption — including those that build on new evidence-based strategies that target heavy users<sup>19</sup> — are likely to have a long-term impact on the violence in neighboring countries, while the interdiction of arms and money tied to the DTOs could play a significant supporting role in Mexican and Central American efforts to limit the reach of organized-crime groups.

In short, US security collaboration with Mexico and Central America has expanded dramatically. But there is still much room to grow and develop a more coherent policy response: one that sets clear priorities, establishes sequencing, supports efforts to establish and maintain public security by strengthening the rule of law and addressing the social needs of poor and marginalized youth, and ultimately, helps establish the state as the sole guarantor of public security.

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<sup>18</sup> Eric L. Olson, *Considering New Strategies for Confronting Organized Crime in Mexico* (Mexico City: Mexico Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2012), [www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/considering-new-strategies-for-confronting-organized-crime-mexico](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/considering-new-strategies-for-confronting-organized-crime-mexico); Beau Kilmer, Jonathan P. Caulkins, Brittany M. Bond, and Peter H. Reuter, *Reducing Drug Trafficking Revenues and Violence in Mexico: Would Legalizing Marijuana in California Help?* (Los Angeles: RAND, 2010), [www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP325.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP325.html).

<sup>19</sup> On evidence-based strategies, see Reuter, “How Can US Drug Policy Help Mexico?” and Mark Kleiman, “Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2011, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68131/mark-kleiman/surgical-strikes-in-the-drug-wars](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68131/mark-kleiman/surgical-strikes-in-the-drug-wars).



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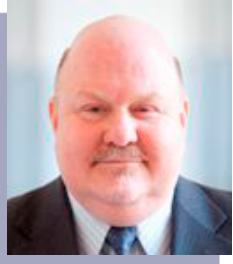
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