

Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment

Annex 5: Nicaragua Profile¹



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¹ Note that this version of the USAID Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment was edited for public distribution. Certain sections, including specific country-level recommendations for USAID Missions, were omitted from the Country Profile Annexes. These recommendations are summarized in the Conclusions and Recommendations Section of this assessment.

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Historical Context

Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest in Latin America. Approximately 70 percent of Nicaraguans live in extreme poverty (less than US\$1 per day), and unemployment hovers around 60-65 percent. Fifty percent of the unemployed are people under the age of 24. Many employed Nicaraguans lack stable jobs that pay fair wages. The average monthly per capita income is US\$60, which means that most Nicaraguans live on US\$2 per day.

Nicaragua is saddled with a large fiscal deficit (6.8 percent of the GDP in 2003), limited GDP, and a trade deficit that reached 31 percent of the GDP in 2003. The mean annual economic growth rate for the 1994-2003 period was 3.7 percent, with an average inflation rate of 8 percent. To further complicate matters, the country is heavily in debt, as various Nicaraguan governments incurred domestic debts to deal with indemnification of those whose properties were expropriated in the 1980s, as well as to deal with the bank collapse of the 1990s.² All this has made economic growth very difficult.

Nicaragua's population is fairly young: 40 percent are under 12, and 35 percent are 13-29 years old. Of these youths, 35 percent are in secondary school, and only 8 percent have reached the university level. Over 13 percent have never had any schooling. Forty-five percent of children drop out of school before grade 5.³

Many people leave Nicaragua in search of better opportunities abroad. An estimated 850,000 to a million Nicaraguans have left for the United States, Guatemala, or Costa Rica. Most of these migrants are young: 42 percent are 15-24, and nearly 40 percent are 25-44. This labor force remits US\$800 million annually to family members back home, making it the largest source of income for the country.

Nature of the Gang Phenomenon in Nicaragua

Nicaragua's gang problems are much different from those of its neighbors to the north. The level of violence reported in El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala is not found in the country. This is remarkable, given the number of weapons cached from the conflict in the 1980s. During this time, the population migrated from rural areas to urban areas, and gangs began to form in urban neighborhoods as a mechanism of survival. By the mid-1990s, neighborhood gangs were prevalent in many cities. Gangs, or *pandillas*, saw themselves as motivated by their "love for the neighborhood."⁴ Gang criminal tendencies were mugging, pick pocketing, shoplifting, and other low-level crimes. Gang warfare was waged between rival gangs in many of the 600 neighborhoods and squatter

² Mitch Seligson "The Political Culture of Democracy in Nicaragua 2004. A study of the Latin American Public Opinion Project." Vanderbilt University, 2004.

³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Statistics In Brief. *Education in Nicaragua*. October 2005.

⁴ Rodgers. From Primitive Socialism to Primitive Accumulation: Gangs, violence, and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua 1997-2002. CERLAC Bulletin. Volume 2 Issue 3 February 2003.

settlements in and around Managua. Confrontations with other gangs would start with sticks and stone-throwing and eventually escalate to guns, fragmentation grenades, and mortars. Neighborhoods became war zones, and people were reluctant to leave their homes unless necessary. Drug use was a part of the gang culture, although it was usually limited to marijuana, glue sniffing, and alcohol. By the early 2000s, Nicaraguan youth gangs became involved in the narco-trafficking trade that had existed along the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua for decades.⁵ Gangs were involved in local wholesaling and pushing on the streets.

Some of Nicaragua's newest gangs are not concerned with protecting neighborhoods, and they even resort to robbing their own neighbors for personal gain.⁶ The new generation gang member is more individualistic and is focused more on accumulating wealth than on protecting territory. The kind of gang warfare that existed five years ago is gone because violence deterred drug clients from entering their neighborhoods.

For the most part, gangs in Nicaragua are small youth gangs that are territorial in nature, concerned with wealth accumulation, and involved in petty crime. MS-13 and 18th Street gangs have not made their presence felt in the country. The combination of lingering socialist structures such as the neighborhood watch, the crime prevention role the police have carved out for themselves during the last few years, and Nicaraguans' interest in deterring the proliferation of "outside" gangs may have prevented these two transnational gangs from establishing a foothold in Nicaragua. Nicaraguan homegrown gangs are resistant to foreign gangs attempting to set up shop in their *barrios*.

Gang activity in Nicaragua has decreased over the years. In 1999, there were 110 *pandillas* (bands) in Managua, with about 8,500 gang members.⁷ According to the National Police, there were 184 gangs in 2004, with 2,614 members, while in 2005 the number went down to 108 gangs, with 2,201 members. According to 2004 and 2005 data, some 30 gangs comprising 517 members have been disbanded. The crimes committed by these youth gangs only make up 0.57 percent of all the criminal activity. Police statistics demonstrate that 0.11 percent of youths between the ages of 13-29 years belong to active gangs, whereas 0.12 percent of these youths are in high-risk groups. Although the media's obsession in Nicaragua with sensationalizing news stories about violence (known as the *Noticias Rojas*) has created the perception of a more serious public security problem, in reality, gangs currently pose a minimal security threat in Nicaragua. The country has one of the lowest homicide rates in Central America with levels at eight homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.⁸

Nevertheless, Nicaragua's fragile economic situation is fertile ground for increased youth gang activity. While most youth gangs have not yet made links to organized crime, some are hired by various political parties to cause disturbances at rival political or social events. Others are mainly involved in petty crime to feed crack and glue habits. Many of

⁵ The proximity of the Colombian island of San Andre makes Nicaragua a convenient transshipment point for crack and cocaine.

⁶ Rodgers, *ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Acuna. *Informe del Estudio de Pandillas en Nicaragua*. November 2005. Page 16.

these youths end up on the street with no future and find themselves joining a street or neighborhood gang, which becomes the basis for delinquent activities.

Costs and Impacts of Gang Activity

Impacts on Economic and Social Development

The cost of violence in Nicaragua does not reach the same proportions as it does in neighboring countries, and gangs have not had the negative impact in Nicaragua as they have in other Central American countries. While there has been an increase in general violence since the 1980s, growing from a low of 8,552 crimes in 1983 to 60,000 crimes by 1997, and more than 64,000 in 2004,⁹ a very low percentage of these crimes can be associated with gang activity.

Much has been attributed to the *Sandinista* revolution in the 1980s as one of the underlying reasons for this initial decline in criminality. At the outset, the creation of the Committees for the Defense of the Sandinista Revolution instilled a certain moral order and allegiance to the revolution. However, after 1984, when the conflict with the Contras began in earnest, obligatory military service was instituted and with it came an escalation in the level of armed violence. The economic situation deteriorated as a result of the civil conflict and the U.S. trade embargo imposed at the time. The subsequent breakdown in the social fabric created the conditions for increased criminality. Interestingly, despite the amount of weapons left over from the war, Nicaragua is considered one of the safest countries in Central America.

As a result, Nicaragua has not had to invest precious resources in huge law enforcement campaigns to deal with gang violence as seen in neighboring El Salvador and Honduras. Rather, the current government, with support from international donors, has directed resources towards prevention and intervention efforts. Those who are rehabilitated in prisons are encouraged to participate in vocational and artistic activities, on the belief that inmates can use their prison time to make reparations to society by working in prison-run leather or license plate-making factories. Other prevention programs focus on the community and the police as the principal actors in identifying risk factors and designing appropriate programs and interventions to target at-risk youth. The positive outcome has been a perceived reduction in costs normally associated with violence; that is, increases in health-related costs, costs associated with law enforcement and the justice sector, and lost productivity.

Impact on Democratic/Political Development

The more serious potential cost is a further deterioration of Nicaraguan's trust in the political system. With the recent corruption scandal fresh on people's minds and continuous political battles, the average citizen perceives Nicaragua's democratic system

⁹ Acuna, Informe del Estudio de Pandillas en Nicaragua, 2005.

as dysfunctional.¹⁰ This view exacerbated by the sense of insecurity that many Nicaraguans feel, fueled in large part by the media's sensationalist reporting (*noticias rojas*). A 2004 Seligson survey indicated that most Nicaraguans feel a sense of insecurity despite the fact that only 18 percent of those surveyed have suffered criminal acts in the previous year. Regardless, in the survey many claimed that there is a high level of criminality in the country.

Moreover, Nicaraguans surveyed show little trust in the judicial system, though they have high regard for the services provided by the National Police. A recent survey conducted by M&R Consultores indicated that from September to early December 2005 the number of people who believe that police vigilance will prevent crime has declined. When asked if police were corrupt, 31 percent said yes, while 28 percent said police do not care about the problems of the public. When asked about police professionalism, 64 percent polled said they were usually professional, 17 percent said they were very professional, and just over 15 percent said they were not professional.¹¹

Causes and Risk Factors of Gang Activity

The causes and risk factors that leave Nicaraguan youths at risk of joining a gang are similar to those in other countries. The National Police's Directorate for Juvenile Affairs has identified the following risk factors:¹²

Individual Factors:

- The loss of self esteem and values in general
- Aggressive and impulsive personality
- Feeling of rejection by society
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Need for sense of permanence or identity
- Dramatic mood swings
- Educational challenges
- Victim of abuse and/or family neglect
- Family whose members have criminal records

Relational Factors:

- Family disintegration
- Intra-familial violence
- Friends and family in a gang
- Stigmatization
- Difficulty in socializing and resolving conflicts
- Violence assumed to be a part of normal conduct

¹⁰ Arnoldo Aleman, former president of Nicaragua, is under house arrest as part of a 20-year prison sentence for money laundering and fraud against the state. Other cases being brought against Aleman for similar charges are by the U.S., Panama and the State of Florida. <http://www.nicanet.org>

¹¹ La Prensa. Policia pierde puntos en opinion ciudadana. December 21, 2005.

¹² Aurora Acuna, Informe del Estudio de Pandillas en Nicaragua, 2005.

- Need for solidarity and security
- Violence as part of daily life

Community Factors:

- No recreation and sports
- Marginalization and poverty
- No basic services
- Easy access to drugs and alcohol
- Fear of reprisals and threats from gangs

Social Factors:

- Unemployment
- Culture of violence
- Large-scale migratory patterns
- Transfer of gang culture from other countries
- Illiteracy

Current Responses to Gangs

Government Response:

Nicaragua's approach to the problem of youth gangs has been quite different from that of other countries in the region. Where El Salvador and Honduras have taken a hard-line law enforcement approach, Nicaragua has focused most of its efforts on prevention and intervention, which have had important results in reducing criminality and youth violence. However, this was not always the case. In 1999, the police adopted a repressive approach to the problem of youth gangs, although they changed course in 2000 towards more preventative actions.¹³ This change is in line with Article 97 of the 1987 constitution, which states that the role of the police is preventative.

On another front, the differences between the penal systems of Nicaragua and those of its neighbors (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) are striking. For example, in the San Pedro Sula Penitentiary in Honduras, approximately 60 members of the 18th Street gang are housed in a one-story, concrete block building in overcrowded living conditions, with no activities. In contrast, at the La Modelo Penitentiary in Nicaragua, inmates are offered several activities, including music, art, and work opportunities in leather and license plate factories. The approaches in both countries are on opposite ends of the spectrum: where Honduras has confined its inmates to life with no hope, the Nicaragua penal system provides rehabilitation programs that allow its inmates to make amends with society. There was an initiative on an anti-gang law sent to the Nicaraguan National Assembly in 2005. However, the Justice Commission and local experts felt such a law would violate the Constitution and no other anti-gang laws are under consideration.¹⁴

¹³ Interviews conducted in Managua, Nicaragua, September 20, 2005.

¹⁴ Information provided by USAID/Nicaragua from the Nicaraguan National Assembly, Justice Commission. February 2006.

Nicaraguan legislation favors the protection of youths. Several constitutional articles and laws protect youths and provide resources for various programs directed at improving the situation of youths, including Law 392, which encourages the establishment of youth programs; Law 228, which directs the National Police to establish plans and policies to prevent youth violence; Law 212, which names a Special Inspector for Youth and Adolescents to ensure respect of human rights for these population groups; Article 98 of the *Codigo de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* (Code for Children and Adolence), which emphasizes that juvenile delinquency should be treated through restorative justice and focus on the reintegration of delinquent youths back into society, and more.

This legal framework has been translated into specific programs to deal with at-risk youths. Nicaragua has developed programs on both the government and civil society sectors dealing with the prevention of youth violence. Most significant is the government's Program for the Attention and Prevention of Violence implemented by the *Secretaria de la Juventud* (Secretary of Youth), which provided marginalized and at-risk youths with alternatives to gang membership. There is also a significant government intervention program that looks to transform former gang members into productive members of society. Some 550 former gang members have been reintegrated back into society.

The Ministry of Interior (*Ministerio de Gobernacion*) has initiated a significant program called Co-Existence and Citizen Security (*Convivencia y Seguridad Ciudadana*), which has funding from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (US\$7.2 million for five years) and its government counterpart (US\$700,000) to pilot youth crime prevention initiatives in 11 municipalities of the country. The program, expected to be underway by March 2006, is being coordinated with seven government institutions, including the Ministries of Family and Education and *Secretaria de la Juventud* (Secretary of Youth), along with civil society organizations. The program targets youths at-risk, youths in gangs, and other youths in the penal system. To date, the program has disbanded ten youth gangs in the municipality of Ciudad Sandino with the collaboration of the *Fundacion Nicaragua Nuestra*.

Through its Prevention of Juvenile Violence program, the National Police is working with different state institutions, *Comités de Prevención del Delito*, the media, the private sector, and gangs members to rehabilitate those who leave the gangs. The program provides psychosocial counseling, educational opportunities, vocational training, and job placement. The police were able to find jobs for 100 ex-gang members in 2004. For Independence Day celebrations, the police trained and used 800 youths formerly belonging to gangs to maintain order during the festivities. During the field team visit, Nicaraguan police were observed as visibly outgoing towards incarcerated gang members. When an individual officer was asked why they treated the gang members differently than police do in other countries, he said, "We have a commitment [to our country]."

Civil Society Response:

Civil society has also played an important role in addressing the problem of youth violence. The NGO Centro de Prevención de Violencia/CEPREV has programs working with at-risk youths and gang members to build their self-esteem, provide psychosocial counseling, and train 705 police officers and teachers as promoters to replicate the Center's model for working with these youths. Also, the Center has planned training for journalists as a means of sensitizing them to the problems of youths and decreasing the stigmatization of these youths in media reports. This NGO works in 23 *barrios* in Managua and has served 1,500 adolescents and youth. The NGO *Instituto de Promoción Humana* (INPRHU – Human Advancement Institute) works with at-risk youths in Managua and Esteli. In Esteli, they implement the Education for Peace and Justice Program in coordination with 34 other NGOs. This program focuses on reintegrating youths into the communities and building collaboration with the police. The police have gone as far as removing delinquencies from the records of youth who successfully reintegrate into society. The private sector has also participated by providing employment and scholarships to these youths.

Civil society organizations Fundación FENIX and Fundación Nicaragua Nuestra have also made important efforts. Fundación Fenix works with one thousand at-risk youth and gang members who are interested in reintegrating into society. This program is coordinated with the universities, the National Technological Institute (INATEC), the private sector, the Office of the Mayor of Managua, and the National Police. Fundación Nicaragua Nuestra implements a youth mediation program and promotes education and vocational training. Some 100 former gang members have been reintegrating into society. The NGO, *Desafíos* (Challenges), works to empower youths in eight municipalities. This NGO has a television program that includes footage on gangs, does youth camp exchanges with youth camps in Honduras, supports political advocacy to influence youth-oriented policies, and has a youth agenda that attempts to bridge the gap between youth and political candidates.

Two of the several factors that have facilitated more community participation in crime prevention councils are the social network remnant of the Sandinista period and the development of the police as a result of focused training. After the Sandinistas took control of government in 1979, they created the Sandinista Defense Committee. The Committee, however, failed to prevent upsurges of organized crime, armed robbery, and attacks by youth gangs. Around this time, the Panamanian National Guard and the Cuban government were asked to help train the police to be a more professional police force. Hundreds of Nicaraguan police were trained at the Panamanian police-training academy. The resulting network of nearly 1,600 local committees with more than 12,000 community volunteers working with the 1,500 police created an early warning system and may be one of the major reasons why MS-13 and 18th Street gangs have not made inroads to Nicaragua. Moreover, the level of confidence and contact between the local communities and police is remarkable. No other country visited for this assessment has this level of community coordination with the police or the extensive social network in place to prevent violence and gang proliferation.

It appears that, although Nicaragua may have a serious problem with high levels of common violence; it does not currently have a major gang problem. Moreover, its prevention and intervention approach appears to be working well and may be a model for other countries in Central America and Mexico.

Donor Response:

The USAID Mission works in the areas of democracy and governance, trade and agricultural diversification, and health and education. Several of USAID's responses to the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 offer good examples that are worth analyzing to determine if future activities could be developed based on these experiences. Several activities cited below focused on vulnerable youths and the issues they faced while attempting to re-start their lives after a catastrophic event.

Under the Mission's Good Governance activity, the *Centro Pro-Desarrollo Socio-Economico Creativo* (CEDESEC) worked directly with 200 high-risk youths 12-20 years old in several districts in Managua. Specific activities under the project provided psychiatric counseling, workshops/seminars to stimulate better family and social climate, youth empowerment training, and awareness campaigns to reduce drug use and prevent drug abuse.

Under a Good Governance and Rule of Law activity, the *Fundacion Nicaragua Nuestra* helped identify productive activities for youths, continue youth education, and tackle the problems of delinquency, gang activity, and drug use after Hurricane Mitch. USAID supported psychological and emotional counseling, human development workshops for community leaders, the creation of neighborhood associations, and the establishment of a youth work program with the Municipality of Managua.

From November 2001 to July 2002, under the Education Recovery Component with BASE II, *Fundación Nicaragua Nuestra*, *Centro de Prevención de la Violencia* (CEPREV), and *Centro Juvenil Don Bosco* (Don Bosco Youth Center) implemented the "youth at risk pilot" that S03 had in the last strategy.¹⁵

A current project implemented with the Fabretto's Children's Foundation indirectly supports anti-gang responses. The project aims to improve school attendance, raise the level of education achievement in primary schools, and improve health and hygiene in the participating schools.

These projects offer valuable lessons learned and have already established levels of organizational and community confidence that could be used to analyze the next best

¹⁵ Castillo A., Melba. *Proyecto Piloto Juventud en Riesgo – Informe Final*.
http://mail.mecd.gob.ni/PbaseII/download/proyectos_jer.pdf. USAID/Nicaragua, Proyecto Base II. 2002.

steps to take for future anti-gang responses. USAID/Nicaragua does not have specific programs targeting youth gangs.

While many of the Mission's programs may coincidentally support youth, it does not have a specific strategic objective or intermediate result dealing with youth violence or gangs.

Other donors, including IDB and GTZ, are working on activities related to youth violence and the phenomenon of gangs. UNDP funding has supported the development of a database on gangs and at-risk youth and made efforts to help ensure that information collected by the various NGOs was shared.

The level of donor assistance to Nicaragua averages about \$500 million per year. The largest donors are the United States and Sweden. The United States leads the donors' Economic Growth roundtable and influences donor approaches towards economic growth. Other bilateral donor support comes from Denmark, Germany, Spain, Japan, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. The World Bank, IDB, European Union, World Food Program, and Central American Bank provide multilateral support for Economic Development. Further investigation is needed to identify synergies between these programs and any anti-gang work considered by USAID.

Individuals and Organizations Consulted

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