



ROBERT STRAUSS CENTER

FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND LAW

MEXICO SECURITY INITIATIVE

Mexico Security Initiative Student Paper
May 2018

Model Police Precincts in Central America: When Improving Policing Becomes Reducing Migration

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Throughout the Florida Regional Community Policing Institute's photos, Americans in short-sleeved shirts pose alongside Salvadoran and Honduran policemen in black tactical gear or gold-trimmed uniforms.ⁱ The smiles stay fixed as the [pictures](#) shift from the lush gardens of the Sheraton Presidente Hotel in San Salvador to the cobblestone streets of smaller Central American municipalities where the Americans are training their engaged counterparts.

These unlikely interactions are neither a goodwill mission nor an event between sister cities. Instead, they are part of the Model Police Precinct program (MPP), an effort that represents over a decade of targeted U.S. policy to decrease violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador by fostering more effective policing. However, increased irregular migration from Central America has made assistance programs such as MPP the primary tools for U.S. efforts to reduce migration. While this development may play well politically, it could disrupt these initiatives' ability to create long-term positive change across the region.

Nestled between Mexico and South America, Central America's seven countries are often referred to as a homogenous block. Yet, there are vast differences between the relative wealth and stability of Panama and Costa Rica and the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. In this three-country bloc, at least half the population of each country lives in poverty, and each country's homicide rate ranks among the top six in Latin America.ⁱⁱ In the past five years, underdevelopment and violence have pushed hundreds of thousands of people to migrate and/or seek asylum in the United States, making the Northern Triangle a focus of U.S. policy and assistance programs.

High violence levels in the Northern Triangle are hardly new. In 1992 and 1996, El Salvador and Guatemala ended their brutal civil wars respectively. Concurrently, the United States stepped up its deportations of immigrants with criminal records, sending members of Los Angeles-born gangs such as MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang back to their home countries in Central America. These deported gang members found fertile soil to expand their operations and power in the Northern Triangle's context of underdevelopment, social marginalization, and weak law enforcement institutions. Twenty years later, these groups have developed powerful criminal fiefdoms throughout the region.

For the past decade, the United States has adopted policies to attempt to address the violence and insecurity resulting from these gangs' expansion and turf battles. In 2008, the Bush administration split the Mérida Initiative into two parts and restructured the portion funding aid to Central America into the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). CARSI differed from previous models of security assistance in that it did not only sell weapons or provide military training but also invested in police professionalization and institution-building. Under this umbrella, the MPP program began to bring the Florida Regional Community Policing Institute's instructors to El Salvador and Honduras.

The MPP program is structured around the objective of making Central American municipal police precincts better run and more effective, using a "clear, hold, build, and sustain" strategy.ⁱⁱⁱ To ready the officers, the U.S. Department of State and USAID vet all "rank-and-file officers" and dismiss those who do not pass background checks.^{iv} Next, the remaining officers are provided with at least 400 hours of community policing training. In addition to instruction, the program also provides precincts with better access to technological equipment, such as security cameras and crime tracking databases. After these initial investments, the precincts are provided with funds for community patrols and outreach, including youth centers and other programs designed to prevent gang recruitment of high-risk young people.^v

Until 2014, CARSI amounted to modest levels of assistance, totaling \$496 million from 2008 to 2012.^{vi} Yet over the summer of 2014, a growing number of unaccompanied Central American children and families began arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border (although migration from the Northern Triangle had been increasing steadily since 2011). With a surge of approximately 50,000 migrants in one summer overwhelming Mexican and American immigration officials, the Obama administration jumped into action. In the search for a comprehensive approach, CARSI and the MPP program became reconfigured into the United States' strategy of reducing violence in Central America to stop irregular migration.

The basic premise of this strategy was that Central Americans would stop coming to the United States if they felt safe and prosperous in their home countries. In June 2014, then Vice President Joe Biden gave a press conference in Guatemala where he stressed the need to "give citizens in Central America security" so that they would "not feel the need or be compelled to try to get to the

United States.”^{vii} Soon after, the Obama administration helped form the Alliance for Prosperity, a joint plan by the governments of the Northern Triangle to address the root causes of migration, including improving the region’s security situation.^{viii} U.S. assistance also increased to \$750 million for the fiscal year of 2015 to fund the plan, with \$222 million earmarked for CARSI in order to bolster stability and security throughout the Northern Triangle.^{ix}

Despite the extra funding, it is unclear whether training police officers in Honduras and El Salvador has either improved regional security or lowered migration numbers. According to the U.S. government, CARSI and the MPP program have both been extremely successful. Officials from both the Obama and Trump administrations have championed the MPP program and called for its expansion, claiming “a 70 percent reduction in homicides in targeted areas.”^x The U.S. Department of State has also cited that one particular MPP location had “100 consecutive days without a homicide,” despite multiple homicides preceding the initiative’s implementation. Notably, these reports do not mention any results related to migration.^{xi}

Independent analysis is more mixed with several studies on CARSI programs finding different results.^{xii} A 2015 study from the Wilson Center explained that the MPP program was “well-run” and “satisfied” its participants but had not reduced violence to manageable levels.^{xiii} In fact, the study noted that much of the MPP’s violence reductions, as cited by the U.S. government, occurred during El Salvador’s 2012 gang truce.^{xiv} The fact that this decline in homicides occurred during a lull in El Salvador’s gang violence may point to other factors reducing violence rather than the MPPs themselves. The study did, however, show that the MPP program has had limited success in preventing gang activities in schools and creating more effective crime-reporting in communities.^{xv}

However, even these mixed results could be further threatened as the MPP program and CARSI become increasingly linked to the number of Central American migrants arriving in South Texas.

This connection helped to pump more money into programs such as MPPs back in 2014, but it has already threatened the program’s long-term prospects. For example, in May 2018, after the arrival of a migrant caravan, President Donald Trump threatened to cut “foreign aid to Honduras” if steps were not taken to reduce the numbers of Honduran migrants coming to the United States.^{xvi} On an operational level, an approach to the MPP program that focuses on reducing migration may change the selection criteria for police forces, prioritizing migrant-sending communities rather than the most at-need municipalities and endangering improvements to overall citizen security in the region.

Further, even if migration reduction were the stated goal of these programs, it is doubtful that any particular security assistance program has the power to rapidly reduce irregular migration from the Northern Triangle. Many Central Americans, particularly in Guatemala, continue to migrate for economic or family reunification reasons. Improved security from MPPs would not affect these individuals’ decisions to migrate in the short-term. As a result, even if the MPP program or CARSI

achieve their stated goals of safer Central American communities, policymakers hoping for reduced levels of irregular migration may view these programs as failures that are unworthy of future funding.

The issues of insecurity and underdevelopment in the Northern Triangle need to be addressed on their own terms using programs such as MPPs to chip away at generational challenges. The teams from Florida Regional Community Policing Institute in El Salvador have been taking the steps toward improving security in Central America. Yet if their work becomes increasingly tied to the number of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border, these efforts to bolster security in the Northern Triangle may soon be in danger of abandonment.

ⁱ Florida RCPI Hispanic Connection. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2018, from <http://cop.spcollege.edu/Conexion/CPcentralamerica6-2010-EN.htm>.

ⁱⁱ The tormented isthmus. (2018, April 14). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/node/18558254>; InSight Crime's 2017 Homicide Round-Up. (2018, February 14). Retrieved from <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2017-homicide-round-up/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin, G. (2011). *Community Policing in Central America: The Way Forward*. Retrieved from the United States Agency for International Development website: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00JBQ7.pdf.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2013, May 4). *FACT SHEET: United States Support for Central American Citizen Security* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/04/fact-sheet-united-states-support-central-american-citizen-security>.

^{vii} The White House, Office of the Vice President. (2014, June 20). *Remarks to the Press with Q&A by Vice President Joe Biden in Guatemala* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/20/remarks-press-qa-vice-president-joe-biden-guatemala>.

^{viii} The Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. (2014). *Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map*. Retrieved from United States Congress: https://cuellar.house.gov/uploadedfiles/plan_of_the_alliance_for_prosperity_in_the_northern_triangle_a_road_ma....pdf.

^{ix} The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2016, January 14). *FACT SHEET: The United States and Central America: Honoring Our Commitments* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/15/fact-sheet-united-states-and-central-america-honoring-our-commitments>.

^x *Examining FY 2017 Funding Priorities in the Western Hemisphere: Hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, House of Representatives*, 114th Congress (2016) (Testimony of Ambassador Luis E. Arreaga Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs). Retrieved from <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA07/20160427/104868/HHRG-114-FA07-Wstate-ArreagaL-20160427.pdf> ; United States Department of State (U.S.). (2017). *Congressional Budget Justification*. Washington, D.C.: Department of State. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271013.pdf>.

^{xi} *United State Engagement on Central America: Hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs*, 114th Congress (2016) (Testimony of William R. Brownfield, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs). Retrieved from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/rls/rm/2016/252584.htm>.

^{xii} LaSusa, M. (2017, March 6). *Are US anti-crime programs in Central America working?* Retrieved from <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/are-us-anti-crime-programs-central-america-working/>.

^{xiii} Eguizábal C., Ingram, M., Curtis, K., Korhuis, A., Olson, E., & Phillips, N. (2015). *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping*,

Hurting, and Can be Improved. Retrieved from the Wilson International Center for Scholars:
https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/FINAL%20PDF_CARSI%20REPORT_0.pdf.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Kim, S. (2018, April 3). *Trump threatens foreign aid to Honduras as he continues focus on 'caravan' of migrants*. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-honduras-caravan-20180403-story.html>.