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[Home](#) > Stay alive: turning around a failing war

Stay alive: turning around a failing war

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A deep strategic rethink is needed to reverse the dismal failure of the war on drugs and gangs, particularly in the way this has been fought across Central America and the Caribbean. Intimate community engagement and integral policy approaches are crucial steps in moving on from the bankrupt iron fist.

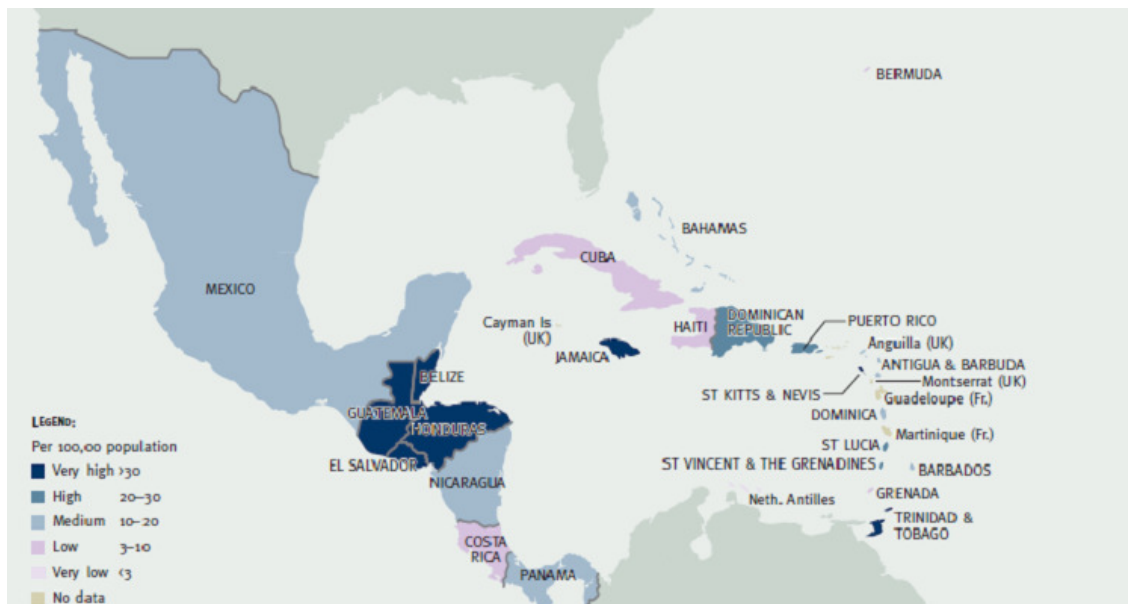
About the authors

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Within the last ten years a rash of countries across Latin America and the Caribbean earned the ignoble distinction of being amongst the most violent on the planet. With an average intentional homicide rate topping 60 per 100,000 in 2010, El Salvadorians are today more at risk of dying than any other group of citizens in the world.

Not far behind these unlucky few are Jamaicans, Hondurans, Colombians, Venezuelans and Guatemalans. In terms of gross numbers, Brazilian and Mexican cities such as Recife and Ciudad Juárez are also the deadliest unofficial war zones around. And across any of these settings, it is young, black and unemployed males who suffer most. As if the situation wasn't bad enough, violence appears to be worsening.



Shades of violence: a snapshot of Central America (2004-2009) Krause, Muggah and Gilgen (2011)

The dramatic escalation of lethal violence across these regions is routinely attributed to international drug cartels and transnational gangs. It is claimed that the transshipment of illicit narcotics passes through Latin America and the Caribbean from producer countries such as Bolivia and Colombia to consumers in North America and western Europe. The calculus of killing is thus a function of violent competition between cartels and gangs over transit routes and protection rackets. And with the drug trade valued at anything from 90 to 320 billion US dollars, the competition has also led to aggressive marketing: neighbourhood youth groups are alleged to have mutated into highly-organized criminal machines. Security analysts fear that these sprawling gangs will turn weak states into fragile ones.

The conventional response to spiralling drug and gang violence has been heavy-handed. The 'get tough on crime' rhetoric amongst Latin American and Caribbean leaders has been taken to new heights. The security-first response – focused on deploying military and police to deter and crack down on crime – has also shown itself to be remarkably ineffective. Indeed, the wars on drugs and crime are failing.

We contend, however, that there are still possibilities of countering the conventional narrative and reversing trends in violence. But identifying credible alternatives requires that these countries take a hard look at their own contribution to the current waves of violence.

The start of combat

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century a rash of Latin America and Caribbean governments have initiated aggressive campaigns on narcotics and gangs. Using the nomenclature of warfare, they proposed to 'combat' cartels and gangs, 'dismember' their command and control structures, 'reclaim' territory lost to non-state actors, and restore 'order' and "good government".

From late 2003 onwards, muscular crackdowns were initiated in El Salvador and Nicaragua

(e.g. *Mano Dura*), Honduras (e.g. *Cero Tolerancia*), and Guatemala (e.g. *Plan Escoba*). Since 2008, Mexico's *Mérida Initiative* has resulted in two billion dollars' worth of military hardware and training. These initiatives combine military and police interventions with targeted legal and operational crackdowns on real or imagined perpetrators. Among other things, they have led to the arbitrary imprisonment of tens of thousands of young men and massive increases in prison populations.

With backing from the Organization of American States (OAS), countries across Latin America have also launched unprecedented cross-border operations to deal with the 'transnational' dimensions of cartels and gangs. This is because transnational gangs were considered by the OAS to represent 'a destabilizing menace, more immediate than any conventional war or guerrilla.'

El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua have lifted legal barriers to international prosecution of gang members, and their governments have established a joint security force to patrol gang activity along common borders. While sold as 'home grown', most of these efforts are in fact coordinated and financed by the US. The Americans, unsurprisingly, are deeply concerned about escalating rates of instability on their doorstep, and the implications of regional contagion (and unwanted 'illegals') spilling across borders.

Analogous debates and activities have also taken shape across the Caribbean. Over recent years a number of governments, led by Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, began investing in regional solutions to the drug and gang menace. Divining ways to confront, contain and counteract transnational gangs was the focus of a high profile government-supported conference in Port-of-Spain in 2008.

Many countries across the region, most notably Jamaica ^[19], have insights based on recent experience. Operation Kingfisher was founded in 2004, and is Jamaica's premier organised crime task force. It emerged in the wake of a 2001 anti-narcotics campaign involving Jamaica and several South American states, the US, Canada and the United Kingdom. By cutting off funding opportunities for organized criminal networks in Jamaica, they hope to curtail some of the worst symptoms of drug and gang violence, such as extortion and protection rackets, the retail trade in drugs and arms trafficking.

Challenging the conventional response

Despite the considerable political and financial capital devoted to wars on drugs and gangs, they are failing on virtually every metric. The recent Global Commission on Drug Policy made emphatically clear that today there is more drug production, drug trafficking, drug consumption, people in prison, and young men committing acts of violence than ever before.

There are numerous indices showing how the wars are failing. Colombian drug production has oscillated since Plan Colombia was initiated, though it appears to have stabilized at higher rates than before the war on drugs began. Recent reports suggest that apart from committing barbaric acts of violence, Mexican cartels now operate in more than 1,285 US cities. There are guesstimates of between 200,000 and 800,000 'operational' gang members across the Americas alone, though no one seems to know for certain. And even as policy makers throw up figurative and literal 'walls' to contain escalating violence, they are privately asking why their wars

are going so horribly wrong.

Part of the problem is that the conventional narrative, while elegantly simple, is fundamentally flawed. The basic claim is that the combination of drug production, transit and consumption – and the gangs who facilitate the narcotics trade – is corroding *legitimate* state institutions. As such, national political and economic elites burnish their credentials by waging a war on drugs and gangs in the interest of 'national' security and preserving 'law and order'.

Operating through UN institutions or regional organizations, diplomats and foreign service personnel market the wars as essential to ensuring 'international peace and security', while selling the tough on crime story to fearful domestic consumers. And yet these efforts to control and contain drugs and gangs have by and large made them more radical, fragmented and murderous. The 'successful' persecution of the wars has paradoxically increased levels of violence and today threaten instability on North American and Western European frontiers.

The reason for this failure is that the conventional narrative of a war on drugs and gangs, ignores two basic facts.

The first is that the states at war against drugs and gangs are often the very same ones involved in sustaining growing narcotics markets and gang proliferation at the outset. In other words, the presumption of a 'legitimate' state and the existence of 'law and order' are contestable. Rather, the armed forces, police agents, cartel bosses, and gang members are often engaged in a violent struggle in a market ruled by the strong, and alternately fighting one another or colluding to secure their share. In Mexico's borderline states, for example, it is estimated that well over half of all public security officials are on the payroll of cartels and gang outfits. Meanwhile, in what amounts to one of the Caribbean's worst-kept secrets, federal and municipal authorities in Jamaica [19] and Trinidad and Tobago [20] have long invested in anti-gang units and social welfare initiatives while simultaneously channelling cash to the region's most notorious gangsters and their rank and file.

The second is that the current response to drug and gang violence is narrowly focused on repressive responses while side-stepping the structural factors that shape insecurity to begin with. In fact, security-first interventions under way across Latin America and the Caribbean conceal the drivers of drug trafficking and gang violence, including widespread impunity, systemic under- and unemployment, illiteracy and weak education systems, and grinding poverty and inequality. It is precisely the young and marginalized, excluded from formal labour opportunities, who are eventually shunted into the informal sector, and in some cases resort to organized crime and gangs.

Imagining alternatives to the failed war

Waging a more effective and humane campaign against drugs and gangs will require facing up to the real drivers of violence. It will also require enlisting innovative partners and creative actions that target both the causes and symptoms of violence. Recent evidence [21] indicates that successfully preventing and reducing violence associated with drugs and gangs must operate across at least four dimensions.

First, there needs to be a concerted focus on communities that are most affected by insecurity - they cannot be side-stepped or ignored. An example of a particularly effective intervention is Rio

de Janeiro's 'Fica Vivo' (Stay Alive) intervention, which reduced homicides by almost 50 per cent in areas affected by narco- and gang-related violence. It did this by forging solid partnerships between the state and municipal governments, prosecutors and court personnel, and NGOs. The programme resulted in the opening of some 27 community centres intended to improve the quality of life in 'at-risk' communities and to minimize the onset and intensity of collective and inter-personal violence.

Second, interventions cannot be stove-piped by sector but should instead address the diverse and interconnected drivers of violence. The presence and persistence of drug trafficking, gangs and related violence cannot be isolated to a monolithic cause or pathway. Rather, it is a manifestation of a combination of factors: the dynamics of demand in neighbouring countries, underdevelopment, poor urban planning, corrupt or inadequate law enforcement and weak public health provision, in addition to the criminal and commercial motives of particular violence entrepreneurs.

Governments and communities in the region thus require information, skills, and resources that extend far beyond what their security apparatus has to offer. Killing or capturing gangsters cannot substitute for helping urban residents revitalise public space, governance and infrastructure. And while this shift in focus will encounter resistance from entrenched interests, it is vital.

Third, any high performing response strategy must account for the supply and demand for drugs and gang membership, at both local and global levels. The motivations and drivers behind extreme violence in Ciudad Juárez, for example, are fundamentally connected to a global political economy. While defending their sovereign obligation to protect borders and citizens, certain governments endorsing the wars on drugs and gangs simultaneously profit from authorized arms sales, expanding prison populations, and a tough approach when it comes to 'fighting crime'. And while the UN Office for Drugs and Crime is right to call for global solutions to "halt deadly drug gangs," the implications may unsettle some of the staunch supporters of these failing wars. Indeed, many members of transnational gangs across Latin America and the Caribbean were in fact strengthened by the US policy of repatriating convicts back to their (or their parents') countries of origin. Once repatriated, new gang members acted as "connectors" linking together ever more sophisticated networks.

Finally, any comprehensive package of responses to drug and gang related violence will require a combination of a hard and soft responses – or *mano dura* and *mano amigo*, in the vernacular. Both law-enforcement and community-based approaches are required. Such approaches must recognize how and why violence has emerged, and recognize the specific roles and functions of these phenomena. Adopting this more nuanced approach is demanding. It is more difficult to sell to sceptical elites and the vulnerable middle class, and takes more time to implement on the ground. Who can honestly publicly endorse a 'get soft on crime' approach when drugs are fuelling gang-led killing sprees?

Ultimately, it will take courage for politicians and business leaders to explain to citizens that violence begets violence. An upcoming ministerial meeting of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development from 31 October to 1 November will offer opportune platform for leaders to take up this challenge. The true test, however, will be if their rhetorical commitments are backed by deeds.

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 Honduras
 Colombia
 Guatemala
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[24] [25] [26]

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