

US Deportees in El Salvador: Lessons for Jamaica?

Background

There is a developing debate around the impact that criminal deportees have on receiving countries in the context of very high levels of violent crime in the region. In broad terms, Jamaica and the countries of Central America argue that deportations from the UK and US constitute an exportation of criminal expertise from the developing world to less-developed countries, whose economic position, governance and policing problems, and general lack of resources, make them especially vulnerable to skilled criminal enterprises. Furthermore, it is often argued that such deportees are major contributors to violent crime, hence general citizen insecurity. As recent poll data from Central America shows, such citizen insecurity clearly increases dissatisfaction with democratic governance. *However, the question of how many criminal deportees re-offend has still not been conclusively answered.*

In general terms, Central American attempts to deal with the arrival of large numbers of nationals removed from the US have been small-scale and of a relatively superficial nature. In short, so few resources, either governmental or NGO, have been available for 'resettlement' that it is almost impossible to draw any worthwhile lessons, other than the obvious one that inaction exacerbates the negative consequences deportees bring - the *maras* phenomenon being a clear example of this.

Comparative Indicators

El Salvador Jamaica

Population 6,900,000 2,650,000

Total deportees 2006: 10,312 2004: UK 1,273; US 1,871; per year (ex-US) Canada 202

GDP per capita US\$ 4,900 (2006 est) US\$ 4,700 (2006 est.)

Remittances US\$ 3,300 millions US\$ 1,651 millions (2005) (2006 est)

Remittances \$US 490 p.a. \$US 580 p.a. per capita

Remittances as % 17.1% 19% of GDP

2006 Human 100 104

Development Index ranking

25% of foreign nationals in UK prisons, around 2,100 prisoners, are Jamaican. In 2004, there were 1,993 deportations from the UK to Jamaica, in 2005, 1,273. UK returnees, however, are only part of the problem: between 1998 and 2005, the US sent 11,455 deportees back to Jamaica. The great majority of Jamaican deportees (81%, in a recent World Bank report) were incarcerated for immigration-related offences, drugs offences (including possession), and fraud. However, according to some sources Jamaica absorbed 530 convicted murderers in 2005 alone.

In Central America, the numbers are considerably larger. Taking Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala together, US deportations totalled in 2005: 34,310; in 2006: 55,224. Of these, criminal deportees were in 2005: 6,982; in 2006: 12,727. Combined population these three countries: 26 million. Nevertheless, considering the difference in relative population size between Jamaica and the Central American republics, the scale of the problem is similar.

How have Central American countries dealt with criminal deportees? In short, initiatives which focus on deportees are scarce, those specifically on criminal deportees non-existent. The most notable initiative is located in El Salvador, where the *Bienvenidos a Casa* (Welcome Home) programme has been since early 1999 jointly run by government, the Catholic Church, and NGOs, funded by the US through the IMO. This programme, however, is not specifically focused on criminal deportees, and is centred on addressing the immediate short-term needs of recent returnees. As such, it provides orientation, temporary food & accommodation (for three days only), emergency medical treatment, provision of documentation, and support for re-entering education and the workforce, but nothing over the longer-term. From 1999-2003, it assisted between 3,000 and 3,500 returnees each year, less than half of US deportees, and less again of total deportees (i.e. those who return from other countries.)

Land of my Birth, a Jamaican NGO similar to *Bienvenidos a Casa*, presses deporting countries to give deportees pocket money to help them get on their feet, and is attempting to establish a 'halfway house' for deportees.

Comment

The scale and consequences of deportee returns to Central America and Jamaica are similar, as are the socio-economic contexts. Evidently, there are no positive lessons to draw from the Central American experience at present. Attempts to ameliorate the impact of criminal deportees are scarce and under resourced, with the issue itself often a political football, further complicating efforts to reintegrate deportees.