

Why is Honduras so Violent? Drugs, Gangs, Corruption, and Impunity

Fast Facts: Some of the contributors to Honduras' violence



Impunity

- 80% of homicide cases are not investigated, while 96% never reach any sort of judicial resolution¹
- There is a backlog of more than 180,000 cases in the Honduran courts²



Drugs

- The U.S. government estimates that approximately 3 to 4 metric tons of cocaine passes through Honduras each month, equivalent to a U.S. street value of \$507 to \$676 million.³⁴



Gangs

- Sources differ, but there are as many as 40,000 active gang members in the country⁵



Poverty

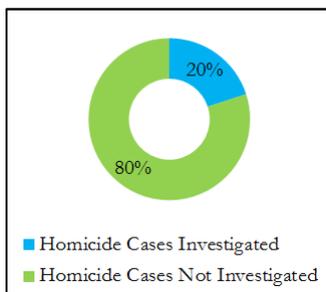
- As of 2013, about 60% of the population lived in poverty, 40% of whom lived in extreme poverty⁶



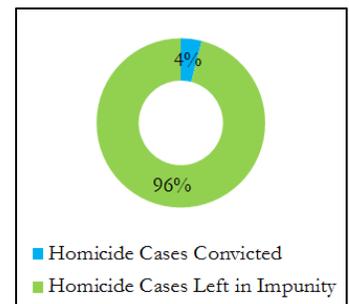
Corruption

- Government institutions are weak, often failing to provide basic public services
- Corruption in the police and judicial systems make victims afraid or unwilling to report crimes
- Weak or corrupt institutions fail to protect individuals such as journalists, civil society members, legal professionals, and human rights defenders such as Berta Caceres

To understand violence in Honduras, you have to understand one negative, recurring cycle: Organized criminal groups like gangs and drug traffickers pay off police, prosecutors, and judges to get away with their crimes. This corrupts the criminal justice system. Without a functioning justice system, impunity runs rampant for criminals and murderers: they are rarely held accountable for their actions. This of course, leads to more violence and crime. This cycle is pictured at right. Impunity, the first piece of this negative cycle, is also the most complex.

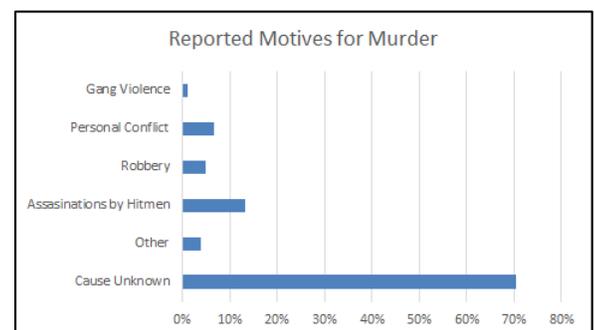


IMPUNITY: Violence and crime in Honduras is extremely likely to go unpunished: Historically, policing has been weak in Honduras. Criminal investigation is severely hampered by limited funding, a lack of high-tech investigative tools, corrupt officers, and poor police education. Even when the police are able to do their jobs, the judicial system and prosecutorial service are overwhelmed with cases and have many of the same deficiencies seen in the police. The judiciary's political independence has also been called into



question. For example in 2009, four Supreme Court Justices were removed for their opposition to the coup d'état, a move which later drew a condemning verdict from the InterAmerican Court of Human Rights.⁷ A broken and manipulated justice system with limited independence creates impunity: 80% of homicide cases are not investigated, and 96% never reach any sort of judicial resolution. This is true for other crimes in Honduras as well. This impunity leads to flourishing criminal activity.

The National Police report the following stats regarding motives for murder in Honduras: Note the high number of cases for which no motive is known, indicating the weakness of criminal investigation.



¹ <http://bit.ly/2pnMQxn>
² <http://bit.ly/2qi9U5w>
³ <http://bit.ly/2mg05IY>
⁴ <http://bit.ly/29lzJW1>
⁵ <http://bit.ly/2qKnOxd>
⁶ <http://bit.ly/2q6HKd9>
⁷ <http://bit.ly/2qtlEIT>



GANG VIOLENCE: Gangs play a key role in the high rates of violence in the country. In a context of poverty and limited government services (whether police, social services, education, health, or otherwise) gangs are likely to form. In Honduras' marginalized neighborhoods, gangs provide an opportunity for young people to find identity and a source of income. Different sources estimate there are between 12,000 and 40,000 members in Honduras. Gangs commit many different crimes: extortion, street-level drug peddling, wholesale drug trafficking (in some cases), robbery, and murder-for-hire schemes. All of these activities can result in violence or murder:

- If extorted businesses or individuals do not pay war taxes, gang members may kill them
- If multiple gangs want to sell drugs in the same area, they may fight over that territory
- Gangs have strict codes for their members that if broken, are punishable by death

DRUG TRAFFICKING: Honduras has the misfortune of being situated between South American cocaine production and U.S. consumption:

In part because of the impunity that has existed in Honduras, drug traffickers saw an easy path to the market in the U.S.: drug planes stop along Honduras' marshy east coastline where drugs and money change hands. Most drugs come to Honduras by boat, passing through the Gulf of Fonseca.⁸ Though drug trafficking through Honduras has dropped sharply in the past few years, between 140 and 300 tons of cocaine still pass through the country every year.⁹ Competition between drug traffickers often results in violence. These traffickers also avoid detection by paying off different authorities, weakening the justice system.

CORRUPTION: The National Police have been implicit in drug and arms trafficking through the country, receiving bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye or cooperating with traffickers moving cocaine north. Police have also been implicating in collaborating with gangs. In addition to police officers, the drug trade has corrupted mayors, members of congress, and even a former President.¹⁰ Crime and the money that comes along with it have contributed to the deterioration of the justice system.

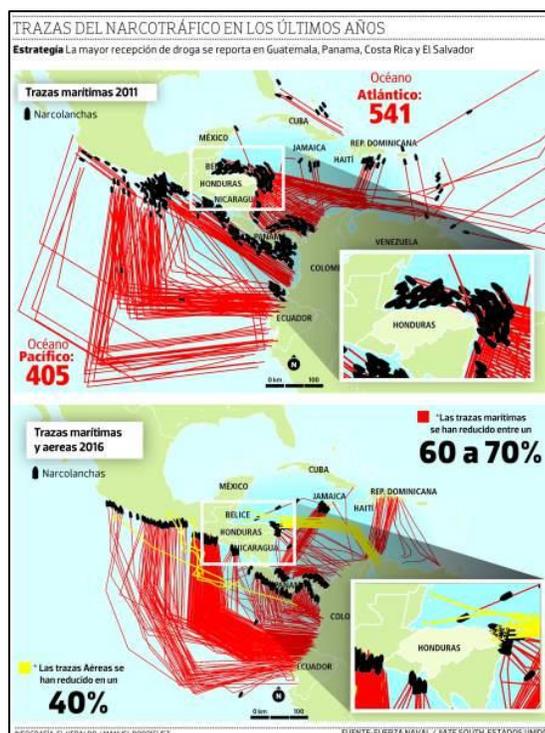


Figure 1: These maps show a 40% reduction in flights suspected to be carrying drugs through Honduras, a 60-70% reduction in maritime drug routes, and a shift away from using Honduras' Caribbean coast as a stopping point.



Corruption is not limited to the justice system, of course. This cycle of impunity and crime occurs with gangs and drug traffickers, but it also occurs with government employees and businesspeople. Some government employees and allies in the private sector have devised a number of devious ways to skim money off the top of budgets from government institutions such as the Ministries of Health or Education. The most famous of these cases is the embezzlement and bribery scheme in the Honduran Institute of Social Security, a health insurance program and system that makes up about a third of the government's overall public health system that came to light in 2015. Some estimate that over 300 million dollars were stolen by government employees in this case. In this

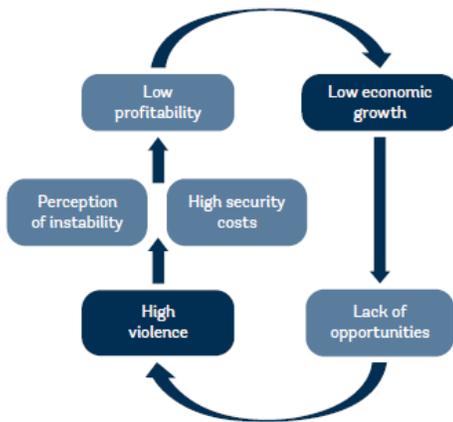
version of the cycle, important public services are weakened – like schools and health clinics – things that could go a long way to help alleviate some of the social problems in crime-ridden communities. This contributes to an environment in which violence and crime can flourish. The weak justice system allows corruption in these public services to continue.

⁸ <http://bit.ly/2q40o1x>

⁹ <http://bit.ly/2pnO4ca>

¹⁰ <http://bit.ly/2qiwHhU>

There is another **cycle that helps explain violence in Honduras**: Poverty provides a context in which high levels of violence and crime can flourish. A lack of jobs or other economic opportunities push some – especially young men – toward crime or gangs to improve their financial prospects. The violence creates obstacles (think extortion) to economic activity, creating a negative cycle pictured on the left (graphic from World Bank¹¹).



Gary Haugen, in his book *The Locust Effect*, compellingly argues that this cycle is not being addressed by NGOs, governments, and multilateral organizations around the world. He says: “efforts to end global poverty and to secure the most basic human rights for the poor are failing because crime and violence against the poor are not being addressed.” The Inter-American Development Bank has made a “lower-bound” estimate that crime in Honduras results in a 6.5% loss in GDP.¹² While the outlook on poverty and violence is again on a positive trajectory, a recent analysis by the World Bank¹³ showed how much work is left to do: in 2013, those making less than \$4/day accounted for almost 65% of the population. Further, Honduras has the second smallest middle class in Latin America at only 10.9% of the population. A larger middle class is associated with lower levels of violence, stronger public institutions, stronger economic growth, and greater societal stability.¹⁴ Working to stem both violence and increase economic opportunities is key to sustainable development.

HOW AJS IS RESPONDING:

AJS works both to prevent and address violence in Honduras by:

- Directly engaging youth through outreach centers and values-based extracurricular activities
- Investigating and trying cases of homicide and sexual violence in some of the poorest communities in Honduras
- Training prosecutors on how to manage sensitive cases of sexual assault
- Working with a broad alliance of organizations to do research on the Honduran justice system and advocate for reforms at the highest levels of government
- Receiving anonymous complaints of corruption and submitting them to the prosecutor’s office, accompanying the cases and public prosecutors until they reach sentencing
- Collaborating with government authorities to restructure the police force and fire corrupt officers

¹¹ <http://bit.ly/2q6HKd9>

¹² <http://bit.ly/2qFiuZw>

¹³ <http://bit.ly/2q6HKd9>

¹⁴ <http://bit.ly/2q6HKd9>