TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

A Threat Assessment

Executive summary
Acknowledgements

This study was conducted under the responsibility of the UNODC Offices in Mexico (ROMEX) and Panama (ROPAN), Division for Operations (DO), with research support of the UNODC Studies and Threat Analysis Section (STAS), Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs (DPA).

Research

Claudio Damián Rodríguez Santorum, Enrique Marín Pellecer, Felipe de la Torre, Jenna Dawson, Jorge Manuel Vargas Mediavilla, Juliana Erthal Rodrigues Dos Santos, Louise Bosetti, Bertha Nayelly Loya Marin, Simone Lucatello (consultant) and Ted Leggett (lead researcher).

Translation, graphic design, mapping support, desktop publishing and printing

Anja Korenblik, Deniz Mermerci, Jorge Manuel Vargas Mediavilla, Kristina Kuttnig and Suzanne Kunnen.

Supervision

Aldo Lale-Demoz (Director, DO)
Amado Philip de Andrés (Representative, ROPAN)
Antonio Mazzitelli (Representative, ROMEX)
Thibault Le Pichon (Chief, STAS)

The preparation of this report would not have been possible without the data and information reported by governments to UNODC and other international organizations. UNODC is particularly thankful to government and law enforcement officials met in the region while undertaking research.

The study benefited from the valuable input of many UNODC staff members - at headquarters and field offices - who reviewed various sections of this report.

The research team also gratefully acknowledges the information, advice and comments provided by a range of officials and experts, including those from the United Nations Task Force on Transnational Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking.

UNODC gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the Inter-American Development Bank towards the cost of this report.

DISCLAIMERS

This report has not been formally edited.

The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of UNODC or contributory organizations and neither do they imply any endorsement.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNODC or the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Website: www.unodc.org
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

![Graph showing murder rates in northern Central America from 2000 to 2011.](image)

Source: UNODC Homicide Database

Map 1: Homicide rates by municipal area in 2011

![Map showing homicide rates by municipal area in 2011 in Central America.](image)

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 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.