



Citizen Security in Belize

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Abstract

In the face of rising crime rates and increasingly complex transnational and local criminal dynamics, Belize's limited institutional resources are overstretched. Youth violence and gangs are of particular concern in urban areas, where lack of education and employment options converge with the prevalence of guns and trafficking networks. Despite some promising smaller-scale crime prevention initiatives, a comprehensive crime prevention strategy requires more significant institutional reforms. This Technical Note reviews the current trends in crime and violence in Belize and the government's existing policies and programs in the sector. It then proposes several short and medium-term actions to strengthen the government's ability to prevent and reduce crime and violence, such as consolidating strategic planning and information management efforts, designing prevention programs more tailored to specific at-risk groups, bolstering criminal investigation and community policing resources, and adapting the corrections system to the specific needs of juveniles and gang-involved youth.

JEL Code: K420

Keywords: Citizen security, crime prevention, institutional capacity, crime, violence, homicides, risk factors, youth development, victimization, perception of security, police, justice system, corrections, public policy, Belize, Central America

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1. INTRODUCTION

Crime and violence are becoming a top priority for governments, development institutions, and the general public in Latin America and the Caribbean. As part of both the Central America and Caribbean subregions, which have seen dramatic increases in some forms of crime and violence in the past decade, Belize faces serious security challenges internally and regionally. Insecurity negatively affects quality of life, prospects for social and economic development, and social cohesion. The government, multilateral development institutions, and the general public have all recognized citizen security as an important priority for Belize and have launched several major initiatives aimed at reducing crime and violence.

Belize's homicide rate—the most basic indicator of violent crime—increased 150 percent between 2000 and 2010, from 16 to 41 per 100,000 inhabitants (OAS, 2012) and was the sixth highest in the world in 2010 (López, 2013). According to official Belize government data, in 2012 there were 145 murders for a population of 340,786, that is, 42.5 per 100,000 inhabitants—Belize's highest rate to date (JICC, 2013).¹ This is higher than the average rate for Central America and the Caribbean,² and ranks behind only Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Jamaica in terms of national rates. Belize City's homicide rate is far higher—estimated at 106 per 100,000³—putting it on par with other violent cities in the region, such as Guatemala City and San Salvador, although not as high as San Pedro Sula. Impunity is also a significant concern: between 1999 and 2007, only 10 percent of homicide cases resulted in a conviction (U.S. Department of State, 2012).

In terms of broader crime indicators, Belize had the worst results in eight of the nine victimization indicators: (i) murdered family member; (ii) being kidnapped or kidnapped family member; (iii) sexual assault or rape; (iv) death threat; (v) blackmail or extortion; (vi) verbal or physical abuse by the police; (vii) being hit; (viii) gunshot wound; (ix) stab wound (LAPOP, 2008), and the highest victimization rate in LAC for sexual assault and rape (UNDP, 2009; Seligson and Smith, 2010), although officially reported police data on rape are lower (54.3 per 100,000 in 2012) (JICC, 2013).

¹ The rate of 42.5 is based on the number of homicides cited by the JICC (2013) (145) and averages the April and September 2012 population figures from Labour Force Indicators, 2012, produced by the Statistics Institute of Belize.

² Compared to UNODC rates for 2010 and 2011.

³ UNODC 2010 rate.

Given the extent of the local and transnational security dynamics of Central America and the Caribbean, Belizean government institutions have very limited resources, capacity, and ability to coordinate and implement programs. By some estimates, the government spends only \$150 per citizen per year on public security (López, 2013). Resources are limited in absolute terms due to the small size of the population and the economy. As a proportion of the economy and budget, however, expenditures on security (defined as the expenditures of the Ministry of National Security), public prosecutions, and the judicial system are significant. Public expenditures in these areas amount to approximately 3.7 percent of GDP and, at 14 percent of total government noninterest expenditures, are the second largest category of expenditures after education (Table 1). Moreover, expenditures on national security, public prosecutions, and the judiciary are among the fastest-growing categories of expenditures.

Table 1. Expenditure on Ministry of National Security, Public Prosecutions and Judiciary

Expenditure on Ministry of National Security, Public Prosecutions, and Judiciary	Outturn 2011/2012	Preliminary outturn 2012/2013	Estimated 2013/2014
Percent of GDP	3.7	3.3	3.6
Percent of noninterest expenditure	14.1	12.8	14.0
Percent growth rate	10.9	-5.0	14.2

Source: IDB based on MOF Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure, various years.

Belize has a strong set of policy frameworks and strategic plans that analyze the characteristics and socioeconomic root causes of crime and violence. These plans contain fairly elaborate multisectoral and multiagency approaches. For example, the Restore Belize framework has a well-developed strategic plan, with specific actions and targets (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011), but it has not been implemented, due to lack of resources and weak management approaches. Current violence prevention interventions are scattered across different agencies and NGOs and appear to be simultaneously insufficient, underfunded, and duplicative or contradictory in terms of strategies and areas of focus. There is scope to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending and international cooperation on citizen security.

This situation—rising crime and violence combined with relative inaction and lack of capacity from the state—undermines public trust in Belizean institutions. According to the Americas Barometer (2010), public trust in the judicial system is at the midpoint for the

hemisphere (43 percent), but trust in the police is at 38 percent—the second-worst in Central America, after Guatemala (UNDP, 2009).

The nexus between insecurity and development is complex, but in Belize's recent history, worsening crime rates have coincided with relatively negative trends in economic and social indicators. After a period of relatively rapid economic growth between 1998 and 2003, Belize's GDP grew by an annual average of only 3.1 percent in real terms from 2004 to 2012. This was barely ahead of the 2.65 percent annual growth in the country's population, with the result that GDP per capita has remained broadly unchanged in real terms since 2004 (Statistical Institute of Belize and UNFPA, 2010; Statistical Institute of Brazil, undated). Unemployment has risen from 8 to 14 percent in recent years (and even more among youth, 23 percent of whom are officially unemployed) (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012), and poverty increased from 33 percent in 2002 to 41 percent in 2009 (Halcrow Group Limited, 2010). Furthermore, Belize has dropped three positions in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2011). Over 60 percent of youth between 14 and 17 years old are not enrolled in school (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012). These data raise questions about the extent to which unequal social and economic development has contributed to rising crime and insecurity.

There is evidence that crime and violence are affecting economic competitiveness. Belize ranks 123rd out of 142 countries globally (WEF, 2011), with institutional factors (including security institutions) considered the fourth most serious concern. In terms of the costs of crime and violence to business, Belize ranks in the bottom 10 with its neighbors: Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras; Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela; and, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti and Jamaica. In the 2010 Enterprise Survey, over 50 percent of firms in Belize considered crime, theft, and unrest a major constraint to their business, with nearly 12 percent citing this as the principal constraint (World Bank, 2010). The Belize Tourism Board considers crime the biggest threat to the tourism industry, which is the leading economic sector in Belize.

2. ASSESSMENT

2.1. Characteristics and Perceptions of Crime and Violence

This section presents three types of quantitative data on crime and violence in Belize. The first category is the official statistics of incidents of different types of crimes reported to police. These data are limited by low reporting rates among citizens and variations in classification systems across countries and institutions, but nevertheless form the official record of crime data. The second category is victimization surveys, which reflect citizens' responses to survey questions asking about their experiences of crime and violence. Typically, this approach reveals more crime and violence than the official record, as respondents report crimes to the survey (anonymously) that they would not report to police, but it lacks the incident-specific data of official statistics. The third category is public perception of insecurity, which is survey data about respondents' subjective opinions about their sense of safety in different settings; there is significant variation in survey questions across countries and years. This perception may or may not align with actual reported rates of crime and violence. Taken together, these three categories offer a more complete—though not comprehensive—quantitative picture of the current crime, violence, and insecurity situation in Belize.

Table 2. Sector Indicators at a Glance

Indicator	Belize	Central America	Caribbean	South America	North America
Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2010)	41	43	22	21	8
Homicides committed with firearms (2010)	52%	78%	57%	62%	55%
Assaults rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	169	113	114	452	249
Robbery rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	158	95	225	376	250
Rape rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	10	17	26	15	23
Sexual offenses against children per 100,000 minors (2009)	73	4	162	27	12
Kidnapping rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	0.7	0.7	1.3	0.6	4.2
Theft rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	400	171	246	518	1572
Burglary rate per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	419	34	582	88	577
Personal victimization (2010)	12%	18%	13%	22%	19%
Perception of insecurity (2010)	47%	40%	38%	43%	30%
Police personnel per 100,000 inhabitants (2009–10)	371	223	275	229	264

Trust in the police (2010)	38%	47%	39%	48%	52%
Trust in the judicial system (2010)	43%	44%	44%	42%	47%
Prison populations per 100,000 inhabitants (2009)	363	180	204	202	572
Overcrowding (2009–12)	-33%	78%	52%	52%	7%

Sources: OAS (2012), adapted from Costa (2012).

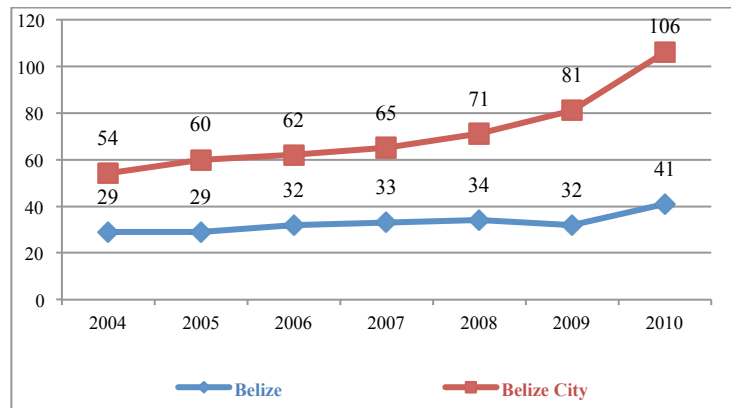
*Note: There are updated figures for some of these indicators, but they are incomplete; thus for regional comparisons, 2010 and 2009 figures are used.

2.1.1. Homicide Figures: Rising Figures and Concentration in Urban Areas and Youth

Belize’s homicide rate in 2012 was 42.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (JICC, 2013), which represents an increase of 14.5 percent over 2011. This continues the upward trend in Belize’s homicide rate, which began to rise sharply in 2006–08 (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012). It puts Belize on a par with its Central American and Caribbean neighbors (similar to Guatemala and Jamaica, above El Salvador, and below Honduras). While Belize is not always the worst in terms of this statistic, its rates are high, and the year-over-year increase is sharper than in other countries. A rising proportion of the homicides involve youth (29.5 percent), firearms, and/or gang activity (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012).

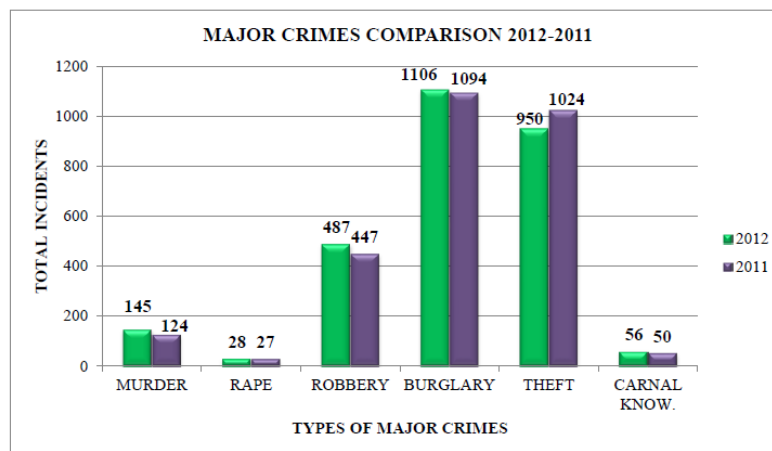
Homicide in Belize is concentrated geographically in cities and within certain neighborhoods. Belize City, with about a quarter of the country’s population, saw 55 percent of all homicides in 2010 and in 2012, a third of all major crimes. The homicide rate in Belize City is growing more quickly than in the rest of the country and is now among the highest of any city in the region (UNODC, 2011). Within Belize City, homicides were especially concentrated on the Southside, which includes only 10 percent of the country’s population but has a homicide rate of 135 per 100,000 inhabitants. This accounted for 40 percent of all homicides nationwide between 2002 and 2009 (Government of Belize, 2009).

Figure 1. Homicides Belize and Belize City, 2004–10 (per 100,000 inhabitants)



Sources: OAS (2012) and UNODC (2011).

Figure 2. Major Crimes Comparison



Source: JICC (2013).

Belize Police classify other crimes in three categories: major crimes (murder, rape, robbery, burglary, theft, and carnal knowledge), other crimes, and offenses. The combined total rose slightly, from 6,222 in 2011 to 6,391 in 2012 (2.6 percent) (JICC, 2013). The most common crimes are burglary, theft, and robbery. The BPD made arrests in approximately 30 percent of all major crimes, and 61 percent of other crimes (JICC, 2013). In murder cases, the arrest rate increased slightly, from 38 percent to 42 percent. However, given that the conviction rate for murder cases remains at only 10 percent, the fact that arrests are increasing does not necessarily mean that more cases are solved. Any analysis of data on reported crimes should take into

account that reporting rates may be affected by citizens’ lack of trust in the institutions and their fear of reprisal. Some studies estimate that 57 percent of all crimes are reported in Belize, which is relatively high for the region but far from sufficient (UNDP, 2009). Additional weaknesses with the quality of information and data attached to reported crimes are addressed below in the section on institutional capacity.

Table 3. Incidents in 2012

INCIDENTS	2012	RATE PER 100,000 INHABITANTS
Murder	145	46.7
Rape/Carnal Know.	84	54.3
Robbery	487	156.8
Burglary	1106	356.1
Theft	950	305.8
Fatal Traffic Accident	64	20.6
Missing Person	175	56.3
Suicide	20	6.4

Source: JICC (2013).

2.1.2. Victimization Surveys

The Victimization Survey presents a different picture than police data on Belizean citizens’ experience of crime and violence. The 2010 Americas Barometer Survey finds that personal victimization rates are relatively low for Belize (Seligson and Smith, 2010), the rate in Belize is 12 percent, the fourth lowest, above only Panama (11 percent), Jamaica (10 percent) and Guyana (9 percent), and two percentages points below that of Trinidad and Tobago (14 percent). This rate is even lower when compared with the average of 16 percent for developed countries reported in the last international survey on criminality and victimization (ICVS 2004–05).

While this appears to suggest that the security situation is less serious in Belize than in the region as a whole, the survey asks respondents whether or not they have been crime victims during the past year, such as robbery, theft, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, threats, and others. The wording of this question emphasizes property victimization (including extortion) over violent crimes against individuals, and it does not ask about homicide. This may lead to a discrepancy in the survey’s findings between violent acts and property crimes. In other words, countries with relatively high homicide and violent crime rates but relatively low property crime rates can appear “better off” under this measure of victimization. This appears to be a possibility

for countries such as Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. The opposite is true for Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina, which rank among the top five in terms of victimization. Of these top five (which also include Venezuela), all have relatively low homicide rates, with the exception of Venezuela.

2.1.3. Perception of Insecurity

The third key indicator is perception of insecurity or fear. The Americas Barometer constructs this indicator by totaling all those who report feeling somewhat or very unsafe. According to this survey, in 2010, perceived insecurity in Belize was the fifth highest in the Americas, with almost half the population (47 percent) reporting that they felt unsafe. This result is just 7 percentage points below that of Peru (54 percent), which leads the ranking, and 24 percentage points higher than that of the United States (23 percent), which has the lowest percentage. Countries of the English-speaking Caribbean, including Jamaica (33 percent), Guyana (34 percent), and Trinidad and Tobago (34 percent), have relatively low percentages. A 2005 survey of youth perceptions showed that 37 percent of boys and 43 percent of girls felt unsafe, with 8 percent of boys and 2 percent of girls reporting having been stabbed.

While these figures do not yet reach the levels of Northern Triangle neighbors (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), and unemployment and poverty continue to be top public concerns, analysts predict that as more serious transnational crime dynamics affect Belize, security will move higher up on the public agenda (López, 2013).

2.2. Drivers and Contributing Factors of Crime and Violence

The most frequently cited causal factors leading to higher crime and violence rates in Belize are similar to those listed for neighboring countries: drug trafficking, the presence of gangs, the availability of firearms, low levels of human development, fragmentation of social ties, lack of education and employment opportunities for youth, and weak rule of law and institutional functioning of the justice sector (World Bank, 2011a and 2011b; UNDP, 2009; UNODC, 2011; UNODC and World Bank, 2007; SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012).

2.2.1. Drug Trafficking

Because of its porous border with Mexico and its Caribbean coastline, Belize is a major transit route for drug trafficking, particularly cocaine (UNODC, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2011). The causal link between trafficking and homicide generally relates to the use of violence by illicit groups as a means of enforcing decisions or dealing with conflict outside the sphere of legal activity. In the case of Belize, this link exists both within micro-trafficking and the international drug trade. Local Belizean gangs operate micro-trafficking and are often in conflict with one another to control the local market for both drugs and extortions, among other reasons. Recent information suggests that while there is no major established Mexican cartel presence in Belize, associates and accomplices of the Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel are operating in the country. There is also evidence of illicit trafficking of weapons and migrants (López, 2013).

2.2.2. Prevalence of Firearms

Licit and illicit circulation of firearms is a growing concern for Belize, particularly because the type of firearms circulating, including military-style weapons, is increasingly sophisticated. According to the head of the Ministry of National Security, 95 percent of homicides in Belize involve a firearm, compared to 80 percent on average for Central America (López, 2013). This also exerts a heavy toll on the hospital and healthcare system, which treats victims of gunshot wound (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011). The Belize Police Department slightly increased its seizure of firearms in 2012, seizing 134 as compared to 129 in 2011, but the statistical reports do not clearly link firearm offenses and seizures to incidents of violent crime (JICC, 2013).

2.2.3. Gangs

Gangs are an increasing part of the crime and violence situation in Belize. As in other countries, gangs provide a space for belonging, protection, and livelihood for marginalized or abused youth in Belize. According to a 2005 study, 12 percent of boys and 5 percent of girls were part of a gang at some point, although gang membership per se is not a crime (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012). There are an estimated 900 total gang members in Belize, and murders related to gang reprisals have been on the rise (Crooks, 2008). Although Belizean gangs remain relatively local by Central American standards, they do have links to U.S. gangs, especially in

Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York (Shifter, 2012) through the deportation of Belizean youth with criminal charges from the United States. While the main gangs in Belize City tend to be loosely linked to U.S.-based non-Latino gangs (e.g., Crips and Bloods), there are increasing signs of an active presence of Central American transnational gangs, such as the MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang (López, 2013). For now, widespread extortion and organized criminal activities by these gangs is limited. For example, Belize has among the lowest reported extortion victimization rates (LAPOP, 2010), but this crime could easily proliferate in Belize’s weak law enforcement environment. The “code of the street” (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012), in which reputation and face-saving are paramount, combined with easy access to firearms, leads to more gang-related murders.

2.2.4. Risk Factors Disproportionately Affecting Youth

Most crime statistics demonstrate that youth—particularly young men in cities—are disproportionately involved in crime and violence as both victims and perpetrators. For example, 47 percent of all those convicted of crimes in Belize were between the ages of 16 and 25 (IDB, 2010). Multiple studies (e.g., Rosberg, 2012; SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012) present comprehensive and multifaceted analyses of social, economic, psychological, and other vulnerabilities that increase the likelihood that a young person will become involved in a violent crime. Broadly, these include inequality and lack of employment or economic opportunity (rather than poverty per se), non-enrollment in school, educational, or training activities (Cunningham et al., 2008), abuse or neglect in the home, exposure to violence, and exposure or access to criminal groups, such as gangs, and means, such as firearms or drugs.

Belizean youth have approximately a 39 percent graduation rate and a nearly 20 percent unemployment rate (López, 2013), the second highest level of youth unemployment in Central America (UNDP, 2009). Massari (2011) found that the rate of unattached youth in Belize is 32 percent, the highest in Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by Jamaica, at 29 percent, and Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, ranging from 26 to 27 percent. Many of these risk factors converge in certain neighborhoods, such as the South Side of Belize City and the Cayo district urban areas (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012). Furthermore, because Belize’s population is small and interconnected, the social consequences of crime and violence are exacerbated. With a population of 2.7 million, Jamaica has a higher homicide rate—51 per

100,000—than Belize (UNODC, 2011, but exposure to violence is significantly higher in Belize. Ninety-nine percent of Belizean youth have been exposed to violence, compared to 58 percent of Jamaican youth (Gayle and Mortis, 2010). This is significant because, in addition to negative psychological effects on individuals, youth exposure to violence is considered an important risk factor for future perpetration of violence.

2.3. Capacity and Legitimacy of Security and Justice Institutions

With respect to legitimacy of institutions, most security and justice institutions rank in the middle range compared to the LAC region as a whole. This is still fairly high. Sixty-one percent of Belizeans say that they have little or no faith that the system would punish the guilty party if they were a victim of robbery or assault (LAPOP, 2010). In terms of capacity, although it is difficult to determine how much of the Belizean national budget is allocated to security, compared to neighboring countries (López, 2013), each of the key security and justice institutions faces multiple internal capacity gaps and challenges in responding to the scope and complexity of the security situation, particularly transnational crime and gang violence.

Police reform is planned but not yet implemented. Crooks (2008) analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the Belize Police Department and set out a plan for institutional reform. Some of the key challenges it identified were: lack of technological capacity for investigations; inadequate legislation on policing; lack of operational strategies to resolve current cases and institutional problems; poor leadership and management structures (including police officers conducting tasks that could be done by civilians); lack of discipline and rising complaints against the police; corruption, with links to other government departments; insufficient guidance/protocol on the appropriate use of force; and poor working conditions for officers (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011). Because the report covered a wide range of topics and made many recommendations, further information is required to determine which of its recommendations, if any, were implemented. Given Belize's sparse population difficult terrain, and scarce infrastructural resources (e.g., transportation), the police face basic limitations in fulfilling their duties (López, 2013). Thus, rather than needing more officers necessarily, the police force needs to be better equipped and trained and more effectively deployed.

Table 4. Resource Levels and Distribution, Belize Police

DISTRICT	AREA KM SQ	AREA MI. SQ	VEHICLES	VEHICLE PER 100 MILES SQ	POPULATION	POLICE STRENGTH	POLICE PER 10,000 INHABITANTS	MAJOR CRIMES	MAJOR CRIMES PER 10,000 INHABITANTS
BELIZE	4,204	1,623	66	4.1	89,247	608	68.1	1190	133.3
CAYO	5,338	2,061	33	1.6	72,899	317	43.5	662	90.8
COROZAL	1,860	718	10	1.4	40,354	73	18.1	258	63.9
ORANGE WALK	4,737	1,829	8	0.4	45,419	71	15.6	234	51.5
STANN CREEK	2,176	840	7	0.8	32,166	120	37.3	307	95.4
TOLEDO	4,648	1,795	7	0.4	30,538	52	17.0	121	39.6
TOTALS	22,963	8,866	131	1.5	310,623	1,241	40.0	2772	89.2

Source: JICC (2013).

Criminal investigation resources and data are scarce, and arrests do not necessarily lead to case resolution. The Belize Police Department’s Annual Statistics Report for 2012 provides detailed information on the number of arrests and seizures for various types of crimes, but not on the quality or results of investigations and eventual convictions. According to Crooks (2008), the average conviction rate from 1999–2007 was 1 in 10 murders, with long delays between reports and later stages of cases (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011). The report cites multiple weaknesses in the investigative process, including lack of planning, targeting, information sharing (notably with the Major Crimes Unit), undercover work, inter-agency cooperation, oversight, and others. Other barriers, such as the lack of a credible witness protection program tailored for the street/gang culture that instills fear of retaliation in witnesses, and lack of equipment in the forensics lab, make investigation of criminal cases extremely difficult. The BPD established a Gang Suppression Unit for Belize City, which might have the potential to use specialized tactics, but there is little information about its operational methods, much less any reliable, transparent mechanisms to evaluate performance. Belize also established the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT), the Zone Beat Liaison Officers (ZBLO), the Police Crime Prevention Education Program (PEPEP), the BPD Youth Cadet Corp, and the

Social Resource Officer Program, although there is little data on the results and challenges of these projects (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012).

The legitimacy of the police is not undermined only by the effectiveness (or lack of) of case investigations, but also by the tactics and interactions of the police with the public.

In this area, the number of complaints about the police's use of coercive methods and the excessive use of force while conducting their work, and about police abuse, harassment, and misconduct, received by the Professional Standards Branch and the Ombudsman, are a significant concern. The BPD has undertaken a few community-policing initiatives, which could improve such relations, but there is little information about their design or results. In terms of more serious infractions by the police, major institutional barriers remain: inaccessible or nontransparent information related to internal affairs, inappropriate mixing of administrative and technical functions, the lack of professional development of personnel, and lack of reliable, transparent mechanisms to evaluate performance.

The justice system faces procedural, knowledge, and resource constraints that lead to inefficiencies and inflexibility in handling cases. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is responsible for determining which cases will be criminally prosecuted. Due to budget limitations and low salaries, Crown counsel earns approximately \$10,000/year); however, this office suffers from frequent staff turnover and a lack of qualified personnel. Limited access to public defenders for low-income people affects the transparency and fairness of the court system, particularly for young people (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012). Institutions and officials rarely apply laws and policy options that promote alternatives to incarceration, such as community service, due to a lack of training by justice officials about how to use such instruments and how to determine which alternative measures are most appropriate for which offenders.

The prison system does not (yet) suffer from overcrowding, but some internal structures and constraints reduce its ability to rehabilitate and reduce recidivism. Belize has a single prison, which houses male and female convicted offenders and inmates awaiting trial. In 2011, the prison population was 1333 in a prison with a capacity of 1700 (OAS, 2012), making Belize one of only three countries in the Americas with an inmate population below capacity. In general, the basic indicators in terms of physical conditions and management of the prison are somewhat better in Belize than in Central American countries, but this does not

necessarily mean that the Belizean system is meeting minimum standards across all categories.⁴ The fact that Belize has one of the highest prison populations per 100,000 inhabitants in the subregion (363), ranking second after El Salvador (406)—though far behind the Bahamas (717) and the United States (747) (OAS, 2012)—is cause for concern. Moreover, about 39 percent of those currently being held are awaiting verdicts. This is a relatively low rate for the region but still demonstrates obstacles in processing cases through the court system. While officials keep good records on the cases and sentences of individuals (Kolbe Foundation, 2012) there is little data about how these characteristics affect recidivism patterns post-sentencing.

The Belize prison system is administered by the Kolbe Foundation, a nonprofit organization, under the supervision of the government, which pays a quota for each inmate. This model has received mixed reviews, which has more to do with Kolbe's religious mission than with the potential for privatization of the prison. However, it is generally considered to be more in compliance with basic standards than prisons in other Central American countries, and it offers more rehabilitation programs. It is not clear if this model is meant to last indefinitely or if there is an effort to install more management capacity in the state institution.

The juvenile justice/detention system in Belize is insufficiently adapted to the needs of youth. Consistent with broader crime trends, between 2006 and 2010, there was an increase in repeat offenses by juveniles. This includes recidivism involving firearms. However, there is little information about the specifics of this trend. Belize has three juvenile rehabilitation and/or detention centers: the Youth Cadet Core, focusing on unattached youth; the Youth Hostel, which houses 160 youth who have been convicted or are on remand mostly for nonviolent offenses; and the Wagner Youth Facility, which is located within the adult prison and houses youth convicted or on remand for violent crimes (IDB, 2011). In all of these, but particularly in Wagner, recruitment by gangs, insufficient support programs, and vague legislative frameworks are major obstacles to rehabilitation (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011). Institutional limitations of the police, court, and prison systems also negatively affect prospects for rehabilitation. These limitations include lack of basic training in conducting investigations, poor conditions in detention facilities, lack of written policies for treatment of juveniles, lack of training on youth issues, profiling of juveniles,

⁴ Discussion held within the Corrections Management and Rehabilitation Committee of Central America (SICA Regional Security Strategy Component), November 2012.

and lack of mediation or diversion options that could be considered by judges (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012).

Beyond the agencies with direct security mandates, multiple ministries and agencies work in relevant social interventions. For example, an institution that plays a key role in citizen security in Belize is the Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation, and Poverty Alleviation. This Ministry is one of the implementers of the Restore Belize program (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011). It oversees the Human Services, the Women's Department, the Community Rehabilitation Department, the Conscious Youth Development Program, and the Special Envoy for Women and Children. It is also the central counterpart for various violence prevention initiatives funded through international cooperation, including the IDB's CAPS project.

3. ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS IN THE SECTOR

Belize has a relatively strong legal and policy framework around security issues, but the policies tend to be all encompassing (rather than tailored to specific issues) and are not substantiated by evidence of their effectiveness or clear plans for implementation. The key documents that lay out the policy framework and strategic plans are:

- RESTORE Belize Program and Strategic Plan (2011–15) (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011)
- National Public Policy Proposal: Prevention of Youth-Involved Violence in Belize 2012–22 (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012)
- National Security Strategy of Belize (2009)
- Horizon 2030 Long Term National Development Framework
- National Plan of Action for Families and Children (NPA 2004–15)
- National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan
- Central Emergency Management Organization Strategic Plan for Crime and Violence (2010)
- Comprehensive National Plan of the Crime Control Council (2008)
- Medium-Term Macro Economic Development Strategy

Two major reports in recent years (Crooks, 2008; Gayle and Mortis, 2010) find that the basic crime and violence problems identified in the 1990s and the policy measures recommended to address them continue to be relevant. They underscore the added challenges and complexities brought on by transnational crime dynamics, increased drug trafficking, and youth gang dynamics—which community-level interventions are not equipped to overcome.

3.1. Restore Belize

Restore Belize is the overarching policy framework that aims to coordinate an ambitious multisectoral effort to address crime, violence, insecurity, and institutional weaknesses in Belize. Its placement within the Office of the Prime Minister, in coordination with civil society and government agencies, indicates that this issue is a priority for the government. It also explicitly acknowledges problems with interagency coordination. The Strategic Plan (2011–15) (Catzim-Sanchez, 2011) sets out a thorough list of strategic actions and targeted outcomes, a detailed mapping of government and nongovernment stakeholders, and clear assignment of roles and tasks for lead agencies, baseline and target indicator data, and a public engagement strategy.

To date, the Restore Belize program has piloted a “community safe zone” in the neighborhood of Port Loyola, in which development projects are accelerated in order to jumpstart community engagement and prevention efforts. It has also launched small-scale scholarships, after-school programs, and urban agriculture programs, with support from UNICEF. There is little information about the program's results to date.

3.2. Community Rehabilitation Department

The establishment of the Community Rehabilitation Department within the Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation, and Poverty Alleviation is a promising step. Few of its benefits have actually materialized, however, because juveniles cannot access alternative sentencing options due to administrative problems. The Department oversees four areas of services: court and case management; the Conscious Youth Development Program; community counseling; and the Youth Hostel.

- The court and case management system (including legal aid) appears not to be fully staffed, and the court system does not have the skills or flexibility to propose alternatives to incarceration, in part due to lack of training by staff and to problematic

police tactics (such as coerced confessions). More involvement by NGOs with specializations in these areas would be useful (ABA Rule of Law Initiative Assessment 2010, cited in Catzim-Sanchez, 2011).

- **Conscious Youth Development Program (CYDP):** This program was originally launched in the 1990s but has suffered from intermittent funding shortages. It operates within the Community Rehabilitation Department and is the only effort focusing directly on gang violence interventions. The program employs several police officers and works with gangs to reduce violence between them and create opportunities to encourage members to stop engaging in criminal activity. Program officers act as “violence interrupters” when an act of violence occurs in an effort to prevent subsequent acts of revenge. They also sometimes serve as intensive case managers. This program is responsible for overseeing the August 2011 truce between the government and 13 gangs in Belize City. Until March 2012, the truce contributed significantly to reducing homicides (BPD, 2012), but it fell apart in April of that year following the murder of three gang leaders (*The Guardian*, 2012). The expiration of funding for jobs and policing is also considered a reason for the breakdown of the truce (López, 2013). The government has recognized that maintaining the truce would cost US\$55,000 monthly, including the financing of the CYDP and the employment program for gang members administered by the Ministry of Public Works.

3.3. Community Action for Public Safety Project

The Community Action for Public Safety (CAPS) project is a new project, launched in 2012–13 and financed through a US\$5 million loan from the IDB under the citizen security initiative. It has three components: (i) school-based positive youth development, which provides age-appropriate, school-based interventions in one primary and one secondary school in Southside Belize; (ii) juvenile social rehabilitation, through technical assistance, training, equipment, and improvement of facilities in the three national institutions and post-prison reinsertion programs; and (iii) the development of the Interagency Public Safety Management Information System (IDB, 2010).

3.4. Other Youth Violence Prevention Projects

Other government programs and initiatives funded and/or implemented by international cooperation agencies and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) include: BZ\$2 million from the Caribbean Development Bank for the Youth and Community Transformation Project in Belize City Southside communities; an apprenticeship program (BZ\$1 million); a conditional cash transfer program (BZ\$4 million); the CARICOM Anti-Gang pilot project (launched in 2011); Youth for the Future (YFF), a capacity building program for youth services organizations; Southside Poverty Alleviation Project; the Gwen Lizzarraga School of Continuing Education; the Belize Red Cross (restorative justice); Belize Crime Stoppers; and UNITE Belize (for at-risk youth) (SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace, 2012).

4. POLICY OPTIONS

In order to implement a comprehensive, multisectoral citizen security policy in Belize, as per best practices in this sector it is first necessary to define the scope of the problem of youth violence and the expected results of programs designed to prevent it (Abizanda et al., 2012). The Restore Belize agenda and the National Security Strategy cover almost every social, economic, infrastructure, and resource issue related to this issue. Clearer prioritization of security results is necessary. Specifically, it is important to determine whether the reducing violent crime (whether gang-related, community-based, or domestic) is to be prioritized, or whether other types of crimes are equally important. The emphasis by international cooperation, which includes substantial equipment for interdiction, appears to be on reducing illicit trafficking, regardless of the effect on violent crime, which may or may not align with the government's priorities.

An additional dimension of the policy challenges relates to the need for accurate and consistent definitions and tracking of expenditures on citizen security—primarily public expenditures through national and local budgets, but also international cooperation contributions. It would be useful to conduct an analysis of such expenditures and contributions, applying clear criteria that can be compared across sectors and over time. Such an analysis could also identify duplications, gaps, and inefficiencies in spending from different sources on similar issues. Some

tools already exist for tracking and analyzing international cooperation,⁵ but there could be more integration with information about national budget planning and allocations.

In order to undertake a serious cost-benefit analysis of different intervention options, more clarity is needed about how funds are packaged and allocated for different programs and what the expected results are. The gang truce provides an obvious example of how the lack of clear information about tactics, goals, and funding distorts the debate about the value of certain interventions, such as paying salaries to gang members who hold the truce. There seems to be some confusion about the inputs, ranging from the operating costs of the CYDP to the monthly wages of the participants, the timeframes, and the expected results, ranging from the actions of certain participants in certain timeframes to the overall homicide and gang violence situation of the country. Given that preventing murder can easily be framed as a “benefit” of nearly indefinite value, a monthly salary seems a minimal cost. This same question can also be applied to other social prevention efforts, such as community centers and after-school programs, many of which do not specify what types of criminal behavior they seek to reduce.

Once this macro framework is set, more specific tracking of prevention interventions and outcomes at different levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—will allow the government to analyze and justify the tradeoffs and benefits of its investments. Not all prevention interventions should be measured solely by the change in crime rates, and not all changes in crime rates should be attributed to general social prevention interventions.

More effective implementation of violence prevention policies and programs will require substantially more research, evidence, and conceptual clarity. Restore Belize is an ambitious policy agenda, but its interventions are scattered across different agencies and NGOs and appear to be simultaneously insufficient, underfunded, and duplicative or contradictory in terms of strategies and areas of focus. For example, there is little evidence on the extent to which homicides are related to gang retaliation, and even less on what incentives might convince young people not to commit murders. Therefore, the policy question of whether a job creation program specifically for gang members is (i) sufficient to address the problem, (ii) sustainable in design and funding, and (iii) socially acceptable in communities where non-gang youth also face

⁵ See the Mapping Tool for Internationally-Funded Citizen Security Projects in Central America, www.seguridadciudadana-centroamerica.org

unemployment requires a more in-depth analysis, including qualitative information from the target group.

A broad but useful range of policy options is set out in SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace (2012). However, more concrete links to crime data are needed. These options are summarized below:

- *Primary*: Increase access to education, especially in high school, by extending the mandatory school age, adding subsidies and scholarships; add diverse career paths through school; provide counseling for youth; create more spaces for artistic expression and positive images in media to reduce youth stigmatization; protect the rights of children and youth in legislation.
- *Secondary*: Establish affordable continuing education programs for at-risk youth to get a GED; provide employment opportunities; provide mentors and role models; improve police-youth relations in violent communities; try cultural exchanges between at-risk youth in urban and rural areas; invest in urban renewal in violent areas (situational prevention specifically linked to at-risk groups).
- *Tertiary*: Set up more rehabilitation programs within and outside the justice system; employment programs specifically for those recently released; transitional programs, including housing, gender-specific considerations, case-tracking, referral system for employment; and additional restorative justice elements.

Box. 1: Relevant Best Practices in the LAC Region

International Experience: Urban Security Information Systems in Chile

An annual National Urban Citizen Security Survey was implemented in 2003. In 2005, the First National Survey on Violence in Schools was conducted and has been carried out every two years since then. In 2007, the first survey on the assessment of police work was conducted and a year later, the first public survey on domestic violence and sex offenses was carried out. Biannually since 1994, surveys on drug consumption among the general population and schoolchildren have been conducted. Since 2006, the Attorney General's Office has compiled all official statistics produced by the security and justice institutions. Within the framework of the 2010–14 Secure Chile Plan, the government is implementing the Strategic Center for Crime Analysis, based on the Unified Database of Criminal Data and the National Public Security Observatory

Toolkit: Practical Suggestions for Youth Violence Prevention (World Bank)

The toolkit developed by the World Bank is recommended for interventions with highly vulnerable youth populations, such as those of Southside (Belize City). It includes core policies, promising approaches, general policies, and recommendations for advancing from wish lists to actions. Core policies include focusing on the first five years of life of the child, keeping children in school, identifying at-risk youth who need remedial support, tailoring reproductive health services to the specific needs of young people, using the media to educate young people, and promoting effective parenting. Promising approaches focus on developing education equivalency programs, job training, and financial incentives for youth. As general policies, the toolkit recommends investing in safe neighborhood programs with a strong police presence, fostering good police-community relations, reducing the availability and use of firearms and providing rehabilitation and second chance opportunities for young offenders.

Sources: Costa (2009 and 2011); Cunningham, et al. (2008).

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Short-Term (1 year)

Recommendation 1: Develop a single citizen security policy and create a feasible implementation plan.

Belize already has strong policy documents, including Catzim-Sanchez (2011); SISCA, UNFPA, and Interpeace (2012); Crooks (2008), and Gayle and Mortis (2010). A comprehensive policy is needed that consolidates the data, analysis, needs assessment, and proposals for interventions, and addresses the contradictions, duplications, and the overly broad scope of the documents. Clear priorities and roles for different institutions should be established, with emphasis on the reform and strengthening of the Belize Police Department more than the armed forces.

Specifically, the policy should be based on quantitative crime data, qualitative data tied to specific at-risk communities, and evaluations of existing programs. Its logic chain for linking interventions to outcomes should differentiate between levels of prevention and types of crimes. An implementation plan can be managed through the structure currently proposed by Restore Belize, but it should include all security institutions. A high-level office should coordinate the relevant institutions and evaluate their work periodically. Working groups on different topics and geographic areas of focus should be set up, with the involvement of local government officials and nonstate local actors. This system should include internal and external communication plans to report on progress and activities. Additionally, a public expenditure review should be conducted to determine and analyze inefficiencies, gaps, or imbalances in current budget allocations, and to calculate the available resources for implementing a citizen security policy.

Recommendation 2: Consolidate the Interagency Public Safety Management Information System with other information, observatory, and evaluation systems for crime and violence.

The Interagency Public Safety Management Information System (under the IDB-financed CAPS project) provides the framework for centralizing and organizing information and making it accessible to policymakers and public opinion leaders. In addition to using official statistics of the police, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the judicial branch and the prison system, the observatory should periodically conduct victimization surveys, commission studies, and evaluate security and justice policies, institutions, and programs. Given that several other similar tools exist, such as the OAS' Crime and Violence Observatory, the IDB-financed Standardized Regional Indicators project, and the SICA-managed Central America Security Observatory (OBSICA), these efforts should be consolidated in terms of planning, funding, and operational objectives. This would serve national, local, and regional information requirements.

5.2. Medium-Term (1–3 years)

Recommendation 3: Implement a comprehensive violence prevention program at the local level, with clear differentiation and coordination between primary, secondary, tertiary, and situational prevention efforts.⁶

The types of projects can be drawn from the proposals and experiences mostly of the Community Action for Public Safety Program and the Conscious Youth Development Program. However, they should be implemented by the appropriate government entity in a coordinated manner according to the policy framework described above. Projects should include plans for expansion or scaling up to other areas or populations; plans for national budget allocations; and the coordination of international funding offers. This program ideally would provide differentiated and focused attention to identified vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 4: Build police capacity, particularly through strengthening institutions, investigation, and community policing.

Crooks (2008) sets out a clear action plan for reforming the Belize Police. The government needs to convert this into an operational plan, phased in over several years, with resource allocations, pilot sites, and an evaluation plan. Responsibility for task should rest with the Police Reform Commission, which is currently charged with establishing the Independent Complaints Commission. The main areas of reform include: policing and investigation, training and culture, leadership and management, organizational capacity building, police service and ethics, anti-drug trafficking and organized crime, policy and legislation, public order, and social integration, communication, and information. Given the range of challenges facing the Belize Police, any reform process will require close coordination with other government departments, as well as extensive use of international and regional expertise, through medium-term consultancies working hand-in-hand with the Commission. The reform process should be kept separate from the task of handling current complaints from the public. Although it is not directly addressed in

⁶ In brief, primary prevention targets the general population, secondary prevention targets at-risk groups, and tertiary prevention targets groups already in conflict with the law. Situational prevention refers to urban and environmental design efforts meant to reduce or prevent violence (for further detail, see Abizanda et al., 2012).

the report, there is also significant scope for building community policing as a central pillar of the Belize Police.

Despite the need for institutional reform in general, current casework could be greatly facilitated by some basic improvements in equipment, staffing, and funding of two programs: forensics and witness protection. New forensics equipment has been donated by international cooperation agencies, and the lab needs to hire and train staff to operate it. Basic equipment requirements for field staff include four-wheel drive vehicles for investigators, portable X-ray machines, tents, and electricity transformers.

With respect to witness protection, the Office for Public Prosecution needs additional tools to be able to convince witnesses to testify without fear of retaliation. First, benefits should be established for defendants who collaborate with the justice system, as established in Article 26 of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Second, evidentiary rules should be established to enable the use of communications technology, such as videoconferencing or other appropriate media. Third, extraordinary protection measures should be implemented for prosecutors and judges involved in cases, as needed. In general, witness protection mechanisms need to contemplate relocation outside of Belize, including through international agreements, because of the small size of Belize and the difficulty of ensuring effective protection.

Recommendation 5: Establish and implement a comprehensive corrections/prison management and rehabilitation/reentry policy, with special considerations for juveniles.

Despite the fact that Belize's prison system does not suffer from overcrowding, a policy framework that establishes basic conditions, education, vocational and rehabilitation programs (including for addiction), and possible community support programs for post-sentence reentry is urgently needed. This should be combined with more robust data on the prison system, including census information and recidivism measurement. Although Belize has a different corrections model than some of its neighbors, the proposed Central America Regional Corrections Management Model (under the framework of SICA's Regional Security Strategy, coordinated by the IDB) provides a good starting point. While Belize has much to offer and much to learn from regional exchanges, it should strive to improve programming and conditions while maintaining the relative simplicity of administration of its prison system.

The juvenile system clearly needs more substantive youth-related policy and programming. The most urgent step relates to clearly separating policies, programs, and facilities for juveniles from the adult system. This may entail changing the current footprint of the Wagner Youth Facility to reduce contamination between the juvenile and adult systems. There is also a need for a transitional living facility for youth offenders once they are released from detention. Beyond these infrastructure changes, the entire justice system—from the police to courts to prisons to community reentry and tertiary prevention—needs more training and specific approaches for dealing with youth, especially gang-involved youth, to overcome the one-size-fits-all approach that leads to higher rates of incarceration.

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