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LADB Staff

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## Central America, the Most Violent Place Of All

by LADB Staff

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It came as no great shock, but Central America has looked within and found itself to be the most violent zone in Latin America and the world. So said a publication of the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Publica (CNSP) in El Salvador. The study was *Los costos economicos de la Violencia en Centroamerica* (Economic Costs of the Violence in Central America). It was released July 29, and it found that, with 14,000 annual homicides and losses of more than US\$6.5 billion, the isthmus has earned its "most violent" designation.

The study was compiled from official police, prosecutorial, and other ministerial data from the countries of the region. The dollar amount is equivalent to 7.7% of regional GDP. Using dollars as the measure, Guatemala registered the highest cost for accumulated mayhem at US\$2.3 billion, edging El Salvador at US\$2.0 billion. Nicaragua brought up the rear with losses of only US\$529 million, and Costa Rica was next with US\$791 million. If murder was the yardstick, then El Salvador led with 68 per 100,000 population, Guatemala followed with 45, and then came Honduras with 43. That compares with an average in all of Latin America for 2007 of 21.8 per 100,000, according to one study, and a worldwide average in 2000 of 8.8, according to another.

As a health issue, the Organizacion Panamericana de la Salud (OPS) classifies anything over 10 per 100,000 as an epidemic. While there is agreement on Central America's premier position on any measure of violence, studies differ on actual rates. Honduras, for instance, found a rate of 49.9 murders per 100,000 population according to an internal violence-monitoring program. Speaking to the disparity, Salvadoran economist Carlos Acevedo, author of the CNSP study, said the numbers should be taken "with some caution" because of incomplete data. But if that were not the case, the overall picture would not change. The point, says the study, is that "pain, suffering, and any other reduction in the quality of life are intangible and, thus, very difficult to measure."

### *Cut the cause, cut the cost*

Murder, of course, was not the only kind of violence taken up by these studies. Assaults, robberies, thefts, extortion, gender crimes, and domestic violence also took their toll. Breaking down the costs, health services for victims of violence amounted to an estimated US\$229 million. That would include not only treatment but also rehabilitation and related services. Loss of work, disability, and the economic consequences of premature death cost US\$1.21 billion.

The intangibles cost another US\$1.9 billion. Institutional costs legal, judicial, law enforcement added another US\$1.14 billion to the bill. Another US\$1.24 billion went to security needs, everything from private guards to fences and alarm systems coming from citizens' own pockets. Theft and destruction of money and goods added a final US\$780 million. As a fraction of GDP, violent crime lopped off 11% of El Salvador's wealth production for 2006, 10% of Nicaragua's, 9.6% of Honduras', 7.7% of Guatemala's, and 3.5% of Costa Rica's. Acevedo maintained that these costs could be

mitigated by redirecting resources away from warehousing offenders and toward education and health.

This is based on the finding that countries with low social spending as a proportion of GDP tend toward higher expenditures for the consequences of violence. He offered Costa Rica as an example, where social spending far exceeds that of the rest of the isthmus. He told Inter Press Service (IPS), "Providing education to a child from the first grade up to high school is five times cheaper than keeping a person in prison." In El Salvador, records show it costs US\$1,200 a year to maintain a person in prison but only US\$200-US\$250 to keep a child in school.

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