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Nicaragua Youth Assessment

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Nicaragua Youth Assessment

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AP	Associated Press
BICU	Bluefield Indian and Caribbean University
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
CEDEHCA	Center for Human Rights, Citizenship, and Autonomy (El Centro de Derechos Humanos, Ciudadanos y Autónomos)
COHA	Council on Hemispheric Relations
CPC	Citizen Power Councils (Consejos del Poder Ciudadano or Gabinetes de la Familia, la Comunidad y la Vida)
DAJUV	National Police Youth Affairs Division (Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles de la Policía Nacional)
EFS	Education For Success
EPDC	Education Policy and Data Center
FADCANIC	Foundation for the Autonomy and Development of Nicaragua's Atlantic Caribbean Coast (Fundación para la Autonomía y el Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua)
FIDEG	International Foundation for Global Economic Challenges (Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global)
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HSRP	Human Security Report Project
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IEEPP	Institute of Public Policy and Strategic Studies (Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas)
INIDE	National Institute for Development Information (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo)
INL	International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
IPCC	Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change
LA	Los Angeles, USA
LAPOP	Latin American Public Opinion Project
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
M18	18 th Street Gang (Barrio 18)
MINED	Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación)
MINSAL	Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Salud)
MPI	Migration Policy Institute
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha 13
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPR	National Public Radio
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
RACCN	Nicaragua's Autonomous Region of the Northern Caribbean Coast
RACCS	Nicaragua's Autonomous Region of the Southern Caribbean Coast
RACN	Nicaragua's Autonomous Region of the Northern Caribbean
RACS	Nicaragua's Autonomous Region of the Southern Caribbean
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
URACCAN	The University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (La Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WDI	World Development Indicators
WDR	World Development Report

Executive Summary

This assessment aimed to understand the situation facing youth in Nicaragua through a multi-faceted research methodology that incorporates primary and secondary data at a regionally specific level. More precisely, the research team reviewed available secondary information, compiled statistics, interviewed key informants, and carried out focus groups. The study was confined to two defined areas: the Caribbean regions and the Pacific border regions. The report examines in detail seven youth risk categories: demographic and socio-economic pressures; inequalities; environmental pressures; access to drugs and weapons; community divisiveness (gangs, migration, and interfamilial violence); crime and violence; and institutional weaknesses. The report concludes with policy recommendations.

Findings

This assessment demonstrates the diverse set of risks that Nicaraguan youth in the Caribbean and Pacific border regions face. Youth in both regions experience challenges related to poverty, joblessness, climate change, weak institutions, spatial inequality, and interfamilial violence. Meanwhile, other risks, such as access to guns, drug trafficking, gang activity, income inequality, and crime and violence are not as severe in Nicaragua as in neighboring countries to the north. Additionally, Nicaragua's legal framework in support of youth is relatively strong, yet the government's ability to enforce this framework is limited, due to limited resources.

Within Nicaragua, risk factors affect youth in both regions differently. Youth in the Caribbean regions generally have greater risk levels than youth in the Pacific border regions. The Caribbean is poorer, has fewer jobs, fewer educational opportunities, greater spatial inequalities, and higher levels of crime and violence. By contrast, youth in the Pacific border regions are at greater risk from environmental pressures exacerbated by climate change.

Youth Risk Factors

Youth risk from demographic and socio-economic pressures: Caribbean regions – extreme; Pacific border regions – high. Poverty and joblessness in Nicaragua are persistent problems. Nearly all corners of the country are impoverished and without secure, decent employment opportunities. This is especially true in the disconnected Caribbean region. The persistent poverty and joblessness have pushed many locals into more profitable, illicit activities. In the Caribbean, examples of these activities include drug transportation and in the Pacific border regions it includes contraband smuggling. In the Caribbean socio-demographic pressures are a leading cause of delinquency.

Youth risk from inequality: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – low. Nicaragua has low income inequality, moderate group inequality, but high spatial inequality. Isolated rural areas are the most impoverished and have the fewest opportunities to escape poverty. However, spatial inequality is not usually a contributor to youth delinquency (just economic stagnation). Moreover, in terms of income inequality, Nicaragua is one of the most equal countries in the region. For this reason, the risk to youth from inequality is relatively low. In the Caribbean, the political conflict between the Miskitu and settlers, and the central government is cause for concern because of the increased insecurity, which should be monitored, but does not appear to be pushing youth toward delinquency.

Youth risk from environmental pressures: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – severe. Climate change is a new and unpredictable challenge in Nicaragua. It no longer seems to be just a future challenge, but a present problem. This is more the case in the Pacific border regions than in the Caribbean regions, though climate change is a serious risk in both regions. The Pacific border regions already have severely degraded lands, a condition exacerbated by severe weather. By contrast, the Caribbean regions, despite facing particular threats to tourism and the fishing

industries, are confronted with slightly fewer predicted climate changes. When considering Nicaragua's extreme climate risk, and the prominent role youth play in natural resource-based livelihoods, it is safe to say that climate change poses a great risk to youth in all parts of the country.

Youth risk from drugs: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – moderate. Evidence suggests that violence is associated with drug trafficking; however, drugs are typically only transported through Nicaragua, and we have not seen the levels of drug-related violence as other countries in the region. If trafficking is ever shifted to Nicaragua, youth risk from drugs will likely increase. In terms of consumption, alcohol and marijuana are being abused by delinquent youth throughout the country, but the abuse of more highly addictive drugs, such as cocaine or heroine, is limited. The increased presence of crack is worrisome and should be monitored.

Youth risk from weapons: Caribbean regions – low, Pacific border regions – low. Nicaraguan youth are generally not in possession of guns, despite the country's recent history of war. Homemade weapons and other *armas blancas* are prevalent and dangerous, but not enhance youth risk as would cheap readily available firearms.

Youth risk from gangs: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – moderate. Gangs exist in Nicaragua, despite claims to the contrary by the national police. However, they are smaller and less violent, organized, and heavily armed than their counterparts in the Northern Triangle. The ideological influence of the *maras* on these Nicaraguan delinquent youth groups is troubling and should be monitored.

Youth risk from interfamilial violence: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – high. Efforts to measure the scope of interfamilial violence are difficult, but focus group discussions reveal it is pervasive. Given the broad scope of this problem, it represents a high risk to youth in both regions. This is because many youth (probably most) who engage in delinquency come from broken and abusive homes.

Youth risk from migration: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – low. Migration is not always bad; it can be an important livelihood strategy and positive community influence by adding diversity as well as new knowledge and resources. This report shows it can also have some negative impacts on community cohesion or be manifested in unfortunate incidents of human trafficking. However, cases of human trafficking are not prevalent, according to police statistics, and seem to be isolated to certain communities in the north. For this reason, migration does not merit a more severe risk rating and, when weighed against its benefits, does not pose a significant risk to youth. The risk in the Caribbean region is deemed moderate because of the recent violence associated with settler migration to Miskitu lands in the northern Caribbean region. Still, given the isolation of many areas of the Caribbean, migration is also an important strategy for youth to pursue work or education.

Youth risk from crime and violence: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – moderate. Some parts of the Caribbean regions have murder rates on par with the violent Northern Triangle countries. In these regions, there is limited policing and different forms of violence beyond traditional criminal violence, including domestic, ethnic, political, and interfamilial violence. The Pacific border regions have lower levels of crime and violence and greater levels of policing. Still, opportunities for criminal activity, such as smuggling and trafficking are frequent.

Youth risk from weak institutions: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – high. This report shows the Nicaraguan government is relatively poor in terms of resources and other capacities. Therefore, despite a strong legal framework they lack the resources to enforce it

effectively. The country has a strong civil society and a wide variety of capable NGOs, but their efforts lack coordination. The prominent role of party affiliated institutions is both a blessing and a curse. On one hand they are well positioned to respond to local challenges, on the other hand they are not inclusive of non-party members. These characteristics are true for both study regions.

USAID recommendations

Based on the assessment of these youth risk factors, there are a number of recommendations for USAID to consider in Nicaragua. These include:

- Focusing explicitly on reducing poverty and joblessness in the entire country.
- Developing a comprehensive plan to improve job opportunities for youth.
- Focusing on youth development, especially youth between 12 and 16 years old.
- Concentrating on diminishing spatial inequalities through territorial development initiatives.
- Targeting youth in the most at-risk communities and neighborhoods.
- Utilizing all local structures to reach at-risk youth, including considering the costs and benefits of working with Sandinista-affiliated institutions.
- Participating in coordination efforts among the various donors, NGOs, government agencies, and civil society organizations.
- Strengthening the capacity of organizations that provide direct services to youth in at-risk communities.
- Prioritizing climate change as a major development challenge.
- Raising awareness on youth risk factors, especially gender-based and interfamilial violence.
- Expanding the Education For Success (EFS) model for at-risk youth to other areas of Nicaragua.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to understand the situation of youth in Nicaragua. The report examines factors that contribute to youth delinquency and how relevant these factors are in the Caribbean regions and Pacific border regions.

The report finds that the Caribbean regions generally have greater risk levels for youth than the Pacific border regions. The Caribbean is poorer, has fewer jobs, fewer educational opportunities, greater spatial inequalities, and higher levels of crime and violence. By contrast, youth in the Pacific border regions are at greater risk from environmental pressures exacerbated by climate change.¹ Youth in all areas of the country are at-risk from drugs, gangs, delinquency, and gender-based and interfamilial violence. In Nicaragua, there is generally a strong legal and institutional framework in place to support youth, but these often lack the resources to fulfill their goals.

This assessment begins by reviewing the research methodology. It then examines in detail seven youth risk categories. These include: demographic and socio-economic pressures, inequalities, environmental pressures, access to drugs and weapons, community divisiveness, crime and violence, and institutional weaknesses. The report concludes with policy recommendations.

Research methodology

The purpose of the youth assessment is to understand the situation of at-risk youth in the Caribbean regions and Pacific border regions of Nicaragua. To do so, we examine the severity of youth risk factors in the study regions and outline the country's current political, programmatic, and institutional framework for reducing youth risk factors. This assessment expands on a 2012 study of at-risk youth in Nicaragua (Castillo, et al 2012), which examined a more narrow set of risk factors and the political, programmatic, and institutional framework for only the Caribbean region.² The Caribbean region, composed of the RACCS and RACCN, remains a strategic priority for USAID.

Definitions

We define "at-risk" according to Barker and Fontes (1996) as "environmental, social, and family conditions that hinder the personal development and successful integration of youth into society as productive citizens." As such, we identified 14 risk factors and risk factor outcomes that social science literature has shown contribute to youth crime and violence. These include: (1) a demographic youth bulge (including migration trends); (2) poverty (holistic definition, not just income poverty); (3) joblessness (opposed to unemployment); (4) school enrollment; (5) horizontal inequalities (group inequalities not individual or income inequalities); (6) environmental pressures; (7) access to weapons (especially firearms); (8) the access, abuse, or trafficking of drugs; (9) a lack of community cohesion (including migration issues); (10) the presence of gangs; (11) interfamilial violence; (12) the incidence of crime and violence; (13) violence against women; and (14) weak institutions. The Caribbean region was defined as the RACCN and RACCS departments while the Pacific border regions were defined as the Rivas, Chinandega, Madriz, Estelí, and Nueva Segovia departments. We define "youth" broadly - between 10 and 29 years old - according to USAID's definition.

¹ Climate change poses a risk to youth in the entire country, not only in the Pacific border regions. But, there is evidence that risks from climate change in the Pacific border regions are more acute than in the Caribbean regions.

² The 2012 youth assessment (Castillo, et al. 2012) examined the following risk factors: "drug trafficking and consumption;" "violence from drug trafficking;" "deterioration of social fabric family and community;" "school abandonment;" and "weak presence of state institutions."

Research team

The research team consisted of a team leader, a senior specialist, and “youth assessors” for different study regions. There were four Nicaraguan youth assessors, all of whom were younger than thirty years old. The purpose of using youth as researchers was to integrate younger perspectives into the research model. This had the benefit of allowing young energetic researchers to carry out focus group discussions with other young Nicaraguans. Such a strategy helped bring a new perspective to the assessment and improve the comfort level of the focus group discussions. At the same time, there were certain capacity constraints in relying on younger, less experienced professionals.

Research tools

This youth assessment has a multifaceted methodology that incorporates primary and secondary data at a regionally specific level. More precisely, the research team reviewed available secondary information, compiled statistics, interviewed key informants, and carried out focus groups. The study was confined to two defined areas: the Caribbean regions and the Pacific border regions.

Literature review

The research team carried out an extensive literature review. This review included sources at the local, departmental, national, and international levels. These sources touched on each of the risk factors from both theoretical and practical points of view. To identify relevant documentation, researchers carried out online scholar searches and asked key informants if they knew of any information that would prove valuable to the assessment’s objectives. The literature review took place throughout the entirety of the project. The reference section at the end of this document lists the documents that informed this report.

Data compilation

The research team compiled all available statistics related to youth risk factors in the major study regions. The team carried out interviews with well-known data collecting agencies in Nicaragua to attain whatever up-to-date statistics were available. A more traditional research approach to finding and compiling data involving searches of well-known data sources such as the World Bank’s world development indicators was also used. Key informants were asked if there was available data they could refer to the research team. Generally, Nicaragua has a deficiency of available data especially at the subnational level. In light of this, the research team used whatever data was attainable. Data sources are cited throughout this assessment.

Interviews

The research team interviewed key informants to understand the situation of at-risk youth in Nicaragua. These interviewees were typically experts in some regional or technical area of the assessment. This helped guide the research team to other relevant research and contextualized the situation for youth. Interviews took place in every study site and region. In total, 46 people were interviewed for this assessment. A complete list of interviews can be found in Annex A.

Focus groups

Focus groups were used to supplement the secondary research with primary, qualitative data. Overall, 20 focus group discussions were carried out in nine municipalities. There were 11 focus groups in the five departments studied in the Pacific border regions and nine focus groups in the two autonomous regions in the Caribbean. Focus group demographics were decided in collaboration with USAID Nicaragua. In order to attain uninfluenced perspectives from focus group participants, different demographics were separated into different groups. For example, girls participated with other girls, rural youth with other rural youth, and so on. The youth assessors, who facilitated the focus groups, underwent a training to use participatory and interactive discussion techniques, such as mapping. The utmost care was taken to craft questions in a non-leading way. Questions were often indirect and open-ended, which helped discussants feel at ease and carry the

conversation. Assessors were instructed to pay close attention to focus group dynamics, and instructed to facilitate groups to achieve maximum participation from all discussants.

Focus groups were selected based on certain demographic characteristics related to age, gender, ethnicity, location, and risk or educational status. Specifically, these included: age: adolescents (10-14), youth (15-24), and young adults (25-29); gender: males and females; ethnicity: Mestizos, indigenous, and Afro-descendants; location: urban and rural; risk status: in-school (low-risk), out-of-school, and out-of-school and not working (high-risk), and special risk groups: LGBT and handicapped individuals. Overall, 154 youth participated in focus groups. The focus groups have a strong female voice, as 58 percent of participants were female. Ethnically, most discussants were Mestizo, which reflects Nicaragua's demographic make-up, but there was also a strong representation from individuals of indigenous or African descent, especially from Caribbean study sites. The ethnic and gender breakdown is presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Percentage of male and female focus group participants.

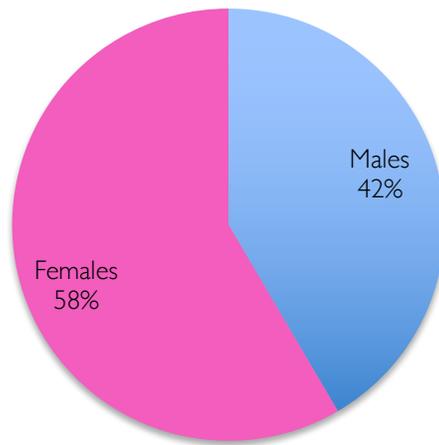
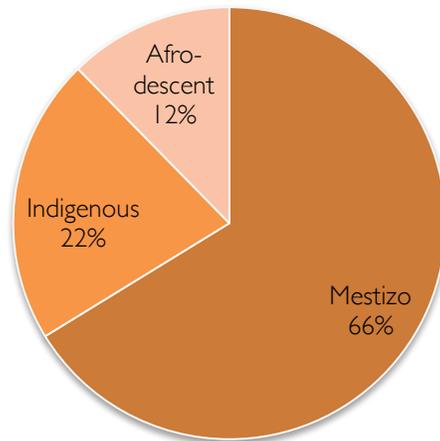


Figure 2: Percentage of Mestizo, indigenous, and Afro-descent focus group participants.



Study site selection

A number of municipalities were selected for case studies. Each municipality acts as a smaller scale youth assessment, complete with a literature review, data compilation, expert interviews, and focus groups. USAID Nicaragua presented a number of possible locations to the research team, based on internal deliberations and an assessment of their needs. The research team then selected the locations based on four questions: (1) could focus groups be practically organized in the municipality? For example, could the team establish local contacts in these areas? (2) Did the location provide a new insight that the other locations did not? For example, were the location's characteristics sufficiently divergent from the other locations? (3) Did the location help fulfill certain demographic requirements like ethnicity or urban-rural location? (4) Is there regional balance and comparability between the study locations from the Caribbean region and study locations from the Pacific border regions?

In the end, the research team selected nine municipalities. From the Pacific border regions, these included: Estelí in the department of Estelí; Somoto in Madriz; Mozonte in Nueva Segovia; Somotillo in Chinandega; and Cardenas in Rivas. From the Caribbean regions, municipalities included: Bluefields in the RACCS; Siuna, Waspam; and Puerto Cabezas from the RACCN. See Figure 3 for a map of these locations.

Figure 3: Location of study sites. Source: Geology.com (2008).



Since it was not possible to carry out individual focus groups for each demographic in each municipality (this would have totaled 126 focus groups), the research team assigned certain focus groups to specific municipalities. A matrix system was established so that each demographics' focus group took place at least once in each of the two regions. This was done to ensure comparability between the Caribbean and Pacific border regions. Table 1 shows where each focus group demographic took place.

Table 1: Focus group characteristics by study site.

	Cardenas	Estelí	Somoto	Somotillo	Mozonte	Bluefields	Siuna	Puerto Cabezas	Waspam
In-school youth									
Out-of-school youth									
High risk youth ³									
Male youth									
Female youth									
Urban youth									

³ For this focus group, we defined high-risk youth as youth who do not work and are not in school.

Rural youth									
Adolescents (10-14)									
Young adults (25-29)									
Indigenous youth									
Afro-descent youth									
Mestizo youth									
LGBT youth									
Mixed youth									

Youth Risk Factors

Social science literature highlights what factors put youth at risk of crime and violence. We have identified 14 risk factors and arranged them into seven categories. These include: demographic and socio-economic pressures, inequality, environmental pressures, access to drugs and weapons, community divisiveness, crime and violence, and weak institutions. Each risk category is examined in detail below. We assessed the level of risk for each region (the Caribbean region – RACCS and RACCN – and the Pacific border region – Rivas, Madriz, Estelí, Chinandega, and Nueva Segovia) using a low-to-extreme risk rating system. Low risk means the risk factor is a very minor or nonexistent issue that needs little additional attention beyond what is currently happening. Moderate risk means it is worrisome and should be monitored, but is not leading many youth toward delinquency. High risk means this factor should be targeted for intervention because it is currently leading youth toward delinquency. Extreme risk means these factors are threatening society’s social fabric and is a leading cause of youth delinquency.

Demographic and socio-economic pressures

Demographic and socio-economic factors put Nicaraguan youth at risk. Specifically, a large demographic youth bulge combined with persistent poverty and joblessness push youth towards crime and violence. These trends are more severe in the Caribbean regions than in the Pacific border regions, but can be extreme in both areas.

Poverty and access

Studies suggest that poverty increases the risk of youth delinquency. Collier and others (2002) find a strong correlation between per capita income and the incidence of violence. In a survey of 32 wars in Africa, Fukuda-Parr and others (2008) find that in 13 of those wars, the per capita GDP was lower at the beginning of the conflict than five years prior. This suggests that increased poverty may have contributed to outbreaks in violence in those countries.

Income poverty

Nicaragua is poor and the Caribbean is the poorest area of the country. Nicaragua is the poorest country in the Americas, only behind Haiti. Nicaragua’s poverty rate in 2013 (less than \$2.1 per day) was 40.5 (FIDEG, 2014). Figure 4 shows Nicaragua’s Gross National Income has remained chronically low compared to the Latin American average. Figure 5 shows that within Nicaragua, the Caribbean regions tend to be the poorest. The Pacific regions – including the

Pacific border regions – have a relatively high level of urban poverty compared to other regions. This is possibly because there are larger urban centers in the Pacific regions than in the rest of the country.

Figure 4: Nicaragua's Gross National Income (GNI) using the World Bank's atlas method. Source: Author's rendering based on WDI (2015).

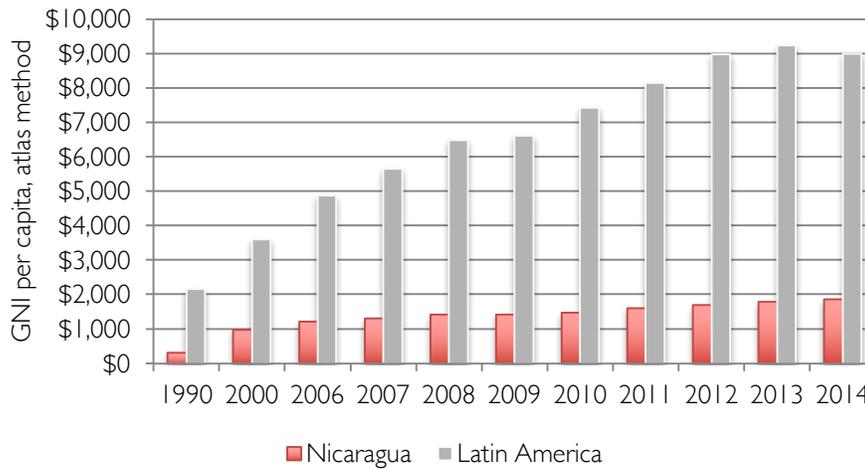
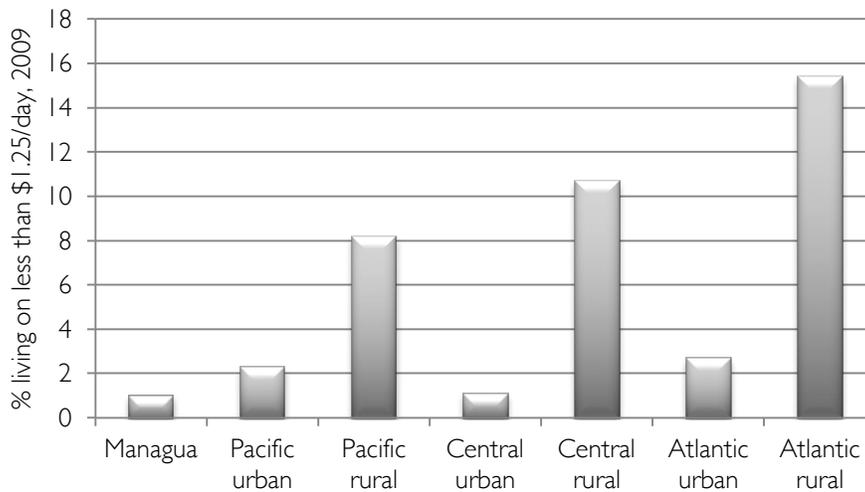


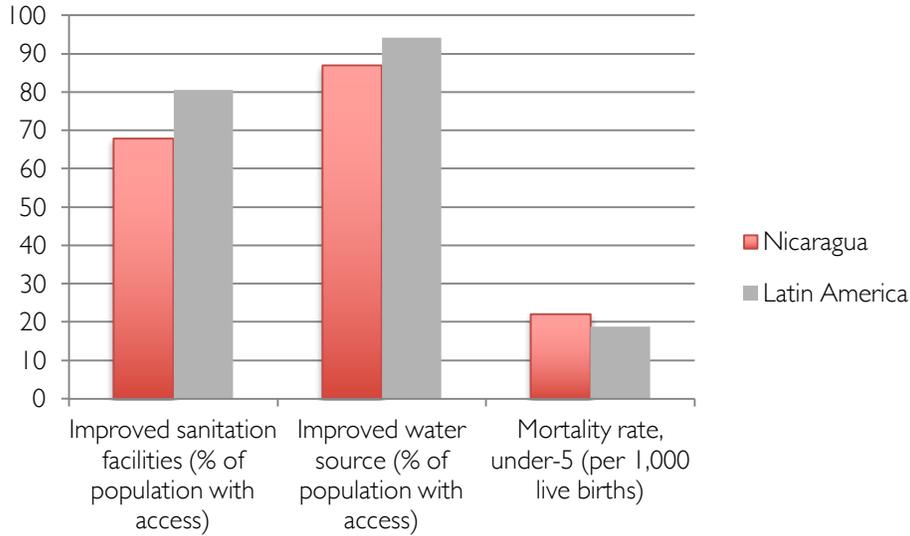
Figure 5: Percent of Nicaraguan's living on less than \$1.25 per day, 2009. Source: INIDE 2011b.



Health and access to basic services

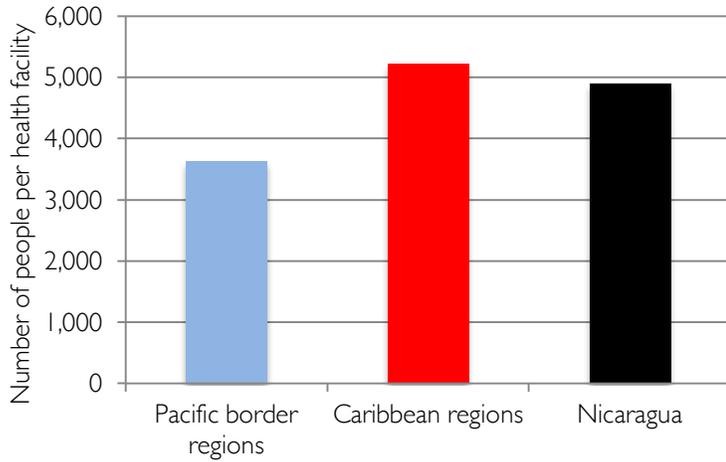
Nicaraguans on average have very poor access to basic services. Poverty is not only in relation to income but includes many other indicators related to health, education, or access to basic services. Figure 6 shows how Nicaragua lags behind the rest of Latin America in access to sanitation, drinking water, and under-5 mortality rates. Access to proper sanitation lags especially far behind. This is likely because of the general underdevelopment in rural areas of Nicaragua.

Figure 6: Access to basic services in Nicaragua compared to regional averages, 2015. Source: Author's rendering based on WDI 2015.



Within Nicaragua, the Caribbean regions tend to have much lower access to basic services than the rest of the country. To show this, we compare the availability of health facilities by region. An area with greater general access to services should also have greater access to health facilities. Figure 7 shows that there are more people per available health facility in the Caribbean regions (RACCS and RACCN) than the national average. In other words, health facilities in the Caribbean are responsible for more individuals than health facilities in the rest of the country. By contrast, individuals in the Pacific border regions (Rivas, Madriz, Estelí, Chinandega, and Nueva Segovia), on average, have much better access to health facilities than individuals in the rest of the country. This should not be surprising considering the much greater connectivity on the Pacific side of the country than the Atlantic side.

Figure 7: Number of people per available health facility, 2011. Source: Author's computation based on health and population statistics in INIDE (2011a).



Education

Access to a quality education is important for improving the situation of at-risk youth. First, attending school keeps kids off of the streets and occupied in productive activities. Second, schooling helps create a literate and more highly skilled labor force. Third, education has been shown to contribute to improved long-term human and economic development.

Educational enrollment lags in Nicaragua, especially at the secondary level.

While primary education expenditures in Nicaragua are almost on par with regional averages, expenditures are much lower for secondary education. In 2015, 62 percent of the Ministry of Education's budget went toward primary education, but only 19 percent went toward secondary education (only four percent for preschool) (IEEPP, 2015). As a result, there are fewer teachers at the secondary level (Figure 8) and many fewer students. Figure 9 shows that in 2001, only 16 percent of youth in Nicaragua finished secondary school, while 37 percent never finished primary school.

Figure 8: Per pupil expenditure and pupil-teacher ratio by school levels, 2010. Source: Author's rendering based on EPDC (2014).

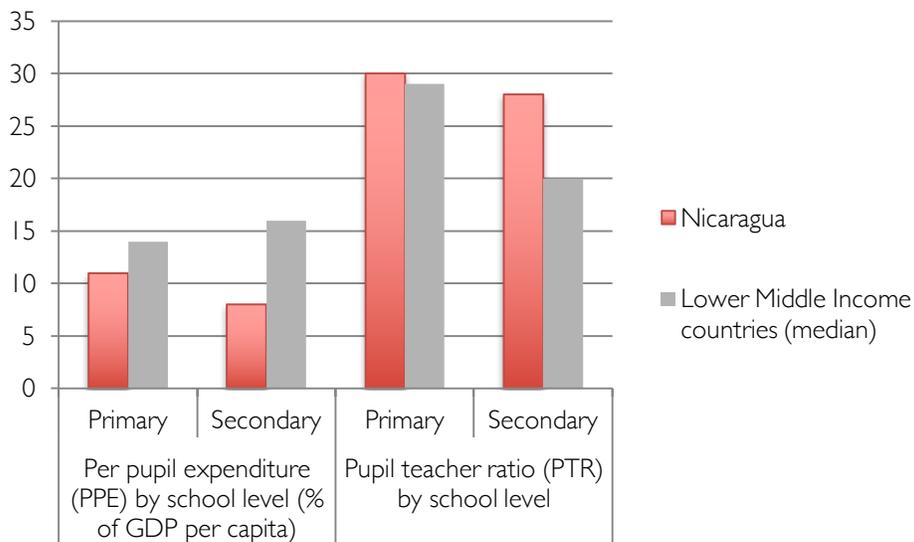
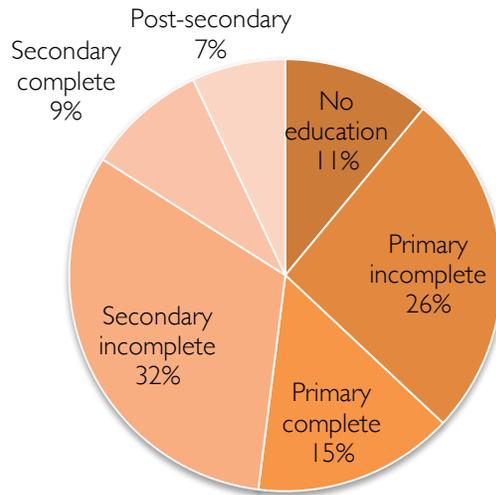
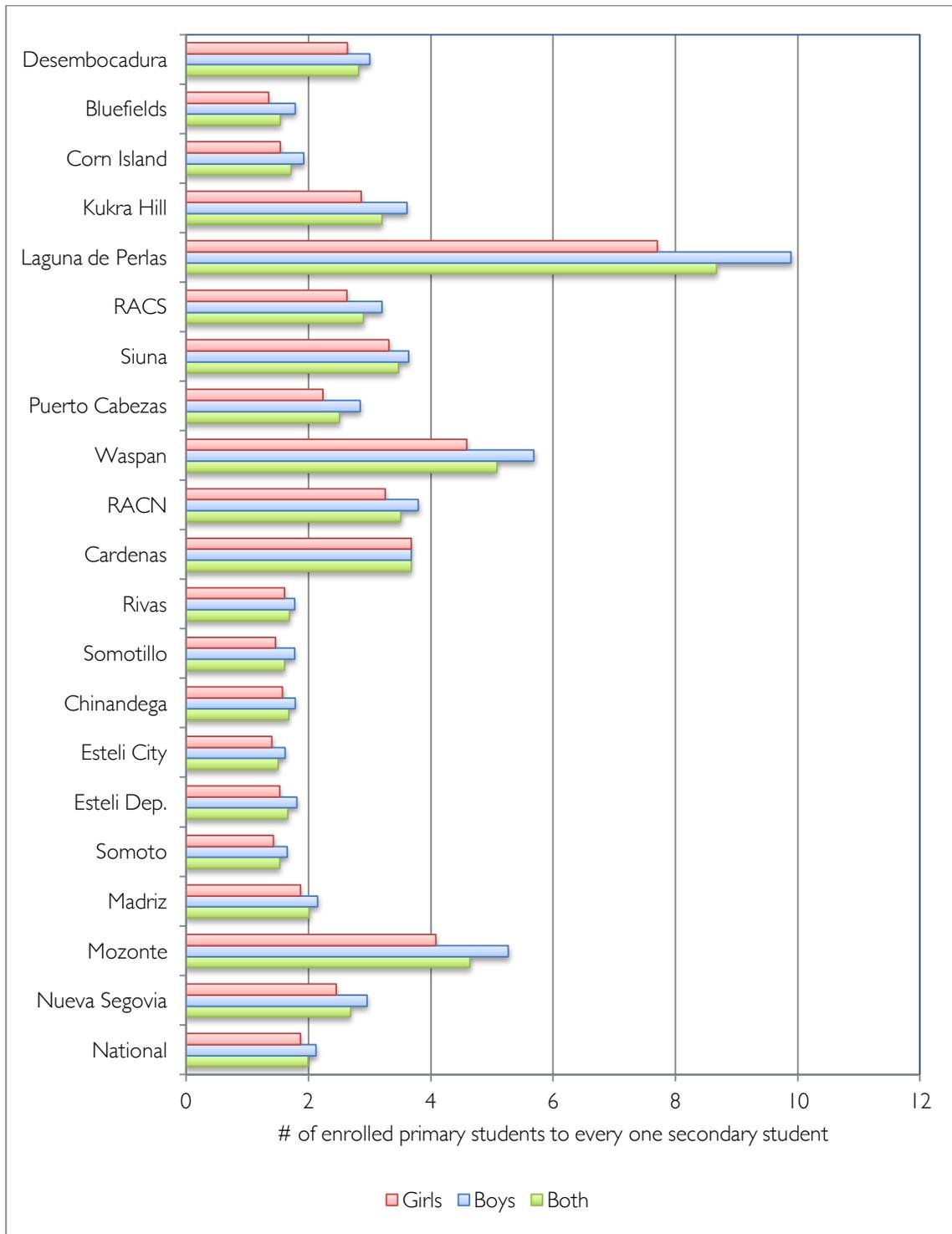


Figure 9: Educational attainment of Nicaragua's population, by 2001 percentages. Source: Author's rendering based on EPDC (2014).



Secondary enrollment is especially low in the Caribbean region. Figure 10 shows the ratio of primary students to secondary students. It can be seen that nationally, on average, there are two primary students enrolled for every one secondary student. In the Caribbean regions, where secondary schools are rare or distant, the ratio climbs to 3.5 to 1. In certain rural municipalities like Laguna de Perla in the RACCS, only about 1 in 9 students continue to secondary school. Among the Pacific border region departments, only Nueva Segovia's ratio of primary to secondary students is greater than 2 to 1. Interestingly, there are a greater proportion of girls who pursue secondary education than boys.

Figure 10: Ratio of primary students to secondary students by study department and municipality, 2011. Source: Author's computation based on INIDE (2011).



Focus group discussions have highlighted other deficiencies in the educational system. In Estelí, a youth remarks, “The educational system is failing a lot because

it is low-quality, has few resources, and the youth aren't interested."⁴ Many Estelí participants said they had friends or acquaintances who used or sold drugs in school. In Siuna, a young male said, "Now in the high schools and universities nobody feels safe because drugs are being sold. Sometimes students are on drugs in school. Women are in danger from these addicts."⁵ In Waspam, a woman described the insecurity in schools as severe: "I feel less safe because now you see a lot of drugs being sold in Waspam. I don't feel safe in the streets or the schools, because drugs are being sold in school also."⁶ In Waspam, the prevalence of drugs, gangs, and violence in the schools has gotten so bad that parents have started pulling their children from school.

Joblessness and the demographic youth bulge

Social science literature shows that certain demographic and socio-economic pressures contribute to youth delinquency. Cincotta and others (2003) show there is a strong statistical relationship between violence and demographic patterns. Specifically, they demonstrate that countries with more than forty percent of their population comprised of young adults are more than twice as likely to experience violence. Such a large youth population, when coupled with high joblessness or a lack of constructive activities, can lead youth to join armed gangs or insurgencies (Cincotta et al, 2003). Fukuda-Parr and others (2008) showed that every African war from 1980 to 2005 had a demographic youth bulge (15 to 29 years old) at the time war began. The logic behind this argument is simple: a society with lots of poor young men without anything to do is much more likely to experience youth joining violent gangs or militant groups and engaging in crime.

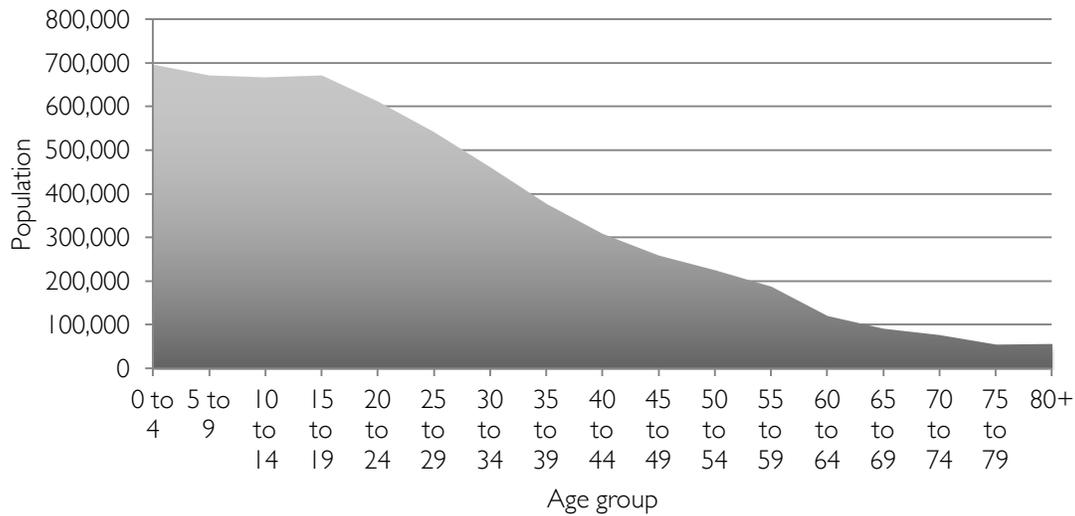
Nicaragua has a large demographic youth bulge. A demographic youth bulge refers to a population that has an especially high ratio of youth (10 to 29 years old) compared to the overall population. Figure 11 shows that Nicaragua has a pronounced youth bulge. Forty-one percent of the population is between 10 and 29 years old, with a large portion of children under 10 as well. In the Pacific border regions, 41 percent of the population is between 10 and 29; in the Atlantic Caribbean regions 44 percent is within this age distribution (INIDE, 2011). In all cases this exceeds the forty percent risk threshold identified by Cincotta.

⁴ "El sistema educativo está fallando un montón porque no tiene tanto presupuesto ni calidad y, a los chavalos no les interesa el estudio."

⁵ "Ahora ni en el colegio y universidades uno se siente seguro porque hay ventas de drogas a lo interno del colegio, a veces los jóvenes andan bajo el efecto de las drogas y las mujeres corren peligros de ser violadas."

⁶ "Me siento menos segura porque ahora se ve más lo de tráfico y expendios de drogas en Waspám, ya no me siento segura ni en las calles ni en el colegio porque ahora en los colegios también venden las drogas."

Figure 11: Age demographics of Nicaragua's population. Source: author's rendering of data compiled from INIDE (2011).



Nicaragua has low unemployment, but high joblessness. Figure 12 shows that Nicaragua's unemployment rate – defined as the number of people actively looking for a job, as a percentage of the labor force – is only 6.8 percent. However, this rate does not paint an accurate picture of the state of Nicaragua's labor market. First, it only includes people actively looking for formal work, yet a large percentage of Nicaragua's labor force works in the informal economy. This means that informal workers are not considered employed. However, informal work is unstable, inconsistent, more closely associated with joblessness. Second, FIDEG (2014) estimates that 44.1 percent of the employed work less than 40 hours per week. This means that many of the people considered employed are actually under-employed. When one combines these factors with Nicaragua's traditionally low wages (in 2011 the average nominal salary was only US\$6,615), it shows Nicaragua's labor market is not nearly as strong as its official unemployment rate would suggest. Keeping this in mind, Figure 13 shows youth unemployment rates tend to be twice as high as adult unemployment rates.

Figure 12: Nicaragua's official national unemployment rate. Source: Author's rendering based on Trading Economics (2015) citing Nicaragua's Central Bank.

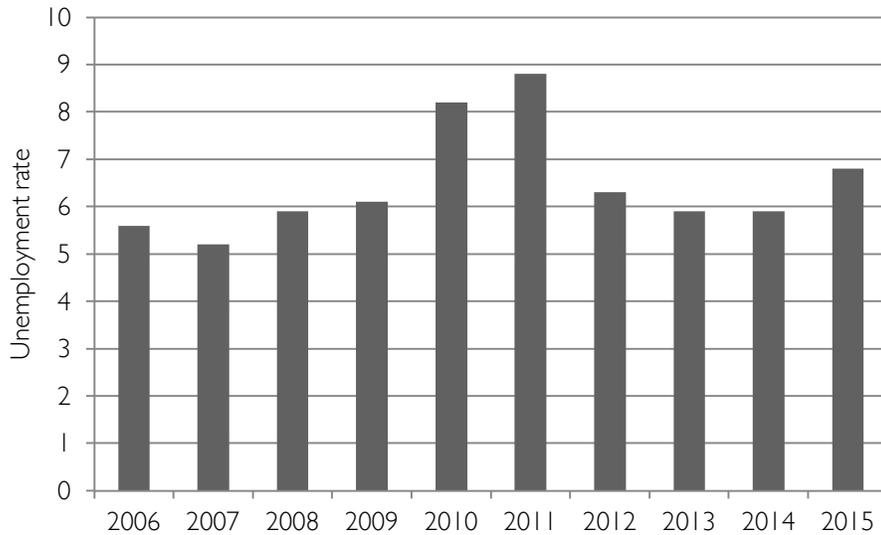
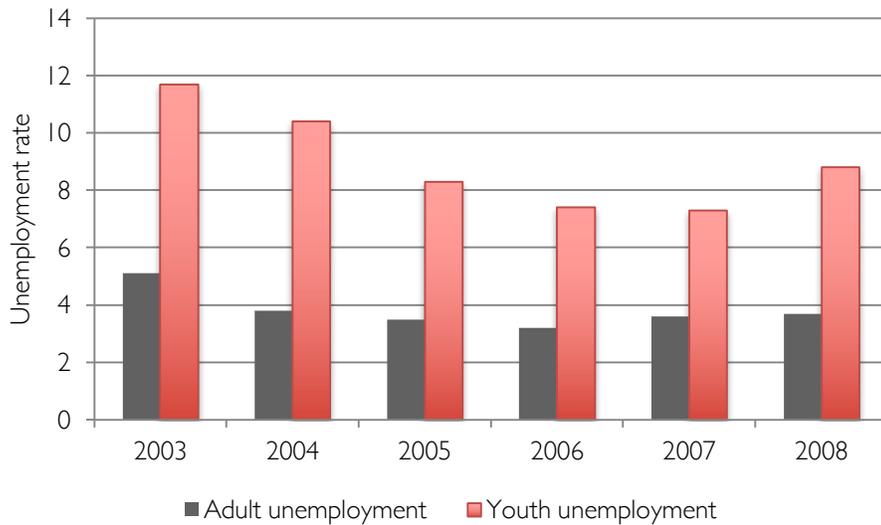


Figure 13: Youth and adult unemployment rates in Nicaragua. Source: UNDP 2011a.



Focus groups demonstrate that poverty and joblessness remain challenges.

Of the nine focus group municipalities, only one reported an economic improvement over the last five years. This was in Estelí, where tourism and tobacco production are driving economic growth and job creation. According to the local government, the tobacco industry in Estelí employs approximately 30,000 people, pays out around a million dollars a week in salaries, and contributes 60 percent of the local GDP. Tourism employs another 3,000 people. About 4,500 youth are employed in Estelí (Rugama 2015; Guerrero 2015). However, for some families, access to jobs

presents a choice between sending their children to school or to the tobacco factories to earn money; it is often not possible to do both.

In eight municipalities, both poverty and joblessness were described as chronic challenges. In Mozonte, drought and leaf blight have ravaged production of corn and other basic grains, slowing the local agricultural economy to a crawl and forcing workers to seek new employment. In Somoto, people stated quite simply, “There are no jobs.”⁷ Blight has hampered coffee production in the region, the related seasonal job market, and the largest job-creating industry is rosquilla (cookie) production. However, these are typically small informal businesses run by “older women” that pay about \$5.50 per day. In the RACCN, both Waspam and Puerto Cabezas are considered among the 25 poorest municipalities in the country (Manzanares 2015). In Puerto Cabezas, 66 percent of working aged men are unemployed (Manzanares 2015). In the RACCS, according to LAPOP (2014) about 75 percent of the population reports the economy as being the region’s “most serious problem.” This is not a surprise, considering in many parts of the Caribbean, low-value fishing and agriculture are the predominant economic activities.

Youth risk from demographic and socio-economic pressures: Caribbean regions – extreme, Pacific border regions – high. Poverty and joblessness in Nicaragua are persistent problems. Nearly all corners of the country are impoverished and without secure, decent employment opportunities. This is especially true in the disconnected Caribbean region. The persistent poverty and joblessness have pushed many locals into more profitable, illicit activities. In the Caribbean, examples of these activities include drug transportation and in the Pacific border regions, include contraband smuggling (see Box 2). In the Caribbean socio-demographic pressures are a leading cause of delinquency.

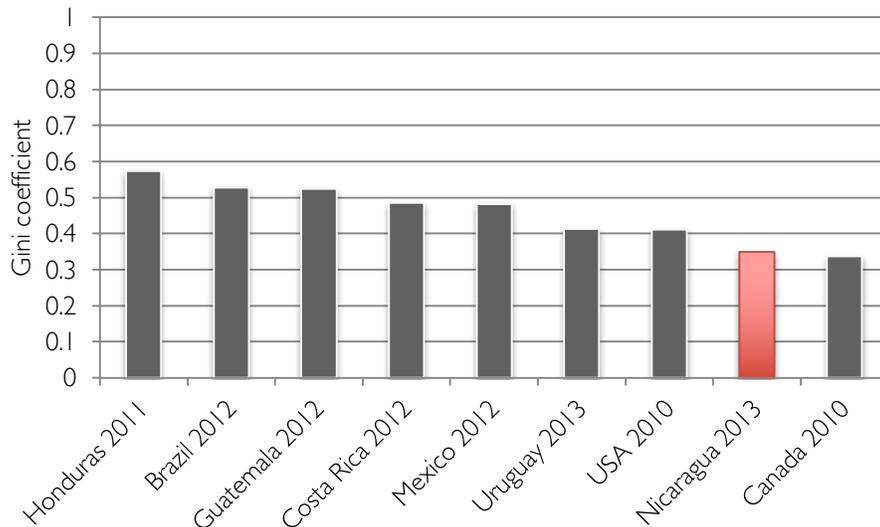
Inequality

Perceived injustices and horizontal inequalities can lead to social grievances, a risk factor for youth violence. Many have proffered that vertical inequalities, or income inequalities could contribute to violence, but research shows that horizontal inequalities, or group inequalities, are a better predictor of violence (Stewart 2002). Horizontal inequalities, when combined with grievances over government injustices or historical exclusion from social, economic, and political opportunities, provide gangs or drug trafficking groups with a powerful recruiting tool. Fukuda-Parr and others (2008) found that of the twenty African wars where data exist, horizontal inequalities were a factor in 14.

Nicaragua has minimal income inequality. At 0.35 Nicaragua has one of the lowest Gini coefficients in the region. Gini is measured on a zero to one scale, with zero being perfect income equality and one being perfect income inequality, for example one person controlling all of a country’s wealth. Countries with high income-inequality, like Brazil, tend to be in the 0.45-0.55 range, while countries below 0.40 have relatively low income inequality. Nicaragua certainly has an elite, wealthy class, but income stratification is not nearly as severe in Nicaragua as most countries in the region (see Figure 14).

⁷ “No hay trabajo.”

Figure 14: Gini coefficients for Nicaragua and select countries. Source: Author's rendering based on WDI (2015).

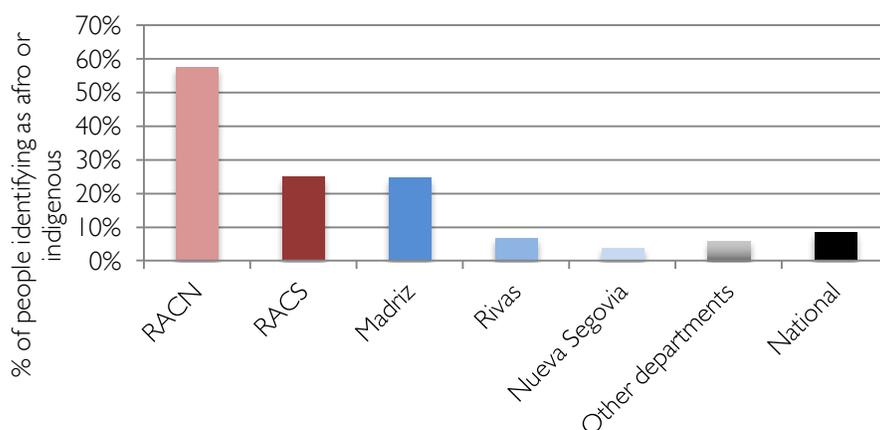


Spatial inequality is much more severe in Nicaragua. Isolation, combined with low economic activity, make certain regions more impoverished than others. As seen in Figure 5 (p. 19), Caribbean regions tend to be poorer than Pacific regions. Towns in the RACCS and RACCN are often isolated from areas with greater economic activity. For example, the primary means to travel from Laguna de Perlas – a rural community in the RACCS – to Bluefields – the main economic center in the RACCS – is by boat. In order to travel from Bluefields to Managua, one must fly.⁸ This makes it very difficult for wealth and labor to be shared between regions. As a result, youth have fewer opportunities for employment the more isolated they are from stronger economic areas. This is apparent in the urban-rural divisions that exist in Nicaragua. In 2013, 22.1 percent of individuals in rural areas lived on less than \$2.1 a day, compared to only 5.5 percent in urban areas. Likewise, 3.8 percent of rural areas suffered from extreme poverty, defined as less than \$1 a day, compared to only 0.6 percent in urban areas (FIDEG, 2014). Figure 5 demonstrates these divisions.

There is also horizontal inequality, or inequality among social groups in Nicaragua. The country possesses a rich mix of cultures, including Mestizos, indigenous groups, and people of African descent. Figure 15 demonstrates that the Caribbean regions have the highest percentage of people self-identified as “afro” or indigenous. These areas also tend to be the poorest in the country. According to the Minorities at Risk database, the Miskitu people are the most at risk of violence. This is because it is the largest indigenous group in Nicaragua – 150,000 members – who are, “territorially concentrated and have relatively high levels of group cohesion.” Traditionally the Miskitu have opposed the ruling Sandinista government and both sides have been accused of engaging in violence. During the course of our fieldwork in the RACCN, our efforts were complicated by outbreaks of violence between Miskitu and Mestizo settlers (see Box 1). Such a politically combustible situation places Miskitu’s youth at greater risk.

⁸ There is currently an unreliable road connecting the Pacific regions to the Caribbean regions via the town of El Rama. Also, there are plans to eventually build a road connecting Bluefields to the Pacific side of the country.

Figure 15: Percent of people who identify as indigenous or of African descent. Source: UNDP (2011).



Gender inequalities persist in Nicaragua despite some comparable socio-economic indicators for men and women. According to FIDEG (2014), 13 percent of women are poor, and 2.1 percent are extremely poor in Nicaragua, compared to 13.3 and 1.9 percent for men. Moreover, while there are slightly more boys enrolled in primary education, women are better represented at the secondary level and other levels of education, which includes higher education and technical training. Still, there are many clear disadvantages for women. Focus groups show an awareness of greater discrimination towards women, including sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. These issues will be discussed further in the section on *Crime and violence*.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals face discrimination in Nicaragua. One discussant in Estelí said, “Safety transcends gender. Now LGBT people are feeling threatened.”⁹ In Bluefields, a focus group participant described how LGBT individuals are targeted, “Violence against gays is happening. I just heard about a gay man who was beaten up and attacked with a machete.”¹⁰ Within the LGBT focus group, at least one participant had been assaulted because of his sexual orientation. LGBT discussants described being harassed verbally and said that the police do not respond to their reports of violence as they do to other demographics. One LGBT youth summed up their situation, “We are the most vulnerable to crime because of our sexual orientation.”¹¹

⁹ “El sentimiento de seguridad, trasciende genero. Ya que a las personas de la diversidad sexual, están siendo muy violentados hoy en día también.”

¹⁰ “La violencia contra personas homosexuales es algo que se está dando también, acabamos de escuchar como machetearon a uno de ellos y lo apuñalaron.”

¹¹ “Somos más vulnerables a la delincuencia por nuestra orientación sexual.”

Box 1: Waspam: A different type of violence

Focus group discussions in Waspam, the north Caribbean town bordering Honduras, suggested that locals believe crime and violence has gotten worse over the past five years. Discussants believe there are persistent problems with gender-based violence and more youth delinquency associated with drug consumption and trafficking. However, there is another form of violence that affects Waspam and the Autonomous Region of the Northern Caribbean Coast (RACCN): political violence.

As recently as September 2015, nine people were killed and twenty wounded in clashes between indigenous people and Mestizos from the Pacific coast (AP 2015). About 90 percent of the population in the Waspam municipality is Miskitu. The violence there stems from land disputes, in which settlers from the Pacific side of Nicaragua have acquired land (often illegally) around Waspam that the Miskitu indigenous population has historically occupied as communal lands. The Associated Press (2015) reported that about 200 Miskitus fled their homes to avoid the violence, while others stayed to fight the settlers (Esteban and Galeano, 2015).

For their part, the settlers claim they acquired the land legally and filed police reports claiming Miskitus of the Yatama political party attacked them. Yatama countered that people sympathetic with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional – FSLN) attacked their leaders. In response, President Daniel Ortega dispatched special operations units to Waspam “to secure public safety and promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence.”

This is not a new conflict. Ever since the Atlantic regions were incorporated into Nicaragua in 1894, there have been persistent worries by Caribbean inhabitants of encroachment by the state (Hale, 1996). The historical distrust, combined with actual acts of encroachment, only entrenched the acrimony. This has led to sporadic outbreaks of violence between regional activists and government forces or their affiliates (Rodgers, 2009), but nothing comparable to the widespread abuses that occurred in countries like Guatemala or El Salvador (Hale, 1996). Although, never in the history of the region has the violence been manifested in its current form of locals feeling the need to defend themselves from armed settlers.

Unlike criminal violence, political conflicts have the potential of undermining the credibility of the state. The historical grievances associated with these conflicts can be a powerful recruiting tool for at-risk youth in Waspam. Such a combustible mix of conflict and grievances have the potential of channeling poor and disillusioned youth into violent acts with the state, either as perpetrators or victims.

Youth risk from inequality: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – low. Nicaragua has low-income inequality, moderate group inequality, but high spatial inequality. Isolated rural areas are the most impoverished and have the fewest opportunities to escape poverty. However, spatial inequality is not usually a contributor to youth delinquency (just economic stagnation). Moreover, in terms of income inequality, Nicaragua is one of the most equal countries in the region. For this reason, youth risk from inequality is relatively low. In the Caribbean, the political conflict between the Miskitu, settlers, and the central government is cause for concern because of the increased insecurity and should be monitored, but does not appear to be pushing youth toward delinquency.

Environmental pressures

Environmental pressures can contribute to youth risk and outbreaks of violence. This theory stems from Malthus' Principle of Population (Malthus, 1872), in which he argued that as populations grow, land will no longer be able to support this growth, and disorder will ensue. Much of this theory has proven incorrect, as human societies have found ways to feed growing populations and sustain human health. However, other "neo-Malthusian" theorists have argued that resource scarcity can still contribute to violence, although in a more localized manner (Myers, 1993; Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1996; Le Billon, 2001). For example, Le Billon (2001) argued that resource scarcity creates a greater vulnerability to violence. Myers (2002) elaborates that "Environmental deficiencies supply conditions which render conflict all the more likely." While much of this is up for debate, what is certain is that environmental pressures can disproportionately impact youth, who tend to have the most insecure livelihoods.

Climate change is affecting Nicaragua. In 2001, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted Nicaragua would experience increased temperatures and decreased rainfall due to climate change. Specifically, they forecast that the Pacific regions would see a 3.7 degree Celsius increase and a 36.6 percent decrease in precipitation by the year 2100. Likewise, the IPCC predicted a 3.3 degree Celsius temperature rise and 35.7 percent loss in precipitation in the Caribbean regions (IPCC 2001). If current climate trends continue, it is predicted that Nicaragua will lose 34,000 tons of corn and 9,000 tons of beans per year by 2020 (Lira, 2014). Between 1993 and 2012, Nicaragua was ranked as the country with the fourth-highest climate risk in the world. Over that period, the country has endured 44 extreme weather events, lost \$225 million dollars (in adjusted PPP) from damages, and lost 160 lives (Kreft and Eckstein, 2014). In 2014, Nicaragua suffered its worst drought in over forty years, with over 53 municipalities and 100,000 farmers affected (Lira, 2014).

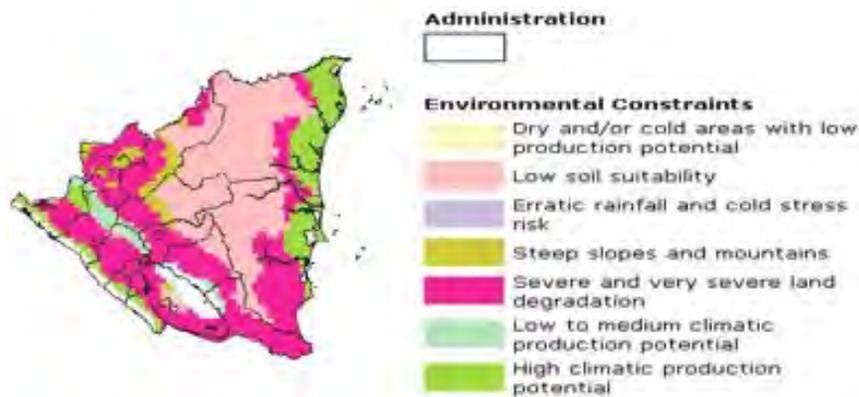
This drought had a major impact on youth in two municipalities in the North-Pacific border regions, Somoto and Mozonte. The reason these two municipalities were greatly affected is because of their reliance on agriculture. In Somoto, it is estimated that 81 percent of communities produce corn and 77 percent produce beans (Bucardo, 2015). The municipality also has important coffee producing lands. Mozonte generally produces the same crops. The drought caused major losses to crop production, from which community members say they have not recovered. Further, they say that the drought has increased joblessness, forced people to migrate to the towns, and increased the criminality of youth in rural areas. In Mozonte, one woman described the health and economic consequences of the drought, "The lack of work means there is no nutritious food. People can't afford a basic food basket."¹²

Youth risk from environmental pressures: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – severe. Climate change is a new and unpredictable challenge in Nicaragua, but it no longer seems to be only a future challenge; it is a challenge now. This is more the case in the Pacific border regions than in the Caribbean regions, though climate change is a serious risk in both. Figure 16 shows that the Pacific border regions already have severely degraded lands; a condition exacerbated by severe weather. By contrast, Caribbean regions, despite facing particular threats to tourism and fishing industries, are confronted with slightly fewer predicted climate changes than the Pacific border regions. The Caribbean also has more productive land, generally. When considering Nicaragua's extreme climate risk, and the prominent role youth play in natural resource-based livelihoods,¹³ it is safe to say that climate change poses a great risk to youth in all parts of the country.

¹² "Por la falta de trabajo no hay una buena alimentación. No se puede comprar completa la canasta básica."

¹³ In 2010, 32 percent of Nicaraguans worked in the agriculture sector. The majority under 30 years old (WDI, 2015).

Figure 16: Land and environmental constraints in Nicaragua. Source: World Bank (2008).



Access to drugs and weapons

Access to drugs and weapons put youth at greater risk of committing crimes or engaging in violence. Both drugs and weapons create conditions conducive to violence. Drugs are valuable, easily transportable commodities that can fund violent, illicit organizations. Drugs act as a resource over which criminal organizations fight. Collier and Hoeffler (2002) argue that the presence of such commodities within a society make that society statistically more likely to experience violence. Drug consumption can also lead users to commit violent acts, either to attain more drugs or because they are under the influence of a mind altering substance. Muggah and Berman (2001) argue that societies with easy access to weapons, often left behind from previous conflicts, are more likely to see violence. Fukuda-Parr and others (2008) show that a history of violence is the greatest predictor of future violence.

Drug trafficking

Drugs travel through Nicaragua on their way to transit points in Mexico or elsewhere in Central America, but trafficking does not commonly occur in Nicaragua. To be clear, Nicaragua is a transportation route, though generally not a trafficking point. Drug shipments from South America travel through Nicaragua on their way to Mexico and the United States, but they are not typically bought, sold, stored, or traded there (Dudley, 2010). This is an important distinction, as Cuevas and Demombynes (2009) show that drug trafficking (not transport) is an important driver of homicide. Specifically, there is a 111 percent increase in Central American homicide rates in areas where drug trafficking occurs. Nicaragua's sparsely populated Atlantic coast is home to the most significant drug trafficking enclaves within the country's borders, and it is also where Nicaragua's most significant concentration of violence occurs, as measured by homicide rate (Cruz, 2011). Most trafficking occurs in the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador or farther north in Mexico. By contrast, Nicaragua is used as a stopover point or way station. As one Corn Island resident explained, "They stop here for gas."

Participating in drug transportation is an economic opportunity. The U.S. Department of State (2010) estimates that 90 percent of illegal drugs pass through Mexico and Central America en route to the United States. An estimated \$38 billion in cocaine flows from South to North America. The U.S. Government estimates that 42 percent of these drugs, representing \$16 billion, pass through Central America (Dudley, 2010). The 560 metric tons of

cocaine that pass through Central America accrues about \$7 billion in street value as it reaches the US (Serrano-Berthet and Lopez, 2011). Such a valuable commodity is often viewed as an economic opportunity for poor Nicaraguans. Focus groups confirm this, but also show that Nicaraguans understand the dangers presented by drugs.

Drug transportation is difficult to monitor. The Caribbean regions are largely isolated and under-regulated, making drug monitoring difficult. For example, in the Caribbean regions there are fewer than two police officers per 100 squared kilometers of territory (Policia Nacional, 2013). Further complicating matters is the importance of small-scale fishing on the Caribbean coast, especially between Nicaragua and Honduras. Authorities have no way of deciphering fishing boats from drug transportation boats. Given the Miskitu in the region do not generally trust the government, authorities receive little assistance from the local population. In coastal areas of the Caribbean regions, almost half of the population believes that a significant proportion of their communities earn money by “selling drugs” (LAPOP, 2014).

The Nicaraguan authorities seize a variety of drugs every year. Figures 17 and 18 show drug seizure trends over the last 25 years. In 2014, authorities seized over five metric tons of cocaine in 3,828 drug operations, up from the three metric tons seized in 2013. Nicaraguan authorities also arrested 218 people and seized \$2.7 million in U.S. currency and \$2.2 million in assets, including 12 “go-fast” boats, six kilograms of amphetamines, and approximately 1.7 metric tons of marijuana (INL, 2015). The seizure of marijuana plants decreased from 264,933 to only 1,000 plants destroyed as of September 2014 (Vanegas, 2014a). According to INL (2015), this decline in seizures reflects a shift of focus by Nicaraguan authorities away from capturing drug shipments toward dismantling transportation systems.

Figure 17: Cocaine seizures in Nicaragua, 1990-2013. Source: Author's compilation based on Policia Nacional (2013).

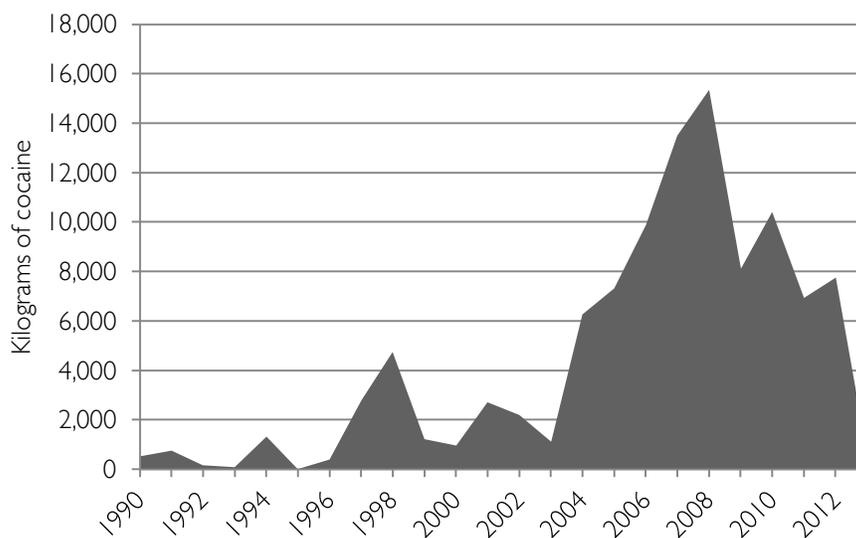
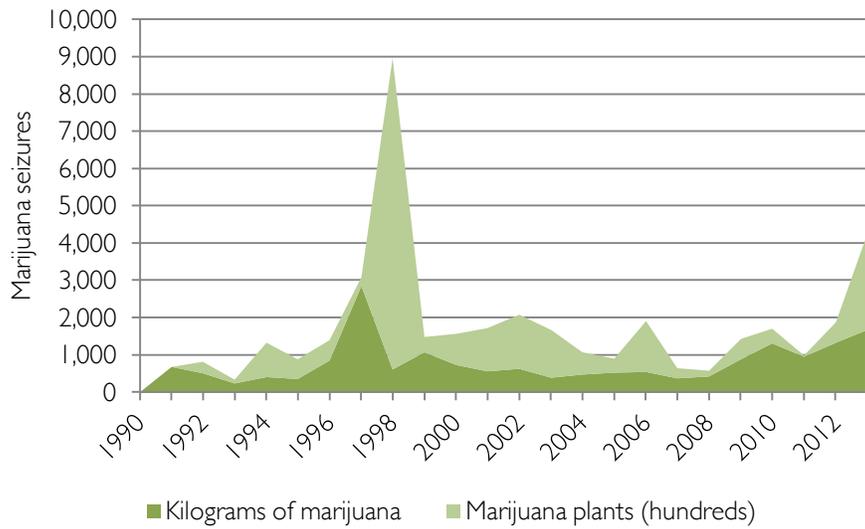


Figure 18: Marijuana seizures in Nicaragua, 1990-2013. Source: Author's compilation based on Policia Nacional (2013).



Box 2: Cardenas and Somotillo: A smuggler's paradise?

Smuggling has become a lucrative activity for youth in the Pacific border regions. The perception that most smuggling takes place on the Caribbean side of Nicaragua is certainly justified, as the vast areas of land without police monitoring are conducive to avoiding detection. However, it may actually be the Pacific side of Nicaragua that is more conducive to most smuggling. Drug transportation does not require a well-developed infrastructure, since drugs can be easily transported by boat or by drug mules - people who carry drugs by land. Most contraband, whether it is food, livestock, or technology, requires roads, something the Atlantic side of the country has in short supply. By contrast, the Pacific side has a much better developed road network, and although there is also stronger police presence, smugglers have learned to hide in plain sight.

In Somotillo and Cardenas, the main legal border crossings are at El Guasaule and Peñas Blancas. In 2012, El Guasaule had nearly 400,000 registered border crossings, while Peñas Blancas had over 750,000.¹⁴ The two areas combined make up over half of the country's registered crossings (Alvarado, 2014). Moreover, El Guasaule only has three border station officers, and Peñas Blancas has only 14. This means that, on average, there is one border officer available for every 68,000 crossings per year. Therefore, if smugglers use the legal, monitored crossings at El Guasaule or Peñas Blancas, the chances that their loads of contraband will be discovered are very low.

However, the smugglers mostly stick to crossing at unmonitored "blind spots" along the border. There are an estimated 140 blind spots in Somotillo and another 62 blind spots in Cardenas, none of which are monitored. The profits involved with smuggling and a lack of state capacity to monitor create the incentives for people, often youth, to engage in smuggling.

In recent years, cattle raiding has also become a profitable smuggling operation in the Pacific border regions. Between 2013 and 2014, it is estimated that 300,000 cattle have been illegally removed from Nicaragua, such that Nicaragua's slaughterhouses are processing fifty percent fewer cattle (Bejarano, 2015). Drug smugglers have used the cattle trade as a money laundering mechanism, even used living cattle to transport drug pellets in their stomachs (McSweeney, 2014).

All of this illegal contraband activity has increased the insecurity in Somotillo and Cardenas. In Somotillo, focus group participants report that delinquent youth rob residents with impunity for items the youth can smuggle. The robberies have become so flagrant and commonplace that the thieves do not even bother concealing their identity. In Cardenas, focus group participants believe that local police are not entirely unaware. They say they are less likely to report crimes to the police, whom they view as corrupt. According to one focus group participant, "The police participate in criminal acts instead of serving the citizens. There are many corrupt police officers, and if they're participating in those activities, they aren't protecting the people."¹⁵

Drug consumption

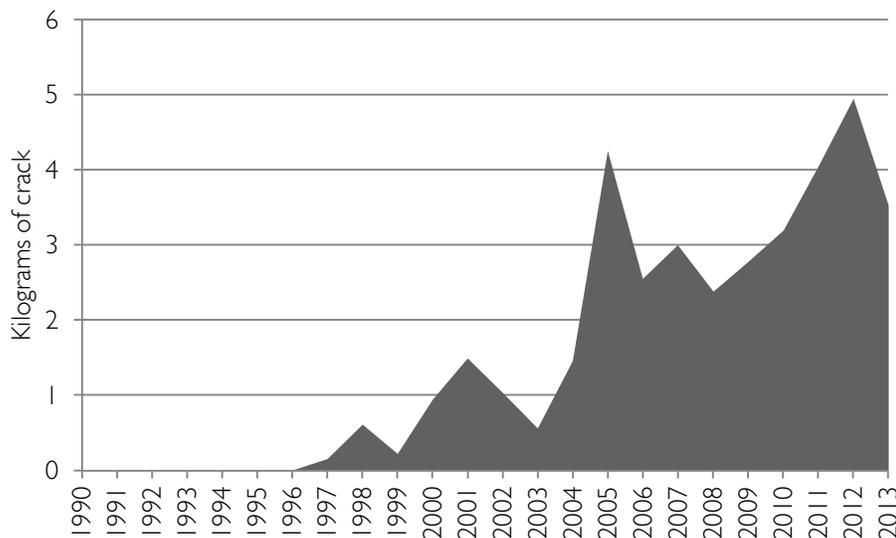
Alcohol and marijuana are the most frequently used drugs in the study areas, with crack and sniffing glue also being abused in some pockets. All 20 focus groups reported that drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana are the most common and

¹⁴ Officially, El Guasaule had 396,321 registered crossings and Peñas Blancas had 762,744 registered crossings (Alvarado Perez 2014).

¹⁵ "La policía participa en actos delincuenciales en lugar de intervenir a favor de la ciudadanía. Hay muchos policías corruptos y si ellos participan en estos actos, ellos no le instalan seguridad a la gente."

problematic forms of drug consumption. In all study areas, it is reported that alcohol consumption is commonly abused. Sniffing glue and smoking crack were reported in two of the more insecure municipalities, Somoto and Waspam, but it is probably occurring in other municipalities as well. Figure 19 shows that crack is a relatively new presence in Nicaragua. Cocaine is not commonly consumed despite it being the predominant drug that is transported through the country. It was mentioned that high cocaine prices limited its consumption. In Bluefields, a youth succinctly described the effects that drugs have on violence, “People don’t rob for food, they rob to buy drugs.”¹⁶ He went on to say, “people now sell it through whatsapp.”¹⁷

Figure 19: Crack seizures in Nicaragua. Source: Author's rendering based on Policia Nacional (2013).



Marijuana use has become commonplace in Nicaragua. This drug is grown in Honduras and smuggled across one of the hundreds of “blind spot” border crossings in the North (see Box 2). In rural areas of Somotillo, it is reported that marijuana is grown in plain sight and even used occasionally to trade for legal items. One youth in rural Somotillo said, “Marijuana has been normalized. Now it’s just another crop.”¹⁸ Several other focus groups said that marijuana has become so prevalent that people treat it as if it were legal, which it is not. Youth in Somotillo said police rarely treat marijuana use, or even cultivation, as a crime.

Youth risk from drugs: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – moderate. As described above, violence is associated with drug trafficking. However, drugs are typically only transported through Nicaragua, which has not seen the levels of drug-related violence as other countries in the region. If trafficking is ever shifted to Nicaragua, youth risk from drugs will almost certainly increase. As far as consumption, alcohol and marijuana are being abused by delinquent youth throughout the country, but the abuse of more highly addictive drugs like cocaine or heroine is limited. The increased presence of crack is worrisome and should be monitored.

¹⁶ “la gente no roba para comprar un frito, la gente roba para comprar más droga.”

¹⁷ “Ahora hasta por whatsapp se venden.”

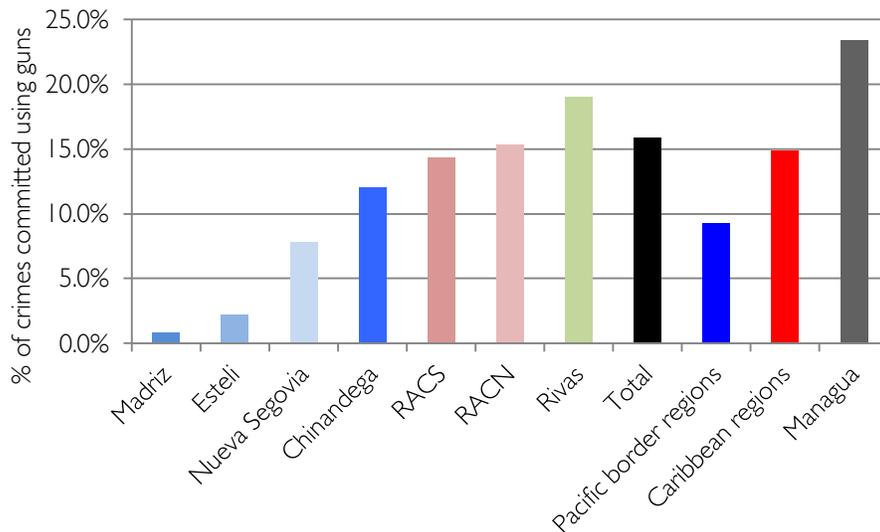
¹⁸ “La marihuana se había normalizado. Ahora ya es un cultivo más que todo.”

Weapons

Nicaragua has a lot of guns. The Sandinista war produced 91,000 ex combatants, most of whom had guns. Only 17,000 guns were decommissioned in the post-war years (Alvarado Perez, 2013). This means there are at least 70,000 guns that are unaccounted for. Estimates suggest there are approximately 345,000 guns in civilian hands in Nicaragua (Karp, 2008; Arias Foundation, 2005). This means there are seven guns for every 100 people, which is the second highest rate in Central America. The government alone has approximately 35 guns per active soldier, by far the highest rate in Central America (Alvarado Perez, 2013).

Guns are rarely used for crime. In Nicaragua, the percentage of homicides committed by guns was only 51 percent. This is lower than every country in Central America other than Belize; in Guatemala, the rate is 84 percent, 82 percent in Honduras, 79 percent in Panama, and 73 percent in El Salvador (Alvarado Perez, 2013). In Nicaragua, only 34 percent of violent crimes are committed using a gun. In fact, over half of these acts were committed in Managua; in 2013, 1,240 of the 2,135 violent acts committed using guns occurred in Managua. If Managua is excluded, only 11 percent of violent crimes in Nicaragua are committed using a gun. Figure 20 shows the percentage of violent crimes committed using guns within the study departments. In Madriz, less than one percent (0.8%) of crimes are committed using guns. In Estelí, it is just over two percent (2.2%). Even in the Caribbean regions, where rates of crime and violence are higher, less than 15 percent of violent crimes involve a gun (Policia Nacional, 2013). These rates are astonishingly low.

Figure 20: Percentage of crimes in Nicaragua committed using a gun. Source: Author's computation using data from Policia Nacional (2013).



Focus groups show that youth possess many weapons, simply not guns. In every municipality where focus groups took place, respondents said that *armas blancas*, homemade weapons, are prevalent. These include: knives, stones, sticks, and machetes. In Somoto (Madriz) for example, there is no evidence of guns, but the police say that nearly every at-risk youth has a knife or some other *arma blanca*. The same can be said of the other study municipalities. However, a lack of guns in the possession of criminals does not necessarily mean a lack of violence. In the Caribbean regions, murder rates are very high (over 30 per 100,000 inhabitants), but most of these crimes are committed without the use of guns. Of the 20 focus group discussions, only the Afro-descendant

focus group in Bluefields reported youth having access to guns. Generally, in Nicaragua, the guns that exist are legally in the hands of adults for security, not delinquent youth.

There are several reasons for the lack of gun violence. First, the national police have a good record on gun control. In 2012, 5170 guns were confiscated (Vanegas, 2014b), which is slightly more than in El Salvador and twice as many as in Honduras, two countries plagued by gun violence. Second, guns are expensive and youth prone to committing violent acts simply do not have the resources to purchase one. Third, there seems to be a cultural element where Nicaraguans do not want guns falling into the wrong hands. Almost every Nicaraguan over 50 years old was involved in some way or another in the Sandinista war, but interviews suggest these weapons are not in circulation; they have either been destroyed or hidden by their owners. For example, the northern border regions of Nueva Segovia and Estelí saw the fiercest battles of the war, followed by Madriz, Rivas, Chinandega, and Matagalpa (Cuevas and Demombynes, 2009). Yet, in 2013, only 9.3 percent of violent crimes in these areas involved a gun.

Youth risk from weapons: Caribbean regions – low, Pacific border regions – low. Nicaraguan youth are generally not in possession of guns. Homemade weapons and other armas blancas, which are prevalent, are dangerous but do not enhance youth risk such as cheap, readily available firearms.

Community divisiveness

Community cohesion has been shown to reduce youth delinquency. Sampson and others (1997), in a survey of over 8,000 residents in nearly 350 Chicago neighborhoods, show that social cohesion among neighbors, combined with a willingness to intervene for the common good, is linked to reduced violence. Reaching this level of community cohesion is difficult, especially when risk factors like gangs, migration, and interfamilial violence tear at the social fabric.

Unfortunately, focus group participants feel that community cohesion has lessened in recent years. In 13 of 20 focus groups, it was believed that community cohesion has declined. Only three focus groups felt their communities have seen greater cohesion; two of these three communities were rural. In Somotillo, one respondent said, “In urban areas, the sense of community doesn’t exist like in rural areas. There exists selfishness and envy which have eroded interpersonal relationships among the people.”¹⁹ In Bluefields, a descendant of African descent complained that community cohesion does not exist, “Today, everyone is fending for themselves. Among us creoles, we’ll eat each other. There’s no unity here.”²⁰ Another Somotillo rural youth disagreed, “Everyday there is more community cohesion. There are many organizations, such as the Citizen Power Councils (CPCs) that try to improve the community and reduce violence. Through them we can make demands and people and the police listen”²¹ (see Box 4 on CPCs).

Gangs

Youth gangs exist in Nicaragua. The most recent figures estimate there are about 4,500 gang members in 268 gangs in Nicaragua (Serrano-Berthet and Lopez, 2011). This is lower than in

¹⁹ “En las áreas urbanas no existe ese sentimiento de comunidad que existe en las áreas rurales. Existe mucho egoísmo y envidia, lo que ha erosionado las relaciones interpersonales entre los habitantes.”

²⁰ “Cada quien en la actualidad está jalando por su lado, hasta dentro de los propios creoles se comen los unos a los otros, no hay unión ahí.”

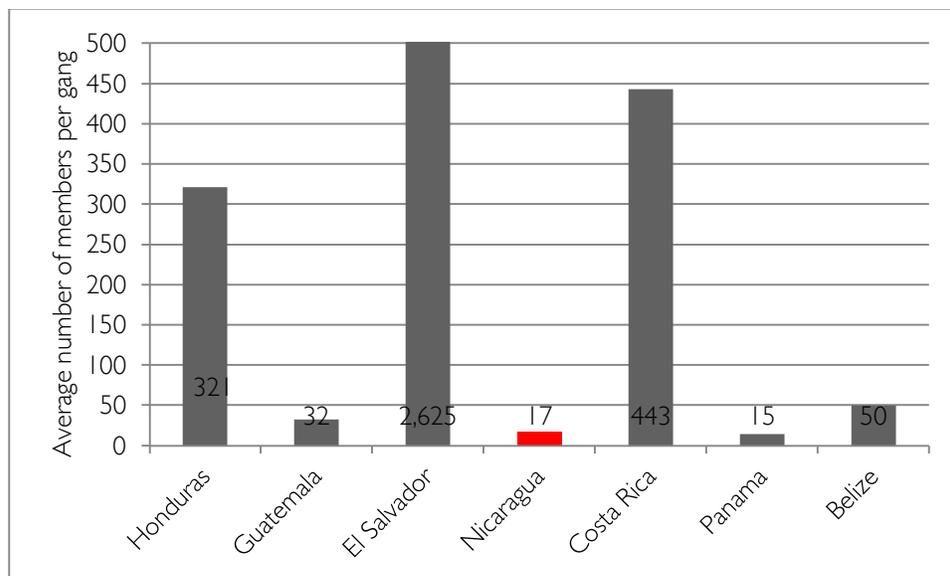
²¹ “Hoy por hoy, existe mayor unidad comunitaria. Existen varias organizaciones nuevas, como CPCs que buscan lo mejor para la comunidad y reducir la violencia. Han ayudado por que a través de ellos se hacen demandas. La gente los escucha mas, y así llegan las denuncias a la policía”

1999, when USAID (2006) estimated there were 8,500 gang members in Managua alone. However, it is higher than the national estimates of 2,614 gang members in 2004 and 2,201 gang members in 2005 (USAID, 2006). In 2005, gangs were responsible for just 0.57 percent of criminal activity in Nicaragua (USAID, 2006). There are no current statistics on present day gang membership or their impacts on criminality. However, focus group discussions in all nine of the study sites reveal that gangs, sometimes referred to as “groups of delinquent youth” exist in their communities. Police often claim there are no gangs in Nicaragua, but what they mean is there is nothing like the maras that exist in the Northern Triangle (Box 3).

Gangs in Nicaragua are less violent than gangs in neighboring countries. The gangs in the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are much more violent than those in Nicaragua. The murder rate in 2012 per 100,000 inhabitants was 90.4 in Honduras (the highest in the world), 39.9 in Guatemala, and 41.2 in El Salvador, but only 11.3 in Nicaragua (UNODC, 2013). Much of this violence was driven by gangs.

Gangs in the Northern Triangle are larger and better organized than those in Nicaragua. Figure 21²² shows that in Honduras average gang size is 321 members and 2,625 members in El Salvador. Moreover, these gangs are involved in organized criminal activities like extortion and drug trafficking (Dudley, 2014). In Nicaragua, gangs are much smaller – only 17 members per gang on average – and territorial in nature (USAID, 2006). There is little evidence that they are involved in organized crime.

Figure 21: The average number of gang members per gang in Central American countries. Source: Author's computation based on Serrano-Berthet and Lopez (2011).



Focus groups and interviews in the nine municipalities support the view that Nicaraguan gangs are small and unorganized. According to interviews with Nicaraguan police officials, “There are no gangs

²² Guatemala has the second highest total amount of gang members in Central America (14,000) but also the highest number of gangs (434). Meaning there are only 32 members per gang, on average. (Serrano-Berthet and Lopez (2011) citing the Central American and Caribbean Commission of Police Chiefs). The high amount of ethnic diversity in Guatemala possibly contributes to the large number of gangs.

in Nicaragua, just small groups of juveniles.”²³ While this may be idealized, there is some truth to it. As one interviewee summed it up, “Nicaraguan gangs are lost youth who hang out on corners consuming drugs and engaging in petty crime with homemade weapons.”²⁴ Drugs and weapons are certainly a part of gang culture, but the drugs are usually consumed (alcohol, marijuana, glue sniffing, and some crack) not trafficked, and weapons are usually knives or stones not guns.

Focus group discussants believe there are many different reasons for youth to join gangs. In Estelí, one youth opined, “If you don’t want to be attacked in the barrio, you have to join a gang. We protect ourselves with our brothers from the barrio because the police don’t provide any security.”²⁵ In Siuna, a female youth said, “We know lots of youth who don’t work or study, and from that comes delinquency.”²⁶ In Puerto Cabezas, a student explained, “Some gang members have told me they joined gangs because they feel the gang protects them, listens to them, and understands them. Nonetheless, at home they are ignored and humiliated.”²⁷ Another youth from the Caribbean linked gangs to drug dealers, “The majority of youth involved in gangs are the children of drug traffickers or drug dealers.”²⁸

Gang activity in the study sites has not consistently increased or decreased over the last five years. In the departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia, gang activity has generally declined. Both the cities of Estelí and Ocotal have seen reduced gang activity. Meanwhile, Somoto has seen an uptick in gang activity (see Box 3). Somotillo and Cardenas did not report the presence of gangs or delinquent groups. Focus groups in the Caribbean region show a general belief that youth gang activity is getting worse. In Bluefields, Waspam, and Puerto Cabezas people believe that youth are increasingly involving themselves in gangs. According to LAPOP (2014), 58 percent of coastal communities believe that gang activity is increasing.

²³ “No hay pandillas, solo grupos juveniles.”

²⁴ Informant interview in Somoto.

²⁵ “Si no quieres que te golpeen en el barrio tienes que ser de la pandilla o tienes que ir con los brothers al barrio de la novia para que te cuiden. Nos protegemos mutuamente porque la policía no da la seguridad que queremos.”

²⁶ “Sabemos de muchos jóvenes que no estudian o trabajan y desde ahí viene la delincuencia.”

²⁷ “Algunos adolescentes que están unidos a los grupos delincuenciales me han expresado que ellos se unen a la pandilla porque se sienten más seguros, sienten que son escuchados y comprendidos por sus amigos; que en cambio en sus casas los ignoran, humillan y hasta lo corren de sus casas.”

²⁸ “La mayoría de los jóvenes que están involucrados en las pandillas son hijos de personas narcotraficantes, de expendedores de drogas.”

Box 3: Somoto: If it walks like a mara and talks like a mara, what is it?

“There are no gangs in Nicaragua.”

These were the words of the police captain in Somoto. What she really meant was there are no Maras. Mara is short for Mara Salvatrucha, and used in reference to the violent youth gangs that are terrorizing Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The two best-known Maras are the Mara Salvatrucha 13, or MS-13, and the 18th street gang (Barrio 18), or M18. Both gangs were formed in Los Angeles (LA) in an attempt to protect themselves within LA’s violent gang culture. The MS-13 was formed mainly by Salvadorian immigrants in the Pico-Union neighborhood and the M18 by Mexican immigrants in the 18th Street area of LA’s Rampart District. Both soon expanded to include members from all Central American countries. Very few Nicaraguans, who were largely in Florida, not LA, were members of these LA gangs. Many of the MS-13 and M18 gang members were convicted of crimes and, when their sentences completed, deported back to their home countries, mainly Honduras and El Salvador. They brought their violent gang culture with them and as a consequence Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are among the most dangerous countries in the world. However, these gangs have not infiltrated Nicaragua. Or have they?

In the streets of Somoto, near Nicaragua’s northern border with Honduras, there are ubiquitous graffiti tags of “MS-13” on street signs and building walls. Youth in Somoto often use Salvadorian MS slang, and even wear iconic MS-13-inspired tattoos. Yet, these are not Maras from El Salvador; these are members of local Nicaraguan youth gangs. These youth represent their barrios and clash with other local gangs over territory. They are not involved in the international drug trade, but do consume their share of crack, alcohol, sniffing glue, and marijuana. These youth do not carry firearms, which are expensive and difficult to find in Nicaragua. Every one of them carries a knife or some other *arma blanca*. These youth gangs are involved in theft, assault, robbery, and the occasional murder. There is even evidence of extortion, with some neighborhood gangs charging taxi drivers to enter their communities. The menace from these youth gangs has gotten so bad that a local street festival had to be cancelled for concerns over public safety.

William Aragon, a local journalist, says that many of these youth had travelled to Honduras and El Salvador for seasonal agricultural work, but ended up meeting and learning from real Maras. Despite Somoto youth gangs claiming to be Maras, MS-13, and M18, the linkages are more ideological than real. Aragon explains, “Nicaraguan youth gangs are territorial in nature and would never let non-local gangs into the city. Also, the local CPCs would call the police if they saw any Maras from Honduras. But, (the CPCs) won’t call the police on their own children.” A member of the Somoto police elaborated, “These are local youth who watch TV and copy what they see from the Maras up north (in the Northern Triangle) because they think its cool.” A focus group youth described the dynamic similarly: “Today, there are children from very young ages who look up to and model themselves after gangsters or Maras in El Salvador or other countries.”²⁹ The question emerges, with a deteriorating gang situation in Somoto, at what point do “copycat” Maras become real Maras?

Youth risk from gangs: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – moderate. Despite police claims, there are gangs in Nicaragua. Yet, they are smaller, less violent, less organized, and less heavily armed than their counterparts in the Northern Triangle. The

²⁹ “Hoy en día existen niños que desde pequeños identifican a sus modelos a seguir como pandilleros o mareros de El Salvador u otros países.”

ideological influence of the Maras on these Nicaraguan youth groups is troubling and should be monitored.

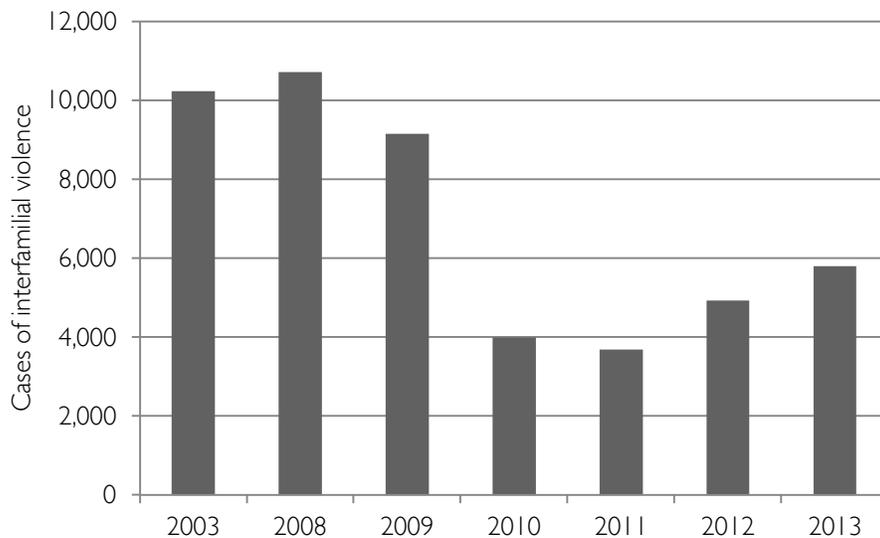
Interfamilial violence

Violence inside the home can contribute to violence outside the home.

Interfamilial violence can have long-term psychological and sociological impacts on youth. Hotelling and others (1989) show a link between physical assaults in the family and assaults and other crimes outside the family. Both adult and child victims of interfamilial violence are more likely than non-victims to perpetrate assaults and other aggression outside the family.

Focus groups and interviews suggest that violence within the home is prevalent and increasing the risk of youth. It is difficult to comprehend the scope of the problem since it is often underreported. It is also very difficult to measure whether certain areas are more or less afflicted by interfamilial violence. Nicaraguans tend to believe it is an issue taken less seriously than it should. One respondent from Estelí said, “If there is a problem, the neighbors will come and help, but if there is interfamilial violence they won’t get involved.”³⁰ According to national police statistics (Policia Nacional, 2013), the occurrence of interfamilial violence has decreased over the past ten years (Figure 22). Again, this is hard to verify given non-standardized enforcement patterns, the inconsistent nature of reporting and responding, and the changing classifications of what constitutes interfamilial violence.

Figure 22: Cases of interfamilial violence in Nicaragua, 2003-2013. Source: Author’s compilations based on National Police statistics (Policia Nacional 2003, 2009, 2011, and 2013).



Focus group discussants feel they are better informed now than they were five years ago about the dangers of interfamilial violence. All 20 focus groups agreed that interfamilial violence existed in their communities and was a problem. This awareness likely reflects the many grassroots community efforts that have worked to improve the situation of

³⁰ “Si hay un problema los vecinos se mueven y ayudan, pero si se trata de violencia intrafamiliar no se meten, hay resistencia.”

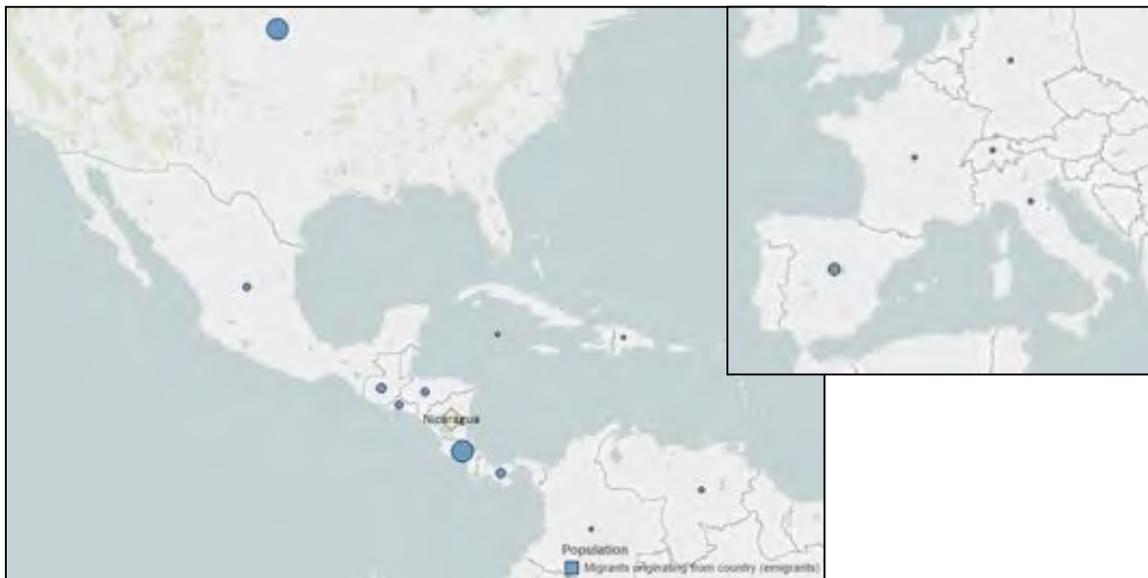
women and families in Nicaragua. Much work must still be done, as at least one rural male from Mozonte stated, “If you allow a bit more ‘traditional parenting’ (physical abuse) there would be less violence.”³¹ An indigenous woman in Mozonte agreed, “Parents need to be able to punish their kids but the Code on Children and Adolescents [a national law that forbids child abuse] and other laws prohibit it. The youth need more discipline from their parents.”³²

Youth risk from interfamilial violence: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – high. Efforts to measure the scope of interfamilial violence are difficult, but focus group discussions reveal it is pervasive. Given the broad scope of this problem, it represents a high risk to youth in both regions. This is because many youth (probably most) who engage in delinquency come from broken and abusive homes.

Migration

Nicaragua is a net emigrating country, meaning that more people are leaving than coming. In 2012, there was an estimated net exodus of 120,000 migrants from Nicaragua (WDI, 2015). As Figure 23 shows, the majority of emigrants settle in Costa Rica and the United States, but many also travel to Spain. Costa Rican authorities say that 287,766 Nicaraguans lived in Costa Rica in 2013, but also say this figure could be as high as 400,000, if illegal immigrants are taken into account (Dyer 2014). According the 2011 US census, there are 395,000 people from Nicaragua living in the United States (Dyer 2014).

Figure 23: Map of primary destinations of Nicaraguan migrants. A larger dot corresponds with a larger immigrant population. Source: Images downloaded from MPI (2015).



Emigration can tear at a community’s social fabric. In most countries, it is the men who migrate (Ashwill and Blomqvist, et al. 2011). However, in many parts of the north Pacific border regions, it is the women who are migrating to find work. They are usually going to Spain. Between 2006 and 2013, it is estimated that 50,000 Nicaraguans migrated to Spain, with 80 percent

³¹ “Si se diera un poquito de permiso a la educación antigua (golpear a los chavalos) sería menos la violencia.”

³² “Los padres deben castigar a los hijos, aunque el código de niñez y adolescencia y el código de la familia y otras leyes lo prohíben. Hay jóvenes que necesitan más rigor de los padres.”

of these migrants being women (Navarro, 2013). The reason for this gender imbalance is that service sector jobs are available to women, with available communal housing that is not open to men. In Nicaraguan families where the mother has left, men do not usually assume the role of caretaker; instead they pass the children on to other female family members. Focus groups show that this has a deleterious effect on the social fabric of communities by breaking up families and leaving the children with less parental guidance. One focus group discussant explains, “The majority of the children of the women who migrated are left with aunts and grandmothers. As a result, these youth find refuge in gangs. Slowly, they begin to see the gang as their family and their family begins to see these youth as their enemy.”³³

Immigration can negatively impact community cohesion. According to some indigenous discussants from Mozonte and Waspam, the immigration of nonlocals can lead to conflict. One indigenous Mozonte woman explained, “Community leaders have been given permission to sell communal land even though national laws forbid this. Nonlocals buy the land and come, which affects community cohesion.”³⁴ A similar dynamic occurred in Waspam where settler and land tenure issues led to violence (see Box 1).

Human trafficking is perceived as a problem in the Pacific border regions.

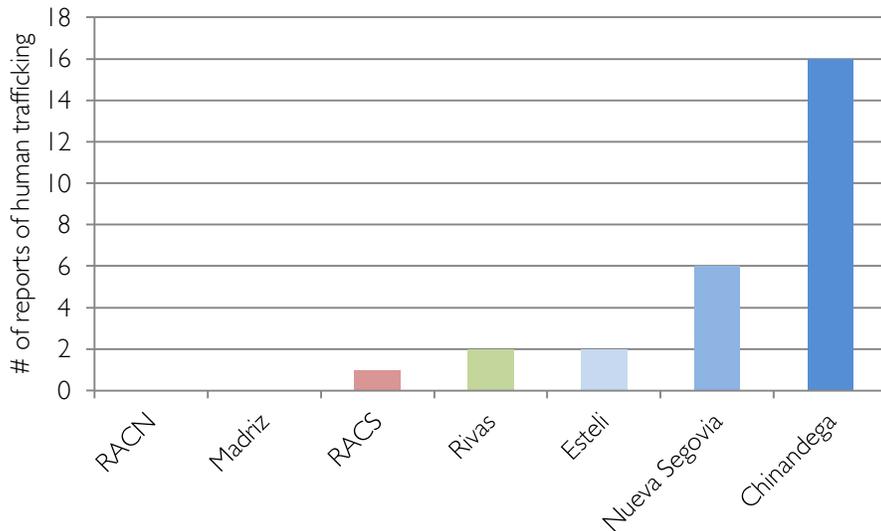
Human trafficking is an extreme form of human mobility, and evidence of its occurrence in Nicaragua has been limited. Figure 24 shows that in 2012 and 2013, the Pacific border regions had a much greater incidence of human trafficking than the Caribbean regions. Chinandega had by far the most cases of human trafficking (16). A young woman in Somoto described her vulnerability, “We, as girls, don’t have access to employment so we may be influenced by people who want to take advantage of this and trick us and take us to other countries to do other things. We are more vulnerable to that in this area (close to the border).”³⁵

³³ “Ahorita la mayoría de chavalas sus papas han migrado y han quedado a cargo de una tía o abuelos, entonces ellos (hijos e hijas) se refugian en grupos juveniles, poco a poco se van integrando y ellos empiezan a ver a estos grupos como su familia y su familia los ve a ellos como enemigos.”

³⁴ “los líderes comunitarios han estado dando permisos para venderlos los terrenos comunales cuando estos según las leyes nacionales de pueblos indígenas no pueden ser habitados por otras personas que no son de las comunidades indígenas. Es decir la migración y la llegada de foráneos a sus tierras afecta la cohesión comunitaria.”

³⁵ “Nosotras como chavalas que no tenemos acceso a empleo nos dejamos llevar por otras personas que se vienen aprovechar de esto de que no tenemos empleo y estamos en esta situación para venimos a engañar y llevamos a otros países a hacer otras cosas. Estamos más vulnerables en esta zona de aquí.”

Figure 24: Reported cases of human trafficking in study regions, 2012 and 2013. Source: author's rendering based on Policia Nacional (2013).



Youth risk from migration: Caribbean regions – moderate, Pacific border regions – low.

Migration is not always negative. It is also an important livelihood strategy that can be a positive community influence by adding diversity, new knowledge, and new resources. As has been described above, it can also have some negative impacts on community cohesion or be manifested in the unfortunate incidents of human trafficking. However, cases of human trafficking are not prevalent, according to police statistics, and seem to be isolated to certain communities in the north (Figure 24). For this reason, migration does not merit a more severe risk rating and, when weighed against its benefits, does not pose a significant risk to youth. The risk in the Caribbean region is deemed moderate because of the recent violence associated with settler migration to Miskitu lands in the RACCN. Still, given the isolation of many areas of the Caribbean, migration is also an important strategy for youth to pursue work or education.

Box 4: Estelí: Reduction of gangs and the role of CPCs

Ten years ago, Estelí had the second biggest gang problem in Nicaragua behind only Managua. According to Rocha (2006), 24 percent of the country's gangs and 19 percent of the country's gang members were in Estelí. It was a problem that was apparent to the city's 200,000 plus residents. Now, in 2015, the presence of gangs is greatly reduced.

One woman who has worked with youth in Estelí for twenty years commented, "The gangs are gone. There are still groups of delinquent youth, but the gangs we had ten years ago are gone." Focus group discussions corroborated this sentiment. The gangs in Estelí are gone, or greatly reduced, but why?

There are several possible explanations. First, Estelí has seen recent economic growth. With decreased poverty levels, there is a reduced risk of youth violence (Collier et al., 2002). Secondly, Estelí has plenty of local job opportunities for young people at nearby large tobacco factories. Joblessness is another youth violence risk factor (Cincotta et al., 2003). Thirdly, Estelí has had good municipal leadership in recent years. Lastly, there are more alternative activities for youth in Estelí today than there were a decade ago, like sports and dance.

Many focus group participants pointed to the increased involvement of Consejos del Poder Ciudadano (CPCs), or Citizen Power Councils (also known as Gabinetes de la Familia, la Comunidad y la Vida), as a principal reason gangs have disappeared.

In 2007, Daniel Ortega's FSLN developed CPCs as a mechanism for local participatory budgeting. CPCs are ostensibly local affiliates of the Sandinista party that have the power to decide government expenditures at the local level. Opponents say the CPCs are mechanisms of political patronage channeling funds to the FSLN or a model of exclusionary development promoting party loyalty (McKinnley Jr., 2008).

Focus group discussants were divided on the issue. In Estelí, one remarked, "There is more community cohesion because community leaders and the CPCs have fought for more unity in the neighborhoods. It's not only from police interventions."³⁶ Another respondent said the CPCs helped with "community policing" and that "the neighborhood is now organized and focused on the issues that affect it."³⁷ Some disagreed, one youth remarked, "Yes, they have united the community with the creation of the CPCs, but not for the common good, just for the good of the party."³⁸ In Somoto, a woman described the inclusiveness of CPCs there, "People who don't belong to the Sandinista party are not invited to the meetings because (the CPCs) don't want us to be critical."³⁹

CPCs are designed to exist in every neighborhood of the country. According to Almendarez (2009), between 4.6 percent and 7 percent of the national electorate is involved in CPCs and 81 percent of these people are Sandinista. This is equivalent to about a half a million community volunteers (NPR, 2014). Perceptions of the CPCs are largely divided among party lines. Sixty-five percent of Sandinistas believe that CPCs should "represent society," while 67 percent of the

³⁶ "Hay más cohesión comunitaria porque los líderes comunitarios y los CPC han luchado para que haya más unión en los barrios, es decir no sólo la policía interviene."

³⁷ "El barrio está organizado y están preocupados por lo que les afecta."

³⁸ "se ha unido la comunidad con la creación de los CPC, pero con un sentido partidario no de bienestar común."

³⁹ "A las personas que no son sandinistas no las invitan a las reuniones porque creen que van a llegar a criticarles."

opposition believe that “independent organizations” should replace the CPCs.

In the case of Estelí, the CPCs seem to be a valuable vehicle for communal policing. CPC representatives work closely with the police to identify problematic areas for gang activity. Community patrols, organized by the CPCs, are quick to report violent or suspicious activity to the police. Also, through CPC coordination, the police have been able to intervene and provide alternate activities for youth in those areas. For example, police have organized soccer matches with rival gang members and used those occasions to mediate among the gangs.

Whether or not CPCs were designed as participatory structures to empower local communities or exclusionary models to maintain party support and political patronage, they have become valuable in reducing violence in certain corners of Nicaragua, like Estelí.

Crime and violence

Crime and violence contributes to youth delinquency. Not only is crime and violence a consequence of the other risk factors, but also it is a risk factor in itself. A youth who engages in crime and violence is much more likely to get caught up in a cycle of violence and delinquency than a youth who is not engaged in crime and violence. The HSRP (2011) highlights a history of violence as a contributor to violence. Fukuda-Parr and others (2008) argue that a history of violence is the single greatest predictor of future violence.

Crime and violence has generally fallen over the past several years in Nicaragua. Starting in approximately 2007, crime and violence in Nicaragua surged. Around this time, the number of police reports, robberies and instances of crimes against women were all at their highest. Since then, each of these indicators has fallen, and Nicaragua seems to be safer now. Homicide rates have consistently fallen since 2006, dropping from nearly 15 per 100,000 habitants to under ten. However, the Caribbean regions saw an increase in homicides since about 2008.

Generally, the Caribbean regions have higher crime rates than the Pacific border regions. Homicide rates in these regions have reached comparable levels to Guatemala and El Salvador. According to 2012 rates, there were 34 homicides per 100,000 in Nicaragua’s Caribbean regions (Policia Nacional, 2013), compared to about 40 per 100,000 in Guatemala and El Salvador (UNODC, 2013). The Caribbean regions also see more robberies, on average, than the rest of the country, if one excludes Managua. If one includes Managua, where robberies are frequent, national averages are similar to Caribbean averages. The Caribbean also has much more frequent crime against women, such as sexual crimes. None of this is surprising, given the greater prevalence of risk factors in the Caribbean regions. Police reports were higher nationally, especially in Rivas and Estelí, than in the Caribbean regions. This may reflect trust in the police and the legal system more than actual criminal activity. Refer to Figures 25, 26, and 27 for a closer look at these crime trends.

Figure 25: The number of police reports per 100,000 people at the national, regional, and departmental levels, 2006-2013. Source: Author's compilation using data from Policia Nacional (2013).

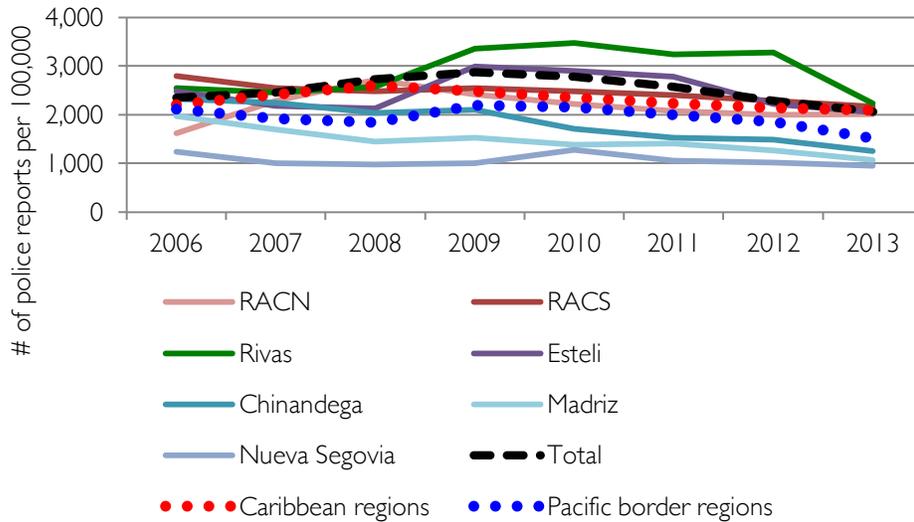


Figure 26: Number of reported robberies per 100,000 people at the national, regional, and departmental levels, 2006-2013. Source: Author's compilations using data from Policia Nacional (2013).

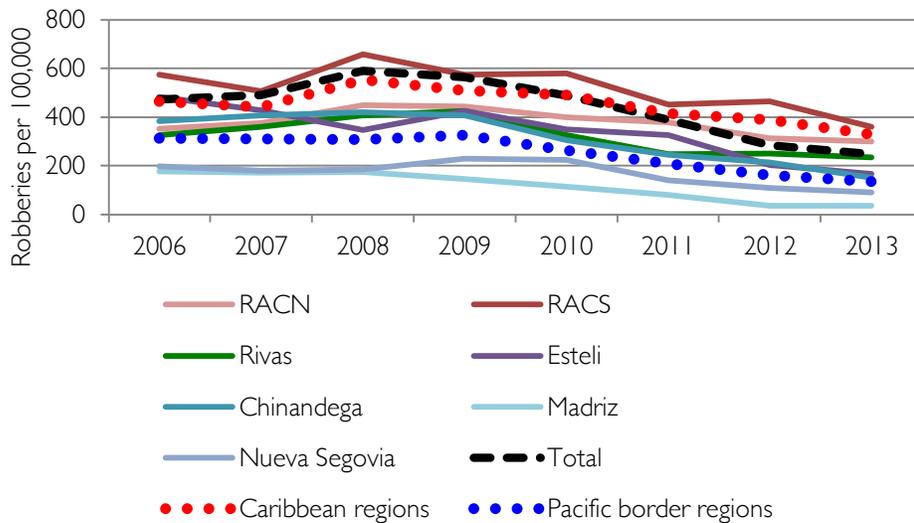
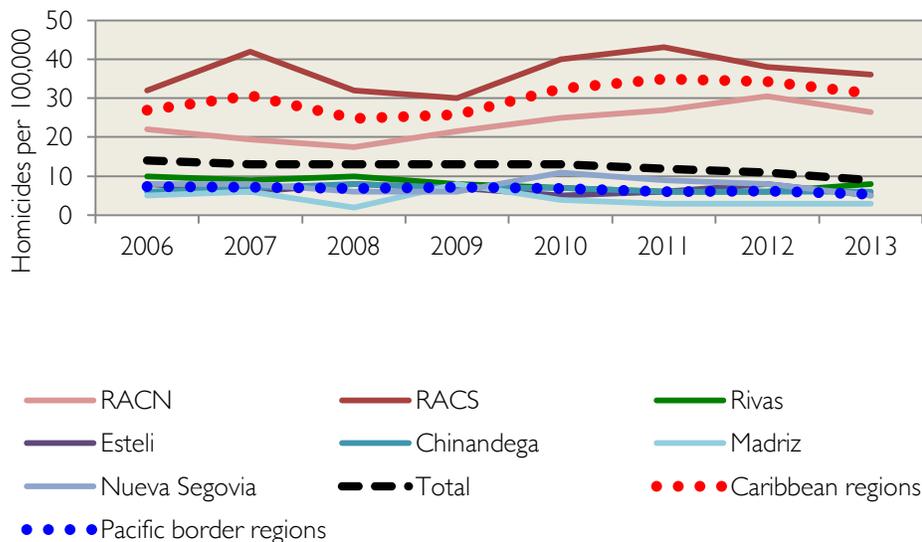


Figure 27: Number of homicides per 100,000 people at the national, regional, and departmental levels, 2006-2013. Source: Author's compilation using data from Policia Nacional (2013).



Nicaraguans believe the country is becoming less safe. Despite trends that show crime and violence decreasing across the country, 12 out of 19 focus group respondents believe the security situation is deteriorating. Only urban youth in Somotillo uniformly felt that the security situation had improved. In Bluefields, one focus group participant said “Three years ago, things were different. We didn’t see much violence. Now, every weekend there is a death, shooting, or machete attack.”⁴⁰ A female youth in Mozonte reiterated this sense of insecurity: “We don’t feel safe in our homes, in the street, in recreation centers, or anywhere because there are more youth consuming drugs. The streets aren’t safe, there is no lighting. People can rob your home. If you want to protest this, the police will repress you.”⁴¹ A woman in Siuna added “I don’t feel safe because everyday the delinquency gets worse. Before it was different. You would never hear about rapes, robberies, or killings.”⁴²

Violence against women

Statistics show that crimes against women are common and widespread.

About forty percent of the victims of crime in Nicaragua are women between the ages of 15 and 40. Overall, 54 percent of victims of crime are women (Figure 28). By contrast, 95 percent of the people detained for committing crimes are males 15 or older (Figure 29). This shows that women are more often the victims of crime despite not putting themselves at risk by engaging in criminal behavior. This suggests that women are targeted as victims at a rate higher than 54 percent. Moreover, women tend to be victims of a wider variety of crimes than males. Crimes such as verbal harassment are typically not reported and only affect women. A female youth in Estelí confirmed

⁴⁰ “Hace tres años las cosas eran muy diferente, no mirábamos mucha violencia pero ahora cada fin de semana hay un muerto, o baleado o macheteado.”

⁴¹ “No nos sentimos seguras ni en nuestras casas, ni en la calle, ni en los centros recreativos, ni en ningún lugar porque hay más jóvenes consumiendo drogas, las calles son inseguras, no hay alumbrado público, se meten a robar a las casas y no pasa nada, si quieres participar la policía reprime.”

⁴² “Me siento menos segura porque cada día avanza lo que es la delincuencia. Antes todo era diferente porque casi no se escuchaba en las noticias hablar sobre violación, robo y muertes.”

the difference in crimes committed against women: “If a woman walks down the street she thinks she could be assaulted, raped, or murdered, whereas the men only worry about being robbed.”⁴³

Figure 28: Percentages of victims by age and gender, 2013. Source: Author's compilation based on data from Policia Nacional (2013).

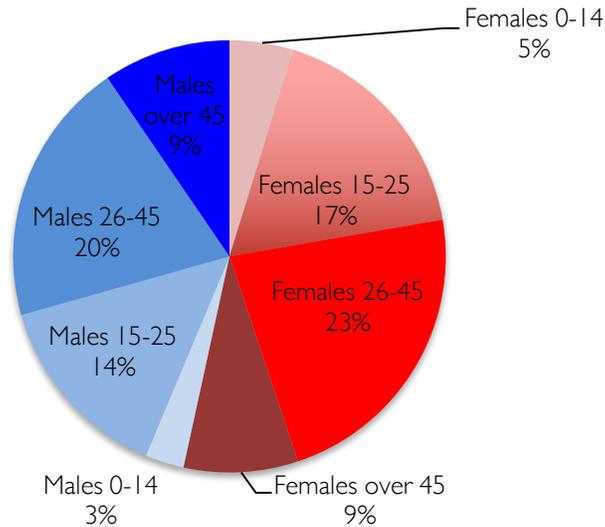
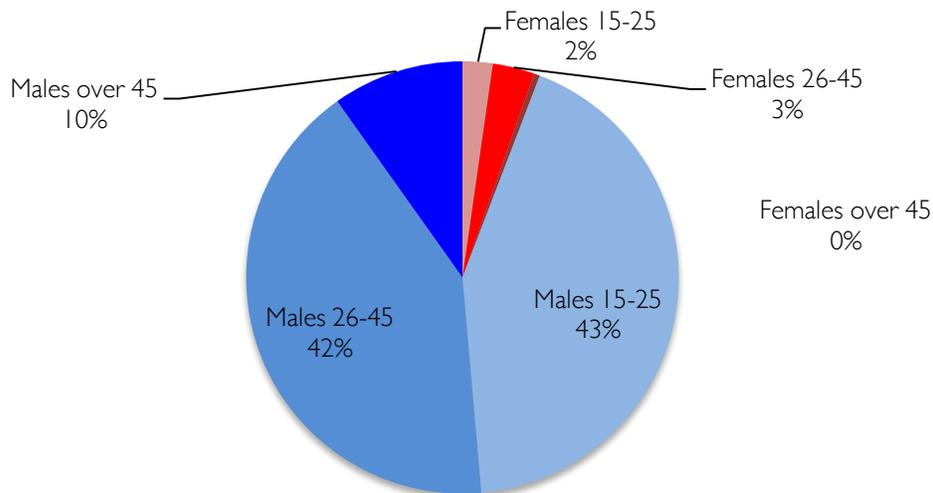


Figure 29: Percentage of people detained for crimes by age and gender, 2013. Source: Author's compilation using data from Policia Nacional (2013).

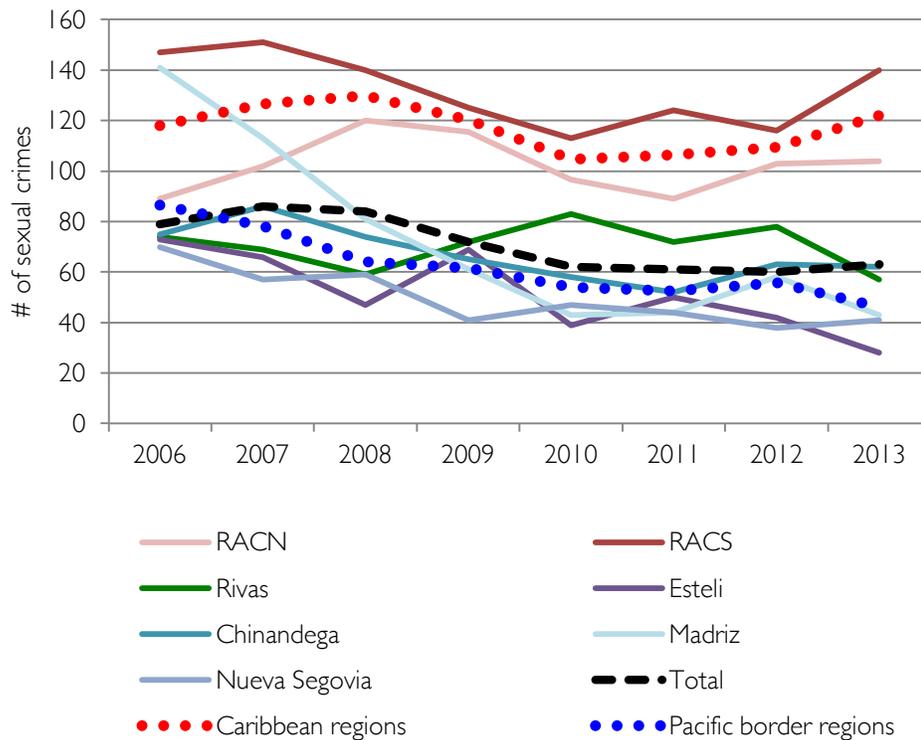


Trends in gender-related crimes are not consistent. Nationally, the number of instances of sexual crimes (Figure 30) and interfamilial violence (Figure 22) has declined since 2006. In the Pacific border regions, the occurrence of sexual crimes has consistently declined since 2006, with Madriz

⁴³ “Si vas por la calle piensas que te van asaltar, pero también a violar o matar, en cambio los hombres sólo piensan en que les van a robar.”

seeing drastic reductions. Sexual crimes in the Caribbean regions also fell, but have seen a resurgence since 2010.

Figure 30: Number of reported sexual crimes at the national, regional, and departmental levels, 2006-2013. Source: Author's compilations using data from Policia Nacional (2013).



Most focus group participants believe that gender-based violence is getting worse. Eighteen out of the 19 focus groups that responded to this question⁴⁴ believe that women are at greater risk of being victims of crime than men. Twelve focus groups out of 19 believe the situation has gotten worse for women over the last five years, despite some data to the contrary. However, it is well understood that gender-based violence is pervasive and under-reported.

Some focus group respondents felt the police do not respond to reports of gender-based violence like they do with other crimes. A male youth from Estelí said, “The police are interested in drugs and other crimes, not violence against women. If a woman is robbed in the street, the police will help because the same thing could happen to me. But if a woman suffers from domestic violence it’s her problem, because her husband certainly wouldn’t hit me.”⁴⁵ A woman in Somoto complained, “When I went to file a police report the police didn’t help me at all. They seem to listen to men more and give them greater priority.”⁴⁶ The only focus group that did not believe that women were more at-risk than men was that of Afro-descendants in Bluefields. This could be because they believe it is that much more dangerous for males (especially

⁴⁴ One focus group failed to discuss gender-based violence.

⁴⁵ “A la policía le interesa la droga y otros crímenes, no los relacionados con violencia a la mujer. Si le robaron a ella en la calle, me puede pasar a mí, por lo que le ayudo. Sin embargo, si ella sufre violencia domestica, es su problema, ya que su esposo seguramente no me va a golpear a mí.”

⁴⁶ “Cuando yo fui a denunciar no me hicieron caso, a los hombres como que los escuchan más y les dan más prioridad.”

black males in Bluefields) or it could reflect some sort of cultural reflection. Participants of this focus group remarked that women enjoy legal “advantages” over men because of Law 779, which provides some protection for women victims of domestic violence (Box 5).

Participants from all focus groups agree that awareness on gender issues has been raised for both men and women.

In Puerto Cabezas, a focus group participant said: “There are men who have become aware of these issues through workshops and educational presentations by some organizations that work on gender.”⁴⁷ The increased awareness may explain the disconnect between trends in gender-based violence and perceptions of it. It may not be that gender-based violence has increased, but people’s awareness of it has and they increasingly notice it more as a problem. Part of this greater awareness may have resulted from the decades-long struggle by women’s rights groups in Nicaragua to achieve greater protection for women.

Box 5: Reforming Law 779: A setback for women’s rights in Nicaragua

In June 2012, Nicaragua passed Law 779, which addresses violence against women. The Law aims to protect women victims of gender-based violence and create a mechanism for women to seek justice. The passage of this law was the result of a thirty-year struggle by women’s rights groups. These struggles began in the early years of the Sandinista government. According to Solis (2013), the “demand for a response to the violence against women appeared on the public stage in 1983-1984.”

Opponents of Law 779 complained that it tore families apart by criminalizing males. They claim that the law is unconstitutional by requiring males who are accused of gender-based violence to go before special judges, while women who commit gender-based violence go before a normal judge. In fact, there was a strong pushback against the law by the more conservative segments of Nicaraguan society, including the church. One Catholic bishop was quoted as saying “The new number of the beast is not 666, but 779” (Solis 2013). A Creole youth from the focus group in Bluefields said, “Men are in danger from women abusing law 779.”

Supporters of the law say it only exposes the ugliness of gender-based violence. Amnesty International said, “The violence perpetrated against women and children is what breaks up families, not legislation designed to help victims escape from violence and hold abusers to account” (Silva, 2013).

The law suffered a major setback in September 2013 when it was reformed in line with opponents’ demands. The law now requires mediation between the accuser and the accused. This is a setback for women’s rights by essentially requiring victims of abuse to negotiate with their abusers. Women’s rights groups say this reform has put women in greater danger by making it easier for the abuser to avoid conviction and seek retribution for a woman speaking out against violence. International human rights groups have condemned the reform.

Youth risk from crime and violence: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – moderate. Some parts of the Caribbean regions have murder rates on par with the violent Northern Triangle countries. In these regions there is limited policing (as the next section shows) and different forms of violence beyond traditional criminal violence, including domestic

⁴⁷ “Hay hombres que están sensibilizados mediante las consejerías, charlas educativas y talleres que imparten algunas organizaciones en el tema de género, igual de género como FADCANIC y CEDEHCA.”

violence, ethnic violence, political violence, and interfamilial violence. The Pacific border regions have lower levels of crime and violence and greater levels of policing. Still, opportunities for criminal activity, such as smuggling and trafficking, are frequent.

Weak Institutions

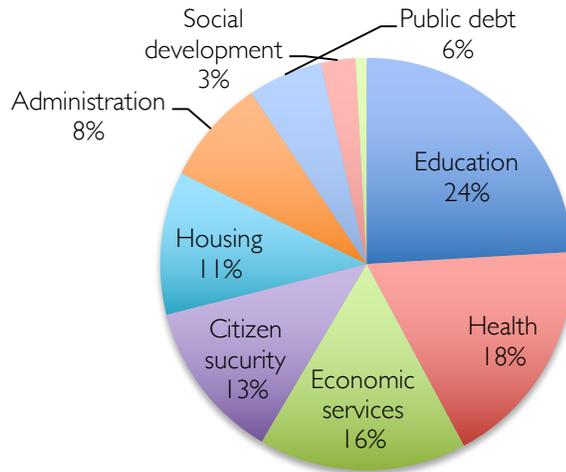
Strong institutions can mitigate youth risk factors, while weak institutions can exacerbate youth risk factors. Many studies have corroborated these linkages (see North, et al. 2009, Goldstone, et al. 2010, and Laitin 2011). An institution with adequate accountability (to ensure transparency and legitimacy) and capacity (both human and resource capacity) can help reduce each of the youth risk factors we have defined, including: socioeconomic pressures, inequality, environmental pressures, access to drugs and weapons, divided communities, and crime and violence. The 2011 World Development Report (WDR 2011: 86) says the linkage between institutions and risk factors “may be compared to the relationship between the human body’s immune system and disease. Weak institutions make a country vulnerable to violence, just as a weak immune system makes the body vulnerable to disease.”

To examine Nicaragua’s institutional capacity, we will examine four dimensions. First, we look at government spending as a reflection of resource capacity. Second, we see how this translates into institutional capacity by examining the institutional strength of the national police force as a case study. Third, we review the types of institutions that are working on youth issues in Nicaragua. Fourth, we look closely at Nicaragua’s legal framework surrounding youth issues.

Government spending

Nicaragua’s government spends over half of its budget on development. The Nicaraguan government’s 2015 annual budget is \$2.2 billion. Of this, \$1.3 billion, or 59 percent, goes toward poverty reduction measures (USAID and IEEPP, 2015). By sector, the largest share goes toward education expenditures, which is 24 percent of the total budget and directly benefits youth (Figure 31). The Ministry of Education channels 62 percent of these funds toward primary education, but only 19 percent toward secondary education. This gap helps explain why Nicaraguan primary school indicators are on par with other middle-income countries, but below average for secondary school (see education section above, Figure 8). Health and social development initiatives, which also benefit youth and the population as a whole receive 18 and three percent of the budget respectively. For social development, this equals only about \$60 million.

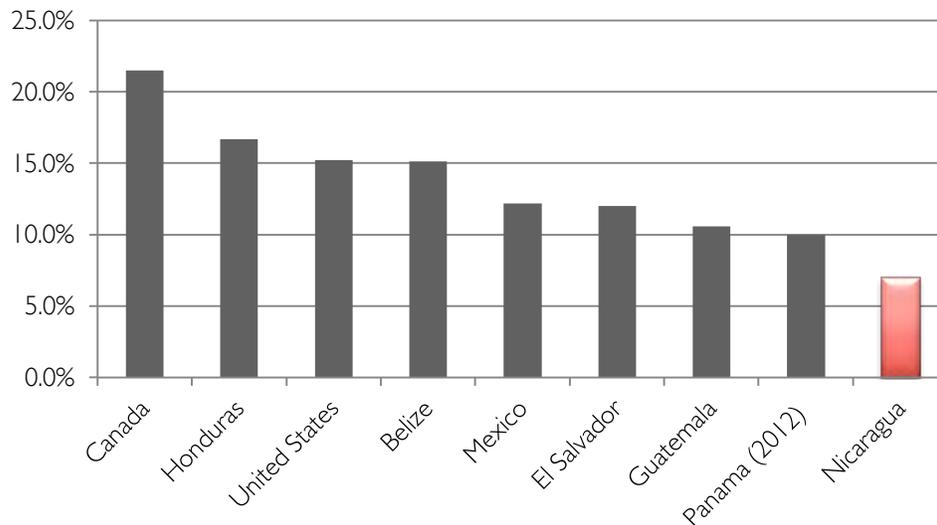
Figure 31: Government spending by sector, Nicaragua, 2015. Source: author's rendering using USAID and IIEPP (2015).



The Nicaraguan government spends very little on its population. In 2013, the Nicaraguan government's Final Consumption Expenditure (as a percentage of GDP) was only seven percent (WDI, 2015). This indicator estimates how much in goods and services a government provides to meet the needs of its population. The so-called "welfare states" of Northern Europe provide about a quarter of their GDP to these expenditures. In the Americas, only Canada and Cuba are above twenty percent. Nicaragua's government has the lowest final consumption expenditure in the Western Hemisphere and one of the lowest in the world (Figure 32). What makes this statistic even more extreme is that Nicaragua's GDP is already one of the lowest in the hemisphere, and thus a small percentage of a small GDP means Nicaragua's total per capita spending on its population is the lowest in the Americas (when controlling for population).⁴⁸ This is perhaps surprising given the government's claims to be socialist.

⁴⁸ Data exists for most countries in the region, but not Haiti or several of the West Indian countries.

Figure 32: The Nicaraguan government's final consumption expenditure as a percentage of GDP compared to select countries. Source: author's compilation using WDI (2015).



Case study: Nicaraguan police force

In order to understand the relative strength of state institutions, we take a closer look at Nicaragua's police force. The reason we use the police force as a case study is because of the availability of data. We also examine the police because of their prominent role in youth risk management. Besides being tasked with controlling crime, they are also a de facto youth development agency. The police force houses three important institutions related to protecting and empowering youth. These include: the Centro Juventud, the Comisaria de la Mujer y la Niñez, and the Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles. These are described in Table 2.

Nicaragua's police force is generally under-funded and under-staffed. Thirteen percent of the government's budget goes toward citizen security. Of this, 19 percent or \$80 million, goes to funding the national police force (see Figure 33). Bradford (2011) shows that the incidence of crime is correlated with the presence of police officers. This is especially true for property crimes. As Figure 34 shows, Nicaragua has fewer police officers per 100,000 citizens than comparable countries in Central and North America (Canada is the exception). On average, there are more officers per population in the Caribbean regions of Nicaragua than in the Pacific border regions.

Figure 33: Partitioning by percentage of the Nicaraguan government's citizen security budget by agency. Source: Author's rendering using data from USAID and IIEPP (2015).

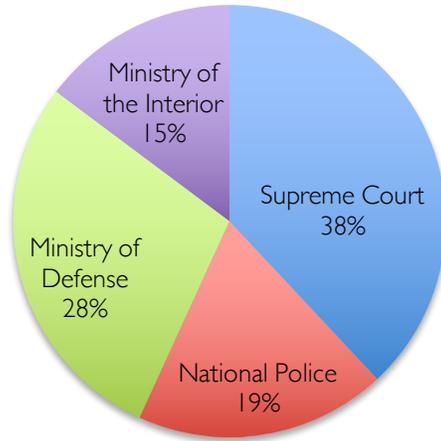
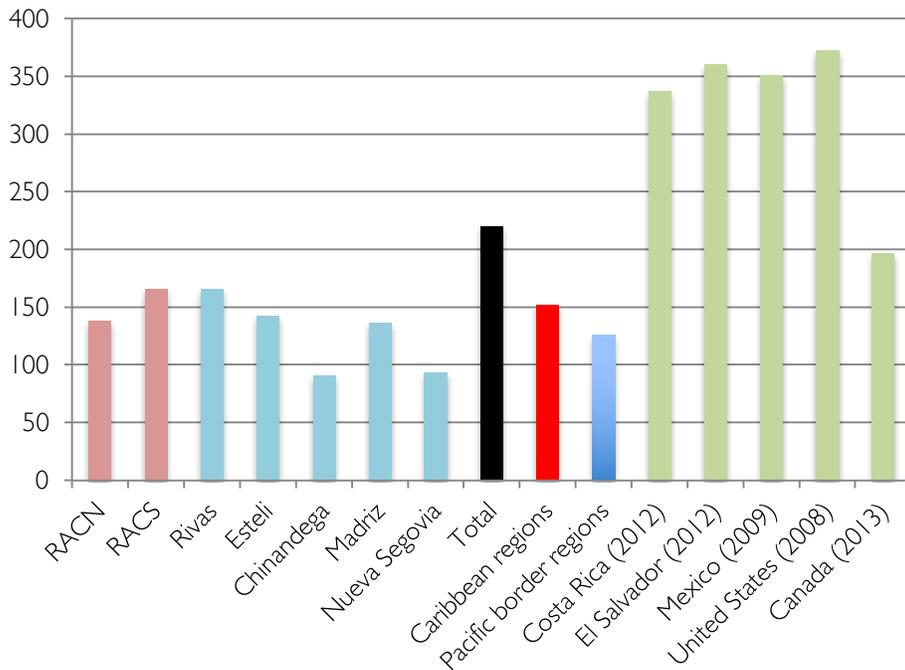
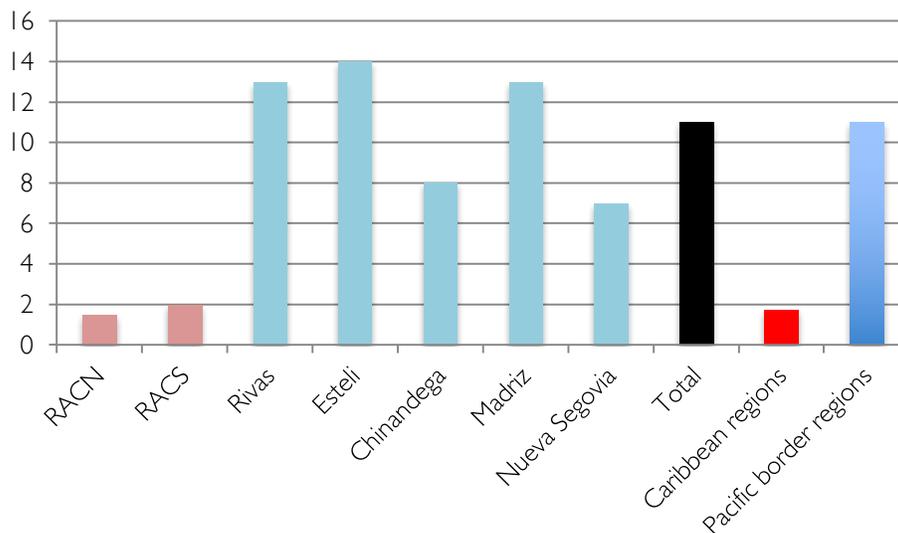


Figure 34: Number of police officers per 100,000 people at the international, national, regional, and departmental levels, 2013 (unless mentioned otherwise). Source: Author's compilation based on multiple sources, including Policia Nacional (2013), Reaves (2011), Sabet (2012), and COHA (2015).



The police have a sparse presence in vast areas of the Caribbean regions. As Figure 35 shows, the Caribbean regions average less than two officers per 100 square kilometers of land, whereas the Pacific border regions, and the country as a whole, average about 11 officers per 100 square kilometers. According to a survey by LAPOP (2015), on average, 21 percent of people in the southern Caribbean regions say there are no police, or police will not come if a crime is reported in their area. This lack of police presence by area makes the Caribbean regions better suited for the transportation of illicit drugs that do not require a well-developed infrastructure.

Figure 35: Number of police officer per 100km2 at the national, regional, and departmental levels, 2013. Source: Author's compilation using Policia Nacional (2013).



Focus groups suggest that Nicaraguans generally have an unfavorable perception of the police. Thirteen of the fourteen focus groups that commented on police performance spoke critically. As described above, focus group participants perceive that police respond less to women's needs than men's and do not respond much at all to reports of interfamilial violence. People also tend to think the police are corrupt. In Puerto Cabezas, one at-risk youth expressed, "Police have a double face of 'I'll protect you, but I'll charge you also'."⁴⁹ In Siuna, a young male said the police are, "Allied with the drug traffickers."⁵⁰ In Somoto, a respondent commented that the police avoid youth gangs: "The police don't confront crime in the barrios because they want to avoid more violence."⁵¹ In Bluefields, an Afro-descendant youth felt the police are abusive, "The police have been violent in our community and they don't carry out their duties."⁵² These sentiments were supported by surveys carried out in the RACCS. In over half of coastal communities, residents report they have little or no trust in the police and that police harassment is a problem. However, the same percentage (31 percent) of people in these communities believe the police do a good job in controlling crime as they believe the police do a poor job.

⁴⁹ "El actuar de la Policía Nacional es de doble cara de 'yo te defiendo pero yo te cubro también!'"

⁵⁰ "Ellos se han aliados con los narcotraficantes."

⁵¹ "La policía ante los enfrentamientos de los barrios prefiere no entrar para evitar más violencia."

⁵² "La policía han sido violentos dentro de la comunidad y también porque no cumplen con sus obligaciones."

Key programs, actors, and institutions

In Nicaragua, there are a wealth of institutions working on supporting youth.

The following Table 2 lists the key actors in national youth issues. We have confined our review to programs and institutions that focus primarily on youth risk factors, not peripheral issues that touch on youth themes. The institutions in Table 2 have been arranged according to subtypes. These include: the government, the United Nations system, multilateral banks, the US Government,⁵³ international, national, and local NGOs, national youth movements, youth movements within the FSLN, churches, and the private sector.⁵⁴ Because of the unique confluence of NGOs working with youth in the autonomous Caribbean regions, these are described separately. After the table, some key points are provided.

Table 2: Key institutions for at-risk youth in Nicaragua. Source: Authors' compilation (red denotes laws that are specific to the autonomous region).

CLASSIFICATION	INSTITUTION	PURPOSE
Government	Ministerio de la Juventud / Ministry of Youth (MINJUVE)	Implements programs and policies aimed at Nicaraguan youth and coordinates youth initiatives among the various state institutions.
	Ministerio de Salud / Ministry of Health (MINSAL)	The Iniciativa 0-20 (the 0-20 Initiative) within the Ministry of Health provides information to young people on sexual, preventative, and reproductive health.
	Dirección de Asuntos Juveniles de la Policía Nacional (DAJUV) / the National Police's Youth Affairs Division	Defines and promotes preventive measures for at-risk youth. These measures aim to promote, protect, and defend the human rights of children, young people, and adolescents. The purpose is to promote "respect, equality, and a culture of peace." DAJUV is responsible for the Modelo de Prevención Policial Proactivo y Comunitario (the Model of Proactive and Community Prevention), a risk prevention program that targets disadvantaged, at-risk youth.
	Comisaría Mujer y Niñez (CMN) de la Policía Nacional / The National Police's Ombudsman for Women and Children	Specializes in research and preventive care in cases of domestic or sexual violence. It adopts screening measures, provides training, and raises awareness through educational campaigns.
	Centro Juventud de la Policía Nacional / The National Police's Youth Center	Home to at-risk youth, or youth involved in gangs, drugs, alcohol, and prostitution, or other risk factors. The center is responsible for providing technical education to young people to

⁵³ Several Asian and European governments finance development and security programs in Nicaragua. This includes the European Union.

⁵⁴ It was beyond the scope of this assessment to analyze funding sources for each project and institution dealing with at-risk youth.

		aspire for a better quality of life.
	Coalición Nacional Contra la Trata de Personas / National Coalition Against Human Trafficking	A national coalition of more than thirty organizations nationwide that focuses on combating human trafficking. It provides shelter and supports the social and professional integration of human trafficking victims into society.
	Justicia Penal Especial de Adolescentes / Special Criminal Justice for Teenagers	A special court for youth composed of 14 district criminal courts in all of the country's judicial districts.
	Comisión Nacional de Juventud / National Youth Commission	The commission coordinates public and private entities related, directly or indirectly, to the situation of youth. Its main function is to ensure compliance among these entities with national laws and regulations and the integration with the Política Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud (National Policy on Integrated Youth Development).
	La Educación en Valores del Ministerio de Educación (MINED) / Ministry of Education's Values Education	Regulates and organizes the school system's teacher trainings and educational services. It also participates in el programa de Salud Sexual y Reproductiva (the program of Sexual and Reproductive Health).
	Secretaría Regional de Educación / Regional Secretariat for Education	Supports activities under the Sistema Educativo Autónomo Regional (SEAR) (Regional Autonomous Education System), which focuses on intercultural, bilingual education. Attached to the Regional Governments of the RACCS and RACCN, it designs public policy to promote and defend the educational rights of Caribbean youth.
	Alcaldías Municipales / Municipal Hall	It comprises various mechanisms that support youth initiatives. These include: the Consejos Municipales de Adolescentes y Jóvenes (COMA) (Municipal Councils of Adolescents and Youth), las Casas Municipales de Adolescentes y Jóvenes (Municipal Youth and Adolescent Houses), and las Casas de Cultura (Cultural Centers).
	Instituto Nacional de la Tecnología (INATEC) /	The institute carries certificate courses in technical and vocational training (cooking,

	National Technological Institute	carpentry, bakery, auto mechanics, and naval mechanics). Private companies and other institutions recognize the certificates.
	Procuraduría Especial de la Niñez y la Adolescencia / Special Procurator for Children and Adolescents	Created in 2000, this institution is designed to promote the rights of children and adolescents. It ostensibly does this by promoting, "the state, the family, society, and the community."
	Mesa Contra la Trata de Personas / The Board against Human Trafficking	Works on preventing human trafficking in the territories. It's a local network that coordinates among government institutions. The board includes representation from government ministries, the national police, municipal governments, la Dirección de Migración y Extranjería (the Immigration Directorate), Gabinetes de Familia (CPCs), and la Juventud Sandinista (the Sandinista Youth).
	Casa Municipal de Adolescentes y Jóvenes (CAMA) / Municipal Center for Youth and Adolescents	Responds to the needs of youth and adolescents by providing spaces to contribute to the youth's personal development. These are managed by the Alcaldías Municipales.
United Nations System	UNICEF Project "Protection and full participation in the development of adolescents"	Helps define policies and programs to reduce violence against youth and provides protective environments for excluded youth. It is adapted to the context of indigenous communities. The program is supported by various government institutions, including: los Gabinetes de Poder Ciudadano (CPCs), el Instituto de la Juventud (the Youth Institute), el Sistema Nacional de Universidades (the National University System), and the ministries of Health, the Public, Families, and Education.
	UNFPA Sexual and Reproductive Health Program	Intervention strategies related to sexual and reproductive health. These are supported by the Police Academy, las Comisarías de la Mujer y la Niñez (CMNs), and the Ministries of Youth, Health, Finance, Interior, and Education. It aims to coordinate youth policy among states institutions and youth groups. The program is national in scope but emphasizes certain municipalities in the Caribbean and Pacific border regions.

	<p>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)</p> <p>Project "Integral Safety and Prevention of Violence affecting children and young people in Central America"</p>	<p>The project's duration is three years (2015-2017) and is part of the Estrategia de Seguridad Democrática en Centroamérica (ECSA) (Strategy of Democratic Security in Central America). It pursues comprehensive policies for increased security, strengthens institutional capacities in violence prevention, and promotes innovative solutions and knowledge transfers. This project's scope is Central America and it has a budget of \$6 million.</p>
Multilateral Banks	World Bank	<p>The World Bank and IADB are development banks that specialize in providing grants and loans to the Nicaraguan government to eradicate poverty. At the moment, neither has a major investment loan (their main financing tool) specifically aimed at youth, although youth issues are components within their national work programs.</p>
	Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)	
US Government	US Agency for International Development (USAID)	<p>USAID helps finance a number of youth-related programs through civil society organizations in Nicaragua. These include: the Education for Success program implemented by FADCANIC, the Community Action for Reading and Security (CARS) program, the Better Approaches to Sustainable Educational Services (BASES) program, the Quality Technical Education in the Coastal Caribbean (QTECC) program, and additional activities designed to vocational training and democracy and governance programs, all in the Caribbean regions. These programs are described separately below.</p>
	International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL)	<p>INL sponsors the Cambia Ahora, Solo Hazlo (Change Now, Let's Do It) campaign that helps mobilize communities in the prevention of youth violence and drug abuse on the Caribbean Coast and some municipalities in Managua.</p>
National NGO'S	Centro Dos Generaciones / Two Generations Center	<p>Develops integrated approaches to reduce youth poverty.</p>
	Puntos de Encuentro / Meeting Points	<p>Programs to reduce machismo and support the rights of young people.</p>
	Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP) / Institute of Public Policy and Strategic Studies	<p>Think tank concentrating on youth violence and security.</p>

	Centro de Prevención de la Violencia (CEPREV) / Center for Violence Prevention	Aims to eradicate youth violence and violent culture in poor neighborhoods.
	Instituto Nicaragüense de Promoción Humana (INPRHU) / Nicaraguan Institute to Promote Humanity	Works to improve education, employment, living conditions, and participation. Supports local government.
	Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense / Nicaraguan Communal Movement	Promotes youth employment, sexual and reproductive rights, HIV prevention, and secondary technical education. Includes education initiatives for youth and youth gang leaders.
Local NGOs	Grupo de Ex Migrantes Adolescentes y Jóvenes (GEMAJ) / Group of former Youth and Adolescent Migrants	Strengthening the ability of adolescent women, young migrants and their families to defend their rights. Operates in Cardenas in the Department of Rivas.
	Asociación para la Sobrevivencia y el Desarrollo Local (ASODEL) / Association for the Survival and Local Development	Promotes urban and rural social and educational development for youth. Builds the capacity of community leaders and civil society groups. It operates in the north-central border areas of Nicaragua.
	Instituto de Liderazgo de Las Segovias / Leadership Institute of the Segovias	Includes a scholarship program for rural youth. Concentrates its work in Nueva Segovia.
	Instituto de Formación Permanente (INSFOP) / Institute of Permanent Training	Works on violence prevention for at-risk groups. Currently serving five groups of urban adolescents in District One of Estelí.
	Vida Joven / Young life	Organizes youth training camps and retreats. It is present in Estelí and Chinandega, among other departments.
	Fundación Padre Fabretto / Father Fabretto Foundation	Works with children and at-risk youth. Addresses issues of violence in schools and provides psychological treatment for children. Based in Estelí but has a national scope, reaching Madriz, Somoto, Managua, and some interior communities in the Caribbean regions.
	Real Estelí	A soccer academy with more than 400 youth players of both sexes, who are also enrolled in school. Based in the city of Estelí.
	Red Local Contra la Violencia / Local Anti-Violence Network	Coordinates anti-violence initiatives among local actors and various state institutions such as MINSAs and MINED. It is present in the northern border regions, with its greatest presence in Estelí.

	Red de Jóvenes Indígenas / Network of Indigenous Youth	Group of youth and adolescents that promotes the rights of indigenous youth. They also manage indigenous-related cultural projects.
NGOs of the Caribbean Region	Centro Ocupacional de Prevención y Rehabilitación para Adolescentes y Jóvenes (COPRAJ) / Occupational Center for Youth and Adolescent Prevention and Rehabilitation	Founded in 2010, provides vocational activities and psychological support to youth addicts.
	Fundación para la Autonomía y Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua (FADCANIC) / Foundation for the Autonomy and Development of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua	A nonpartisan, nonprofit civil society organization based in Bluefields, RACCS. Aims to improve the quality of life of the Caribbean people by improving equity, education, development, and social justice. Manages multiple programs related to youth development including the Education For Success program, which aims to keep youth in school and provide them life skills and vocational training to find jobs, and the Wawashang Center for Technical Education, which provides technical training to Nicaraguan youth on themes like agro-forestry.
	Acción Medica Cristiana (AMC) / Christian Medical Action	Implements health and development programs in poor communities, with an emphasis on women, children, and adolescents.
	Centro por los Derechos Humanos Civiles y Autonómicos (CEDEHCA) / Center for Civil and Autonomous Human Rights	Supports human rights and sexual and reproductive health initiatives for women and youth.
	Community Action for Reading and Security (CARS)	Improves early grade reading outcomes and contributes to reducing insecurity in five municipalities of the RACCS. (Not an NGO; USAID funded)
	Better Approaches to Sustainable Educational Services (BASES)	Aims to improve early grade reading performance, provide alternative rural secondary education opportunities, and increase community participation and advocacy. (Not an NGO; USAID funded)
	Quality Technical Education in the Caribbean Coast (QTECC)	Provides opportunities for technical education to at-risk youth in Nicaragua's Caribbean region (Not an NGO; USAID funded)

	Movimiento de Mujeres Nidia White / Nidia White Women's Movement	Psychosocial care for women, children, and adolescents in situations of violence. It offers shelter those at risk of domestic violence.
	Mesa de Concertación en Juventud / Youth Dialogue Roundtable	A space for dialogue, coordination, and articulation on youth themes among local institutions.
	Centro de Atención Psicosocial (CAPS) / Psychosocial Care Center	Founded in 2008, the center promotes drug prevention in schools and works to defend the rights of youth in coordination with Ministry of Education. It also provides drug treatment options with the Ministry of Health.
International NGO's	Fondo Cristiano Canadiense / Canadian Christian Fund	Funds local NGOs to increase youth participation and to prevent young people from getting involved in gangs and delinquency.
	Creative Associates International	Implements technical and vocational skills training in Nicaragua.
	Aldeas Infantiles SOS / SOS Youth Villages	Looks to rebuild families by providing support to at-risk youth and their families. It also supports job searches by youth in coordination with the Ministry of the Family.
	Svalorna	Works to empower youth against child exploitation and trafficking.
	La Asociación Proyecto Miriam / The Project Miriam Association	Contributes to the integrated development of women, children, and adolescents. Supports social processes that lead to empowerment, multiculturalism, the fulfillment of human rights, and gender and generational equity.
	TECHO	Seeks to overcome poverty in the slums through joint actions with local youth volunteers. Operates throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.
National Youth Movements	Consejo de la Juventud / Youth Council	Founded in 1992, it politically mobilizes youth to have their voices heard in the country's social, political, and economic agenda.
	Movimiento de Jóvenes	Active in the public and private spheres for the

	Ambientalistas / Young Environmentalists' Movement	promotion of environmental citizenship.
	Scouts	Youth and adults volunteering in non-formal education that also aims to strengthen families. It seeks integrated development approaches and continuing education for young people by stimulating their appreciation for the natural world.
Youth Movements Linked to the FSLN Political Party	Unión Nacional de Estudiantes de Nicaragua (UNEN) / National Union of Nicaraguan Students	Student union organization with a broad national reach.
	Federación de Estudiantes de Secundaria (FES) / Federation of Secondary School Students	Secondary student organization with a broad national reach.
	Movimiento Guardabarranco / Guardabarranco Movement	Promotes the organization and mobilization of young people as advocates and managers of the environment.
	Movimiento Deportivo Alexis Arguello / Alexis Arguello Sports Movement	Operates at the community-level to encourage youth to participate in sports.
	Juventud Sandinista / Sandinista Youth	FSLN-mobilized youth organization.
Youth Movements of The Caribbean Coast	Jóvenes Estableciendo Nuevos Horizontes (JEHN) / Youth Setting New Horizons	Works with young people with an emphasis on STDs and HIV/AIDS in Bluefields, RACCS.
	Mesa de Concertación de Juventudes / Youth Dialogue Roundtable	The roundtable comprises youth organizations of the Caribbean Coast. It aims to improve conditions for young people in the Caribbean by creating spaces for dialogue, the implementation of joint actions, and an interchange of knowledge and experiences.
	Asociación de Estudiantes de BICU / BICU Student Association.	Multiethnic representation of various indigenous communities focused on active student participation, sustainable development and the general welfare of Caribbean Coast people.

	Movimiento de la Diversidad / Diversity Movement	Sexual diversity organization working in HIV prevention, citizen participation, and public policy advocacy.
	Asociación de Mujeres Jóvenes Luchadoras / Association for the Struggle of Young Women	Nonprofit, nonpartisan, gender-focused organization that aims to develop spaces for training, reflection, and informational exchanges on young women's rights and sexual and reproductive health.
Churches	Pastoral Juvenil Iglesia Católica / Catholic Church Youth Pastoral Service	Joint work with pastoral youth services and universities on issues related to dating, sexuality, and responsible parenting. Consistent with Catholic doctrine.
	Pastoral Juvenil Iglesia Evangélica / Evangelical Church Youth Pastoral Service	Youth promoting the doctrines and moral and spiritual values of the Evangelical church.
	Iglesia Morava / Moravian Church	A very important institution for youth on the Caribbean Coast. Promotes moral and spiritual values as dictated by doctrine of the Marovian church.
Caribbean Universities	Bluefields Indian & Caribbean University (BICU)	Both BICU and URACCAN are stakeholders in the process of providing opportunities and empowering young people. They do this through university programs and by promoting the participation of youth in public life as citizens and professionals. Each university is crafted to meet the needs of their multicultural student bodies.
	La Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense (URACCAN) / University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast	
Private Sector	Programa de Jóvenes Emprendedores - Instituto para el Desarrollo Económico Social (INDES) / Young Entrepreneurs Program - Institute for Economic and Social Development (INDES)	A program that organizes courses and provides startup funds to young people to start businesses.
	Central American Fisheries	A Nicaraguan company owned by Nicaraguan and foreign investors. The company maintains operations on the Caribbean and the north-Pacific coasts of Nicaragua. The company implements internship programs with young graduates of vocational training programs, like that of FADCANIC.
	Emprendedores Juveniles	A nonprofit organization that implements

	de Nicaragua del INDE (Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Empresarial) / The National Institute for Business Development's Young Entrepreneurs of Nicaragua	entrepreneurship education programs aimed at young children and female heads of household.
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Based on the table above, it can be said that the Nicaraguan government is currently the principal actor in youth issues.

This is especially true for programs affiliated with the ruling FSLN party. The youth wings of the Sandinista party receive support from the central government and provide a strong local presence throughout the country. Focus group discussions show that people both see the benefits of these institutions – they are grassroots in nature and have a broad participation from local communities – and the costs – they are not perceived as inclusive and seem to mainly benefit Sandinista supporters. These party-affiliated institutions are a bit stronger in the Pacific border regions than in the Caribbean region, where there is still some lingering animosity towards the Sandinistas in some areas, especially the Miskitu-dominated north Atlantic.

NGOs have a strong presence in Nicaragua, but lack coordination. The UN and others have made attempts to coordinate these disparate institutions, but with little success to date. In spite of a lack of coordination, many NGOs are doing important youth work in Nicaragua. FADCANIC, an NGO based in Bluefields, is the principal actor on supporting youth in the RACCS and has a broad youth work program. Bilateral donors often support NGOs such as FADCANIC and not party affiliated institutions.

Influence and resources from the central government seem to have shifted to party affiliated institutions. The government, the ruling party, and international organizations such as the United Nations have all tried to coordinate activities and resources, but these have not materialized in creating a collaborative framework to support at-risk youth. Key informant interviews highlight the belief that the Sandinistas have undermined these efforts by shifting resources and support toward party affiliated groups, not independent civil society organizations or the NGO community. The benefit to this is that the FSLN has a legitimately strong local presence throughout the country, and the party can more easily coordinate activities among party allies. However, this framework is not inclusive, especially for supporters of the opposition. For an example of this dynamic in action, see Box 4 on the CPCs.

A challenge is making these programs relevant for youth. Sometimes efforts to mitigate youth risk make sense at the macro-level, but have little relevance for targeted youth. A student in Puerto Cabezas elaborated the following: “The majority of youth don't identify with the programs and projects that have come to the region or our neighborhoods because they don't appeal to our interests. Those programs were designed without consulting with us previously.”⁵⁵

Legal framework

Nicaragua has a relatively strong legal framework for supporting at-risk youth. The various programs and projects are only as strong as the national legal system. Laws

⁵⁵ "La mayoría de los jóvenes no se siente identificados con los programas y proyectos que han venido en la región o barrio porque no son de sus interés, ya que estos son elaborados sin la consulta previa con ellas y ellos."

and policies mobilize the various state institutions in support of youth. They also provide the legal justification for independent institutions to pursue social justice and mitigate youth risk factors.

Table 3 highlights major laws and policies in support of at-risk youth. It has been arranged chronologically, and we have included a separate section for laws specific to the autonomous Caribbean regions. The reason is the legal and political framework has a distinct character and distinct relations among the various government and non-government institutions in the autonomous regions.

Table 3: Legal framework for at-risk youth. Source: Authors' compilation
(those highlighted in red denote laws specific to the autonomous region)

LAWS AND POLICIES	OBJECTIVES
<p>Código de la Niñez y Adolescencia (Ley 287) / Infancy and Adolescence Code (Law 287)</p> <p>Origin: March, 1998</p>	<p>A momentous institutional step to ensure the interests of children. It remains the principal tool for regulating the rights of children and adolescents and protecting them from abuse. It defines boys and girls as anyone who has not turned 13 years of age, and adolescents as anyone between 13 and 17 years of age.</p>
<p>Ley de Promoción del Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud (Ley 392) / Law for the Promotion of the Integrated Youth Development (Law 392)</p> <p>Origin: May, 2001. Launch: March, 2002</p>	<p>Defines youth as between 18 and 30 years old. Defines the political rights of youth. It also outlines the various forms of participation rights of youth and that the State has a duty to promote and respect at the local, regional, and national levels. The compliance mechanism of the law is still pending.</p>
<p>Política Nacional de la Juventud / National Youth Policy</p> <p>Origin: November, 2001</p>	<p>The first policy of its kind in Nicaragua. Expresses the political will of the State of Nicaragua on various sectors, including sports, housing, culture, rural youth, education, recreation, volunteering, youth services, the environment, disadvantaged youth, youth participation, integrated healthcare, training and employment, and indigenous and Afro-descendant youth.</p>
<p>Ley de Participación Ciudadana (Ley 475) / Citizen Participation Law (Law 475)</p> <p>Origin: 2003</p>	<p>Regulates citizen participation, which is defined as involving social actors, individually or collectively, with the objective of influencing and participating in the decision-making, management and design of public policies at different administrative levels and modalities of government. The law highlights the participation mechanisms at the national level, regional levels, departmental levels, and municipal levels.</p>
<p>Plan Nacional Contra la Explotación Sexual Comercial de Niños, Niñas, y Adolescentes 2003-2008 / National Plan Against the Sexual</p>	<p>Designed by the Equipo de Trabajo de la Secretaría Técnica del Consejo Nacional de Atención y Protección Integral a la Niñez y la Adolescencia (CONAPINA) (The Task Force of the Technical Secretary of the National Council for Comprehensive Care and Child and Adolescent Protection). Action areas relate to prevention, detection, protection, comprehensive care, and political sanction. Originally it was designed to have annual operating</p>

<p>and Commercial Exploitation of Boys, Girls and Adolescents 2003-2008</p> <p>Origin: 2003</p>	<p>plans to strengthen the Sistema Nacional de Información sobre la Niñez y la Adolescencia Nicaragüense (the National Information System on Nicaraguan Children and Adolescents), however, having reached its deadline, it is now being redesigned for the next 10 years.</p>
<p>Plan de Acción de la Política Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud: 2005-2015 / Plan of Action for the National Policy of Integrated Youth Development: 2005-2015.</p> <p>Origin: August, 2004</p>	<p>Its goal is to improve the quality of life for Nicaraguan youth by creating opportunities and conditions for youth autonomy, social incorporation, and the strategic recognition of youth as subjects of development.</p>
<p>Ley General de Educación (Ley 582) / General Law of Education (Law 582)</p> <p>Origin: 2006</p>	<p>This law defines the general guidelines of the national educational system, the powers and duties of the state concerning education, and the rights and responsibilities of individuals and society as it relates to education. This law is the de facto regulation of all educational activities undertaken by individuals and public or private entities in Nicaragua.</p>
<p>Modelo de Atención Familiar y Comunitario / Family and Community Attention Model</p> <p>Origin: July, 2008.</p>	<p>This model establishes a plan to achieve equality in the health sector. It requires ensuring access to health services and reducing access gaps for excluded social groups. The model must respond to the needs and expectations of the population in order to achieve a quality and comprehensive health care system where the right to health is guaranteed. It is regulated by the Ministry of Health (MINSa).</p>
<p>Modelo de Prevención Policial Proactivo y Comunitario en atención de adolescentes y jóvenes en situación de alto riesgo social / Model for Proactive Community Police Prevention targeting high-risk youth</p> <p>Origin: 2008</p>	<p>Develops plans for community risk prevention interventions for the period 2008-2013. This includes monitoring at-risk youth, youth gangs and other youth groups, and youth involved in the national police's Centro de Juventud (Youth Center). The model also involves secondary actors such as families, society, and community police.</p>
<p>Programa Conjunto de Juventud, Empleo y Migración / Joint Program on Youth, Employment and Migration</p> <p>Origin: 2008</p>	<p>Improve youth employment in 11 select municipalities; create or strengthen youth cooperatives and microenterprises in these municipalities; and strengthen national capacities for youth employment and responses to youth migration. This program is led by UNDP and Nicaragua's Ministry of Youth.</p>
<p>Ley de los Derechos de</p>	<p>Establishes the legal framework and guarantees the dignity, equality, and full</p>

<p>las Personas con Discapacidad (Ley 763) / Law for the Rights of Disabled People (Law 763)</p> <p>Origin: August, 2011</p>	<p>protection of human rights for disabled individuals. The law outlines efforts to improve the living standards and inclusion of the disabled in society without discrimination.</p>
<p>Decreto - Creación del Ministerio de la Juventud / Decree to Create the Ministry of Youth</p> <p>Origin: February, 2012</p>	<p>The Ministry of Youth was created to replace the Instituto de la Juventud (the Youth Institute). Some of its objectives are: to promote recreational and cultural programs for Nicaraguan youth; construct the facilities necessary for these programs, encourage youth participation in age-appropriate activities; and promote the use of legal instruments for youth.</p>
<p>Ley Integral de Violencia Hacia la Mujer (Ley 779) / Law on Violence Against Women (Law 779)</p> <p>Origin: June, 2012 Reform: September, 2013</p>	<p>The goal is to protect women's human rights and guarantee a life free from domestic violence by creating legal protections. It promotes women's empowerment consistent with the principles of equality and non-discrimination; it establishes comprehensive protection measures to punish perpetrators of domestic abuse and eradicate violence against women. The law hopes to change sociocultural and patriarchal power relations. The reform of 2013 curved some of the laws protective measures for women (see Box 5).</p>
<p>Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Humano / National Human Development Plan</p> <p>Origin: November 2012</p>	<p>Announces a series of conceptual and methodological principles to guide public institutions in their treatment of youth needs and demands.</p>
<p>Plan Nacional de Empleo y Trabajo Digno y Decente para las Juventudes de Nicaragua 2012-2016 / National Plan on Dignified Employment for Nicaraguan Youth 2012-2016</p> <p>Origin: 2012</p>	<p>This plan promotes dignified work for Nicaraguan youth in partnership with youth, worker, and employer organizations and local-, regional-, and national-level governments.</p>
<p>Guía para la Atención Integral de las y los Adolescentes / Guidelines for the Comprehensive Care of Adolescents</p> <p>Origin: 2012</p>	<p>Provides health workers with tool strengthen the healthcare for adolescents. It emphasizes attention to sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, generational perspectives and prevention of the most common diseases. The guidelines coordinate actions among key stakeholders in the community and health care providers in the public and private sector.</p>
<p>Ley Contra la Trata de Personas / Law Against Human Trafficking</p>	<p>This law aims to prevent human trafficking by investigating, prosecuting, and punishing human traffickers. It also aims to improve the protection and comprehensive care for victims with special protection for witnesses,</p>

Origin: January, 2015	technicians, and professional experts involved in criminal proceedings.
Estatuto de Autonomía (Ley 28) / Autonomy Statute (Law 28) Origin: 1987	It is a framework law that establishes the criteria and legal context for the autonomous system. It protects and establishes special rights in the defined autonomous regions by guaranteeing collective land rights and respecting the autonomy of indigenous cultures.
Sistema Educativo Autonómico Regional (SEAR) / Regional Autonomous Education System Origin: 1997	This system protects the cultural identities of people living in autonomous territories by guaranteeing education in native language and culture. The establishment of this law was the result of years of advocacy by indigenous people and communities of African descent for fair and comprehensive education in the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua.
Estrategia de Desarrollo de la Costa Caribe y Alto Wangki Bocay. Para el Buen Vivir y el Bien Común 2012 – 2016 / Development Strategy for the Common Good on the Caribbean Coast and Alto Wangki Bocay 2012 – 2016 Origin: June 2012	This strategy continues the model of human development with the aim to increase economic growth without losing equity. It also aims to incorporate the Caribbean in the national economy with social, economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability. It promotes the exercise of self-governance to strengthen democracy.
Secretaría Regional de la Juventud / Regional Youth Secretary	Strengthens the synergies among state institutions, regional authorities, aid agencies, and civil society organizations to ensure the human rights of youth in the RACCS. It seeks the active participation of young people in all spheres of social, cultural, political, familial, and professional life.

The table shows that since about 2000, the government has initiated a wide range of laws and legal protections for Nicaraguan youth. These laws and policies largely support excluded or disadvantaged youth, such as girls, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. The various government institutions have shown a strong respect for these laws and have acted to carry them out.

These laws are stronger in some areas than others. The main focus of these laws is oriented toward facilitating participation and political action while mitigating violence and sexual exploitation. Although legal support for youth employment or youth delinquency, such as drug abuse, are peripheral at best. The national police have at times enacted programs to target these youth, but the legal framework largely lacks any sort of focus on rehabilitation for youth in conflict with the law.

The biggest problem with the legal framework is the institutions tasked with carrying them out, lack the financial resources to do so. As we have seen above, the Nicaraguan government spends less than any government in the hemisphere (with available data) on its population. This is largely because of low government revenues not political will, but still

leads to an inability to effectively enforce laws. We have seen that state institutions like the national police force and border patrols are severely underfunded and understaffed. For obvious reasons, this prevents these laws, which can mitigate youth risk, from achieving their potential.

Youth risk from weak institutions: Caribbean regions – high, Pacific border regions – high. As we have seen, the Nicaraguan government is poor. Therefore, despite a relatively strong legal framework, the government lacks the resources to enforce it effectively. The country has a strong civil society and a wide variety of capable NGOs, but efforts lack coordination. The prominent role of party affiliated institutions is both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, they are well positioned to respond to local challenges, on the other hand, they are not inclusive for non-party members. These characteristics are true for both study regions.

Moving forward

This assessment shows that Nicaraguan youth in the Caribbean and Pacific border regions face a diverse set of risks. Youth in both regions face challenges related to poverty, joblessness, climate change, weak institutions, spatial inequality, and interfamilial violence. Meanwhile, other risks such as access to guns, drug trafficking, gang activity, income inequality, and crime and violence are not as severe in Nicaragua as in neighboring countries to the north. Nicaragua's legal framework in support of youth is relatively strong.

Within Nicaragua, risk factors affect youth in both regions differently. Youth in the Caribbean regions generally have greater risk levels than youth in the Pacific border regions. The Caribbean is poorer, has fewer jobs, fewer educational opportunities, greater spatial inequalities, and higher levels of crime and violence. By contrast, youth in the Pacific border regions are at greater risk from environmental pressures exacerbated by climate change.

USAID recommendations

The following are recommendations for USAID to consider during the planning phase of the next Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) with Nicaragua. These recommendations could be included in the next strategy or in future operations. The current CDCS concludes in 2017 and has two main pillars: first, to strengthen democratic governance and second, to reduce youth risk on the southern Caribbean coast.

The next CDCS should have a much more explicit focus on reducing poverty and joblessness in the entire country. Poverty and joblessness are the most problematic risk factors for youth in the country because of their prevalence and persistence. The government already spends half of its budget on fighting poverty, and countless NGOs are doing the same, yet year after year, Nicaragua remains one of the poorest nations in the hemisphere. This is especially true for the Caribbean regions, which are the poorest, on average. USAID should share this general poverty focus.

USAID should consider developing a comprehensive plan to improve job opportunities for youth. This plan could include several elements, including the following:

1. Strengthen regional initiatives that build the skills of at-risk youth through formal and non-formal educational opportunities.
2. Identify unexplored economic sectors that can absorb jobless youth.

3. Develop seed funds to finance youth-run small businesses in sectors that are relevant to their local economies.
4. Promote private sector involvement to create youth job opportunities. This could include creating incentives for the private sector to provide internships, identify labor needs, offer job opportunities, and serve as career trainers and mentors.

The next CDCS should focus on youth development. Nicaragua's demographic youth bulge shows that the country has become a nation of children and youth. Any development strategy should invariably focus on youth, since youth represent a majority of the population. Human development at early ages has been shown to lead to long-term economic development. Therefore, efforts to improve health, education, and other opportunities for youth must become the focus of USAID's development plan. Focusing on youth is critical if Nicaragua is to break out of its long-term cycle of poverty.

USAID should especially target youth between 12 and 16 years old. As we have seen, Nicaragua's primary education system is relatively strong. Where it lags behind comparable countries is at the secondary level. There is lower teaching capacity, fewer resources, and fewer students at Nicaragua's secondary schools. Such an arrangement leaves many youth out of the early human development process once they complete primary school at age 11. What happens to these children before they reach adulthood? Life skills training, sports or recreational programs, and other initiatives should be developed to take aim at the 12 to 16 year old age group and improve the possibility of turning these children into productive young adults.

To reduce youth poverty, USAID should focus its development strategy on diminishing spatial inequalities through territorial development initiatives. Territorial development is defined as the integration of lagging and leading areas using policies that converge living standards across a given area (WDR 2009). This report shows there are great disparities between urban and rural areas and gaps in interconnectivity among regions and local economies. To overcome these spatial disparities, USAID should preference territorial development policies to support institutions that unite, infrastructure that connects, and interventions that target those living in the greatest risk.

As part of a territorial development policy, USAID should target youth in the most at-risk communities and neighborhoods. This package could include: community planning; parenting workshops; coordination with police on neighborhood security (community policing); renovation of common spaces and public areas; leadership and conflict resolution training; and support structures for small youth projects, vocational services, sports teams and leagues, cultural activities, conflict resolution training. By targeting these communities, youth will have a heightened sense of security, connectedness to their families, and feel positive about their futures.

USAID and other aid agencies should make efforts to utilize all local structures to reach at-risk youth, this includes considering the costs and benefits of working with Sandinista-affiliated institutions. These institutions represent a model of non-inclusive development. They entrench political clientelism and favor party members, and collaborating with these institutions legitimizes a non-inclusive, party-centric development model, which is neither desirable nor sustainable. Still, these institutions represent strong grassroots networks at the local level, and partnering with them could leverage youth development efforts. Moreover, this would provide opportunities to better coordinate local and national youth development programs.

USAID should be involved in coordination efforts among the various donors, NGOs, government agencies, and civil society organizations. The United Nations and Nicaraguan government have both tried to foster greater agency coordination, but with little success. Youth development activities are as splintered as ever. Pooling resources and channeling activities would make the process of mitigating youth risk more effective. USAID could play a leading role or work with other agencies to improve coordination.

USAID should continue to strengthen the capacity of organizations that provide direct services to youth in at-risk communities. Some examples of organizations that could be targeted include: rehabilitation centers for young people addicted to drugs and alcohol, protection centers for victims of sexual or gender-based violence, vocational training centers and other providers of non-formal education, tutors that help youth in formal education or guide adults in good parenting, sports clubs and other organizers of productive youth activities, among many others.

USAID should include climate change as a priority in its next CDCS. Climate change is happening in Nicaragua and must be confronted as a serious challenge. Given all of the problems in Nicaragua related to poverty, joblessness, and weak institutions it does not seem fair that the country has the fourth highest climate risk in the world. Especially considering the country is not a major emitter of carbon, the major cause of climate change. But, this is the case. Recent droughts have ravaged rural areas in the north, damaging livelihoods, and leading to increased poverty, migration, joblessness, and youth delinquency.

USAID should raise awareness on youth risk factors. Sometimes reducing risk is simply a matter of educating people on the dangers that exist. As we have seen, there are a multitude of risks facing Nicaraguan youth. Raising awareness on these risks could steer youth in other directions. Potential awareness raising campaigns could target drug and alcohol consumption, the threat from climate change and the need to protect the environment, the danger of gangs and Maras, the prevalence of interfamilial and gender-based violence, and other potential risks. Media platforms such as radio, television, and social media can be leveraged to raise awareness in a cost effective manner. The US government has experience in awareness raising campaigns and is well positioned to continue and expand these efforts. For example, the “Change Now, Just Do it” (“Cambia Ahora, Solo Hazlo”) campaign, financed by INL, raises awareness in communities in the Caribbean Coast and some municipalities in Managua to prevent youth violence and drug abuse.

USAID should specifically promote efforts to raise awareness on gender-based and interfamilial violence. Law 779 was initially a big step forward in this regard, but the reform in 2013 was a problematic step backwards. USAID and the government must continue to support these efforts and civil society groups must continue to push for stronger actions to protect young women and families. These forms of violence and abuse are major risk factors that pervade in all areas of the country and contribute significantly to youth risk.

USAID should consider expanding the Education For Success (EFS) model for at-risk youth to other areas of Nicaragua. The EFS model is one that incorporates many of the above recommendations, to a certain extent. The model is designed to strengthen institutions, promote social cohesion, and improve youth employment and formal and non-formal educational opportunities for at-risk youth. Currently, the model is being applied in five municipalities in Nicaragua's southern Caribbean coast, but with the proper resources, it could be expanded to other areas with high concentrations of at-risk youth. The model has been put into practice, and with proper planning, could be adjusted to new regions and socio-economic contexts.

Moreover, the model has been closely monitored and several evaluations have measured its effectiveness in producing positive outcomes for youth.⁵⁶

Conclusion

As this assessment has shown, Nicaraguan youth face a diverse set of risks related to poverty, joblessness, climate change, weak institutions, spatial inequality, and interfamilial violence. Additional risks must be taken into consideration, such as access to guns, drug trafficking, gang activity, income inequality, and crime and violence. Despite these risk factors, however Nicaragua faces a markedly less significant set of risks than the neighboring countries Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Risk factors affect youth in both in the Caribbean and Pacific regions, yet the intensity of risk varies between the two. Youth in the Caribbean regions generally have greater risk levels than youth in the Pacific border regions because the Caribbean is poorer, has fewer jobs, fewer educational opportunities, greater spatial inequalities, and higher levels of crime and violence. By contrast, youth in the Pacific border regions are at greater risk from environmental pressures exacerbated by climate change.

Nicaragua's government and NGO community have taken significant steps in support of youth in the past decade, mitigating some of the risk factors. Yet, to achieve this, there is still significant work needed to reduce the still pervasive risk factors facing Nicaragua youth.

⁵⁶ For a greater understanding of the details and relative strengths and weaknesses of the EFS model, refer to this report's sister publication, "Reducing youth risk on Nicaragua's southern Caribbean coast: An evaluation of FADCANIC's development model for at-risk youth" (USAID forthcoming).

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Annex A – Interviews

NAME	ORGANIZATION	LOCATION
Alaniz, Enrique	FIDEG	Managua
Aragón, William	Corresponsal La Prensa y radio ABC stereo.	Somoto
Balladares, Yanira	Red Local contra la Violencia	Somoto
Biddle, Jeremy	Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) at USAID	Washington DC
Castillo, Melba	Directora del Centro de Investigación y Acción Educativa Social (CIASES)	Managua
Castillo, Hayde	Directora del Instituto de Liderazgo de las Segovias (ILS)	Mozonte
Chavez, Cara	POL/INL	Managua
Chow Dixon, Roberto	Lider de la comunidad de Kisalaya	Waspam
Cuadra, Elvira	Directora del IEEPP	Managua
Dávila, Maria Elena	Concejal del Municipio de Somotillo	Somotillo
Dávila, Wilmer	Cooperativa de salud "salud para todos"	Estelí
Delgado, Maria Miranda	Borge Asociados	Managua
Espinoza López, Everth	Oficial de Investigaciones del Departamento de Rivas	Cardenas
Espinoza, Glenda	Los Quinchos	Somoto
Flores Guido, Reyna	Centro de Derechos Humanos y Autonómico de la Costa Atlantica (CEDEHCA)	Siuna
Gonzales, Brezo	Los Quinchos	Somoto
Gutiérrez, Maricela	INSFOP	Estelí
Hooker, Ray	FADCANIC	Bluefields
Howard, Norman	Coordinador Costa Caribe, UNDP	Bluefields
Ivette, Maria	AIR	Canada
Jiménez, Silvia Elena	Aldeas Infantiles SOS	Somoto
Juan Jose	Universidad Centro Americana Jesuita	Managua
López Muñoz, German	Asuntos Juveniles de la Policia Nacional	Siuna
Marín, Alexis	Aldeas Infantiles SOS	Estelí
Medina, Adilia	Red de Mujeres del Norte "Ana Lucila"	Somoto
Mejía, Sandra	National Police	Somoto
Mejía, Sandra	Unidad de Asuntos Juveniles de la Policía	Somoto
Muñoz, Pedro	Delegado de la Policia Nacional	Waspam

Nakano, Chiemi	Inter-American Development Bank	Managua
Paíz, José Ramón	Radio ecológica stereo	Somoto
Palacios, Francisca	Consejería Escolar, Ministerio de Educacion (MINED)	Siuna
Perret, Georgina	COPRAJ	Bluefields
Restrepo, Andres	Inter-American Development Bank	Washington DC
Reyes, Kaleth	GIZ	Estelí
Rodriguez, Gloria	POL/INL	Managua
Rojas, Sonia	Inter-American Development Bank	Managua
Ruiz, Francisco	Jefe del Distrito Policial de la Zona Norte	Somotillo
Salezar, Maria Andrea	Global Communities	Managua
Slate, Alicia	USAID	Managua
Sosa, Roberto	Global Communities	Managua
Suarez, Raquel	Plan Internacional	Somoto
Tórrez, María Carazo	Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense	Somoto
Urbina, Ascensión	IMPRHU	Somoto
Vanegas, Leoncio	Corresponsal del periódico nacional El Nuevo Diario para Nueva Segovia	Ocotol
Villagra, Marcela	USAID	Managua
Villareyna, Juana	Fundación entre Mujeres (FEM)	Estelí
Hazel Wilson	FADCANIC	Bluefields
Zalequett, Monica	CEPREV	Managua