

Executive Summary Backgrounder

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North American Transnational Youth Gangs: Breaking the Chain of Violence

Stephen Johnson and David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D.

Youth gangs have been a familiar part of American urban life since the American Revolution. Today, because of their growing size and globalization, they also pose a serious threat to public security. Groups that began in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1980s now have fraternal links to an estimated 130,000 to 300,000 members in Mexico and Central America and have spread to cities and small towns across the United States.

Their activities range from fighting rivals to armed robbery, extortion, alien smuggling, and arms and drug trafficking. Domestic anti-gang policies should seek to stabilize gang neighborhoods through migration reforms, to deny time and space to delinquent activities, and to improve coordination among law enforcement agencies. In Mexico and Central America, U.S. engagement should promote family cohesiveness, the rule of law, economic reforms to boost employment, and cooperative security links to track gang member migration.

Gangs Everywhere. Youth gangs are a growing phenomenon in the United States, Mexico, and Central America. The number of U.S. cities reporting gang activity went from 270 in 1970 to more than 2,500 in 1998—an increase of more than 800 percent. In 2002, a national survey of law enforcement agencies revealed that there were some 731,500 active gang members in the United States, mostly in large cities.

Unstable neighborhoods, broken homes, learning problems, violent role models, and access to

drugs feed gang growth. A long-term study conducted in Seattle found that children affected by these factors are two to four times more likely to join gangs. Historically, poor migrants—whether from another city or overseas—often settle first in marginal neighborhoods. For children with no parents, a single parent, or both parents working, gangs may offer stability and identity where integration and acceptance are unlikely.

International Links. As a consequence of a large Hispanic influx that began in the 1970s, Latino gangs now predominate. The Calle 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, gangs that originated in Los Angeles, are the most notorious and widespread.

After the Salvadoran government and rebels signed a peace accord in 1992 and after the conclusion of the Guatemalan peace process in 1996, the United States began deporting undocumented Central Americans, especially those convicted of crimes in the United States. The newly organized civilian police forces in El Salvador and Guatemala were barely able to deal with the rampant delinquency caused by demobilized combatants, much less the deported criminals. Honduras faced a sim-

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ilar problem even though it did not have a war: Many Honduran youth left in the 1980s to seek jobs in the United States. Those who ran afoul of the law were likewise deported.

In the mid-1990s, Colombian drug traffickers arrived to expand smuggling routes in Central America. Yet U.S. lawmakers cut support for regional justice reforms and police training, believing that peace and democracy had been achieved.

Growing Tentacles. Increasing flows of undocumented migrants across porous borders, deportations, and improved transportation and communication systems have helped to fuel the international expansion of Calle 18 and Salvatrucha. Los Angeles remains their major hub of activity, and they have members in almost every state, contributing to a rise in violent assaults.

In Mexico, Salvatruchas ambush, rob, and kill Central American migrants on their way to the U.S. border. In El Salvador, Calle 18 and Salvatrucha sell drugs, traffic in arms, and fence cars stolen in the United States. In Honduras, the murder rate has jumped by 50 percent in the past two years, with many of the killings attributable to gangs.

Operating from Nicaragua to the United States, gangs are sought by transnational drug and arms traffickers for their expertise in crossing the U.S. border. Last year, there were unsubstantiated rumors that an al-Qaeda cell leader met with Salvatruchas in Mexico and Honduras, supposedly to seek help in smuggling terrorists into the United States.

The Need for a Comprehensive, Sustained Effort. Some communities have attempted to reform entire gangs, but in doing so have increased their cohesiveness. Others have conducted massive roundups that cleaned up the streets only temporarily. Research shows that sustained efforts work best when police partner with other local agencies. However, the larger process that fuels gang growth requires both national and international coordination. U.S. policymakers at all levels should:

- **Promote stable neighborhoods** through collaboration among federal and local law

enforcement agencies to minimize characteristics that induce delinquency;

- **Reduce illegal immigration** through stronger border zone controls to filter out undocumented migrants more effectively and through policies that simplify entry and exit for documented legal workers and visitors;
- **Deny time and space for gang activities** through private–public partnerships to expand youth activities that promote integration, competition, and self-fulfillment; and
- **Employ multi-agency, multi-strategy policing** to rein in gang violence by partnering police, probation officers, social workers, and community leaders in the same quest.

Internationally, to curb transnational gang mayhem, U.S. policy should:

- **Help to open market economies** by supporting foreign projects that foster economic reform, property rights, and the growth of new industry;
- **Strengthen the rule of law** by bolstering support for judicial reform in Mexico and Central America;
- **Promote family-friendly policies** to improve education and keep families together; and
- **Cooperate with partner countries** by sharing intelligence on gangs, in processing deportees, and by helping them to strengthen their own borders through database sharing and training immigration and customs personnel.

Conclusion. Like crime, youth gang activity can be reduced but never eliminated. However, its potency can be reduced at home and abroad by focusing efforts on the systems and factors that feed gang activity.

Stephen Johnson is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, and David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.

Background

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North American Transnational Youth Gangs: Breaking the Chain of Violence

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Youth gangs are nothing new. They appeared in New York City and Philadelphia at the end of the American Revolution. Their numbers and violence correspond to peak levels of immigration and population shifts that occurred in the early 1800s, 1920s, 1960s, and late 1990s. Entrenched in American culture, gangs are romanticized in movies while rap artists copy their dress and jargon. However, because of their growing membership and globalization, gangs have become a public security threat that must be addressed.

Gangs once provided outlets for marginalized youths to socialize, control territory, and release aggression. More recently, some have evolved into informally affiliated international criminal networks. Two predominantly Hispanic gangs—Calle 18 and Mara Salvatrucha—began to proliferate in Los Angeles during the 1960s and now have fraternal links to some 130,000 to 300,000 members in Mexico and Central America and have expanded across the United States to major cities and rural communities on the Eastern Seaboard.¹

Gang activities range from defending neighborhood turf to armed robbery, extortion, alien smuggling, and arms and drug trafficking. Gangs provide a handy supply of young collaborators for organized crime. Their transnational nature is facilitated by fluid migration across porous national borders, incarceration with experienced criminals in U.S. prisons, and the weak rule of law in Mexico and Central America. Although no hard evidence links them with terrorist networks, transnational gangs are

Talking Points

- The recent spread of certain Hispanic gangs throughout the North American continent poses a public security threat.
- Migration across porous national borders and weak rule of law in Mexico and Central America have encouraged gang growth.
- Hispanic gangs that began in the United States have spread from coast to coast and now have links to 130,000 to 300,000 members in Mexico and Central America.
- Policymakers can help to stabilize gang neighborhoods through migration reforms, denying time and space to delinquent activities, and boosting coordination among law enforcement agencies.
- The United States should promote the rule of law and free-market reforms in Mexico and Central America to boost employment while fostering cooperative security links to track gang member migration.

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a potential menace to the stability of North American neighbors of the United States.

In the past, piecemeal measures have targeted symptoms without resolving root causes. To reduce the domestic risk, policymakers at the national and local levels should work together to identify factors that destabilize neighborhoods, to deny time and space for gang activities, and to improve coordination among various law enforcement agencies. At the same time, the White House and Congress should enact migrant labor reforms to reduce the chaos associated with undocumented transient populations.

Abroad, U.S. assistance programs should promote pro-family policies, the rule of law, and economic reforms to boost employment. The U.S. should also promote cooperative security links among countries and enhance border security.

Ubiquitous Phenomenon

Street gangs have been around since the dawn of civilization and affect nearly every country except countries with totalitarian regimes, where populations have been immobilized and freedom of assembly is constrained. Gangs were known in 14th century Europe, and Americans have complained about them since the early 18th century.² Today, they are a growing phenomenon, particularly in the United States.

The number of cities reporting gang problems went from 270 in 1970 to more than 2,500 in 1998—an increase of more than 800 percent.³ In 2002, the National Youth Gang Survey estimated that there were 21,500 gangs and 731,500 active gang members in the United States, 85 percent of whom reside in large cities.⁴ All law enforcement agencies covering populations of 250,000 or more have gang problems; 87 percent of police departments serving populations of 100,000 to 249,999, and 68 percent of police departments serving populations of 50,000 to 99,999, have reported gang problems; and 27 percent of police departments in municipalities of between 2,500 and 49,999 people have had trouble with gangs.⁵

Although sociologists have yet to agree on a definition, the term “gang” generally describes a group of adolescents or young adults who frequently gather, share an identity, use common symbols, claim control over neighborhood territory, and may sometimes engage in illegal activities. Members may number less than a dozen or in the thousands.

Gangs are less hierarchical than adult criminal groups and not exclusively dedicated to crime.⁶ Yet within gangs, delinquency far exceeds that of non-gang youth.⁷ A recent comparison between gang members and at-risk youths in Cleveland revealed that:

1. Numbers vary depending on media accounts and data cited by Central American officials. Probably no one knows how widespread gangs are in the region.
2. Randall G. Shelden, Sharon K. Tracy, and William B. Brown, *Youth Gangs in American Society* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2001), p. 31.
3. James C. Howell, “Youth Gangs: An Overview,” U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, August 1998, at ojjdp.ncjrs.org/fjbulletin/9808/history.html (December 3, 2004).
4. The National Youth Gang Survey is a nationally representative sample drawn from law enforcement agencies. See Arlen Egley, Jr., James C. Howell, and Aline K. Major, “Recent Patterns of Gang Problems in the United States: Results from the 1996–2002 National Youth Gang Survey,” in Finn-Aage Esbensen, Stephen G. Tibbetts, and Larry Gaines, *American Youth Gangs at the Millennium* (Long Groves, Ill.: Long Groves Press, 2004), pp. 103–104.
5. *Ibid.*, “Recent Patterns of Gang Problems in the United States,” p. 97.
6. Shelden *et al.*, *Youth Gangs in American Society*, pp. 19–20.
7. Howell, “Youth Gangs”; C. Ronald Huff, “Comparing the Criminal Behavior of Youth Gangs and At-Risk Youths,” in Esbensen *et al.*, *American Youth Gangs at the Millennium*, pp. 77–89; and Terence P. Thornberry, “Membership in Youth Gangs and Involvement in Serious and Violent Offending,” in Ralph Loeber and David P. Farrington, eds., *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998), pp. 147–166.

- 44.7 percent of members versus 4.1 percent of non-members reported committing auto theft;
- 40.4 percent of members said they participated in drive-by shootings compared to 2.0 percent of non-members;
- 34.0 percent of members versus zero percent of non-gang members reported intimidating or assaulting crime victims or witnesses;
- 72.3 percent of gang members versus 16.3 percent of non-members admitted assaulting rivals; and
- 17.0 percent of members versus 2.0 percent of non-members committed robbery.⁸

Finally, gangs are becoming more violent and mobile. Handguns, assault rifles, and grenades have replaced brass knuckles and blackjacks. Cars allow members to commit drive-by shootings and recruit new members in other communities and states. Meanwhile, robbery, assassination for hire, and drug trafficking supply a steady income for more organized groups.

Fertile Soil. Unstable neighborhoods, broken homes, violent role models, and access to drugs feed gang growth. Even the media glamorize and encourage violence.⁹ The Seattle Social Development Project tracked a sample of more than 800 juveniles from 1985 to the present, monitoring factors that influenced them to join gangs between the ages of 13 and 18.¹⁰ It measured neighborhood conditions,

antisocial circumstances in families and peer groups, school problems, and the early onset of individual problem behaviors.

The Seattle project concluded that, as the number of risk factors increased, an adolescent was more likely to join a gang.¹¹ These risk factors¹² included:

- **Marginal neighborhoods.** Youths living where acquaintances were in trouble were 3.0 times more likely to join gangs. Those living in neighborhoods where marijuana was easily available were 3.6 times more likely to join.
- **Family.** Juveniles in single-parent families were 2.4 times more likely to join than those in two-parent families. Children living in single-parent families with other adults were 3.0 times more likely to join gangs than youths in two-parent families. Regardless of family structure, parental attitudes favoring violence, poor family management and supervision, and low parental attachment correlated with gang membership.¹³
- **Academic problems.** Youths with learning disabilities contributing to low self-esteem were 3.6 times more likely to join gangs. Likewise, those with low academic achievement were 3.1 times more likely to join. Poor academic performance and low commitment to school corresponded to gang membership.

8. Huff, "Comparing the Criminal Behavior of Youth Gangs and At-Risk Youths," p. 80, Exhibit 2.

9. A recent university study found that American children spend nearly 2.5 hours in front of a television each day and up to 4.5 hours watching television or videotapes, playing video games, and browsing the Internet. Children from lower-income households spend an average of 30 more minutes per day watching television and 27 more minutes on video games than children from more affluent households. Long-term studies show that children who watch a lot of television violence are three times more likely to commit crimes when they became adults. See Emory H. Woodard IV, Ph.D., and Natalia Gridina, "Media in the Home 2000: The Fifth Annual Survey of Parents and Children," University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Public Policy Center, *Survey Series* No. 7, 2000, pp. 19–20, and L. Rowell Huesmann, Jessica Moise-Titus, Cheryl-Lynn Podolski, and Leonard D. Eron, "Longitudinal Relations Between Children's Exposure to TV Violence and Their Aggressive and Violent Behavior in Young Adulthood: 1977–1992," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (March 2003), pp. 201–221.

10. Karl G. Hill, Christina Lui, and J. David Hawkins, "Early Precursors of Gang Membership: A Study of Seattle Youth," in Esbensen *et al.*, *American Youth Gangs at the Millennium*, pp. 191–199.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

13. *Ibid.*, and Thornberry, "Membership in Youth Gangs and Involvement in Serious and Violent Offending," p. 154.

- **Peer groups.** Youth who associated with delinquent friends were 2.0 times more likely to join gangs.
- **Drugs and violence.** Juveniles who used marijuana were 3.7 times more likely to join gangs. Youth who engaged in violent behavior at younger ages than their peers were 3.1 times more likely to join.

The Role of Migration. Surges in gang activity often accompany population shifts, regardless of whether migrants are foreign-born or native. During the 19th century, Irish and Italian street gangs proliferated in East Coast cities as waves of European immigrants entered the United States. African-American gangs prevailed in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s as southern blacks moved west. Migrating to survive, such people have little choice but to settle in disorganized, transient neighborhoods.

Foreigners who are unprepared to compete in their adopted society find survival even more difficult. Gangs offer stability, identity, status, and protection for children who have no parents or must spend most of their time on the streets.¹⁴ Wilmer Salmeron Molina, deported from the United States to El Salvador, told *The Washington Post*:

My mother used to hit me with a belt buckle and wires, and my father didn't want anything to do with me.... [The gang] gave me money, a place to sleep. Maybe it was the wrong step I took, but I had no options.¹⁵

Following a migrant influx that began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1990s, the U.S.

Census Bureau believes that between 10 million and 12 million undocumented Hispanic aliens, attracted to seasonal work in agriculture and construction, are now present in the United States. Although the vast majority are hard-working and law-abiding, some of their numbers have fueled Hispanic gang growth. According to the 1999 National Youth Gang Survey, the racial and ethnic composition of U.S. gang members is about 47 percent Hispanic, 31 percent African-American, 13 percent Caucasian, 7 percent Asian, and 3 percent other.¹⁶

International Links

Although notorious homegrown groups such as the Skinheads, Crips, Bloods, and Latin Kings gained national reach by inspiring imitators or by occasionally recruiting in other cities, two Hispanic groups—Calle 18 and Mara Salvatrucha—have drawn on the ebb and flow of Latin American migrants to become a transnational phenomenon.

The Calle 18 (18th Street) gang coalesced among Mexican migrants in Los Angeles during the 1960s after other Hispanic gangs blocked them from joining. It expanded by accepting Central Americans and natives, as well as members of other nationalities and races. It was the first Hispanic gang known to recruit outside its home city and state, seeking out youth of middle school and elementary school ages to help steal, extort protection money, and sell drugs. Mexican and Colombian traffickers now reportedly use Calle 18 members to distribute drugs in the United States.¹⁷

14. In 2004, as many as 10,000 lone Mexican minors risked hunger and predation to cross the southwest border to join family members working in the United States. See Catherine Bremer, "Thousands of Mexican Kids Try to Sneak into U.S.," Reuters, December 9, 2004. Countering the attraction to gangs, fraternal associations and other mutual aid societies were formed during the 19th and early 20th centuries to help Italians, Irish, Poles, and other immigrants adapt to their new country. These voluntary associations served as legitimate avenues to seek stability, identity, and assistance in times of crisis. See David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

15. Mary Jordan, "Central America's Gang Crisis: Prison Riots Reflect Widening Violence in Poor Nations," *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2004, p. A1.

16. Arlen Egley, Jr., "National Youth Gang Survey Trends from 1996 to 2000," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *OJJDP Fact Sheet No. 2*, February 2002, p. 2, at www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200203.pdf (March 1, 2005).

The Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13)¹⁸ was formed in the 1980s in the same neighborhood as Calle 18, but among new Salvadoran migrants. At the time, conflict and high unemployment inspired an exodus of Central Americans to other countries.¹⁹ In the case of El Salvador, a 12-year civil war between communist guerrillas and a fledgling democratic government displaced nearly 1 million people, about half of whom are believed to have entered the United States.²⁰ Some were former guerrilla recruits from Salvadoran slums who brought with them knowledge of weapons, explosives, and combat tactics.²¹ Since its inception in California—and later in Washington, D.C., where another sizable Salvadoran community blossomed—MS-13 has spread to neighboring states, where gangs now prey on and recruit other Latino migrants.

Fueling the Fire. After free elections brought peace to Nicaragua in 1990 and a negotiated settlement ended El Salvador's conflict in 1992, the United States started sending Central American refugees and migrants home. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service²² deported 4,000 to 5,000 people per year to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. According to official figures,

roughly one-third of these individuals had criminal records and had spent time in American prisons.²³ In 2003, the United States forcibly removed a total of 186,151 persons, including 19,307 who were returned to these three countries; 5,327 had criminal records—three to four times the number deported in the early 1990s.²⁴ A relatively minor phenomenon in the 1980s, gangs now number between 150,000 to 300,000 members in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, although no one knows the exact figure.

At first, the U.S. government sent deportees home without ensuring that there were local programs to receive them. Many knew little Spanish and had no ties to Central America except for having been born there. In El Salvador, jails were already packed with ex-soldiers and demobilized guerrillas who had turned to crime in the absence of employment. As a consequence, many returnees sought out the urban slums and rural war zones that their parents had abandoned in the 1980s. There, they introduced local toughs and former combatants to the drug-based crime that they had known in the United States. Deportees arriving in Guatemala and Honduras followed similar patterns.²⁵

17. See Al Valdez, Investigator, Orange County District Attorney's Office, "California's Most Violent Export," 2000, at www.streetgangs.com/topics/2002/18thexport.html (March 8, 2005), and Al Valdez, "A South American Import," National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations, 2000, at www.nagia.org/mara_salvatrucha.htm (March 8, 2005).

18. In Spanish, *mara* means "gang" and *Salvatrucha* generally means "smart Salvadoran."

19. While internal conflict prompted Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans to emigrate, the mechanization of farms reduced employment for unskilled labor in Honduras, prompting many young men to seek jobs abroad.

20. From 1980 to 1990, the number of Salvadorans reportedly living in the United States increased from 94,447 to 465,433. By 2000, an estimated 600,000 to 900,000 were living in the United States. U.S. Bureau of the Census and U.S. Department of Commerce, *Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2000*, December 2001, p. 12.

21. Scott Wallace, "You Must Go Home Again—Deported L.A. Gangbangers Take Over El Salvador," *Harper's Magazine*, August 2000, p. 52.

22. The Immigration and Naturalization Service was transferred to the Department of Homeland Security in 2002 and renamed the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

23. U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1997 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999), at uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/1997YB.pdf (March 8, 2005), and Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), at uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/2003Yearbook.pdf (March 8, 2005).

24. *Ibid.*

25. Wallace, "You Must Go Home Again," p. 53.

In helping to end communist insurgencies during the 1980s, the United States rightly persuaded Central American dictatorships to cede power to civilian-elected leaders. Pressured by human rights activists, U.S. diplomats pushed countries like El Salvador to separate their police forces from their armed forces. In each case, a hiatus between the demobilization of the military police and the training of a civilian force corresponded to a rise in delinquency. Rampant crime outstripped civilian capacity to deal with it, to the point that soldiers were recalled to assist the police—first to stop rural marauding in postwar El Salvador and, more recently, to fight crime in Guatemala and gangs in Honduras.

In the mid-1990s, Colombian drug traffickers arrived in Central America to expand smuggling routes, adding an additional challenge. Yet U.S. support for regional justice reforms and police training declined, as U.S. lawmakers believed that peace and democracy had been achieved. Moreover, these programs had become mismanaged within the U.S. Department of Justice.²⁶

Global Reach. Increasing flows of undocumented migrants across porous borders, deportations, and improved transportation and communication networks have helped the Salvatruchas and Calle 18 to become international. According to Salvadoran police, 90 percent of deported gang members return to the United States as fast as they can. Los Angeles remains their major hub of activity,²⁷ and Washington,

D.C., is the next largest center. In fact, gang members number between 3,000 and 4,000 in Fairfax County, Virginia, alone. Allied groups are present along the Eastern Seaboard from New York to the Carolinas.

Further south, Salvatruchas and Calle 18 traffic in prostitutes and prey on illegal migrants along highways and railroads that run from Guatemala through Mexico to the southwest U.S. border. In Chiapas, Mexico, authorities arrested and deported 57,000 aliens in 2002.²⁸ There, Salvatruchas commonly ambush, rob, and kill Central American migrants jumping off freight trains as they approach cities and police checkpoints.²⁹ Documents found on arrested gang members show that they come from the United States, Mexico, Central America, and as far away as Ecuador. Besides young delinquents, some are former soldiers and police officers.

Migrants are not the only targets. In Tapachula, Chiapas, parents pulled their children out of schools for nearly a week after *maras* threatened to avenge the arrest of comrades who attacked a school parade in November 2004. Later, some 5,000 citizens marched through town to protest the violence, some with signs calling for Mexico to adopt the death penalty.³⁰

On Mexico's northern flank, the Carrillo Fuentes drug cartel has reportedly recruited *maras* in Juárez. Mexican prosecutor José Santiago Vasconcelos claims that "traffickers hire them as killers, but without making them formally part of their organization."³¹ On the U.S. side of the border, El Paso authorities

26. Hearing, *Investigation of Misconduct and Mismanagement at ICITAP, OPDAT and Criminal Division's Office of Administration*, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. House of Representatives, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess., September 21, 2000, at commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/hju67329.000/hju67329_0.htm (March 3, 2005).

27. Los Angeles ranks first in the nation in gang-involved youth, with some 58,000 members of various groups. Moreover, California has the most gang-related problems compared to any other state, with more than 200 communities seriously affected by gang activity. Tia Kim, "Youth Gangs," fact sheet, University of California, Riverside, Southern California Center of Excellence on Youth Violence Prevention, Fall 2004, p. 1.

28. Tessie Borden, "S. Mexico's Trail of Tears," *Arizona Republic*, May 14, 2003, at www.azcentral.com/specials/special41/articles/0514southernborder.html (December 17, 2004).

29. George W. Grayson, "Mexico's Southern Flank: A Crime-Ridden 'Third U.S. Border,'" *Hemisphere Focus*, Vol. 11, Issue 32 (December 22, 2003), p. 2.

30. Francisco Robles Nava, "Maras extienden sus tentáculos," *La Opinión*, February 23, 2004. See also Kevin Sullivan, "Mexico Battles Influx of Violent Gangs," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2005, p. A10.

Struggling Economies, Weak Justice Systems

Partly closed economies encourage gang proliferation south of America's border. Since 2002, nearly 1 million young adults have joined the Mexican labor force each year to find only 200,000 jobs waiting for them. Unwilling to confront entrenched interests, the Mexican National Congress blocks competition in the telecommunications and energy industries and has declined to reform an obsolete land tenure system.

Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran economies depend on remittances from the United States that total \$3 billion.¹ According to the International Labor Organization, underemployment averages about 65 per cent in these countries.² Until negotiations began with the United States on the U.S.–Central America Free Trade Agreement, local politicians were unwilling to permit competition in sectors dominated by family monopolies.

Historically weak justice systems have struggled to keep up with the new challenges. In Mexico, migrants and human traffickers (known as “coyotes”) used to bribe corrupt border guards to allow them to pass. Gangs now extort tolls as violence against both migrants and police escalates.

In Honduras, prisons now hold twice their capacity, and the nation of 6.9 million is protected by 6,200 police—one officer per 1,100 people, counting administrative personnel. In 1998, Honduras had a murder rate of 154 per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest murder rate in the hemisphere and twice the rate in Colombia during the same period. By contrast, in 2000, El Salvador had a murder rate of 34 per 100,000 inhabitants—still considered high—with about 17,000 police protecting 6.5 million or one officer per 383 citizens, which is close to the

1. In 2001, remittances from the United States to El Salvador totaled \$1.9 billion, remittances to Guatemala totaled \$584 million, and remittances to Honduras totaled \$460 million. Remittances to El Salvador accounted for 17 percent of that country's GDP. See Manuel Orozco, “Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean: Money, Market, and Costs,” Inter-American Dialogue, PowerPoint presentation, 2002, at www.iadb.org/mif/v2/files/Orozco2002.ppt (January 18, 2005).
2. International Labor Organization, Subregional Office for Central America, Haiti, Panama, and Dominican Republic, “Decent Work Indicators Database,” at www.oit.or.cr/estad/td/indexe.php (January 31, 2005).
3. Justice Studies Center of the Americas, *Report on Judicial Systems in the Americas 2002–2003*, Table 2, at www.cejamericas.org/reportes/muestra_seccion.php?idioma=ingles&capitulo=INDBASIC&tipreport=REPORTE0&seccion=TASADELI (January 3, 2005).

reported their first encounter with a Salvatrucha last August while responding to an assault in a downtown parking lot.

Oscar Bonilla, president of El Salvador's National Council for Public Security, which manages delinquent rehabilitation programs, believes that Salvatruchas showed up as deportees as early as 1992, and Calle 18 members began arriving in 1996. They settled in capital city slums and former guerrilla strongholds like the villages of Apopa and Quetzaltepeque. Today, these two gangs have an estimated 22,000 and 12,000 members, respec-

tively. They procure arms for foreign affiliates, fence cars stolen in the United States, sell drugs, and collaborate with kidnapping and bank robbery rings. In the mid-1990s, many of them tried to return to America because local vigilante groups like the *Sombra Negra* (Black Shadow) targeted them for execution. Now murders by rivals are more common.

Some Salvatruchas and Calle 18 members have been deported to Honduras, where allied gangs now number an estimated 45,000 members. In the past two years, the murder rate in Tegucigalpa, the

country's capital city, has increased by 50 percent. Many of these killings are attributable to gangs, judging by typical signs of gang torture. During that period, *maras* killed some 100 bus drivers throughout the country for failing to pay them "taxes" of about \$10 per day. In December 2004, gang members identified as Salvatruchas fired on a city bus with automatic weapons in San Pedro Sula, killing 28, including four children.³²

Although half of all homicides are attributable to gangs in El Salvador and Honduras, police reports indicate that gangs account for only 20 percent of homicides in Guatemala. However, in a raid on a Guatemala City barrio in 2003, police arrested 872 gang members, confiscating 70 guns, 55 knives, and various explosives. In January 2005, police found the head of a female victim on a bus that was shuttling between shantytowns where rival *maras* operate.

While these delinquent groups exact a heavy social cost in Central America, they currently pose no national security threat to the United States. However, operating from Nicaragua to the United States, these gangs come in contact with transnational drug and arms traffickers, who increasingly employ them as distributors and assassins. Moreover, they are experts in gaining illegal entry into the United States. Last year, rumors circulated that al-Qaeda cell leader Adnan G. El Shukrijumah had been sighted meeting with *maras* in Mexico and Honduras, supposedly seeking their help in smuggling terrorists into the United States. None of those stories could be confirmed.³³

Playing Catch-Up

Until the 1990s, local officials addressed most local problems caused by street gangs. Since then, national authorities have become more involved in prevention and enforcement. None of these authorities, however, have tackled the larger social, demographic, and economic pressures that feed transnational gang growth in the United States and abroad.

U.S. Efforts. Through trial and error, piecemeal suppression and prevention strategies have yielded gradually to more comprehensive approaches. At the local level, the Chicago Area Project, founded in the 1930s, sought to reduce crime through recreational activities and self-improvement campaigns, assigning case workers to gangs to convert them into positive social forces. Afterward, evaluators found that treating gangs as a group increased cohesiveness and, in turn, crime.³⁴ Los Angeles launched massive gang roundups in 1988, believing they would dramatically curb activity. During one sweep, police apprehended some 1,400 youths. Yet only about half of those detained actually belonged to gangs; the result was only 60 felony arrests and much citizen aggravation.³⁵

Many states have passed anti-gang laws that sound tough to voters but may not be any more effective than enforcing laws already on the books.³⁶ Often, new legislation includes enhanced penalties for crimes committed by gang members. A New York district attorney is even using anti-terrorism statutes to pursue gangs.³⁷ Among other

31. Daniel Borunda, "Central American Gang May Have Presence in EP," *El Paso Times*, January 3, 2005, at www.borderlandnews.com/stories/borderland/20050103-7469.shtml (January 3, 2005).

32. Associated Press, "Honduran Busdrivers Strike to Protest Extortion by Mara Gang," October 15, 2004. See also Ginger Thompson, "Gunmen Kill 28 on Bus in Honduras; Street Gangs Blamed," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2004, p. A4.

33. Jerry Seper, "Al Qaeda Leader Identified in 'Dirty Bomb' Plot," *The Washington Times*, October 5, 2004, at washingtontimes.com/national/20041005-013052-7047r.htm (October 29, 2005).

34. Finn-Aage Esbensen, "Preventing Adolescent Gang Involvement," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, September 2000.

35. James C. Howell, "Youth Gang Programs and Strategies," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, August 2000.

36. For more information on the increasing federal role in prosecuting gang activity, see Paul Rosenzweig, "The Gang Act Needs Modification," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 494, May 3, 2004, at www.heritage.org/Research/Crime/wm494.cfm.

Family-Friendly Policies Are Important

Patrick F. Fagan¹

From New York's Hell's Kitchen among Irish immigrants in the 19th century to the poverty-ridden slums of El Salvador and Guatemala, neighborhoods of broken families—immigrant and non-immigrant alike—have spawned gangs.

Children in such circumstances are more likely to be abused or neglected (a key ingredient of juvenile violent crime) and to be involved in drugs and less likely to get an education and, thus, to obtain a good job.² Central America's culture of serial cohabitation among the poor puts children at much greater risk of becoming gang members. Governments sometimes add to the problem with bureaucratic red tape and costly fees that stop many poor individuals from even contemplating marriage.

Federal and state governments in the United States, particularly in Oklahoma and Utah, are trying to learn how to promote marriage and sexual abstinence for teenagers. The National Council on Family Relations is building a database on all marriage programs around the country for the federal government's Administration for Children and Families. The Abstinence Clearing House provides a repository of data on abstinence programs.

Public debate can draw on such research to shape policies that will foster family cohesion and social stability in the United States as well as in Mexico and Central America.

1. Patrick F. Fagan is William H. G. FitzGerald Research Fellow in Family and Cultural Issues at The Heritage Foundation.
2. For a more exhaustive review of the sociological data on family and juvenile violent crime, see Patrick F. Fagan, "The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1026, March 17, 1995, at www.heritage.org/Research/Crime/BG1026.cfm.

measures, raising the school dropout age has kept more juveniles under adult supervision in some communities, real estate agents in Indiana must disclose whether property is affected by gang activity, and the District of Columbia City Council has debated whether to ban sales to minors of video games that glorify crime and gang violence.

Some states like California, Minnesota, and Virginia have established gang task forces, often with the collaboration of Drug Enforcement Administration agents and other federal authorities. In 2004, Virginia's Fairfax County budgeted \$1.4 million for an 11-member anti-gang unit. Yet commu-

nities that succeeded in rolling back gang violence did so through political will, sustained efforts, and multiple strategies.

In 1995, authorities in Boston believed that gangs were responsible for at least 60 percent of all youth homicides.³⁸ In response, they adopted problem-oriented policing, encouraging officers to analyze problems contributing to specific crimes and to attempt to solve them, as opposed to traditional methods that emphasize response to calls, arrests, and after-the-fact investigation.³⁹ Instead of relying on new laws, the city set out using available laws and resources to impose costs

37. This is a controversial use of such laws because youth gangs usually have no political motive in committing their crimes. See Michelle Garcia, "N.Y. Using Terrorism Law to Prosecute Street Gang," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2005, p. A3.

38. David M. Kennedy, Anne M. Piehl, and Anthony Braga, "Youth Violence in Boston: Gun Markets, Serious Youth Offenders, and a Use-Reduction Strategy," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (1996), pp. 147–196.

on offenders by shutting down drug markets, serving warrants, enforcing probation restrictions, making disorder arrests, and dealing more strictly with resulting cases as they progressed through prosecution and adjudication.⁴⁰

Additionally, Boston police cultivated partnerships with probation and parole officers, federal and state prosecutors, local clergy, juvenile corrections officials, and social service providers. Police and probation officers conducted joint patrols and shared information about specific gang members. Community leaders, social service providers, and local clergy walked the streets to demonstrate support for law enforcement.⁴¹ As a result, Boston's Operation Ceasefire coincided with a 63 percent decrease in monthly youth homicides and a 25 percent drop in gun assaults.⁴²

At the national level, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention recommends a number of prevention strategies such as parent training, after-school activities, truancy and dropout prevention, reentry programs with appropriate services, tracking of

former offenders, and job programs for youth in high-crime, high-risk communities.⁴³ But not all strategies work in every circumstance. For example, parent-training programs have largely failed to reduce delinquency, while school-based child interventions combined with parent training appear to have more success.⁴⁴

Federal programs such as Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT)—which uses uniformed police as instructors in middle school classrooms to teach students about the negative consequences of gang participation—are highly touted in promoting negative perceptions of gangs.⁴⁵ Yet a 2001 evaluation of GREAT found no statistically significant impact on gang membership, drug use, or self-reported delinquency.⁴⁶

One Department of Labor program that provided on-the-job training, classes, and job search assistance for disadvantaged youth actually corresponded to increased arrests.⁴⁷ A 1996 evaluation found that males who participated in the job-training program with no prior history of apprehension had arrest rates that were 10.4 percent higher than

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39. See Anthony A. Braga, David M. Kennedy, Elin J. Warring, and Anne Morrison Piehl, "Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence: An Evaluation of Boston's Operation Ceasefire," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2001), pp. 195–225.
40. David M. Kennedy, "Pulling Levers: Chronic Offenders, High-Crime Settings, and a Theory of Prevention," *Valparaiso University Law Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1997), p. 462.
41. Jack McDevitt, Anthony A. Braga, Dana Nurge, and Michael Buerger, "Boston's Youth Violence Prevention Program: A Comprehensive Community-Wide Approach," in Scott H. Decker, *Policing Gangs and Youth Violence* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003), pp. 53–76.
42. Braga *et al.*, "Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence," p. 207.
43. In its Comprehensive Gang Model, the five elements are community mobilization, provision of opportunities, social intervention, suppression, and organizational change and development. For more details about the model, see Institute for Inter-Governmental Research, National Gang Youth Center, "Comprehensive Gang Model," at www.iir.com/nygc/acgp/model.htm (February 7, 2005).
44. For a review of the evaluation literature on various prevention programs that include parent training and other family-related interventions, see David P. Farrington and Brandon C. Welsh, "Family-Based Crime Prevention," in Lawrence W. Sherman, David P. Farrington, Brandon C. Welsh, and Doris Layton MacKenzie, eds., *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 22–55.
45. Finn-Aage Esbensen, D. Wayne Osgood, Terrance J. Taylor, Dana Patterson, and Adrienne Freng, "How Great Is G.R.E.A.T.? Results from a Longitudinal Quasi-Experimental Design," *Criminology and Public Policy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 2001), pp. 87–118.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Larry L. Orr, Howard S. Bloom, Stephen H. Bell, Fred Doolittle, Winston Lin, and George Cave, *Does Training for the Disadvantaged Work? Evidence from the National JTPA Study* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1996).

those among comparable male youths who did not participate in the program.⁴⁸

Private-sector efforts show more promise. For decades, Boys and Girls Clubs have helped to keep children off the streets. Founded in the 1860s, they now have 3,400 locations in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Evaluations of two Boys and Girls Clubs indicate that these programs help to reduce delinquency in neighborhoods where they are located.⁴⁹ Yet not all parents can afford the modest fees needed to enroll their children.

In his 2005 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush pledged \$150 million over three years to community and faith-based groups to help troubled youth avoid “apathy, gangs, or jail.” “Taking on gang life,” declared the President, “will be one part of a broader outreach to at-risk youth, which involves parents and pastors, coaches and community leaders, in programs ranging from literacy to sports.”⁵⁰

While the President is right to acknowledge the roles that community and faith-based groups play in helping to prevent gang membership, the government’s track record suggests that it should confine itself to helping local jurisdictions handle tasks they cannot do by themselves, such as coordinating the flow of information among federal and local law enforcement agencies. In September 2004, the U.S. House Appropriations Committee earmarked \$10 million to establish a National Gang Intelligence Center at the Federal Bureau of Investigation to do just that.

Foreign Approaches. Surprised by the alarming growth of delinquency and gangs during the past decade, Central American governments have

responded mostly by strengthening law enforcement. In 2003, El Salvador and Honduras adopted broad anti-gang statutes known as *Mano Dura* (Firm Hand) laws. In El Salvador, prosecutors can send juveniles to prison for two to five years for simply joining a *mara*. Wearing tattoos or using gang hand signals can result in a similar sentence. Carrying arms or explosives carries a penalty of up to six years. From July 2003 to 2004, Salvadoran police registered some 19,275 arrests on gang-related charges.⁵¹ All in all, El Salvador’s prisoner population has doubled in the past five years to 12,000 inmates, 40 percent of whom belong to street gangs.⁵²

In Honduras, some 1,500 tattooed juveniles have reportedly been incarcerated under *Mano Dura*. Honduran authorities say that kidnappings have dropped from 18 in 2001 to one in the past year. Bank robberies have dropped from 70 to single digits. They say car thefts and gang-related killings have also declined. *Mano Dura* reforms have also enabled authorities to keep suspects in jail pending trial. Formerly, gang victims had to press charges within 24 hours—which they seldom did—or the suspects were released.

Guatemala also approved tougher anti-gang laws. In 2004, President Oscar Berger even appointed a new interior minister to fight crime and deployed 4,000 army troops and police to troubled neighborhoods throughout Guatemala City.

Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso pushed for similar laws, but her successor, Martin Torrijos, has proposed a social rehabilitation initiative instead. His *Mano Amiga* (Friendly Hand) campaign would provide at-risk youth with extra edu-

48. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

49. R. J. Brown and D. W. Dodson, “The Effectiveness of a Boy’s Club in Reducing Delinquency,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 332 (March 1959), pp. 47–52, and Steven P. Schinke, Mario A. Orlandi, and Kristen C. Cole, “Boys and Girls Clubs in Public Housing Developments: Prevention Services for Youth At-Risk,” *Journal of Community Psychology*, OSAP Special Issue (1992), pp. 118–128.

50. George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” February 2, 2005, at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html (March 9, 2005).

51. EFE Newswire, “Dura lucha contra los maras en El Salvador,” *el Nuevo Herald*, September 14, 2004, at www.miami.com/mld/elnuevo/news/world/americas/9655243.htm (September 14, 2004).

52. Jordan, “Central America’s Gang Crisis.”

cational, cultural, and social opportunities and would use existing laws to prosecute gang violence. It would also draw on international organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund for funding and expertise.⁵³

Besides more aggressive policing, the Salvadoran government has developed rehabilitation centers in several prisons. Its National Council for Public Security has collaborated with private foundations to establish a rescue camp west of San Salvador for some 120 youths per year who voluntarily leave gangs. It asked the Catholic Church and the International Organization for Migration to create the *Bienvenidos a Casa* (Welcome Home) program to supply clothing, counseling, and employment advice to deportees arriving from the United States.

Meanwhile, a former Peace Corps volunteer and an Amnesty International official formed *Homies Unidos* (Brothers and Sisters United) to guide active *maras* toward social integration, self-respect, and stable employment. Partly supported by the opposition Farabundo Martí Liberation Front party, it lobbies for rehabilitation in place of tougher laws—countering law enforcement advocates in El Salvador's ARENA party government and challenging skeptics who believe that treating entire gang cliques will only strengthen cohesion.

Elsewhere, private organizations surpass meager governmental reeducation efforts. Six years ago, Honduran sociologist Ernesto Bardales created *Jovenes Hondureños Adelante—Juntos Avancemos* (Forward Honduran Youth—Together We Advance) to reform former gang members. Emilio Gouboud, director of Guatemala's *Asociación para la Prevención del Delito* (Association for the Prevention of Petty Crime, or APREDE) has developed year-long programs to train former members as carpenters and barbers. *Fundación Remar* supports

32 homes for reforming gangsters in Guatemala, while Antonio Quiñonez is a former *marero* who runs *Poderoso Gigante* (Powerful Giant), a small rehabilitation center that treats about 25 troubled youths at a time.

Although these measures represent progress, they only approach a comprehensive strategy in El Salvador and hardly scratch the surface in neighboring countries where gangs reportedly have tens of thousands of members. Salvadoran Interior Minister Rene Figueroa says that even new prison construction means “money being taken away from hospitals and schools. We are stretched to the last dollar.”⁵⁴ Moreover, the United Nations has complained that anti-gang laws have clogged existing weak courts, leaving thousands of minors jailed for prolonged periods while they await processing. On May 17, 2004, a suspicious prison fire in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, killed 103 inmates, mostly Salvatrucha members, half of whom were awaiting trial.⁵⁵

Burgeoning Cooperation. To gang members who communicate by cell phones and travel in stolen cars, international boundaries are little more than jurisdictional lines that provide temporary haven when crossed. Thus, authorities in Central America, Mexico, and the United States are seeing the need to cooperate with each other. In January 2004, Salvadoran, Honduran, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Dominican Republic leaders signed an agreement to create a database on crimes and gangs share information, and keep better track of the movements of gang members.

In October 2004, Ricardo Menesses, director general of El Salvador's National Civilian Police, met with county law enforcement officials in Southern California, offering to share his database on 10,500 Salvadoran gang members in return for information from American police on criminals and gangsters returning to his jurisdiction.⁵⁶ In fact, Orange

53. “Torrijos Takes Soft Approach to Mara Problem,” *Latinnews Daily*, September 29, 2004.

54. Jordan, “Central America's Gang Crisis.”

55. Freddy Cuevas, “Fire in Honduran Prison Kills 103,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2004, p. A16.

56. Ben Fox, “El Salvador Police Chief Seeks Closer U.S. Ties in Gang Fight,” *San Jose Mercury News*, October 12, 2004, at www.mercurnews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/local/states/california/the_valley/9901716.htm?ic (October 29, 2004).

County, California, has an innovative Gang Incident Tracking System that combines intelligence and gang crime reports, generating maps of hot spots and areas where gang members live.

In addition, Erwin Sperisen, Guatemala's National Civil Police chief, has proposed a special Central American police force to fight gangs and organized crime, claiming that juvenile criminals are more organized than the countries in which they operate. And on March 3, 2005, defense, security, and interior ministers from seven Central American countries agreed to create a regional rapid response force to combat drug trafficking, terrorism, and other transnational threats.⁵⁷

Upping the Ante

North America's youth gang phenomenon will never be eliminated or drastically curtailed without harsh limits on civil liberties, larger prisons, or detention programs that rival concentration camps—remedies that are seen as expensive and abhorrent in free societies. *Mano dura* laws that imprison youths for simply wearing tattoos have already been cited as violating civil liberties. Labeling these youths terrorists in the United States may close doors to rehabilitation and give them a political cause, advancing a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On the other hand, piecemeal prevention and suppression merely nibble around the edges of the problem. Program evaluations suggest that no single approach works well by itself or in all communities. Moreover, efforts need to be sustained as long as conditions that lure juveniles into gangs exist. Transnational gangs will continue to flourish as a byproduct of larger social and economic processes such as the growth of transient, unstable neighborhoods and the expanding numbers of undocumented migrants who live on the margins of society. Though unintended, past uncoordinated deportations and subsequent frequent returns to the United States appear to have facilitated the spread of criminal networks.

Future anti-gang strategies need to target root social processes as well as sanction criminal behavior. Domestically, these strategies should:

- **Foster stable neighborhoods.** The Bush Administration should task the U.S. Census Bureau and the FBI's new National Gang Intelligence Center to collaborate with academics, local government officials, and law enforcement officers in studying the likely geographic and demographic factors that affect marginal neighborhoods, as well as the elements that draw people to them. The relevant authorities should then tailor their anti-gang strategies to alter characteristics that promote delinquency.
- **Reduce illegal immigration.** At present, America is ignoring an underground guest worker problem by which hundreds of thousands of migrants arrive annually to take jobs without permits or visas. Both the White House and Congress should agree to simplify U.S. immigration and labor requirements to encourage prospective workers and U.S. employers to abide by the law. Greater compliance would enhance homeland security by providing a more complete database of documented workers and by helping to maintain a tax base for local services to accommodate them. At the same time, more effective controls on foreign workers would enable the U.S. Border Patrol to focus its efforts on those who may enter for destructive purposes, such as gang members, criminals, and terrorists.⁵⁸
- **Deny time for gang activities.** It is no accident that many of today's parents "over-program" their children with tutoring and extracurricular activities. Such preventive strategies help to steer them away from friends who have little adult supervision and from risky behaviors that lead to crime. However, not all families can afford such programs. Recognizing that fact, President Bush's promise to

57. Associated Press, "Central America Creates Security Force," *The Miami Herald*, March 3, 2005 at www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/world/americas/11045143.htm (March 3, 2005).

58. For more on immigration policy, see Edwin Meese III and Matthew Spalding, "The Principles of Immigration," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1807, October 19, 2004, at www.heritage.org/Research/GovernmentReform/bg1807.cfm.

involve “parents and pastors, coaches and community leaders” should help social, tutorial, and mentoring opportunities to reach all youth. Above all, state and local community leaders must assume the primary responsibility for developing and funding prevention strategies because they are closest to the problem. Taking the lead in White House efforts, First Lady Laura Bush can use the “bully pulpit” to boost awareness of effective anti-gang interventions and the role that parents play in helping children to avoid gang culture.

- **Focus prevention on the individual.** As demonstrated by the Seattle Social Development Project, several factors related to family, school, and peers affect youths’ decisions to join gangs.⁵⁹ Prevention programs like Multisystemic Therapy (MST) that recognize multiple pathways to delinquency hold the most promise. MST is a counseling program targeted at individual youths that seeks to improve family relations, peer associations, and school performance.⁶⁰ Three randomized evaluations strongly suggest that MST effectively reduces delinquency.⁶¹ Given its success in preventing general delinquency, MST holds great potential as a prevention program.
- **Ensure that suppression is multi-agency and multi-strategy.** As learned from Boston’s Operation Ceasefire, enforcing existing laws through the collaborative efforts of various criminal justice agencies can be more effective than passing new laws that may threaten civil liberties. Members of Operation Ceasefire

warned gang members that continued violence would provoke an immediate, intense response.⁶² Expedient pursuit, arrest, and conviction of violent gang members—in combination with the systematic campaign to explain to gang members the consequences of their behavior—contributed to substantial reductions in gang-related violence.

Internationally, U.S. foreign policy toward Mexico and Central America should:

- **Help to open market economies.** Remittances from workers in the United States represent a significant portion of Mexico’s and Central America’s gross domestic products—17 percent in El Salvador and 7.5 percent in Honduras.⁶³ There is no reason why employment opportunities should not exist in home countries. Millennium Challenge Account grants provide an incentive for countries to adopt policies that streamline business licensing requirements, simplify commercial codes, guarantee property rights, and provide affordable microcredit to encourage the growth of small businesses. The U.S. Congress should approve the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement to help create more job opportunities at home and abroad. Both U.S. diplomacy and any development assistance must support economic reforms and better governance to provide a foundation for more prosperous societies.
- **Strengthen the rule of law.** Rule of law that guarantees property rights and due process

59. Hill *et al.*, “Early Precursors of Gang Membership.”

60. Scott W. Henggeler, Gary B. Melton, and Linda A. Smith, “Family Preservation Using Multisystemic Therapy: An Effective Alternative to Incarcerating Serious Juvenile Offenders,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (December 1992), pp. 953–961.

61. Charles M. Borduin, Scott W. Henggeler, David M. Blaske, and Risa J. Stein, “Multisystemic Treatment of Adolescent Sexual Offenders,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 1990), pp. 105–113; Charles M. Borduin, Barton J. Mann, Lynn T. Cone, Scott W. Henggeler, Bethany R. Fucci, David M. Blaske, and Robert A. Williams, “Multisystemic Treatment of Serious Juvenile Offenders: Long-Term Prevention of Criminality and Violence,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (1995), pp. 569–578; and Henggeler, Melton, and Smith, “Family Preservation Using Multisystemic Therapy.”

62. Braga *et al.*, “Problem-Oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence.”

63. Orozco, “Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean: Money, Markets and Costs.”

supports greater citizen participation in the economy. Visible policing, transparent justice, and adequate court facilities help to reduce backlogs of criminal cases, thereby helping law enforcement to become an effective deterrent. Although the United States gave ample military assistance to Central America during the 1980s, follow-up support for justice systems to strengthen state authority has lagged. Congress should restore the funding for projects related to the administration of justice that has been diverted to other uses in the past five years. Overseas police training is also complicated by Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which prohibits advising and training foreign constabularies except as exempted by legislation. Congress should amend the law to allow more targeted and flexible support for assisting police in democratic societies.

- **Promote family-friendly policies abroad.** Family-friendly policies will encourage local participation. U.S. public diplomacy and consultancy programs provided by the National Endowment for Democracy and multilateral banks, for example, should encourage better schooling for Mexican and Central American youth by facilitating more local control over public education and encouraging partnerships between the public and private sectors to provide textbooks and supplies. Governments should be encouraged to avoid tax codes that penalize entrepreneurship and marriage and to gather data on the role of marriage in promoting stable neighborhoods. Where the United States supports foreign justice programs to curb delinquency and rehabilitate gang members, it should favor those that address enough risk factors to be effective and avoid those that encourage continued gang cohesion.
- **Support intelligence sharing among U.S., Mexican, and Central American law enforcement agencies.** Already self-initiated by local and national authorities throughout North America, these procedures could provide valuable information on gang activities and help to save lives. The U.S. Attorney General should task the FBI's National Gang Intel-

ligence Center to cooperate with and encourage these arrangements instead of blocking them with unnecessary bureaucracy. At the policy level, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should maintain a dialogue with foreign governments to ensure that deportees receive appropriate treatment and processing when they arrive home. Both the FBI and the DHS should work with local law enforcement and foreign counterparts to develop protocols for managing hot pursuits on national borders.

- **Enhance border security.** Border security should be enhanced not just along the U.S., Canadian, and Mexican boundaries, but throughout North America. To the extent possible, the United States should share technology and techniques for monitoring boundaries to reduce migrant flows as local economic reforms take hold. The Guatemala–Mexico border is porous and particularly dangerous, with gangs preying on large numbers of undocumented emigrants seeking employment further north. The desolate Panama–Colombia border will require increased vigilance if Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez provokes a confrontation with Colombia, aided by Colombia's leftist rebels. Just as national and local police chiefs have begun to seek out each other, Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the DHS should strengthen cooperative links to foreign counterparts.

Conclusion

Like crime, youth gang activity can be reduced but never eliminated. Because it is neither hierarchically organized nor motivated by politics, it does not currently challenge U.S. national defenses. However, its transnational nature is worrisome, and it is enough of a problem in nearby countries that are still making the transition to democracy that it could destabilize them. Moreover, history shows that disaffected youth were a source of guerrilla recruitment in past conflicts that the United States felt compelled to help quell. The U.S. can reduce this threat now by focusing domestic efforts on the systems and factors that feed it.

Because the phenomenon is transnational, U.S. efforts to curb criminality must have similar reach. In fact, the United States and its North American neighbors should plan for increased trouble. Migrants from South America are beginning to show up in youth gangs, and as political and economic advances stagnate on that continent, the exodus could multiply.

Not long ago, Latin America seemed distant to most U.S. citizens. Now most countries are a plane ride away, roads and power grids crisscross borders, and trade has flourished. As a result of this

new proximity, problems that plague more distant hemispheric neighbors will affect U.S. citizens as well. They must not be ignored.

—*Stephen Johnson is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, and David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.*