

Field Notes: Report from Honduras

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Honduras is a place of enormous contradictions. It is home to great beauty—beaches, mountains, wildlife, and strong and resilient people—but also to a troubling array of social, governance, and human rights challenges. Endemic corruption, extreme violence, poverty and desperation, and a weak and broken government take a toll on its people. Both a product and a symbol of broken society are the prisons, where people are warehoused, forgotten, and even dying by the scores with almost no one taking notice. Honduran citizens and authorities, alike, struggle to cope under the weight of these problems.

Between May 21 and 31, Professor Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and I struck out on our second road trip together in the last nine months.¹ The first was to the lower Rio Grande Valley on the Texas-Mexico border where we interviewed migrants, shelter workers, government officials, researchers and scholars, and law enforcement officers about border security, migrant smuggling, and trafficking of Central Americans in that area.²

On this occasion, we decided to travel to Honduras and venture across its northern coastal region to better understand the country's security challenges and the issues driving internal displacement and migration northward. During the first week we spent time in San Pedro Sula and its surrounding communities of Choloma and Rivera Hernandez, El Progreso, which by some calculations is now the third most violent city in Honduras, and the port city of La Ceiba. We ended our journey in Tegucigalpa. Throughout the trip, we talked to community workers, young people, prisoners and prison officials, police, judges, local and

¹ We were joined on part of this journey by Joy Olson, former director of the Washington Office on Latin America. She is engaged in a yearlong study project to more fully understand the nexus between organized crime and human rights. Joy also happens to be my wife.

² Read my report from that trip: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/olson_border_2016final_0.pdf.

national government officials, members of the Honduran Congress and opposition figures, representatives from international organizations, foreign embassies (including that of the United States), civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens we encountered along the way.

From this experience we confirmed what we already suspected—that reality is far more complex than can be summarized in a policy memo or encapsulated in a soundbite. Honduras is a place where one can presume to understand what is going on, but the truth is much deeper, more opaque, and often contradictory in nature. Below are my reflections on what we observed. They are not intended as hard and fast truths, but as reflections on our sense of the reality Honduran people experience. These perceptions don't easily conform to the political narratives that play out in the 24-hour cable news mayhem. Instead, they offer a glimpse of the realities that many Honduras confront daily. Each visit reminded us of the proverb of the six blind men trying to describe an elephant, each with his own perspective based on his own experience.

With this in mind, the following observations are offered based on our trip and our years of combined experience studying crime, violence, and the failure of governance in Latin America.

Illicit Drugs

The illicit drug problem in Honduras is enormous but often misunderstood. Cocaine making its way from the Andes to the lucrative U.S. market inevitably passes through Honduras and other Central American countries even though Central America is not the primary destination. Nevertheless, small amounts of cocaine remain in Honduras as payment for trafficking services, often generating secondary wholesale markets that can be very violent.

Marijuana is also widely consumed and, as we learned, is used in some places like Choloma as a way to bring youths, sometimes as young as 9 or 10, into gangs—as a reward for simple gang activities such as serving as a look out, and as a status symbol. Youth we talked to also reported that marijuana is widely used in schools (including elementary schools) and is commonplace in nightspots in La Ceiba. In other cases, illicit drugs are used to calm prison

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populations that are living in inhuman and overcrowded conditions. In our visits to two prisons, drug use was in plain view.

Efforts to deal with the local drug problem have relied heavily on aggressive law enforcement strategies. Incarceration is a common response to consumption and low-level resale. Incarceration also exposes inmates to further consumption. Meanwhile, an effective strategy to discourage drug consumption among youths or treat problem users is largely absent. We were told there are no public

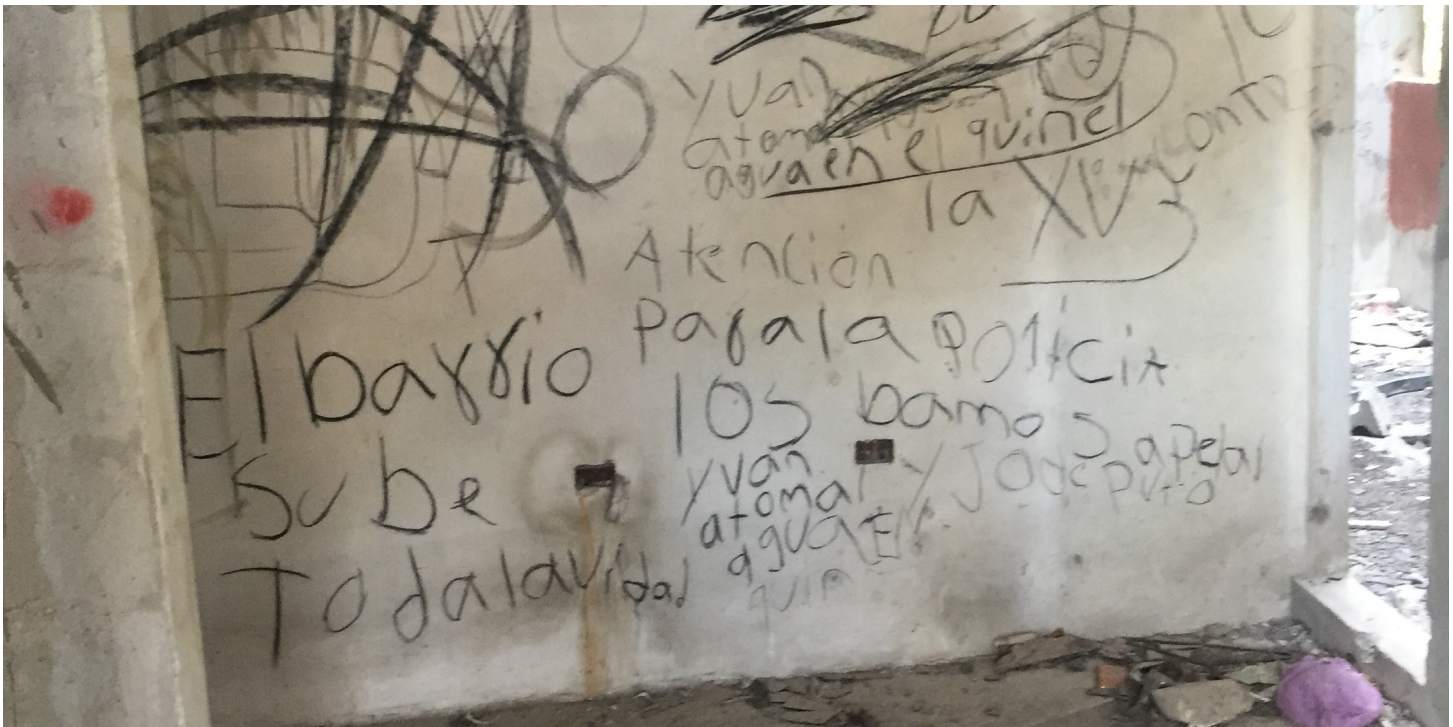


Photo Credit: Eric Olson

rehabilitation options on the entire northern coast of Honduras for those with serious consumption problems (see section on the juvenile justice system below). Incarceration is too often the only governmental response, which simply exacerbates the problem.

Gangs

Equally complex and seldom understood is the youth gang phenomenon. Multiple gangs operate where we visited in Choloma and Rivera Hernández, not just the well-known MS-13 or Barrio 18. Despite the transnational reputations of these groups, gangs are primarily a local phenomenon anchored in individual communities. Many of the gangs operating in Choloma and Rivera Hernández are smaller, splinter groups, often unique to a specific place and operating within a specific territory. Their connections to a larger gang network depend on many variables, and evidence of vertical integration exists but is limited in scope. Communities such as Choloma and Rivera Hernández can be carved up by gang territory, making moving about or attending school extremely dangerous. In Rivera Hernández, where homicides have declined significantly, gang territories are still well demarcated and an unexpected incursion from a rival or unknown person can result in an outburst of violence. Our visit to Rivera Hernández was announced ahead of time.

We also learned about so-called “social cleansing” groups, most notably the Pumas in La Ceiba. They are akin to a self-defense group made up of former police or military personnel that “collect fees” from the community to defend it from outside gangs.

Additionally, gang members no longer self-identify in the obvious ways they did in the past with gang-specific tattoos, clothing, and haircuts. Many officials told us it is increasingly difficult to know who is in a gang and to what group an individual belongs.

We also met with a number of young boys and men who had not been in gangs, but

talked about being part of the *relajo*, or chaos of the street. They didn't join an organized or recognized gang but simply hung out on the streets, as young toughs, smoking pot and causing trouble.

This is not surprising since several studies have found that there are a relatively small number of criminally active youth, even in the most violent communities. For example, according to a World Bank study in 2016, an estimated 75 percent of aggressive behavior and violent crimes can be attributed to between 5 and 15 percent of offenders.³ The risk factors for joining gangs are generally understood and should become the basis for programs designed to discourage gang membership and encourage active gang members to leave the group.

The non-gang member youth are not exempt from violence. They talked of the pressure and threats they received from gangs and their fear of the police. They described fleeing when they saw police approach and how these situations could result in further violence; in one particular case, they recounted witnessing an escalation that ended in the deaths of four young people from their neighborhood. We drove by the homemade cement markers commemorating the four on our way out of Choloma.

Schools

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Schools are also a victim of gang territoriality. The community of Rivera Hernández reportedly has two elementary schools (Grades 1-9), but with six or seven gangs operating there it is inevitable that a young person living in one gang's territory will have to enter another's to attend school—assuming the school is functional. Programs exist to provide “safe passage” for children to and from school, but these are not universally available and they address only the symptom, not the problems, many children face. Very few school-based programs are available that attempt to meet the needs of students in a holistic manner: reducing violence, addressing the risk-factors for gang activity and drug consumption in schools, and promoting a better learning environment. A heavy-handed law enforcement approach doesn't begin to address the needs of children who are NOT criminally active, and has had no visible impact in schools. Only a limited number of programs (see section below) are designed to strengthen families.

³ Chioda, Laura. 2016. *Stop the Violence in Latin America: A Look at Prevention from Cradle to Adulthood*. Washington, DC: The World Bank Group.

The Juvenile Justice System

In both San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba we met with juvenile justice officials, including judges. They described a largely broken system with few alternatives for dealing with youth in trouble with the law. For example, they reported that no rehabilitation centers existed on the entire northern coast of Honduras, where violence and youth gangs are most prevalent. If a child is in trouble for consuming illicit drugs, the option is to send them to a youth detention facility in the south, release them to a private treatment facility (which costs their parents money), or release them back into the community. If the accused is a gang member, he or she can be incarcerated in two of Honduras's new maximum-security facilities—one in the northwest of the country (Pozo I) and the other in the southeast (Pozo II). Conditions there are supposed to be improved because they are relatively new facilities, but they are also maximum security facilities and not designed as rehabilitation centers for youth.

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currently set at 18 years old. This change would mean children over the age of 16 could be subjected to the judicial process, although Honduran law prohibits minors from being sent to prison before the age of 18. This proposal, which also includes more rigorous detention centers for 16 to 18 year olds, is in the process of debate and will be submitted to the National Congress shortly.

Those we spoke to in the court system said rehabilitation options are urgently needed, and did not personally favor lowering the age of criminal responsibility.

Police

Honduras has made progress in its efforts to reform and professionalize its police, but these are initial steps on a long journey. A government-appointed “purge and reform” commission was established in April 2016 after it was reported that senior police officials had ordered, and then covered up, the murder of the Honduran drug czar and his deputy. Unlike other efforts to clean up the police, the purge and reform commission started at the top, dismissing two-thirds of the top generals and moving down the ranks to suspend or fire approximately 4,000 police so far. Furthermore, the Honduran Congress passed a new police reform law and partnered with the Inter-American Development Bank to revamp its police academy, improving facilities, curriculum, and selection standards for police recruits. The United States has invested heavily in police reform, training, and the promotion of community-oriented policing programs and strategies.

On the other hand, the reform process is incomplete. The “Police Careers” law, intended to create a more professional career track for police, has not been passed and may not be this

year. Only a minimal number of purged police will face the justice system, although there is still hope that prosecutions will occur in the most serious cases of corruption and abuse.

The process of transforming the Honduran police into a community-oriented police force will require a cultural transformation that goes well beyond legal and operational changes. In conversations with police, young people, and community workers, it became clear that the gap between police and community, and the lack of confidence in police institutions, remains a vexing problem.

Community-oriented police activities such as fairs, workshops, and interaction with children are a positive first step that may begin to break down stereotypes of police. But the long-term impact of these programs are not documented. Meanwhile iron-fisted, zero-tolerance approaches to community-level crime and violence are often carried out by the military police (MPOP) and continue to drive a wedge between residents of these communities and law enforcement. Furthermore, the continuing presence of a military police on city streets and in communities creates confusion and undermines progress within the civilian police by creating a parallel police structure.

Violence

We were reminded again of the multiple causes and forms of violence in Honduras. During our trip we heard of, and in some cases witnessed, the complex stories of violence. It exists in all spheres of life: from the domestic and interpersonal level to gender-based violence, community-level violence, violence perpetrated in the commission of common crimes, gang violence, revenge killings, the institutional violence of prisons, and violence perpetrated by the state. Violence is caused by drugs, but also alcohol, and made worse by easy access to firearms.

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The government of Honduras has made a case for how the country's violence has decreased. They have pointed to important reductions in the national homicide rate. According to the National University's Violence Observatory (IUDPAS-Honduras), homicide rates, indeed, appear to have fallen since their peak in 2011 and 2013, but seem to be ticking up again since then—not yet approaching the peaks but on an upward trend. Additionally, if one examines numbers in individual cities, homicides remain at alarmingly high levels. In 2016 San Pedro Sula was believed to have a homicide rate of 107 per 100,000 inhabitants, nearly double the

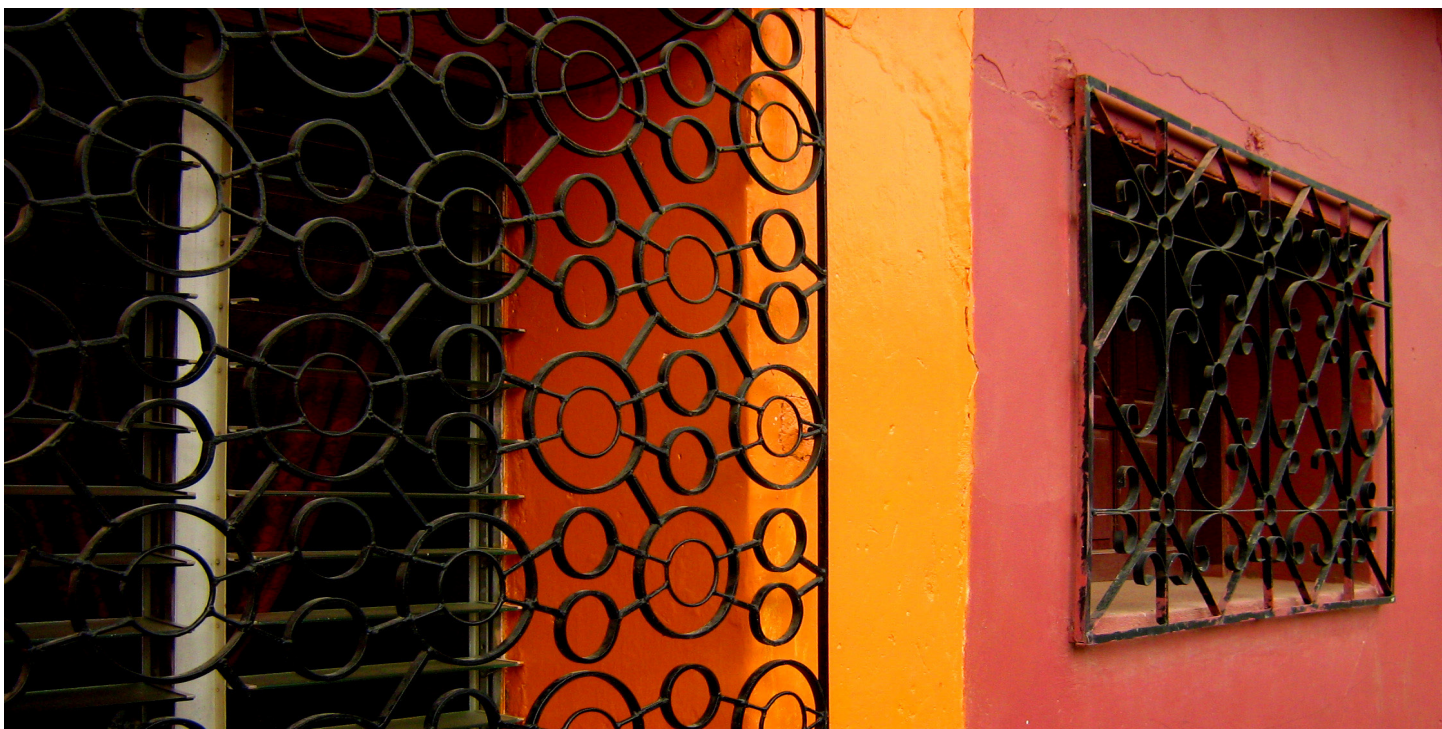


Photo Credit: Gavin Schaefer / Flickr / Creative Commons

national average, and Choloma was at 92.7 per 100,000.⁴ Beyond homicides rates, where data is even less reliable, the landscape remains extremely troubling.

Prisons

During our travels, we visited two prisons and talked to a person who works with prisoners in a third. Gang members were not supposed to be incarcerated in these prisons, as they had recently been transferred to maximum security prisons. The remaining prisoners were accused of committing common crimes.

Both the prisons we visited were severely overcrowded—by nearly 100 percent in both cases. Most prisoners lived in cellblocks where living spaces were boxes barely larger than a coffin, stacked five high from floor to ceiling. The unlucky ones slept near the corrugated metal ceiling where temperatures were much higher than the already sweltering lower levels. The really unlucky ones had to sleep on makeshift mattresses on the floor. There were no windows for ventilation; every square inch was used for living space.

Illegal economic activity and the delicate security balance within the facilities were easily visible. No authorities or security guards were inside the prison walls. They remained outside and simply opened the door to let us in and out. In the larger of the prisons we visited, we were told there were only a total of eight guards for the entire facility, further divided into groups of four per shift. They remained in the safety of the outside world, not daring to patrol the depths of the prison. Inside, the prisoners ruled.

We spoke to the “coordinators” of each jail and were startled to learn that they were both long-term prisoners who had won the respect of others. They maintained control inside the prison by force, threats, and doling out favors. The “coordinators” also controlled economic

⁴ For more information on homicide rates in Honduras, visit <https://homicide.igarape.org.br/>.

activity within the prison and allocated privileges based on a payment structure only they knew. We saw a woodworking shop that made nice furniture out of contraband hardwoods. The furniture was then resold on the outside. Food was made in a central prisoner-run kitchen, then sold to individual prisoners who added their own ingredients and resold it. We visited private and “luxury” cells, conjugal cells, and cells with air-conditioning, further evidence of the prisons’ inner hierarchies.

This system works reasonably well, until it does not—until someone gets too greedy and the delicate balance is undone. Prisons in Honduras have been the sites of some of the country’s worst massacres and greatest human tragedies. A fire in a prison in February 2012 led to the deaths of approximately 360 prisoners, after prison guards failed to open the jail door. Numerous similar cases involving fewer prisoners have also ended in tragedy; in 2003, 2004, and 2012, a combined total of 538 prisoners died as a result of fires in the jails of El Provenir, La Ceiba, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, and Comayagua.⁵

In addition to the deplorable conditions, one of the greatest tragedies is the number of people in prison without charges. Under Honduran criminal procedures, an individual can be detained in prison for up to two years based solely on an allegation of a crime. If no charges are filed within two years, the person can be set free. It is estimated that as many as 40 percent of Honduras’ prison population are alleged criminals, and we were told that both prisons in La Ceiba had roughly similar numbers of people waiting to see if they would be charged. The lawyer who accompanied us on these visits said the greatest tragedies at the prisons were the living conditions and the slow pace of justice involving many innocent people.

Violence Prevention

While much of the Honduran government’s focus has been on suppression of crime through aggressive law enforcement and military actions, programs designed to give youth alternatives to becoming criminally active are also an important, if overshadowed, part of the government’s strategies. The United States and the international community have been essential supporters and funders of these efforts.

Key to this strategy have been the Centros de Alcance (CDAs), or neighborhood drop-in centers where young people can stop by to play video games, work on computers, work out in a gym/weight room, engage in positive interactions with other youth and adults, and participate in group activities such as workshops or music lessons. These are modest facilities intended to offer youth a safe place to engage in healthier activities and to develop a network of friends and relationships that will hopefully keep them out of gangs.

I have visited several CDAs in the last few years, including two more on this latest trip. My impression is that CDAs are a positive first option for some youth in difficult circumstances,

⁵ See <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/1049041-410/538-reos-murieron-en-tres-tragedias-carcelarias>. For an excellent description of conditions in the San Pedro Sula, see also Insight Crime’s investigation: <http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/where-chaos-reigns-inside-the-san-pedro-sula-prison>.

but they are very limited in their approach and reach, especially in their ability to provide a wider array of services to a child at risk. There have been no longitudinal studies regarding the effectiveness of CDAs in Honduras, so their impact over the life of a child is unknown. We don't know, for example, the rate at which children who have participated in CDAs at some point go on to gang and/or criminal activity. Additionally, the CDAs lack the kind of wrap-around services—like family counselling and long-term educational support—that make other programs more successful.

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Finally, there are real questions about the sustainability of the CDA model since they are largely dependent on international contributions that will eventually dry up.

Fortunately, there are some alternative models for crime prevention and violence reduction we observed during our trip. Two programs in particular stand out. One is the Organization for Youth Empowerment (OYE) in El Progreso, an organization with which I have been affiliated since its inception. The idea of OYE is to provide study grants to young people to finish high school and/or university. OYE makes a long-term commitment and investment in each scholarship recipient, accompanying him or her for as long as he or she remains successfully engaged in school. The child's educational progress is monitored, and if there is a downturn in performance, the program visits with the family to determine the circumstances. Sometimes the problems are school-based—as described above—and in other cases the family or friendship networks can help. Additionally, scholarship recipients are required to engage in other enrichment programs, some of which are designed as community service projects. OYE employs a simple model, one that differs from the CDAs insofar as it makes a long-term commitment to an individual child and provides the student with additional support and training opportunities that encourage success.

Another interesting program is Proponte Mas (Achieve More). We visited their offices in La Ceiba and learned about their methodology for identifying at-risk youth based on seven primary risk factors for gang activity. If a child demonstrates four of these, he or she is deemed eligible for treatment. The program is based on six-month periods of family-based counseling and intervention designed to reduce the risks for the child. The program works with the child and the entire family unit, not just the individual youth. The interventions are structured in month-long segments, including a time of evaluation and decision about whether behaviors have changed and risk factors have been reduced. If progress is identified, then the child and family move onto the next six-month cycle.

In both cases, the programs make a significant time commitment to offer specific services and activities to an individual child and his or her family. Both of these programs represent a more comprehensive, structured, and longer-term approach to addressing a child's needs than the CDAs, which are more passive, lack structured interventions, and can result in

erratic participation. Comprehensive evaluations of OYE and Proponte Mas have yet to be conducted, but they are modeled on other successful evidence-based violence reduction programs.

Anti-corruption Efforts

Corruption and the hollowing out of state institutions continues to be a major concern in Honduras. One of our most troubling visits was to the municipal government of La Ceiba, where we were informed that employees had not been paid in eight months. There was no electricity when we visited (not uncommon in the area), the facility was in disarray, and

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few people were working. We do not pretend to know all the reasons for the lack of payment, but we discussed the situation with different people in La Ceiba. We were

told that all municipal services function on the basis of direct payments by an individual. If you need a permit or license, or need your trash picked up, one has to pay for it directly. If true, it would appear that the entire city government is based on corruption, pay-to-play schemes, and favoritism.

Honduras does not have municipal police so corruption at this level should not impact policing functions, but there is little doubt that it is pervasive in and around the city government, affecting other sectors and institutions. Legal reforms, greater transparency, and more vigorous oversight mechanisms are needed from inside (prosecutors) and outside (civil society and independent press) to restore some semblance of governance and democracy in these instances. But many of these mechanisms are already fragile or non-existent in Honduras, and criminal networks—gangs, transnational organized crime, and local extortion networks—relentlessly exploit these state weaknesses.

Consequently, it has been necessary for the international community to step up and support Honduran efforts to fight corruption. The OAS mechanism known as the MACCIH is just over a year old but is already winning the confidence of Hondurans, including civil society, for its efforts to investigate cases of high-level corruption. The MACCIH has had its own internal challenges, and faced criticism from both the Honduran government and local civil society. But it has also played a significant role in promoting important legal reforms and, alongside the Attorney General (public ministry), has begun sensitive investigations into corruption cases throughout much of the country. The MACCIH will not solve all of the country's corruption problems but, given its international stature, it may be able to push back against the corrupt influences that plague nearly all Honduran government institutions. This is an important initiative worth supporting.



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U.S. Policy

On June 15 and 16, the U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security will co-convene, with Mexican counterparts, a two-day conference in Miami with the heads of state from the Northern Triangle countries (NTCA). Day One will be devoted to promoting investment and economic development in the NTCA, while Day Two will focus on the security challenges facing the region.

While major new policy directions or foreign assistance programs are unlikely to emerge from this meeting, its significance cannot be overstated: it is the first time senior Trump Administration officials, including Vice President Pence, are expected to meet with Mexican officials and Northern Triangle leaders to reaffirm their commitment to working collaboratively to address the region's endemic challenges.

Unknown is what kind of unique twist the Trump Administration will put on current policy. No radical departure is expected from previous policy, but there will likely be a new emphasis on and prioritization of some strategies. President Trump's recent request to Congress for the Fiscal Year 2018 Budget represents roughly a 39 percent decrease since Fiscal Year 2016 in all forms of assistance to Central America. Despite the Homeland Security Secretary's statements prioritizing economic growth as key to improving conditions in the region, the Administration's request specifically for economic assistance to Central America represents a 42 percent reduction since 2016.

While these numbers are troubling, it's important to place them in context. The U.S. Congress has approved significant aid packages for Central America in Fiscal Years 2016 (\$750 million) and 2017 (\$650 million). These funds were approved with broad, bipartisan support, and important conditions related to fighting corruption, dissuading migration, and strengthening border security were placed on the expenditures of the funds. The strategy supported by these funds includes efforts to promote economic opportunity, strengthen governance, and increase security in the region. It is important that the new Administration reaffirm both the strategy and the conditions placed on these expenditures.

Recommendations

Going forward, I would suggest the following elements and priorities:

1) It is important not to reduce Central America's complex challenges to a matter of ending drug trafficking—which is a fool's errand. Drugs are a concern but they are not the region's only problem, or even its most pressing one. Furthermore, drug consumption in gang-infested neighborhoods is a problem that requires a strategy rooted in treatment, education, and employment, not bigger jails and greater isolation.

2) The United States needs to remain focused on the deeper problems that undermine democracy in the region and to create a policy that goes beyond a narrow focus on fighting drugs. Central America became a key transit zone for drugs because of its weak governments and endemic corruption, not the other way around. Organized crime takes root and prospers where the state is weakest or non-existent.

3) It is time to rethink counternarcotics strategy aboard, not double down on something that is not working. Data generated by U.S. military and intelligence suggests that cocaine entering the United States through the Central America-Mexico corridor has shifted very little in the last eight years despite billions spent by the United States, Mexico, and Central America in law enforcement efforts, intelligence agencies, and militaries. An estimated 95 percent of cocaine entered the United States through this corridor in 2010 and approximately 90 percent entered in 2016. A staggering 80 percent of all suspected drug flights originating in South America continue to make stops in Honduras.

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4) Corruption may be the single most important problem to be addressed. It destroys governments, skews the economy, and contributes to the region's extreme violence. It erodes public confidence in essential institutions—police and justice systems in particular—and is a disincentive to vital investments. Fortunately, there are some glimmers of hope in the region. The international community has come together in Guatemala and Honduras to support innovative mechanisms (CICIG and MACCIH) that have worked with local prosecutors to deal serious blows to corruption at the highest levels. And El Salvador's Attorney General has done the same with international support. But fighting corruption is a constant task, and the United States and Central America cannot afford to take their foot off the pedal.

5) A strategy that builds from the bottom up is not a glamorous approach but may be the most successful. Reinforcing local governance, professionalizing police and prosecutors, and providing youth opportunities are the most important ways to combat violence and corruption. Strengthening family and social structures, reforming neighborhood schools,

and creating employment skills and opportunities may not be as sexy as capturing the latest kingpin or making a multi-ton drug bust, but it may ultimately be the most useful and successful.

6) Deportation of gang members from the United States to Central America could easily backfire and make the situation in Central America worse. It is understandable that the Administration has sought to increase deportations of violent and destructive gangs like MS-13, many of which were formed in places like Los Angeles in the 1980s. During the 1990s and 2000s, deportation of these gang members propelled El Salvador and its Central American neighbors to the brink of collapse. These countries were completely unprepared to receive and reintegrate gang members, leaving them free to take root and grow. To renew aggressive deportations could deepen the crisis in the region and trigger new migration.

7) Finally, the United States needs to reconcile itself to the notion that its own security depends on a prosperous and stable Central America and Mexico. Simply walling itself off from these problems (some of which are of our own making) won't make the United States safer. Instead, the United States will be better, safer, and stronger if we adopt a long-term policy of working with Central Americans to root out corruption, recover government institutions, and restore the social fabric that has been seriously tattered by decades of conflict, violence, and exclusion.



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