

The Question of Gang Violence in Central America

Gang violence has been a problem in Central America for decades, born in the aftermath of civil wars. Gangs are responsible for brutal acts of violence, abuse of women, and the forced displacement of thousands. Since the 1980s, gang violence in Central America has evolved from a localized, neighbourhood-based security concern into a complex, multi-faceted, transnational problem. They were hugely boosted by mass deportation from the U.S., and still are. The issue is only amplified by instability, poverty, climate shocks, and the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

The Northern Triangle

Gangs are especially a problem in the Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Gang membership in this area is estimated at 85,000. The rampant extortion in the Northern Triangle is estimated to be generating profits of over 1\$ billion a year, and murder rates are significantly higher than anywhere else in the world. El Salvador is now the 3rd most dangerous country in the world for civilians, only safer than Syria and South Sudan. This is directly linked to gang violence; homicides halved overnight when gangs held a truce in El Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18

The two most prominent and influential gangs operating in Central America are Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street gang/B18). Both gangs engage in a wide range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, extortion, human smuggling, robbery, murder, and contract killing. They both originated in the US and then expanded to Central America, particularly the Northern Triangle.

Effects on the Area

The activities of these gangs have far-reaching consequences. Their presence disrupts social structures, leading to a breakdown in community cohesion and a loss of faith in public institutions. Their drug trafficking and the resulting drug trade, fuels addiction, leading to devastating social and public health consequences. Extortion practices target businesses and individuals, hindering economic growth and creating an environment of fear and instability. Robberies and acts of violence committed by gang members further destroy trust within communities and continue cycles of violence. And their influence extends beyond their direct criminal activities. They often control informal economies within their territories, exerting control over local markets and exploiting vulnerable populations.

Emigration

Because of gang activities and violence, more than a million people from Central America have been uprooted from their homes, both within their own countries and in neighbouring ones. In 2022 there was nearly 600,000 refugees and Asylum-seekers from the Northern Triangle. There are over 318,000 internally displaced people in Honduras and Guatemala. They are escaping gang violence, threats, extortion, recruitment into gangs or prostitution, and gender-based violence (GBV). Homicide in Latin America has risen 3.7% a year on average over the past decade, which is more than three times the population growth rate of 1.1%.

National Response

A sharp switch in current policies is needed. The governments of the area have responded through punitive measures in the past, reproducing the stigmas and prejudices of internal armed conflict. The Iron Fist in El Salvador, Sweep-up Plan in Guatemala, and Zero Tolerance in Honduras were all national programmes to address the issue. They focused on mass incarceration, harsher prison conditions, and extrajudicial executions. They statistically have not worked at all. They have failed to recognise the counterproductive effects of security measures in *maras* prisons which confirm their identity as social outcasts. They don't consider the deep social roots of gangs. Gangs provide identity, purpose, and status for youths who are unaccommodated in their own societies and "born dead". Now all three countries are experimenting with new forms of regional collaboration in law enforcement.

International Response

Meanwhile, aid agencies are criticising donors for being slower to fund emergencies in Central America compared to others elsewhere. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras only received between a quarter and a half of the amount needed to address their UN-identified humanitarian needs last year, which was one of the lowest ratios in the world.