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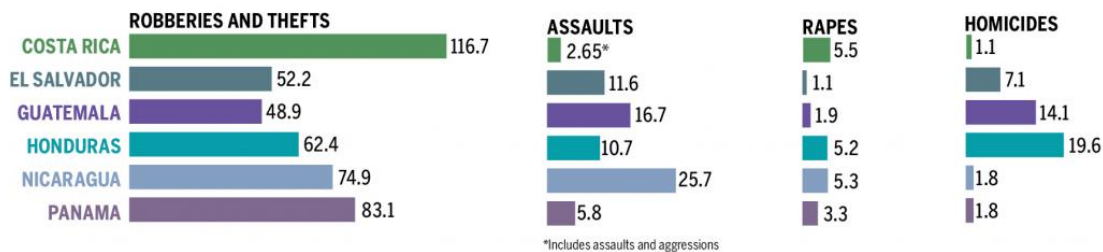
# Behind the Numbers: Insecurity and Marginalization in Central America

BY [Matthew Budd](#) and [Marcela Donadio](#)

## Ways to tackle the region's problems of crime and violence.

With 11 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012, Nicaragua stands out as a relatively fortunate exception in a region whose homicide rates rank among the world's highest. Its northern neighbors all recorded rates at least three times greater: with Guatemala at 34.3 murders per 100,000 citizens; El Salvador at 41.5; and—at the top of this grim list—Honduras at 85.5. To the south of Nicaragua, only traditionally stable and more developed Costa Rica recorded a lower rate (8.8). Panama registered 17.6 murders per 100,000 in 2012.

CHART 1: **DAILY INSECURITY**



The contrast in murder rates between Nicaragua and some of its richer neighbors challenges the common view that security and development are linked. The real explanation is in the levels of social inclusion.

The idea that insecurity is a direct result of poverty is often used by governments themselves as a means to justify inaction or failure to provide citizens with a secure living environment. The picture they seek to paint is one where poverty and inequality render helpless against criminality and violence.

Yet with a GDP per capita of just \$1,756, and a minimum monthly salary of \$192, Nicaragua is very much on the poorer side of the Central American divide. The differences go beyond per capita income to the amount invested in security, with Nicaragua also at the low end compared to its northern neighbors.

### CHART 2: SECURITY AND BUDGET

	COSTA RICA	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS	NICARAGUA	PANAMA
ON AVERAGE, CONTRIBUTION OF EACH ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE MEMBER OF THE POPULATION (EAP) EVERY YEAR	\$2,741	\$1,351	\$877	\$807	\$497	\$2,751
OF THIS, THE ASSIGNMENT TO HEALTH	7%	15%	12%	20%	22%	12%
TO EDUCATION	57%	24%	30%	39%	28%	32%
TO SECURITY	14%	12%	14%	10%	7%	21%
% OF SECURITY BUDGET DEVOTED TO SECURITY FORCES*	42.6%	64.7%	48.9%	69.5%	63.6%	60.5%
ASSIGNED TO SECURITY PER EAP IN 2013	\$393	\$164	\$125	\$84	\$34	\$590

\*Percentage allocated to public security forces located with the Ministries of Public Security

In Nicaragua, each economically active member of the population (EAP) contributes \$497, and receives just \$34 per capita in terms of the security budget assignment. In contrast, in Honduras and Guatemala, each EAP contributes \$84 and \$125 toward security. Farther south, in Costa Rica and Panama, each EAP contributes \$393 and \$590, respectively—a world away from Nicaragua.



Gang members in El Salvador voluntary give up their weapons to Monsignor Colindres and OAS officials. Photo courtesy of Departamento de Seguridad Publica OEA / Arena Orte.

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### Belonging, Trusting, Participating...Security

As discussed earlier in this section, social inclusion is about far more than just the absence of poverty and inequality. It is about a sense of belonging—to a group, or to a process. Marginalization,

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on the other hand, generates a sense of alienation, of being an outsider and, inevitably, of insecurity. Social exclusion and marginalization lead to non-conventional (and often violent) efforts to attain justice and security.

Social inclusion creates social bonds and attitudes conducive to security. In contrast, an environment of insecurity curtails freedoms and choices, and undermines the opportunities and possibilities central to the notion of social inclusion.

In the case of Central America, mutually reinforcing phenomena come together in a turbulent mix.

The region's young people are increasingly both the victims and drivers of violence and insecurity. A study conducted by our organization, *Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina* (Latin American Security and Defense Network—RESDAL), in its “2013 Public Security Index” revealed that in El Salvador, 29.4 percent of those in prison in 2011 were between 18 and 25 years old; while in Honduras, 48 percent of homicide victims in 2012 were between 15 and 29 years old.

A closer look at these young people is revealing. Few have finished high school, and many not even primary school. Many suffer from substance abuse. Family members are often involved in crime or in gangs. While they are central to the problem of insecurity, youth are very much on the periphery of society.

The insecurity and marginalization of vulnerable groups like youth and women is determined not by a country's level of economic development, but by the strength of state institutions.

It is through institutions that the state creates and ensures a secure, inclusive living environment, and that policies and legal frameworks are developed and applied equitably. Citizens' interaction with these institutions over the course of their lives has important consequences for their personal development, their understanding of society, their sense of belonging, and the choices and decisions they make.

In many cases across Central America, state institutions are grossly deficient in terms of development, resources and reach. When it comes to security, Central American governments have historically devoted resources to the search for immediate responses, which tend to focus on hardline policies of repression. This *mano dura* (iron fist) approach has distorted institutional development, undermining inclusive policies and structures necessary to build social fabric and trust.

However, Central American governments are paying increasing attention to the development of institutions targeting marginalized groups—through legislation, the creation of specialized bodies, and prevention policies that seek to target the underlying drivers of insecurity and social exclusion.

The establishment of special units within public prosecutors' offices across the Central American region is one example. As part of the development of the public prosecutor's office in Guatemala, the *Oficina de Atención a la Víctima* (Office of Victim Attention) was created to provide a comprehensive model of victim and witness attention that includes the provision of police protection and victim and witness protection programs. The number of cases handled by the office increased from 7.6 percent of total cases in 2008 to 40.3 percent in 2011.

The introduction of legislation that specifically focuses on youth and seeks to promote their rights and participation has also been a positive development. In El Salvador, the 2012 *Ley General de Juventud* (General Law on Youth) specifically cites the rights and responsibilities of young people—such as the right to a life free from violence—and commits the government to increasing their political, social, cultural, and economic participation.

The law also establishes procedures to increase involvement of young people in the development of policies and rules directed toward youth and their development, through the *Instituto Nacional de la Juventud* (National Youth Institute—INJUVE). Programs developed from this include a focus on the social prevention of violence with an emphasis on youth participation, involving training young men and women in rehabilitation and social prevention methods in 14 municipalities of the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador, with the goal of participants reproducing these efforts in their local communities. This has been accompanied by the providing 810 training scholarships to youth from San Salvador, increasing economic opportunities for them and their families.

The region is also making progress in crime prevention. Nicaragua's *Centro de Formación y Desarrollo Juvenil* (Center of Youth Training and Development) within the *Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles* (Directorate of Youth Affairs) targets at-risk youth and those with established links to gangs.

A year-long evaluation of possible cases is carried out within the locality. It examines the behavior of youth and their tendency to violence through a psychosocial assessment rooted in both the school and family environments, helping them to address personal issues such as low self-esteem or personal identity. Certain cases are then selected to engage in a formal education program under the guidance of specially trained teachers who provide vocational training over a 10-month period, along with community-based internships.

The promotion of such comprehensive policies and programs, with an emphasis on preventive policing methods, may help to explain Nicaragua's low homicide rates.

Youth detained within the criminal justice system require specific attention. In all the countries cited here, prisons are overcrowded, processing times are long, and prisoners awaiting trial spend long times on remand. In Guatemala, as of August 2013, there were 15,488 prisoners in a system with a capacity for just 6,492, while in Honduras, just 25 percent of detainees have been sentenced in certain cases.

In Panama, 48 percent of the population is between 18 and 28 years old. In recognition of this demographic challenge, both laws and the judicial system are starting to seek ways to address the risk of criminality among adolescents through prevention. In 2010, a law established a special regime for juvenile criminal responsibility, which applies non-custodial sentences for minor offenses committed by youths between 12 and 15 years old. These measures include obligatory participation in social assistance and guidance programs along with the provision of community service; the system also created special judges and prosecutors to deal with cases related to adolescents.

The introduction of legislation and specialized units that target vulnerable groups is a positive move. But multiple hurdles, including limited resources, remain. There is no escaping the fact that a government's ability to strengthen its justice institutions will determine the success or failure of efforts to combat the insecurity and marginalization of these groups.

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C. Lew · 6 months ago

This article attempts to answer an interesting question posed by Latin America watchers: Why are Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala so much more violent than Nicaragua (a poorer country)? The conclusion it reaches is that social exclusion and marginalization are the determining factors. However, there is no mention of exogenous factors that may have caused these levels of violence such as 1) the deportation of thousands of hardened criminal gang members to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras from the U.S. at levels much greater than happened in Nicaragua, 2) the location of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras along violent drug smuggling routes. Additionally, when other crime indicators such as "Robberies and Thefts" are brought into the equation, Costa Rica becomes by far the most dangerous place for "Robberies and Thefts" despite it having a reputation for being among one of the best Central American countries in terms of inclusive institutions.

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