Readings on Central America

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The announcement by the White House on January 29 that it would ask Congress for $1 billion for Central America in its FY2016 budget is welcome news for the region, and for the United States. The proposed request would triple the resources earmarked for Central America by the U.S. government in recent years, although the amount of money contemplated remains modest by comparison to the magnitude of problems that those countries face.

The administration’s declaration on Central America, in combination with its restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba, creates the opportunity for the United States to forge a new relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean. With both initiatives, and the possibility of more surprises on Latin America policy yet to come, the upcoming Summit of the Americas in April in Panama City could be one of the most productive multilateral engagements the United States has had with the region in years.

Although the actual amount and composition of funds that will eventually be provided for Central America is far from clear, the assistance is badly needed. The surge of 60,000 minors detained trying to enter the United States during the summer of 2014 highlights how critical the situation has become, as do failed attempts by El Salvador, Honduras and Belize to forge “truces” between (and with) the street gangs perpetrating violence and criminality in their country. The September 2012 call by conservative Guatemalan president Otto Perez Molina to consider legalizing drugs further indicates the degree to which the destructive dynamic of narcotics, gangs, criminality and violence is tearing apart the countries of Central America, and particularly El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

According to the White House, $400 million of the money requested will be for programs to promote trade, reduce poverty and improve customs and border integration. $300 million will be for security assistance (military weapons) and anti-crime activities (including the continuation of programs conducted under the umbrella of the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Approximately $250 million will be for institution building and reform programs.

While the details provided by the administration appear reasonable, they appear, at first glance, to reflect a compilation of ideas by individual State Department and USAID organizations currently supporting Central America, regarding how to modify or plus-up their existing programs to spend $1 billion, rather than reflecting a coherent strategy about how to best attack the complex, interdependent problems impacting the region.

I can only imagine the emails, memos and frenzied meetings that must have occurred as high-level requests for information percolated down through individual program offices and field organizations in recent weeks. With the greatest respect for the abilities, professionalism and good intentions of my distinguished colleagues in Foggy Bottom, the United States may be
losing a historic opportunity to think creatively about how it might spend a billion dollars in a way that would most effectively assist our partners in Central America.

As those familiar with Defense Department programs in Afghanistan and Iraq know, $1 billion gets spent much more quickly than one might think. For both the United States and our Central American partners, it is critical that we get this right.

With due consideration to the many worthwhile ongoing programs to help Central America, the administration should consider the “thought exercise” of starting from a blank page and contemplating how best to help the region to see where it leads. I have confidence that many talented people in the administration have good ideas about how to help Central America. Yet the public details of the president’s initiative provided to date suggest that the window for innovation and strategic planning is already closing. The current moment is a historic opportunity to consider what we want to do, before we advance too far down the road.

In an ideal world, the structure of the new Central America initiative should be guided by a strategic concept that understands and addresses the region’s challenges in systemic terms, rather than a response to the separate manifestations of those problems. The approach taken should also be internationally coordinated not only with our partners in the region, but with outside actors such as European and Asian nations which can potentially contribute resources and solutions.

In both formulating and implementing the new initiative, the international and whole-of-government approach that Vice President Biden correctly advocates requires that U.S. and partner nation defense, police, judicial, trade and other officials from multiple stakeholder countries are talking together at the same table, rather than “team USA” deciding its position and traveling down-range to communicate its interagency solution to its partners.

Reciprocally, the partners involved in the initiative must engage with their U.S. counterparts frankly, at senior levels, if we are to work together effectively. Too often, officials of partner nations complement and profusely thank their U.S. benefactors for training and other support that did not correspond to their needs, not wanting to “offend the gringos,” in the belief that sincere feedback not only would not correct the problem, but would ensure that the “ingrates” got nothing the next year.

**General Principles for U.S. Engagement**

For the United States, three principles should guide the relationship with our partners as we develop and implement expanded engagement with Central America in the coming years: respect, reliability, and agility.

**Respect.** The United States must come not to impose its own solutions, but to sincerely listen and identify, collaboratively with its partners, which U.S. resources are most needed to bring to the table, building on existing programs where appropriate, but departing from them where necessary.
Reliability. Within the executive branch, and within Congress, the United States should deliver in a complete and timely fashion what it commits to. Our Central American partners cannot integrate us into their security and development programs, except at the margins, if the United States regularly cuts programs and theater cooperation assistance as the first option to balance the federal budget.

Agility. Although the United States must prevent abuse within assistance programs, the time and procedural burdens must not be so onerous that our partners seriously question whether it is worth it to accept U.S. help.

Recommended Elements of the New Approach

Where should we begin?

Take Drugs out of the Region. Although the scourge of transnational crime is about much more than “drugs,” the most significant single way that the United States can help to restore public order in Central America is to remove the enormous flow of illicit narcotics from the region. Doing so is not easy, and much more needs to be done to reduce demand in the United States, yet we should not deceive ourselves: drugs are one major contributor to the problem.

Go After the Money. In going after transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) operating in the region, their income flows and illegitimately obtained wealth is arguably a key center of gravity. Putting TCO money at risk has a multiplier effect: It decreases resources available to corrupt officials to buy high-powered arms, to hire local gang members and to build sophisticated international organizations. Attacking such income streams through financial and legal means also arguably spawns less collateral violence than the power struggles unleashed by eliminating the leadership of criminal organizations. Thus, strengthening financial institutions and associated vehicles for oversight and international cooperation within Central America should be a priority.

Fight Corruption. Corruption in public security forces, judicial systems and other public institutions is another center of gravity. Not only does corruption undercut the operational effectiveness of law enforcement, the judiciary, prisons, taxation, customs and financial oversight through which criminality can be controlled, but perceptions of corruption breaks the bond of trust that members of those institutions need to work together, and with, counterpart institutions. The question of corruption is also at the heart of citizen confidence in government and their participation in public security, from reporting crimes and testifying in judicial proceedings to participating in civic society and the formal economy, and thus reducing the space available for criminals to operate.

At the earliest phase of cooperation, the United States should help partner nations implement strict systems of control, possibly to include regular, organization-wide polygraph testing, monitoring systems and electronic databases for accounting and administration.

Such measures must also be accompanied by initiatives to make public service without corruption more viable, including increased options for police, military, judicial, prison
personnel and other public servants to live with their families in protected zones, safer from the criminals that they combat, as well as to increase salaries to a living wage.

Anti-corruption efforts must go beyond cleansing of operational level entities, to take on such behavior at the highest levels of government, and eventually, in the private sector as well.

U.S. assistance in the fight against corruption may include expanded cooperation on extradition, proving intelligence and technology systems and helping to screen and train the enormous quantity of personnel who must be brought in to replace those whose integrity is called into question by the oversight measures.

**Leverage the National Guard, the Coast Guard, and Service Schools and Academies.** The security assistance portion of expanded U.S. engagement with the region should make good use of three often overlooked U.S. military assets: the National Guard state partnership program, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the professional military education programs of each of the services.

Because the National Guard can operate in a law enforcement and public order role under the statutory authority of Title 32 of U.S. Code, Guard personnel are well positioned to interact with partner nation institutions performing law enforcement roles. Similarly, the statutory authority and mission set of the U.S. Coast Guard make it a good resource to support and coordinate with Central American partners on coastal and port security issues.

There are, of course, numerous ways in which conventional U.S. military forces can contribute, from intelligence and surveillance support to operations by our partner nations, to in-country training by U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Special Operations Command.

Finally, the U.S. military services should also consider expanding seats for military leaders from the region at their first-line institutions for professional military education including the Army and Navy War College, and the Service Academies. There are few more effective ways to demonstrate U.S. respect for, and commitment to, the region’s security forces than to invite their “best and brightest” to study alongside (not just from) their U.S. military counterparts.

**Take Back the Prisons.** Establishing effective control of Central America’s prisons, so that they cannot be used as bases of operation and centers for forced recruitment by criminal organizations, should take place in advance of, or concurrent with, programs that enhance partner nation capacity to investigate, detain, prosecute and incarcerate criminals. Failing to control prisons significantly undermines investments in law enforcement and the judiciary. Indeed, if more people are incarcerated, only to be obligated to join the gangs in prison, and to give leaders a secure environment from which to conduct extortions and plan operations, enhancing law enforcement without prison reform may make the situation worse.

Possible solutions range from the wider implementation of cell phone blocking technologies, to the construction of more and better incarceration facilities, combined with the expedited movement of detainees out of overcrowded holding cells. New and existing facilities must also have more effective physical and human controls, including the monitoring and protection of those who run them, and provisions for the protection of their families against gang blackmail.
**Creative Investment in Country.** Generating greater economic opportunity for the region, and redressing poverty and inequality in the countries of the region, is necessary for breaking the cycle of crime and violence, poverty and immigration in the region — yet investment and trade promotion must take local circumstances into consideration so as not to produce counterproductive side effects. U.S. promotion of expanded exports from the region, for example, will likely increase options for smuggling drugs and other contraband into the United States, and thus will require a corresponding increase in resources to inspect and control commercial cargos coming into the U.S. Similarly, U.S. companies which invest in Central American factories will inadvertently fuel criminal activity as much as local communities, since both their operations and their employees will represent new revenue streams for criminal organizations to extort. Creative “pilot programs” to redress specific problems might include secure living and shopping facilities, so that employees do not have to cede a portion of their wages as protection money to the gangs that dominate their neighborhoods.

**Leverage Remittances.** Remittances already account for over 16% of the GDP of El Salvador, and more than 10% in both Honduras and Guatemala. In total, more than $12 billion in remittances flowed to these countries in 2013, far greater than the support for the region just announced by the White House. Remittances are thus a factor to be taken into account, and leveraged where appropriate, in any U.S. program with the region. The U.S. and partner governments can, for example, work to bring down remittance transaction fees, and to create vehicles by which contributors in the United States can pool resources to fund private schools, hospitals or business in their home countries with the added security of government oversight.

**Expanded Youth Programs.** While U.S. assistance will doubtlessly help at the margins in providing more economic opportunities for those living in Central America, it will be difficult to provide widespread employment opportunities for youth already caught up in street gangs, or to eliminate the informal sector in which criminal organizations can thrive. Yet the region is awash in at-risk minors, whose fathers, and often mothers, have left to work in the United States, Canada or Europe, leaving them in the supervision of working or aging relatives. One of the best, and most cost effective, ways to slow the spread of the “virus” of gang membership and to strengthen civil society is to create spaces on a national scale in which these youth can interact away from the gangs, under the protection of competent authorities who can inculcate good values and examples (whether religious, military or otherwise).

**Work through the Inter-American System.** Where possible, the U.S. should involve institutions of the Inter-American System, such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the Inter-American Defense Board, in its Central America programs, particularly when those efforts involve outside donors such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea and China. While doing so may incur some efficiency costs, it will help to reinvigorate and bolster the Inter-American System in the face of alternatives such as CELAC and UNASUR, which seek to exclude the U.S. from the hemisphere.

As suggested by Vice President Biden in his op-ed piece, the United States cannot impose a “made-in-Washington” concept of salvation on Central America. It can only work with the countries of the region and empower them to overcome common problems together. Such a partnership depends on Central American governments re-establishing a bond of confidence and
trust with their own people, as well as the Central American people and governments rebuilding a bond of confidence with the United States. The difficult, arguably uphill, fights over funding of the initiative and the details of implementation have just begun. But 2015 is off to a promising start.

Five key social development issues in Latin America in 2014

January 9, 2015

Cynthia Flores Mora/World Bank

Inequality and informal employment

“An increase in inequality because the rich keep getting richer (rather than due to an increase in the percentage of the poor), which has contributed to rising homicide rates,” said economist Hernan Winkler, co-author of a World Bank study on inequality and violence in 2,000 Mexican municipalities, in this interview. This is not an easy task given that around half of all jobs in the region are informal. Latin American countries face the daunting challenge of generating quality, formal employment.

The fight against poverty in the region has also enjoyed some successes, such as conditional cash transfer programs, in which the poorest families receive cash in exchange for sending their children to school and taking them for regular medical checkups.

One of the most successful of these initiatives, the Bolsa Familia Program in Brazil, managed to reduce extreme poverty by half. It serves as a model for the rest of the world.

Women, rights and equality

Women’s efforts have been crucial for reducing extreme poverty in the region. In fact, many Latin American women are abandoning more traditional roles to engage in what was previously considered “men’s work.”

Several women have undertaken initiatives to form small businesses to address and overcome the effects of violence in their lives and that of their families. With respect to women’s political participation, key efforts have been made to ensure that they have increasing access to decision-making entities.
Unfortunately, in Latin America, prejudices and stereotypes from the past remain and cases of harassment or street violence against women continue. Additionally, the rights of sexual monitories are often not respected, despite the enactment of several laws in their favor.

**Innovation and education**

Much remains to be done in the education field. Although there is widespread access to education in most of Latin America, the main challenge continues to be education quality, as demonstrated by the World Bank study, *Great Teachers: How to Raise Student Learning in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

Based on direct observation in schools, classrooms and of teachers in different countries of the region, the study concluded that Latin American students lose an average of one day of classes weekly due to teachers’ inefficient use of time.

However, the region has made some notable progress in this area, such as in Jamaica, where basic education coverage is nearly 99%; and in initiatives such as a private school in Mexico which students attend for free; as well as a school with thatched roofs in Costa Rica that has surpassed all attendance records.

In terms of innovation and new technologies, some countries of the region are exploiting their comparative advantages. For example, several Caribbean nations have taken advantage of the English-language skills of their populations along with the proximity to the United States to position themselves as allies in industries such as animation and software or videogame development.

The enormous penetration of smart phones in the region (almost all countries have more than one cellphone per inhabitant) is also an opportunity for young programmers to join forces with development experts to create technology tools to fight poverty.

**Chikungunya and obesity**

The increase in non-communicable diseases in the region is of growing concern for governments, who must add this burden to their already overwhelmed health systems. In Mexico alone, some

Another health concern is Chikunguña. In August, experts warned that the spread of this disease throughout Latin America would be difficult to control given that it is a relatively new illness, for which reason Latin Americans have yet to develop the necessary antibodies to fight it.

This means a major challenge for governments and their health systems, as along with uncertain economic effects.

Additionally, cancer, one of the leading causes of death in the region, disproportionately affects the poor, who have limited access to good doctors, lack the funds to pay for treatments, and do not have the possibility of taking time off to recover from the illness.
Corruption in Latin America is skyrocketing. Here's why that’s good news

Image: REUTERS/Nacho Doce
Written by Stéphanie Thomson Editor, World Economic Forum
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What are the biggest challenges facing Latin America in 2015?: corruption, educational skills development, increasing inequality

It’s been a challenging couple of years for the international community. A stagnant global economy, tumbling commodity prices, rising populism, ongoing conflicts.

But when Latin American leaders were asked to name the biggest challenge in their region for 2015, the majority of them pointed to something else: corruption.

“Corruption has long been regarded as a significant problem for Latin America – perhaps the most significant of all,” a Forum report on the topic noted.

And in Guatemala, former president Otto Perez Molina will stand trial for allegedly masterminding a scheme under which bribes were paid to customs officials.

A long history of corruption

Saying no to corruption

Indeed, as analysts at Insight Crime have pointed out, it’s no coincidence that some of the region’s most corrupt countries – Honduras, Venezuela, Guatemala – are also among the most violent places in the world.

February 11, 2016

5 facts about Mexico and immigration to the U.S.

U.S. immigration from Latin America has shifted over the past two decades. From 1965 to 2015, more than 16 million Mexicans migrated to the U.S. in one of the largest mass migrations in modern history. But over the past decade, Mexican migration to the U.S. has slowed dramatically. Today, Mexico increasingly serves as a land bridge for Central American immigrants traveling to the U.S.

Here are five facts about Mexico and trends in immigration to the U.S.
Mexico is stopping more unauthorized Central American immigrants at its southern border. The Mexican government said in 2014 that it would increase enforcement at its southern border in response to an increased flow of Central Americans traveling through Mexico to reach the U.S. In 2015, the government there carried out about 150,000 deportations of unauthorized immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, a 44% jump over the previous year. These three Central American countries alone accounted for nearly all (97%) of Mexico’s deportations in 2015.

Despite increased enforcement by Mexico, many unauthorized Central Americans are still reaching the U.S. via Mexico. At the U.S.-Mexico border, the number of families and unaccompanied children apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials is again rising, though it’s too early to tell how 2016 will compare with prior years. From Oct. 1, 2015, to Jan. 31, 2016, 24,616 families and 20,455 unaccompanied children – the vast majority of them from Central America – were apprehended at the southwestern U.S. border, double the total from the same time period the year before.

More Cubans are also traveling through Mexico to reach the U.S. The number of Cubans migrating through Mexico to reach the U.S. spiked dramatically last year after President Barack Obama said the U.S. would renew ties with the island nation. In fiscal 2015, 43,159 Cubans entered the U.S. via ports of entry, a 78% increase over the previous year. Two-thirds of these Cubans arrived through the U.S. Border Patrol’s Laredo Sector in Texas. (Cubans who pass an inspection can enter the U.S. legally under the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966.)

Fewer Mexicans are migrating to the U.S. today than in the past. In fact, more Mexicans left than came to the U.S since the end of the Great Recession. Between 2009 and 2014, 870,000 Mexican nationals left Mexico to come to the U.S., down from the 2.9 million who left Mexico for the U.S. between 1995 and 2000. Of those moving back to Mexico, many cite family as the reason for their return. About 1 million Mexican immigrants and their U.S.-born children moved from the U.S. to Mexico between 2009 and 2014, and 61% said they had done so to reunite with family or to start a family, according to the 2014 Mexican National Survey of Demographic Dynamics.

More Mexicans now say life is about the same in the U.S. and Mexico. In 2015, 33% of Mexican adults said life in the U.S. is neither better nor worse than life in Mexico, up from 23% who said this in 2007. Still, about half of Mexican adults believe life is better in the U.S. and 35% of Mexicans said they would move to the U.S. if they had the opportunity and means to do so, similar shares as in 2009.

The administration said it would broaden an initiative that currently lets unaccompanied Central American children enter the United States as refugees, allowing their entire families to qualify, including siblings older than 21, parents and other relatives who act as caregivers.

Republicans said the expansion was the latest example of the White House’s misuse of its authority.
“Once again, the Obama administration has decided to blow wide open any small discretion it has in order to reward individuals who have no lawful presence in the United States with the ability to bring their family members here,” Representative Robert W. Goodlatte, Republican of Virginia and the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said in a statement. “Rather than take the steps necessary to end the ongoing crisis at the border, the Obama administration perpetuates it by abusing a legal tool meant to be used sparingly to bring people to the United States and instead applying it to the masses in Central America.”

--In El Salvador, people are fleeing a staggering level of violence that has made the country the murder capital of the world. It recorded a homicide rate of 104 people per 100,000 in 2015, the highest for any country in nearly 20 years, according to data from the World Bank.

--In Honduras, violence has come down in recent years, with a 15% drop in homicides in 2015, meaning many people leaving there are seeking better economic opportunities in the United States.

--In Guatemala, pockets of intense violence are driving some to the U.S. But Guatemalan officials said at the United Nations this week that their migrants are leaving mostly for economic reasons and should not be considered refugees.

Central America’s Violent Northern Triangle

Author: Danielle Renwick
Updated: January 19, 2016

Introduction

Tens of thousands of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans, many of them unaccompanied minors, have arrived in the United States in recent years, seeking asylum from the region’s skyrocketing violence. Their countries, which form a region known as the Northern Triangle, were rocked by civil wars in the 1980s, leaving a legacy of violence and fragile institutions. However, recent developments in Guatemala and Honduras have spurred talk of a “Central American spring” as protesters in both countries have come out in unprecedented numbers to denounce corruption and demand greater accountability from their leaders.

How many people have left the Northern Triangle in recent years?

Nearly 10 percent of the Northern Triangle countries’ thirty million residents have left, mostly for the United States. In 2013, as many as 2.7 million people born in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were living in the United States, up from an estimated 1.5 million people in 2000. Nearly one hundred thousand unaccompanied minors arrived to the United States from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras between October 2013 and July 2015, drawing attention to the region’s broader emigration trend. At the United States' urging, Mexico stepped up enforcement along its southern border, apprehending 70 percent more Central Americans in 2015 than it did in the year before.
Many seek asylum from violence at home: Between 2009 and 2013, the United States registered a sevenfold increase (PDF) in asylum seekers at its southern border, 70 percent of whom came from the Northern Triangle. Neighboring Belize, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama all registered a similar rise. Migrants from all three Northern Triangle countries cite violence, forced gang recruitment, extortion, as well as poverty and lack of opportunity, as their reasons for leaving.

Why are so many people fleeing the Northern Triangle?

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras consistently rank among the most violent countries in the world. Gang-related violence in El Salvador brought its homicide rate to ninety per hundred thousand in 2015, making it the most world’s most violent country not at war. All three countries have significantly higher homicide rates than neighboring Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama.

Extortion is also rampant. A July 2015 investigation by Honduran newspaper La Prensa found that Salvadorans and Hondurans pay an estimated $390 million and $200 million, respectively, in annual extortion fees to organized crime groups; meanwhile, Guatemalan authorities said in 2014 that citizens pay an estimated $61 million a year in extortion fees. Extortionists primarily target public transportation operators, small businesses, and residents of poor neighborhoods, according to the report, and attacks on people who do not pay contributes to the violence. Guatemala’s transportation sector has been hit especially hard: In 2014, more than four hundred transportation workers were killed, and authorities linked most of those cases to extortion.
**What is causing the violence?**

The nature of the violence is distinct in each country, but there are common threads: the proliferation of gangs, the region’s use as a transshipment point for U.S.-bound narcotics, and high rates of impunity are major factors contributing to insecurity in the region.

A CFR special report in 2012 said organized crime is a clear legacy of the region’s decades of war. In El Salvador, fighting between the military-led government and leftist guerrilla groups (1979–92) left as many as seventy-five thousand dead, and Guatemala’s civil war (1960–96) killed as many as two-hundred thousand civilians. Honduras did not have a civil war of its own, but nonetheless felt the effects of its neighbors’ conflicts; it served as a staging ground for U.S.-backed Contras, a right-wing rebel group fighting Nicaragua’s Sandinista government during the 1980s. Organized crime grew following these civil wars, particularly in El Salvador, where war produced a “large pool of demobilized and unemployed men with easy access to weapons,” according to the CFR report. In Guatemala, groups known as illegal armed groups and clandestine security apparatuses, grew out of state intelligence and military forces.

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras consistently rank among the most violent countries in the world.

Organized crime in the Northern Triangle includes transnational criminal organizations, many of which are associated with Mexican drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs); domestic organized-crime groups; transnational gangs, or maras, such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Eighteenth Street Gang (M-18); and pandillas, or street gangs.

MS-13 and M-18, the region’s largest gangs, may have as many as eighty-five thousand members combined (PDF). Both were formed in Los Angeles: M-18 in the 1960s by Mexican youth, and MS-13 in the 1980s by Salvadorans who had fled the civil war. Their presence in Central America grew in the mid-1990s following large-scale deportations from the United States of undocumented immigrants with criminal records. Lack of state capacity and governments’ inability to protect citizens, “are conditions that lend themselves to the emergence and strengthening of violent actors. Some of them involved in the drug trade, some are not.” In addition to the drug trade and extortion, criminal groups in the region also engage in kidnapping for ransom and human trafficking and smuggling.

Location along drug-trafficking routes adds to the violence. U.S.-led interdiction efforts in Colombia, Mexico, and the Caribbean have pushed trafficking routes into the region, and U.S. officials report that 80 percent of documented drug flows (PDF) into the United States now pass through Central America. DTOs sometimes partner with maras to transport and distribute narcotics, sparking turf wars (PDF), according a Congressional Research Service report.

**Why has violence lasted so long?**

Weak, underfunded institutions, combined with corruption, have undermined efforts to address gang violence and extortion. Tax revenues as percentage of GDP in the Northern Triangle are among the lowest in Latin America, exacerbating inequality and straining public services. Transparency International, a global anticorruption NGO, ranks all three countries low on its
corruption perceptions index. Honduran institutions remain particularly shaky following a 2009 coup—Latin America’s first in nearly two decades—that ousted President Manuel Zelaya.

As many as 95 percent of crimes go unpunished (PDF) in some areas, and the public has little trust in the police and security forces. (The police and military were accused of widespread human rights abuses during El Salvador and Guatemala’s civil wars.) Cynthia Arnson and Eric “There has been so much penetration of the state and so much criminal involvement in security forces, it makes it difficult to think about how they would [reform] without some outside intervention,” Olson says.

**How have Northern Triangle countries tried to stop the violence?**

In the early 2000s, Northern Triangle governments enacted a series of “mano dura,” or “heavy hand,” policies that expanded police powers and enacted harsher punishments for gang members. Around the same time, military personnel were deployed (PDF) to carry out police functions.

Though popular (PDF), these tougher policies in most cases failed to reduce crime and may have indirectly led to a growth in gang membership. Mass incarcerations increased the burden on already overcrowded prisons, where gangs, which effectively run many of them, recruited thousands of new members. The U.S. State Department, human rights groups, and journalists have raised concerns about the policies, denouncing prison conditions and police violence against civilians. Overcrowding in prisons drew international attention in 2012, when a prison fire in Comayagua, Honduras, killed more than three hundred inmates.

In 2012, in a departure from traditional hard-line policies, officials in Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes’ administration helped to broker a truce between the MS-13 and M-18 gangs. Homicides fell by more than 40 percent that year. Despite the reduction in violence between the gangs, critics charged that crime against civilians such as extortion continued unabated. When the peace deal unraveled two years later, killings surged.

Guatemala has seen important gains thanks in part to an independent body created by the UN in 2007 to investigate and prosecute criminal groups “believed to have infiltrated state institutions.” The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) grew out of the country’s 1994 Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights. Between 2009 and 2012, impunity levels fell (PDF) from 95 percent to 72 percent, according to CICIG, and in 2015 the tribunal worked with Guatemala’s attorney general on an investigation into a customs corruption scheme that led to the ouster and arrest of President Otto Pérez Molina. In a sign of disillusionment with Guatemala’s political class, voters in fall 2015 elected Jimmy Morales, a comedian with no political experience, over more established candidates.

In Honduras, allegations that members of the ruling National Party embezzled social-security funds, has led protesters to call for the ouster of President Juan Orlando Hernández. Anticorruption activists and U.S. State Department Counselor Thomas Shannon have called for institutions similar to CICIG to be created in El Salvador and Honduras, a proposal top officials in both countries have rejected. The Organization of American States announced plans in
September to create an anticorruption body in Honduras, but critics say it will only have a limited advisory role, making it “toothless.”

**What has been the regional impact of the violence?**

The regional impact is mostly felt in continued outflows of people. The United States and Mexico have apprehended more than one million Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran migrants since 2010, according to Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank. Belize, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama have also reported a sharp increase in inflows from the Northern Triangle since 2008.

Gang violence has mostly been contained within the region, although MS-13 and M-18 have a presence in the United States and Mexico. The U.S. Treasury Department, which in 2015 sanctioned three MS-13 leaders, estimates there are eight thousand MS-13 members in the United States, and in 2013, Mexico’s justice department reported on growing ties between Mexican criminal groups and Central American gangs, with as many as seventy Central American organized crime cells operating in Mexico.

**How has the United States responded?**

The United States has traditionally addressed violence in Central America by sending aid to the region’s law-enforcement agencies, supporting rule-of-law programs, and assisting in counternarcotics and anti-gang operations. Increasingly, U.S. initiatives also look to address the region’s challenges more broadly, including poverty and a lack of competitiveness.

Between fiscal year 2008 and fiscal year 2015, the United States gave just over $1 billion through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), a security and rule-of-law focused aid package. CARSI grew out of the Mérida Initiative, a U.S. program to fight DTOs and organized crime in Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Central America.

Following the 2014 influx of unaccompanied minors, President Obama met with the leaders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and acknowledged the United States’ "shared responsibility" in addressing drug trafficking and U.S. demand for narcotics. (The United States is the world’s largest market for illicit narcotics.)

Experts say U.S. gun laws and the practice of deporting criminals—between 2010 and 2012, the United States deported an estimated hundred thousand immigrants with criminal records to Northern Triangle countries—also contribute to the violence.

The Obama administration has requested $1 billion from Congress for FY2016 to support its U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America (PDF). The plan, which would represent a significant increase in annual spending in the region, focuses on security, governance, and economic development. The House Appropriations Committee recommended $296.5 million in CARSI funds; its Senate counterpart offered up to $675 million for the new strategy (PDF), according to the CRS.
“The move from CARSI to [the new strategy] reflects an evolution in thinking and an increasing appreciation for the importance of rule of law and institutions for making these aid packages successful,” says Shifter. “How it will end up is a different question.”

In January 2016, amid a new rush of arrivals from the region, U.S. authorities began to round up and deport recently arrived immigrants whose asylum claims had been denied. The Obama administration said that its aim was to deter would-be migrants. Meanwhile, the administration announced it would expand its refugee program to admit as many as nine thousand people each year from the Northern Triangle and enlist the United Nations to help screen refugee claims in Latin America.