An Overview of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) to Reduce Violence and Strengthen Institutions in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA)

Enrique Roig[1]

[1] Enrique Roig is former USAID CARSI Coordinator from 2010-2015 and currently implements citizen security programs worldwide for an international organization. Report prepared for the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission. The findings and recommendations in this paper are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Commission or of any Commissioner.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate crime and violence prevention (CVP) programs under CARSI, focusing on best practices in evidence-based interventions to prevent or reduce drug-related violence and improve citizen security. Both the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) use a place-based, public health violence prevention framework which incorporates decades of research and relies on data and expertise from a broad range of disciplines to understand the complex interplay between individual, relational, and societal factors that contribute to violent behavior.

This paper defines violence as the intentional use of physical force against an individual, group, or community, be it threatened or actual, in which the outcome is physical injury or death. Violence falls on a continuum ranging from domestic to state sponsored violence.[2] The focus here is on community violence, defined as violence occurring primarily in public settings that is interpersonal (i.e. taking place between individuals and small groups that may or may not know one another), loosely planned, and generally impulsive by nature, often resulting in death or disabling injury.[3] This includes group-inspired violence[4], often associated with gangs. Young men and boys from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities are usually the perpetrators and victims, but not exclusively.

Section II reviews lessons learned about violence prevention and Section III discusses the challenge of implementing evidence-based strategies in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) countries. The findings are based on a review of published research and government evaluations on what works in reducing community violence in the NTCA. The author also consulted U.S. government (USG) officials, experts in violence prevention, and program implementers to better understand their achievements and challenges. The final section provides concrete, actionable recommendations for the USG and its Central American partners. These recommendations should provide guidance for both strategy and implementation, including how to ensure that programs are politically and economically sustainable and sufficiently flexible to respond to changes in target communities and countries.

II.   Lessons Learned in the NTCA Countries

Research has shed light on evidence-based strategies to prevent and reduce violent crime and gang-related violence by establishing a greater balance between the public health and law enforcement (punitive) aspects of public security. Cities and communities across the United States and Latin

---

[2] Thomas Abt, "Towards a framework for preventing community violence among youth," Psychology Health and Medicine, 2016.

[3] Thomas Abt, "What Works: in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study, March 27, 2017.

[4] For purpose of this report, I will be using term group-inspired violence in substitution of gang violence, when the identity and motivations of the group committing violence are not clear. The term "gang" has become politicized and often results in suppression only policy recommendations in the NTCA, which are counterproductive.

America and the Caribbean (LAC) are learning the hard way over decades of shortsighted crime control efforts that "you can't arrest your way out of the problem." Evidence indicates that urban violence tends to be concentrated in specific micro-environments. In many cases, it is limited to particular street corners or sections of a neighborhood and occurs at certain times of the day. Urban violence is also often committed by a small number of individuals, especially young men, and is associated with certain high-risk behaviors, such as carrying a gun, being intoxicated, and belonging to a gang. This takes place within a larger backdrop of grueling poverty and limited opportunities for education and jobs.

A powerful criminological finding from the past two decades is that homicidal violence is sticky, clustering in specific places, among specific people, and around specific behaviors, such as carrying firearms, selling illegal drugs, excessive consumption of alcohol, and belonging to a gang, among others. In five Latin American cities, 50 percent of homicides occur in 1.59 percent of blocks.[5] In Venezuela, 80 percent of homicides in Caracas came from just 6 percent of its street segments.[6] In most major cities, 0.5 percent of the population is responsible for 75 percent of the homicides[7]. These findings have served as guideposts for innovations in law enforcement, such as hot spots policing, but also for groundbreaking rehabilitative work with high-risk offenders. The most effective strategies to reduce homicidal violence must focus on where violence happens, who is involved, and how those involved are behaving.[8]

The USG response to citizen security programming has included a multitude of programs and approaches across the NTCA. These have often been characterized as Community Violence Prevention Programs (CVP) that combine public safety with a public health approach. For INL this has meant support for policing efforts including a combination of Model Police Precincts, data collection systems, training law enforcement in investigations on extortions and homicides, and a combination of youth-police engagement through the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program and Police Athletic League. USAID has taken a more community-focused approach working with municipalities and national governments on a series of activities to improve data collection, support community policing, fund interventions aimed at preventing recruitment of youth into gangs and delinquent behavior. At the same time, NTCA governments have attempted to improve security conditions in a variety of ways by investing in rule of law and social programs as a long-term strategy.[9] Some NTCA governments have emphasized military and policing strategies while others have also sought to improve regional security cooperation, working with the Central American Integration System (SICA) recognizing the transnational nature of the threats.

---

[5] Pablo Sanguinetti et al., "RED 2014: Por una América Latina más segura. Una nueva perspectiva para prevenir y controlar el delito," (Caracas, Venezuela: CAF Development Bank of Latin America, 2014): 95, https://scioteca.caf.com/handle/123456789/167.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Waller, Irvin, *Science and Secrets of Ending Violent Crime* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019): 168.

[8] Nathalie Alvarado and Gustavo Beliz, "Operational Guidelines for Program Design And Execution in the Area of Civic Coexistence and Public Safety," 2009

[9] The NTCA governments have invested approximately $10 billion in the Alliance for Prosperity, a regional strategic development plan created by the NTCA governments and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The plan intends to address multiple issues, including citizen security and access to justice. See "U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress," *CRS*, November 12, 2019, pg. 17.

The public health framework used by the USG was developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that utilizes an epidemiological approach by organizing responses to community violence based on a differentiated risk approach that focuses on places, people and behaviors.[10] Using this approach, violence is treated as a disease, with careful diagnosis of those infected in hotspots, targeted interventions to interrupt transmission of violence, and preventive measures to keep those at risk from infection. This requires a focus on where violence is taking place and on those individuals most likely to engage in delinquent activities. While the evidence points in this direction in terms of targeting, it also potentially leads to abuses by law enforcement when certain communities are singled out and discriminated against given the violence dynamics. Navigating this scenario with a more public health approach is critical. The evidence demonstrates that in order to reduce group-inspired violence, the focus needs to be on changing behaviors as opposed to attacking group identity. Applying this epidemiological public health approach to CVP involves examining the factors that increase or decrease the risk for delinquent behaviors and identifying the protective factors that can be strengthened through interventions.

The public health approach includes four levels of interventions aimed at preventing youth from progressing from low- to high-risk behavior, which are proximate determinants of violence and delinquency: (i) Primary prevention: interventions and programs that target risk factors within the general population, namely youth between ages 10-29 years old. (ii) Secondary prevention: interventions and programs that target risk factors within sub-populations that are at higher risk of becoming perpetrators or victims of violence in the future most often youth between 10-17 years old have not made contact with the criminal justice system. (iii) Tertiary prevention: interventions and programs targeting individuals that are already engaged in violent behavior, largely youth ages 15-29 and increasingly older and rehabilitation of former offenders in re-entering society (iv) Suppression and relational policing: interventions and programs within the realm of law enforcement action and responses.[11]

The interventions depicted in this Anti-Violence Framework developed by Thomas Abt can be matched up depending on the risk level and their focus whether on places, people or behavior allowing the implementer a more focused strategy and method for measuring impact.[12]

Anti-Violence Framework – All Strategies				
	Primary Prevention	**Secondary Prevention**	**Tertiary Prevention**	**Suppression**
Place	*Urban renewal* *CPTED* *Neighborhood watch*			Hot spots policing Disorder policing Problem-oriented policing *Community policing*
People	Family-based therapy *School-based programs* *Vocational training* *Mentoring*	CBT Family-based therapy	Focused deterrence *Streetworker programs*	Problem-oriented policing
Behavior	Family-based therapy *School-based programs* *Juvenile curfews* *Gun buybacks* *Gang prevention*	CBT Family-based therapy Alcohol regulation	Focused deterrence *Streetworker programs*	Problem-oriented policing Firearms enforcement *Drug enforcement*

Evidence from violence prevention programs in LAC demonstrates that identifying risk and protective factors that lead to and mitigate youth violence are a key component of an evidence-

---

[10] Centers for Disease Control, A Public Health Approach to Violence Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/PH_App_Violence-a.pdf.
    [11] Centers for Disease Control, A Public Health Approach to Violence Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/PH_App_Violence-a.pdf.
    [12] Thomas Abt, "Bleeding Out," 2019, pg. 226.

based approach to preventing violence in hotspot communities. These approaches need to address multiple risk factors simultaneously, including individual risk factors (being male, previous experience with violence, alcohol and substance use) family and environmental factors (negative peer influence, critical life event) and community factors (poverty, widespread violence, alcohol and substance use, access to weapons, social, justice, economic, and gender inequalities).[13]

Research also shows the four hours after school ends for the day and summer breaks are critical intervention points to reduce risky behaviors. Young people unsupervised after school are much more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, engage in criminal and other risky behavior, and do poorly in or drop out of school compared to those who participate in after-school programs that provide constructive, supervised activities. Therefore, after-school programs are one aspect of interventions to keep youth at primary risk levels.

Over the past two decades, a proliferation of programs to address urban violence has produced a robust body of evaluations, many of them with experimental or quasi-experimental design that allows for discerning causal relationships.[14] This research also suggests that cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), family counseling, and soft skills support are necessary prior to gaining employment, particularly for secondary and tertiary risk level youth, and contribute to violence reduction. An improvement in family communication, adaptability, and flexibility in terms of relationships strengthens bonds and inoculates youth against external negative influences that can lead to delinquent behaviors (gangs, weapons carrying, property crimes and vandalism, drug use/sales, truancy).

Further, research shows strong links between different types of violence. There is a cycle of violence that may begin with child neglect at birth, leading to hyper-vigilant children and youth who are less likely to be calmed and are more likely to participate in intimate partner violence as adults even elder abuse or suicide. Underlying and "crosscutting these causal links between the different subtypes of violence are shared risk factors—such as alcohol and substance misuse, parental loss, crime, household poverty, and social and economic inequalities—that underlie most of the subtypes."[15].

The 2014 USAID-Vanderbilt University CARSI impact evaluation highlighted where a targeted prevention approach can improve citizen's perception of their security environment.[16] While perception surveys are a standard methodology to measure improvements in security, there is also a need to combine this with a clear measurement of crime and violence indicators Without these metrics, the programming tends to be less place-based and instead falls into the trap of becoming a co-location strategy between policing and prevention that does not have clarity around what the USG is trying to achieve.

---

[13] Interviews with violence prevention experts, March 2020.

[14] Flávia Carbonari, Alys Willman, Federico Manolio, Sofia Reinach and David Marques, "A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention," March 2020, pg. 57.

[15] Izabela Milaniak and Cathy Spatz Widam, Does Child Abuse and Neglect Increase Risk for Perpetration of Violence Inside and Outside the Home?" Psychol Violence, July 2015.

[16] Susan Berk-Seligson, Diana Orces, Georgina Pizzolitto, Mitchell A. Seligson, and Carole J. Wilson, "Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Prevention Approach in Central America: Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama," Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt University, October 2014: pp.1-10

Another global review of the literature commissioned by USAID of what works to prevent lethal youth violence examined more than 1,300 studies between 2000-2017 that showed statistically significant effects of violence prevention interventions on individuals between the ages of 10 and 29. This study reviewed 229 distinctly named interventions at the primary (17 percent), secondary (13 percent), tertiary (26 percent), and multi- (44 percent) intervention levels.[17]

Overall, the most common foci of interventions were gun violence prevention studies (13 percent), school-based violence prevention studies (11 percent), and studies that examined published literature on any type of violence prevention approach excluding gun and gang violence (9 percent). Outcomes discussed in the studies reviewed were almost evenly split between positive intervention effects (52 percent) and a mix of positive, negative, or no effects (48 percent). Of the studies that reported overall positive intervention effects, more than one-third (38 percent) acted across multiple prevention types, one-third (33 percent) targeted tertiary levels of prevention, one-fifth (21 percent) involved primary prevention programs, and slightly less than 10 percent focused on secondary prevention. Articles that described mixed effects for violence prevention interventions typically showed an improvement in knowledge or attitude, though behavioral outcomes did not follow suit. No programs had harmful or negative effects.[18]

The results of this global review analysis provide several key insights to inform the CARSI strategy for CVP:

1) No single program can address all the outcomes required to reduce violence. There are many specific types of violence in different contexts.[19]
2) Many communities face persistent violence. Donors, policy makers, and researchers need to invest in longitudinal studies in these communities to understand how such patterns develop, why they continue, and how some communities overcome long histories of community-based lethal youth violence.
3) Clear outcome indicators are crucial and should be linked to impact evaluations so that the USG can more rapidly increase evidence used to develop and implement CVP strategies.

To be clear, a laser focus on such a targeted public health prevention strategy does not come at the expense of ongoing USG-supported security and justice sector reform efforts. For example, effective, fair and legitimate *civilian* police forces are essential to the long-term security prospects of the region, as are functional criminal justice systems capable of investigating, prosecuting and – if the evidence warrants – incarcerating perpetrators of homicides. These efforts should, in fact, be complementary, selectively targeting investigations and prosecutions for homicides.[20]

---

[17] Campie, P., Tanya, M., & Udayakumar, C. (2019, November*). What works to prevent lethal youth violence in the LAC region: A global review of the research.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
[18] Ibid.
[19] While crime and violence are affected by a confluence of factors, few CVP programs in the NTCA share enough indicators to allow statistical analyses to isolate effective interventions.
[20] Many CVP interventions connect intermediate achievements, such as improved community-police relations and education, to overall violence and crime outcomes. Other factors like government-led security strategies and gang truces also influence results and often have more of a direct connection to violence and crime outcomes. See "El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence," *Crisis Group*, December 19, 2017.

III. Challenges for Implementation

The NTCA has seen a reduction in homicides, though the rates remain high, extortions continue to be problematic, and gender-based violence is on the rise particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As long as the region's impunity rate for homicides stands at 95 percent, the deterrent effect of law enforcement for even the most minor of offenses is severely diminished. What is more, the lack of prioritization on crimes diverts limited criminal justice resources from the most violent and pernicious offenses. Moreover, the excessive use of force leading to disappearances and summary executions by police is a serious problem that undermines U.S. efforts. These may be framed as "legal interventions" within the existing laws, or interpretation of those laws, or they may be extra-judicial measures. In some contexts, such actions have been associated with large reductions in overall violence, but they threaten the longer-term goals of violence reduction by fomenting distrust of security forces in high crime communities.[21]

There is recognition among USG officials that the drug trade foments more violence in the NTCA, which has led to destabilization and negative impact on governance and security. The issue of drug trafficking also has relevancy for those strategies in the U.S. led by the Office of National Drug Control Policy to reduce drug use and its consequences. And at the same time the problem of arms trafficking from the U.S. into Mexico and Central America needs to be examined in light of efforts to prevent escalating violence in the region.

During the early years of CARSI funding from 2008-2015, a main focus was on incorporating evidence-based violence prevention programming into the strategy, striking a balance with law enforcement efforts and counter-narcotics efforts, aligning USG and NTCA priorities, and demonstrating impact, though the priority shifted to dealing with the unaccompanied children crisis in 2014.

Since 2018, the Trump administration's freeze on foreign assistance for the NTCA has been a major hurdle as programming shifted towards prevention of migration without clarity on the metrics for signaling progress.[22] This has led to a reduction in previous CVP programming, delaying the design and implementation of new USG programs. Border enforcement has been the main priority for Department of Homeland Security which determines programming in the interagency when it comes to CARSI funding.[23] The Safe Third Country agreements are emblematic of this approach.

Meanwhile, longer-term efforts to hold the line on successes in CVP have been largely put on standby as USAID programs end and INL waits for a green light to move forward.[24] Looking forward, a place-based strategy needs to focus on places, people, and behaviors to reduce violence, using data and agreed-upon metrics to drive the tactics and interventions. In practical terms, this means, using data to map out hotspots using metrics like gang related homicides, shootings with injury, armed robberies, and kidnappings while using various public health and policing methods

---

[21] Flávia Carbonari, Alys Willman, Federico Manolio, Sofia Reinach and David Marques, "A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention," March 2020.
[22] Interviews with USG officials, March 2020.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

to identify those individuals most likely join gangs or commit violent crimes. At the same time we need to recognize the existing challenges in the region's crime reporting data. Reliable data on non-fatal shootings, for example is hard to come by in the U.S. and it is even worse in the NTCA. For this reason, building the capacity of crime and violence observatories is a required component of any place-based strategy. These efforts also need to be coordinated with other USG focused efforts particularly ONDCP, DoJ, ICE, and Health and Human Services to ensure a more comprehensive approach to connect drug use reduction, border management, migration, and arms and trafficking in persons with efforts aimed at violence prevention in the NTCA.

Joint USAID and State-INL agreement needed on the problem to be solved.

With so many actors involved and priorities that shift from one administration to the next, planning documents and appropriations language need to institutionalize a common understanding of the violence problem in the NCTA with clear roles and responsibilities and outcome metrics for each USG agency.

U.S. embassies and USG agencies often frame their crime and violence approaches differently, which results in different metrics to measure impact and is often reduced to outputs. One embassy, for example, describes their work using the DOJ "Weed and Seed" terminology; others talk about the CDC place-based approach; still others characterize violence prevention as a rule of law issue. While programming efforts between USAID and State-INL are much improved there are still occasional turf battles in certain countries that impede an integrated place-based strategy. Joint interventions are based more on relationships than on the institutional framework needed to drive USG strategy.[25]

There is a clear body of research, data, and implementation experience on evidence-based violence prevention and reduction programs to better guide investment of resources with clearer roles of responsibilities and outcome measures. However, there is still a significant knowledge gap in Latin America about how to deal with gangs and organized crime, which also leads to lack of clarity around the most effective use of resources to address these different phenomenon.

Preventing and reducing gang violence is far more complicated than just neutralizing gangs using law enforcement. The *mano dura* tactics employed extensively by NTCA governments in recent decades have largely failed. Even with a reduction in homicides over the last few years, there is an increase in 2020 that is likely a result of COVID-19, with a troubling new pattern of violence emerging. Mass incarceration, combined with longer sentences and worsening prison conditions, has been counterproductive, often serving only to consolidate prison gangs and criminal organizations. The Bukele administration in El Salvador has made incarceration a major component of their approach though recent reports of negotiations with gang leaders leave some uncertainty over how violence will play out over the next year.

Organized crime has also corrupted security forces, sometimes becoming embedded within law enforcement institutions themselves. Although police reform has made progress in some certain countries, these efforts face serious hurdles in Honduras where police complicity in organized crime has contributed to high homicide rates. A special police reform commission established in

---

[25] Ibid.

2016 sent more than 500 cases of corruption to the Attorney-General's office in its first six months.[26] By early 2017, nearly half of security forces were removed on corruption or criminal charges.[27]

Violence prevention requires data-driven diagnosis with clear metrics for success.

In the early years of CARSI funding, most of the programs were based on a generalized understanding of violence in the NTCA as gang-related. If we keep kids out of gangs with jobs and after school activities, the thinking went, this would reduce gang membership and therefore reduce violence. Or, if we institute policing training and provide better equipment, this will lead to a more professionalized force that conducts better investigations.

There was no clear comprehension of the need to collect data for hotspot mapping, to differentiate risk levels explaining why small groups of mainly young men are more likely to join gangs or carryout delinquent acts, to use the latest research on behavior change, to build community trust in police so residents report crimes, and to improve police and justice capacity to investigate and prosecute crimes.[28]

Analysis tended to focus on the problems of poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and gang identity. There was no clear focus on places, people, and behavior to inform a coherent NTCA violence prevention strategy. The questions of who is engaged in violence, where they commit violent acts, and why they become violent needs be the starting point for diagnosing the problem and subsequently driving the data needed to inform the USG planning process.

This process has improved vastly in recent years. There is a clear understanding among USG officials working on these programs about the need for hotspot mapping, identifying risk levels and developing comprehensive strategies. Both USAID and State-INL incorporate data into their analysis for geographic targeting and use the public health framing when designing interventions to address various risk levels for individuals. State-INL has been supporting police Compstat systems and USAID uses various tools to analyze individual risk and geographic targeting, while also conducting impact evaluations to inform future programming.

There however continues to be a strong need for clear and shared metrics to prevent and reduce violence. Drug seizures, arrests, number of people trained, and number of youths participating in positive youth development programs are not useful indicators of success, particularly when there is little evidence these efforts have any long-term impact on violence or crime rates.

Developing clear and shared metrics is one of the hardest tasks in the USG interagency process when it comes to security programming. Much of it is driven by congressional funding mandates

---

[26] Clavel, Tristan, "New Allegations Highlight Continuing Corruption in Honduras Police," Insight Crime, January 12, 2017, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/new-allegations-highlight-continuing-corruption-honduras-police/.

[27] Flávia Carbonari, Alys Willman, Federico Manolio, Sofia Reinach and David Marques, "A Review of the Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention," March 2020. Or "World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Honduras," Human Rights Watch, December 9, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/honduras.

[28] Ibid.

and each agency's own planning process and mission. As indicated in the 2019 GAO report on US Assistance to Central America, the State Department relies too often on output indicators that do not demonstrate any outcome results.[29] A better joint USAID and State-INL planning process with consensus on the type of crimes and violence to address (homicides, extortion, gender-based violence) would allow the real work of developing measurable outcome indicators to truly begin. The use of outcome indicators would also lead to better program designs and allow the USG to legitimately show how it contributed to these outcomes.[30]

Need for ongoing capacity building of USG personnel working on violence prevention.

As USG officials who have worked in the NTCA indicated, study tours to Los Angeles, Chicago and other cities that also included high level host government officials were instrumental in developing their respective place-based strategies to address crime and violence.[31] This type of contact with experts to learn about what works in similar contexts is an ongoing need.

Capacity building for USG officials working on violence prevention is critical as well as bringing in non-USG experts to oversee these programs. There is a low level of specialization in violence prevention policy and programming. USAID and State-INL foreign services officers in particular have faced a steep learning curve over the last ten years to understand what works in the violence prevention field. While many are well versed and experienced in conflict settings, those lessons are often not easily transferable to urban violence in the NTCA.

The rotation of foreign service officers, which often occurs every two to three years, results in a constant loss of institutional knowledge. The local Foreign Service national staff are a source of continuity, maintaining local context knowledge and technical know-how to varying degrees. State-INL officials who focus on law enforcement interventions face a similar challenge when foreign service officers rotate in with a mindset dominated by a law enforcement approach to the problem. Though not always the case, these attitudes are part of the State-INL culture.

These ongoing limitations in technical know-how limit the USG's ability to analyze, design, execute, and evaluate security programming consistently. The practical absence of a culture of evaluation also limits the government's ability to improve service delivery and apply knowledge to future security programs.

This type of capacity building will require more staff and the ability to use online platforms, workshops, and conferences. Many USG officials for example cited the annual Los Angeles Gang Prevention and Intervention conference as a venue where they were exposed to the violence prevention field and which contributed to their professional development.[32]

---

[29] U.S. Assistance to Central America, United States Government Accountability Office, September 2019, p. 30.
[30] Interviews with USG Officials, March 2020.
[31] Interviews with USG officials, March 2020.
[32] Ibid.

Operationalization of USG CARSI Violence Prevention Programs.

The implementation of CVP programs is not easy. It requires a high degree of technical know-how, extraordinary amounts of coordination among various agencies ranging from law enforcement to community service providers, and the funding to make everything happen. More importantly it requires a one-team approach where data is the driving force behind decisions on where to work and who to target for interventions. Law enforcement and service providers need to be on the same page, and a high degree of trust needs to exist, which often times is lacking. Dialogue and collaboration between USG and NTCA partners is fundamental for ensuring success.

What often happens instead is competition for resources and turf battles while USG officials lose sight of the larger mission. For example, in most countries State-INL takes on the role of training police while USAID focuses on social prevention. When there is good chemistry among the working level staff from the agencies, there will be the coordination necessary to advance USG goals and objectives.

Some of the most robust evidence we have indicates that at a societal level those efforts that are balanced and coordinated (mixing law enforcement and community prevention) are more effective. Having bifurcated funding and investment schemes reinforces divisions rather than incentivizing necessary coordination.[33] This is one of the challenges that both USAID and INL will need to overcome to ensure more effective use of resources.

USG programs in the NTCA provide a roadmap of how to implement CVP programs effectively. The place-based, public health approach in Honduras shows how working level staff can collaborate effectively with buy-in from the U.S. Ambassador, and USAID and State-INL leadership back in Washington, D.C. In El Salvador both USAID and State-INL describe the partnership as an exceptionally good one. Similarly, in Guatemala there is good collaboration that had not always been the case. While progress has been made, much more strategy development is needed among agencies to ensure an integrated place-based and public health approach to reduce violence.

These practices, however, need to become institutionalized in the Congressional Budget Justification, Congressional Notification, and Fiscal Year appropriations planning process for CARSI. If all parties agree on a clear set of metrics, they will be better able to measure outcomes that are relevant to violence prevention and reduction. This process also needs to include joint USG evaluations among the agencies to ensure knowledge and learning for future programming.

The contracting process for new programs provides particular challenges that also need to be addressed. The notion that approval of FY funds will "hit the streets" quickly is fictional and often leads to unrealistic expectations around how quickly the USG can begin to see results.

Most large USAID violence prevention programs take up to 18 months from initial idea to contracting or cooperative agreement, which means there is significant lag time before approval

---

[33] Impact Peace, *Evidence Brief: Making the Case for Peace in our Cities: Halving Urban Violence by 2030*, Kroc Institute, University of San Diego, October 2019.

of FY funds translates into new programming. Anytime a contract is over $25 million it has to go to a contract review board at USAID, which also extends the procurement lead-time.

If there are already acquisition and assistance instruments in place, those FY funds can be obligated quickly. The challenge arises when contracts specifically awarded in previous years already have a certain set of outcomes and metrics, but a new political reality requires a shift in priorities.

A case in point is the emphasis on migration since 2018. Many violence prevention programs did not include this as a stated outcome, which meant implementers needed to make changes in contract performance measures and adjust activities where feasible, which is often not easy or realistic. For assistance instruments such as cooperative agreements, USAID has less authority to request an implementing partner to change the nature of the program without a more formal modification process.

For State-INL there are similar challenges when grants and cooperative agreements are used to support programs, and other contracting mechanisms are utilized to support state actors such as the police in order to procure equipment and train personnel. Processes that can slow down implementation, such as Leahy vetting for police officers, should be recognized when trying to integrate USAID and State-INL programs. In addition, the Congressional holds that are often placed on State-INL funding limit their ability to plan and be flexible in programming funds.[34]

IV. Recommendations for USG and Central American Partners

These recommendations provide guidance for both strategy and implementation, including how to ensure that CVP programs are politically and economically sustainable and sufficiently flexible to respond to changes in the targeted countries and communities. Applying a comprehensive and integrated USG approach is especially challenging in an international context where numerous agencies are tasked with spending large sums of resources connected to their specific mission and in response to specific metrics.

Multiple CARSI programs are implemented in each country with each wave of fiscal year funding. While these programs have common elements, they lack the comprehensive, unified vision needed to have the desired impact. CARSI's origin as counter narcotics funding should also be clarified as it relates to violence prevention. A common understanding of CARSI's purpose – to prevent and reduce violence -- would help focus joint planning and programming, guiding outcomes through a multi-year strategy.

A comprehensive USG approach would greatly enhance the effectiveness of CARSI CVP programming, utilizing proven methodologies such as hotspot mapping, social network analysis, and analysis of the risk factors associated with violence in particular contexts. Years of research spearheaded in the U.S. indicates that the most impactful and cost-effective violence prevention and reduction efforts combine a public health approach with building criminal justice capacity and more precision around evidence-based practices like focused deterrence.

---

[34] Ibid.

Strengthening the police is necessary but not sufficient to address the region's violence epidemic. Instilling respect for rule of law and human rights is also important. There should be an ongoing conversation around abuses committed by NTCA security forces and the USG role in promoting greater accountability when this takes place. The lack of trust between communities and police is one of the main impediments to improving security. Earning that trust is key and is best done when the police are seen as true protectors of people's safety.

Emphasize joint planning and appropriations process between State-WHA, USAID and State-INL for CARSI CVP programming.

The freeze in foreign assistance funding for Central America and a singular focus on migration prevention has disrupted CARSI efforts. Although homicides have fallen, they remain exceedingly high while other crimes, such as extortion and gender-based violence, continue unabated. The shift to migration prevention also may result in programming decisions that compromise longer term efforts around CVP.

There is a strong need for high level State-Western Hemisphere Affairs leadership to oversee improved planning coordination within the interagency, particularly with USAID and State-INL. This would ensure development of a joint strategy, not only for violence prevention programs, but also for anti-corruption measures, and greater transparency and accountability.

Since CARSI is a political initiative, this would require writing a senior-level, State-WHA Special Coordinator with budget authority into the legislation. The Special Coordinator's role should be to facilitate a budget process with the relevant agencies in line with the strategy and metrics, develop plans to operationalize programs while monitoring and reporting on their impact. He or/she would work with USAID and INL CARSI Coordinators in DC who in turn would coordinate with their Embassy colleagues. At the start of Merida, the WHA Assistant Secretary served as the de-facto Coordinator, which gave more weight to the initiative.[35]

Without overall direction and authorities, budgeting is relegated to each agency. This means decisions are based on agency priorities, not on an integrated USG strategy for CARSI crime and violence prevention. To ensure long term sustainability, State-WHA should work with USAID and State-INL to develop a five-year strategy that builds on the best practices in violence prevention/reduction, including a clear set of outcome metrics emphasizing homicide reduction, extortions and gender-based violence.

This strategy should build on existing USAID and State-INL assets and equities, combining a public health approach with a focused law enforcement strategy. The strategy should give embassies enough flexibility to adapt to the politics and context of each country, while at the same time clarifying roles and responsibilities within USG agencies to ensure programmatic longevity and outcomes. This would limit institutional turf battles and give the strategy a better chance of transcending changes in U.S. and NTCA administrations.

During this process, the senior USAID and State-INL leadership both in DC and the NTCA embassies also need to engage with their host government counterparts to get their input and buy-

---

[35] Interview with senior State Department official, March 3, 2020.

in for this long-term CARSI strategy. The Law Enforcement Working Groups at U.S. Embassies serve as a coordination and planning mechanism that works well when the personalities involved are willing to play nice in the sandbox.[36] This mechanism helps mitigate turf battles when it comes to implementation and coordination with host government partners.

Operationalize effective USG evidence-based violence prevention programs in the NTCA.

Those working on CARSI programs need to understand the difference between crime and violence prevention. Extortion and gang violence are connected, though we approach the two differently. Extortion is a crime that requires mainly a law enforcement approach through special police task forces. The purpose of a vetted extortion crime police unit is not to prevent youth violence, nor is a youth violence prevention program designed to reduce extortion. Trying to align a funding stream with an unrelated outcome drains precious resources from violence prevention and reduction. Also greater knowledge must be supported on the relationships across forms of violence. GBV is massive in Honduras and El Salvador and – in many ways – connected to dynamics of gang violence, although not always. Separating GBV from gang violence can do a disservice to better understanding how these phenomenon are related

Lessons learned about violence prevention in LAC should be shared not only within agencies but also across the USG. Joint agency learning opportunities need to be mandated, whether these are study tours to cities that are implementing crime and violence prevention programs or conferences that bring experts together. This would help integrate public health and public safety approaches and allow officials to break out of the silos where one agency sees their work as mainly prevention and the other as policing. At the Embassy level this should translate into a joint USG approach in interactions with host government partners that reinforces similar messaging.

This also requires a triage mindset in NTCA countries with unacceptably high levels of homicides where all the available USG assets are brought to bear. Saving lives should always be the USG's main priority. Homicides require immediate public health and public safety approaches working in tandem.

Gang violence, in particular, affects all three NCTA countries and is closely associated with extortions and other illicit activities. Other types of violence should be addressed though require a phased approach that moves from the most dangerous violence –that results in loss of lives – to other crimes -- such as robberies, kidnappings, intrafamilial abuse -- that also create insecurity and destabilize communities. Extortions and gender-based violence should continue to be prioritized with specialized programming. Both USAID and State-INL need to clarify the equities they bring to the table to avoid overlap and duplication. Doing this effectively requires a common set of USG priorities that are reflected in how funding is utilized. Without this, we end up with citizen security programming that tries to do too many things, limiting the potential impact.

Get program design, contracting, and implementation right.

While it is unrealistic to recommend using just one form of contracting or assistance, there are existing mechanisms that could move the process more quickly. The normal route can take up to

---

[36] Ibid.

18 months depending on the ability of the technical office to develop a scope of work and the contracting office to issue the Request for Proposals or RFP. The Indefinite Quantity Contract mechanism (IDIQ), which short lists the competitors, and then issues task orders for specific work could facilitate the procurement process related to CVP work.

Similarly, the Leader with Associates (LWA) serves the function of pre-competing for certain programming where the outcome is a cooperative agreement, which may be better suited for NGOs. The expedited procurement procedures currently being used for COVID-19 response are another route that can program funds quickly. The use of an Annual Program Statement for grants and cooperative agreements can establish programs without the lengthier process of issuing a Request for Application (RFA). Another option is the use of Performance Work Statements (PWS) where the applicant is tasked with coming up with the scope of work for the contract as part of their application.

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is an example of a process that worked quickly, through close cooperation between the USAID Contracting Officer Representative located in Washington, D.C., and a Field Activity Manager based in the USAID country mission. Although there are disadvantages to centralizing planning in Washington D.C., the activity managers in each Embassy allowed some level of control in the host country. PEPFAR's focus on clear metrics and timelines provides an interesting model for CARSI and even more importantly it demonstrates how to bring together different agencies to plan and coordinate activities while expediting awards and contracts to implementing partners.

It is highly recommended that a mechanism like an IDIQ or LWA be used for CVP programs based on a balanced public health and public security approach and managed jointly by USAID and INL. Both agencies would co-design the program and designate activity managers to oversee implementation. Establishing at least one joint anchor USAID-INL CVP program per country would help develop a culture of integrated programming with joint indicators and closer collaboration to ensure impact.

While there is a need to involve more local NTCA organizations in the process of receiving direct funding from USAID and INL, there also needs to be a realistic understanding of the absorptive capacity to implement multi-million dollar programs. A graduated approach where local organizations receive technical assistance to gradually manage larger sums of funds is a much more sustainable process. This needs to be built into every large contract or cooperative agreement with international organizations where the mandate is on building local capacity to receive direct funding from USAID and INL.