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A stylized map of Central America and the Caribbean region, rendered in a light purple color, set against a darker purple background. The map shows the outlines of the continents and islands.

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

A Threat Assessment

September 2012

UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME
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Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean:

A Threat Assessment

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Key findings

- Although several contraband flows affect the region, the paramount crime issue is cocaine trafficking, the groups empowered by it, and the violence associated with this flow.
- This study finds that while cocaine trafficking has undeniably catalyzed violence in some areas, the security problem in the region is much deeper, rooted in weak governance and powerful sub-state actors.
- Cocaine has been trafficked through Central America for decades, but the importance of the region to this flow increased dramatically after 2000 and again after 2006, due to an escalation in Mexican drug law enforcement. The resulting displacement effect underscores the importance of coordinated strategies to address the entire contraband flow, so that one country's success does not become another's problem.
- The implementation of the new Mexican security strategy in 2006 has disrupted cocaine supply to the United States market, forcing dealers to cut purity and raise prices. These changes have deeply undermined United States demand for the drug, but not yet reduced the violence associated with the flow.
- In response to an increasingly inhospitable environment in Mexico, traffickers have shifted their focus to new routes along the Guatemalan/Honduran border and contesting new "plazas" throughout the region. Displacement to the Caribbean remains a threat.
- The contest today is between longstanding organized crime families that effectively govern the remote areas of the countries in which they operate. In addition to cocaine trafficking, these groups are involved in a wide range of organized crime activities, and manipulate local politics. If cocaine flows abate, they will seek revenues from other forms of acquisitive crime, such as extortion, which may cause violence levels to increase.
- Cocaine has inflamed conflict between these groups, but, regardless of the state of the cocaine trade, they will continue to use violence to control their areas of influence until they are dislodged. Long-term change will require improvement in governance in these underserved regions so that surrogate authorities do not emerge.
- In 2007, UNODC concluded that the *maras* groups (MS-13 and M-18) play very little role in transnational cocaine trafficking. This continues to be the case.
- The Zetas, the *Maras*, and other territorial groups appear to be involved in migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and the firearms trade. This involvement may increase if cocaine revenues decline.
- Addressing transnational flows requires international cooperation. Full implementation of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols and the UN Convention against Corruption is critical.
- National police services cannot resolve the organized crime problems of this region alone, because reducing the contraband flows requires tools they do not possess. Development actors must cooperate in a global strategy to address the problems of drugs and illicit markets.
- Addressing the violence is a separate issue. Governments need to develop the capacity to assert control over their entire territories and consolidate democracy through justice.
- Programmes to build capacity among local law enforcement cannot bring about the rapid results required, due to widespread corruption. The temporary use of armed forces for some law enforcement tasks should not delay police development and reform, including the promotion of civilian oversight. The international community should do what it can to supplement local criminal justice capacity.
- Cross-sectoral crime prevention strategies must be explored. Crime affects all aspects of life, and so a multi-agency crime prevention plan, involving the participation of the private sector, should be developed.

Background

This report is one of several studies conducted by UNODC on organized crime threats around the world. These studies describe what is known about the mechanics of contraband trafficking – the what, who, how, and how much of illicit flows – and discuss their potential impact on governance and development. Their primary role is diagnostic, but they also explore the implications of these findings for policy.

These studies are based on a number of data sources. UNODC maintains global databases on crime and drug issues, based mainly on the official statistics provided by Member States. This allows cross-national comparison and trend analysis. For example, UNODC has extensive time series data on drug production, seizures, and consumption, and by analyzing these data, a comprehensive picture can be drawn. This information is supplemented with data from other international organizations and Member States, as well as open source material. For the present study, analysts in the field were able to interview public officials on a range of topics, and much of the qualitative insight in this report comes from these interviews.

The present study addresses Central America and the Caribbean, as the region is defined by the United Nations. Due to time and data limitations, it focuses primarily on Central America, with the Caribbean referenced only contextually. The purpose of this assessment is partly internal. In 2011, the Secretary-General created the United Nations Task Force on Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking, a body intended to promote a “one-UN” approach to these multi-faceted problems. This report represents the first discussion document for this body. UNODC has also recently expanded its work and field office structure in this region, and this study is offered to help inform programming in the region. But it may also be of broader interest to both the Member States of the region and the world, as they collectively work to address transnational organized crime.



Preface

Central America and the Caribbean, particularly countries in the Northern Triangle, face extreme violence inflamed by transnational organized crime and drug trafficking. According to UNODC's own studies, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras now have some of the highest homicide rates in the world.

There is little doubt, therefore, that these transnational issues present major challenges to countries within the region and to the wider international community. Criminal networks and their activities disrupt stability, undermine democratic institutions and hinder the economic activity so vital to the region. All of these issues are apparent within Central America and the Caribbean.

However, as the report *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment* makes clear, the violent impact of drugs and crime forms only part of the region's problems. The trafficking of illicit cocaine has undoubtedly given stimulus to the violence, but the instability is embedded in weak institutions and the presence of non-state actors.

As the Report stresses, governments need to build effective, humane and efficient criminal law systems. Above all, the relationship between development, the rule of law and security needs to be fully understood. Drugs and crime are also development issues, while stability can be promoted by embracing human rights and access to justice.


UNODC's role is to offer assistance and support to countries in the region. As a first step, the implementation of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention against Corruption is crucial. UNODC is also focusing on developing a strategy based on its integrated regional programmes.

These activities are supported by a re-profiled office in Mexico and other countries in the region being linked to the Regional hub for Central America and the Caribbean in Panama. Centres of excellence have been established in Mexico regarding public security statistics and in the Dominican Republic concerning drug demand reduction and the reform of prisons.

Within Panama, UNODC has helped the government establish a Regional Anti-Corruption Academy. The network of prosecutors in Central America known as REFCO is also using best practices and the exchange of information to build strength in the criminal justice chain.

Robust policies flow from strong research. The *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment* has highlighted many of the underlying problems. The international community now needs to commit itself to working closely with countries in the region to build strong democratic institutions as the cornerstone and guarantor of human rights, economic and social development and stability.

The international community also needs to acknowledge the scale of the challenges faced by these regions due to the violence. Countries in the region have called for our collective support, we must not ignore them.



Yury Fedotov
Executive Director
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Executive summary

The people of Central America regard crime, and particularly criminal violence, as one of the most important issues facing their countries today. This violence is broadly attributed to the increase in cocaine trafficking through the region since 2006. While there is some truth to this association, the situation is more complicated than it is commonly portrayed.

In the past, Central America was largely a refueling stop for vessels moving cocaine northwards. After 2006, the year the Mexican government implemented its new national security strategy, it became more hazardous for traffickers to ship the drug directly to Mexico, and so an increasing share of the flow began to transit the landmass of Central America. These new paths traversed areas controlled by local organized crime groups, upsetting the balance of power between them. While these groups had long been involved

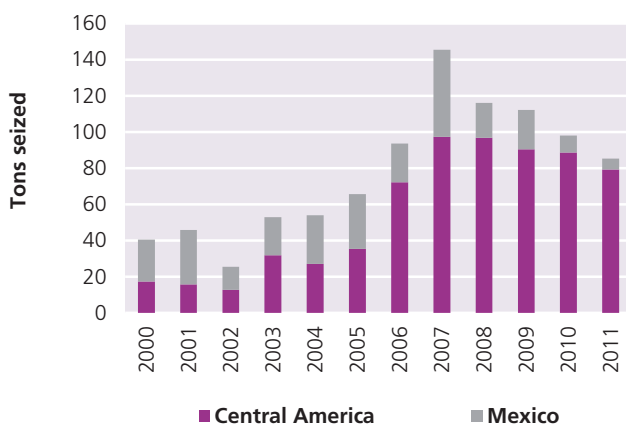
in cross-border trafficking, the influx of greater volumes of cocaine greatly raised the stakes, promoting competition for territorial control.

It is these groups, not the flow of cocaine, that are the core cause of the violence. Relatively little cocaine transits El Salvador today, for example – less than 2% of that crossing Guatemala. Although recently eclipsed by Honduras, El Salvador has suffered the highest sustained murder rates in the region. For a number of reasons, competition between groups has been more intense in El Salvador, entirely independent of the cocaine flow.

In Guatemala and Honduras, in contrast, there is a clear link between contested trafficking areas and the murder rates. Some of the most violent areas in the world lie along the Honduran coast and on both sides of the Guatemalan/Honduran border. But the groups involved have long engaged in a range of criminal activities, from extortion to migrant smuggling. Though their role in crime and corruption was less visible before the recent boom in cocaine trafficking, they have long been a drain on the nations of Central America.

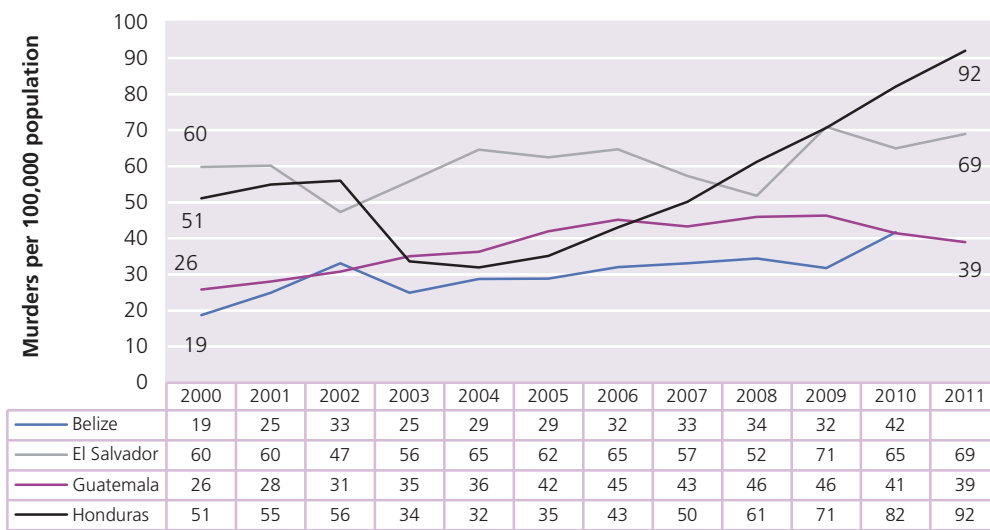
The groups involved in transnational organized crime can be divided into territorial groups and trafficking (*transportista*) groups. Territorial groups, such as the Guatemalan crime families, focus on maintaining control over a geographic area and taxing all criminal activity therein, including drug trafficking. Some display of violence is necessary to maintain this control. *Transportistas*, in contrast, prefer to fly under the radar, simply moving contraband from place to place, paying tribute to territorial groups when necessary. Some territorial groups, known locally as *tumbadores*, focus on robbing *transportistas* of their cargo, and are

Figure 1: Cocaine seizures in Central America and Mexico, 2000-2011



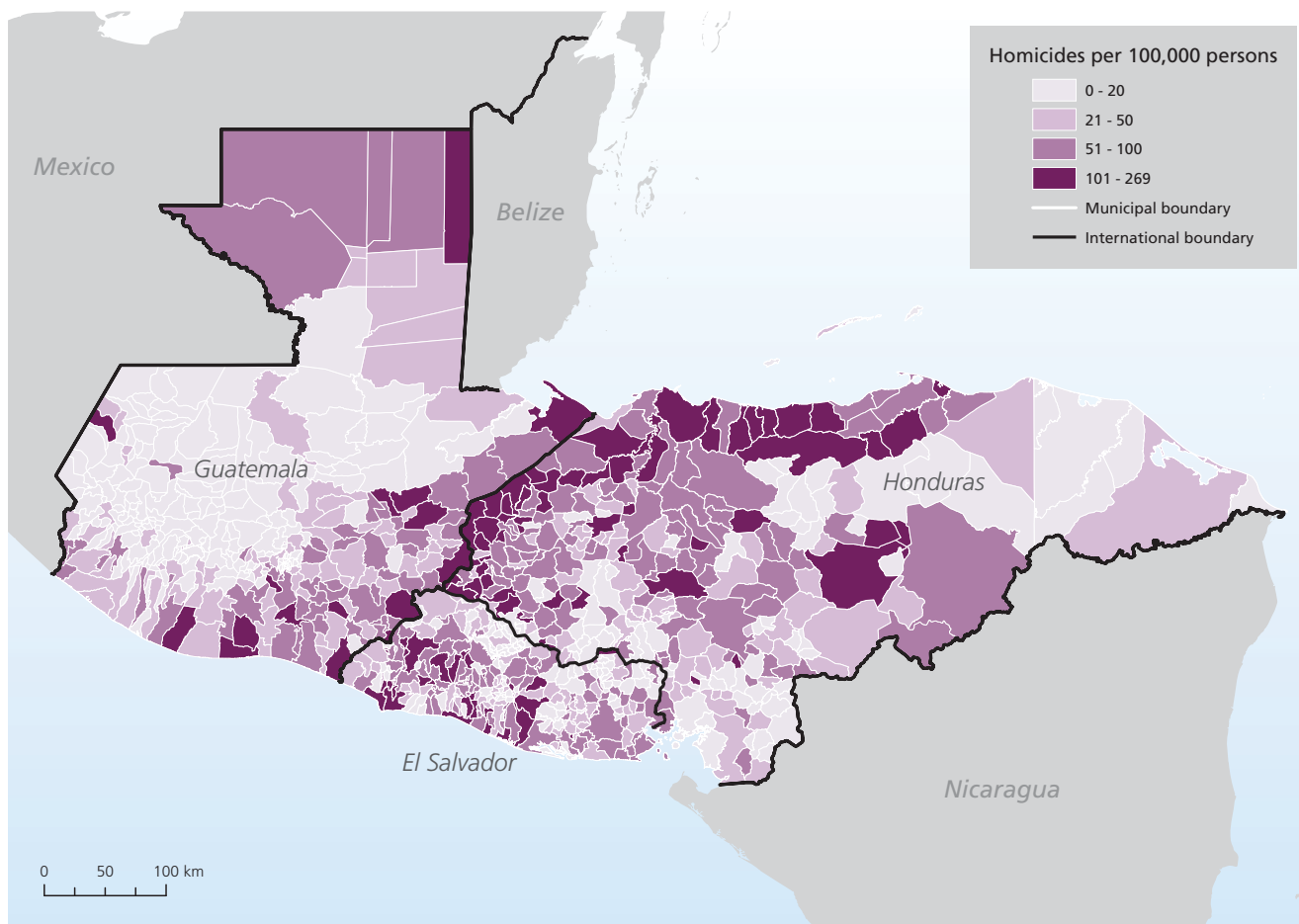
Source: Annual Report Questionnaires

Figure 2: Murder rates in northern Central America, 2000-2011



Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Map 1: Homicide rates by municipal area in 2011



Source: UNODC, elaborated from data from national police (Guatemala, El Salvador) and *Observatorio de la Violencia* (Honduras)

a major source of violence. Finally, one type of territorial group, street gangs known as *maras*, have little connection to the transnational drug trade, and focus primarily on extortion and other local power struggles.

Cocaine trafficking is currently the most lucrative organized crime activity in Central America, but it is far from the only one. Both territorial groups and the *maras* prey on migrants moving northward, who may be very vulnerable. The recent economic downturn has reduced the flow of smuggled migrants, but those who continue to make the journey north are subject to a range of abuses, including being held for ransom. Some migrants are sexually exploited, particularly as they reach Guatemala and southern Mexico. Organized crime groups may also deal in firearms, either stolen or bought from corrupt officials. Military weapons are smuggled both northward and southward. In many ways, the territorial groups act like a state within the state, and can easily move into other forms of criminality should their current portfolio of activities prove unprofitable.

If cocaine trafficking were to disappear tomorrow, the impact on violence would be unpredictable. Diminished flows can actually exacerbate violent competition, and more direct forms of criminal income acquisition (such as extortion, robbery, and kidnapping) can cause more violence than drug trafficking. The flow of cocaine through the Caribbean has declined remarkably in recent years, but this reduction has not brought low murder rates. The key driver of violence is not cocaine, but change: change in the negotiated power relations between and within groups, and with the state. For progress to be made, the risk of aggravating violence in the short term must be taken into account.

The long-term goal is to eliminate, through state building and development, the opportunities for these groups to thrive, allowing democratically elected authorities to govern. But achieving this goal is dependent on establishing order in the short-term, which will require measures to reduce the capacity and incentives of criminal actors to confront and subvert the state. There are essentially two ways of doing this:

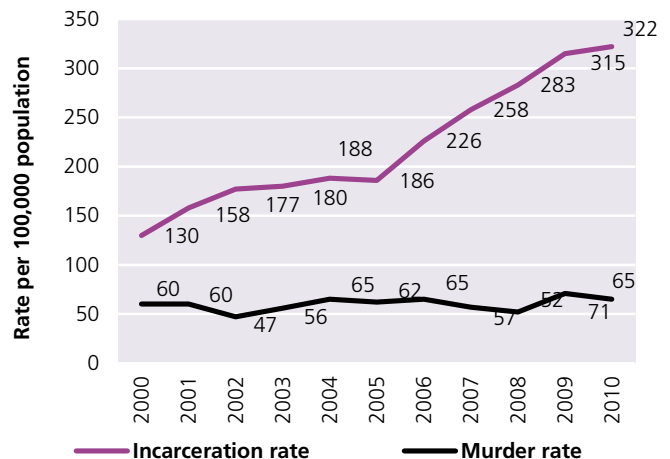
- Dismantling the organized crime groups through law enforcement, including the provision of international assistance (such as CICIG¹ and UNPOL²);
- Finding alternative means of disabling the organized crime groups.

To date, most of the anti-crime efforts in the region have focused on an increasingly militarized and repressive approach to policing. This approach carries the risk of further damaging governance through the erosion of civil rights, and has so far proven largely ineffective due to other

weaknesses in the criminal justice system. Poor investigation, lack of prosecutorial capacity, and judicial corruption have resulted in extremely low conviction rates, effectively ensuring impunity.

Even if these rates were improved, most prison systems are overcrowded to the point that human rights may be violated.

Figure 3: Number of prisoners and number of murders per 100,000 population in El Salvador, 2000-2010



Source: ILANUD, UNODC Homicide Database

To properly target prosecutions, a strategic framework is required. National crime prevention strategies, including strategies for law enforcement action, should be devised. These could involve techniques outside the normal law enforcement portfolio. Much of what has been learned in post-conflict work could be employed to address criminal violence, including efforts to “demobilize” the *maras*. For example, in 2012, the two opposing *mara* factions in El Salvador agreed to a ceasefire. The resulting dramatic reduction in homicide rates suggests that negotiated solutions are possible.

To avoid displacement of crime problems from one area to another, these national efforts must be internationally coordinated. International crime prevention strategies are needed for both the region and the contraband flows affecting it. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols and the Convention against Corruption provide the platform for this cooperation to proceed, and so full implementation of these agreements is critical.

¹ International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, established in 2007 as an independent body designed to support national authorities in the investigation of crime in Guatemala.

² United Nations Police.



Cocaine, organized crime groups, and violence

In a number of Central American countries, crime is the paramount public policy issue, deciding elections and changing the relationship between the people and their government.³ The crime problem in this region has been well researched, including recent work by UNDP⁴ and the World Bank,⁵ as well as previous UNODC assessments on Central America (2007)⁶ and the Caribbean (2007, with the World Bank).⁷ There is no need to duplicate this work, so the present study will focus on what is widely recognized to be the central threat confronting the region today:

- the flow of cocaine,
- the criminal groups this flow empowers, and
- the violence associated with both.

Other trafficking flows are discussed – including the trade in illicit firearms, the smuggling of migrants, and trafficking in human beings. All of these flows are relevant, since most of the organized crime activity in this region is interrelated. But in parts of the region, the single most important public policy issue is criminal violence, and drug trafficking groups are blamed for much of the bloodshed. The present report critically explores this association.

3 For example, the Commissioner of Human Rights in Honduras has declared drug trafficking and organized crime to be public enemy number one in his country, alongside corruption.
<http://www.conadeh.hn/index.php/7-conadeh/69-derecho-a-la-salud>

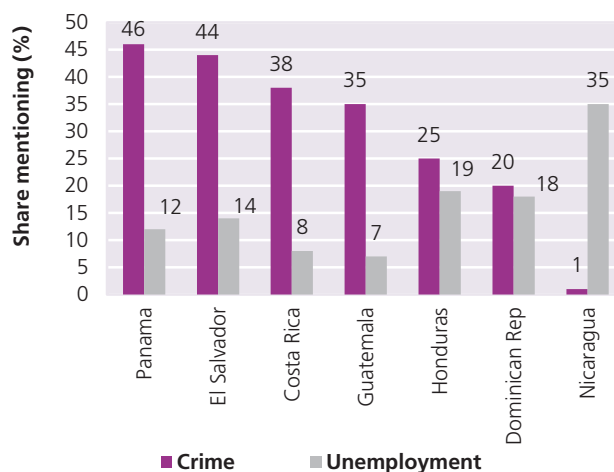
4 UNDP, *Report on Human Development in Central America, 2009-2010*; UNDP, *Caribbean Human Development Report 2012: Human Development and the Shift to Better Citizen Security*. 2012.

5 World Bank. *Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge*. 2011.

6 UNODC. *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire*. 2008.

7 UNODC and the World Bank, *Crime, Violence and Development: Trends, Costs and Policy Options in the Caribbean*. 2007.

Figure 4: What is the most important issue facing your country in 2010?



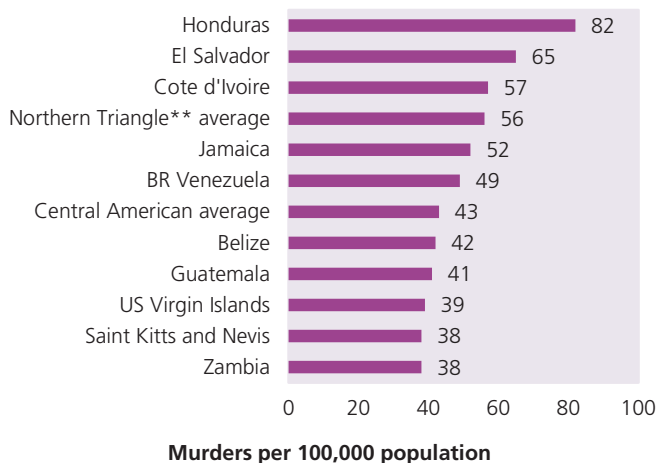
Source: Latinobarometro 2010

Central America has long suffered from high levels of violence, and has never really recovered from the civil wars that ended in the 1990s. The most recent wave of violence started around 2000, particularly affecting the northern part of Central America: Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Collectively, these four countries are experiencing the highest murder rates in the world today. Honduras is the single most affected country, with murder rates more than doubling in the last five years, off a very high base. Honduras' national murder rate in 2011 (92 per 100,000) is one of the highest recorded in modern times.⁸

With the exception of Nicaragua, the balance of Central America is also reporting a dramatic increase in murder rates. Panama's rate was stable until 2006, after which it

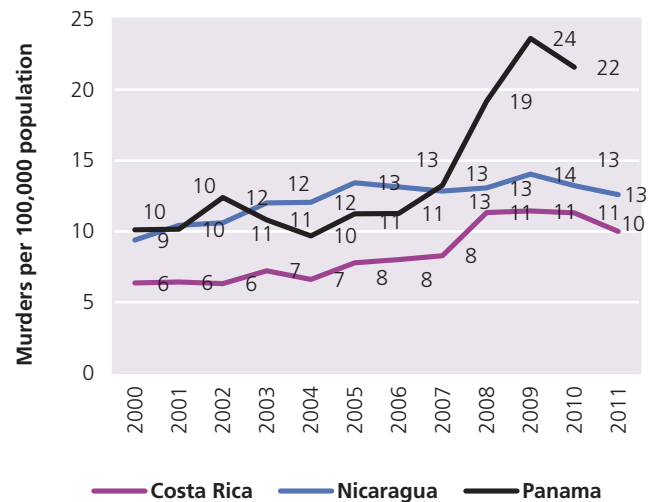
8 UNODC Homicide Database

Figure 5: Top 10 national murder rates in the world* (2010 or most recent prior year available)



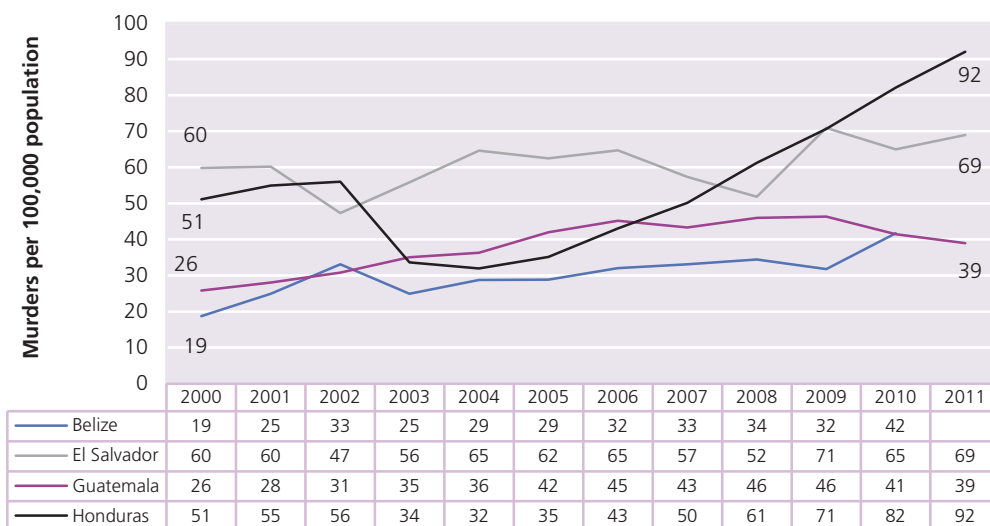
*Out of 206 countries and territories where comparable data are available
 ** "The Northern Triangle" includes Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador
 Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Figure 6: Murder rates in southern Central America, 2000-2011



Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Figure 7: Murder rates in northern Central America, 2000-2011



Source: UNODC Homicide Database

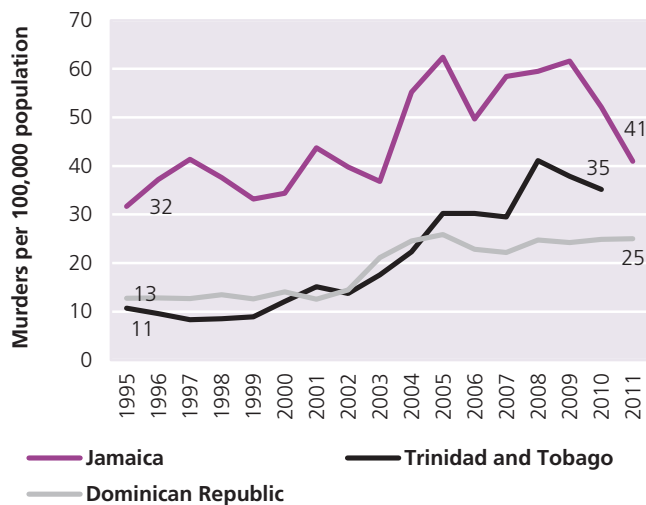
doubled in two years. Costa Rica's rate is still relatively low, but it has also doubled in the last decade.

The situation in the Caribbean is much more difficult to characterize, but several countries show similar trends. Crime statistics in small island states can be deceptive for many reasons, notably the fact that the population often swells significantly due to tourist influx, and these additional people are not counted when assessing a crime rate, despite the fact that they could become victims or perpetrators. Small populations also mean a small number of events can produce a high rate: for example, Saint Vincent & The Grenadines ranked highly in the international murder standings in 2010 due to just 25 homicides. But almost all Caribbean countries have much higher rates than would be desired in a tourism-dependent region.⁹

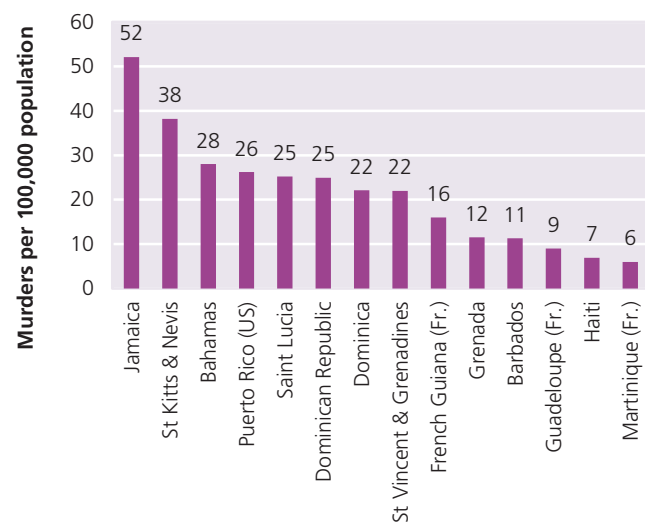
⁹ Because a small number of events can produce dramatic shifts in rates when

Central American and the Caribbean lie along what has long been the highest value drug flow in the world: the flow of cocaine from South America to the United States. This flow has affected the region for over 40 years, but recent changes in the global market have changed the role some countries play. Countries that had previously been used as refueling stops have become storage and logistics centers for transnational trafficking groups.

the population concerned is small, murder rates in the Caribbean are also highly volatile. Countries ranking highly today may disappear from the standings altogether tomorrow. Caution should be taken in interpreting trends as a result. In addition, many of these countries have less than 100,000 citizens, meaning a single murder can push the rate up a point or more. Rates that would reflect deep social problem in larger countries could be the work of a single serial offender in the Caribbean. This fact has implications for policy, because incarcerating a limited number of offenders can produce dramatic results. Criminal justice capacity is also limited in small states, but judicious use of extradition can greatly supplement this capacity.

Figure 8: Murder rates in selected Caribbean countries, 1995-2011

Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Figure 9: Murder rates in selected Caribbean countries, 2010

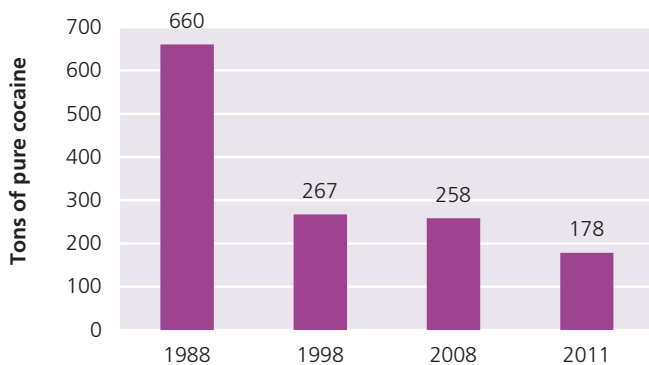
Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Drug trafficking and violence

Drug trafficking is not always associated with violence. Large-scale cultivation of coca or opium poppy requires territorial control, so drug production is often connected to insurgency.¹⁰ Further down the chain, though, there is no inherent need for drug distributors to quarrel among themselves or fight with the authorities. In both well-established and emerging transit areas, the quickest way to profit is to avoid conflict and so market interests tend to favour peace.

For example, tons of heroin have been trafficked through Southeast Europe for decades, with little appreciable effect on murder rates. Where crime is well organized, drugs can flow through a transit region without incident, centrally-controlled and facilitated by high-level corruption.¹¹ Similarly, the surge in drug trafficking through West Africa after 2005 did not result in a wave of street violence. In addition to high-level corruption, the West African market was also novel, and most traffickers were too busy capitalizing on emerging opportunities to bother with rivals.¹²

In contrast, the flow of cocaine through Central America is neither new nor settled. It is old and very much contested. Its dynamism is not due to expanding opportunities, but to diminishing ones, as the North American demand for cocaine has been declining for decades. This long-term trend may be partly attributable to fashion: cocaine, and particularly crack cocaine, is not the emblematic drug of the present generation.

Figure 10: Tons of (pure) cocaine consumed the United States, 1988-2011

Source: For 1988, ONDCP; for other years, UNODC estimates

While cocaine consumption has been steadily declining since the mid-1980s, the decline has been remarkably acute since 2006, a shift that cannot be explained away by trends in fashion. Based on over four million urine tests administered to United States workers, cocaine positives dropped from about seven-tenths of a percent in 2006 to two-tenths of a percent in 2010.¹³

Survey data also show a remarkable decline. Survey-based estimates of the number of current (previous month) users dropped by 39% in five years, from 2.4 million in 2005 to less than 1.5 million in 2010. Estimates of the number of new initiates during the same period dropped by 27%, from 872,000 in 2005 to 637,000 in 2010. The rate of past month use among probationers and parolees was cut in half, from 6.9% in 2005 to 3.1% in 2009.¹⁴

¹⁰ The largest producers of illicit opium poppy are Afghanistan and Myanmar, both countries with active insurgencies. The largest producers of coca are Peru and Colombia, which are also home to illegal armed groups.

¹¹ UNODC. *Crime and its impact on the Balkans* (2008).

¹² UNODC. *Transnational trafficking and the rule of law in West Africa: A threat assessment* (July 2009).

¹³ Quest Diagnostics, Drug Testing Index <http://www.questdiagnostics.com/home/physicians/health-trends/drug-testing>

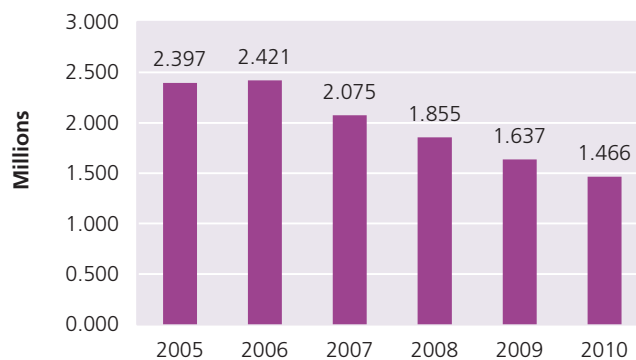
¹⁴ Office of National Drug Control Policy, *2011 National Drug Control Policy: Data Supplement*. Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, 2011.

Figure 11: Share of United States general workforce urine tests positive for cocaine, 2004-2010



Source: Quest Diagnostics

Figure 12: Number of current (previous month) users of cocaine in the United States (millions), 2005-2010



Source: ONDCP

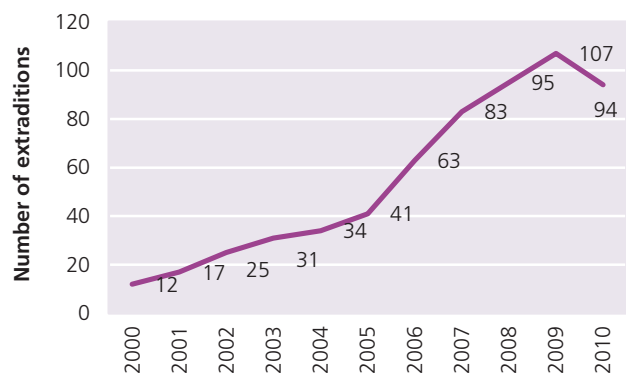
The clearest explanation for this sudden decline in demand is a concurrent decline in supply. There were declines in Colombian cocaine production during this period of time, and Colombia remains the primary source of United States cocaine. But more dramatically, in 2006, Mexico redoubled its efforts against the drug trafficking groups, making it harder to move product north, and reducing cocaine availability.

Since 2006, extraditions of Mexican drug traffickers to the United States have more than doubled. In 2009, the Mexican government named its 37 most-wanted drug traffickers, offering substantial rewards for their capture. Of these, at least 23 had been captured or died by the end of 2011. Whole criminal groups, such as the Arellano Felix organization, the Beltrán-Leyva group and *La Familia*,¹⁵ have been decimated. The instability between and within these organizations has contributed to increased violence, but there is no denying that they are much weaker today than before the Mexican security strategy was launched.

The sharp decline in cocaine supply created a vicious circle for drug traffickers. Forced to cut purity and raise prices, they further damaged their consumer base in the United

¹⁵ Also known as “*La Familia Michoacana*”.

Figure 13: Extraditions from Mexico to the United States, 2000-2010



Source: United States Department of State

States. Within two years, the price of pure cocaine effectively doubled, and this surely had an impact on the relative attraction of the drug, particularly for first-time and casual users.

In Mexico, a similar vicious circle was developing. As the Mexican government intensified its law enforcement efforts against the various criminal groups, instability was created both within and between them. Succession struggles caused many to fragment, with the various factions fighting against their former colleagues.¹⁶ Weakened groups became targets for others keen to acquire prime smuggling territory. The balance of power was shattered, and violent conflict was the result.

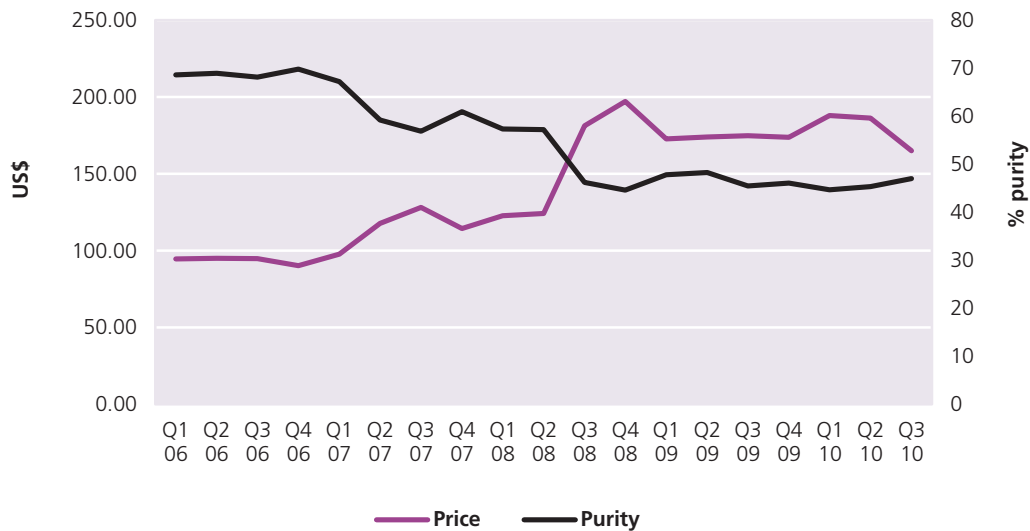
Today, traffickers are competing for a smaller pie under far more difficult circumstances than ever before.¹⁷ As experienced operatives are lost, they are replaced by younger, more erratic aspirants, each eager to demonstrate a capacity for violence.¹⁸

In addition to affecting United States drug supply and demand, the implementation of the new Mexican security strategy in 2006 has had a profound effect on Central America. Between 2007 and 2010, Mexico made some of the largest cocaine seizures in history, and key maritime import hubs became disputed territory. Direct import became more difficult, and the share of the cocaine flow

¹⁶ For example, much of the violence in the northeast of the country is due to fighting between the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas, their former coercive wing. The Zetas broke away from the Gulf in 2010, a move broadly attributed to power struggles after the arrest of Osiel Cardenas in 2003 and his extradition in 2007. Similarly, the killing of Nazario Moreno Gonzales in 2010 led to succession struggles in *La Familia Michoacana*, producing a splinter group, calling itself “*Caballeros Templarios*,” which immediately declared war on *La Familia*. Another example can be seen in the fragmentation of the *Tijuana Cartel* after the arrest of Javier Arellano Felix in 2006, which led to extensive in-fighting. In each instance, fragmentation also prompted territorial expansion by rival groups.

¹⁷ The volumes of cocaine trafficked through Mexico have declined as United States consumption has declined. The volumes consumed in the United States declined by about half in the last decade, and purity adjusted prices have not increased.

¹⁸ For example, much of the escalation of violence in Juarez has been attributed to the use of the Aztecas street gang. Similarly, in Tijuana, so-called “narcouniors” were famed for lethality, such as Fabien Martinez Gonzalez (“*El Tiburon*”), attributed with killing a dozen men before his death.

Figure 14: Purity and street price of a gram of cocaine in the United States, 2006-2010

Source: Elaborated from the 2011 National Drug Threat Assessment

transiting Central America increased. Similar to the situation in South America, where strong law enforcement in Colombia displaced trafficking to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Ecuador, one country's success became the problem of others. Effectively, the front lines have been moved southward, with new "plazas"¹⁹ emerging on the Guatemalan borders.

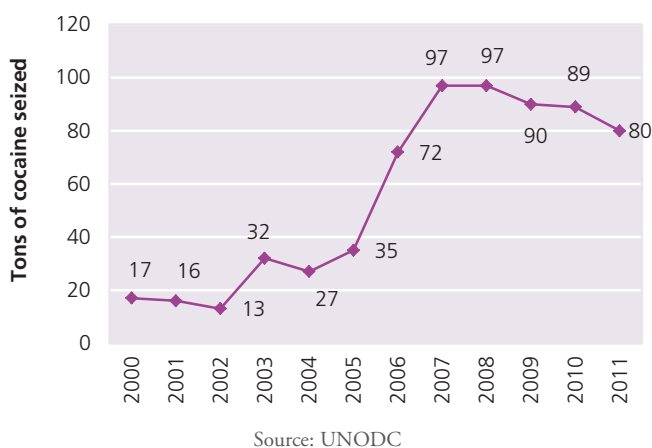
The implementation of the Mexican security strategy augmented the importance of Central American links that had been put in place many years before. Struggles between the Mexican groups became struggles between their allies in the countries to the south. Local political circumstances also influenced this trend. In 2009, President Zelaya of Honduras was deposed by the military. Local law enforcement fell into disarray, resources were diverted to maintaining order, and United States counternarcotics assistance was suspended. The result was a kind of cocaine gold rush. Direct

flights from the Venezuelan/ Colombian border to airstrips in Honduras skyrocketed, and a violent struggle began for control of this revived drug artery.

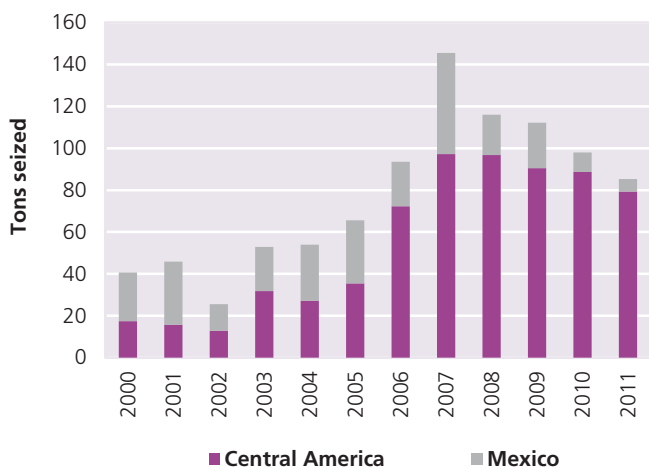
The increased flow through Central America can be seen in the remarkable growth of cocaine seizures in the region. From 2005, the volume of cocaine seized in Central America shot upwards, nearly tripling in two years and plateauing at a much elevated level.

Between 2000 and 2005, the amount of cocaine seized in Central America was about equal to the amount seized in Mexico. In 2011, Central America seized more than 13 times more cocaine than Mexico. Both the cocaine supply to the United States and organized crime in Mexico have been greatly disrupted, and the front lines in the battle against cocaine appear to have been moved further south.

This shift was also reflected in data collected by the United States government about cocaine movement. The share of

Figure 15: Tons of cocaine seized in Central America, 2000-2011

Source: UNODC

Figure 16: Cocaine seizures in Central America and Mexico, 2000-2011

Source: UNODC

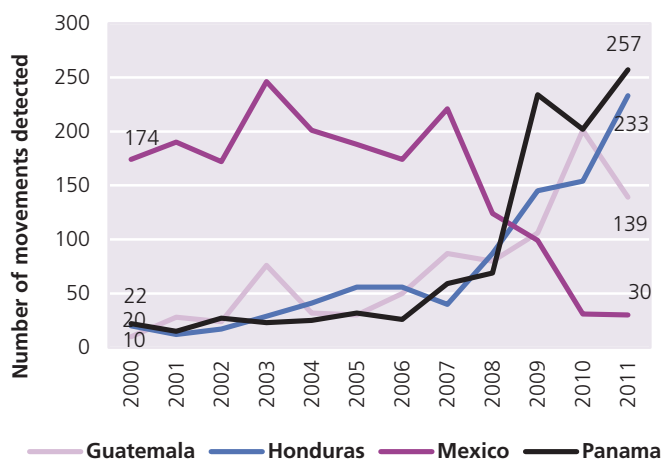
¹⁹ The term "plaza" has been used to describe the territories along the United States-Mexico border across which drugs are trafficked. Most of the major cartels were associated with a particular plaza, usually centered on one of the twin border cities. Control of the plaza meant control of the drug revenues associated with it, so fights for these territories have been fierce.

all detected “flow events” whose first destination or point of seizure were in Central America (rather than Mexico or the Caribbean) shot from a quarter in 2000 to 85% in 2011. Detected direct shipments to Mexico dropped from 174 in 2000 to 30 in 2011, while those to Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras rocketed upwards, most markedly after 2006. Honduras went from 20 incidents in 2000 to 233 in 2011.

The displacement of trafficking also affected the Caribbean, although the impact was more varied. The Dominican Republic, long an important transit country, saw an increase in trafficking and seizures, while countries like Jamaica and Cuba did not.

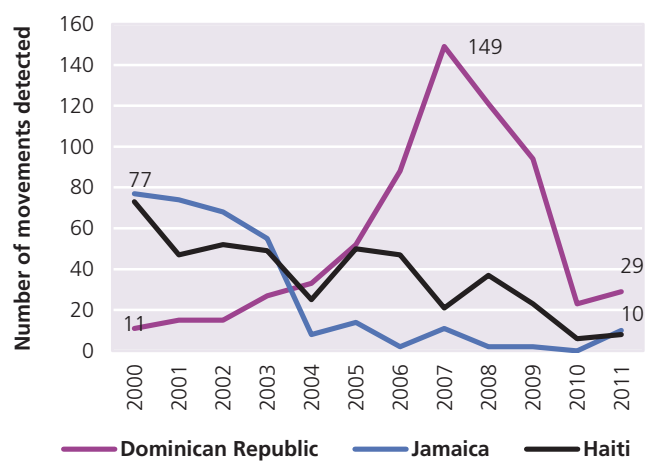
There can be no doubt that Central America has seen an increase in violence at the same time that it has experienced an increase in the volume of cocaine transiting the region. The question is: how are these two phenomena connected? This report attempts to shed light on these and related issues.

Figure 17: Number of primary cocaine movements destined for or interdicted in selected Central American countries and Mexico, 2000-2011



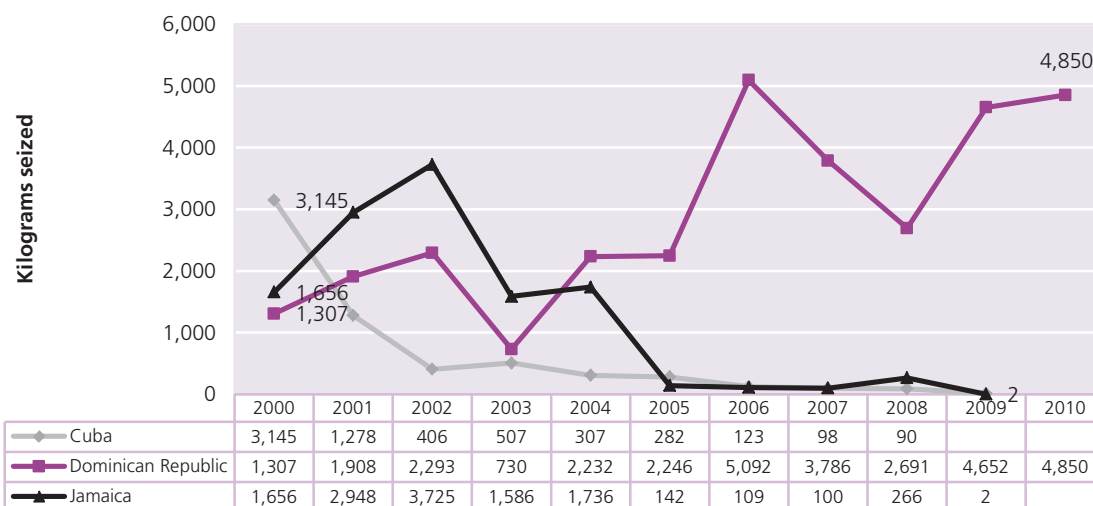
Source: ONDCP

Figure 19: Number of primary cocaine movements destined for or interdicted in selected Caribbean countries, 2000-2011



Source: ONDCP

Figure 18: Kilograms of cocaine seized in selected Caribbean countries, 2000-2010



Source: UNODC



The importance of territorial groups in Central America

UNODC's first global transnational organized crime threat assessment (TOCTA) (*The Globalization of Crime: A transnational organized crime threat assessment*, published in 2010) spoke of two ways of looking at organized crime. The first, and more common, is to focus on the groups involved.

The global TOCTA found, however, that most transnational organized crime is rather systemic, or market-based. As long as supply and demand exist, removing particular intermediaries is not sufficient to destroy the market. This is especially true in a globalized world.

For example, hundreds of thousands of people are illegally smuggled into the United States each year, a flow far beyond the capacity of any organized group to manage. Instead, thousands of smugglers ply the trade in an open market with low barriers to entry. The same is true of the illegal wildlife trade in Southeast Asia, or the counterfeit goods business in East Asia, or firearms trafficking in most of Africa. In fact, there are very few markets in which the current participants matter much. There are groups in every market, of course, of greater or lesser size and longevity, but the groups themselves are not the core of the problem.

Central America is an exception in this regard. In Central America, the groups are very much the core of the problem. As elsewhere, the markets, in particular the cocaine market, are a key issue, but eliminating any particular contraband flow would not eliminate the groups presently exploiting it. On the contrary, most of these groups predated the current cocaine boom, and can be expected to long outlast it.

In Central America and the Caribbean, there are two main headings under which all organized crime groups fall:

- Territory-bound organized crime groups
- Transnational trafficking groups

These two types of groups are completely different in character. Territorial groups are focused on controlling territory and taxing activity within this domain. Trafficking groups are hardly groups at all, but rather networks of suppliers, transporters, and receivers, as would be encountered in any licit supply chain. In the region, they are often referred to as “*transportistas*”. Much of the violence in the region today is about the growing control of territorial groups over transnational trafficking. This produces conflicts between territorial groups and the *transportistas*, as well as conflict between territorial groups.

Within these two broad headings, there are many distinct variations. Some territorial groups focus almost exclusively on preying on cocaine traffickers, and are known as *tumbadores* in the region. One type of territorial group, the street gang, is more about identity than illicit commerce. There are street gangs throughout the region, but those in the north, known as *maras*, are particularly violent. Each of these groups is discussed in turn. Most of the information in this chapter comes from interviews with law enforcement officers in the region, including CICIG,²⁰ in early 2012.

Territory-bound organized crime groups

There are very few parts of the world where there is truly no one in control. Human beings are social creatures, and when left to their own devices, naturally self-organize along hierarchical lines. Even in the most war-torn and desolate areas, strongmen emerge to monopolize force and to bring order to people's lives.

The classic territorial organized crime group is a kind of state-substitute, imposing order in areas that the formal

20 CICIG: Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala

state has neglected or cannot fully control. In industrialized societies, this typically involves a geographic area, often urban, often peopled with new immigrants or others whose status is marginal. New immigrants and other socially excluded people often lack access to security, to adjudication of disputes, to job markets, to credit, and to other amenities provided to better-established residents. What we call “organized crime” often starts as a mechanism for providing many of these services.

For new immigrants and other vulnerable people, the first concern is security. Those who eventually become organized criminals may start out as public-minded youth, defending their community from the predation of those who would exploit its marginal status. Over time, these “neighbourhood watches” can morph into informal private security operations, where the community defenders are supported through voluntary contributions. As more time passes, these contributions may no longer be completely voluntary, but rather imposed as a kind of tax, and the operation becomes a protection racket. Once the neighbourhood is completely dominated, the racketeers may victimize, unopposed, the community they once protected.

This sort of territorial domination requires enforcement capacity; in other words, something like an army. There must be a clear hierarchy and a chain of command, or control will soon be lost to better-organized groups. Families may form the head of the group, often a patriarch or patriarchs and their sons, with bonds of blood allowing trust in pursuits where trust is often lacking. There must be captains, foot soldiers, informants, and aspirants: concentric circles of authority radiating from the central leadership. Without the formal mechanisms for mediating disputes, loyalty and fealty are paramount, and disloyalty is punishable by death.

These territory-bound groups are intensely concerned with local affairs, and this limits the scope of what they can do. They can demand tribute (extortion), give credit at usurious rates (loan sharking), and dictate local employment conditions (labour racketeering) within their zones of influence. With their money and community standing, they can even affect voting outcomes and wield considerable political clout. They may move into high-level corruption, such as public procurement fraud. Once secure in their status as political patrons, they can engage in acquisitive crime at will, selling stolen property and smuggled goods with impunity.

Vice markets are, of course, a key component of organized crime. Since vice markets have security implications, they are the first to be targeted, and the credibility of any organized crime group rests on how well it controls its vice markets. In many cases, though, the groups themselves do not run these rackets. Rather, they provide protection for those that do, and derive a tax or tribute from street operators.

In addition to this broad portfolio of local activities, many groups have to fight with rival outfits within or outside their community to maintain their dominance. They have to ensure that they are paid due “respect,” or the whole system collapses. This means they spend an undue amount of time addressing symbolic infractions, sending messages to their constituencies about who is in control.

As a result, they usually have little attention span left for matters beyond their geographic area of dominance. Territorial groups in Central America may dabble in transnational trafficking, but this is unlikely to persist in the long term. By controlling wholesale supply and distribution territory, they already command the highest value links in the supply chain. Since they are unlikely to be challenged in their own territory, they can subcontract out almost all of the risk. In most cases, they subcontract street distribution as well, and so can focus on what they know best: controlling territory.

There is one exception: territorial groups can become directly involved in trafficking if their geographic position demands it. Local affairs become international affairs when the territory concerned abuts an international border. Nearly every pairing of countries differs in internal regulations, and most are still protected by some sort of tariff barriers. These represent revenue opportunities to criminals stationed near the frontier. For example, if cigarettes are taxed at a high rate in one country and a lower one next-door, great profits can be made exploiting this differential, particularly by those with the distribution networks. This is true for agricultural controls, fuel subsidies, pharmaceutical regulations; disharmony in national policies creates a kind of potential difference between neighbouring states, and this is the voltage on which many border-bound organized crime groups run.

Nowhere in the world is the potential difference between states greater than along the border of Mexico and the United States. The crossing points between these two countries – known locally as “*plazas*” – are the basis for many of the Mexican territorial criminal groups. But the groups are heterogeneous, and the most successful are those that do not fit the traditional model. There are two that today eclipse all the others, and these are the only two relevant to Central America and the Caribbean: the *Cartel del Pacífico* (an alliance between the Sinaloa Federation and the Gulf Cartel) and the *Zetas* (*Los Zetas*).

The “Sinaloa Cartel” (1969-2005) originates from the state in Mexico most associated with drug production, and this has given it some unusual characteristics. Unlike many of the other drug trafficking organizations, the “Sinaloa Cartel” has not focused exclusively on cocaine, but has long produced and trafficked cannabis, heroin, and methamphetamine. Sinaloa is not a border state, so the group has had to make alliances with those along the border to allow contraband to pass through their *plazas* into the United

States. This is why the group went from being called the “Sinaloa Cartel” to being called the “Federation”²¹ (2006–2010)– its need for allied or subordinate groups has given it an expansionary quality not seen in strictly territorial organizations. This has given it a more business-like approach, but it has also led it into conflict. More recently the “Federation” joined forces with the Gulf Cartel to create the so-called *Cartel del Pacífico*, for the purpose of fighting the Zetas.

The Zetas did not start out as a territorial group at all, but as the coercive wing of the Gulf Cartel. They have no territorial affinity, but they do, as a illegal armed group, have the ability to conquer and hold trafficking areas. These areas, run by semi-independent cells, facilitate transnational trafficking by securing nodes of safety. In the areas in which they operate, the Zetas don’t just engage in drug trafficking, however, but in a range of predatory activities: taxing and directing drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. They are like *tumbadores* in many respects – criminals in the criminal world.

These two rivals conduct their affairs in Central America through proxies and local allies for the most part. Representatives of the *Cartel del Pacífico* or the Zetas may be spotted negotiating deals abroad, but it is rare for them to be directly involved in foreign operations. When they need something accomplished south of the Mexican border, they can generally contract this work out to their contacts in the region.

The exception to this rule involves the Zetas in Guatemala. Their influence in the south started with their recruitment of Guatemalan special forces soldiers (*kaibiles*), evidence of which emerged when some were arrested in Mexico in 2005, long before the Zetas split from the Gulf Cartel.²² The Zetas are said to have moved into Guatemala itself around 2008 and created a local chapter. Since then, they have featured prominently in the violence in the country.²³

Around 150 members of the Zetas have been arrested in Guatemala, both Mexican and Guatemalan nationals.²⁴ While it appears that the Guatemalan branch has some autonomy, they report to their Mexican superiors. As will be discussed below, they have been involved in a number of violent incidents, particularly in the northern provinces of Petén and Alta Verapaz.

Guatemalan criminal groups

In addition to local chapters of Mexican organizations, Central America has its own territorial groups. Historically, they have been most active in Guatemala, where there are at least four major borderland territory-bound organized crime groups, but they have also grown in prominence in Honduras since the 2009 coup.

Starting in the northeast of Guatemala, the Mendoza family is said to operate in the department (province) of Izabal, on the border of Honduras. Izabal contains the important port of Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean, and is along the most direct path from the Honduran coast to Petén and onward to Mexico. After the death of its patriarch, four brothers assumed leadership over this family, which is active in both licit and illicit commerce.²⁵

Although its interests extend into Petén, the Mendoza crime family has long been centered in their hometown of Morales, along the road from the Honduran border to the north. They are landholders (*ganaderos* – “cattle ranchers”), and the territories they control are of interest to international agribusiness. As a result, in addition to running drugs, the Mendozas have been implicated in anti-union violence and other attacks against local farm workers.²⁶ They have a mix of legitimate and illicit business interests and longstanding political connections. One of the brothers is both the spokesperson of the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Football and the President of the Heredia football club. This is not unusual for crime families: many dabble in football and horse racing. These sports provide a way to turn profits into instant social capital.

21 In 2006 the criminal organizations from Juárez, Sinaloa, Guadalajara and Milenio created the “Federation”. The objective was to gain strategic territory over the Pacific corridor, the Yucatán peninsula and some border points along the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, in order to facilitate their trafficking activities (in particular, cocaine) to the United States. However internal struggles arose within the “Federation” leading to its implosion.

22 Otero, S. ‘Confirman presencia kaibile.’ *El Universal*, 31 October 2005. http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_nota=131520&tabla=nacion

23 Some examples include:

-The March 2008 ambush and murder of Juancho León and his brother, Haroldo in May 2011.

-A series of incidents in Alta Verapaz in 2010, including a gun fight at a shopping mall, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency in that province from December to February.

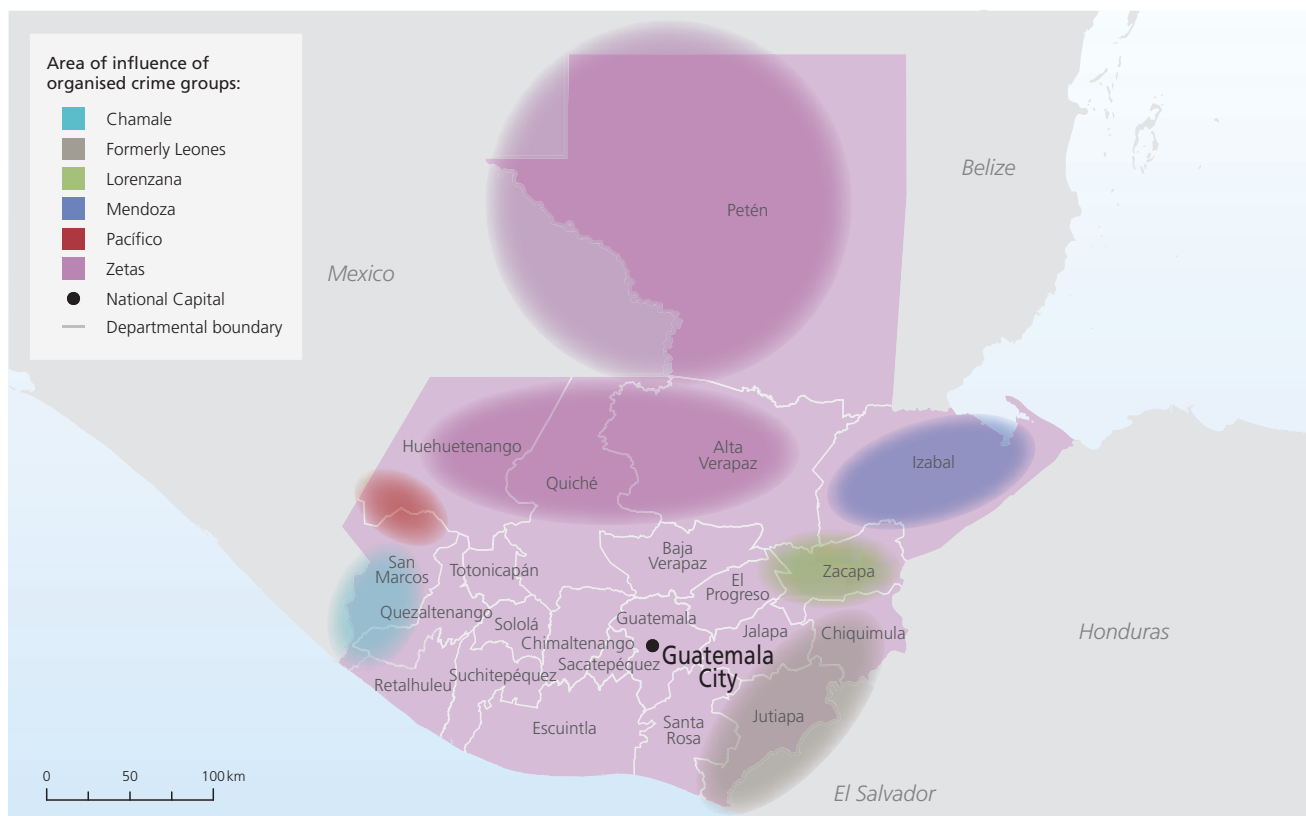
-The massacre and beheading of 27 farmworkers at a Petén ranch in May 2011, resulting in the declaration of a state of emergency in that province.

-A series of incidents, including grenade attacks, that resulted in the extension of the Petén state of emergency.

24 Interview with CICIG. Among these were the alleged second-in-command, Marvin Campos Pena (known as *El Chombo*); Alvaro Gomez Sanchez (known as *El Sapo*), purported head of logistics; and Hugo Alvaro Gomez Vasquez (known as *La Bruja*), a former *kaibil*.

25 The four are said to be Walter Obdulio Mendoza Matta (50), Milton Oswaldo (47), Edwin Alfredo (52) and Haroldo (46).

26 See *Aldana et al v Del Monte Fresh Produce*. Case No. 01-3399, United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, and the 11th Circuit Appeal (16 F.3d 1242 (2005)). http://www.rightsaction.org/pdf/izabal_full.pdf
<http://www.villagevoice.com/content/printVersion/178143/>

Map 2: Territorial groups in Guatemala, 2012

Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region

The Lorenzanas, in contrast, are longstanding *transportistas*, and smuggled a variety of goods prior to becoming active in the cocaine trade. Their territorial characteristics are relatively new, and may be prompted by their alliance with the Zetas. They are centered to the south of the Mendozas in Zacapa department, particularly the municipality of La Reforma, but also have interests in the provinces of Alta and Baja Verapaz, and Petén. Like the Mendozas, they have lost their patriarch, Waldemar Lorenzana Lima, but to prison, not death. The 71-year-old patriarch was arrested in April 2011, during a rare trip without bodyguards outside his area of control. Police also arrested his son, Eliu Elixander (41). The business continues to be run by his other sons.²⁷

The Mendozas had been traditional allies of the Gulf Cartel, transporting cocaine northward to the east coast of Mexico, the Gulf's area of influence, while groups allied with the former "Sinaloa Cartel" were trafficking along the west coast. After the Zetas split from the Gulf Cartel, the Mendozas became their enemy, and the Zetas formed an alliance with the Lorenzanas. As the Gulf began to lose its influence further south, the Mendozas allied with the "Federation". This created a tricky situation for both groups, because the trafficking routes lost their clear

geographic delineation. As Honduras became an increasingly attractive destination for both groups, the logistics became more complicated still.

The Mendozas and the Lorenzanas are said to have once had a non-aggression pact, based in part on their joint opposition to a third group, *Los Leones*. This group, headed by Juan José "Juancho" León Ardón, was traditionally involved in trafficking along the Salvadoran border, and later became an ally of the Gulf Cartel in cocaine trafficking. Perhaps due to the Gulf's loss of power, *Los Leones* became *tumbadores*, focusing on robberies of other group's cocaine shipments. This led to the assassination of Juancho and 10 of his men in 2008. *Los Leones* continued to operate under the leadership of his brother, Haroldo, until he was murdered, allegedly by the Zetas, in 2011. Today, very little of the organization appears to remain, with the Zetas assuming control of their former operations. This led to further geographic disarray, because Juancho's territories extend into the south of the country, near areas associated with the *Cartel del Pacífico*.

A fourth territorial Guatemalan group of note are *Los Chamales*, followers of Juan "Chamale" Ortiz López and his brother, Rony. This group worked closely with the "Federation" for some time, focusing on the department of San Marcos, running from the Pacific coast along the Mexican border, an area long used for smuggling people, foodstuffs, subsidized Mexican petrol, and other goods. *Los*

²⁷ These are said to be Waldemar Lorenzana Córdón (46), and Haroldo Jeremías (45). There is also a fourth son, Abaldino, about whom little is known.

Los Mendozas	
Origin	Traditional territory dominating group with roots in Morales and the border areas of Izabal. The family developed its business interests in the 1980s, extending their influence into Petén. In the 1990s, they moved into drug trafficking and are now one of the most powerful drug-trafficking organizations in the country.
No. of members	Unknown. Believed to have hundreds of members in Guatemala.
Areas of influence	Guatemala: Petén, Izabal, some areas of the Caribbean coast (Livingston, Río Dulce); centered in Morales.
Organization	Family-based organization led by the Mendoza brothers.
Relations with other groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formerly allies of the Gulf Cartel. - Currently allied with the <i>Cartel del Pacífico</i>. - Had a working agreement with the Lorenzanas, the status of which is unclear. - Enemies of the Zetas due to their former Gulf alliance.
Activities	Drug trafficking (mainly cocaine), agriculture, other businesses (hotels, gas stations, construction), procurement fraud. Agricultural land provides landing strips and storage areas for cocaine trafficking.
Violence	The Mendozas have been accused of kidnapping and sometimes killing local farmers in order to acquire land. In the late 1990s, the United States fruit export company Del Monte hired them as a private security agency to deal with local labour unrest and land acquisition. They are well-equipped and make use of military-style firearms.

Los Lorenzanas	
Origin	Traditional contraband smuggling family that started operations in the 1990s in the department of Zacapa, Guatemala.
No. of members	Less numerous than the Mendozas, they have about one hundred members.
Areas of influence	Guatemala: western states (parts of Izabal, Zacapa), Petén, border area with Honduras and Belize.
Organization	Family-based organization composed of a father (Waldemar Lorenzana Lima) and his four sons, with other relatives also involved in their business. After the patriarch's arrest, son Haroldo appears to be in charge.
Relations with other groups	Alliance with the Zetas.
Activities	Evolution from contraband activities of all kinds to narco-trafficking, in particular cocaine trafficking.
Violence	In Guatemala, they are believed to be responsible for 20 to 25 homicides/year, that is to say less than 1% of the homicides recorded in 2011. Many of the murders they are responsible for may remain unrecorded as they often hide bodies in remote areas.

Los Chamales	
Origin	Started operations in the 1990s in the department of San Marcos in Guatemala, working for the <i>Sinaloa Cartel</i> as "transportistas".
No. of members	Unknown-believed to have a couple of hundred members.
Areas of influence	Guatemala: northern province of San Marcos (Malacatán, Tecún Umán), at the border with Mexico (strategic location close to Mexico and the Pacific coast).
Organization	Family and territory-based organization believed to be recruiting among police and military ranks. Leaders: Juan Ortiz López (until his arrest in March 2011), his brother, Rony, and Mauro Salomón Ramírez.
Relations with other groups	Alliance with the <i>Cartel del Pacífico</i> and the Mendoza family.
Activities	Cocaine trafficking, opium poppy and cannabis production, corruption (at the local level in the areas they control), money-laundering (shell companies).
Violence	Believed to be responsible for approximately 50 homicides per year in Guatemala. Engaged in kidnapping, extortion and land expropriation.

Chamales have long cultivated community support in this largely mestizo area, and Juan Ortiz is himself a pastor in a church he funds.

Due to this support and the preponderance of smuggling activities in the region, the people of Chamale territory have little use for the state, and many of the municipalities, including some on the border, have no police presence at all. Residents have actually detained police for attempting

to enforce the law, before ejecting them from the municipality. *Los Chamales* have suffered from a series of high-level arrests, including Juan Ortiz himself (in 2011), his associate Mauro "León del Mar" Salomón Ramírez (2010), and Alma "La Tía" Lucrecia Hernández (2011). Despite these setbacks, the organization appears to remain viable.

Transnational trafficking networks (*transportistas*)

Transnational trafficking networks can be seen as a second kind of organized crime group, although they are “groups” only in the loosest sense of the word. As with any business, relationships between suppliers, transportation agents, and buyers may be longstanding, but they are not exclusive. Each link is free to form bonds with others, and there is no common source of authority or pooling of funds. So long as all are satisfied, these linkages may endure, but like any commercial supply chain, the loss of a link is easily accommodated. They are essentially economic entities.

These *transportistas*, as they are known locally, operate very much like any licit transportation company. They do not need the rigid structures essential to territory-bound groups, because they do not seek to control territory and, for the most part, they are not in direct competition with one another. Their goal is to bring merchandise from point A to point B, and there are generally many ways of doing this. Quite often, both point A and point B are under the control of territory-bound groups, and so they may become peripherally embroiled in conflicts between them. But their goal is fly under the radar, and they do best when they are least noticed.

Cartel de Taxis

Origin	This group gained visibility at the beginning of the 2000s. They are historically based in the municipality of Metapán and Texistepeque, in the northwest region of El Salvador (department of Santa Ana), where they smuggle drugs from Honduras to Guatemala through El Salvador.
No. of members	Unknown.
Areas of influence	Based in Metapán, they transport drugs from Honduras through the northwest regions of El Salvador to Guatemala, controlling the route known as “ <i>el caminito</i> ”.
Organization	No vertical hierarchy. The “cartel” consists of transportation agents, allegedly controlled by its three high-level founders.
Relations with other groups	Work with Honduran and Guatemalan trafficking organizations. Links with high level politicians, security authorities, judges, prosecutors.
Activities	Smuggling of drugs (mostly cocaine), corruption, money-laundering.
Violence	Characterized by their business approach to cocaine trafficking, they use bribery and corruption rather than violence to manage their activities.

Los Perrones

Origin	First appeared in Santa Rosa de Lima, a municipality of the province of La Unión, in the eastern part of El Salvador (close to the border with Nicaragua) as a transport company owned by Reynerio de Jesús Flores Lazo. They started their illicit activities in the late 1990s, becoming involved in smuggling all types of contraband (food, clothes, cheese etc.) from El Salvador to Honduras and Guatemala. They soon shifted to cocaine trafficking and expanded their activities to Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica, becoming one of the most famous transportista groups in the region.
No. of members	Small organization, about 15 key members.
Areas of influence	Two geographical divisions in El Salvador: <i>Los Perrones orientales</i> : San Miguel, Usulután, La Unión. <i>Los Perrones occidentales</i> : Santa Ana. Also present in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (through establishing transport companies).
Organization	All original members have been captured, including Reynerio de Jesús Flores Lazo (the historical leader of the organization) but some claim the organization is still operating in parts of the country. The organization was composed of a national leader and members who are in charge of transportation logistics and drivers (mostly truck drivers).
Relations with other groups	- Alliances with Mexican criminal organizations, in particular the <i>Cartel del Pacífico</i> (Chapo Guzman hired Reynerio Flores to smuggle cocaine to Guatemala and transport money to Panama). - Local political alliances and links with businessmen. - Believed to have established some links with the <i>maras</i> (hired as an additional force for some operations).
Activities	Contraband of any type, cocaine trafficking.
Violence	Not believed to have generated particular levels of violence, mostly due to their support from the police and local authorities.

Outside of Guatemala and Honduras, most Central American and Caribbean drug trafficking groups are networks of *transportistas*. The most famous are found in El Salvador, a country where territorial drug trafficking groups do not seem to be a factor. *Los Perrones* and *El Cartel de Taxis* are two Salvadoran *transportista* groups that have received a good deal of attention, but they are unlikely to be unique. *Los Perrones* are simply a shipping company gone criminal, providing the vehicles and the drivers to move a wide range of contraband, including drugs. The *Taxis* organization is entirely different, and a rare example of high-level corruption preceding the trafficking. In neither case is violence much of an issue, because both groups focus on moving drugs, not controlling territory.

Predatory groups (*tumbadores*)

Popular portrayals of drug traffickers depict them as predators, heavily armed and ruthless. While this is true of the territory-dominating groups, *transportistas* are actually highly vulnerable, moving in small teams and operating in out-of-the-way places so as to avoid the attention of law enforcement. Given the value of their cargo, it is not surprising that gangs specializing in drug robbery, known locally as *tumbadores*, have emerged all along the trafficking chain.

Tumbador groups are often founded by former *transportistas*, but most appear to be based on territorial groups. They ambush cocaine shipments using surprise and larger numbers of personnel. Once established as a credible threat, they may also extort money from traffickers, and may engage in other street crime.

Street gangs (*maras*)

Street gangs are a variant of the classic territorial organized crime groups, their main distinguishing feature being that they are comprised almost entirely of youth (with “youth” being extended into the 20s and even 30s in societies where education and opportunities are limited). In the region, they are usually not classified as “organized crime groups” because their focus is not on financial gain. While this is true, it is also true of many territorial groups. Acquisitive crime is but one means to dominating territory.

Being comprised of impulsive young people, most street gangs lack the capacity to engage in pseudo-state functions. They may provide security from interlopers, and their money may benefit family and friends, but they generally do not engage in any pretense of being community servants. They are intensely concerned with local affairs, however. For them, territorial control is about identity, about “respect,” and about their place in the world. This orienta-

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)	
Origin	Created by Salvadoran immigrants who fled the country during the civil war and settled in Los Angeles in the 1980s, the gang first appeared as a way of protecting the Salvadoran community from the gangs of other ethnic communities and other Central American immigrants joined rapidly. At the end of the civil wars in Central America (1996), the United States started deporting Central American immigrants convicted of certain offences. These deportees effectively imported Los Angeles-style gang culture to the post-conflict societies of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.
No. of members	El Salvador: 12,000 Honduras: 7,000 Guatemala: 5,000
Distinctive signs	Tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, slang. <i>Mano dura</i> laws that made gang membership a criminal offence have forced gang members to abandon some of these signature behaviors, such as tattooing the face.
Areas of influence	Present in urban areas of El Salvador (San Salvador, Santa Ana, Sonsonate, La Libertad, San Miguel), Guatemala (Guatemala City, Chimaltenango, San José Pinula, Mixco, Villanueva), and Honduras.
Organization	Organized by “cliques” (<i>clicas</i>) in control of a small territory, the “barrio”. Local leaders are often referred to as “cabecillas,” “palabrerros” or “ranfleros”. <i>Las Maras permanentes</i> are the members with the longest experience inside the gang, whereas the <i>Novatos</i> and <i>Simpatizantes</i> have less experience and therefore less power. Members in charge of killings are known as “sicarios” or “gatilleros”. The nine leaders of the most powerful <i>clicas</i> form the “Comisión,” whose functions may include the right to activate the <i>luz verde</i> , a green light to the death sentence on a mara member found guilty of insubordination. As a result of <i>mano dura</i> policies which contributed to massive imprisonment of mareros, incarcerated members now organize their main operations from jails, communicating with the cabecillas through mobile phones.
Relations with other groups	Historical rivals of Mara 18. May work on an ad-hoc basis for drug trafficking organizations.
Activities	Mainly extortion (bus companies, local businesses, individuals), street-level drug trafficking (cannabis and some cocaine), theft and robberies, murder-for-hire.
Violence	While undeniably violent, the share of national homicides attributable to MS-13 varies between countries, and remains controversial.

Mara 18 (M-18)	
Origin	Unlike Mara Salvatrucha, Mara 18 (or the “18th Street Gang”) was created by Mexican immigrants in 1959 in the Pico Union district in Los Angeles, California. At the time, the gang was created to protect themselves from other ethnic gangs, and they incorporated other Latinos, including Central American refugees. Under the United States immigration policies of the 1990s, foreign-born residents with criminal charges were deported to their home countries, which contributed to the spreading of the gang culture in Central America, particularly in the Northern Triangle.
No. of members	Guatemala: 14,000-17,000 El Salvador: 8,000-10,000 Honduras: 5,000
Distinctive signs	Tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, slang, but as with MS-13, <i>mano dura</i> laws have forced M-18 members to be less publicly-identifiable in appearance.
Areas of influence	Present in urban areas of El Salvador (San Salvador, Santa Ana, Sonsonate, La Libertad, San Miguel), Guatemala (Guatemala City, San Marcos, Xela, Antigua etc.), Honduras (Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula), Mexico, and the United States. Some members have been recently arrested in Panama and Costa Rica.
Organization	Like MS-13, Mara 18 is also organized by local subdivisions known as <i>clicas</i> which are more or less independent from each other. There is also an internal hierarchy inside the <i>clica</i> : the “ <i>ranflero</i> ” is the leader, the “ <i>llaveros</i> ” his close partners and the “ <i>soldados</i> ” obey the “ <i>llaveros</i> ”. The “ <i>chequeos</i> ” are the members who have recently been integrated. Their putative national structure, the “ <i>rueda de barrio</i> ,” brings together the “ <i>ranfleros</i> ” of the 15 most powerful <i>clicas</i> in the country.
Relations with other groups	Historical rivals of the MS-13. Opportunistic alliances with other M-18 members and <i>clicas</i> in other countries.
Activities	Extortion (bus companies, local businesses, private individuals), street-level drug trafficking (cannabis and some cocaine), theft, murder-for-hire.
Violence	While undeniably violent, the share of national homicides attributable to M-18 varies between countries, and remains controversial.

tion often causes them to act against their financial interest, feuding with similar groups over perceived insults or symbolic incursions. Conflict seems to be an essential part of their existence, their group identity rooted in whom they oppose.

The *maras* of Central America are street gangs. They are often referred to as “transnational gangs,” but this term is misleading. They do have an international origin and exist in several countries, but there is very little evidence that this has changed their central focus on local affairs. The two major factions – *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Mara 18* – both trace their origins to East Los Angeles, and their presence in Central America is almost certainly a result of the wave of criminal deportations from the United States to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras after 1996. There remain *mara* members in the United States and Mexico, in addition to those in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador). But these facts should not be mistaken for evidence that they operate transnationally, or that they all respond to some international chain of command.

The emergence of the *maras* in Central America was not an act of colonization. Rather, the influence of the deportees appears to be primarily cultural. *Pandilla* groups in the region predate the emergence of the *maras*.²⁸ Countries that

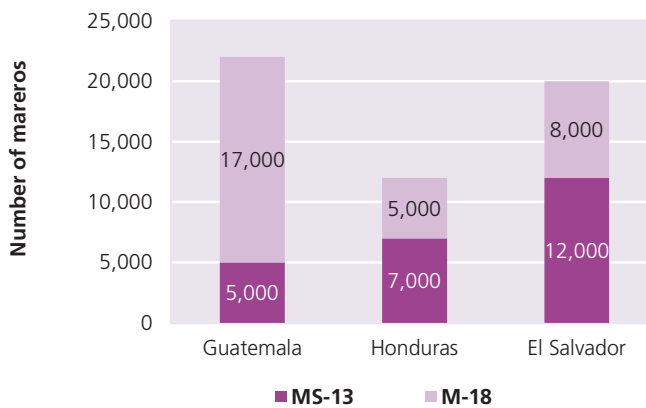
received relatively few deportees, or those whose expatriates were not located in the gang areas of the country, did not pick up the *mara* culture. For example, Nicaragua has long had a history of street gangs, but does not have a *mara* problem because most Nicaraguans who migrated to the United States settled in Florida rather than California. Pre-existing *pandillas* may have been converted to one *mara* or the other based on personal connections or in reaction to the allegiance of other *pandillas*.

It has also been claimed that *mara* groups have gone beyond their street focus to acquire a political or even insurgent character, engaging in behavior that has been described as “terrorism,” such as mass executions of innocents. In most instances, however, these incidents were tied to pre-existing extortion operations, particularly regarding public transport. Whatever the rhetoric surrounding them, these acts appear to be instrumental, ensuring that local communities know their place in relation to the *maras*. No street gang has aspirations of overthrowing the state.

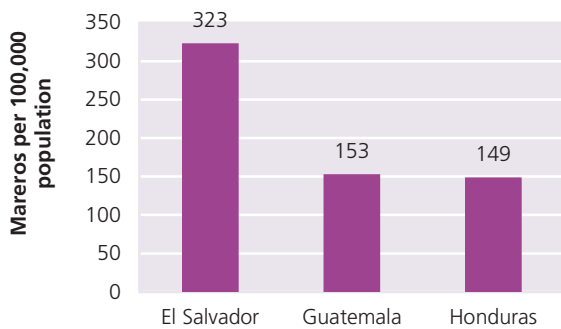
Local police assert that there exists a national leadership hierarchy, with larger “programmes” (MS-13) or “tribes” (M-18) giving direction to local “cliques” (MS-13) or “courts” (M-18). In MS-13, it is even alleged that there is a top leader called “Master Homie,” an anonymous figure who keeps a very low profile. The authorities do concede,

²⁸ The *pandilla* doesn’t necessarily imply criminal activities, but rather refers to a group of people linked together by a set of beliefs, an identity, or common

interests. In El Salvador, *pandillas* were often based on a common school affiliation, and were known as *pandillas estudiantiles* or *pandillas juveniles*.

Figure 20: Mara membership in the Northern Triangle, in 2012

Source: Law enforcement interviews

Figure 21: Mareros per 100,000 population, in 2012

Source: Law enforcement interviews

however, that the degree of cooperation varies considerably, and that some cliques or courts are at war with others within the same *mara*. The power of this centralized authority over the various local chapters was recently put to the test, when the two major *mara* factions in El Salvador agreed to a church-brokered truce that has apparently dramatically reduced homicide levels. Time will tell whether cohesion can be maintained.

The mass imprisonment of tattooed youth under the *mano dura* (“iron fist”) policies of the region did much to build connections between cliques previously affiliated only by a common name. Still, the quantity and quality of these linkages vary considerably, and there has been little evidence of substantial transnational activity. While individuals may rise to higher levels of criminality, the *maras* as a whole remain very much street gangsters, focused on local affairs.

One distinguishing characteristic of the Central American street gangs is that the “streets” in question are often made of dirt. In the Northern Triangle, a large share of the population is found in the capital cities, which generally represent the only cities with populations in excess of one million. The *maras*, however, are found in a much wider range of locales, including many towns with less than 50,000 inhabitants. For example, in Guatemala, the municipality of Colomba in the department of Quetzaltenango has a

population of about 40,000, yet 22 *mareros* were arrested there in 2011. In the same province, the municipality of Sibilia, with a population of 8,000, still managed to arrest three *mareros*. At the same time, some municipalities with more than 100,000 residents arrested no *mara* members at all.

Much has been made of potential synergies between *maras* and the Mexican drug trafficking organizations, but it is hard to see how such cooperation could proceed. Typically, drug trafficking organizations find street gang members bothersome, and “social cleansing” operations by territorial groups are common, in Central America and elsewhere. These programmes can win community support for territorial groups, and prevent the *maras* from growing into a major inconvenience. *Mara* members do buy drugs from traffickers for local distribution, but this comprises such a small portion of trafficker revenues that contacts are generally kept to a minimum.

If individual *mara* members could be persuaded to leave their brothers behind, they could provide potential recruits, but joining a territorial organized crime group would require a major reorientation in values. *Mara* groups could assure that drugs passing through their areas are unhindered, but these territories are generally small. They could accept responsibility for storing drugs and assuring no police interference. They could provide killers-for-hire. There is evidence that some of this has occurred in parts of the region.²⁹ But many of these functions could be provided by other groups, without all the baggage associated with street gang members.

This baggage is considerable. Street gangs are comprised of marginalized youth, who by nature are highly unpredictable. They are largely uneducated and many lack basic skills, such as functional literacy and the ability to drive a car. To maintain control of their turf, these groups are obliged to engage in periodic demonstrations of violence, drawing unwanted attention. And even with regard to violence, they are not especially skilled – most learned to shoot from their peers. Secrets shared with leadership may trickle down the chain of command, leaving the fate of millions of dollars in merchandise in the hands of reckless youth. Siding with one of the two umbrella groups – MS-13 or M-18 – can mean making an enemy of the other, entangling transnational traffickers in local feuds that generate no profit. And because each clique remains independent, a contract made with one clique will not necessarily be honored by others. Securing a land route through gang territories would mean negotiating and maintaining a series of deals with inherently undependable partners. On the whole, it is difficult to see how becoming entangled with the *maras* would be in the interest of the professional drug traffickers.

²⁹ For example, in Honduras, in Bajo Aguan, department of Colón, a group called Mara 61 is allegedly hired by local traffickers to provide security and logistical support for their operations. There has also been evidence that M-18 was hired by the Zetas to perform hits in Honduras.

It is also difficult to see why it would be necessary. Setting aside all the cocaine trafficked by sea and air, the land routes typically make use of the major highways, including CA1, CA2, and other commercial arteries, crossing at official checkpoints, concealed in cargoes, and facilitated by corruption. Given their limited presence on the road or at border crossing points, it is unclear how the *maras* would find out about these shipments, let alone be in a position to facilitate or impede them.

The Zetas are chronically short of manpower, and so may recruit *mareros* with promise, but on an institutional level, they will most likely continue to use the *maras* instrumentally. Anything beyond this should be regarded as a true act of desperation on the part of the Zetas, and would likely lead to their downfall.

The importance of sub-state groups

All of the major territorial organized crime groups in Central America had an identity before becoming involved in cocaine trafficking. This is because cocaine trafficking does not produce territorial groups – it produces *transportistas*. If the *transportistas* could do their business unimpeded by territorial groups, they would do so, and the impact of drug trafficking on transit countries would be much less. But once trafficking routes start to transit extended areas of land, and particularly land border crossings, they collide with pre-existing interests. On borders, these interests are already controlling smuggling, with expertise in clandestine crossing and high-level connections to corrupt officials. At first, they may simply tax the trade, but soon they control it. While transiting their areas raises costs, the cargo may ultimately be more secure than on the open seas.

It is a fundamental misconception to view these territorial groups as primarily cocaine trafficking operations. They are alternative forms of governance. The cocaine has made many more powerful than they could ever have hoped to be otherwise, but because cocaine did not create these groups, removing cocaine will not destroy them. In fact, eliminating key revenue streams can actually make territorial groups become more violent, as they turn to acquisitive crime to replace lost income. The mechanics of the cocaine flow and the relationship of these groups to it is the subject of the next chapter.



Cocaine from South America to the United States

What is the nature of this market?

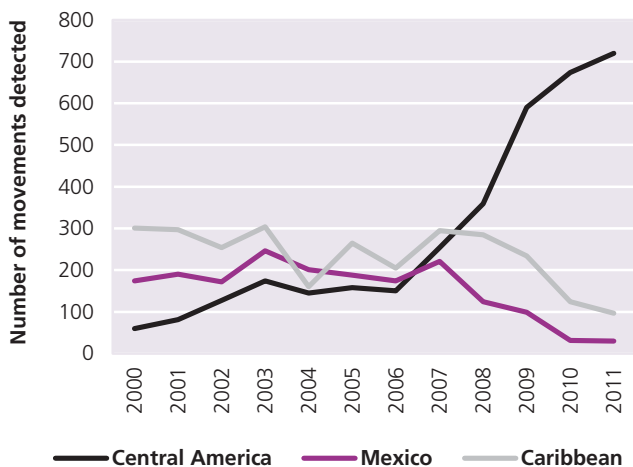
The history of cocaine trafficking from South America to the United States has been well documented. The flow peaked in the 1980s. During most of this time, Colombian traffickers dominated the market, and they often preferred to use the Caribbean as a transit area. Due to vigorous law enforcement, the Colombian groups were weakened in the 1990s, and Mexican groups progressively assumed control of most of the trafficking chain.

As a product of this shift, an ever-increasing share of the cocaine entering the United States did so over the south-western land border. Initially, direct shipments to Mexico were favoured, with stopovers in Central America largely

limited to refueling. After 2000, and especially after 2006, law enforcement increased the risks of shipping directly to Mexico. Consequently, Central America took on new importance as a transit and storage area, and parts of the Caribbean were reactivated.

This can be seen in the seizure figures. In the mid-1980s, over 75% of the cocaine seized between South America and the United States was taken in the Caribbean, and very little was seized in Central America. By 2010, the opposite was true: over 80% was seized in Central America, with less than 10% being taken in the Caribbean. The bulk of the cocaine seized in recent years in the Caribbean has been taken by the Dominican Republic, which is also a transit country for the European market.³⁰

Figure 22: Number of primary cocaine movements destined for, or interdicted in, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, 2000-2011



Source: ONDCP

How is the trafficking conducted?

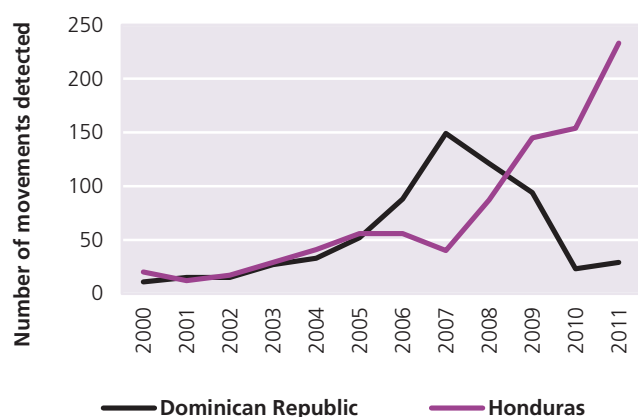
Despite reductions in production, the latest cocaine signature data indicates that most of the cocaine consumed in the United States comes from Colombia.³¹ The Colombian government has been extremely successful in disassembling the larger drug trafficking organizations, and this has changed the nature of the market in the country. While large groups like the *Rastrojos* and the *Urabeños* exist, they are not powerful enough to threaten the state or eliminate all interlopers. Rather, a free market exists in which a wide range of players can source cocaine, and this is manifest in the diversity of trafficking styles and techniques.

³⁰ The Dominican Republic is by far the most frequent source of cocaine courier flights to European destinations, and has recently been the source of some large maritime shipments destined for Valencia, Spain.

³¹ United States Cocaine Signature Program

Focused law enforcement in Colombia has also reduced the number of shipments departing directly from the country. Shipments by air mostly take off just across the border, in Venezuelan territory. Shipments by sea are increasingly embarking from Ecuador on the Pacific and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on the Atlantic. Until 2009, a large share of the flights were destined for the Dominican Republic, but much of this air traffic appears to have been re-routed to Honduras after 2007, particularly following the Zelaya coup in 2009.

Figure 23: Number of primary cocaine movements destined for, or interdicted in, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, 2000-2011



Source: ONDCP

Today, in addition to many minor sub-flows, there are three main arteries for northward movement of cocaine:

- Pacific fishing boats and other marine craft, including semi-submersibles, particularly destined for Guatemala, supplying cocaine to the *Cartel del Pacifico*.
- Atlantic go-fasts and other marine craft, including some semi-submersibles, particularly destined for Honduras, to supply both the *Cartel del Pacifico* and the Zetas.
- Aircraft, departing from the border area of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, particularly destined for Honduras, supplying both the *Cartel del Pacifico* and the Zetas.

Much has been made of the use of self-propelled semi-submersibles (SPSS), and there have indeed been some spectacular seizures, including recent ones off the coasts of Honduras and Guatemala. These devices began as submersed trailers off other vessels that could be cut loose in the event of law enforcement contact, but they have evolved considerably since then. True submarines have also been detected, causing considerable alarm. But while the potential for profit is great, so are the losses when an SPSS is detected, and the Colombian government alone has seized at least 50 of them. In addition to the cost of the vessel, an SPSS usually carries multiple tons of cocaine, costing US\$10 million or more in Colombia. And SPSS are

generally very slow, so while they are hard to detect, there is more time to detect them.

First detected in 1993, seizure of these vessels appears to have peaked between 2007 and 2009, and to have declined since. The United States government notes a reduction of 70% in the estimated use of SPSS between 2009 and 2010.³² It may well be that traffickers are returning to more traditional methods of moving their drugs. Go-fast boats, a perennial favourite, seem to be making a comeback along both coasts.

The use of aircraft, previously largely reserved for short hops to the Caribbean, has also increased. Light aircraft such as the Cessna Conquest and the Beechcraft Duke seem to be preferred, but larger aircraft have been detected. They may make several short hops between remote areas in Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. These areas are often not accessible by road, and so rely on small airstrips or jetties for all contact with the outside world. Using both light aircraft and go-fast boats, cocaine can be moved northward in an endless series of combinations, touching down in areas the police rarely visit.

Panama

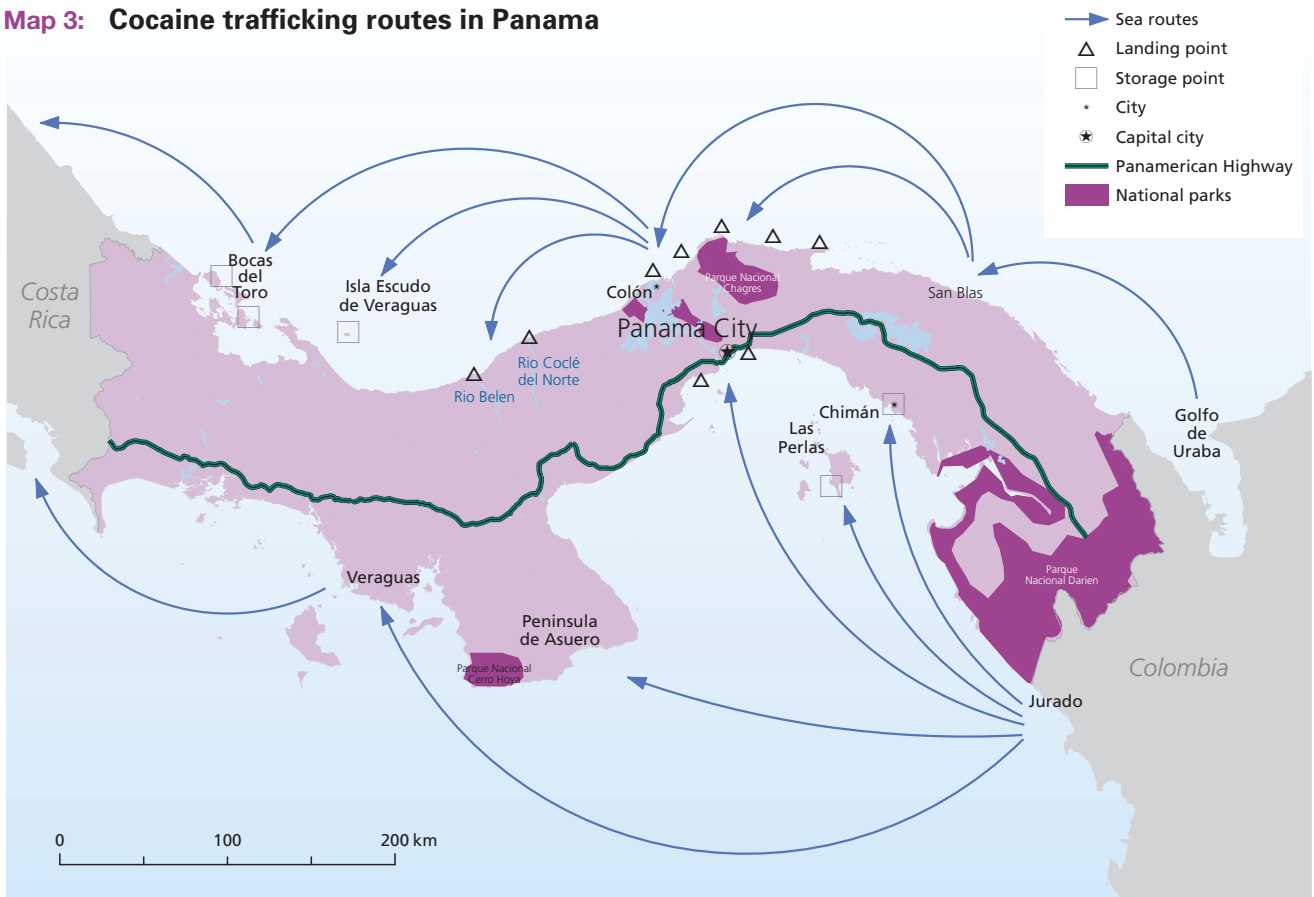
It is very difficult to traffic large volumes of cocaine by land from Colombia, due to the Darien Strip, a near-impassible stretch of jungle between the country and Panama. To circumvent this barrier, some traffickers make the short sea voyage to Panama from the Gulf of Uraba on the Atlantic (about 55% of the detected shipments) or Jurado on the Pacific (45%). Traffickers simply wait for a break in the security patrols before making the trip, using a wide range of sea craft. On the Pacific side, this can involve rather slow artisanal boats. Loads are consolidated in Panama, often in areas inaccessible by road, before being shipped further north.

Those who ply this leg are mainly Colombians and Panamanians, *transportistas* handling the cargo of others. The country serves as both a storage and re-shipment zone. Authorities estimate that perhaps 5% to 10% of the cocaine entering the country is consumed locally, but although Panama has the highest adult cocaine use prevalence in Central America (reported to be 1.2% in 2003), this is difficult to believe given the huge volumes transiting the country. Authorities also say as much as a third may eventually make it to Europe, often flowing via the Dominican Republic, although local police only detected five Europe-bound shipments in 2011. The bulk proceeds northward.

Larger shipments from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Ecuador also transit Panamanian waters. Panama routinely makes some of the largest cocaine seizures in the world. Between 2007 and 2010, around 52 tons were seized

³² Office of National Drug Control Policy, Cocaine Smuggling in 2010. Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, 2012.

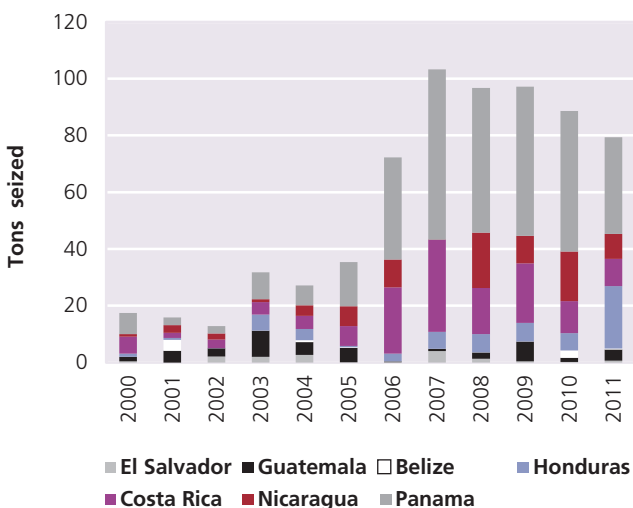
Map 3: Cocaine trafficking routes in Panama



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region

per year— an average of a ton a week. Seizures in 2011 were about 35 tons, but given that United States consumption requirements are perhaps three times this, Panama’s seizures alone continue to represent a significant source of supply reduction. The loads also appear to have diminished in size recently, from tons to a few hundred kilograms, perhaps because traffickers can no longer afford losses that were previously acceptable.

Figure 24: Distribution of cocaine seizures in Central America, 2000-2011



Source: UNODC Delta Database

Costa Rica

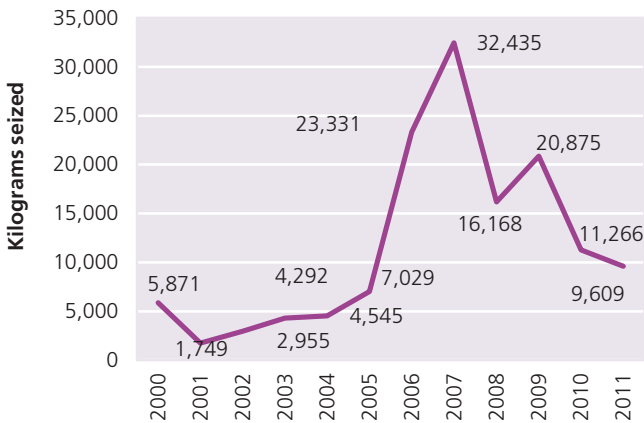
The next country on the journey north is Costa Rica. The number of direct shipments to Costa Rica has increased remarkably in recent years, and between 2006 and 2010, the country seized an average of 20 tons of cocaine per year, compared to five tons between 2000 and 2005. More recently, seizures have declined, but remain higher than before 2006. The decline in seizures is difficult to explain, as there does not appear to have been a commensurate reduction in the number of direct shipments to the country.

Drugs making landfall in Costa Rica are reshipped by land, sea, and air, with air becoming the predominant means in recent years. There have also been significant recent seizures (of amounts up to 300 kg) along the Panamerican Highway. Large seizures have been made in Peñas Blancas, the main border crossing point with Nicaragua in the northwestern part of the country. In the south, the strategic zone of El Golfito (the bay bordering Panama) and the border crossing point of Paso Canoas are also used as storage points for shipments heading north.

In addition to the northward traffic, Costa Rica has long been a significant source of cocaine couriers on commercial flights to Europe. This prominence seems to have decreased in recent years, however.

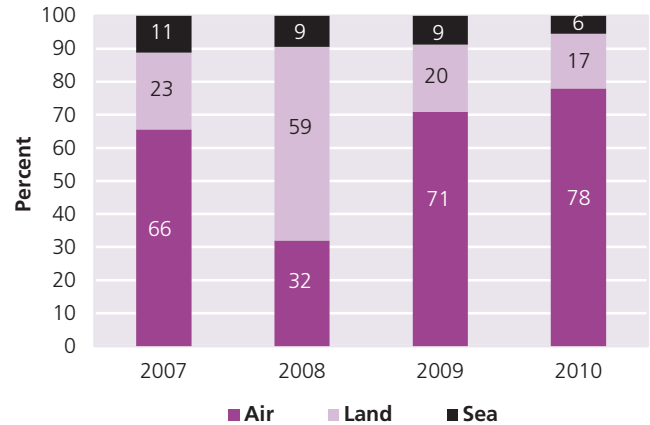
Costa Rican coasts, both Pacific and Atlantic, are used by traffickers to transport larger quantities of cocaine, through

Figure 25: Cocaine seizures in Costa Rica (kg), 2000-2011



Source: Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas

Figure 26: Means of moving cocaine into Costa Rica (in percent of detected incidents), 2007-2010

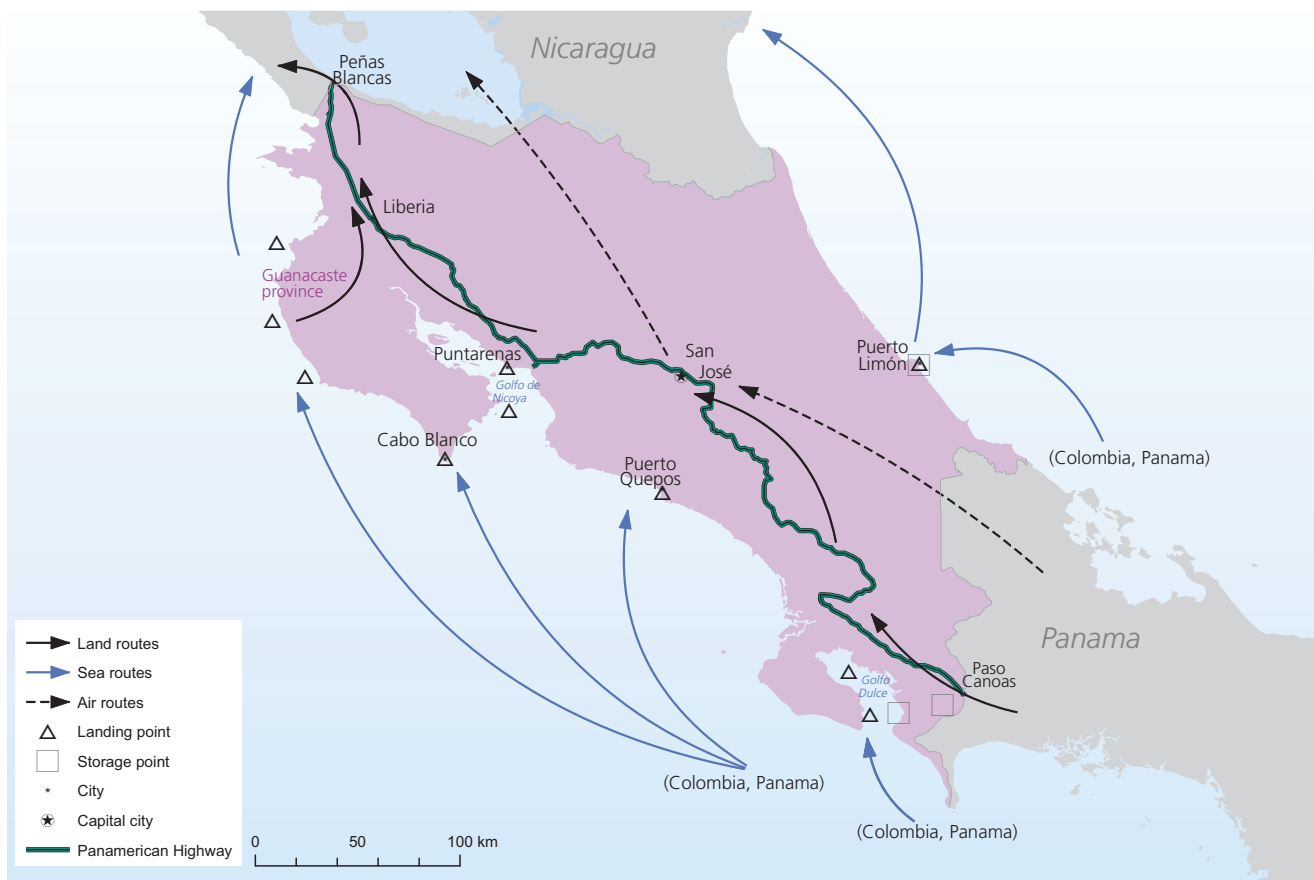


Source: Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas

go-fast boats coming from Colombian sea ports, or medium-sized boats (40 feet or less) and fishing vessels for shorter trips. The Gulf of Punta Arenas and Puerto Quepos on the Pacific coast are used as refueling stops for shipments coming from Colombia and Panama. Seizures have been made on the Atlantic coast at Puerto Limón, but they are

fewer in number than on the Pacific coast. Talamanca, a remote area at the border with Nicaragua (and the region where 80% of Costa Rica's cannabis is produced³³) is also believed to be used for trafficking smaller quantities of cocaine, with the involvement of indigenous communities.

Map 4: Cocaine trafficking routes in Costa Rica



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region

33 Javier Meléndez Q., Roberto Orozco B., Sergio Moya M., Miguel López R. *Una aproximación a la problemática de la criminalidad organizada en las comunidades del Caribe y de fronteras Nicaragua-Costa Rica-Panamá*, Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas. Costa Rica. August 2010.

Nicaragua

While Nicaragua seizes impressive amounts of cocaine, most of these seizures are made along the coasts, stretches of which (particularly the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur-RAAS/Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte-RAAN areas) are under-developed. The country remains primarily a re-fuelling stop, and Nicaraguan traffickers are rarely encountered outside their home country. Coastal communities, including indigenous groups, provide logistic support to traffickers, one of the few sources of income in these isolated areas. Some may have a formal arrangement with a particular *transportista* network, while others may simply be capitalizing opportunistically from their geographic location.

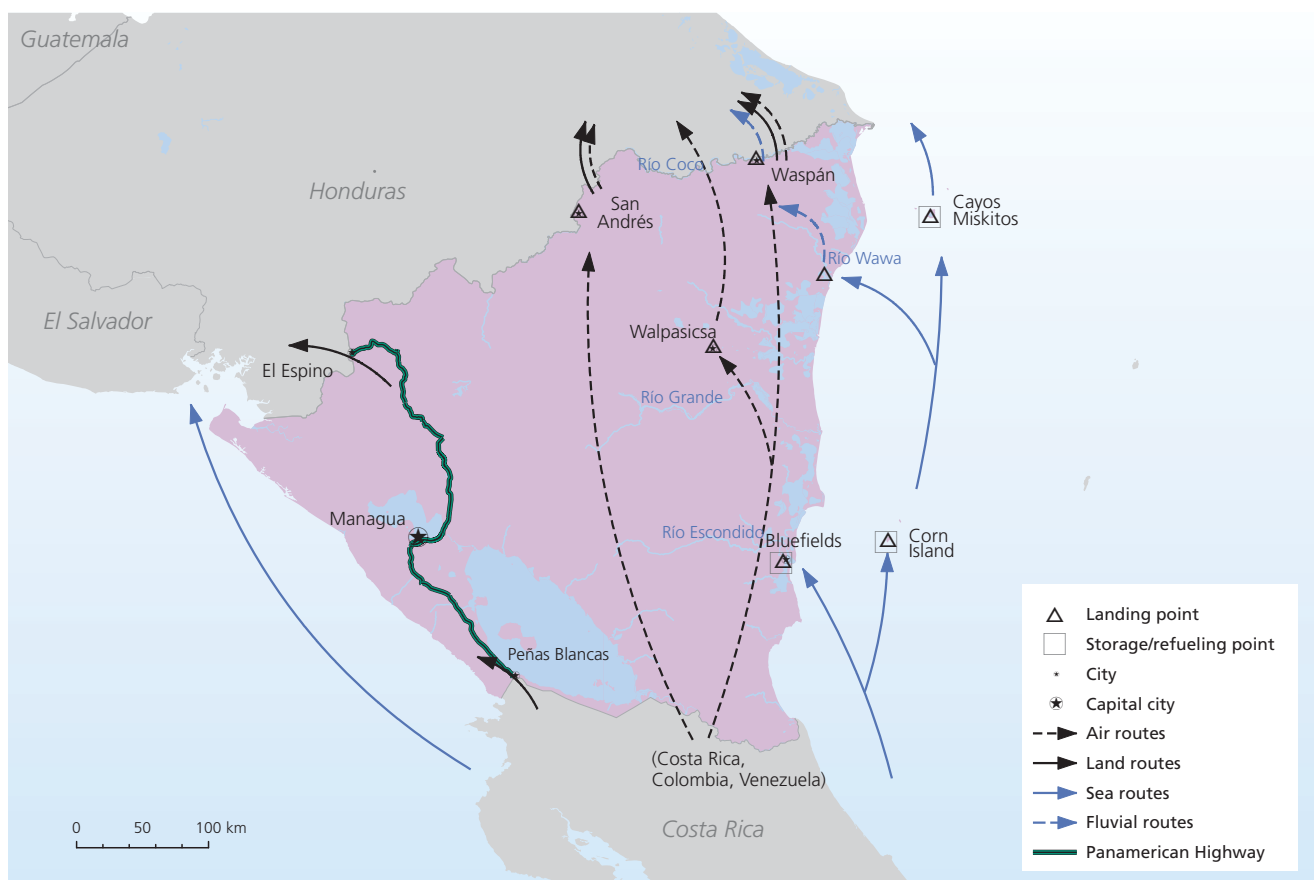
Many of these more remote areas are serviced by small airstrips, since travel by road is impractical. These small strips, combined with those in similar areas in Honduras, allow cocaine to be moved northward in an almost endless set of combinations of air, land, and sea transport. Although most of the traffic is coastal, there does appear to be some inland flow along the rivers, some of which transit more than half the breadth of the isthmus.

The peripheral role Nicaragua plays in the trafficking is reminiscent of the role formerly played by Central America as a whole, and this has reduced the impact of the flow on the country. Crime hardly plays a role in the political life of Nicaragua, and its citizens are far more satisfied with their country's security posture than those in neighbouring countries. Murder levels, though elevated, are stable.

El Salvador

El Salvador remains something of a puzzle. The authorities claim that very little cocaine transits their country, because they lack an Atlantic coast and pose few advantages over countries further north. It is also true that El Salvador is the most densely settled country in the region, reducing the opportunities for clandestine airstrips and remote maritime landings. Radar data suggest very few shipments from South America proceed directly to El Salvador. Still, given the fact that it borders both Honduras and Guatemala, it seems likely that more cocaine passes through the country than is sometimes claimed. This is suggested by the September 2011 addition of El Salvador to the list of Major Illicit Drug Transit countries by the United States Government.³⁴

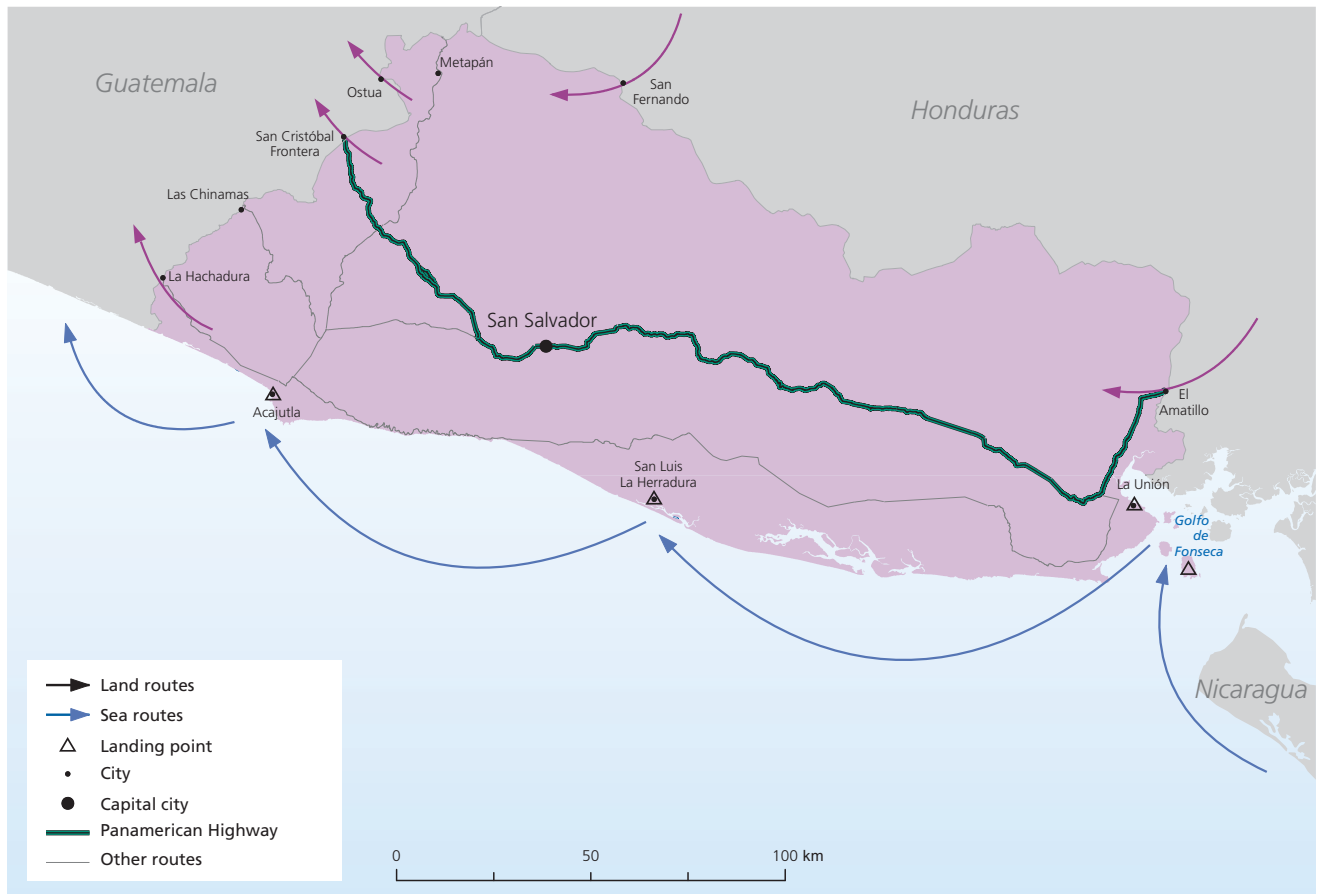
Map 5: Cocaine trafficking routes in Nicaragua



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region

³⁴ By Presidential Memorandum (Presidential Determination No. 2011-16) dated 15 September 2011.

Map 6: Cocaine trafficking routes in El Salvador



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region

Cocaine seizures are typically among the lowest in the region, certainly on a per capita basis. The anti-narcotics division seized less than seven kilograms in 2011, while the United States estimates that four tons of cocaine transited the country that year.³⁵ This is a product of the fact that large seizures are rare, and that seizures of any size are made rarely – less than 130 seizures were made in 2010.³⁶ The police report that only “ant traffic” passes through the country, with most shipments smaller than two kilograms. Many of these seizures are made at El Amatillo, where the Panamerican Highway crosses from Honduras into El Salvador, the single best-controlled border crossing in the country. At other border points, the police admit seizures occur only with “flagrant” violations.

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that several prominent *transportista* networks have been uncovered. The Perrones network ran cocaine from one end of the country to the other, with separate groups handling trafficking in the east and west of the country. Although no seizures were ever linked back directly to Reynerio Flores, it is unlikely he dealt in quantities of less than two kilograms.

The Taxis investigation, reported by journalists from the

Figure 27: Number of cocaine hydrochloride seizures in El Salvador, 2002-2010



Source: Annual Report Questionnaires

on-line periodical *El Faro*, revealed a route whereby cocaine is flown to rural Honduras or Nicaragua, and then flown deeper into Honduras. It is then driven by road to El Salvador, where Salvadoran traffickers bring it across the northwestern corner of the country into Guatemala. This flow, protected by high-level corruption and without direct connections to violence, may have been tolerated for years, and there does not appear to be an active investigation today.

35 By Presidential Memorandum (Presidential Determination No. 2011-16) dated 15 September 2011.

36 ARQ 2010

The cocaine that enters the domestic market is believed to be the product of “in kind” payment to *transportista* networks. Many seizures of small amounts of crack are evidence of this domestic market. Police claim that there is a cocaine shortage in El Salvador, and that cocaine actually travels back into the country from Guatemala. This is demonstrated by the fact that prices for cocaine are often higher in El Salvador than in Guatemala, although there does not appear to be systematic price data collection.

The case of Juan María Medrano Fuentes (aka “Juan Colorado”) demonstrates that commercial air couriering also takes place. Until 2009, he ran a network of people travelling three or four times a week carrying “nostalgia” items to the Salvadoran expatriate community in the United States, such as local cheese and bread. They were also reportedly carrying cocaine.³⁷

There are also patterns of violence that are difficult to explain except in terms of the drug trade. The violence is particularly intense in the west of the country, especially along several transportation routes radiating from the coast and the borders. This concentration is suspicious, especially given that it affects some lightly populated areas with relatively low crime rates overall.

Cocaine as well as methamphetamine precursor chemicals have been detected entering at the port of Acajutla on their way to Guatemala, which is a short drive away through an under-manned border crossing. This port is ideally situated for traffickers looking to import discretely and cross an international border quickly to evade detection. It is also one of the more violent areas of the country, and one of the few areas where it is alleged that certain *maras* members are involved in cocaine trafficking.

Honduras

Today, Honduras represents the single most popular point of entry for cocaine headed northward into Guatemala.

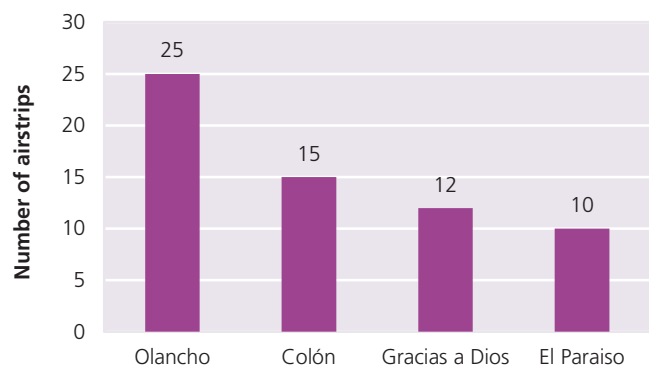
Honduras has a long history as a transit country, including during the Civil Wars of the 1970s and 1980s, when it represented a relatively safe means of getting cocaine to Mexico through a dangerous region. Its use has waxed and waned over time, but it is greater today than ever before.

Direct cocaine flows to Honduras grew significantly after 2006, and strongly increased after the 2009 coup. In particular, air traffic from the Venezuelan/Colombian border, much of which was previously directed to Hispaniola, was redirected to airstrips in central Honduras. According to the United States government, roughly 65 of the 80 tons of cocaine transported by air toward the United States lands in Honduras, representing 15% of United States-bound cocaine flow.³⁸ Almost as much is moved to

the country by sea. It takes just six hours by go-fast boat to cross from Colombia to Honduras, and the brevity of this route also allows the use of submarines. In the last year, at least four submarines were detected around Honduras, and seizures from just two of them amounted to about 14 tons of cocaine.

Flights depart from the Venezuelan/Colombian border heading north, before banking sharply and heading for Honduras. Maritime shipments may unload at Puerto Lempira, or another remote area of Honduras or northern Nicaragua, before being flown further north in small aircraft to other coastal areas, islands, or the provinces of Olancho and Colón, or even into Guatemala. Once on land, the drugs cross the border at both formal and informal crossing points, although the formal crossings are generally more convenient for the larger loads.

Figure 28: Clandestine airstrips detected in Honduras, February-March 2012



Source: Armed Forces of Honduras

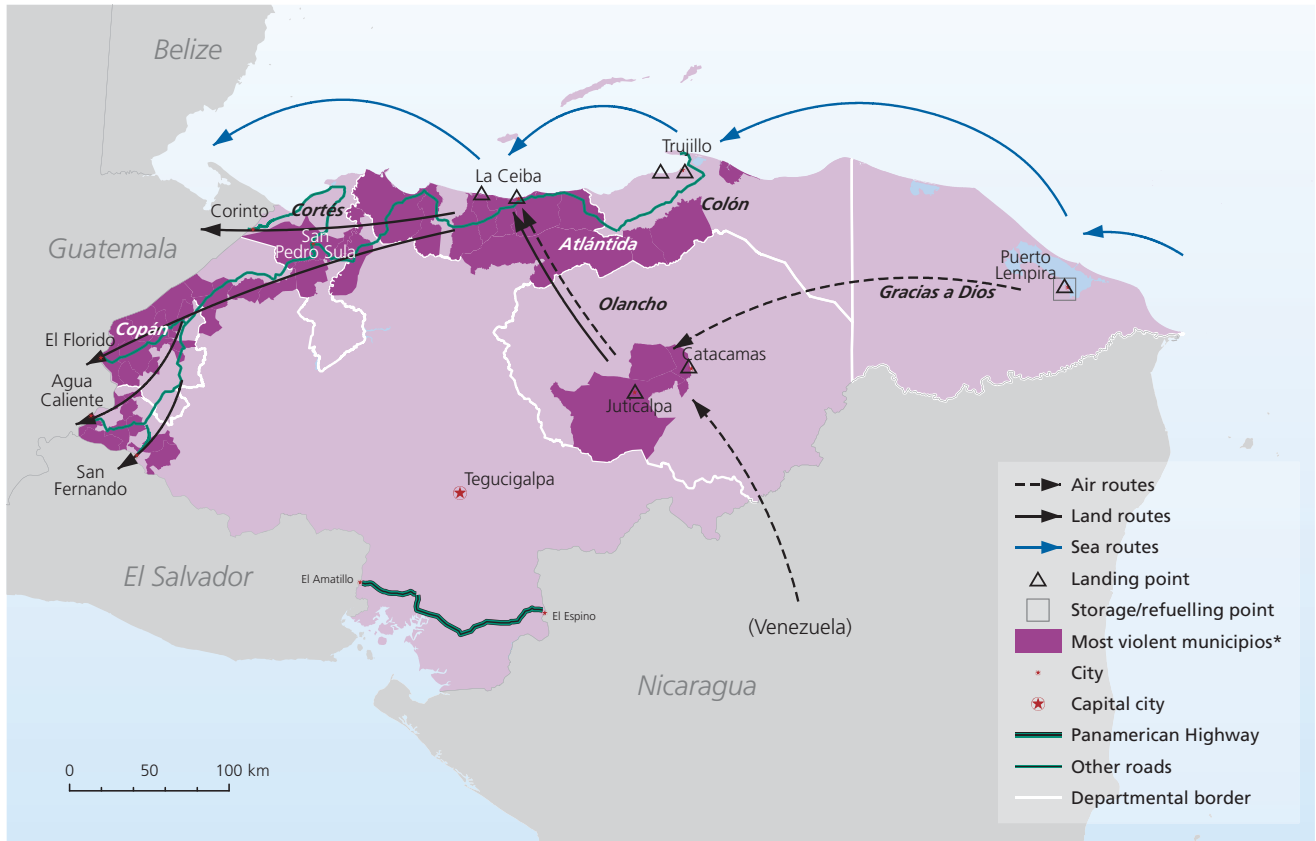
The new “plazas”

Some of the most dangerous places in Central America lie in a swath running between the northwestern coast of Honduras and southwestern coast of Guatemala. There are hundreds of informal border crossing points between the two countries, but, due to corruption and complicity, it appears that most cocaine crosses at the official checkpoints, such as Copán Ruinas/El Florido (CA-11). Municipalities on both sides of the border are afflicted with very high murder rates, which is peculiar given that these are mostly rural areas. Given the competition between groups allied to the Zetas and the *Cartel del Pacífico*, it is highly likely that these deaths are attributable to disputes over contraband and trafficking routes.

³⁷ See <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/judicial/78128-fgr-medrano-enviaba-droga-via-encomienda.html>

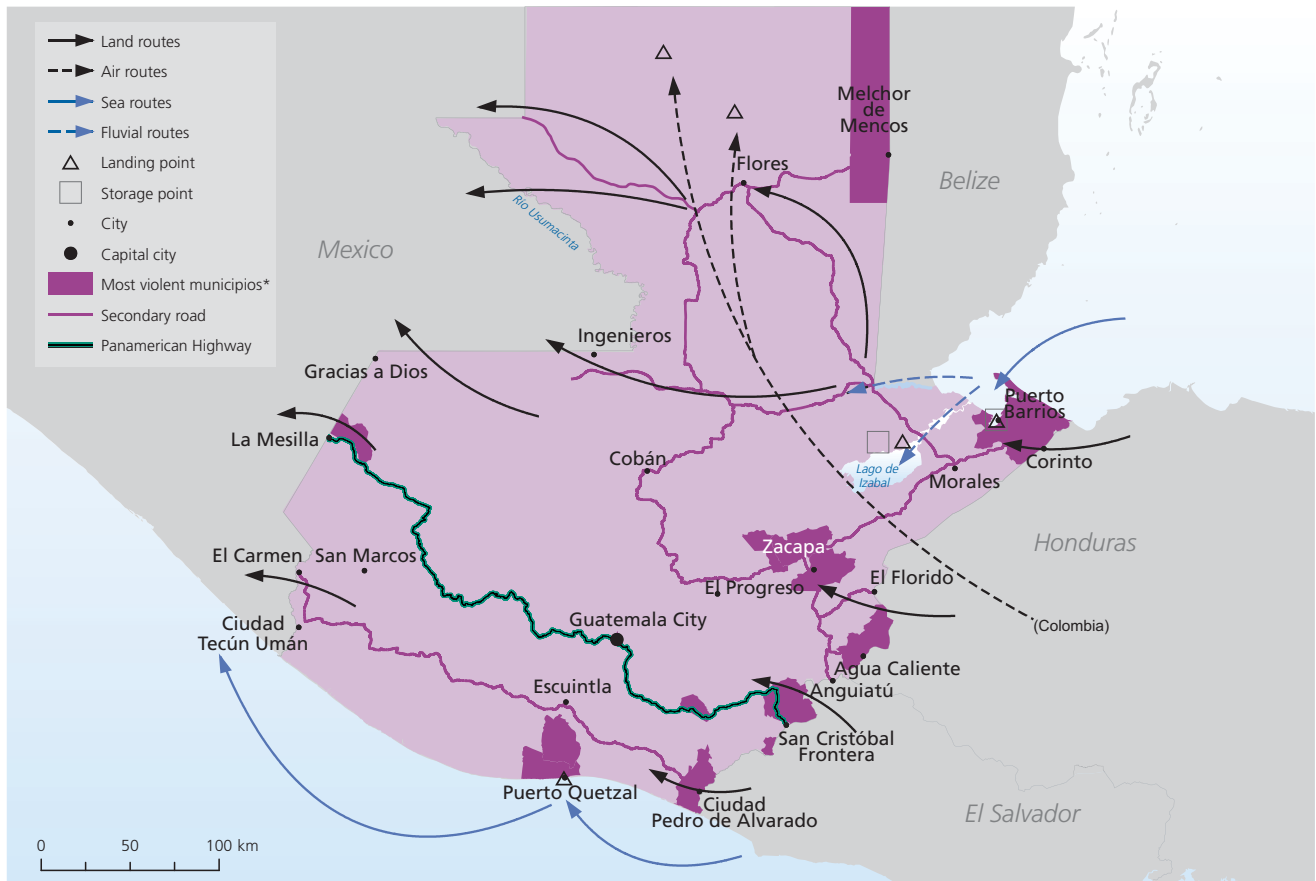
³⁸ Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Cocaine Smuggling in 2010*. Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, 2012.

Map 7: Cocaine trafficking routes in Honduras



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region and national police data
 *Selected among the municipalities with highest homicide rates (<100 homicides per 100,000 population)

Map 8: Cocaine trafficking routes in Guatemala



Source: UNODC, elaborated from interviews in the region and national police data
 *Selected among the municipalities with highest homicide rates (<100 homicides per 100,000 population)

Guatemala

When it comes to Central American cocaine trafficking, all roads lead to Guatemala.

Traditionally, the country has been divided cleanly between supply routes to the *Cartel del Pacífico*, which remains close to the Pacific coast and depart the country primarily from San Marcos, and those that supply the other groups, which skirt the north of the country and leave through Petén.

Three seismic shifts appear to have precipitated the present crisis. One is downward pressure from the Mexican security strategy, which has virtually suspended direct shipments to Mexico and forced as much as 90% of the cocaine flow into the bottleneck of Guatemala. The second was the breakaway of the Zetas from its parent, the Gulf Cartel. And the third was the massive increase in direct shipments to Honduras.

Suddenly, dramatically increased volumes of cocaine were crossing the border between Honduras and Guatemala, greatly increasing the importance of the reigning crime families there. As discussed above, the Mendoza crime family in the north is currently aligned to the *Cartel del Pacífico* and the Lorenzanas in the south are aligned to the Zetas, which could create considerable friction as trafficking routes intersect. The situation is complicated by the geography of Guatemala, which does not allow a road directly north from the Honduran border. Between the border and Petén lies the Parque Nacional Sierra de la

Minas and Lake Izabal. To continue northward, one must go east or west along CA-9:

- To the west, through Cobán, Alta Verapaz
- To the east, passing close to Morales, Izabal

The Zetas worked with local allies to secure control over Cobán, causing the President to declare a state of emergency in 2011. This temporary pressure may have encouraged the Zetas to try the eastern route, but this runs directly into Mendoza territory, turning northward not far from their family home in Morales. All this seems to have contributed to making the border area one of the most violent areas in the world.

Belize and the Caribbean

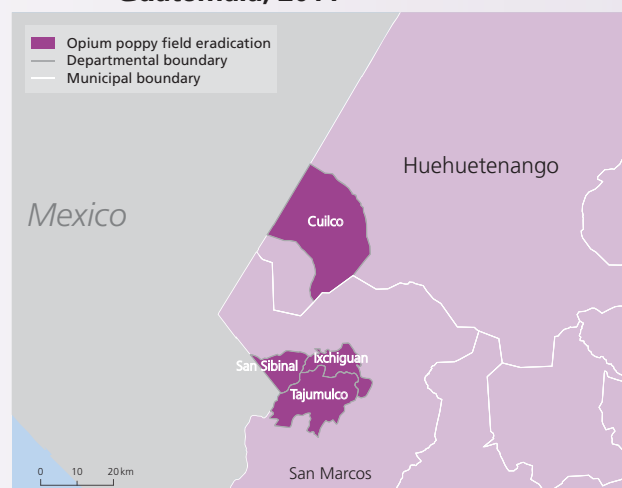
Belize has long been a secondary route for cocaine, and has diminished in popularity since 2006. The country has participated in some important seizures, but most years, the annual take is limited to some tens of kilograms. While the country is highly vulnerable to trafficking groups with access to resources exceeding national GDP, northward movement is limited essentially to one road, with bottlenecks at Belize City and Orange Walk. It is believed that the Zetas are active in Belize, and seizures close to the border in Mexico indicate increased trafficking. Some of this cocaine may be entering from Guatemala in the north of the country, crossing at Melchor de Mencos to Belize City.

Opium poppy – Guatemala's drug crop

While methamphetamine looms as a possible second, at present the only drug produced in Central America for export is opium poppy grown in western Guatemala. The United Nations has never conducted a survey of the extent of opium poppy cultivation in the area, but eradication reported by the government suggest a growing problem. Between 2007 and 2011, poppy eradication in Guatemala tripled, from less than 500 hectares eradicated in 2007 to more than 1500 hectares in 2011. Eradication is concentrated in two departments and four municipalities in the western part of the country: San Marcos (Ixchiguan, Sibinal, Tajumulco) and Huehuetenango (Culco). The *Cartel del Pacífico* is the group most associated with heroin trafficking, and San Marcos is home to its ally, *Los Chamales*.

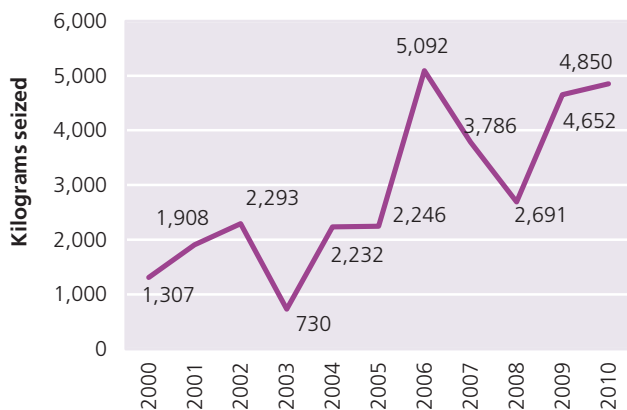
Since 2007, Guatemala has surpassed Colombia with regards to opium poppy eradication and is now second only to Mexico. According to the Ministerio de Gobernación, the eradication only represents 10% of the cultivation, which would suggest a total area of cultivation of approximately 15,000 hectares, close to the estimated opium poppy-growing area in Mexico. Lack of clarity around the cultivation area, yields, and quality makes any estimate highly dubious. It is also unclear where this output would be consumed. In the past, opium was trafficked across the border for processing, as evinced by the seizure of opium poppy capsules in transit. But today, it seems likely that some heroin is made in Guatemala, particularly given the increased seizures of precursor chemicals.

Map 9: Opium poppy eradication in Guatemala, 2011



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Policía Nacional Civil (Guatemala)

Figure 29: Kilograms of cocaine seized in the Dominican Republic, 2000-2010



Source: UNODC Delta

The Caribbean used to be the primary conduit for cocaine trafficking to the United States, and there is always the risk that it could become so again. Enhanced monitoring of both air and sea traffic along the United States coastline has made this more difficult than in the past, however. The Caribbean does play a role in trafficking to Europe, but much of this flow is maritime, and the drugs never need make landfall on Caribbean soil.

Hispaniola, and the Dominican Republic in particular, saw a resurgence in popularity as transshipment points between 2006 and 2009, in the period between the implementation of the new security strategy in Mexico and the coup in Honduras. Opportunities in Central America, teamed with stronger enforcement in the Dominican Republic, have caused this flow to dwindle over the last two years. Seizure figures were up in 2009 and 2010, but this appears to represent a higher rate of interdiction, not a greater flow.

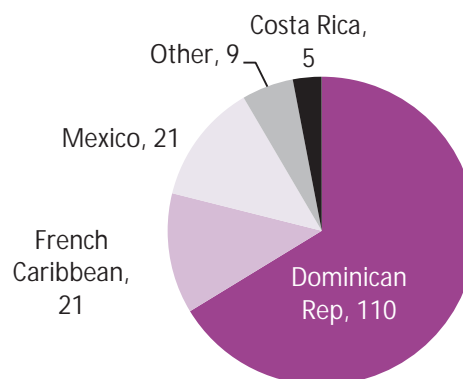
Dominican traffickers have long been close partners of the Colombians in moving cocaine to the United States and in distributing it in the northeast of the country. The Dominican Republic is also a popular destination for tourists from Europe and a large European expatriate community resides there. These factors placed Dominican traffickers in a favourable position when cocaine use in Europe began to grow during the 2000s.

Today, the Dominican Republic is the primary source in the region of cocaine smuggled on commercial air flights to Europe. The number of air couriers detected on flights from the region in one European airport database quadrupled between 2006 and 2011.³⁹ This does not necessarily indicate an increase in flow, since the amounts trafficked by this means are small. Dominican citizens are also the most prominent nationality in the region among those arrested for cocaine trafficking in Europe.

Jamaica was once a key transit country for both the United

³⁹ IDEAS database. The IDEAS database is a product of voluntary information sharing between a number of European airports. It is not a representative sampling of all European airports.

Figure 30: Breakdown of the origin of detected cocaine shipments on commercial flights to selected European airports from Central America and the Caribbean in 2011

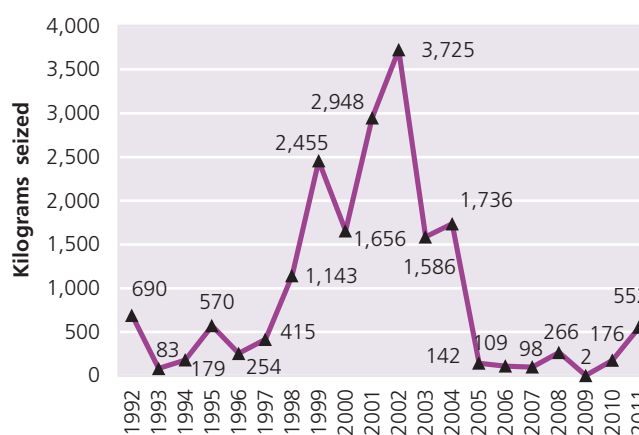


Source: IDEAS database

States and the United Kingdom but has declined considerably in importance since its heyday. The Jamaican example illustrates that the removal of a drug flow can be as destabilizing as its inception. Estimates of the cocaine flow through Jamaica dropped from 11% of the United States supply in 2000 to 2% in 2005 and 1% in 2007.⁴⁰ This is reflected in declining seizures in Jamaica and declining arrests and convictions of Jamaican drug traffickers in the United States.⁴¹ The impact of this decline in flow is discussed in the final sections of this report.

Both the Dutch Caribbean and the French Caribbean have become important conduits for cocaine destined for Europe. During the early 2000s, huge numbers of couriers

Figure 31: Kilograms of cocaine seized in Jamaica, 1992-2011



Source: UNODC Delta

⁴⁰ Statement of the Donnie Marshall, Administrator, United States Drug Enforcement Administration before the United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 15 May 2001; National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2006. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2006; National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2007 Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2007; National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2009. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2009.

⁴¹ In 2000, the United States federal authorities convicted 79 Jamaicans for cocaine trafficking. In 2008, they arrested just 35. In 2010, not one was arrested.

landed at Schiphol airport, overwhelming the capacity of the Dutch legal system to process them. Recognizing that the couriers were much less important to the traffickers than the drugs, the Dutch began seizing the drugs from all suspected couriers and sent them home with blacklisted passports. The intervention worked, and the airflow diminished remarkably.⁴²

The French Caribbean only really became an issue after Francophone West Africa became part of the cocaine trafficking chain. France itself consumes relatively little cocaine, so it did not become an important port of entry until cocaine landed in West Africa, and the main commercial air routes happened to be linked to France. Today, the French overseas departments are some of the main sources of air couriers detected in Europe. Located in South America but with cultural connections to Europe, “the Guyanas” (Guyana, French Guiana, and Suriname) are also important in the European flow, but much less so to the United States.

Who are the traffickers?

Most of those arrested for drug trafficking in Central America are citizens of the country in which they were arrested. Globally, this is not always the case, and suggests that each country has its own network of traffickers and *transportistas*, carrying the drug from one border to another. But the type of people involved in trafficking varies sharply between countries. As the drugs move northward, the range of alternative routes narrows, and the competition becomes more fierce. As a result, Honduran and Guatemalan groups compete to control territory, while those further south are primarily *transportistas* and their foes.

In Guatemala and Honduras, the territorial nature of drug trafficking has given special importance to land ownership, and many large landholders, including commercial farmers and ranchers, are prominent among the traffickers. Plantations and ranches provide ground for clandestine landing strips and cocaine storage facilities. They also provide sites for training and deploying armed groups, and plausible cover for large groups of men operating in remote areas of these countries. Guatemalan landholders have long employed “private security companies” to oversee their agricultural labourers, so the sight of armed men in pick-up trucks is not unusual. Profits from drug trafficking can be passed off as the proceeds of productive farms and ranches. These groups are also more likely to invest in buying political influence beyond paying off the local border guards.

Outside of Guatemala and Honduras, most of those involved in the cocaine trade appear to be *transportistas* or *tumbadores*. In Panama, the *tumbador* problem is particularly

acute, but it is also an issue in Honduras and Guatemala. *Tumbadores* tend to strike when the drugs are on land, especially in the urban areas they dominate.

Panama

Transportista groups in Panama are primarily comprised of Panamanian and Colombian nationals. In addition to cocaine lost to the state, these *transportistas* also lose an unknown share to *tumbadores*. There are perhaps 40 to 50 *tumbador* factions (though some sources place the number much higher), each with about a dozen men. Some charismatic leaders have managed to unify several gangs into larger units, but more often these groups are locked in conflict over trafficking areas.

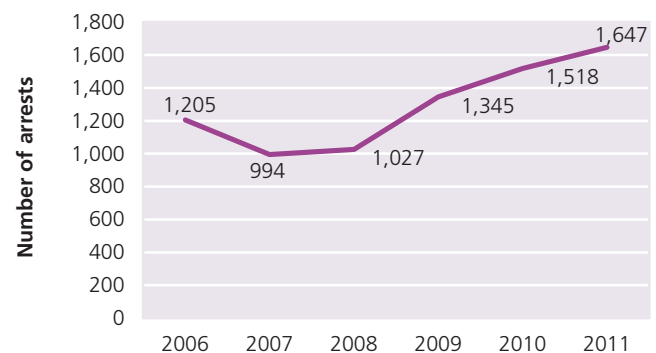
One of the most notorious *tumbador* groups is under the leadership of “Cholo Chorrillo” (“El Cholo”), who managed to merge three juvenile local gangs into one organization, dedicated to drug theft and extortion from other trafficking groups.⁴³ Much of the violence in Panama City is caused by a conflict between two opposing *tumbador* groups from different areas of the city – one led by a famous *tumbador* called “Moi” and the other one by his rival “Matagato”.

Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Most of the cocaine touching Costa Rica and Nicaragua tends to do so along the periphery, so domestic groups are not a big issue. In Costa Rica, several *transportistas* from Guatemala and Nicaragua have been recently arrested at border points with Nicaragua, in particular in Peñas Blancas on the Panamerican Highway, carrying consignments of several hundred kilograms. All evidence suggests, though, that transportation along the southern portions of the Panamerican Highway is a relatively minor trafficking route.

It would require an attenuated definition of “organization” to include the many people who provide support to the traffickers along the coasts. Many of these communities are

Figure 32: Number of arrests for drug trafficking in Costa Rica, 2006-2011

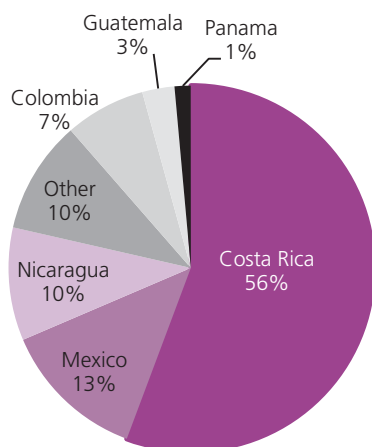


Source: Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas

⁴² For a more detailed discussion of this intervention, see Chapter 7 of World Bank and UNODC, *Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs and Policy Options in the Caribbean*. Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2007.

⁴³ The groups were *Bagdad* from Chorrillo; *El Pentágono* from Santa Ana; and “El MOM (*Matar or Morir*)” from Curundú.

Figure 33: Nationalities of people arrested for cocaine trafficking in Costa Rica in 2010



Source: Instituto Costarricense sobre drogas

indigenous, and are simply providing food and fuel to some well-heeled visitors. But there are others who are fully cognizant of what is going on, and provide both security and information to the *transportistas*. They may even provide offloading and storage services if required.

Cocaine trafficking arrests in Costa Rica have increased significantly in recent years. The majority of those arrested for cocaine trafficking were Costa Rican, but only just. A significant number of Mexicans and Colombians were detected. For example, in January 2011, Costa Rican authorities dismantled an organization of five Colombians and one Costa Rican in charge of coordinating maritime shipments of cocaine from Colombia and Ecuador to Guatemala and Mexico. In February 2011, three Mexicans were arrested in El Guarco (south of San José) with more than 300 kg of cocaine.

El Salvador

Much has been made of the ongoing activities of the Perrones *transportista* network, a group that the state claims to have dismantled some time ago. In 2007 and 2008, a number of high profile members were targeted, including dozens of police officers from the Anti-Narcotics Division. The arrest of the putative leader of the Perrones, Reynerio de Jesús Flores Lazo, in 2009 was considered by many to be the decisive blow to the organization, but others contend that it continues to operate in the country. The investigation of the *Cartel de Taxis* uncovered high-level corruption, and opens the possibility that there are other such networks operating undetected in the country.

But there have been no claims that territory-dominating groups are present in El Salvador. There have been claims of *mara* involvement in moving some medium sized shipments in the southwest of the country, but all other known groups are mere *transportistas*. As a result, El Salvador's sustained high levels of violence cannot easily be tied to transnational drug trafficking.

Honduras

In Honduras, several territorial groups are working for Colombian (in Atlántida) and Mexican (in Olancho, La Ceiba, and Copán) drug trafficking organizations. Some *tumbador*-style groups, known as “*los grillos*,” have also been reported in the country, in particular in the area of La Ceiba.

As in Guatemala, land-owners and “*rancheros*” are involved in trafficking activities, particularly in border areas that they control. Some municipalities in the northwest part of the country (in Copán, Ocotepeque, Santa Bárbara) are completely under the control of complex networks of mayors, businessmen and land owners (“*los señores*”) dedicated to cocaine trafficking. “*El Chapo*” Guzmán has also been reported to be travelling to this part of the country (Copán), so groups here may be connected to the *Cartel del Pacífico*, but the violence in this area suggests that control is contested.

Guatemala

Traditionally, much of Guatemala has been governed locally, with few services provided by the central state. In its place, large landholders and other local authorities saw to the provision of basic civic services and were allowed to operate with relatively little interference. When civil war broke out in the 1960s, the situation changed, with the military eventually extending state authority to every corner of the country and every aspect of political and economic life.

In the more remote areas of the country, the liaison between the military units and local community was a civilian official known as a “Military Commissioner”. Drawn from the local community, these Commissioners wielded tremendous power, acting as the eyes, ears, and right hand of the military commanders. Large-scale cocaine trafficking began to pass through Guatemala in the 1980s, at the peak of military control. The Commissioners were clearly complicit in that traffic.

Under the peace accords, the military was downsized considerably, and the more remote areas reverted back to their traditional ways. Many retired officers began to focus on business interests they had developed during the war. These officials had strong ties to the government and their former colleagues in the military, allowing them to operate with impunity. And the former Commissioners, who continued to wield power in their home areas, read like a who's who list of drug trafficking: Juancho León, Waldemar Lorenzana, and Juan “Chamale” Ortiz.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Espach, R., J. Melendez Quinonez, D. Haering, and M. Castillo Giron, *Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking in Guatemala's Border Communities*. Alexandria: Center for Naval Analyses, December 2011, p. 12.

Belize and the Caribbean

Belize has been cited many times as a possible refuge for Guatemalan traffickers on the run, and some have been apprehended there. Still, the navigable territory for drug trafficking is limited. The country is, however, a site for money laundering and, as it has not ratified the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, the import of precursor chemicals.

In the Caribbean, Dominican traffickers appear to be the single most active national group. There are significant Dominican communities in Spain and the Northeastern United States, and a good number of Dominicans have been arrested in both countries for drug trafficking. Jamaican traffickers used to be much more prominent than they are today.

How big is the flow?

The United States has recently generated detailed estimates of the amount of cocaine that transited the landmass of each Central American country in 2010.⁴⁵ Cocaine proceeds by air and sea, and the amount making final landfall grows as the flow moves northward. The exceptions are El Salvador and Belize, which, according to the United States, are mainly circumvented because the northward land flow proceeds through Honduras and Guatemala. According to these estimates, 330 tons of cocaine left Guatemala and entered Mexico in 2010, with 267 tons of this having previously transited Honduras, and so on down the line.

Converted to wholesale values at local prices, the values of these flows range from more than US\$4 billion in Guatemala to just US\$60 million in El Salvador. Relative to the local economy, this flow represents a remarkable 14% of the GDP of Nicaragua, while representing a rather small amount relative to the sizes of the economies of Panama and El Salvador.

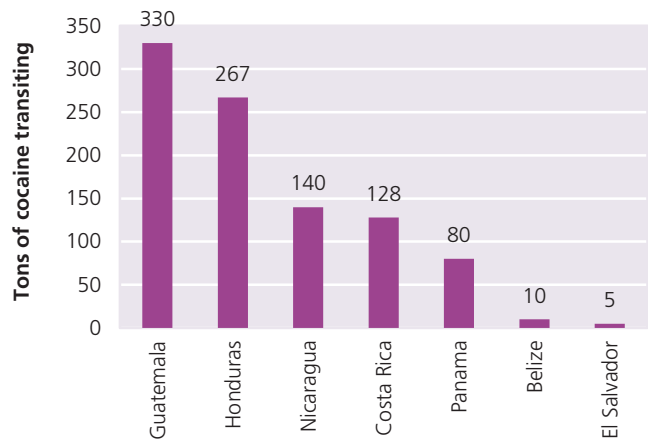
Implications for responses

The discussion above has highlighted several points about the mechanics of the cocaine flow that are relevant when formulating policy:

- Though diminishing, the value of this flow is still very large in proportion to the economies of the countries through which it flows. For example, the wholesale value of the cocaine passing through Guatemala, if sold on local markets, would be over US\$4 billion, more than the US\$3 billion the entire region spent on the fight against crime in 2010. Not all of this accrues to traffickers in Central America, but if even one-tenth of the local wholesale value remained in the region, the impact would be enormous. Disproportionate economic power gives traffickers great leverage in both sowing corruption and fomenting violence.

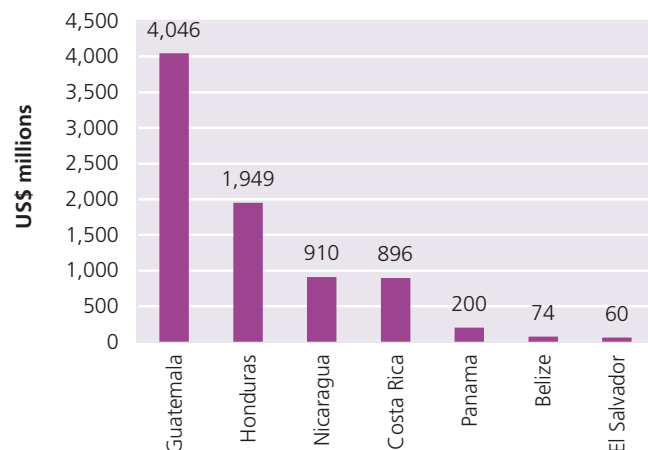
⁴⁵ Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Cocaine Smuggling in 2010*. Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, 2012.

Figure 34: Tons of cocaine transiting the landmass of Central American countries in 2010



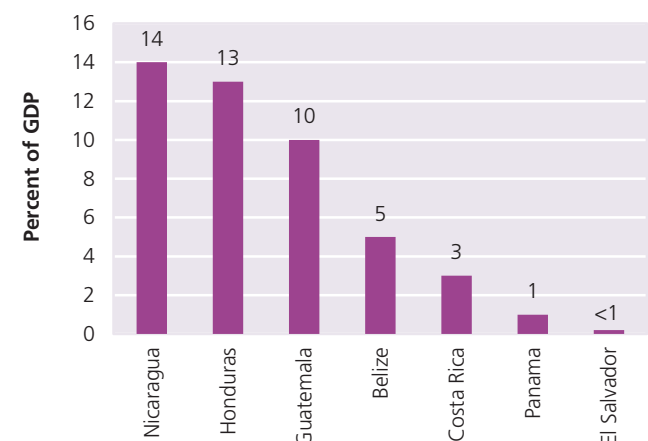
Source: ONDCP

Figure 35: Value of cocaine transiting Central American countries (US\$ millions), 2010



Source: Elaborated from ONDCP and UNODC data

Figure 36: Share of GDP represented by value of cocaine transiting each country, 2010



Source: Elaborated from ONDCP and UNODC data

- The flow is fluid, adapting with ease to any blockages encountered. This is illustrated by the extremely rapid manner in which traffickers took advantage of the post-coup chaos in Honduras, re-routing their shipments virtually overnight to take advantage of the opportunity. They predictably take the path of least resistance, and local allies appear to be easily replaced.
- Despite the ability of traffickers to adapt to sudden changes, shifts in the flow can be devastating for the transit areas, both those abandoned and those newly involved. Violent contests for access to cocaine revenues are predictable whenever trafficking patterns change, whatever the reason for the change.
- Much of the flow, particularly in the southern states of Central America, proceeds by air and sea between areas not connected by road to the major population centers. On the one hand, this is a good thing – the use of remote stopover points minimizes the impact of the drug flow on the countries affected. On the other, this technique makes enforcement challenging, because law enforcement agencies rarely visit the areas where the drugs are transiting.

The discussion above highlights the fact that two issues often amalgamated – the cocaine flow and organized crime

related violence – are distinct, and need to be addressed separately. At the same time, the two problems are sufficiently interrelated that each policy line needs to take into account the other. In particular, interventions that affect cocaine trafficking can produce negative outcomes in terms of violence. These outcomes need to be planned for and buffered by all available means.

The problem today is that the flow has become concentrated in the countries least capable of dealing with its presence. Unless these areas become inhospitable, the traffickers will become entrenched, using their economic weight to deeply infiltrate communities and government structures. This slow incursion is less dramatic than the violence associated with enforcement, but it is far more devastating in the long term. Cocaine trafficking is not a problem that can be solved through passivity.

The countries of Central America do not have the resources to deal with this problem on their own, and they should not be expected to do so. The flow originates and terminates outside the region. The international community should provide these countries its full support in dealing with what is truly a transnational problem.

Methamphetamine

Cocaine is the primary focus of virtually every drug trafficking organization in Central America, but given the influence of the *Cartel del Pacífico* in San Marcos and the south of Guatemala, it is not surprising that methamphetamine has become an issue. The supply of methamphetamine to the United States has long been a specialty of the “Sinaloa Cartel” and its successors, although this dominance was interrupted when it lost the port of Lázaro Cárdenas to former ally La Familia and its splinter, the Knights Templar (*Los Caballeros Templarios*). Since then, there has been increasing transshipment of precursor chemicals and methamphetamine to Mexico from Guatemala.

More recently, large volumes of precursor chemicals have been found flowing the opposite direction, suggesting that methamphetamine manufacture has been relocated to Guatemala. A number of labs have been discovered in San Marcos and near the Mexican border, and hundreds of thousands of liters of precursor chemicals have been seized, especially in Puerto Barrios, in the territory of the Mendoza family, a *Cartel del Pacífico* ally. Major seizures of precursor chemicals have also been made in El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, and Nicaragua.

Precursor chemical seizures in Guatemala in 2012

Date	Barrels	Chemical	Location	Origin
2 Jan	160 (33,264 L)	Dimethylmaleate	Puerto Barrios, Izabal	China
3 Jan	65 (13,513 L)	Acetone	La Libertad, Petén	
5 Jan	761 (158,212 L)	Unspecified	Puerto Barrios, Izabal	China
10 Jan	320 (66,736 L)	Marked as noniphenol	Puerto Barrios, Izabal	Shanghai, China
11 Jan	320 (66,736 L)	Marked as noniphenol	Puerto Barrios, Izabal	Shanghai, China
16 Jan	66 (13,720 L)	Methylamine	Guatemala City	
17 Jan	131 (27,240 L)	Methylamine	Guatemala City	
17 Jan	240 (49,900 L)	Monomethylamine, ethyl phenyl acetate	Puerto Barrios, Izabal	
8 Feb	80 (16,353 L)	Unspecified	El Caco, Puerto Barrios, Izabal	
April	80,000 L	Unspecified	En route to Honduras	China

Source: National Police of Guatemala



Smuggling of migrants from the Northern Triangle to the United States

All migrants want to improve their lives. Not all of them can fulfill the administrative requirements to migrate legally to the United States, so some of them decide to breach the law and become “irregular migrants”. There are essentially two ways of doing this. For those Central Americans who can afford the airfare and are able to get a visa, either with or without the assistance of an agent, the simplest way is to fly in and overstay the visa. For those unable to secure visas, there is the tried and true route of travelling the length of Mexico and crossing the border clandestinely. Illegally crossing the United States land border is quite difficult, and most of the irregular migrants employ smugglers. And it is this latter flow of people - the migrants smuggled through Mexico to the United States – that is the subject of this chapter.

Irregular migrants are willing to work off the books for lower wages and under worse conditions than would be legally permissible in most destination countries. Since they are not legally in the country, they are not likely to complain, and they will continue to come, at their own expense, so long as conditions abroad appear better than conditions at home.

At times, the exploitation of irregular migrant labour crosses the line from opportunism to criminality. Smuggled migrants are extremely vulnerable to being trafficked. Employers offering low pay may opt to offer no pay, with protests being met with a call to the immigration office. It may also suit the employer to deny the workers freedom of movement. It may suit them to deny bathroom breaks, reasonable nutrition, safe working conditions, or time to sleep. Misdirection, threats, intimidation, and even violence may be employed to ensure compliance. Migrant labourers may also be sexually exploited. Poor, displaced, often

illiterate, and unable to seek help from the authorities, smuggled workers are easily cowed.

Even before they arrive at the workplace, irregular migrants may be subject to a range of abuses. They aspire to invisibility, and this is often their undoing. Far from home and hiding from the law, they may be victimized with virtual impunity. Migrant smugglers know this, and although some work hard to maintain a reputation for reliable service, others do little to ensure the safety and comfort of their charges. When threatened by law enforcement, they may abandon the migrants, wherever they happen to be at the time. Worse, they may hold the migrants hostage, extorting additional payments from family members for their return. Thus, enforcing laws against the smuggling of migrants is not just about protecting borders. It is about protecting an extremely vulnerable population.

The following assessment looks only at the overland flow of irregular migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras through Mexico to the United States. This flow is the focus because:

- Although people from the region also migrate irregularly to other parts of the world, such as Western Europe, they do so in much smaller numbers than to the United States.⁴⁶
- Although people from the Caribbean and the southern countries of Central America migrate irregularly to United States, they do so in much smaller numbers than

⁴⁶ According to Census figures, there were over three million people born in Central America living in the United States in 2010. The equivalent figure for Spain, the primary destination of Central American immigrants to Europe, was just over 100,000.

those from the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.⁴⁷

What is the nature of this market?

The United States is host to more migrants than any other nation in the world. These migrants represent a vital part of the labour force, key to United States economic dynamism. According to the 2010 United States Census, more than three million people who were born in Central America are living in the United States, nearly equal to the entire population of Panama. The Census may not include many irregular migrants. The Pew Hispanic Trust estimates that there were 1.3 million irregular immigrants from Central America living in the United States in 2009.⁴⁸ Based on border detection figures, almost all of these Central Americans came from the so-called Northern Triangle of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Of those migrants who entered the country irregularly, surveys show that most were smuggled into the country. Mexicans represent the single largest national group in this

irregular migrant labour force, representing 87% of those apprehended at the border in 2010. Migrants from the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) come second, representing 75% of the “other than Mexican” migrants apprehended at the border. Most of these migrants are young men traveling in search of work,⁴⁹ and so their intent may be to return home with their earnings.

The number of these Northern Triangle migrants appears to have declined dramatically in recent years, as has the number of irregular migrants generally. The number of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans apprehended by the Mexican authorities dropped off after 2005, and the number of apprehensions of Central American migrants on the United States border in Fiscal Year 2011 was the lowest in 40 years. This is due in part to the recession of 2009, which has similarly affected migrant flows to Europe. But the decline predated the recession and was sharpest between 2006 and 2007. This suggests that the reduction is at least partly ascribable to growing apprehension of the dangers posed by the journey north. These dangers have been augmented by the increasing involvement of territorial and

Central America as a global pathway to the United States

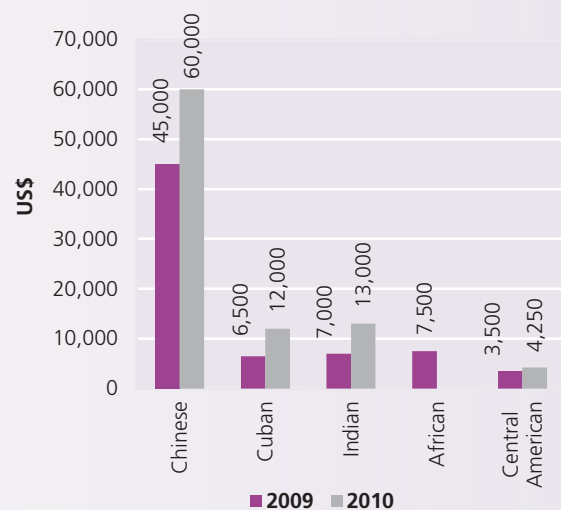
Central Americans are not the only ones being smuggled through Mexico to the United States. Irregular migrants from the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia), as well as South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, and India), China and other African and Asian States are also being smuggled through Central America.

Migrants from the Horn of Africa are transported using land routes to South Africa, and then air transport to Brazil and Colombia. Those who can afford onward air travel fly to Mexico, while others proceed by land and sea to Costa Rica or Panama. From that point, their journey looks very much like that of the Central Americans. Until recently, Indian nationals did not require a visa to enter Guatemala, and from there joined the rest moving northward.¹ Chinese nationals may reach their North American destinations via Central America and Mexico with forged passports from Japan or Hong Kong, China, which allow entry without a visa.² According to the authorities of Panama, smuggling of Cuban migrants has increased threefold in the first months of 2012.

1 FLACSO-UNODC, *El Tráfico de migrantes en Centroamérica y México* (Mexico, 2011).

2 Ibid.

Figure 37: Cost of being smuggled to the United States via Central America, 2009-2010



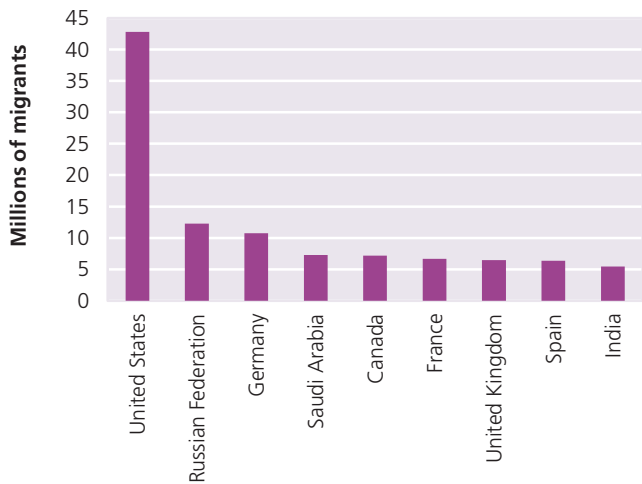
Source: FLACSO-UNODC

47 Large numbers of people from the Caribbean live also live in the United States, but these communities are well-established and more likely to be naturalized than those from Central America. United States authorities detected around 46,000 irregular migrants from the Northern Triangle at United States borders in 2010, compared to 1,300 from the Dominican Republic and 700 from Cuba, the Caribbean countries with the highest numbers. Similarly, only 900 were detected from Nicaragua, with very few from Costa Rica or Panama. See Sapp, L. *Apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol: 2005–2010*. Department of Homeland Security Factsheet, 2011.

48 Passel, J. and D. Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010.

49 According to research conducted by FLACSO and UNODC, there has been a slight decrease - from 98.8% in 2008 to 96.4% in 2010 - in the percentage of migrants who state ‘labour’ as the main reason for migrating. The remaining 4% migrate for family reunification and political reasons, such as the *coup d’etat* in Honduras in 2009.

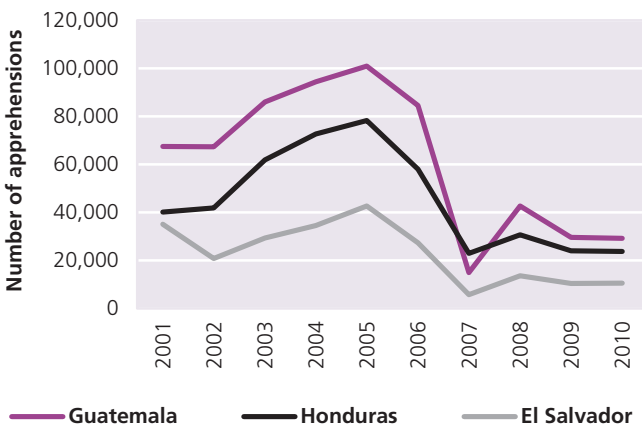
Figure 38: Countries with the highest number of resident international migrants*, 2010



Source: World Bank

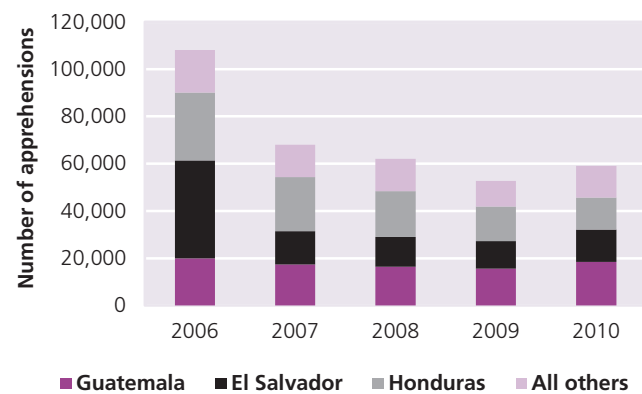
*Defined as people living in a country other than the one they were born in, regardless of citizenship status.

Figure 39: Apprehensions of irregular migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras in Mexico, 2001-2010



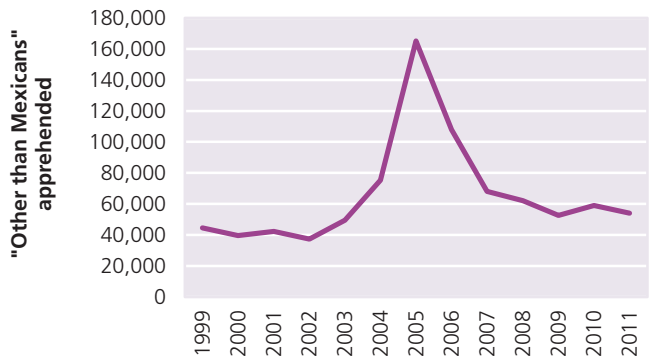
Source: Instituto Nacional de Migración, México

Figure 40: Apprehensions of irregular "other than Mexican" migrants at United States borders, 2006-2010



Source: United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Figure 41: Irregular "other than Mexican" migrants apprehended at United States borders, 1999-2011



Source: United States Border Patrol

The "Tamaulipas Massacre"

In 2010, 58 men and 14 women were shot dead just outside Tamaulipas, Mexico, allegedly by the Zetas. A survivor has claimed both that the Zetas attempted to extort money from them, and also tried to force the migrants to work for them. It has also been alleged that the Zetas believed the group was on its way to working with their rivals in the Gulf Cartel.

That same month, Mexican Federal Police captured Edgar Huerta Montiel, known as "El Wache," a high-ranking member of the Zetas who was allegedly responsible for the massacre. By August 2011, Mexican authorities had detained 81 members of the Zetas who were allegedly involved.

predatory organized crime groups in controlling the flow. The risks were most dramatically illustrated in what has come to be known as the "Tamaulipas Massacre" of 2010 (See Box), where 72 migrants were murdered, allegedly by the Zetas.

How is the smuggling conducted?

As is true in migrant flows around the world, there is no single road from source to destination. Irregular migrants employ a range of strategies, with some paying piecemeal, hazarding part of the trip on their own, and others buying a comprehensive package. According to Mexican experts on the topic, the premium package being offered today includes up to seven attempts to cross the border; in the past, three attempts were standard. Those who opt on with a single smuggling network pay large sums to be smuggled across two borders and to ensure that they will not be victimized during the 3,000-kilometer journey across the length of Mexico.

Getting to the Guatemalan border is relatively easy, as citizens from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are

able to travel freely between these countries.⁵⁰ The first hurdle is the crossing into Mexico, but there are many options for surmounting this obstacle. According to estimates by Mexican authorities, there are more than 350 unofficial crossing points between Mexico and Guatemala.⁵¹

Some of these unofficial crossings are marked with gates and chains operated by local peasants, who collect a “toll” from travellers. Other points include river crossings, using raft ferries or zip lines. Along the Usumacinta River, which forms a portion of the border between Guatemala and the Mexican state of Chiapas, a zip line crossing is available for just over US\$1. Zip line crossings can also be found on the Suchiate River, which also serves as a border between the two countries.

Once in Mexico, many irregular migrants traveling without smugglers choose rail travel, while smuggled irregular migrants are more likely to be moved in trucks, buses, and vans. Those crossing the Suchiate River must hike along the train tracks to Arriaga, a 320 kilometer trek that can take up to nine days, to board the train and head north.⁵² The Chiapas-Mayab Railroad, connecting Merida, Campeche and Coatzacoalcos along the Gulf coast of Mexico with Ixtepec, Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo, is another option, although it is said this route is controlled by *maras*.⁵³

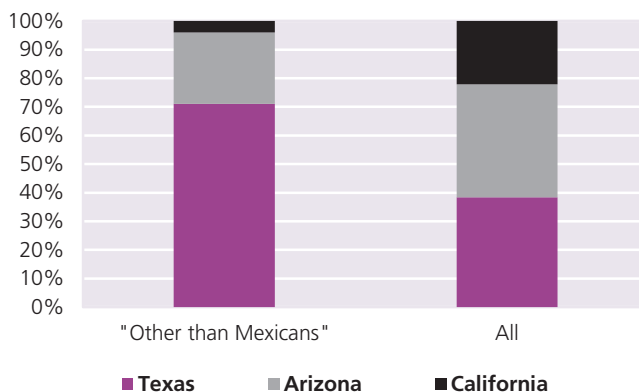
Cargo trailers seem to be the most common method of transporting large volumes of irregular migrants, and they are employed right from the border. Trailers with large volumes of people have been apprehended near the border in Chiapas in January (219 people), March (513 people), and May (210 people) of 2012. The hot and uncomfortable ride allows irregular migrants to traverse the country undetected.

While Mexican nationals are smuggled along the full length of the Mexican border, smuggling of irregular migrants from the Northern Triangle has been concentrated along the Caribbean coast toward crossing points along the Texas border. The primary reason for this appears to be a policy of releasing Central American irregular migrants on their own recognizance when shelter space is overwhelmed, as it frequently is in this area.

Unlike Mexicans, who can quickly be shuttled back to their home country, there are no automatic repatriation agree-

ments between the United States and the Northern Triangle countries. Thus, when irregular migrants are apprehended, they are detained until the country of origin accepts repatriation and sufficient numbers are consolidated to justify a chartered flight. This means that irregular migrants are held

Figure 42: Breakdown of the states where “other than Mexicans” were apprehended versus that of all irregular migrants in 2011



Source: United States Border Patrol

Migrant smuggling from the Caribbean to the United States

Migrants are smuggled from the Caribbean to the United States, but they are smuggled in much smaller numbers than from Central America. The United States border patrol made just over 8,000 coastal apprehensions in 2010, just slightly more than were made at the border with Canada and less than 2% of those made at the southwest land border.¹ In recent years, only two countries in the Caribbean have contributed significant numbers of detected irregular migrants: the Dominican Republic and Cuba. The Dominican Republic is the country that contributes the most, with around 1300 irregular migrants detected in the country in 2010, while Cuba presented 712.

The Dominican Republic is a popular point of departure for migrants from a number of countries, due to its proximity to Puerto Rico (about 40 nautical miles). Because Dominican citizens are almost immediately repatriated on detection, smugglers make use of motorized rowboats called “*yolas*” to make the short journey at night. Cubans, in contrast, are given a special status under United States immigration law, assuming they manage to make it to United States soil. As a result, their voyage to the United States is conducted with stealth and speed, but almost all Cuban entrants declare themselves upon arrival.²

50 The Central America-4 (CA-4) Border Control Agreement was a treaty signed in June 2006 between the Central American Nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, establishing the free movement across borders between the four signatory states of its citizens without any restrictions or checks. Foreign nationals who enter one of the signatory countries can also travel to other signatory states without having to obtain additional permits or to undergo checks at border checkpoints. The CA-4 Agreement establishes a harmonized visa regime for foreign nationals travelling to the area.

51 Procuraduría General de la República-CENAPI

52 Heather Stone, *Immigrants Grapple With Man and ‘The Beast’*, (Nieman Foundation, 2006).

53 Ariel Gustavo Forselledo, *Maras y tráfico de Personas*, (Universitario de Estudios Superiores, Washington DC, October 2006)

1 Sapp, L. *Apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol: 2005–2010*. Department of Homeland Security Factsheet, 2011

2 Watts, R., ‘Caribbean Maritime Migration: Challenges for the New Millennium’. Proceedings of the 2008 Center for Homeland Defense and Security Annual Conference. *Homeland Security Affairs*, 2008.

for several days pending transfer, and bed space is limited, particularly at the Rio Grande Valley (formerly McAllen) and Del Rio border stations. When berths are filled, the balance of apprehended Central American irregular migrants are released on their own recognizance, effectively immigrating.

Who are the smugglers?

As with drug trafficking, migrant smuggling involves *transportista*-type groups, territorial groups, predatory groups, and street gangs.

The *transportistas* are known by a variety of names: *coyotes*, *pateros*, or *polleros*. The full-time professional *transportista* groups are usually very small: often an extended family or group of friends from the same town or region. These people have experience with the journey north and may have been irregular migrants themselves at one time. They coordinate the trip using contacts along the route and usually accompany the irregular migrants. If apprehended, they blend with the other irregular migrants and are unlikely to be denounced. Their relationship with the irregular migrants is based on trust, and this trust runs both ways.⁵⁴

In addition to these professional *coyotes*, many people involved in smuggling irregular migrants are simply opportunists. Migrant flows shift, and with them come the prospects for profits in communities all along the flow. Bus drivers, taxi drivers, truck drivers, hotel operators – all can do well by tailoring their services to a community willing to pay more than the market rate for a little discretion. They may see themselves as providing a needed service to their clients, and making a sizeable profit for skirting the law.

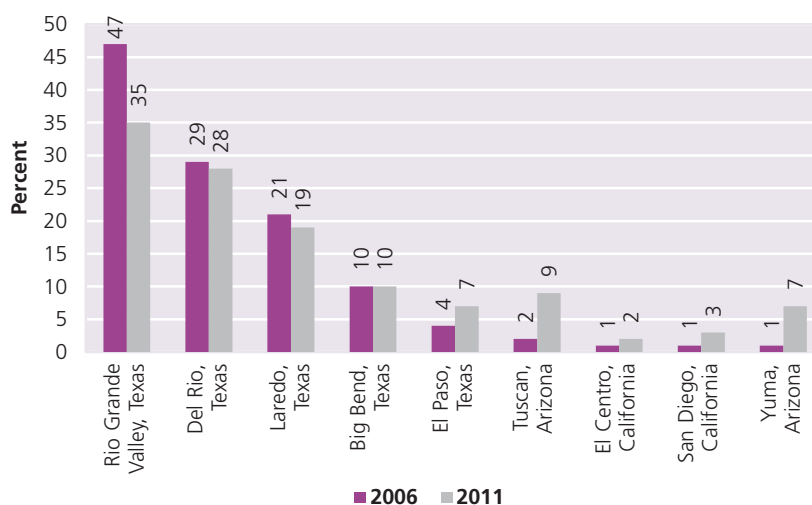
The law, however, is not the biggest concern of the irregular migrants. Their greatest concern is those who operate outside the law. Migrant smuggling involves the interests of territorial organized crime groups situated along border crossing areas. These groups can tax the income of professional smugglers, charge them protection fees, or simply assume control of the whole operation themselves. Through their connections to corrupt officials, territorial groups can guarantee passage free from legal hassles. They can also victimize with impunity.

Groups of irregular migrants are subject to robbery, kidnapping, and exploitation. Because irregular migrants frequently carry their life savings in cash, they are prime targets for robbery. Women may be raped or sexually exploited. Some are kidnapped for ransom, and kidnappings are conducted by groups known to be involved in cocaine trafficking. Well publicized massacres and many unexplained disappearances assure that irregular migrants do all they can to meet ransom demands if detained. All these threats keep the smugglers in business. For a single consolidated payment, irregular migrants can reduce uncertainty.⁵⁵

Where true territorial groups are absent, irregular migrants may encounter street gangs. Mara Salvatrucha is active along parts of the southern border of Mexico, and is said to control the Maya-Chiapas route. As with other territorial groups, they sell “protection,” essentially from themselves, to irregular migrants and *coyotes* operating in this area. The *maras* have publically warned that any attempts to interfere with their operations will result in violence.

The *maras* are a worry, but the group most feared by irregular migrants is the Zetas. In Northern Mexico, the gravitation of irregular migrants to the relatively weak

Figure 43: Share of all apprehended irregular migrants who were “other than Mexican” in FY2006 and 2011 by border crossing area



Source: United States Border Patrol

⁵⁴ López Castro, G., *Binational Study: Migration Between Mexico And The US, Factors that Influence Migration Coyotes and Alien Smuggling* (United States Commission on Immigration Reform, 1997). Available at: <http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/uscir/binational.html>

⁵⁵ Comisión de Jefes (as), y Directores (as) de Policía de Centro América, México y el Caribe. Anuario Estadístico Regional, 2010.

control posts on the Texas border also drew them into the territory of the Gulf Cartel, which would become the territory of the Zetas. While Texas is still the crossing point of choice, irregular migrants from the Northern Triangle have begun to shift towards Arizona and away from the Rio Grande Valley, which covers some of the areas where the Zetas are most prominent. This may be a reaction to the threat of violence.

How big is the flow?

In the past, most “other than Mexican” irregular migrants have known that they would be released if they were apprehended. Being detected assures transport from the crossing area to a major urban center, from which they can move further north once released on their own recognizance. As a result, they did not attempt to escape detection, and so the number of irregular migrants detected was close to the total number making the crossing. This “catch and release” policy was, in principal, suspended during the Bush Administration, but was necessarily continued in many areas as border stations expanded their capacity to accommodate more irregular migrants. Many migrants may not be aware of this change. As a result, the number of irregular migrants detected is probably close to the number of irregular migrants making the crossing. About 46,000 crossings by irregular migrants from the Northern Triangle were detected in 2010.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that in 2008 some 300,000 irregular immigrants entered the United States,⁵⁶ and, based on earlier research, about 55% of these people would have entered clandestinely.⁵⁷ It also estimates that, in 2009, about 12% of the irregular immigrants in the United States were from Central America.⁵⁸ If the flow is proportional to the population, this would suggest only about 20,000 irregular migrants from Central America around that time. Based on apprehensions, the flow has reduced since then.

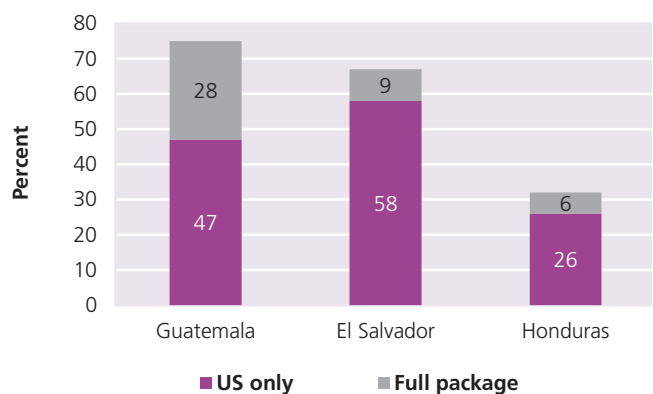
Looking at it another way, Pew also estimated there are 1.3 million irregular Central Americans living in the United States in 2009.⁵⁹ If, as indicated by the border detection figures, almost all of these irregular migrants were from the Northern Triangle, the inflow represents just 3% of the total Central American irregular migrant population resident at that time. But Pew also estimates that just 47% of the population arrived in 2000 or later, which suggests

around 600,000 Central Americans arrived in nine years time, or about 70,000 people per year on average. With strongly declining flows, these estimates are in keeping with a flow of 20,000 to 46,000 in 2010.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement Authorities report deporting just under 74,000 people from the Northern Triangle in 2010. The migrant status of these people varied – even legal permanent residents can be deported if they commit certain criminal offences - and 38% of these deportees were criminally deported. The size of the irregular migrant population seems to be declining, so again, a partial replacement of these deportees suggests a flow of 20,000 to 46,000 irregular migrants is on the right order.

Not all these irregular migrants paid to be smuggled. Surveys among returnees show the share of irregular migrants who paid to be smuggled at various stages of the journey varies greatly by national origin.

Figure 44: Share of irregular migrants apprehended in the United States who paid to be smuggled all the way to the United States versus those who paid just to cross the border to the United States in 2010



Source: La Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México

Surveys have also revealed the prices paid by irregular migrants to be smuggled from their home countries to the United States, as well as the prices paid by those who only wished to be smuggled across the United States border. The prices are actually very close to one another – as surveys with Mexican irregular migrants attest, the crossing into the United States is by far the most expensive. Oddly, Salvadorans who pay just to be smuggled into the United States at the border pay more than those who contact with the smugglers for the whole trip in Central America.

By estimating the number of irregular migrants as the number detected by United States authorities (about 46,000 irregular migrants in 2010), and taking into account the share smuggled and the amount paid by each nationality for each service, a total annual flow value can be estimated at about US\$85 million, which represents the gross annual income for smugglers plying this trade. Due to the decline in migration flow, these revenues are down substantially from five years ago.

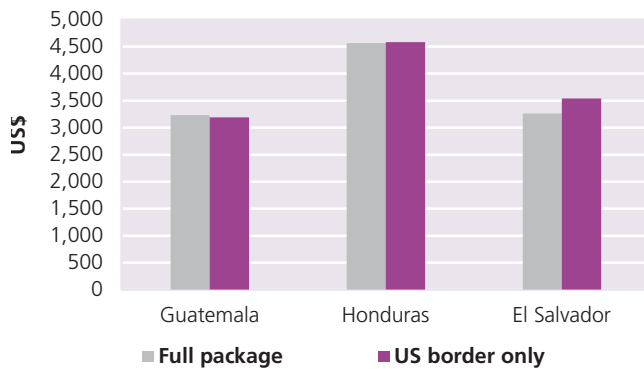
56 Passel, J. and D. Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010.

57 Pew Hispanic Center, 'Modes of Entry for the Unauthorized Migrant Population'. *Fact Sheet*, May 22, 2006, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/19.pdf>

58 Passel, J. and D. Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010. The United States Department of Homeland Security places this estimate slightly higher, at 1.56 million in 2011. http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf

59 Ibid.

Figure 45: Prices paid by irregular migrants for smuggling from Central America and across the United States border in 2010



Source: La Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México

Implications for responses

Migrant smuggling is an occupation with low barriers to entry. Many of the participants are professional transportation and hospitality agents, so little adaptation is necessary to specialize in assisting this particular group of clients. Flows shift over time, so those involved today may not be involved tomorrow. It is unclear where opportunities for smuggling will next emerge. As a result, any attempt at deterrence must be broad and sustained.

Given the extreme flexibility of this market, it is unlikely that law enforcement alone can stop the smuggling of migrants. As indicated by the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), interventions should rather be based in the realm of migration policy reform, allowing the labour demand to be met within the bounds of the law. The politics of migration management have been debated for decades, but if progress is to be made in stemming the abuse of people willing to risk their lives and liberty for a job, change will have to come at the policy level.



Trafficking of women and girls within Central America

With tens of thousands of people migrating irregularly, it is not surprising that some of this migration leads to exploitation.⁶⁰ As soon as migrants leave home soil with the intent of moving undetected, they enter into a shadowy world. They place their lives in the hands of strangers who flout the law, and many pay dearly for this decision. Women are particularly vulnerable: female irregular migrants comprise around 20% of the migrant pool.

Most of the Central American trafficking victims detected in Central America have been trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, but it is unclear whether this is representative of the larger victim pool. Local laws may specifically prohibit sexual exploitation but remain vague about other forms of labour. It may be that investigators prioritize the search for sexually exploited victims, or that they are simply more visible. To sell sexual services, traffickers need some sort of public face, whether it is location in a red light district or some kind of advertising. Clients, concerned by what they see, may feel compelled to report abuses to the authorities. Proprietors of sweatshops or labour camps, on the other hand, can perform their operations in isolation, and are thus more likely to avoid exposure.

Labour trafficking does occur, but these cases represent less than 10% of the victims detected in the region, so little is known about these markets. Trafficking of Central American men and women into agricultural labour in Mexico is more common, but sex trafficking near the border is also widespread. And while sexual exploitation of males does

occur, these cases are relatively small in number. For these reasons, this chapter focuses on trafficking in women and girls for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

What is the nature of this market?

There appear to be at least two distinct submarkets for the trafficking of women and girls in the region. One involves waylaid irregular migrants, a problem particularly concentrated in the Mexican province of Chiapas and in Guatemala. The second is in the south, in Costa Rica and Panama, where women are trafficked from much farther afield to cater for wealthier interests. There is also domestic trafficking in most of the countries of the region, but relatively little is known about this practice.

The situation along the Guatemala-Mexico border has been well documented. According to a study undertaken by CEIDA (*Centro de Estudios y de Investigación en Desarrollo y Asistencia Social*), Chiapas is the Mexican state most vulnerable to human trafficking.⁶¹ The victims are mostly irregular migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. They are exploited in bars and brothels, and their clientele is mostly local.⁶² Since there is no reason to think that demand for paid sex is higher in Chiapas than in other parts of the country, this appears to be a supply-driven market. The Mexican government has identified scores of Guatemalans who had been trafficked in recent years, although many of these were agricultural workers.

⁶⁰ Under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, a key element in the crime of “trafficking in persons” is “exploitation”, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, and the removal of organs.

⁶¹ Índice Mexicano sobre la vulnerabilidad ante la trata de personas, CEIDAS, México, 2010.

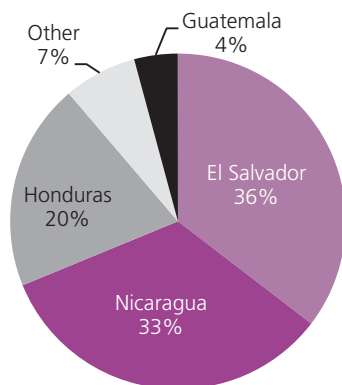
⁶² Estudio diagnóstico de la situación de violencia y vulnerabilidad de las mujeres migrantes en Chiapas, Instituto Estatal de las Mujeres de Chiapas, México, 2008.

The Guatemalan situation is very similar to that in Chiapas, and appears to be comprised of irregular migrant women and girls who somehow fell through the cracks. Even more so than in Mexico, however, the emphasis seems to be on young girls. At least 15,000 children are the victims of child sex trafficking networks in Guatemala, according to estimates from the NGO Casa Alianza.⁶³ In Guatemala City alone, Casa Alianza identified more than 2,000 children sexually exploited in bars and massage parlours, most coming from neighbouring Central American countries. A network of NGOs working for children's rights, ECPAT, reported that children in Guatemala aged between eight and fourteen were sold for between US\$100 and US\$200, primarily for sexual exploitation.⁶⁴

Unlike most other countries and in stark contrast to the situation in Chiapas, only a small minority (4%) of the human trafficking victims detected in Guatemala are Guatemalan. Most (89%) are from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, strongly suggesting a link to northward migration. Nicaraguans show up more often among the trafficking victims in Guatemala than among the irregular migrants detected in the United States. But more Nicaraguans are deported from Guatemala than from any other country, suggesting that many Nicaraguans may be destined for intermediate countries rather than the United States. As all these countries are in the C-4 visa area (in which citizens of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua can travel freely between these four countries), promises of jobs in Guatemala may be used to lure Nicaraguan victims.

The situation in El Salvador is very different. El Salvador detects more human trafficking victims than any other country in the region, and between 2005 and 2010, 79% of these victims were from El Salvador. Based on data from victim shelters, less than three-quarters (73%) of the vic-

Figure 46: Breakdown of national origin of trafficking victims detected in Guatemala, 2005-2010

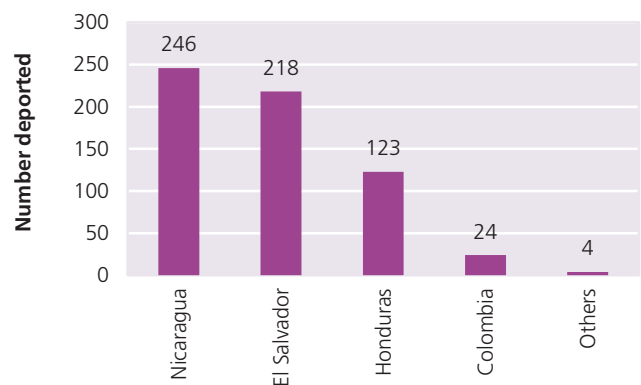


Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala

63 See: <http://www.casa-alianzamexico.org/quienes.html>

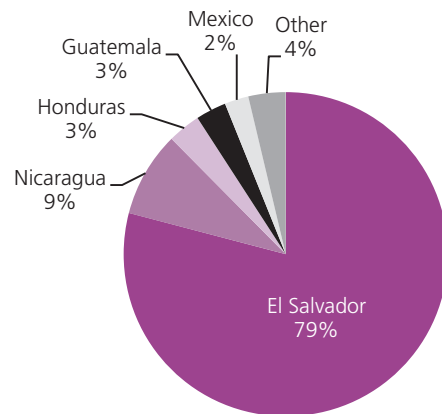
64 ECPAT International is a global network of organisations and individuals working together for the elimination of child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

Figure 47: National origin of deportees from Guatemala 2009-2010



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala

Figure 48: Breakdown of national origin of trafficking victims detected in El Salvador, 2005-2010



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, El Salvador

Asian labour trafficking detected in Costa Rica

The trafficking of men and boys into forced labour on fishing boats is a major issue in Southeast Asia, and the problem is beginning to be detected outside Asia. Trafficked fishermen may be forced to work long hours with little or no pay, and simply tossed overboard when they are of no further use. In 2010, 36 Asians (including 15 Vietnamese, 13 Indonesians, five Filipinos, two Taiwanese, and one Chinese citizen) were rescued from fishing boats off Puntarenas. The Taiwanese owners and captains of the two fishing boats were arrested on charges of human trafficking. The victims were forced to work up to 20 hours a day, never receiving the promised wages of US\$250/month.¹ This is not the first time exploited Vietnamese fishermen were detected: in 2009, nine were found. Chinese victims have also been detected inland, indentured in laundries and other Chinese-run businesses.

1 Zuera, D. 'Costa Rica : (In)human trafficking'. *Interpress Service*, 15 April 2010

tims are sexually exploited, indicating that other forms of trafficking exist. Similarly, in Nicaragua in recent years, over 80% of the victims have been Nicaraguan. Trafficking in these countries is four-fifths domestic.

Further south, the situation changes again. In Panama, women from Colombia and Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, and the Russian Federation) comprised the bulk of the victims detected in 2011, though these high profile cases are not necessarily representative of the overall victim pool. This is reflective of a wealthy local clientele (able to pay for the luxury of imported women) and a strong tourist trade.

How is the trafficking conducted?

The markets in Guatemala and Mexico seem to be a direct by-product of migrant smuggling. Women and girls headed north find themselves compromised and exploited. Some wind up in exploitative labour – recent studies suggest that labour trafficking may have recently eclipsed sexual exploitation in Mexico.⁶⁵ Some are trafficked into begging, especially indigenous girls. Others are subjected to sexual exploitation.

For exploitation in Chiapas, most of the victims are recruited close to the border, in towns like Malacatán, Tecún Umán, and El Carmen. They may be approached by unknown people (referred to as “enganchadores” or “reclutadores,” “padrotes”, or “caifanes”), often in a public place, such as parks. Victims have been identified in over a dozen cities in Chiapas, but Tuxtla Gutiérrez and Tapachula seem to be particularly prominent.⁶⁶

In some cases, the victims may be kidnapped, or forced into prostitution by people who were their smugglers. In others, they may be robbed or have simply run out of money. With no other means of support, they may be lured into the sex trade. Some may have dependents to support back home, and when they learn that they have no other means of sending remittances, find themselves involved in sex work, an activity they would never contemplate in their own countries. Traffickers know where migrant women congregate, and use their experience to spot potential victims.

Once involved, many women find it difficult to get out. Brothel owners may threaten them with violence or exposure if they perceive that a worker is about to leave. Particularly if the trafficker was originally employed as a smuggler, they may have knowledge of the victim’s hometown and relations.

The Dominican Republic – the only global source of victims in the region

For reasons that require more research, the Dominican Republic is the only country in the region that consistently supplies victims to countries considerably farther away. Dominican women have been trafficked for sexual exploitation to Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and the United States, as well as regions farther afield, including Europe, South America, and the Middle East.

Map 10: Trafficking flows of women and girls in Central America, 2011



Source: UNODC

65 Le Goff, H., and T. Weiss, *La trata de personas en México: Diagnostico sobre la asistencia a victimas*. International Organization on Migration, June 2011.

66 Ibid.

In short, trafficking in Chiapas and Guatemala appears to be opportunistic. The large flow of irregular migrants practically guarantees that some women and girls will get left behind, stranded in a foreign land without resources or options. Traffickers can make money by exploiting this vulnerability. So long as brothels operate openly in these areas, and no other alternatives are forthcoming for these women and girls, the exploitation will continue.

There have been accounts of women being lured by fictitious employment opportunities, but traffickers in this area do not need to be so clever. Their victims will continue to cross borders, at their own expense, in search of non-fictitious employment opportunities further north. All traffickers need to do is be alert, wait for a few to stumble, befriend them, and take advantage of their disorientation.

To remain competitive in such a saturated market, traffickers need to operate fairly openly. Brothels and bars in red light districts are likely to receive more business than more underground establishments. In Guatemala, while offering sexual services is legal, procuring these services is not. Nonetheless, there are many well-known services and establishments that advertise and operate without pretense to legitimacy.

The number of detected trafficking victims in Guatemala has declined remarkably in recent years. In addition, Guatemalan women and girls comprise a growing share of the victim pool. Fewer Salvadorans and Hondurans are found. This may be due, in part, to declining migrant flows. It may also be attributable to growing migrant awareness of the risks of being trafficked. Among the Guatemalan women and girls trafficked, mestizo victims are more likely to be sexually exploited, while indigenous victims are more likely to be trafficked into begging or domestic servitude.⁶⁷

In Costa Rica and Panama, trafficking follows a more traditional model. Women are imported from Eastern Europe and South America to serve high-end local demand, the sizable expatriate community, and sex tourists, particularly from the United States. Some of these women are deprived of their liberty and otherwise exploited.

For example, in March 2011, after obtaining registration to operate as an entertainment company, a nightclub called The Diamond requested approval of a visa for 10 women of foreign nationality who were recruited as “entertainers”. Suspicions that this was an illegal operation arose as eight of the ten women tried to escape from the establishment. The supposed artists had remained locked in an apartment and worked six days a week, receiving a basic monthly salary of US\$350. To make the trip to Panama, visas were processed from the Consulate of Panama in Russia. The approval of visas was authorized by the then Deputy

Director of Migration, who was fired the same day the story hit the press.⁶⁸

The Panamanian “*alternadora*” visa was specifically designed for females working in the adult entertainment industry, but was eliminated in 2009. Many women still travel to these countries with the intention of engaging in sex work, but cases like The Diamond show that some fall prey to exploitation. Unfortunately, these high-profile cases may mask domestic trafficking, including trafficking of children, that occurs in more remote locations, including the Darien strip.

Who are the traffickers?

For victimization in Chiapas, the *enganchadores* or *reclutadores* may be Guatemalan or Mexican, but the former appear to be more common. In one study, 62% of the traffickers were women, and 50% were Guatemalan.⁶⁹ Some of these Guatemalan traffickers may also traffic women in Guatemala as well.

Polleros (migrant smugglers) are particularly well placed to route women into exploitation. A number of factors could influence whether the *pollero* performs the service for which they were employed or betrays their clients. Decline in migrant flows could conceivably compel *polleros* to turn to trafficking to keep up their income. They may also be compelled to provide victims to border area territorial groups as a condition of their continued operation.

Bar and brothel owners in Chiapas and Guatemala are surely complicit in the trade. Since most of the women transport themselves across the border, there is really no need for dedicated procurers, although scouts may be used to befriend potential victims and steer them toward the exploitation site.

Alongside these systemic actors, professional human traffickers may operate as well, of course. One example is the 2011 “Torres Cuello” case in El Salvador. One man and two women were convicted of luring girls aged 14 to 16 years from the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua to El Salvador, where their sexual services were advertised on the Internet for prices ranging from US\$60 to US\$150. There was evidence this network operated in other countries as well.

Because the exploitation in Mexico is especially concentrated along the border area, it is not surprising that territorial organized crime groups have become involved. The Zetas in particular have been implicated. These links came to light in the case of Jesús Ovidio Guardado, a Salvadoran *pollero* who sold victims to the Zetas. Aside from sexual exploitation, the Zetas may drive victims into drug trafficking, or hold them for ransom. When the Honduran

⁶⁷ Interview with ECPAT Guatemala, 30 April 2012.

⁶⁸ Interview with Raúl Olmos, former magistrate of the Republic of Panama.

⁶⁹ Le Goff, H., and T. Weiss, *La trata de personas en México: Diagnóstico sobre la asistencia a víctimas*. International Organization on Migration, June 2011.

consul in Chiapas spoke out about Zetas involvement in trafficking, she received death threats, and was later removed from her office by the Foreign Ministry for her own protection.

In Costa Rica and Panama, it appears that many of the high-end clubs are owned by United States citizens, although there are many locally-owned establishments as well.

How big is the flow?

The number of trafficked sex workers in any country is a matter of speculation, and estimates are usually based on the number of victims detected. The rate most often used internationally is that one in 30 women trafficked into sex work will be detected annually. In Chiapas in 2010, there were 79 cases of trafficking in persons,⁷⁰ and there are indications that just over a quarter of the victims are from Central America.⁷¹ This would suggest around 20 detected victims, which, with a one in 30 detection rate, would be 600 victims. Recent studies suggest, however, then only a minority of these would be trafficked into sexual exploitation, or about 200 victims.⁷²

In Guatemala, 53 victims were detected in 2010, implying around 1,600 victims. This is quite a bit less than the numbers cited by groups like Casa Alianza (15,000 child victims in Guatemala City alone), but the Casa Alianza estimate may refer to all underage sex workers. In Panama, 33 victims were detected in 2011, implying just under 1,000 victims. In Costa Rica in 2010, the figures were atypical due to the detection of trafficked fishermen. Removing these cases leaves 13 victims, suggesting around 400 victims overall. In sum, the market in Chiapas/Guatemala and Costa Rica/Panama would tally at about 3,000 victims. Most studies suggest a turnover of about two years, which would imply an influx of around 1500 victims per year.

In terms of the income generated by these victims, prices per work hour very widely depending on the venue and the service. A study that focused on high-end night clubs and massage parlours in San Jose, Costa Rica found that while sex in a night club could cost as much as US\$100 to US\$300, the average price for sex in a massage parlour was US\$15 per hour. In low-end clubs, the price cited was US\$9 per hour. The study also emphasized that women in nightclubs provide a number of other services to clients for lesser fees.⁷³

In terms of client loads, one study of 94 sex workers in the region found that in a seven-day period, they provided 1,343 sexual services, or an average of 14 per sex worker per week.⁷⁴ If all the trafficked sex workers were equally exploited, they would provide a total of almost 2.5 million illegal sexual services per year. Using the high-end massage parlour rate of US\$15 per hour for each of these services, this would amount to a market size of about US\$36.5 million per year.

Implications for responses

The situation in Guatemala and Chiapas is symptomatic of the larger migration problem. If exploitable women were not present in such abundance, the bloated market would soon return to more standard proportions. Any intervention that would reduce the number of displaced women, or assure that they have alternatives to sex work if they find themselves at loose ends, would reduce the opportunities for traffickers.

The situation in the south is more straightforward. A large and open sex industry provides cover for exploitative practices. Measures must be taken to increase industry vigilance.

70 Procuraduría General del Estado de Chiapas:
<http://www.pgje.chiapas.gob.mx/numerospgje/Default.aspx>

71 <http://www.provincia.com.mx/2012/04/detalla-chiapas-a-la-onu-resultados-del-combate-a-trata-de-personas/>

72 IOM found that a majority of the victims detected in Chiapas were trafficked for agricultural labour. See IOM 2011 op cit.

73 Mong-Najera, J. and K. Vega Corrales, 'The price of sexual services in nightclubs and massage parlours of San Jose, Costa Rica: biological and anthropological interpretations'. Laboratorio de Ecología Urbana, Vicerrectoría de Investigación, Universidad Estatal a Distancia. August 2011.

74 Mack, N., T. Grey, A. Amsterdam, C. Interiano Matta, and N. Williamson, 'Central American sex workers' introduction of the female condom to different types of sexual partners'. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, Vol 22, No 5, 2010, pp 466–481.



Firearms within Central America

If Central America's biggest problem is violence, and 77% of all murders in the region are committed with a firearm, then stopping the flow of weapons to criminals should be a top priority. The threat of firearm violence is also undermining governance in the region. Local police are apprehensive that they are out-gunned, that organized criminals have access to military arms left over from the civil wars, and there have been some dramatic acts of violence to back this apprehension up. This alleged imbalance of power is used to justify use of the military in policing. For these reasons, it is important to understand the nature of the regional illicit firearms market.

As has been well documented elsewhere, huge numbers of firearms were imported and disseminated within Central

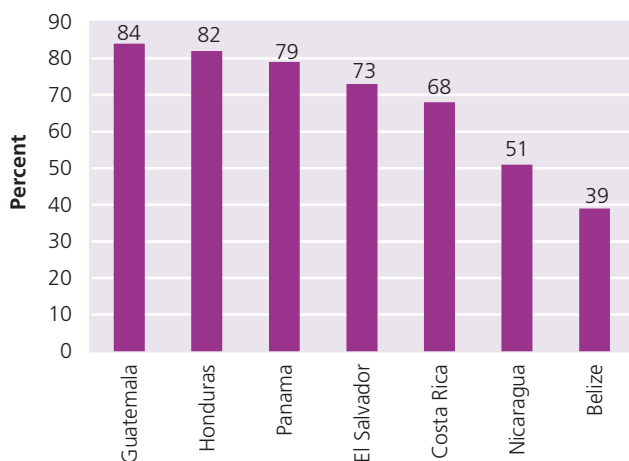
America during the three civil wars: Guatemala (1960-1996), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Nicaragua (1972-1991). Most of these were provided by Cold War allies, and were provided to both the states and rebel groups. In the latter case, smuggling also established routes for moving weapons around the region. Part of the counterinsurgency programmes of these countries, particularly in Guatemala, involved the arming of civil protection groups, so these weapons were disseminated across a broad area, and a relatively small number were ever collected.

Firearms are durable goods, and those that were imported remained in circulation when the wars ended. The modern assault rifle has not been significantly improved since the Cold War, so there is no need for updated technology. In addition to leftover caches, the militaries of the region were downsized radically under the peace accords, so surplus abounds.

There are no active insurgencies in Central America today. These firearms are mainly of interest to criminals, particularly those with military backgrounds and those who aim to control large areas of land, especially in rural areas. In general, assault rifles are not a big feature of urban crime - handguns are more concealable, easier to use in close quarters, and just as effective for almost every criminal task.

The sources of handguns are entirely different than those for assault rifles. Most handguns were purchased legally in the United States. While some are smuggled to the region, many more are licitly imported and only later diverted to illicit use. So the problem in Central America is about diverting handguns from both the licit civilian market and the armories of the local police and military.

Figure 49: Share of national homicides committed with a firearm, 2010 (or most recent year available)



Source: UNODC Homicide Database

What is the nature of this market?

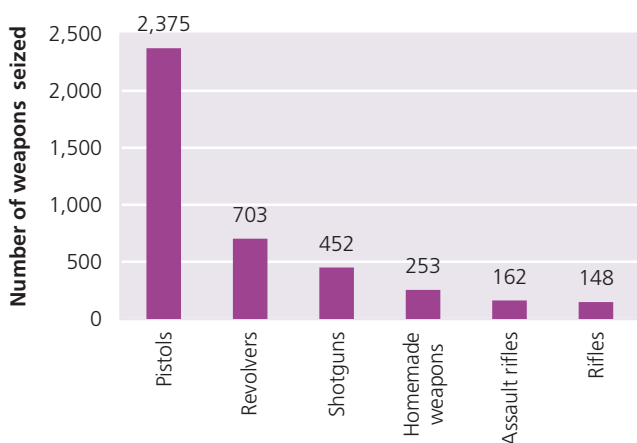
Despite the efforts of local governments and the international community, there were many weapons unaccounted for when the civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua ended. In El Salvador, it is estimated that about 360,000 military-style weapons were not handed over at the end of the war,⁷⁵ and it is alleged that arms caches were moved to neighbouring countries. Similarly, in Guatemala, only 1,824 firearms were handed over at the end of the conflict. In Nicaragua, only 17,000 firearms were surrendered, despite that fact that some 91,000 purported combatants were demobilized.⁷⁶ Nicaragua did eventually destroy over 100,000 firearms, but many more remain in the region. Although the exact number of unaccounted assault rifles remains unknown, estimates have been in the millions.

But while there has been some high-profile use of assault rifles, they are rarely encountered by the police. Since police most often seize weapons when they are used in connection with a crime, the profile of seized weapons should parallel the illicit weapons in use. If assault rifles were used in common crime, they would likely be well represented among seizures. In fact, they comprise a small minority of the weapons seized.

For example, firearms seizures in Guatemala have been remarkably consistent in the volume and composition over the last few years. Between 2008 and 2011, between 4,000 and 5,000 firearms were seized each year, of which between 58% and 60% were pistols. Assault rifles were also seized, but these comprised less than 4% of the total, consistently fewer than the number of homemade weapons seized.

The most popular pistol caliber is 9mm (61% of the pistol seizures), the most popular street round just about everywhere. The same is true in Honduras, where 63% of the pistols seized between 2008 and 2011 were 9mm.

Figure 50: Guatemalan firearms seizures in 2011

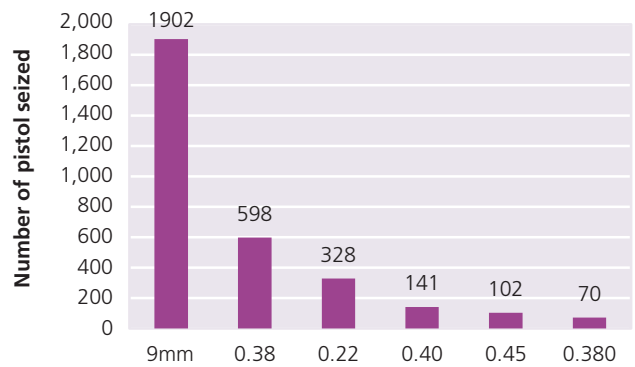


Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala

75 *Weapons Collection in Central America: El Salvador and Guatemala* (SAND Program on Security and Development, 2000).

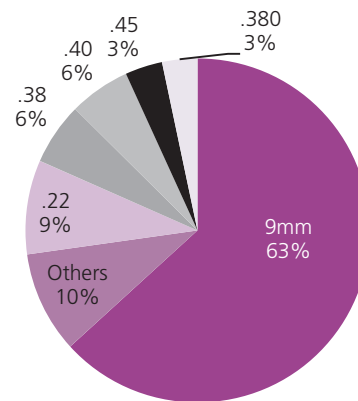
76 Source: MINUGUA, ONUSAL, ONUCA, BICC

Figure 51: Calibers of pistol seized in Guatemala in 2011



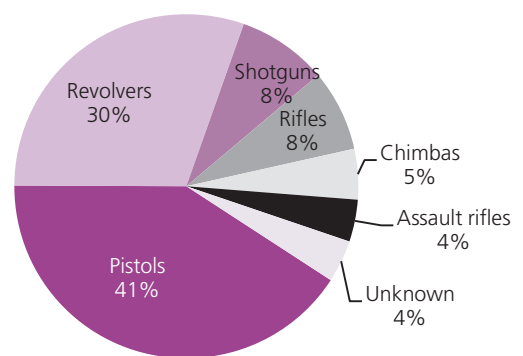
Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala
 .38 and .380 refer to similar diameter rounds that vary in length; they are not interchangeable

Figure 52: Calibers of pistol seized in Honduras, 2008-June 2011



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Honduras

Figure 53: Types of firearm seized in Honduras in the first half of 2011



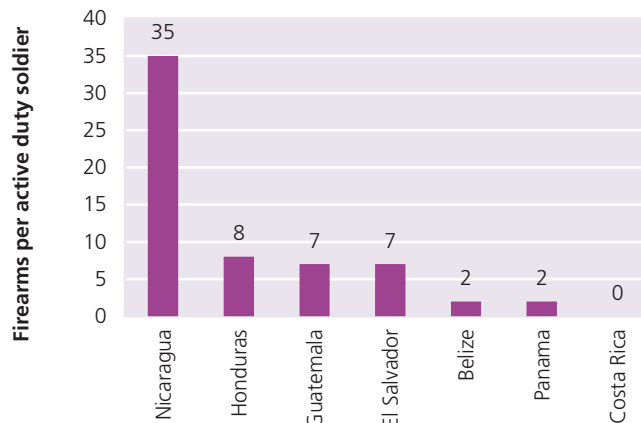
Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Honduras

Revolvers have maintained more popularity in Honduras than Guatemala, but assault rifles are equally uncommon (4% of seizures). So while the military weapons left over from the war are a concern, they are not really what the domestic firearms market is all about.

Rather, the problem is leakage. Guns leak from licit civilian use to illicit use. They leak from licit military and police use to illicit use. And they leak across borders, in every conceivable direction.

Key to leakage is surplus.⁷⁷ If every police officer and soldier had only the weapons needed for immediate use, explanations would be called for when a weapon went missing. Unfortunately, several countries in the region run rather large surpluses, the legacy of military downsizing during the peace process. Nicaragua, in particular, has a disproportionately large number of guns relative to its number of soldiers, and the country continues to import weapons.

Figure 54: Number of firearms per active duty soldier (or paramilitary member), 2010 (or most recent year available)



Source: Elaborated from IISS, *The Military Balance*, and Small Arms Survey

Over time, the leak has become larger than the source. There are an estimated 2.2 million registered firearms in Central America, of which 870,000 are registered to the security forces and 1.4 million are registered to civilians. In addition, there are an estimated 2.8 million unregistered firearms.⁷⁸ If these estimates are correct, then there are theoretically enough firearms in the hands of civilians to arm one out of every three men in the region.⁷⁹ In practice, however, many of these weapons are likely tied up in caches or private collections. And many of these weapons may be military weapons, not the 9mm pistols that are most in demand.

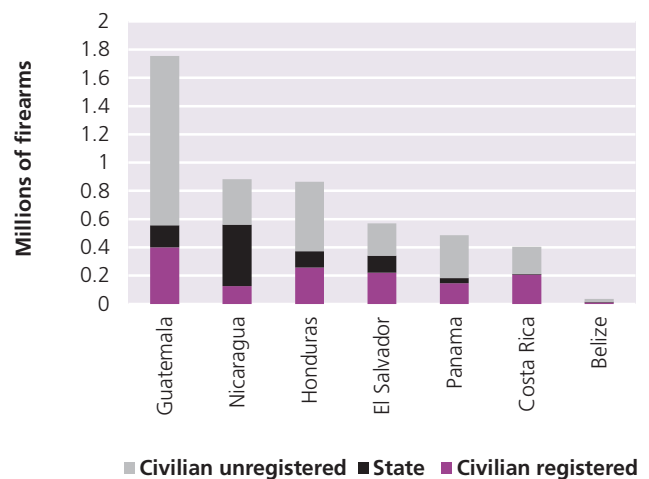
On its face, then, there is no real need to smuggle weapons into Central America. The weapons are already there. But the location of the firearms and the location of the demand are not always the same, so considerable cross border trade exists. It is not really a matter of one country with a surplus feeding another with a shortage; rather, it is a matter of borders becoming irrelevant when someone wants to buy a gun.

⁷⁷ There is some evidence that Mexican organized crime groups have acquired grenades and landmines from Central American countries, in particular El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. According to public sources, these arms were stolen from military deposits in Central America to be then sold in the black market by Mexican organized crime groups.

⁷⁸ *Latin America country data*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2012. There is broad consensus on the number of illegal weapons in Central America. The Oscar Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress in Costa Rica estimates that there are some 2.85 million illegal firearms in Central America. A recent UNODC meeting of experts in Mexico City put the figure at 3 million.

⁷⁹ There are just under 13 million men aged 15 to 64 in the seven countries of Central America.

Figure 55: Registered, state, and unregistered firearms in Central America, 2011 (or latest year available)



Source: Small Arms Survey, *Latin America country data* (Geneva, 2012)

This is problematic because firearms laws vary between countries. For example, the most popular guns in Guatemala and Honduras are 9mm pistols, which are banned for civilian use in Mexico. Weapons purchased legally in one country can be moved illegally to another for a profit. This kind of regulatory imbalance across borders creates opportunities for organized crime.

How is the trafficking conducted?

Given the overall surplus of weapons in the region, there are two sets of flows: movement of weapons within countries and across the borders within the region, and movement of weapons from Central America to other countries, particularly Colombia and Mexico. Military and police stockpiles in Honduras, El Salvador⁸⁰, and Guatemala⁸¹ have been identified as the largest sources of illegal firearms in the region.⁸² This is not surprising, given the levels of firearms violence in these countries. But two other countries are also important in this trade: Nicaragua and Panama.

Nicaragua's role in the gun trade is unexpected. The country had the most successful weapons destruction programme in the region, and its rate of homicide, and firearm homicide in particular, is low by regional standards. But not only does Nicaragua run the highest weapons surplus in the region, it has also been the destination of illicit weapons shipments.

⁸⁰ In April 2012, the Attorney General of El Salvador (Fiscalía General de la República) ordered the arrest of 8 military officials for illegal possession of weapons of war, storage and trade of illegal weapons. See: <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/256730-prision-preventiva-para-militares>

⁸¹ In December 2011, the Military Court of Guatemala started investigating cases related to the disappearance of rifles, pistols, machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades and military ammunitions from several military stockpiles.

⁸² Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), *Armas de Fuego y Municiones en Guatemala*, (Guatemala, 2009); Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES), *El Tráfico Ilícito de Armas en Guatemala* (Guatemala, 2006).

For example, in November 2011, a shipping container bound from Turkey to Nicaragua was seized in Lázaro Cardenas port on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Nine hundred firearms were hidden inside the container, including pistols and shotguns.⁸³

Panama is important because of its allowance of duty-free arms purchases. North American weapons can be bought legally in these duty-free shops, and are then sent illegally to other Central American countries. This provides a convenient regional shopping center for the 9mm pistols that criminals demand.

While these countries may supply local arms markets, the markets themselves are located throughout the region. For example, there are open sales of arms and ammunition in the border zone of San Cristóbal and Ocotepeque, on the Honduras-Guatemala border. This is also one of the most violent areas of the region.

There are apparently enough arms in Central America to allow substantial export, particularly of military arms. Colombia has traditionally been one of the main destination markets for these weapons. A study produced this year by UNODC estimates that 36% of the illegal firearms trafficked to Colombia originate in Central America, particularly from Nicaragua and Panama. One route involves Nicaraguan firearms transported by land or sea, often together with other merchandise, to Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia.⁸⁴

There has also been considerable evidence of trafficking of Central American arms to Mexico. It has been alleged that half the military grade weaponry recovered in Mexico originated in Central America.⁸⁵ Many of the hand grenades used by the Mexican drug trafficking organizations come from Guatemalan military stocks. Heavy arms recovered in Mexico have been traced to United States sales to the Honduran military. Thousands of firearms and ammunition, as well as hand grenades, have been recovered in Chiapas, right over the Guatemalan border. Hand grenades have also been recovered in large numbers in Guatemala and El Salvador. The Guatemalan Pacific coast (particularly the San Marcos province) is also believed to be an important trafficking point for firearms coming from Panama and heading to Mexico.⁸⁶

Within the region, since guns are available virtually everywhere, there is no particular pattern or technique for

Map 11: Firearm flows from Panama and Central America to Colombia



Source: UNODC, elaborated with information from UNODC Field Office in Bogotá, Colombia

moving them, any more than there is one particular pattern or technique for moving automobiles. Sellers look for buyers and buyers look for sellers, without much regard to national boundaries.

Although there is a wide range of weapons available and prices cited are generally very low, not everyone can afford to access them. Street gangsters, particularly in the poorer countries, often arm themselves with *armas hechizas*, also

Armas hechizas collected in Nicaragua



Source: Róger Olivas R., *El Nuevo Diario*, Managua (Nicaragua)

83 EFE. "Mexican authorities make record arms seizure". 28 November 2011.
 84 Stohl, R. and D. Tuttle *Small Arms Trade in Latin America*. Washington D.C., North American Congress on Latin America, 2008.
 85 Ibid.
 86 Ibid.

known as “*chimbos*” in the region. These are usually bits of pipe welded or strapped to handles with a firing pin, designed to fire a single shotgun shell, and prone to blowing up. The situation in Central America is similar to the situation in West Africa, where, despite a surplus of military weapons, the poor often rely on “craft weapons” of this sort.

Who are the traffickers?

Just as there are no clear trafficking routes when guns flow every direction, there is also no clear trafficker identity. People of all sorts can become involved in moving guns for profit on a full time or a part time basis. But there is also strong evidence of involvement by both corrupt officials and territorial organized crime groups.

The core role of the police and military in supplying guns to criminals is not unusual – in many developing regions, unpaid or underpaid police and military officers sell or rent their firearms as a way of supplementing their income. The risk is particularly acute where there are large military stocks relative to the number of active duty military. In Honduras, all firearms sales are controlled by the military. This has not, however, prevented criminals from accessing guns.

There have been repeated allegations that drugs are being traded for guns, but the two are rarely found in the same place at the same time. At one time, relations between the Colombian FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) and Nicaraguan groups were believed to be a key conduit for weapons for drugs exchanges, but there is little recent evidence of this trade. The Armed Forces of Honduras have found weapons of the same type and origin in the possession of both Zetas-linked traffickers and *mara* members. Although this was taken as evidence of collaboration, it could be nothing more than a common source of weapons.⁸⁷

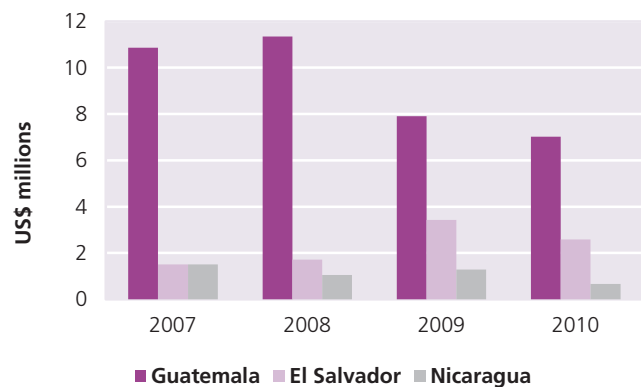
How big is the flow?

Prices for illicit firearms vary, but tend to be exceedingly low, suggesting a saturated market. Though prices vary between countries, recent research found that an AK-47 could be had for between US\$200 and US\$400.⁸⁸ Smaller arms may sell for considerably less. With 2.8 million illicit arms, this suggests the sum value of all the illegal arms in the region would not exceed US\$500 million. The annual trade is likely to be some small fraction of this.

The number of licit arms Central America continues to grow, and with it, the potential for diversion. Despite

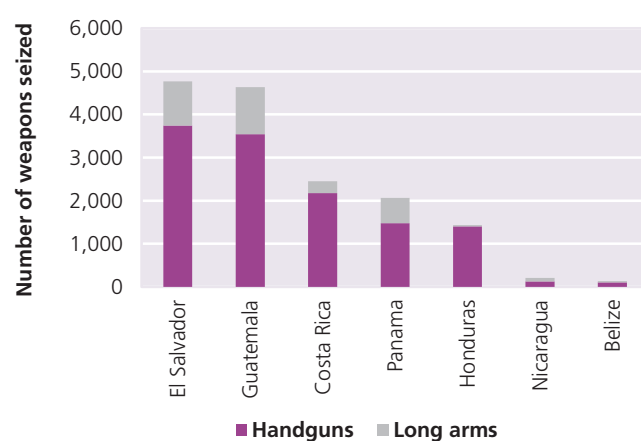
having an impressive number of arms, some countries in the region continue to import firearms. The amounts are generally small: total imports for Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in 2010 amounted to about US\$11 million. If the illicit trade tracked the licit trade proportionate to the relative sizes of licit and illicit markets, this would suggest illicit imports of around US\$4.5 million. This would be a sub-set of the total market, which is also comprised of a lot of internal trade. Based on UN COMTRADE data, most of these imports came from the United States.

Figure 56: Declared value of firearms imported in 2010



Source: Sistema de Estadísticas de Comercio de Centroamérica

Figure 57: Firearm seizures in Central America in 2010



Source: Comisión de Jefes (as), y Directores (as) de Policía de Centro América, México y el Caribe. Anuario Estadístico Regional, 2010

If everyone who wanted an illicit firearm had one, then new purchases would be necessary only to replace lost weapons. Nearly 16,000 firearms were seized in Central America in 2010, over 80% of which were handguns. This is about 1,000 more than in 2009. At an outside price of US\$200 per weapon, this would suggest an annual market value of US\$3.2 million. But it is likely that the market is, in fact, growing, as users of homemade weapons seek to upgrade to formal firearms.

The regional police chiefs' commission estimates that firearms trafficking is worth between US\$24 million and US\$25 million, but this estimate includes Mexico and the

87 “Central America: Mexican cartel “Los Zetas” use “Mara Salvatrucha” gangsters as soldiers in drug war”. The Americas Post. See: <http://www.theamericaspostes.com/3172/central-america-mexican-cartel-los-zetas-use-mara-salvatrucha-gangsters-as-soldiers-in-drug-war/>

88 This is the same price cited in Colombia. Small Arms Survey, ‘What price the Kalashnikov? The economics of small arms.’ *Small Arms Survey 2007*. Geneva: SAS, 2007, chapter 8.

Dominican Republic.⁸⁹ If seizures were proportionate to market share, then this estimate can be scaled down to about US\$14 million for Central America. Based on the discussion above, this seems a reasonable estimate for the region. At US\$200 per firearm, this would represent some 70,000 arms annually.

Implications for responses

As stated by the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, an important step would be to have a proper accounting of all the weapons in the region. Most of the data used in this chapter are estimates, including those of official state holdings. It is presently impossible to tell whether a particular illegal weapon was once part of state stocks, because some countries do not record the serial numbers of the weapons they hold. This is not uncommon in developing countries but, given the state of firearm violence in the region, this informational disarray should be addressed.

Secondly, as detailed in the Firearms Protocol, ammunition flows need to be regulated. Even if it is impossible to control all the weapons currently in circulation, each active gun requires a continual inflow of bullets. Rather than trying to clean up the legacy of the past, it might be more effective to put in place procedures whereby all ammunition is registered, imports accounted for, and purchases centrally recorded.

In time, though, further efforts need to be made to reduce the number of illegal arms in circulation. Police in region are presently seizing 16,000 guns per year. Even if no more firearms were to enter the market, it would take 188 years to remove all the guns from the streets at this rate. In Honduras, for example, there are almost four times as many firearm homicides as there are firearms seized. Further targeted operations should be conducted with the aim of disarming the most violent areas.

Finally, military holdings need to be rationalized in some countries. In the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua, there do not appear to be enough soldiers to justify the standing weapons holdings. The international community can help in disposal efforts, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) mobile arms destruction machine. This device uses mechanical grinders to destroy the produce of local weapons collection efforts on site.

⁸⁹ Comisión de Jefes (as), y Directores (as) de Policía de Centro América, México y el Caribe. Anuario Estadístico, 2010, p. 49.



Impact

Measuring the impact of any social phenomenon is difficult, and it is especially so for clandestine matters like transnational organized crime. The following discussion does not aspire to being comprehensive, but rather focuses on four areas where impact is relatively clear: violence, drug use, economic development, and governance.

Violence

Violence is an issue in itself, and also has ramifications for economic development and governance. Present depictions of the violence in Central America and the Caribbean are often over-simplifications. It is true that every country in this region, to a greater or lesser degree, suffers from drug market-related violence, but the experience between countries varies dramatically. There is no easy association between the amount of drug trafficking and the amount of violence experienced. Countries with very little traffic at present can experience much higher rates of violence than countries with lots.

El Salvador is probably the best example in the region of a country with a relatively low cocaine flow (an estimated four or five tons per year) and the highest sustained murder rate in the region (60 per 100,000 between 2001 and 2010). Costa Rica has 26 times the cocaine flow, and one-sixth the ten-year murder rate of El Salvador. As the recent *maras* truce indicates (see Box: The 2012 *maras* truce in El Salvador), a large share, perhaps a third, of El Salvador's violence is tied to the orchestrated violence of the *maras*. This does not appear to be the case in the other countries of the region.

Similarly, the ratio between the value of the drug flow and the size of the local economy is greatest in Nicaragua, where the cocaine passing through every year is worth 14% of

GDP. But the flow is largely confined to remote areas, and Nicaraguans themselves are not major players in the global cocaine market. Unlike the other countries of the region, Nicaragua's murder rate is not increasing, and most of its people feel safe.

Recent trends in Central America and the Caribbean suggest that drug trafficking alone does not cause violence. For many years, cocaine flowed through Mexico by the ton, and violence rates remained moderate. What causes violence is change in the balance of power between territorial groups. Any change in the *status quo*, even when it is the result of the necessary and legitimate action of law enforcement agencies, can contribute to instability and violence between territorial groups. Any event that changes the trafficking landscape can precipitate contests between and within these groups, including unrelated events such as the Zelaya coup in Honduras, or changes in drug demand, or re-routing due to a natural disaster.

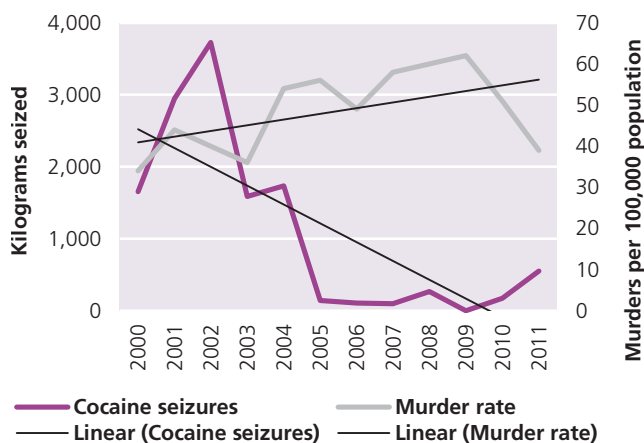
Indeed, declines in drug trafficking can be just as destabilizing as increases. Much of the fighting in Mexico today boils down to increasing competition for a shrinking pie. Jamaica provides an interesting case study of a country whose murder rate rose as drug trafficking declined. Estimates of the cocaine flow through Jamaica dropped from 11% of the United States supply in 2000 to 2% in 2005 and 1% in 2007.⁹⁰ During the same period, the

⁹⁰ Statement of the Donnie Marshall, Administrator, US Drug Enforcement Administration before the United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 15 May 2001; National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2006. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2006; National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2007 Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2007; National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2009. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2009.

murder rate skyrocketed, from 34 per 100,000 in 2000 to 59 per 100,000 in 2008.

There are historical reasons for this paradoxical effect. The importance of Jamaica as a transit country in the cocaine trade rose markedly after the violent 1980 elections in that country. A large number of important crime figures left Jamaica for New York, where they became key suppliers in the crack cocaine boom. This period of growing criminal opportunities represented a time of relative calm in Jamaica. When this market died out and cocaine flows began to shift westward, these men returned to Jamaica to find a much less well organized crime scene, where ‘neighbourhood dons’ had turned to more direct means of income generation: violent acquisitive crime, including extortion and robbery. Cooperative efforts between Jamaican law enforcement and the United Kingdom sharply reduced the air courier traffic to Europe around 2002. Street-level competition for diminishing returns has fuelled growing homicide rates: the highest in the Caribbean and among the highest in the world until recently.

Figure 58: Murder rate versus cocaine seizures in Jamaica, 2000-2011



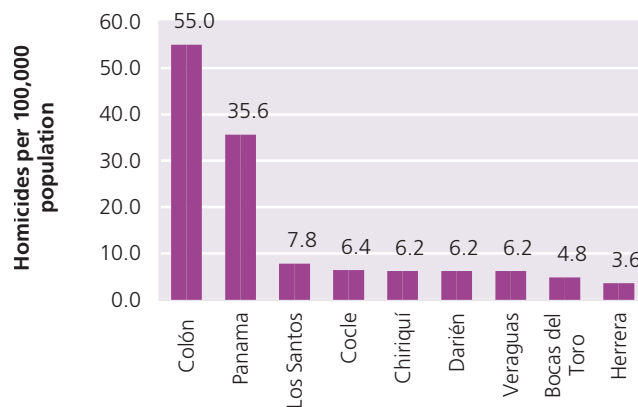
Source: Jamaica Constabulary Force

As in Central America, the cocaine flow through Jamaica empowered territorial criminal groups, corrupted law enforcement officials, and set the groundwork for the violence to come. But the effects of this build-up were not really felt until the flow of drugs abated. The relationship between drug flows and violence is not linear. Those who regard the contraband flows through their country as a problem only for the destination markets may be in for trouble later.

The violence situation encountered in each country is deeply tied to the particulars of that country. For example, *tumbador* groups appear to be one of the primary sources of homicide in Panama. In addition to territorial fights, which the national police estimate result in perhaps 20% of the killings, the *tumbadores* kill and are killed by the traffickers, allegedly including both Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking groups. Local law enforcement agencies estimate

that revenge attacks account for 70% of the murders. The influence of these urban-based groups is manifest in the extreme variation in provincial murder rates, with the rate in Colon soaring to nearly 10 times that in most of the other provinces.

Figure 59: Provincial homicide rates in Panama in 2009



Source: Observatorio de la Seguridad Ciudadana en Panamá

In drug trafficking, the violence is not necessarily proportional to the profits. Relatively small amounts of money can acquire great importance in impoverished areas. For example, much of El Salvador’s drug-related violence appears to be related to contests over domestic retail markets rather than trafficking. *Transportistas* endeavour to fly under the radar, while gang battles for territory are deliberately public affairs, with each killing a message sent to both rivals and the community as a whole.

It can be difficult to distinguish drug retail from trafficking violence, because they are both likely to occur in the same geographic area. According to Salvadoran police, *transportistas* are paid in kind, and are then left with product to unload, either on the domestic market or through their own transnational trafficking (usually through the use of commercial air couriers). Since there are very few Salvadoran air couriers detected (especially since the demise of the Juan Colorado organization) and since the Salvadoran police report a cocaine shortage in the country (as evidenced by trafficking from Guatemala to El Salvador, and the higher price of cocaine in El Salvador than in Guatemala), it appears most *transportista* payoffs are pumped into local markets.

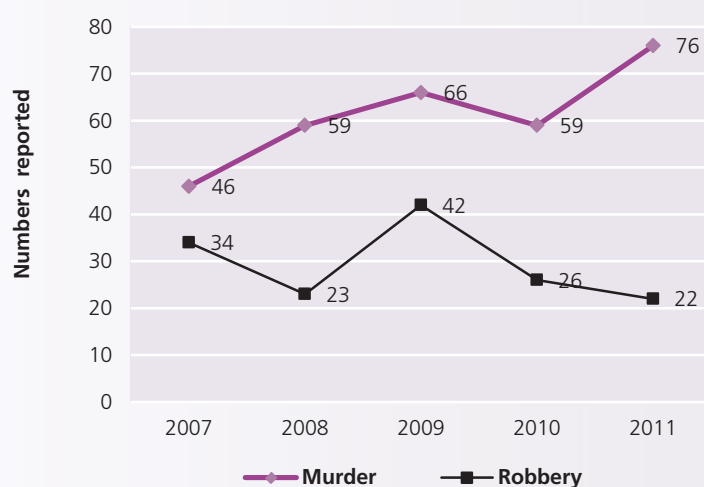
But Guatemala perhaps best typifies the complexity of violence in this region. The most violent parts of the country are clustered around ports, border crossings and along major roadways. These are not just drug trafficking areas: they are contested drug trafficking areas. Broad swathes of land in the southwest of the country (where the *Cartel del Pacífico* and their allies, the Chamales, operate) and in the interior provinces of Alta and Baja Verapaz (area of influence of the Zetas) have very little violence. The most troubled areas in Guatemala appear to be along the borders with Honduras and El Salvador, areas that could be

The Acajutla corridor in El Salvador

On a national level, transnational cocaine trafficking does not appear to be the primary driver of murder in El Salvador, but it can have profound effects more locally. Cocaine landing at Acajutla, one of the country's three main ports and the one closest to the Guatemalan border, appears to proceed north to Sonsonate along the CA-12 to the Panamerican Highway. In so doing, it crosses some of the most dangerous parts of El Salvador. In fact, five of the top 10 most dangerous municipalities in the country in 2011 lie in a contiguous area in the southeast of Sonsonate province, with a collective murder rate of 165 per 100,000.

The robbery rate in this cluster, however, is only 92 per 100,000, less than half the national rate. Fewer people report being robbed than are killed in the Acajutla/ Sonsonate corridor. The existence of so much murder in an area that does not record much other violent crime strongly suggests these killings are related to drug trafficking. There are, however, indications that MS-13 members are involved in trafficking in this small segment of the cocaine flow. Given the otherwise low crime rates, it appears this flow has reduced local dependency on acquisitive crime.

Figure 60: Number of murders and robberies in Acajutla municipality, El Salvador, 2007-2011



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, El Salvador

contested by *Cartel del Pacífico* ally *Los Mendozas* and *Zetas* ally *Los Lorenzanas*.

The conflict may stem from the need to cross each other's territories. Cocaine trafficked into Zacapa (Lorenzana territory) must be moved to the north to reach Petén, the department of egress for *Zetas* cocaine. On the other hand, cocaine trafficked into Izabal (Mendoza territory) must be moved west to exit through San Marcos, which is under the influence of the *Cartel del Pacífico*. This need for transiting of each others territories could be the cause of considerable conflict.

Drug violence is but one source of civil disorder in Guatemala. In 2012, the Ministerio de Gobernación declared 58 municipalities to be "ungovernable" or "without police presence". In several of the municipalities, police had been ejected or detained, often when they tried to enforce unpopular laws against smuggling. These municipalities are not the most violent areas of the country. On the contrary, some of them had no registered murders in 2011 at all.

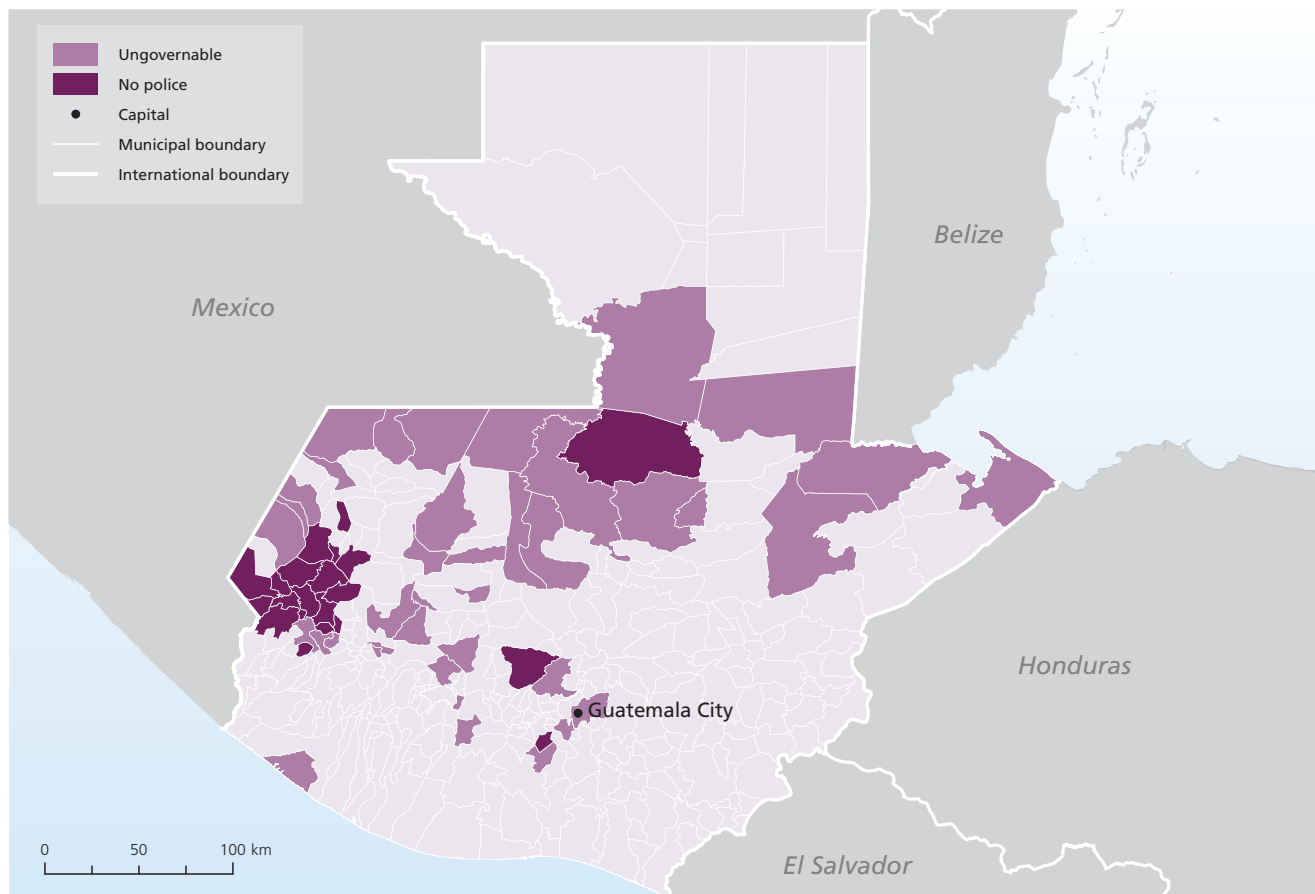
Rather, they are areas that have given up on the state, and are run by popular groups, including traffickers. The largest

cluster of places without police presence are found in the trafficking territory of the popular Chamale group, and most have some connection to the border with Mexico. The most common form of violence in some of these municipalities is lynching, or mob justice. These killings are not related to struggles for drug trafficking areas. They are effectively a product of sub-state succession. At present, the violence is limited, but it could spike if the state attempts to reacquire these lost territories.

Another form of non-drug violence is *mara* violence, which can be further subdivided into violent competition between *mara* factions (primarily, but not exclusively, between M-18 and MS-13), and violence by *maras* against the public. For the latter, one of the most common targets are the drivers, security officers, and passengers on public transport. Extortion is the primary source of income for the *maras*, and public transport is one of their favourite targets.

Mara members are arrested in some of the most unlikely places, often in areas with very little street crime. Gang members who don't commit crime are not really relevant to an analysis of crime, so it makes more sense to focus on attacks of public transport. The provinces with the highest

Map 12: Guatemala: municipal governability, 2011



Source: UNODC, elaborated from information from the Ministerio de Gobernación (Guatemala)

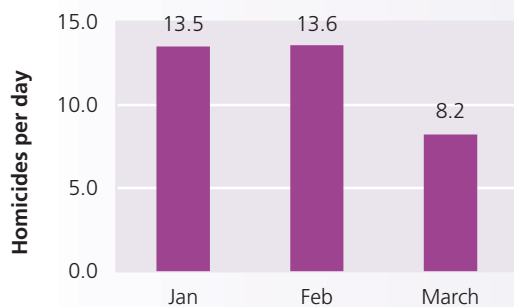
The 2012 *maras* truce in El Salvador

On 8 and 9 March 2012, around 30 gang leaders were transferred from the high security prison of Zacatecoluca to a number of lower security prisons around the country. Included in this number were most of the incarcerated leadership of MS-13 and M-18. On 14 March, the on-line investigative newspaper *El Faro* published a story alleging that the transfers were part of a deal worked out between the government and the gang leaders to reduce violence. Both the government and the *maras* leadership denied any such deal. Rather, the *maras* alleged, a truce between the two rivals was being brokered by the Catholic Church and civil society.

Whatever the cause, the *maras* truce appears to have had a dramatic effect on violence levels. The average number of homicides committed daily declined by 40% between February and March, and the number of homicides committed in March were 28% lower the March average of the previous three years. All this suggests that *mareros* do indeed contribute significantly to the violence levels in El Salvador.

Only time will tell whether this change is real or illusory, and whether, if real, it can be sustained.

Figure 61: Homicides per day in El Salvador in 2012

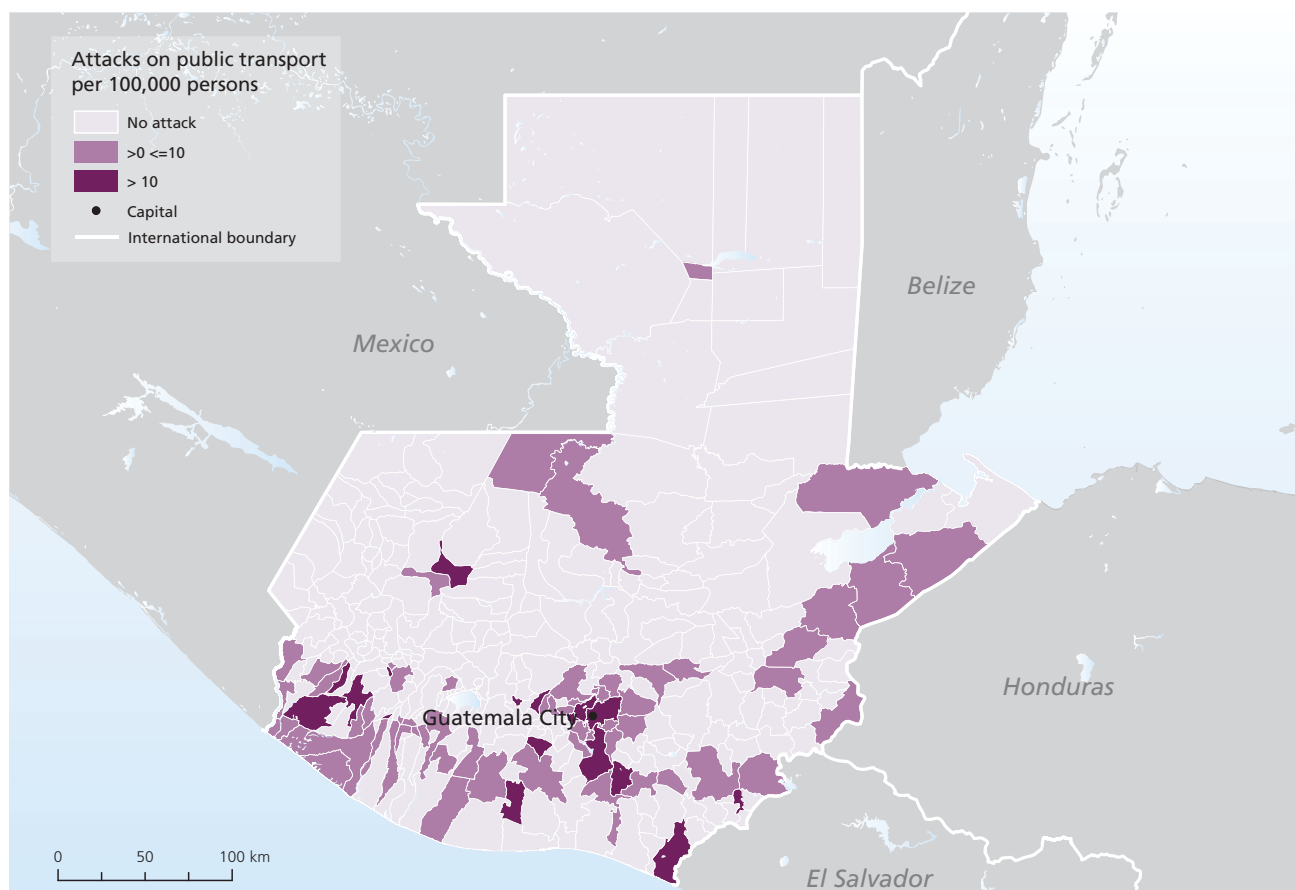


Source: Policía Nacional Civil, El Salvador

Figure 62: Homicides per day in March 2009-2012



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, El Salvador

Map 13: Guatemala: municipal rates of attack on public transportation, 2011

Source: UNODC, elaborated from data from the Procurador de los Derechos Humanos, Guatemala

rates of attack on public transport are not deemed ungovernable and, again, are not the most violent areas of the country. In fact, only two municipalities that have attacks on public transport are deemed “ungovernable” and experience high homicide rates. These are the two municipalities at the heart of the state: Guatemala City, the capital and largest city, and nearby Villa Nueva, the second largest city.

A similar pattern is seen in the other countries of the Northern Triangle. In El Salvador, for example, murder rates have traditionally been low along *el caminito*, the trafficking route used by the Taxis cartel. They spiked, however, in areas where the Perrones were expanding, and a series of assassinations occurred following the arrest of their leader, Reynerio Flores in 2009.⁹¹ Some of the most peaceful places are spots the state no longer contests. Gang members appear to play a much more important role in the violence in El Salvador than in Guatemala, perhaps in part because the drug traffickers are only *transportistas*.

Elsewhere in the region, the links with drug trafficking become more attenuated still, and there are no *maras* to

blame for the bloodshed. Work by UNODC’s research affiliate in Costa Rica (ILANUD) suggests that Costa Rica’s rising murder rates have more to do with growing inequality than the drug trade. Still, the most violent provinces in Costa Rica are those bordering Panama along the coasts, not in the capital of San Jose, which is four times larger than the next largest city.

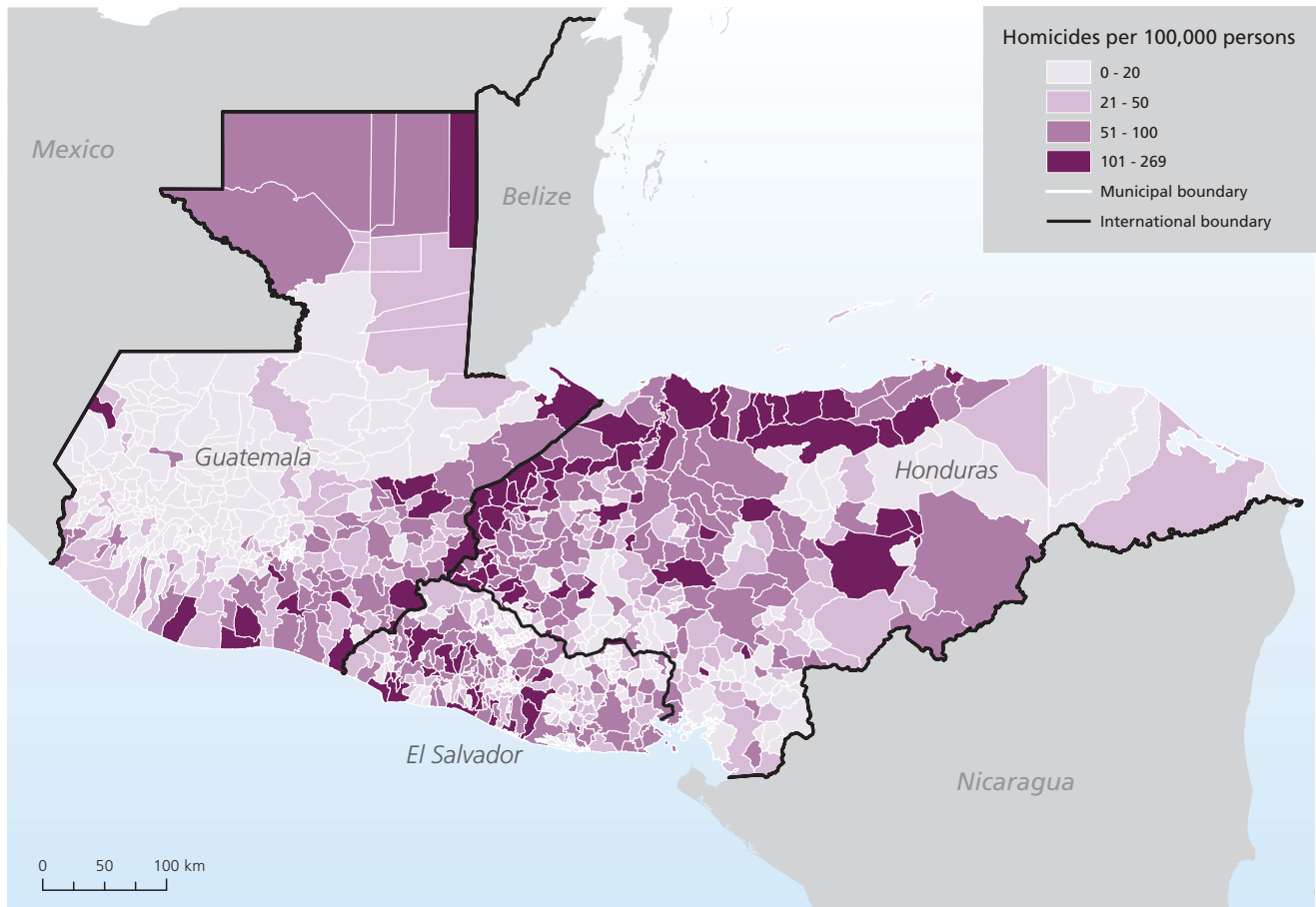
In the end, the presence of gangs alone is not enough to explain high murder rates. Nor is the presence of drug

Figure 63: Murder rates in Costa Rican provinces in 2010

Source: Fuerza Pública, Costa Rica

⁹¹ In May 2009, Reynerio Flores was arrested. In August, Edwin Reinaldo Argueta Contreras (“El Porras”), a trafficker from Santa María Usulután (one of the most violent areas of the country) is killed in Soyapango (San Salvador). In May 2011, Salvador Augusto Guzmán, formerly of the Salvadoran Army, is killed in Nicaragua while he is travelling with one of Reynerio Flores’ brothers, and in June 2011, José Bladimir Ventura (“El Bladi”), a trafficker linked to *Los Perrones*, was assassinated in Santa Tecla (La Libertad).

Map 14: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras: Municipal homicide rates, 2011



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from national police (Guatemala, El Salvador) and Observatorio de la Violencia (Honduras)

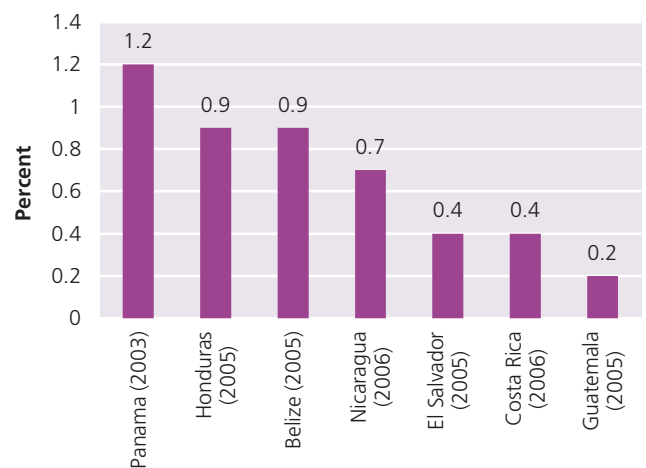
trafficking. Rather, violence is occurring in areas where sub-state groups have been brought into conflict with one another, presently because of flux in the cocaine markets. These conflicts appear to span borders, and the frontier between Guatemala and Honduras is one of the most dangerous strips of land in the world.

Drug use

There are no recent reliable assessments of the level of drug use in Central America. The figures on which UNODC relies for its consumption estimates mostly date from 2005 or so. Given the fact that everything has changed since the inception of the new Mexican security strategy in 2006, there is an urgent need for new survey data. *Transportistas* are often paid in kind, and must then either traffic their small loads forward on their own (usually through the use of commercial air couriers) or dump their payment on the local market. If they are doing the latter, and the lack of detected air couriers from the region suggest they are, then drug use levels are likely rising.

Central American police detect crack at least as often as they detect powder cocaine. Crack is always produced locally for local consumption – it is easy to make and much bulkier than powder cocaine to transport. It was crack, not powder cocaine, that fuelled the worst of the drug violence the United States experienced in the 1980s and 1990s. It is

Figure 64: Annual cocaine use prevalence in Central America



Source: UNODC

cheap, highly addictive, and its impact has never really been measured in a developing country. If crack use in Central America is increasing, it should be regarded as a priority threat.

But the truth is, for the most populous states in the region, the impact of the upswing in drug trafficking on local drug use levels remains unknown. A problem may be developing unrecorded that could take decades to reverse.

Governance

While violence gets the most press, a far more insidious effect of organized crime is its impact on governance. If sub-state actors are allowed to run their territories unimpeded and transnational trafficking continues to pay well, they may operate with relatively little violence, although democracy in any meaningful sense will disappear in these areas. Strongmen govern by fiat, enjoying the safety of being ensconced in a sovereign state but not compelled to operate by any of the laws governing it.

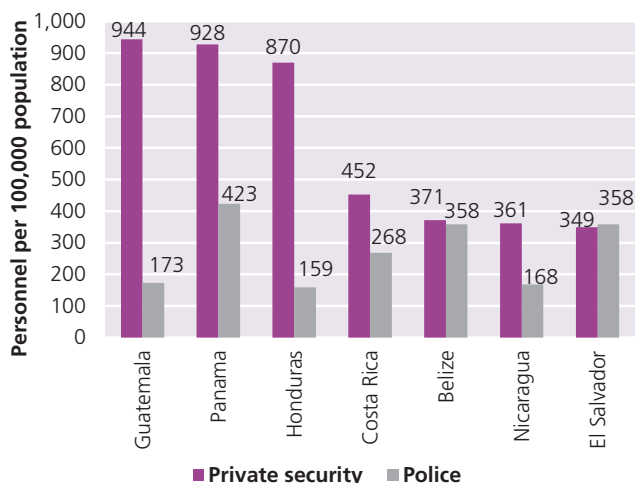
This erosion is scarcely noticeable in some areas, because the state never had much presence there to begin with. But the solution is to expand democratic inclusion, not withdraw it. Societies cannot be sustainably built based on exploiting tax differentials, smuggling irregular migrants and dealing in contraband. Neglected communities may welcome the income, but in so doing they are compromising their futures.

The first obligation of the state is to ensure citizen security, and when it fails to do so, people take matters into their own hands. The precise response is dependent on resources. The rich hire private security, and this has become a massive industry in Central America. The use of private security is most intense in Guatemala, Panama, and Honduras, but there are more private security guards than police in every country except El Salvador.

The poor, of course, cannot hire others to provide for their security. They must respond directly and one of the clearest indicators of state failure is the emergence of vigilante action. It appears that both private security and vigilante action are on the rise in Guatemala as well as elsewhere in the region.

The lack of confidence in democracy is also clearly reflected

Figure 65: Personnel per 100,000 – Private security and police



Source: Orozco 2012*

*Orozco, R., *¿Un cambio de actores en el tráfico ilegal de armas en Centroamérica?* Nicaragua: Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (forthcoming).

Figure 66: Number of recorded lynchings in Guatemala, 2004-2011

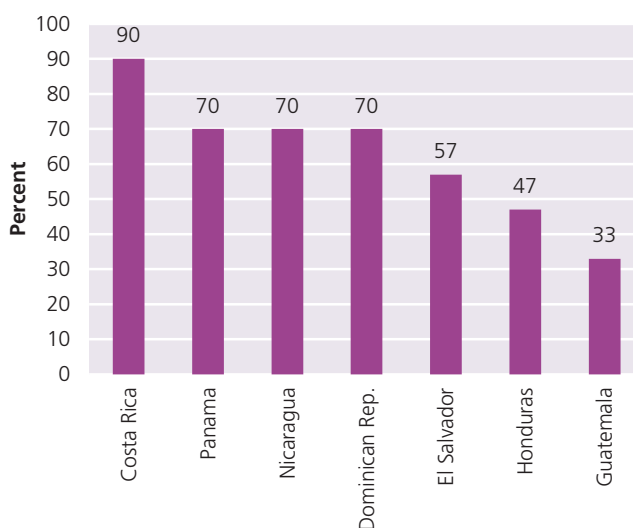


Source: Procurador Derechos Humanos, Guatemala

in survey data. The Latinobarometro endeavours to measure citizen attitudes toward democracy in annual polls it conducts throughout Latin America. In 2010, Guatemala was the country where citizens were most receptive to the prospect of a military government, with only a third saying that they would never support one, and a quarter holding a favourable opinion of the last one. It was also the country where the lowest share felt democracy was preferable to other forms of government (58%). A rising share of the population of some Latin American countries feels it is acceptable for the government to act outside the law when faced with a “difficult” situation, with the highest share in the Dominican Republic.

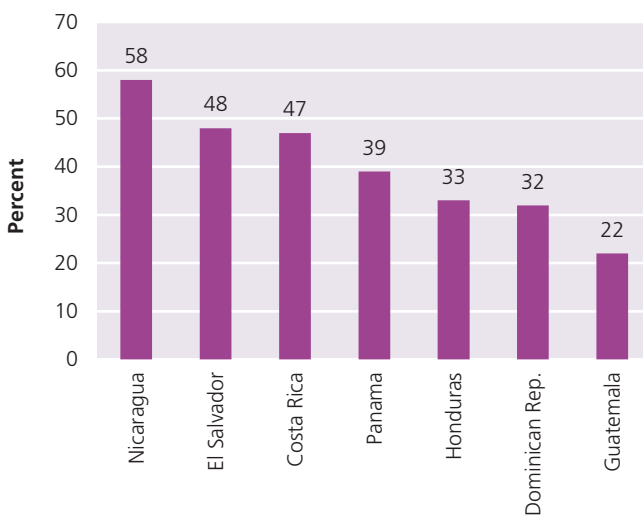
Part of this discontent is surely rooted in dissatisfaction with present crime policy. Among Central American countries, only in Nicaragua did a majority approve of the way the government was tackling the crime problem. This is probably because it is the only country where the majority did not feel the country was becoming less safe and where the largest share felt safe in their own country. Guatemala was on the opposite end of this spectrum.

Figure 67: National share of respondents who would never support a military government, in 2010



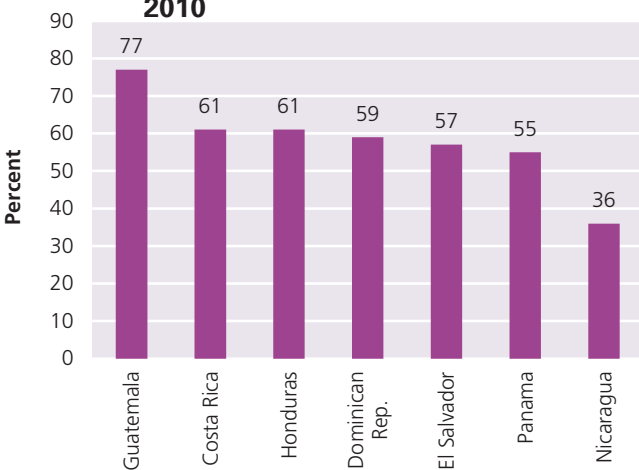
Source: Latinobarometro 2010

Figure 68: Share approving of government security/crime policy, in 2010



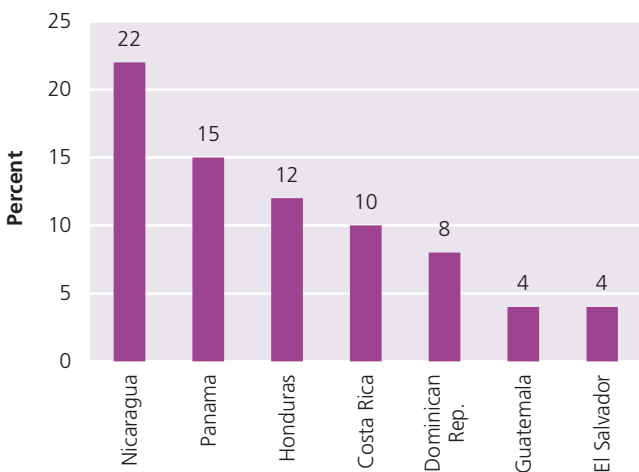
Source: Latinobarometro 2010

Figure 69: Share of people who feel that the country is becoming less safe, in 2010



Source: Latinobarometro 2010

Figure 70: Share of people who feel safe in the country, in 2010



Source: Latinobarometro 2010

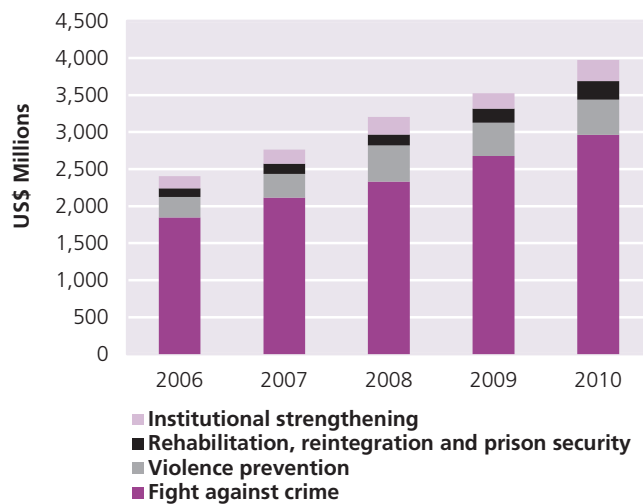
Desperate people are willing to entertain extreme solutions to their problems. In countries where 96% of the population feels unsafe, like Guatemala and El Salvador, the willingness to support alternatives to democracy, which could include anything from local oligarchs to an authoritarian military government, grows. Crime has become a direct threat to democratic governance in this region.

Economic development

The security situation has had a direct impact on economic development in the region. In 2012, the United States Peace Corps was pulled out of Honduras, one of its largest missions in the world, due to insecurity. There can be few more direct ways that crime can undermine development than when aid workers leave due to fear of violence.

Another way crime and violence undermine local development is the cost of combating these problems. Resources that could have been used to foster growth are diverted to maintaining order. In 2010, UNDP estimated that the regional resources dedicated to security and justice were just under US\$4 billion, representing 2.66% of regional GDP.

Figure 71: Regional spending on public security and justice in Central America, 2006-2010



Source: UNDP and partners*

*UNDP and partners, Información sobre el gasto público de seguridad y justicia en Centroamérica 2006-2010: Resultados preliminares para la Conferencia de apoyo a la Estrategia de Seguridad en Centroamérica, 2011. http://www.regionalcentrelac-undp.org/images/stories/novedades/informe_gastopublico.pdf

Some parts of the region have managed to grow well despite the violence, but none well enough to make serious inroads on poverty. Many Caribbean economies are stagnant, like Jamaica's, or shrinking, like Haiti's. The Northern Triangle of Central America experienced a serious setback due to the financial crisis in 2009. Honduras *maquiladoras*, an engine of employment and growth, began shutting down and El Salvador has managed less than 2% average annual growth

in the last decade. The region remains dependent on remittances, and the loss of human capital at home surely undermines progress. Given that crime is an even greater public concern than unemployment, it is surely fuelling the brain drain.

Figure 72: GDP growth in the Northern Triangle, 2000-2010

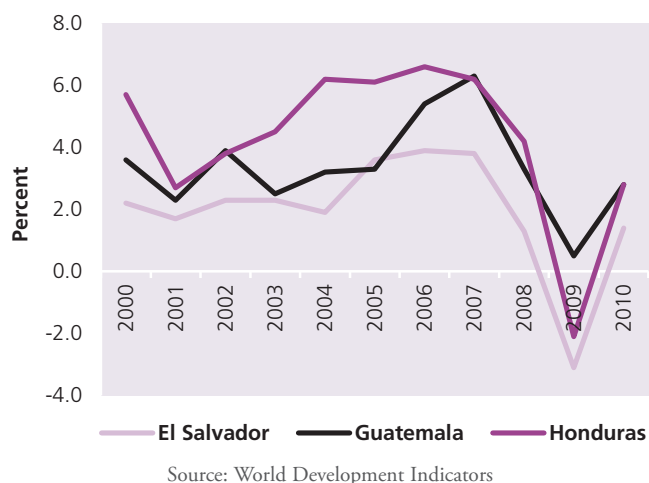
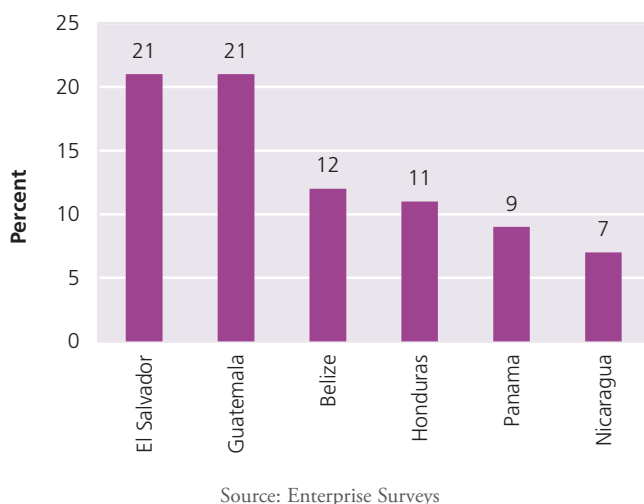


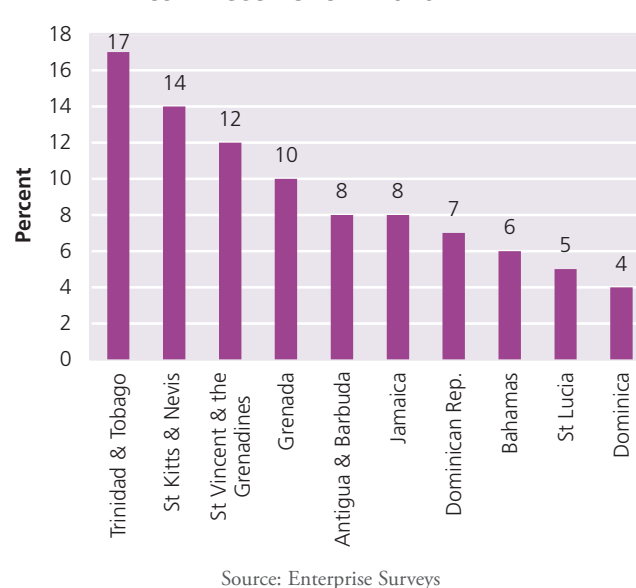
Figure 73: Share of firms in Central America who said crime was their primary barrier to investment in 2010



Investment climate surveys show that crime is one of the primary barriers to business growth in this region, affecting small, medium, and large firms alike. Over a fifth of the firms polled said that crime was the primary barrier to their investing in Guatemala and El Salvador, above other issues like taxation, finance, infrastructure, and labour regulations. It was the number one issue for investors in Guatemala, and prominent in several Caribbean countries as well.

As a result of all these factors, the World Bank has recently estimated that a 10% drop in the homicide rate could boost per capita annual income growth by 1% in El Salvador and by 0.7% in Guatemala and Honduras.⁹²

Figure 74: Share of firms in the Caribbean who said crime was their primary barrier to investment in 2010



⁹² World Bank. *Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge*. 2011.



Implications for policy

The following discussion is aimed at investigating some of the broader implications of the descriptive work above. These are not “recommendations” *per se*. To provide recommendations would require a comprehensive review of the capacities of the affected states, the interventions attempted to date, and the impact of these interventions. Such a “needs assessment” should be undertaken, but would require a dedicated study, and is beyond the scope of the present work. Rather, the research above has revealed something about the nature of the threat confronted, and this allows some general conclusions about what is likely to work in reducing the threat.

The discussion above has demonstrated that cocaine trafficking is a key factor in the violence in the region, but it is not the only one, and eliminating the flow will not necessarily reduce the violence. Rather, the core causes of instability in parts of Central America and the Caribbean are weak states and powerful sub-state actors. Until these actors are subdued or co-opted, they will continue to contest the primacy of the state, they will continue to deal out arbitrary “justice,” and they will continue to use force and corruption to secure their authority.

The long-term goal is clearly to eliminate, through state building and development, the opportunities for these groups to thrive, allowing democratically elected authorities to govern. This will require finding the resources to build state capacity, construct infrastructure, professionalize the civil service, and reduce corruption. But achieving these goals is dependent on establishing order in the short-term, and that will require measures that reduce the capacity and incentives of sub-state actors to confront and subvert the state.

A comprehensive response needs to encompass both law enforcement and alternative means of disabling the sub-state organized crime groups. There are several ways the international community could support the countries in the region to establish order in the short-term and reduce violence in the long-term:

- Building and directly supplementing local law enforcement capacity;
- Creating national crime prevention strategies;
- Reducing the flow of contraband, particularly cocaine;
- Employing peace-building strategies.

The following discussion looks at the alternatives presented under each of these headings.

Law enforcement

In the face of rising violence, the initial response of most countries in the region was to arrest a lot of gang members, the so-called “*mano dura*” approach. Unfortunately, this common sense approach failed, only entrenching the *mareros* in their opposition to the law, while violence levels continued to climb.

Despite this setback, the discourse has continued to focus on ever-tougher law enforcement, including bringing in the military. In just the last year, these countries have advanced the role of the military in a variety of ways:

- Several states of emergency were declared in Guatemala, where civil rights were suspended and the military deployed;
- The Salvadoran and Honduran governments recently replaced the entire command staff of their police force with career military officers;

- The military is being used in joint patrols and operations with the police in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago;
- In Panama and Costa Rica, once content to be de-militarized, there is talk about bringing back the military to address the crime problem.

This is an extraordinary development in a region that suffered under decades of military dictatorship, and it is worrying from a human rights perspective.

The desire to enlist the military is based in part on distrust of the police. While the military was involved in human rights abuses during the conflict, so were the police. Efforts since that time to reconstruct a democratic police service have been demonstrably inadequate. As a result, many people in this region have never known a functional police service, and view the military as a more efficient alternative to assuring security. In the public mind, the choice is between an under-resourced, often corrupt, civilian force and a military they know to be extremely efficient. With this background, their preference for the military is rational.

Given the problematic relationship between the state and the public in the region, however, it seems likely that the police of this region should not be militarizing, but rather moving in the opposite direction, toward growing civilianization. Militarized police forces around the world live in barracks, patrol in large groups, and are encouraged to see themselves as an arm of the state, independent of the populace. Democratic policing, in contrast, is about moving closer to the people, increasing accountability, contact, and individual interaction with communities. The “neighbourhood policing” of Nicaragua is an example of this. By giving officers a particular geographic region to understand and care for, community cooperation can be engendered.

Law enforcement remains a necessary component of any comprehensive approach. The most direct way of reducing the power of sub-state groups is to arrest and jail the members, and some of this will surely be necessary. But given limited resources, these arrests will have to be tactically selected and managed through the courts to ensure appropriate sentences are secured.

The need for a strong and independent justice system is paramount, but prosecutors cannot make bricks without straw. The poor investigative skills of the police also feed low conviction rates. And the whole system will fail without correctional facilities that produce more good than harm. The international community needs to help ensure that all these elements are in place.

Capacity building

At present, it appears that the criminal justice systems of the worst affected countries are not up to the challenge of resolving these issues on their own. The word most commonly employed to describe the problem is “impunity”.

Criminals in some Member States know that their chances of being jailed are slim, and this surely affects their willingness to offend.

The weakness appears to extend through the entire process: the number of recorded crimes that result in an arrest is small, the number of arrests that result in a conviction is small, and a small share of those convicted face substantial periods in prison. Data on criminal justice performance in many countries is hard to come by, but based on figures from UNODC’s Survey on Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, the share of cases brought to the court that result in a conviction has ranged from 2% to 42% in the past. In some countries, even murder cases are rarely cleared up. The international community should help these Member States improve on this performance.

At present, even if convictions were to be secured, there is no place to put the convicts. In the correctional context, lack of capacity literally means lack of capacity – there is simply no physical room for expanding enforcement efforts. Aside from Belize, every corrections system in Central America is overcrowded. In some cases, the majority of these inmates are in pre-trial detention. The extended incarceration of people whose guilt has not been established is an often untallied cost of an inefficient justice system, and, given the conditions in many of these overcrowded prisons, could represent a source of human rights violations. The United Nations standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice aim to prevent such violations and need to be implemented.

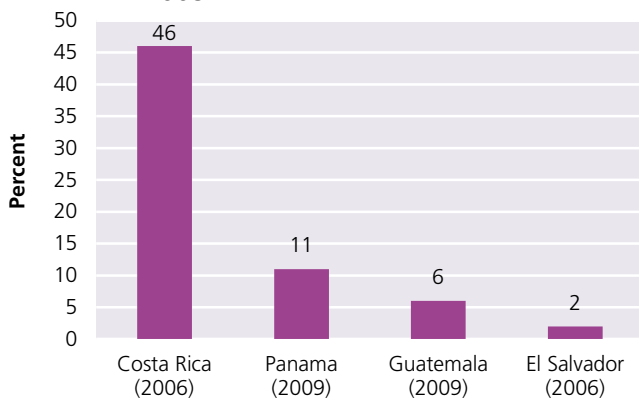
There are no easy ways to quickly correct these problems. Prisons take years to construct, and they are actually the easiest-solved aspect of the problem. Rather than waiting years for capacity building efforts to take effect, the international community should help guide the countries of the region to make optimum use of the limited available resources to address the sub-state groups. Two sub-state groups in particular need to be targeted creatively: the *maras* and the territorial organized crime groups.

Against maras

In the past, the anti-crime programmes of some Central American countries have simply been anti-gang programmes, and it was in the gang context that the term “*mano dura*” emerged. Many have argued that the *mano dura* crackdowns on gang members have been counterproductive. Gang leaders continue to give orders from behind bars, enabled by the contraband cellphones tolerated by corrupt wardens. Joint incarceration allowed disparate cliques, unrelated except by the abstraction of their *mara* affiliation, to find common causes and form practical networks.

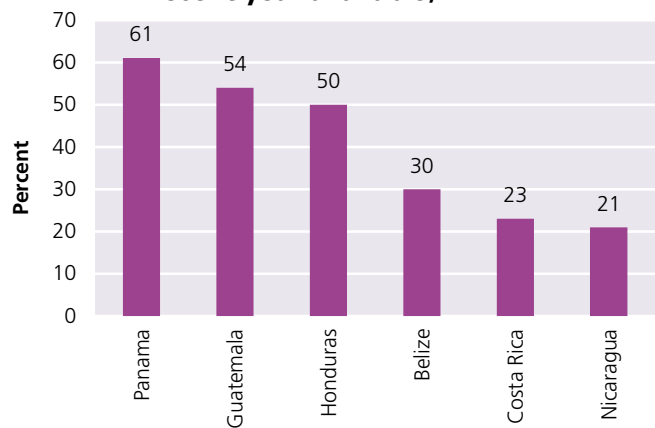
Gang members are not deterred by the threat of incarceration. The drama of crime and punishment is the central thread that gives meaning to their lives. In fact, jail plays a paradoxical role for gang members: imprisonment insulates

Figure 75: Convictions as a share of all cases brought before the court, 2006 or 2009



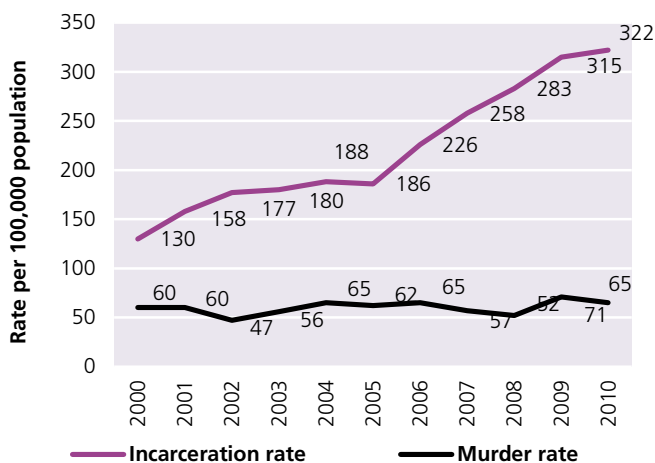
Source: UNODC Crime Trends Survey

Figure 77: Share of prisoners who are on remand/awaiting trial, 2010 (or most recent year available)



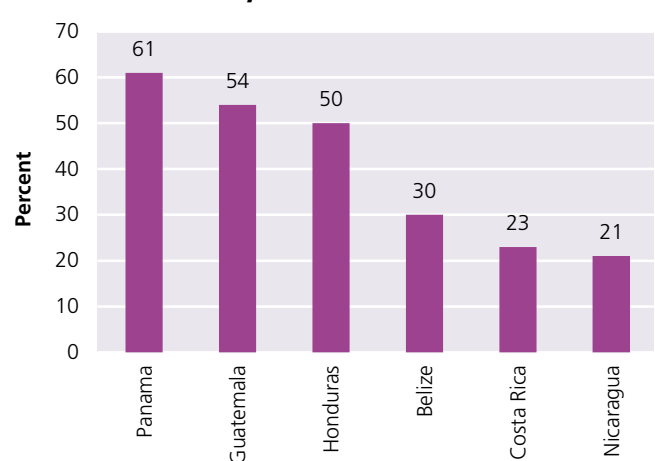
Source: International Centre for Prison Studies

Figure 76: Number of prisoners and number of murders per 100,000 population in El Salvador, 2000-2010



Source: ILANUD, UNODC Homicide Database

Figure 78: Rate of overcrowding in Central American prisons, 2010 (or most recent year available)



Source: International Centre for Prison Studies

them from common responsibilities that they are ill-equipped to handle.

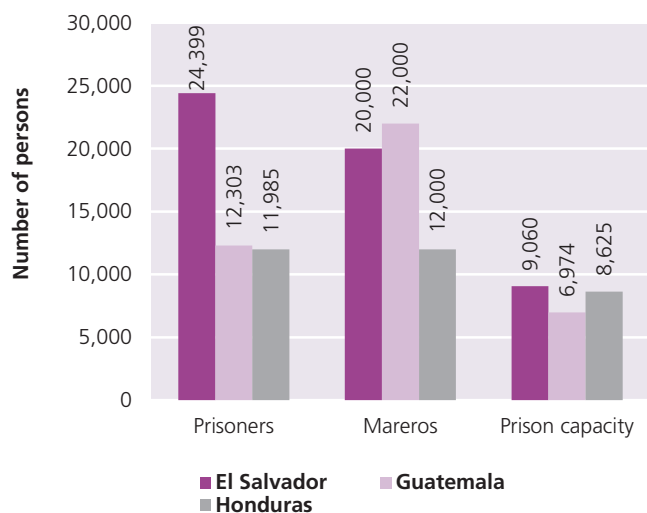
There are more than 50,000 *mareros* in the Northern Triangle alone, which is more than the total number of inmates currently incarcerated, and far exceeds local prison capacity. Laws banning gang membership cannot be fully enforced, because there is simply no place to put them all.

Gang membership provides meaning to lives that would otherwise feel meaningless, and drawing *mareros* away from this lifestyle will not be easy. The church, or other alternative systems of belonging, will surely play an important role, particularly given MS-13's use of religious imagery. Support for traditional families and provision of employment are also key, allowing the young men to step up to their role as fathers and providers with dignity. There is also a need for prison alternatives for those without the skills and maturity to fully assume adult responsibilities, like a youth service corps or other public works programmes that provide a surrogate home environment.

Those who have fallen into addiction need access to rehabilitative services, and may be best treated through specialized drug courts. Drug use surveys in Central America are out of date, and it is unclear how much drug use has been affected by the increased flow through the region. Crack cocaine in particular is highly associated with violent crime. The growth of addiction must be carefully monitored and treatment options expanded accordingly.

Of course, where *mara* members commit serious offences, they cannot be spared criminal sanction, but rounding up young people simply due to an alleged affiliation is deeply counterproductive. It consolidates nascent gang identities, facilitates networking, and apparently has little effect on command structures. There may be a technological quick fix for some of this – devices to block cell transmissions in the prisons themselves – but so long as there is corruption among the prison staff, messages will continue to be passed. In the end, it is impossible to incapacitate all potential gang members, so jail time should be reserved for those known to be guilty of a serious offence.

Figure 79: Prison population, *mareros*, and prison capacity in the Northern Triangle in 2011



Source: ILANUD, law enforcement interviews, World Prison Brief

The ultimate solution to the gang problem is to make the *barrios* safe places to live. Many if not most gang members join as a defensive measure, to place themselves in the role of predator rather than prey. Some non-members may be assumed to be *mareros* by the police and other gangs based on their residence and age group, so joining up at least allows them to take advantage of the benefits that accompany this stigma. Gang membership allows them to provide protection to their loved ones against real threats from rival neighbourhoods and at home. To truly address the causes of gangs, general security must be established, eliminating the need for informal community safety structures.

Against territorial groups

The other key organized crime structures – the territory-dominating drug trafficking groups – are less amenable to social interventions. Their involvement in crime is not the product of disadvantage and loss of direction. They are, in fact, quasi-governmental actors, whose power feeds their wealth and whose wealth allows them to extend their power.

Unlike street gangs, which have spread into even the smallest Central American village and comprise a significant share of male youth, the personnel of these drug trafficking groups are limited in number. Thus, with some prioritization, room could be made for them – all of them – in the criminal justice system. What is lacking is the wherewithal to do so.

For putting transnational organized criminals away, specialized units have had spectacular success in some countries. These groups often involve teams of investigators and prosecutors working together from the outset of an investigation, ensuring that the correct evidence is gathered to ensure a conviction in court. These units are considered elite, and so draw on the very best talent the system has to offer. They can also be overseen by international advisors,

adding credibility and global best practice to the initiative. Arrests and prosecutions will have to be selective, targeted for maximum impact, and pursued by all involved until a conviction is secured.

In Guatemala, for example, the groups involved are well known, as are their property holdings. There have already been some impressive high-level arrests, but these can be dangerous, due to the succession struggles and power plays they engender. Each group should be assessed carefully for its weaknesses, and a strategic sweep made that attacks the organization at every level.

Direct supplementation

In the long term, of course, the goal is to build criminal justice capacity, allowing these countries to respond appropriately to all the crime they face. But until this is possible, the international community has a responsibility to help. With the cooperation of the affected states, the international community could directly intervene in a number of ways.

The United Nations has, in the past, assembled groups of experts or created other agencies to help Member States investigate matters too sensitive to be broached locally. These experts have issued detailed reports on everything from human rights violations and prison conditions to arms trafficking and natural resource exploitation. They have not shied away from declaring official involvement in criminal and corrupt activity. These reports are not legal indictments, but they can be used as the basis for policy.

The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) took this thinking a bit further. Founded out of the recognition that international assistance was required to overcome those who were manipulating the political system to achieve their criminal objectives, the Commission independently gathers evidence about Guatemalan crime problems, including those too sensitive for local authorities to address alone. The Guatemalan government has recently renewed CICIG's mandate, signaling the country's commitment to the process and the value of the work being done.

This kind of assistance allows the countries concerned to benefit from the expertise of international investigators and to circumvent corruption. It also creates pressure at a higher level, as corrupt officials know that independent eyes are reviewing the facts. And in the end, these efforts recognize that crime is a problem for the whole of society, not something to be blamed on the police and courts.

In addition to independent investigators, the United Nations deploys police contributed by Member States to post-conflict countries all over the world. The purpose of these deployments is manifold, and varies depending on the circumstances of the host country. Initially, these missions were limited to observation and monitoring, providing a

less obtrusive presence than military observers. But over time, police mission mandates have become more robust, in recognition of the fact that domestic police services are often decimated by war, and that re-establishing the rule of law requires a strong police presence. It is possible that an international deployment could provide both supplemental capacity and guidance to the countries of the region.

The bottom line is that the people of Central America and the Caribbean need to believe state institutions can deliver justice and security. Improving local capacity is a long-term project, while the need for security is immediate. If requested by national governments, an international police deployment is one way the international community could help fill the security gap in the interim.

Alternative means to peace

Crime is a product of a range of complex social dynamics. Rapid urbanization, unemployment, the fragmentation of families and communities, population displacement, inter-group tensions, income inequality, evolving gender relations, and many other issues can influence crime rates. Understanding these dynamics and designing interventions to ameliorate their impact on crime should complement the expertise of law enforcement officials. Creating strategic solutions will require intense inter-agency collaboration.

To create a national crime prevention strategy, a super-ministerial secretariat should be founded, housed perhaps in the office of the President. This office must have the resources and the authority to convene consultations at the highest level and to coordinate technical cooperation work across government agencies. It should be able to mobilize the resources needed to test and implement interventions it determines to be essential. Government agencies often see themselves at odds with one another, each working off a different scorecard, and none receiving points for collaborating across chains of command. The crime prevention secretariat must have the ability to change that, to recognize and reward inter-agency cooperation.

The kind of programmes that such an agency could coordinate are as varied as the crime problems themselves. For example, one way of thwarting the machinations of territorial groups is to clear up questions of land tenure. The easiest way for an organized crime group to gain control over territory is to buy it, and they exploit the fact that the land deeds systems in countries like Guatemala and Honduras are in need of repair. Many are engaged in a systematic campaign to acquire ownership over vast tracts of strategically placed property. With international assistance, the state could review land ownership claims, documenting the results and seizing all properties that are linked to drug trafficking. Communities legally rooted in the soil would stand a better chance of resisting future incursions.

Of course, much of what fuels local crime problems lies not only outside the control of the national law enforcement agencies, but also outside the control of any national government. Contraband flows are transnational, usually trans-regional, and thus strong intervention in one part of the trafficking chain merely displaces the flow somewhere else. For this reason, international cooperation under the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols and the Convention against Corruption is critical. These conventions provide a platform for cooperation that is essential to address issues of supply and demand that span the globe.

To address these problems requires something very much like a national crime prevention secretariat, but at an international level. Of course, the barriers to international cooperation are even more formidable than those within a government, and there is no supra-national authority to which to appeal. But these issues are of sufficient import to motivate extraordinary measures, and the United Nations is one vehicle through which such cooperation could proceed.

Contraband moves from suppliers to consumers tugged by the power of the market. What appear to be massive conspiracies are often simply the actions of unrelated players all responding to a common incentive structure. Reducing these flows will require changing the incentive structures.

The methods for changing incentive structures depend on the dynamics of each contraband flow, and determining these methods will require considerable thought and planning. The specificities of each flow must be considered with respect to the commodity concerned and the geopolitical context in which it is traded. In some cases, the solution will involve manipulating supply; in others, the mechanics of trafficking or the subtleties of demand.

For example, many policy decisions outside the criminal justice field could affect the demand for migrant smuggling. Demand has, in fact, been reduced by the economic downturn. Programmes to support investment in *maquiladoras* or to reduce agricultural subsidies abroad could help keep workers at home. Expansion of guest worker programmes could provide an alternative to irregular migration. Loosening visa standards could allow the labour to enter without the risks of land transit. The solutions to trafficking problems can come from many unexpected places, and these should be explored in parallel to the criminal justice response.

Demand reduction

Demand reduction is an attractive approach to disabling contraband markets, but it is often fiendishly difficult to achieve. These markets exist in the first place due to demand so resilient that consumers are willing to break the law. Changing their opinion about what they want is not easy to do, but once accomplished, the market simply disappears.

For example, exotic pets are a luxury item, and a specialized

one: there are a limited number of dealers and venues for purchasing live animals. A targeted public relations campaign in consumer countries could highlight the damage being done to these animals and their environment by traffickers. The anti-fur campaign managed to make wearing mink unfashionable in the United States, drastically reducing the number of mink farms in the country.

The problem is that it does not always disappear all at once, and the severity of the issues associated with the market are not always determined by its scale. Even a relatively small incentive can motivate people to behave in anti-social ways, particularly when the alternative is poverty. For example, cocaine demand in the United States has been declining for years. This has not reduced the violence associated with this market outside the United States. In fact, in some instances, declining demand simply serves to increase competition – a fat market allows many players to comfortably operate side-by-side. The market only becomes cutthroat when one's gain is another's loss.

For this reason, simplistic solutions to these complex problems should be avoided. Strategies aimed at taking down markets must be based in the understanding that change produces stress, and that people denied livelihoods or cut off from sources of great wealth will not simply fade away. This is why any interaction with these markets needs to be globally planned, or one country's success could produce another's downfall.

Peacebuilding

The original purpose of the United Nations was to build peace, and in this it appears to have broadly succeeded. Since its inception, the number of wars between states has plummeted, and the civil wars that followed have also declined. Since Kofi Annan's pivotal statement *In Larger Freedom*, it has been recognized that a new series of threats to international stability have emerged. Among these is the threat of transnational organized crime.

These new threats are not so different in character - there are many ways the lessons of international peace building can be applied to the problems associated with transnational organized crime. In both cases, the goal is to get groups of armed men to lay down their arms and return to socially beneficial activities. Like antagonists in war, those involved in criminal violence may be eager for peace, but need help in finding their way. A peace process has already been initiated with the *mareros* of El Salvador, and while it is not clear where this experiment will lead, there is interest in its potential in Guatemala and Honduras.

To participate, offenders must see that there are alternatives to the jailhouse, the hospital, and the prison. It is possible to promote peace using carrots as well as sticks. Extensive support is often required to allow combatants to reintegrate in society, and even with this, some will fall back into their old ways. For these, the criminal justice system remains.

In some jurisdictions, individual criminals are often granted lighter sentences or even immunity from prosecution in exchange for cooperation and testimony. Protection for cooperating witnesses can be extended to families, and may even involve comprehensive resettlement. With due regard to the rights of the victims, the needs of justice can be balanced with the needs of crime prevention.

Since many territorial groups enjoy a measure of community support, it is important that the vacuum be filled when these groups are removed. Asset forfeiture provides one vehicle to ensure that communities benefit from the state's attention. Seized land and livestock can become the basis for farming cooperatives. More than anything else, strong communities provide a bulwark against the incursions of transnational organized crime.

Global solutions to global problems

In the end, the main organized crime problem afflicting Central America – cocaine trafficking – does not originate within the region at all. The drug is produced in South America and consumed in the richer countries to the north. Central America is literally caught in the crossfire, a victim of its geographic placement.

To resolve issues spanning continents requires international cooperation. A global strategic approach to these contraband flows is required. The platform for this work lies in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocols and the United Nations Convention against Corruption. These treaties provide the basis for international cooperation and so are critical to addressing transnational trafficking. It is essential that all the nations concerned fully implement these international agreements so that cooperation on these issues can advance.