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

TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

A Threat Assessment

Executive summary

September 2012

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Executive summary

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

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

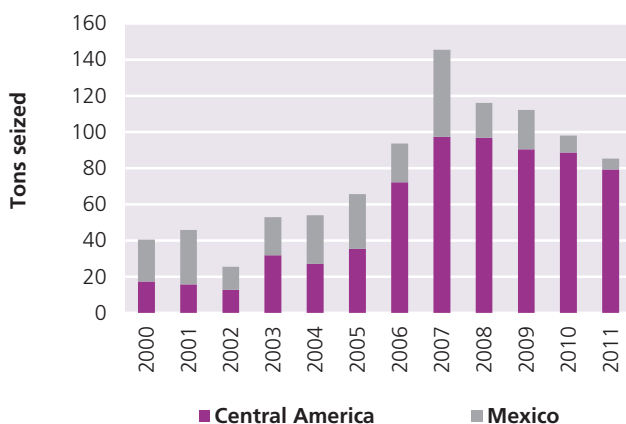
in cross-border trafficking, the influx of greater volumes of cocaine greatly raised the stakes, promoting competition for territorial control.

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

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

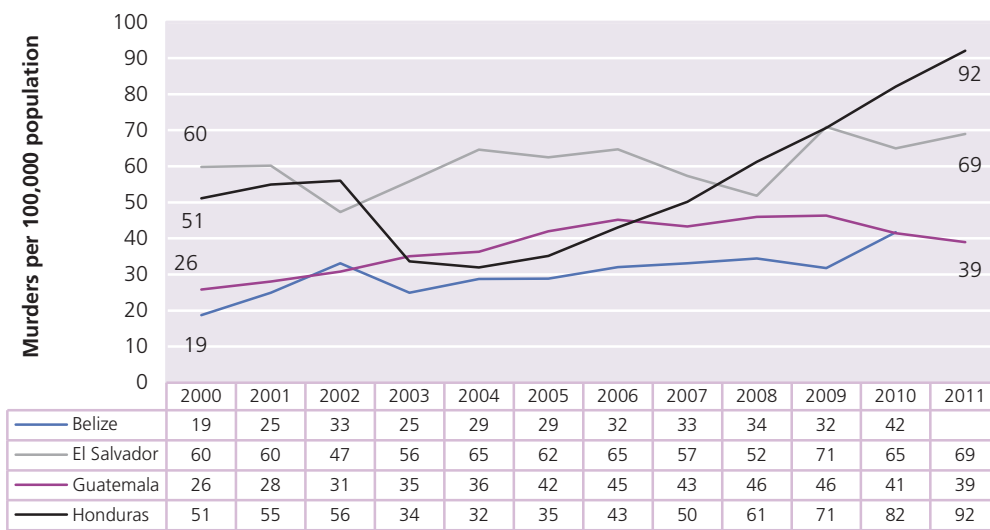
The groups involved in transnational organized crime can be divided into territorial groups and trafficking (*transportista*) groups. Territorial groups, such as the Guatemalan crime families, focus on maintaining control over a geographic area and taxing all criminal activity therein, including drug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

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



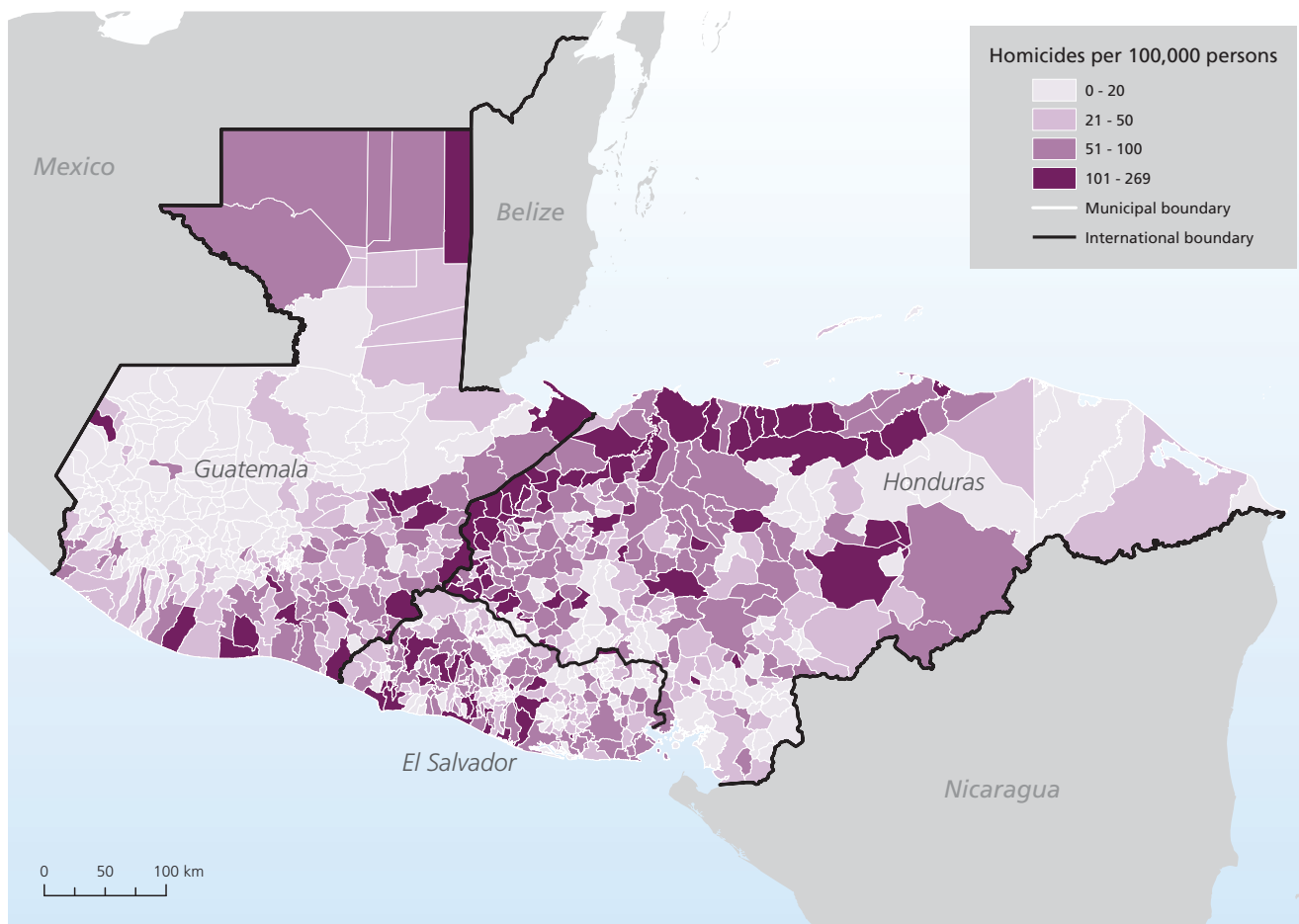
Source: Annual Report Questionnaires

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



Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Map 1: Homicide rates by municipal area in 2011



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

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

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

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

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

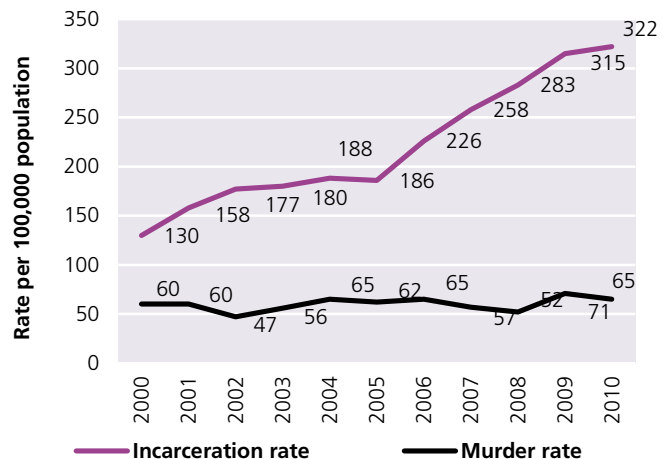
- Dismantling the organized crime groups through law enforcement, including the provision of international assistance (such as CICIG¹ and UNPOL²);
- Finding alternative means of disabling the organized crime groups.

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

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

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

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



Source: ILANUD, UNODC Homicide Database

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

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

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

2 United Nations Police.