Understanding and Addressing Youth in “Gangs” in Mexico

Academic and policy analysts have identi ed Mexican street gangs as a potential looming security threat as Mexico continues its struggle against large drug tra cking organizations (DTOs).[1] However, interviews for this chapter indicated that a security-centric lens on “gangs” only exacerbates youth involvement in

approach.[5] Indeed, even the word gang or [illegible] brings with it connotations that lead to false understandings and counterproductive policies.[6] This lack of information about this diverse youth gang phenomenon makes further analysis on this issue all the more necessary.

This report seeks to understand the gang issue in Mexico, [illegible] establish

largely youth-based street gangs and understand the history of gangs in the region, including the United States and Central America. Before we can delve into the histories and sociologies of youth gangs in Mexico, we must establish a working de nition of this highly " uid" concept.[7]

In a recent report, the Organization of American States "eclectically" de nes youth gangs as:

> …a spontaneous e ort by children and young people to create, where it does not exist, an urban space in society that is adapted to their needs, where they can exercise the rights that their families, government, and communities do not o er them. Arising out of extreme poverty, exclusion, and a lack of opportunities, gangs try to gain their rights and meet their needs by organizing themselves without su rt by cht4.6(t)-21.2()3hr rppl9-26.5(n)-16.8(g t)-21.1(h)3.6(e)-7(m)

A group must be involved in a pattern of criminal acts to be considered a youth gang. These groups are typically composed only of juveniles, but may include young adults in their membership. Prison gangs, ideological gangs, hate groups, and motorcycle gangs are not included. Likewise, gangs whose membership is restricted to adults and that do not have the characteristics of youth gangs are excluded.[10]

Spanish media often refers to gangs as [illegible] or [illegible] interchangeably. Those that distinguish between the two teracœe810.512(s)-7-6.6(o.2(t)-11p)-54-43.1(i)-26.59(s t)-9.9(n

It should be noted that some youth gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) have been reported to form alliances with DTOs such as Los Zetas.[25] Central American also have established relations with prison gangs, e.g., Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) has a historic a liation with the Mexican Ma a or La Eme prison gang. The nature and extent of these alliances is hotly debated. Most analysts believe that the relations are ad-hoc and operate on an as-needed basis motivated by pro t. Recent reports also indicate that Mara Salvatrucha and other gangs prey upon Central American migrants on their way to the U.S. through Mexico through kidnapping, extortion or by providing information on the migrants to larger ci m i nt2.9(i)-1022(l)-5(so)2.44(r)-1.7(pg-5.4(r)-275(n)-1603(i)6.1(hza)8.6(it-7.6(i)63.1(o)-2

California Latino street gangs.[45] The Mexican Attorney General's Office (PGR) has identified it as having a presence in Mexico. Given its business-oriented nature and connections to highly profitable drug trafficking organizations, this "presence" likely consists of intermediaries between prison gangs and Mexican DTOs designed to facilitate the flow of drugs into the highly profitable U.S. consumer market.[46] In reality La Eme is not a youth gang, but a sophisticated organized crime group.[47]

Numerous U.S. street gangs have a significant presence in Mexico, particularly in the northern border region. Examples include collaboration between the Barrio Logan gang (San Diego) and the Arellano Félix Organization (Tijuana Cartel), and the alliance of the Carrillo Fuentes Organization (CFO) and the El Paso-based Barrio Azteca.[48]

When the Arellano Félix brothers (Tijuana Cartel) found themselves in conflict with Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán of the Sinaloa Cartel they relied on David Barron Corona, one of their bodyguards, to recruit from his San Diego-based Barrio Logan street gang and La Eme prison gang to build their enforcer squads.[49] Over time the enforcers for the Tijuana Cartel, who were also members of La Eme and Barrio Logan, grew in number; thus institutionalizing the relationship.[50]

the social groupings that may be most prone to gang involvement or con ated with gangs. These groups are also the most easily prevented from joining gangs through

There is an extensive literature pro ling gang members and their social characteristics.[63] Among those characteristics identi ed by the literature and interviews are: aged 12–24,[64] unemployment, lack of education, a family member who is a gang member, "aggressive or violent … experience multiple caretaker transitions … associate with other gang-involved youth,"[65] come from single parent homes, su er abuse in homes, drug consumption, traumas, and living in poor urban environs with a lack of public services and utilities especially when a large proportion of the population is in poverty.[66] For example, in some cases, Mexican citizens in rural areas do not have birth certi cates due to the cost of traveling to attain one or other barriers created by weak state capacity and poverty, making it impossible for some to enter the formal economy.[67]

Mexico's economy has shown impressive macroeconomic stability. Following the "unholy trinity" of the 2008 nancial crisis, the so-called swine u epidemic and tourist fears due to drug violence, Mexico's economy contracted by 6 percent.[68] However, Mexico has since had modest but consistent growth and has become a $1.8 trillion economy.[69] In 2011, GDP growth was over 4 percent, outpacing Brazil's 2.7 percent.[70] Mexico continued to outpace Brazil's economic growth in 2012 climbing at 3.5 percent compared with Brazil's 0.9 percent, but slowed in 2013 with 1.2 percent economic growth compared with Brazil's 2.5 percent,

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63 J.P. Sullivan and R.J. Bunker, "Drug Cartels, Street Gangs, and Warlords,"

according to the OECD. Mexico's economic ministers have suggested that drug violence costs the Mexican economy 1.2 percent of total GDP, which makes Mexico's economic resilience all the more impressive.[71] More recently Mexican Health Minister Mercedes Juan López has suggested that the material costs of the "drug war" alone cost the state 1.3 percent of GDP and if other factors, such as health costs, insurance, private security, and lost productivity are taken into account, the costs may be as high as 8 percent to 15 percent of GDP.[72]

sustain themselves and their families. However, the reality of is complex and being a is not a permanent state.[78]

Luis Miguel González of identi es a youth unemployment rate of 12.3 percent in Mexico in 2011, indicating that 1.6 million young people between the ages of 16–29 neither work nor study. González also notes that unemployed youth are more likely to be pulled into criminal activity, su er from mental health issues and be vulnerable to illness.[79] Suicide is also a major problem for young people in this age group. According to INEGI, suicides among 15–24 year olds account for 23.2 percent of all violent deaths.[80]

The Merida Initiative is a U.S.-Mexico partnership that has been an important framework for bilateral cooperation since 2007. It was initiated as partnership to counter organized crime partnership and was security-centric, focusing on military equipment. The United States initially provided $1.4 billion over three years to Mexico and lesser amounts to Central America.[81] The initiative has four pillars: (1) "disrupt capacity of organized crime to operate," (2) "institutionalize capacity to sustain rule of law," (3) "create a 21st century border structure," and (4) "build strong and resilient communities."[82] Pillar IV, "building resilient communities," was added in the Merida 2.0 phase and is particularly important in addressing youth gang involvement.

The initial military equipment was slow to be delivered and U.S. and Mexican government o cials have since acknowledged that local and national capacity-building and development e orts characterized by pillars II and IV are where

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78 Rodolfo Tuirán and José Luis Ávila, "Jóvenes que no estudian ni trabajan: ¿Cuántos son?, ¿quiénes son?, ¿qué hacer?" , March 1, 2012, http://estepais.com/site/?p=37606.

79 Luis Miguel González, "¿Cuánto Cuestan Los Ninis?" , February 10, 2012, http://eleconomista.com.mx/caja-fuerte/2012/02/10/cuanto-cuestan-ninis.

80 INEGI, "Causas de defunción: Porcentaje de muertes por suicidio con respecto al total de muertes violentas por sexo u grupos quinquenales de edad, 2000 a 2012, http://www3.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/sisept/default.aspx?t=mvio23&s=est&c=22659. (accessed February 17, 2014.)

81 Colleen Cook, Rebecca G. Rush, and C(s)-22(r s72.2(a)-)-3.2(9 L,Cq1-15.45.9(/)81.4(c)-13.3(a)3(j)-3.9(a)-[(d)1.4(TJETEM

resources now need to be allocated in order to address Mexico's long term security issues.[83] This has led to a re-evaluation of the Merida Initiative, which is sometimes referred to as "Beyond Merida" or "Merida 2.0."[84]

The government of Mexico acknowledges it must fund its own social and development programs to expand state capacity in a sustainable fashion. Pillar IV of the Merida Initiative is primarily funded by the Mexican government and through programs such as the Todos Somos Juárez (We are all Juárez) program. It has devoted 3.38 billion pesos in Ciudad Juárez, making the city a testing ground for Merida Initiative funded concepts and programs.[85]

Most Merida funds for development on the U.S. side are administered through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and help to fund important initial projects. The Mexican government has been particularly interested in "proof of concept" from USAID-funded programs.[86] Proof of concept is understood to mean that the Mexican government is interested in seeing e ective program concepts tested and measured for success so that these programs can be scaled up and expanded throughout the country. Measuring success of small-scale development programs is particularly di cult, leading some to question the e ectiveness of development programs to combat or prevent youth gang activity; however, as Jütersonke et al. point out, "absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence."[87] The work of USAID, NGOs, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) have been valuable insofar as they have demonstrated the e cacy of various programs and provide the technical know-how in establishing pilot programs. Beyond the government of Mexico, the private sector in Mexico, particularly in Monterrey, has demonstrated a willingness to fund and operate programs that would bene t youth prone to gang activity. Awareness that these are pilot programs, which will have funding and support from domestic actors, bodes well for their long-term sustainability and e ectiveness.[88]

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83 It is now estimated that funding is closer to $1.8 billion. Cook, Rush, and Seelke, "Merida Initiative: Proposed U.S. Anticrime and Counterdrug Assistance for Mexico and Central America"; Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin Finklea, "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond," Congressional Research Service, August 16, 2010, http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a528272.pdf; Randal C. Archibold and Damien Cave, "U.S. Braces for Mexican Shift in Drug War Focus," , June 10, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/world/americas/us-braces-for-mexican-shift-in-drug-war-focus.html.

84 Seelke and Finklea, "U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation."

85 U.S. Embassy in Mexico, "Cd. Juárez Action Plan 'Todos Somos Juárez: Reconstruyamos La Ciudad,'" May 2010.

86 Telephone interview with USAID o cial, October 2012; USAID, http://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/usaid-history.

87 Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers, "Gangs, Urban Violence," 14.

88 Interview with USAID o cial.

counselors trained in a "standardized curriculum developed with support from the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission and Merida assistance." According to INL, plans to train 5,000 new

such as the dominance of the Sinaloa Cartel in its conflict with the Juárez Cartel.[104] Some have also credited the “get-tough” policies of Julián Leyzaola, the Juárez public safety chief who previously presided over a similar reduction of violence in Tijuana, but who in both cities was accused of human rights abuses.[105] Most analysts believe the reduction of violence in Juárez can be explained by all factors to greater or lesser degrees coalescing, although many point to the potential negative long-term consequences of zero-tolerance policies.[106]

[illegible] 21

One of the specific programs implemented in the backdrop of Todos Somos Juárez was *[illegible] 21*, which was developed in Latin America and the Inter-

neighborhood youth to older residents and the resulting dialogue brought the two groups closer together.[115]

mediation directly with local gangs and youth groups to convert gangs and youth groups into positive social forces within their communities.[126]

[illegible]

The Washington O ce of Latin American A airs (WOLA) has pro led youth gang prevention programs in Central America that can serve as examples for Mexico. In Guatemala, "Ceiba Group" is an NGO that provides mentors and after-school programs for at risk-youth. The group also provided training to local youth to become mentors in addition to opening centers, which provide safe public spaces for library and Internet services.

Paz y Justicia in Honduras is run by the Mennonite Church and works with homeless youth to "cultivate" leadership in an e ort to prevent gang initiation. The NGO also provides tattoo removal funding in conjunction with the Catholic Church.[127] The NGO has served roughly 320 youth and has limited police involvement in intervention programs to raise youth trust levels.[128]MCID 5376 BDC BT0.02 Tc -0.2(om)-0.CID 53783(r)3MCII

Central America. In many ways, this is occurring and should be deepened. It must also be recognized that Merida funding is a small fraction of what the Mexican government is spending on these types of programs and reforms.

Through Merida Initiative funding, USAID has supported NGOs and local civil society groups that have on a small scale successfully engaged in youth employment training programs. These programs like Youth: Work Mexico, Circo Volador and Cauce Ciudadano should be "scaled up," and expanded to more cities throughout Mexico. Initial statements and plans from the new Peña Nieto administration indicate it plans to do just this by expanding the Todos Somos Juárez model to 251 cities with over $9 billion in funding from the Mexican federal government.[130]

Circo Volador and Youth: Work Mexico currently function in Ciudad Juárez and are expanding to other cities such as Tijuana, where they recently graduated 112 youth.[131] Though Youth Work: Mexico is still in the implementation phase and is yet to be formally evaluated, it has successfully applied best practices in the Mexican context as evidenced by similar procedures used by Circo Volador and Cauce Ciudadano. These programs should be applied in large cities throughout Mexico, especially those hardest hit by drug violence like Monterrey, where private sector funding is available and likely to be supportive.[132] Where private sector funding may be lacking, federal government funding for projects is critical.

Below is a list of recommended policies for the Peña Nieto administration to address youth in street gangs in Mexico.

1. **Emphasize development funding.** Current funding to address drug related violence in Mexico is heavily weighted toward the security apparatus

susceptible to gang involvement. Likewise addressing these issues makes young people valuable to employers, further reducing their propensity to become involved in gangs. Increased program funding for these and similar programs can be administered via grant programs through Sedesol or other government agencies. To expand these types of programs they must be "scaled up" and adopted by government agencies. This will rst require long-term funding of institutions and programs. Second, leaders of these NGOs must be utilized to "train the trainers." Third, the Mexican government must have a willingness to accept localized failures and to adjust these programs and the metrics by which they are assessed to local and institutional conditions.

3. Institutionalized police-youth dialogue forums. Interviews with o cials of the Mexico City Commission for Human Rights indicated that there were moments in Mexico City where dialogue between youth and police was encouraged and resulted in salubrious policy proposals. One such time followed the News Divine nightclub tragedy where police arrived to arrest underage drinkers at an overcrowded club and the ensuing stampede resulted in the death of nine youths and three police o cers.[134] Unfortunately these

gang phenomenon.[139] Unlike the law enforcement focus of the U.S. NAGIA, the Mexican version should emphasize civil society participation.

10. **Gang Truces and Peace Zones.** The recent and apparently successful gang truces in Central America suggest these strategies might be e ective in addressing Mexico's [illegible] and gang problems. El Salvador has created peace zones in which local gangs agree to cease all gang and criminal activity in designated municipalities. This is the second phase of the gang truce in El Salvador between the largest [illegible], MS-13 and Barrio 18, that appears to have successfully reduced homicides.[140] Due to the apparent success, other Central American nations such as Honduras are attempting to replicate them. While tentative and experimental at best, the peace zone concept might be applicable to Mexico, especially in southern states such as Oaxaca and Chiapas that have the strongest [illegible] presence.[141] Civil society groups, in particular the Catholic Church and other religious groups, have played a critical role in the negotiations of these truces in Honduras and El Salvador and could play an important role in the establishment of truces with [illegible] in Mexico. There has been signi cant internal debate in both the Salvadoran government and the Catholic Church on whether or not the gang truce is a good idea.[142] Some fear legitimizing the gangs as political actors, while others fear the government is admitting that it is powerless to stop the gangs.[143]

Because of the role of higher-level organized crime groups such as cartels in Mexico being responsible for a higher percentage of homicides, a gang truce might not have the same impact on homicides in Mexico as it did in El Salvador. This does not mean that it might not be an e ective strategy for reducing localized violence and diverting gang members into job training programs and the legitimate economy. There are localized examples of non-aggression pacts between street gangs throughout Mexico, e.g., eight gangs signed a non-aggression pact before local authorities in León, Guanajuato. A program called León is with the Young, which included sports, recreational activities, and self-employment workshops designed to

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