



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## U.S. Strategy to Combat the Threat of Criminal Gangs from Central America and Mexico

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Certain criminal gangs pose significant public safety and security threats to the countries in which they operate, including the United States. Of particular concern to the United States, they threaten the U.S. regional interest in fostering stable democracies with free and vibrant economies and the domestic interest in protecting U.S. citizens and communities from the ravages of gang violence and associated criminal activities.

U.S. Federal law enforcement agencies consider such gangs as transnational criminal organizations. These transnational gang members are currently migrating to all regions of the United States and are proliferating in areas, particularly rural areas, where neither law enforcement nor the communities they serve are accustomed to addressing these types of gang and criminal dynamics. Historically, such gangs are notoriously violent and exercise a tremendous amount of threats and intimidation, backed up by extreme violence in order to carry out and further their objectives. Gangs such as these are involved in various crimes of opportunity such as drug trafficking, extortion, human smuggling/trafficking and prostitution, thereby making them extremely dangerous and unpredictable. In addition, this threat is amplified by the gangs' recruitment of children near schools, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities, targeting those as young as eight years old.

Gangs are expanding across the United States and Canada; their activities have reached critical proportions in places such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and on Mexico's southern border; and they pose a threat to other countries of the region. Effectively addressing the problem of transnational gangs requires close cooperation, coordination, and information-sharing among the countries affected and a comprehensive approach that includes law enforcement, prevention, intervention, rehabilitation and reintegration. To varying degrees criminal justice systems in Central America and Mexico may need additional capacity to adequately facilitate such cooperation or implement integrated strategies. Crucial deficits include insufficient and inconsistent data on gang members and gang activity, inadequate legal frameworks, limited investigative and prosecutorial capabilities, and overwhelmed prisons. The strategy must be shaped with recognition of the larger socioeconomic factors fueling the gang problem, such as drug and alcohol abuse, family disintegration, and insufficient employment, education, and constructive community opportunities. It must also consider the means to combat human rights abuses that could be committed during efforts to suppress gangs and the right to security of affected communities.

U.S. and regional experience provides two critical lessons. The first is that reducing gang crime requires a balanced and integrated approach that incorporates effective law enforcement with youth crime prevention and interventions that provide alternatives and opportunities to leave gangs. Schools, community groups, and the private sector have as important a role to play as the policy environment and the justice system. The second lesson is that the approach must be truly regional, with strong bilateral foundations, because success in one jurisdiction may simply transfer the problem to neighboring areas, as gang members move between countries through legal and illegal means.

The peculiar characteristics of the gang problem - its multiple causes and transnational nature - call for a comprehensive international plan that engages the countries of Central and North America and multilateral organizations. One of those organizations, the Central American Integration System (SICA), has made a number of specific regional commitments to address the gang problem that cover the spectrum from prevention to enforcement. Recent policy statements by hemispheric leaders at the Summit of the Americas and the Organization of American States (OAS) General Assembly demonstrate the collective concern of the 34 democratic governments in the Western Hemisphere regarding the problem of criminal gangs and the need for a coordinated response.

The United States is committed to combating the threat posed by criminal gangs from Central America and Mexico and to working in cooperation with the other countries principally affected by it. Toward that end, the United States will undertake activities in five broad categories: diplomacy, repatriation, law enforcement, capacity enhancement and prevention.

**1. Diplomacy:** Focus diplomatic efforts with affected nations of the region (including El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico) on establishing a coordinated, comprehensive approach to the gang problem, and which indicates clear priorities for action within each area. Specifically the United States will:

- Establish an ongoing dialogue with partner nations and with multilateral agencies on security matters, including the gang problem.
- Work with multilateral organizations, including SICA and the OAS, to coordinate and support a regional strategy.
- Review the commitments already made through SICA - including a regional anti-gang plan and prevention strategy - and determine where U.S. technical and/or financial assistance should be provided to develop a workable comprehensive regional plan for implementation.
- Continue to support efforts to address the gang problem at the hemispheric level within the OAS and Summit of the Americas process, to inform Caribbean and South American countries of ongoing efforts within Central and North America and lay the groundwork for expansion of such efforts at a later date.
- Identify key technical specialists in each country who are engaged on these specific issues with bilateral or multilateral partners, as well as actual or potential U.S. counterparts and establish communications networks among them.
- Conduct periodic reviews of existing bilateral and multilateral treaties and practices on extradition and judicial assistance and urge implementation of best practices and, where possible, improvements in the legal framework for law enforcement cooperation.
- Pursue a multi-track policy of engagement with the partner countries through bilateral and international channels, working with them to

identify the best initiatives to pursue at any given time.

- Engage other potential international donors, the private sector, faith-based and other nongovernmental organizations, and relevant diaspora communities to support implementation of a regional anti-gang strategy.

**2. Repatriation:** Expedite the repatriation process and develop an efficient way to provide receiving countries with criminal history information and gang affiliation. Specifically, the United States will:

- Work with El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala to implement on a pilot basis an electronic Travel Document System (eTD) to allow foreign consular officials to certify travel documents electronically from a remote location and thus speed removal of aliens from the United States.
- Expand the eTD system to other countries in the region as conditions permit.
- Provide biometrics in the form of fingerprints and digital photographs.
- Continue to implement and further develop the eTD.
- Where feasible, provide receiving countries with related information that could help facilitate the effective re-integration of deportees.

**3. Law Enforcement:** Seek actively to identify and exploit the vulnerabilities of transnational criminal gangs in order to fully identify their command and control, disrupt their criminal activities and dismantle their criminal infrastructure. Specifically, the United States will:

- Identify opportunities to conduct joint international law enforcement operations targeted against transnational criminal gangs operating in the region.
- Develop common and shared operational terms of reference related to the definitions of a gang, gang membership and gang-related criminal activities.
- Develop effective channels for sharing intelligence and operational enforcement information pertinent to anti-gang activities.
- Disrupt the gangs' criminal activities, dismantle their criminal infrastructure and investigate, prosecute and incarcerate their command and control structure and criminal participants.
- Deter and deny, through bilateral and multilateral anti-gang law enforcement activities, the ability of criminal gangs to continue to engage in transnational criminal activities or to recruit new members.
- Develop a more effective ability to identify and deny entry into the United States and facilitate the removal of foreign national gang members.
- Utilize asset forfeiture and anti-money laundering laws to identify and take away gang resources as well as the proceeds of crimes committed by gang members, and share the realized forfeited proceeds with any foreign nations that assist the United States. Consider specifically programming shared forfeiture funds to law enforcement projects that combat international criminal gangs in the assisting nations."
- Allocate additional resources necessary to support operations under this strategy, including assigning additional law enforcement personnel to U.S. missions in the region and in the United States to facilitate execution of law enforcement operations, to establish vetted anti-gang law enforcement units in the region, and to address increased international obligations and opportunities arising from the implementation of this Strategy.

**4. Capacity Enhancement:** Strengthen the capacity of criminal justice systems in the region to identify, successfully prosecute, and effectively incarcerate key gang leaders and operatives, and identify, seize and forfeit their assets while respecting human rights, acting through bilateral or regional channels as appropriate. Specifically, the United States will:

- Conduct an inventory of existing USG assistance programs (including applicable DOD programs) to see where there are gaps or overlaps.
- Offer assistance in the revision of laws and legislation necessary to establish an appropriate legal framework to address the gang problem.
- Provide bilateral and regional training/technical assistance to selected elements within the justice system in each country, especially on the criminal side, and support the development of regular channels of communication and cooperation among them.
- Improve the quality of law enforcement, including addressing issues of corruption and respect for human and civil rights.
- Support community efforts to combat gang crime and violence, including collaboration between law enforcement entities and communities.
- Assess existing capacity to identify criminal individuals and to analyze crimes within the region and possible mechanisms for improvement. Determine the most effective and cost-efficient way of linking all countries to an Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), and of enhancing the sharing of criminal intelligence on gang members and their activities.
- Assist prison authorities to develop and implement management changes to address longstanding problems created by large gang prison populations, including the need for security and rehabilitation.

**5. Prevention:** Strengthen the capacity of governments, nongovernmental organizations, and communities in gang-affected countries to reduce criminal gang activity by discouraging youth from joining gangs and providing viable rehabilitation and integration options for youth who leave gangs. Specifically, the United States will:

- Pursue policy reforms at the national and regional level to expand productive opportunities for youth (e.g., education, employment, health, juvenile justice).
- Assist community-based organizations and local authorities to provide youth with productive alternatives to criminal gang activity or encourage them to leave gangs (e.g., job placement, vocational skills training/alternative education, drug rehabilitation).
- Develop capacity of authorities at all levels of government and communities to identify factors driving youth into gangs and to create multi-sectoral alliances to address these needs in a sustainable fashion.
- Foster partnerships at the national, regional, and international levels -- among the public and private sectors, donors, faith-based organizations, and the Central American and Mexican diaspora -- to leverage resources to address gang prevention.
- Increase information-sharing, training, and technical assistance among government and nongovernmental actors in affected countries, including the United States, on tools and successful practices in gang prevention, rehabilitation, and integration.
- Support efforts to provide rehabilitation and reintegration programs and services to returning deportees to prevent them from joining a criminal gang or continuing involvement with criminal gangs upon return.

- Facilitate balanced and professional media coverage of the gang issue.