

Transnational Security Challenges in National Context: El Salvador

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As part of the Central American isthmus, El Salvador has been at the forefront of international and American efforts to address transnational organised crime and gangs that, despite punitive counter-crime strategies, have survived and flourished. Weak political institutions, law enforcement capacities, and judicial systems along with social hardships are factors which present in baseline studies and have been considered in foreign initiatives but with few long-term reportable results.

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Welcome to the “Corner Store”



Homicide Rates per 100,000 (2000-2013)

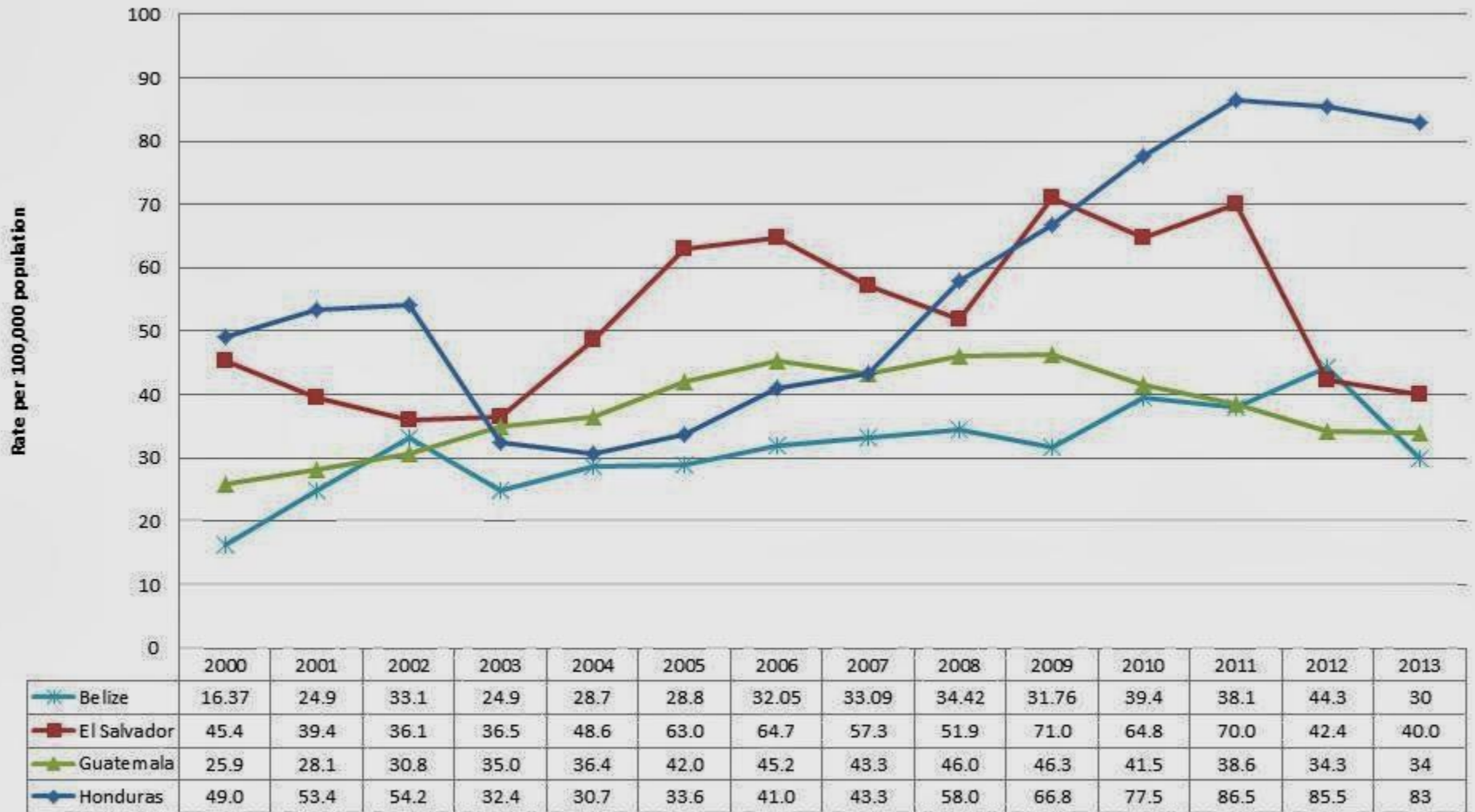
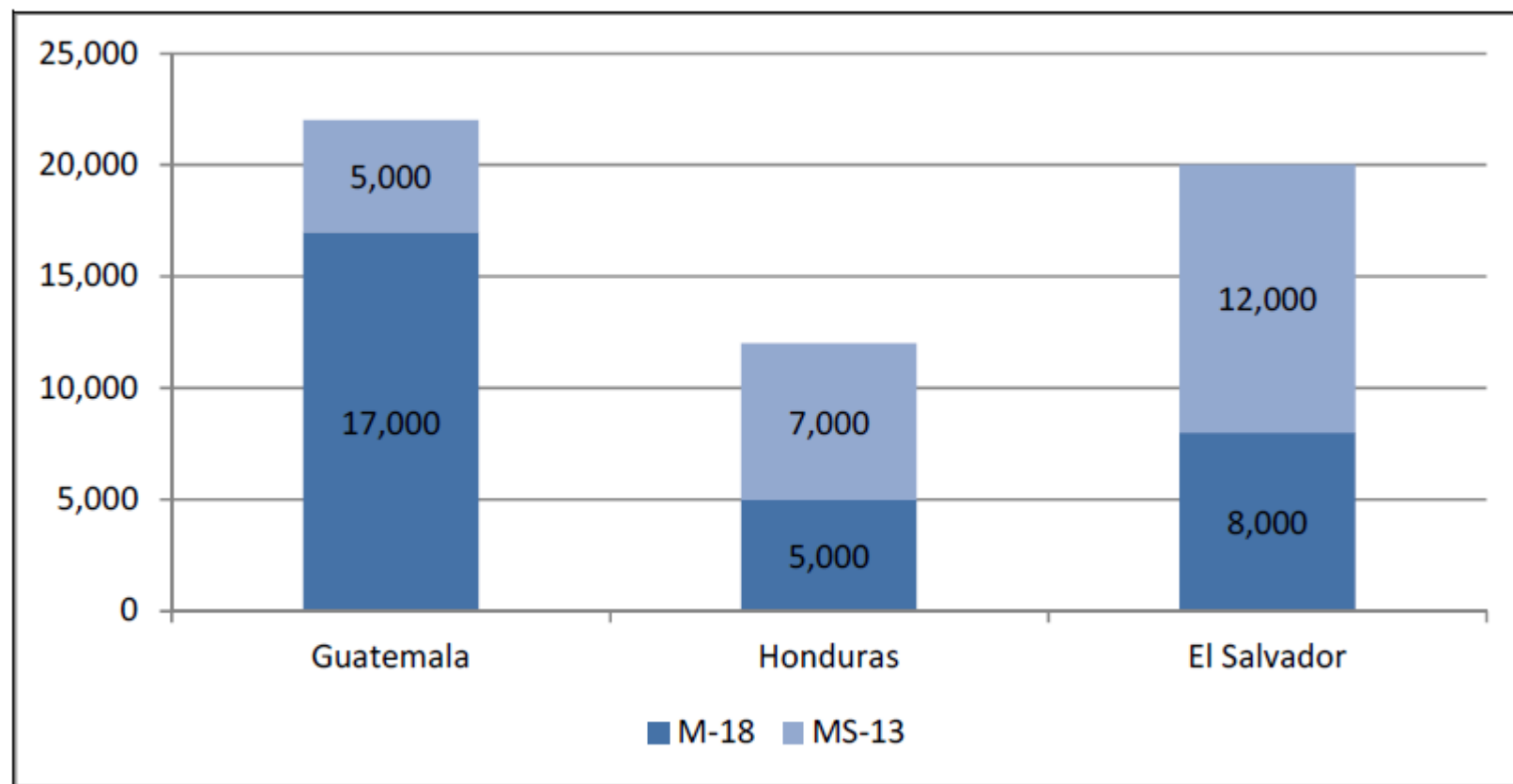


Figure 1. Estimated Gang Membership in the Northern Triangle of Central America, 2012



Source: U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: a Threat Assessment*, September 2012.



Popular Drug Trafficking Routes (The Economist 2014)



Radar data collected by the United States government shows what are believed to be illicit drug flights, mostly between Venezuela and Central America. (Joint Interagency Task Force South 2012)

Painting a Highly Problematic Picture

- “When international organized crime can threaten the stability of regions and the very viability of nations, the issues are far from being exclusively in the realm of law enforcement; they also become a matter of national security.” (CIA Director James Woolsey in Galeotti 2001, 215 fn)
- Early conflation of Gangs (maras more than pandillas) with TCOs
- Securitisation of Crime



Central America: TCOs

- Financial Power derived through products (including humans)
- Social Transformation: Illicit jobs that persist in the long term
- Territory: Gaining control of significant territory and borders
- Challenging State Institutions: Organised crime and violent activities weaken public support for democratic institutions and weaken the institutions themselves through corruption and intimidation
- Control of Security: Organised crime and gangs locally provide and take away security for their communities and territories, negating government responsibilities

El Salvador: Types of Crime

Gangs (Maras, Pandillas)

- Largest number of homicides
- Other violent crimes (robbery, theft)
- Extortion
- Drug Sales and small transit
- Small Territory Control (urban, rural)
- Violence as identity
- Generally thought to emerge out of marginalised society

Acknowledged to have influence at every level of government and security organisation (police, military, prisons)

Transnational Criminal Organisations (TCOs)

- Transportation of Illicit Goods
- Trafficking of Illicit Goods
- Human Trafficking
- Money Laundering
- Broad swaths territory control (rural)
- Violence as control
- Moving into territory and building networks (Sinaloa, Los Zetas: Perrones, Taxis)

Acknowledged to have influence at every level of government including politicians who are known cartel members

Policy Trends: 2000s

- Mano Dura / Super Mano Dura
 - Targeting anyone who appeared to be associated with gangs (stop and search targeting “gang markers” leading to change in identifications)
- Mass arrests leading to prison crisis
 - Prison population expanded exponentially → currently highest in the region
- Anti-narcotic patrols (Land, Sea, Air)
 - Focus on confiscation numbers rather than long-term institutional change
- Conflation of TCOs and Gang Members in crime and punishment



Security and Violence Prevention: 2009

- 2012

Prioritising crime and violence indicators rather than long-term solutioning

Capacity of government institutions to implement programmes limited

Combatting crime v. Preventing crime

Clinging to old habits (*Mano Dura*) as politically popular in the polls

Greater grassroots inclusion and locally-implemented programmes demonstrate some level of ideological switch (citizen security)

Alternative Efforts

- Legalisation Proposals (2012-present) (Guatemala-Driven)
- Gang Truce (2012-2014)
- Focus on long-term Prevention Programmes
- Regional Collaborations (SICA)



Gang Truce

- Truce negotiated between two main gangs, MS-13, M-18, ostensibly facilitated by independent individuals
- Despite lack of clarity, successful decrease in homicides led to opportunity for programming implementation
- *Cities without Violence* creating space for change
- Despite success, individual citizens, government institutions and the international community remained unsold on potential
- Failed in 2014 after lack of political support and funding
- Population never in favour – worries of ulterior motives
- ULTERIOR MOTIVES: Time for restructuring? Consolidation of authority? Politicisation? Graduation to TCO?

Challenges to the Drug War

- Guatemala's President Otto Molina proposed consideration of de-criminalisation/legalisation in 2012 supported by Costa Rica's (ex)President Laura Chinchilla and Panama's Ricardo Martinelli
- Expressing continued support for the drug war:
 - President Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua)
 - (ex)President Mauricio Funes (El Salvador)

"Our government is open to discussion on any proposal or measure which achieves a reduction in the high levels of consumption in our countries, but particularly (to reduce) the production and trafficking of drugs. As long as the United States does not make any effort to reduce the high levels of (narcotics) consumption, there's very little we can do in our countries to fight against the cartels, and try to block the production and trade in drugs." vs.

"En lo particular yo no estoy de acuerdo con la despenalización ni de la producción, ni del tráfico, ni del consumo de la droga" (ENADE 2012).

- (ex)President Pepe Lobo (Honduras)

Counter-TCOs/Gangs

United States of America:

- Both law enforcement and prevention
- 2007: U.S. Strategy to Combat Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico focused on diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity enhancement, and prevention
- October 2012: Treasury Department designated MS-13 as a major Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) subject to sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13581
- Bartolinas, community policing, school education programmes (prevention), and police-youth soccer leagues
- Conflation of gangs and TCO efforts: “Between FY2008 and FY2013, Congress appropriated roughly \$38 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds for anti-gang efforts in Central America” (Seelke 2014)

Unintended Consequences of Counter-TCOs Activities

Trends:

- Geographic movement of TCOs from stronger countries to those with weaker democratic institutions and financial capabilities
- Increased corruption issues in CA countries due to increasing power of new criminal activities
- Increasing militarisation of policing efforts

Specifics:

- Duplication of Efforts: Police Training
- Lack of cooperation / information-sharing (territory, distrust, corruption)
- Neglect of affected populations: Counter-narcotics operations do not typically consider local populations
 - Participation / facilitation in support activities
 - Pressed from all sides to pick sides
 - Increased violent risks without consideration of potential supports



Thank You!

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Central America: A Region Under Threat

Country	Threat
Costa Rica	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• TCO Presence: The government has recorded four drug trafficking organisations in addition to over 100 local criminal gangs: the Sinaloa, Juárez and Familia Michoacana cartels from Mexico and the successors of Norte del Valle cartel from Colombia• Border crossings: Like Peñas Blancas (shared with Nicaragua) have low capacity for effective counter-trafficking operations whilst aerial enforcement capabilities are limited• Attraction: Lax gambling and financial regulations facilitating money laundering

Central America: A Region Under Threat

Country	Threat
El Salvador	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Powerful National Gangs: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara-18 (M-18) hold significant control on homicide rates in the country• Powerful Transportista Cartels: Perrones and Taxis both involved in trafficking and transport of which narcotics form only one component• Borders: Border crossings shared with Honduras and along the Golfo de Fonseca are key risk areas• Attraction: Nicely paved highways for easy transport and dollarization makes for easy money laundering (and only 10 individuals in the investigations department)

Central America: A Region Under Threat

Country	Threat
Guatemala	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mexican Cartels: Mexican counter efforts have successfully pushed cartels into Guatemala where they effectively control up to 40% of territory• Border Risks: those departments bordering Mexico and Honduras at greatest risk of violence as cartels have demonstrated willingness to massacre large groups to “send a message”• Attraction: Relatively sparse population in many areas allow for easy transportation and weak government institutions have already been (or remained) corrupted

Central America: A Region Under Threat

Country	Threat
Honduras	<p>Ostensibly the most violent country in the world hosting the world's most homicide-intense city (San Pedro Sula)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clandestine flights: Most popular destination for narco-planes although flights appear to have been decreased over the last year due to increased monitoring• Cartels: Presence of cartels in Ocotepeque, Copan, Colon and Atlantida provinces. Honduran drug-trafficking gang the Cachiros, with ties to elites, was targeted in 2013 US anti-crime operations.• Corruption: Estimates that up to 60% of security forces are corrupt or work directly for TCOs.

Central America: A Region Under Threat

Country	Threat
Nicaragua	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Corruption: In March 2014, arrests of free-lance drugs transporters highlighted the close ties these “tumbadores” maintain with corrupt authorities in increasing transit operations in Nicaragua• Homicides: Lowest in the region but rise dramatically in the poorly policed autonomous zones• Autonomous Regions: Bluefields and nearby islands dominated by drug-trafficking locals