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Central American street gangs – a
problem spanning nearly three
decades

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Central American street gangs – a problem spanning nearly three decades

Abstract:

The phenomenon of *Maras* or street gangs, which originated in California in the 1980s and was exported to Central America in the wake of U.S. deportations during the 1990s, continues to this day, particularly in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. None of the plans implemented for its eradication have borne any fruit. The high degree of violence and the soaring rates of homicides explain to a large extent the massive displacements of citizens fleeing from the gangs. This is why the affected states must urgently increase security and develop rehabilitation plans for gang members who decide to break with their criminal past.

Keywords:

Maras, street gangs, Northern Triangle, USA, El Salvador, violence, homicides.

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‘As a child you do things you shouldn’t do, but when you become an adult and have kids, your mind matures, and what you did then you don’t want to do any more. Every human being has the right to change. One doesn’t want to spend one’s whole life doing unlawful things’¹

Introduction

Over the last decades, the history of Central America has been marked by violence, even reaching one of the highest homicide and crime rates in the world. According to the latest report on homicides published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)², America, which represents only 13% of the world’s population, registered 42% of global homicides.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that any country with a rate of more than 10 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants is experiencing a homicide epidemic. With the exception of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, all other Central American nations are caught in this epidemic, as their rates are far higher. This holds particularly for the three belonging to the so-called Northern Triangle —El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala— with El Salvador exhibiting particularly high rates of 62.1 per 100,000 in 2017, although in recent months the rate has decreased to 30, followed by Honduras with 41.7³.

These countries have moved from political violence during the period of the civil wars of the 1980s to post-war violence of a social nature, characterised by the emergence of new and dangerous actors such as the *Maras* or street gangs⁴ and organised crime. Their members are offenders and criminals whose aims are neither ideological nor political, but personal or group-related, and mainly financial, as in the case of organised crime, but also identity-based and social in the case of the *Maras*. This new type of crime has been spreading like a cancer across the whole region, turning it into one of the most dangerous areas of the world. It also lies at the heart of the massive population shifts registered both internally —71,500 in El Salvador between 2006 and 2016, and 174,000 in Honduras

¹ Words of a *Mara* speaker during an interview with the digital newspaper *El Faro*.

² UNODC *Global Study on Homicide 2019*. Available at <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The name ‘mara’ is derived from ‘marabunta’, a term borrowed from the Spanish translation of the film title *The Naked Jungle*. Young Salvadorans in California adopted it as part of their slang and it became an important symbol of identity for them.

between 2004 and 2014— and externally over the past decade. The violence often leaves the population no other choice but to flee.

Whilst the three countries in the Northern Triangle are undeniably affected by violence, they do not suffer the same kind of problems or to the same extent, and certain differences are apparent. Guatemala has ‘a growing economy and the country is less affected by the Mara phenomenon, although it has a higher rate of organised crime, its state is weaker, there is more corruption among its politicians, and the army and the police have deeper criminal ties. Honduras is severely affected by both Maras and organised crime and its criminal ties within the police and the army are entrenched. El Salvador has fewer political problems and there is a low level of criminal ties with security forces. However, it is the country that suffers the most serious problem with Maras and faces the greatest difficulties in developing its economy’⁵.

Accordingly, this article will focus more on the problems affecting El Salvador, although almost everything that will be said about the Maras of this country equally applies to Honduras and Guatemala, both in terms of their origin and ensuing developments. Let us begin by looking at how this phenomenon originated and spread.

Understanding what Maras are

Origin

There were street gangs in Central America before the civil wars. However, the phenomenon of Maras as it is understood nowadays began in Los Angeles in the 1980s. At the time, the city was considered the Mecca of gangs and became the favourite destination of many families fleeing the Northern Triangle to escape war and the threats posed by paramilitary groups. Although the civil conflicts in Central America formally ended after the signing of the 1990s peace treaties, political and economic uncertainty continued to plague the region, as did migration to the north, with many emigrants entering illegally.

⁵ VILLALOBOS, Joaquín, “Los muros del Triángulo Norte”, *Revista NEXOS*, 1 August 2019. Available at <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=43589>

Between 1980 and 1990, the immigrant population from Central America tripled in the United States, and within that migratory context, their children were exposed to social exclusion and even ethnic violence. To defend themselves, this diaspora first joined *chicano* gangs, where they acquired extensive knowledge. Later they formed their own groups in Los Angeles, with the most relevant ones being *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS13) and *Barrio-18* (the 18th Street Gang), referring to the street where it originated.

In the 1990s, the USA started to perceive immigrants as a potential threat to national security and launched a mass deportation policy. In 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act was passed (IIRIRA) which significantly contributed to the criminalisation of immigrants and to the rise in the number of deportations with the introduction of various legal mechanisms. As a result, the USA deported an estimated 46,000 gang members to the Northern Triangle countries between 1998 and 2005, with a further 200,000 ordinary deportees⁶.

The returnees applied the modes of operation they had learned in L.A.'s dangerous streets and prisons to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Quickly, other young people already associated with street gangs joined them in these countries which led to a process of hybridisation involving existing gangs such as Mao Mao, Chancleta, Gallo or Morazán, in the case of El Salvador, incorporating the traits imported by the Californian-style gangs. The groundwork for this had been laid by the legacy of violence left behind by the wars.

The deportations took place at a moment of particular state weakness in the small countries of the Central American Isthmus, as they were in the midst of a transformation to adapt to the new post-war reality and to comply with the Peace Treaties. The latter demanded —among other measures— the democratisation of institutions and the creation of a new civilian police which was in the process of being set up and had not yet become fully effective. This situation created a power void which was skilfully exploited by the deported gang members whose gangs morphed into a mass tribal phenomenon of an anthropological character that gradually extended across the Northern Triangle and has kept a large part of the population in a state of oppression and fear ever since. In his

⁶ IZCARA PALACIOS, Simón Pedro, ANDRADE RUBIO, Karla Lorena “Causas e impactos de la deportación de migrantes centroamericanos de Estados Unidos a México”, *Estudios fronterizos*, vol. 16 no.31 Mexicali Jan/Jun 2015. Available at http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0187-69612015000100010

foreword to a book by the anthropologist Martínez D'aubuisson⁷, Oscar Martínez remarks about the MS13 gang: 'the *Salvatrucha* Mara is the tale of the failure of a country that did not know what to do with a bunch of youngsters who didn't know what to do with their lives.'

Becoming a gang member

The Mara phenomenon is essentially urban and takes root mainly in poor and marginalised neighbourhoods with low levels of state surveillance and control. Mara gangs draw on predominantly male youths who come from families torn apart by the war and who have dropped out of school before the age of 16, running away from home without even completing their secondary education. Seven out of ten come from households with a monthly income of less than 250 dollars. For these boys, especially for the youngest, Maras offer an alternative space for socialising and solidarity in the middle of an adverse and hostile environment. In time they grow more violent until they become full-blown criminals.

Young would-be members are accepted after having undergone harsh rites of passage such as strong physical attacks. Once in, the new members accept a series of strict rules and values and find themselves forced to develop strong ties of belonging, unity, loyalty and solidarity with the new 'family' while simultaneously weakening their links to their own families and to society. In principle, joining a gang is an irreversible process, as the leaders do not allow anybody to leave, unless this is achieved through joining some evangelical church, as will be seen later.

There are multiple reasons to ask for admission to a Mara. A large part of the appeal has to do with the excitement of belonging to a gang, particularly among the youngest recruits. The chance to 'show off' to friends and, above all, to develop their self-esteem and get recognition from the community plays an important role. In some cases, it is a question of protecting oneself from enemies, of avenging the death of a close friend or as a way to obtain money, drugs or women. Some —although the minority— state that they joined because they were forced to. As far as women are concerned, they tend to join somewhat

⁷ MARTÍNEZ D'AUBUISSON, Juan José, *Ver, oír y callar*. Un año con la mara Salvatrucha 13, Ed. Pepitas de calabaza, España 2017

later, around the age of 18, in many cases to flee family problems and in 12.3% of cases because they were forced to join the Mara⁸.

One of the most common burdens for youths is early parenthood: 40% have children before finishing school and before turning 18, which in turn reduces their chances of finding stable employment. The need for money to support a family turns into a pressing problem which —coupled with the lack of job opportunities— can push them into joining a Mara in order to provide for their families.

Inside the Mara, members ascend as they commit murders and earn the respect of the gang. While the members are minors they are very active, but once they reach between 26 and 35 years, they tend to see fewer advantages of belonging to a Mara. On the contrary, the percentage of respondents who want to give up this way of life —this is called being in the process of ‘calming down’— grows significantly as they grow up, start their own families and are faced with the difficulties caused by the violence between gangs, police persecution and years spent in prison.

The logic behind the Maras and the importance of the ‘other’

During the Los Angeles phase the members of MS13 (Mara Salvatrucha) were united with those of Barrio-18, an old gang that took them under its wing. For a while, they functioned like sister organisations which allowed the ‘clicas’ or cliques⁹ of the MS13 ‘to grow and claim important territories under the ward of their mentors. This explains the emergence of, amongst others, the *Normandie Locos Salvatrucha* and the *Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha* cliques who started displaying their symbols on walls in the

⁸ CRUZ, José Miguel et al, “La nueva cara de las pandillas callejeras: El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador”, Florida International University, USA, 2017.

⁹ The most basic cell of a *Mara* is the *clique* in the case of MS13 and the *tribe* in the case of Barrio 18. Cliques are semi-autonomous and not necessarily tied to any formal structure, which affords them a certain level of independence in their activities. Several cliques can constitute what MS13 calls a *programme* and Barrio 18 a *cancha* or court/playing field. *Programmes* report to a governing board called *ranfla* (in Honduras: group of people heading for the same place) or *mesa* (table). These boards are made up of the most experienced and respected gang members, most of whom are in prison. The higher level of the hierarchy comprises the *palabrerros* (perhaps borrowed from Columbian/Venezuelan Guajiro culture: a sort of mediator or arbiter), i.e. leaders of *programmes* or of the national *ranfla*. They operate inside or outside of prisons and are responsible for coordinating all criminal activities, extortion being one of the most important.

neighbourhoods and, using machetes, bullets and barbarous methods, elbowed their way to a position where their names inspired fear and respect.’¹⁰

But in 1988, the alliance between MS13 and Barrio-18 broke as a result of a fight during a gang party night on King Boulevard, and since that day the war—or ‘the cause’ as it is known in Mara jargon— between ‘the letter guys’ and ‘the number guys’ has become unstoppable to the point where its exacerbated hatred has swept across the borders of Central America and turned into the main catalyst and *raison d’être* of these groups and their actions. ‘For these youngsters, honour lies in barbaric acts and bravery in sacrifice, and only “the cause” makes life worth living.’¹¹

Mara members get caught up in a ferocious war between rival gangs, a never-ending spiral of revenge and settling of scores, or become the target of dire repression by the police – the third variable in this equation, by the gang itself or by new breakaway groups, as in the case of Barrio-18, which for a quite a while has already been divided into rival factions: *Barrio-18 Revolucionarios* and *Barrio-18 Sureños*.



Figure 1. The motto translates as: ‘See, hear and shut up’. Source: Comisión Española Ayuda Refugiado (CEAR, the Spanish Commission for Aid to Refugees)

<https://www.maraslaserie.com/>

Within this war logic, each action of MS13 provokes a reaction from Barrio-18 and vice versa. It is a sort of game consisting in carrying out actions or tests of bravery to hit the opponent and wait for their response. Each attack is followed by another, more forceful counter-attack. Gang warfare is a fight to the death, a kind of macabre game that consists

¹⁰ MARTÍNEZ D`AUBUISSON, op. cit., p. 19

¹¹ Ibid., p 63-64.

in killing each other tit for tat and which determines the gang member's status and life. Like in chess, each move implies a counter move, otherwise the whole loses its sense¹². The degree of respect commanded by a Mara member within his or her own Mara depends on the number of murders committed and the barbarity involved, as well as the victim's status within the rival group¹³.

Gang members' way of life

Gangs are groups that create their own rules and membership criteria and that are marked by an obsessive territorial logic. The territorial framework —usually a marginal neighbourhood or a hill— is their place of action which they consider their property. Mara members fight to maintain control over their physical space and defend it to the last. They even impose restrictions on the movement of its inhabitants, often according to the territorial limits established with the rival gang. Maras secure the support of local gang family members and also rely on 'falcons' or informers who act as their eyes and ears inside the neighbourhoods and supply them with all information.

The Mara gangs have established themselves on the ground as an alternative authority to the state that exacts 'taxes'. From that position, they run drug traffic or small dealing schemes as well as extorting small businesses and residents within their catchment area. The latter are charged 'rent' or 'housing'. Extortion is also used on delivery companies, street vendors, families that receive money transfers from abroad or that have their own work-related earnings, and on persons perceived to be disloyal to the Mara. The Maras impose tacit codes of conduct on inhabitants, and if the latter reject those, they suffer violence. If the victim refuses to play along or there is a delay in payment, a member of the family is kidnapped or killed as a means of pressure. Refusing to collaborate also means death, as does accidentally trespassing on a rival gang's territory¹⁴.

Gang members lay down the rules in the communities. People can see and hear, but they must never speak about or report anything or they risk being tortured or, in the worst case, murdered. At night, vehicles trying to enter the neighbourhoods must switch off their lights, otherwise they can come under fire. If a person wants to move between

¹² Ibid., p. 109.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ VILLALOBOS, art. cit.

neighbourhoods, they must request a permit and pay 5 dollars. Everyone is asked to produce their ID, and there are even rules regarding clothes. For example, wearing a T-shirt with the number 18 in a neighbourhood controlled by the MS13 Mara can be a reason to die.

Over the years, the Maras have engaged in drug trafficking and selling, often acting as a local security force for the small drug cartels. This has been accompanied by patterns of increasingly violent behaviour. Thus, their earnings from rackets, with rates going from 100 to up to 5,000 dollars monthly, are increased by the profits obtained from selling drugs or small-scale drug dealing, as well as payments received for contract killings and prostitution.

Over time, the Mara leaders have built up their capital. This became apparent during 'Operation Checkmate' in June 2016, when 77 MS13 members were arrested, 25 buses and 54 vehicles seized, and over 20 properties confiscated that were in the hands of straw men and trustees. Mara members also own legal businesses which they have managed to set up in order to launder money from illegal sources. The revenues have served to buy motels, bars, restaurants and workshops, as pointed out by Howard Cotto, chief of the National Civil Police force of El Salvador until a few months ago.

Leaving a Mara

As mentioned above, leaving a Mara is a complicated matter. If done without permission, it implies certain death, and obtaining the leaders' blessings involves long and arduous negotiations. When a member is in the process of 'calming down', he or she progressively pulls out of the gang's life but is still considered a member. This is the accepted way of leaving, but the steps to total withdrawal from the group need to constantly be negotiated with the Mara's leadership¹⁵.

Many departures take place via religious conversion and integration into an evangelical church, an experience which provides a safe haven that allows aspiring deserters to re-establish links with the community, to build their families and to look for educational or job opportunities without harassment from the gang. However, this way is not easy either, as any members wishing to leave the Mara are subjected to very close monitoring and

¹⁵ CRUZ, art. cit.

relentless surveillance to make sure that the ex-member's commitment to the religious faith he or she embraces and to the values associated with a pious existence is absolute¹⁶.

Other challenges faced when leaving a gang are the total lack of the skills needed for regular work, the lack of training opportunities, the constant threat emanating from old gang rivals, harassment from the police and security forces, and social discrimination on account of their past and their appearance¹⁷, since one of the most visible features of Mara members until recently were their tattoos, which are almost impossible to get rid of. Having said that, this tendency is changing, and tattoos are becoming less popular because of their conspicuousness.

Consequences of the violence

Beyond the loss of human life, the criminal activities that affect the region have devastating consequences for the legitimacy of institutions, for national economies and for social cohesion. The violence undermines society in that it reduces life expectancy, destroys its productive capital and puts macroeconomic stability at risk. Studies concerning the socioeconomic impact of violence reach different conclusions, but they all agree that the burden is very heavy¹⁸ and that it diverts significant state resources while suffocating private initiative.

In Honduras, for example, small enterprises generate between 60% and 70% of employment and the annual amount of extorted money they pay is estimated at 200 million dollars. In Tegucigalpa alone, 1,500 small shops closed down between 2016 and 2017, representing 30% of this kind of business in the Honduran capital. In El Salvador, 72% of small businesses are victims of extortion, which amounts to daily losses of 20 million dollars. Moreover, hundreds of employees in the public transport sector, one of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ALVARADO, Nathalie et al. "Crimen y violencia, un obstáculo para el desarrollo de las ciudades de América Latina y el Caribe", Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), November 2018, Available at <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/Crimen-y-violencia-Un-obstaculo-para-el-desarrollo-de-las-ciudades-de-America-Latina-y-el-Caribe.pdf>

the most affected by extortion, have been killed. In Guatemala, extortion has risen by 72% over the last four years, while small businesses represent 85% of employment¹⁹.



Figure 2. Number of applications for asylum from Northern Triangle countries in Central America to other countries around the world. Source: ACNUR, Map of the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador).

In 2016 alone, 93,000 applications for asylum were received from Northern Triangle countries in Central America to other countries around the world

Responses from different governments

Between 2003 and 2019, the governments of Central America implemented various strategies to fight against Mara activities, from hard-line approaches ('mano dura' or iron fist) and mass imprisonment. Examples include El Salvador's 'mano dura' and 'mano superdura' schemes of 2003-2004 and the 'Plan Escoba' (operation broom) in Guatemala, which were described as failures by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In addition, dialogue was set up between the government and the Maras in El Salvador, also known as 'the truce', which lasted from 2012 to 2014.

¹⁹ VILLALOBOS, art. cit.

The hard-line approach led to an increase of imprisonments, but killings also rose from 2,172 in 2003 to 3,825 in 2005, indicating that the intended goals were not achieved. As far as the dialogue in El Salvador is concerned, the initiative failed for various reasons. The gangs did not interpret the truce as a sophisticated strategy to reduce deaths but as a sign of state weakness. The effect turned out to be the opposite from that intended: not only were they not deterred, but they grew bolder through the knowledge of their power and gained in terms of capacity to intimidate in their campaign to consolidate territorial control²⁰. Moreover, the truce offered the two large Maras additional peace time which they used to reorganise internally.

As soon as the truce ended, homicides soared. The year 2015 saw 6,657 killings, which is equivalent to 103 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants. Partly, this came as a response to the drastic persecution of these groups initiated under the new government of President Sánchez Cerén (2014-2019), an ex-guerrilla fighter of the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN), thereby establishing a sad record by converting the country into the world's most violent nation without a war, according to UNODC sources.

Sánchez Cerén re-declared war on the Maras, launched the 'Plan Salvador Seguro' (Salvador Safety Plan) and implemented a series of 'extraordinary' measures to go after the Maras. He also ordered the Mara leaders who had been transferred to lower security-level prisons during the truce²¹ to be returned to the maximum security prison of Zacatecoluca. The plan included setting up an elite anti-gang battalion within the police, as well as three rapid strike forces within the army to support the National Police.

According to UNODC figures for 2017, there were only four other countries with homicide rates above 40 per 100,000 inhabitants, all located in America: El Salvador (62.1), Venezuela (57), Jamaica (57) and Honduras (41.7). The year 2019, however, saw an improvement of the situation in El Salvador, where the rate decreased to approximately 30. In contrast, it was Mexico's turn to head the ranking, following the upsurge it had

²⁰ FARAH, Douglas, "Pandillas de Centroamérica, más peligrosas que nunca", *Insight Crime*, 28 January 2016. Available at <http://es.insightcrime.org/analisis/pandillas-centroamerica-mas-peligrosas-nunca>

²¹ AGUILAR, Jeannette, "Las políticas de seguridad pública en El Salvador", 203-2018, Ed. BÖLL, El Salvador, January 2019, p. 57. Available at https://sv.boell.org/sites/default/files/las_politicas_de_seguridad_publica_en_el_salvador_2003-2018.pdf

experienced in the previous two years, reaching, according to latest data, a homicide rate of 85.4 per 100,000 inhabitants.

The new Salvadorean government under Nayib Bukele, who took office in June 2019, launched a new plan —the ‘Territorial Control Plan’— geared towards recovering the territories controlled by Maras and cutting off their sources of finance. So far, the new plan has led to a greater presence of security forces and army units, as well as transfers of prisoners in order to interrupt communication channels between convicts and the outside world and to prevent them from directing criminal activities from inside prison. Another objective is to dismantle the organisational structures that Mara members had progressively been building inside the prisons.

Final considerations

In view of the situation the Northern Triangle countries are facing, it is not surprising that their inhabitants find themselves forced to abandon them and to seek refuge in other countries. According to a 2019 survey carried out by the Central American University in El Salvador, 63.8% of Salvadoreans would like to leave the country, and a corresponding survey for Honduras by Red Jesuita puts the figure at 42% in the case of Hondurans²².

²² AGUILAR, art. cit.

Although the majority of migrants are motivated primarily by financial reasons and/or lack of employment, crime and violence are cited as the second reason for migrating in 41% of cases, particularly in El Salvador (48%) and Honduras (43%), and less so in Guatemala, where financial reasons predominate. Hence, the respective governments will have to adopt measures to protect their populations.

President Bukele, for example, has presented the Honduran Congress with a request for 91 million dollars for social projects to be implemented by the *Unit for Rebuilding the Social Fabric* in communities with Mara presence. In a similar context, El Salvador has recently passed a law to provide aid for citizens who have become internally displaced as a consequence of the violence. The law was drafted with technical support from ACNUR and establishes mechanisms to allow affected persons to reclaim properties which they were forced to abandon in their flight²³. In Honduras, where 247,000 people are estimated to have been displaced inside their own country as a result of the violence, the parliament is considering passing similar legislation²⁴.

Finally, in view of the fact that there are Mara members who want to leave the gangs but cannot discern any possible future, it would be advisable to support rehabilitation projects such as the ones proposed by the company *League Collegiate*. This company not only employs persons regardless of their tattoos and criminal records, but also offers them educational opportunities and help with any problems that arise.

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²³ DIAZ, Diana “Una nueva ley ayudará a los desplazados internos de El Salvador”. *New UN*. Available at <https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/01/1467771>

²⁴ Ibid.