
Gang Violence and Insecurity in Contemporary Central America

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Gang activity constitutes one of the most serious problems of crime in Central America. Since the end of the 1980s, a period of armed conflict:

gang violence has evolved from a localised, purely neighbourhood-based security concern into a transnational problem that pervades urban enclaves in every country in the region. The two predominant Central American gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang (Barrio 18), while originating in the Los Angeles region of the United States, have capitalised on globalisation trends and communications technologies to acquire arms, power and influence across the United States, Mexico, and Central America. (USAID, 2006)

Gang activity has developed into a complex, multifaceted, and transnational problem. This chapter will explore the origins and consequences of youth gang violence for contemporary Central America, focussing particular attention on the transnational and multidimensional nature of the problem.

The Latin American region has the dubious distinction of having the highest rates of crime and violence in the world. Homicide rates usually are considered to be the most reliable indicator of crime, because few murders go unreported. According to an extensive study (by the World Bank) of homicide rates for 1970–1994, the world average was 6.8 per 100,000 (Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza, 1998). The homicide rate in Latin America is estimated at 30 murders per 100,000 per year, whereas it stands at about 5.5 in the United States and about 2.0 in the United Kingdom, Spain and Switzerland. The Pan American Health Organisation, which reports a lower average for Latin America as a whole, of 20 per 100,000 people, says that ‘violence is one of the main causes of death in the Hemisphere [. . .] In some countries, violence is the main cause of death and in others it is the leading cause of injuries and disability’. (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001: 938–963). However, according to the United Nations Global Report on Crime, health

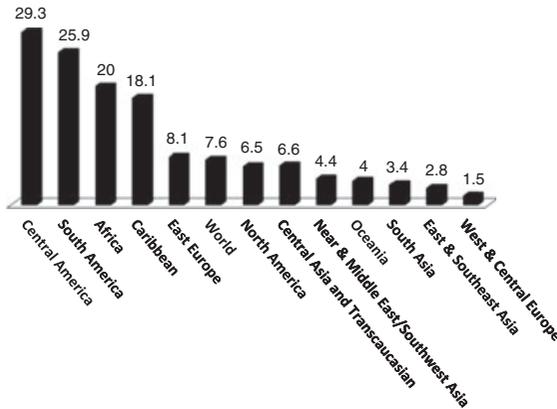


Figure 9.1. Intentional Homicide Rates per 100,000 Inhabitants by Region and Sub-Region

statistics as a basis for measuring homicide significantly under-report the total homicide levels; health statistics data are based on the classification of deaths made by physicians rather than by the police. According to the United Nations (UN) comparison, health-based homicide rates average about half those of Interpol or UN statistics (Newman, 1999: 12–13). In the region, there are 140,000 homicides each year, although not all of the countries in the region face the same magnitude and type of violence. In the 1990s, Colombia, faced with epidemic problems of drug trafficking and guerrilla violence, had one of the highest homicide rates anywhere (around 90 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants), whereas, in contrast, Chile, despite a history of political conflict, displayed homicide rates no greater than five deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 1996). According to this and other indicators, violence in Latin America is five times higher than in most other places in the world (Fajnzylber, Lederman and Loayza, 1998). Moreover, according to Gaviria and Pagés, the homicide rates are not only consistently higher in Latin America, but also the differences with the rest of the world are growing larger (Gaviria and Pagés, 1999).

Figure 9.1 presents data that shows that Latin America has the dubious distinction of having the highest rates of crime and violence in the world (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008). Within the Latin American region Central America exhibits the highest rates of homicide.

Crime Victimisation and Insecurity in Central America

Figure 9.2 indicates that homicide rates in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have increased steadily since the early 2000s, despite significant efforts by national governments to apply *mano dura* policies that emphasise

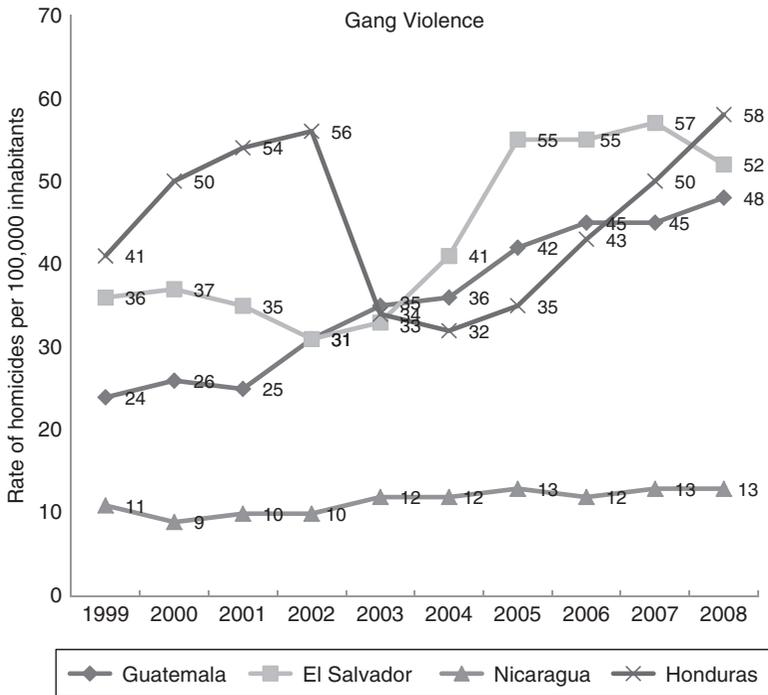


Figure 9.2. Central America: Homicide Rates (1998–2008)

law enforcement and punishment, including extensive use of the armed forces to repress gang and other criminal activity.

At its core, *mano dura* necessitates curtailing individual rights and re-empowering the military and police. These sets of policies normally include deploying the military for internal policing, in addition to lengthening prison sentences, suspending due process guarantees and other protections for alleged criminals, and aggressively arresting youths suspected of gang membership.

The evidence shows that criminal activity has not been disrupted by these strategies; instead, gangs and other criminal networks have increased their level of organisation, technological sophistication and international links. Moreover, because *mano dura* policies have led to the incarceration of growing numbers of at-risk youth, they have created prison conditions that facilitate the organisation of prison gangs, and that increase youths' risk of continuing involvement in gang-related activities. In El Salvador alone, police records show that some 60,000 young people were jailed as a result of the *mano dura* policies; Salvadoran police estimate that more than 10,000 of some 14,000 suspected gang members arrested in 2005 were later released for lack of evidence against them (Pérez, 2011).

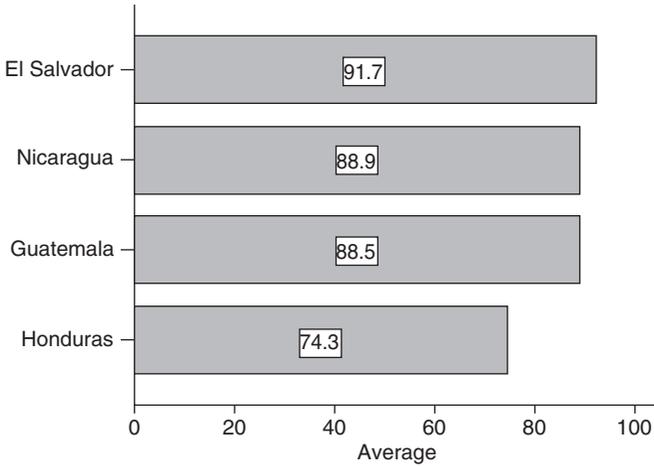


Figure 9.3. Percentage of Citizens who agree that Crime is a Threat to the Nation's Well-Being

When Central Americans are polled about their primary fears, personal security and neighbourhood safety are the most common concerns, and gangs are often cited as the reason for high rates of crime and violence in their communities. Figure 9.3 shows the extent to which citizens of the region consider crime a threat to the nation's well-being (the data are derived from a series of surveys conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP: <http://www.lapopsurveys.org>); the surveys are of national probability employing a multi-stage cluster design with a minimum of 1,500 cases, conducted in early 2008). Overwhelming majorities in each nation indicate that crime is a threat to the country.

Figure 9.4 shows the percentage of citizens in the Central American countries who express fear that they will be victims of crime in their neighbourhood. The data indicates that over 40 percent of those surveyed in Honduras and El Salvador fear falling victim to a crime in their neighbourhood. Close to 40 percent express the same feelings in Guatemala. Citizens in the country with the lowest homicide rate, Nicaragua, exhibit the lowest level of fear of becoming victims of crime.

The differences between the vast majorities who say that crime is a threat to the nation and who express fear of becoming victims of crime reflect the dichotomy between evaluations of the national condition, which is affected by media coverage and more remote perceptions, and feelings related to the respondent's neighbourhood, which could be seen as safer than other places. Nonetheless, the fact that more than a third of respondents say they fear becoming victims of a crime in their own neighbourhood should indicate the seriousness of the crime problem for nations in Central America. As we

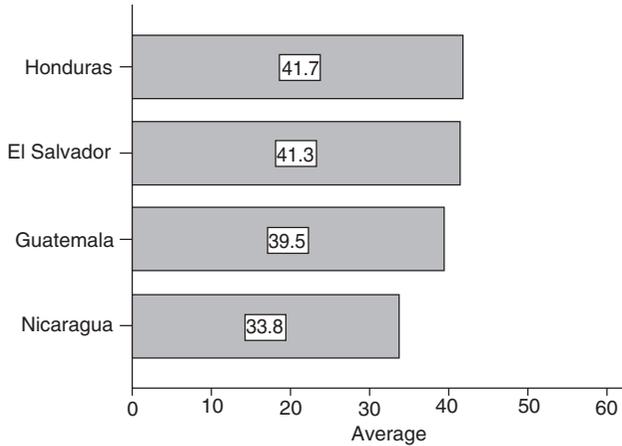


Figure 9.4. Percentage of Citizens who Express Fear at being Victims of Crime

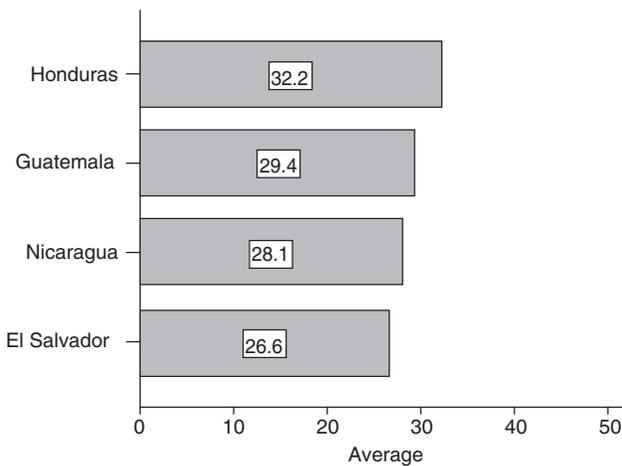


Figure 9.5. Percentage of Respondents whose Neighbourhood is Affected by Gang Activity

will see below, gang-related activity constitutes a particularly difficult and serious threat to the security and stability of democracy in Central America.

Figure 9.5 indicates the percentage of citizens who say that their neighbourhood is affected by gangs. We can observe that nearly a third of respondents in Honduras and Guatemala indicate their neighbourhoods are affected by gang-related activity. More than a fourth of Salvadorians say that their neighbourhood is affected by gangs.

The relationship between perceived gang activity and fear of becoming a victim of crime is very close. Figure 9.6 shows the impact of gang violence on the sense of security in respondents' neighbourhood. As perception of gang

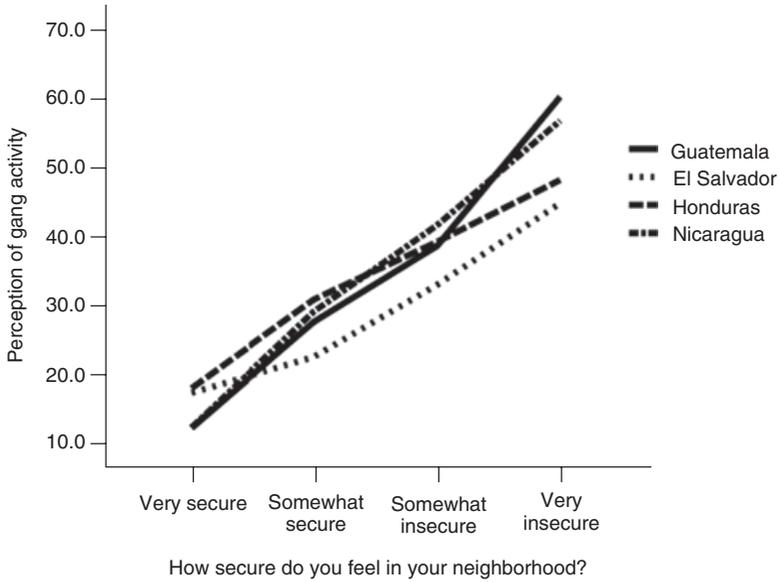


Figure 9.6. Gang Activity and Perceptions of Security in the Neighbourhood

activity increases, levels of insecurity also rise; although not a surprising finding, this empirical evidence demonstrates the psychological impact that gang violence has on citizens’ view of their own safety and security in their neighbourhood.

Determinants of Gang Violence

As stated earlier, youth gang violence must be analysed as a multi-dimensional problem, arising from domestic and international factors. Table 9.1 illustrates the various factors that have an impact on youth gang violence in the region.

Gangs are therefore the product of diverse social factors that express themselves in a variety of life conditions. In the end, these factors are responsible for shaping the conditions within which young people live and permit the emergence and growth of gang activity. For example, poverty is relevant only if it exists within an environment of social injustice and exclusion (Cruz, 2004). In a similar way, the Central American civil wars (Guatemala in 1960–1996 and El Salvador in 1980–1992), which have been mentioned by government officials and the media as the precursors of an army of youngsters ready to use violence, cannot explain entirely why hundreds of young people became involved in gang-related activity years after the war ended and without any historical memory of its violence. The first studies conducted on the

Table 9.1. Elements Associated with the Central American Gangs

Relational level	Causal category	Specific elements
Social	Social exclusion	Precarious socio-economic conditions
		Communities lack basic services
		Lack of educational opportunities
	Culture of violence	School expulsion or dropout
		Unemployment or underemployment
		Culturally defined models of personal relationships
Community	Rapid and disorganised urban growth	Patterns of teaching/learning violence
		Society's permissiveness regarding the use of weapons/availability of weapons
	Migration	Urban congestion
		Lack of recreational spaces
		Poor or non-existent community services.
Family and friends	Lack of social capital	Youth adopt gang culture outside their country
	Drugs	Youth return to their country without supportive infrastructure
		Deported criminals
	Domestic problems	Lack of trust between community members.
Individual	Friends	Lack of citizen participation in community affairs.
		Drug consumption
	Dynamics of violence	Drug traffic
Individual	Lack of individual or collective identity	Dysfunctional families
		Neglect by the parents and/or guardians
Individual	Lack of individual or collective identity	Family history of violence
		Gang members in the community
Individual	Lack of individual or collective identity	Gang members in schools
		Cycle reinforces and reproduces violence
Individual	Lack of individual or collective identity	Violence a means to create identity
		Absence of positive role models

Source: adapted from Cruz, 2004 and 2005

emergence of youth gangs did not show any evidence that those who fought during the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala were any more likely to engage in gang activity (Levenson, 1989; Argueta, 1992). The war's contribution also is questioned because Nicaragua, which suffered an armed conflict, does not have the type of gang problems that affect other Central American nations, and Honduras, which did not suffer an internal civil war at all, faces one of the most severe forms of youth gang violence. This does not mean that the wars had no impact whatsoever on the rise of gangs; the armed conflicts contributed by creating other conditions that would later favour the development of gangs in the region. They helped to generate an exile community in the United States and the subsequent migration that contributed to the diffusion of gang culture (Smutt and Miranda, 1998). Additionally, the

civil conflicts aggravated a culture of violence that existed in Salvadorian and Guatemalan society and made weapons more accessible. Central American gangs did not develop in a vacuum. Gangs are the heirs of urban juvenile groups that developed in the socio-economic conditions of urban areas, and were transformed by those conditions and by political decisions, from juvenile groups engaged in petty crimes to transnational criminal networks involved in drug trafficking, money laundering and serial murders. Therefore, gangs are a result of the social, political and economic environment that the population of the region has experienced in the last two decades or more. This environment represents, on the one hand, the confluence of several demographic and social conditions: the average age of the population, the level of poverty and inequality, the unequal access to educational opportunities, lack of health coverage, scarce housing, little or no safe recreational spaces; on the other hand, it is the product of the reciprocal effects of political and security decisions taken to combat the problem, which have made the situation worse. In other words, gangs in Central America are the result of social dynamics, where not only the identity of gang members and their environment matters, but the manner in which society tackles the phenomenon (Cruz, 2005).

While gangs across the region share similar origins and characteristics, there are key differences. Each particular case generates a series of conditions that determine the gang's behavioural dynamics. This explains the differences encountered in the behaviour of the *clikas* (cliques) that make up the basic organisational structure of gangs. Thus, normal behaviour for some members in one country could be considered 'unthinkable' for fellow members in another country. For example, a practice known as 'Running the South', which means to establish alliances between enemy gangs inside penitentiaries, could be acceptable in prisons in the United States and, recently, Guatemala, but it would be nearly impossible to establish in countries such as Honduras or El Salvador. In the latter, gang activity is dominated by the 18th street gang (Barrio 18) and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), making collaboration in prison less likely; moreover, government policy perpetuates this polarisation inside prisons.

Strocka argues that the organisational structure of youth gangs varies across and within countries (Strocka, 2006). While some gangs, for example the Salvadoran *maras*, display clear leadership and a well-developed hierarchical structure, 'others, such as the Brazilian *galeras cariocas*, are more egalitarian and less cohesive. The age of youth gang members also varies widely, ranging from as young as seven to about 30 years old. Although the overwhelming majority of youth gang members are male, both all-female and female-led youth gangs reportedly exist in a number of Latin American countries, including Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Peru' (Strocka, 2006: 135–136).

Moreover, the reasons that youth gangs are established, as well as the functions that they perform, vary widely. Some gangs, such as the Brazilian *quadrilhas*, pursue primarily economic interests, while others, like the *pandillas* in Peru, fulfil mainly social functions (related to the achievement of a positive social identity, control over territory and neighbourhood protection). Youth gangs also differ significantly in terms of their involvement in illegal and violent activities. The Costa Rican *chapulines*, for example, are centred mainly on pleasurable pursuits, such as playing football and consuming alcohol and drugs, and only occasionally engage in petty crime. The Salvadoran *maras*, on the other hand, are extremely violent and extensively involved in armed robbery, assaults and homicides. Some youth gangs, such as the Nicaraguan *pandillas*, are mainly territorial and tend to have strong ties with their local communities. However, other gangs, such as the Brazilian *quadrilhas*, have only weak relationships with their local communities and are indiscriminate in the scope of their criminal activities (Strocka, 2006).

In the cases of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, gang activity is primarily polarised by Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs, which are the most well organised and violent gangs in the region. According to the police, the gangs in the region are divided into three overall groups, and, while there is a degree of permeability between these groups, particularly between juvenile criminal gangs and organised criminal gangs, their activities and modus operandi are distinct. This typology is as follows:

- (i) Juvenile gangs (age range 9–20 years old):
There may or may not be an organisational hierarchy; they engage in minor crimes (petty theft, burglary, fighting amongst themselves, and so on); they serve as a breeding ground for more sophisticated gangs; the majority still live at home.
- (ii) Juvenile criminal gangs:
They possess defined organisational structures; they are used by organised crime and are capable of conducting more serious offences such as rape, larceny, homicide; most members have broken with family ties.
- (iii) Organised criminal gangs:
These are transnational criminal organisations; they have elaborate organisational structures, spanning several countries; they are linked to transnational drug trafficking and money laundering criminal organisations; they engage in homicides, kidnapping, drug trafficking, money laundering, and so on.

Only MS13 and M18 belong to the third group. The vast majority of youth gangs identified by the police belong to the first category. Table 9.2 shows an estimate of membership in the four countries with the highest level of gang

Table 9.2. Estimated Numbers of Gang Members (Comisión de Jefes de Policía de Centro América y El Caribe)

Country	Gang membership (predominantly MS-13 and 18th Street)
El Salvador	10,500
Honduras	36,000
Nicaragua	2,200
Guatemala	14,000
Totals	62,700

activity. The largest number of gangs, according to the police, is concentrated in Honduras. However, while the number may be less than in Guatemala and Honduras, El Salvador's gangs are probably the most violent in the region.

One of the major trends observed across the region is the declining age of entry into youth gangs (Cruz and Portillo, 1998). Another trend is the expansion of gang activity to rural areas. Gangs are no longer restricted to the big cities but increasingly emerge and operate in small towns and villages. Youth gangs are increasingly and more systematically involved in drug trafficking. As a consequence, the divide between youth gangs and organised narco-crime is gradually disappearing (Rodgers, 2003, Moser, Winton and Moser, 2005). Finally, another trend that has been observed, at least among Central American youth gangs, is their transformation into 'transnational' networks (Reguillo Cruz, 2005). In other words, youth gangs no longer operate only within the boundaries of a particular, relatively small neighbourhood, but increasingly extend their sphere of influence across cities, regions and countries.

It is commonly believed that deportees from the United States have contributed to the gang problem. According to numerous anecdotal accounts, some of those deported during the 1990s who arrived in the United States during the 1980s, and who had participated in Latino gangs in the United States, had minimal family or community ties in their home countries, and spoke limited Spanish. Consequently, their arrival may have facilitated the rise of gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

The level of deportations is related to US immigration policies. Deportations rose significantly after 1996, when the US government passed two new laws: the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA). The first law expanded the offences for which a non-citizen could be deported. Previously, only a fairly limited class of aggravated felonies, including murder and drug trafficking, could be the basis for deportation. IIRIRA extended the list to 28 specific offences, including any crime of violence

with a prison sentence of at least one year. Provisions of IIRIRA and AEDPA also greatly limited the number of deportation cases subject to judicial review and subjected many more to expedited removal processes (Hagan, Castro and Rodriguez, 2008).

In 2005, US law enforcement began to target transnational gang members for deportation in a programme known as Operation Community Shield. The programme was initially directed towards the Mara Salvatrucha, but was later expanded to cover other gangs. Under the programme until September 2008, 4,000 suspected gang members and associates had been charged criminally, and more than 7,000 were charged with immigration violations and deported (Vaughan and Freere, 2008).

Overall, the information available suggests that the large majority of deportees are not gang members. However, among the more than 200,000 people deported to Central America since 2004, at least a few thousand were members of gangs. Nonetheless, while US immigration policies may be a contributing factor in the proliferation of youth gangs in Central America, the main determinants of gang activity are related to socio-economic conditions that undermine family and community cohesion.

In order to fully understand the gang problem in Central America we must examine further each national case. While there are common social and economic problems shared by the nations of the region, there are historical and socio-political factors unique to each country that help explain the differences in the levels and lethality of gang activity. The analysis will focus on El Salvador and Guatemala, among the nations with the most serious gang-related problems.

El Salvador

The origins of El Salvador's violent gangs can be traced to the Salvadorians and their children who fled the country during the civil war of the 1980s. By 1990, over 700,000 had settled mainly in Los Angeles, California, and also in Washington DC, suburbs of New York City and in parts of Maryland, where they had formed their own gangs or joined existing gangs (USAID, 2006). Salvadorian youth gravitated in particular toward two gangs that became increasingly organised in US cities in the 1990s: the 18th Street gang (Mara Barrio 18), composed mainly of Mexican-American youth and named after 18th Street in Los Angeles, and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), a gang formed by Salvadorian youth (Hayden, 2004; Cruz, 2005).

In 1992, the Peace Accord between the government and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) marked an end of the twelve-year war and the beginning of the flow of Salvadorians back to their country. In

1996, changes to US immigration laws expanded the reasons for deporting non-citizens, including lawful permanent residents. Although these deported immigrants were not identified as criminals or gang members at the time of deportation, some had been incarcerated in the California prison system. Some of these deportees were gang members, including members of the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, and took many aspects of US gang culture back to El Salvador, including hand signals, insider language, styles of dress and propensity for violence. Salvadorian gang members learned much of their craft from the Mafia Mexicana, then the most influential gang in Southern California (USAID, 2006).

The failure of the post-war Salvadorian government to address the structural causes of the civil war and to construct effective democratic institutions meant that conditions on the ground in El Salvador were ripe for the spread of gang culture, especially in marginalised communities. In particular, reductions in government expenditures on social services throughout the 1990s served to limit young people's opportunities to pursue decent and dignified lives in El Salvador. Furthermore, the Salvadorian government pursued policies aimed at transforming its traditional dependence on the agricultural sector and promoting foreign investment and labour-intensive exports. However, growth in the export sector has not kept pace with the displacement of rural populations who depended on agriculture for their survival, and the Salvadorian economy has come to depend increasingly on remittances from abroad. Poor, marginalised youth in post-war El Salvador thus had few options for the pursuit of a decent life. In addition, generalised levels of violence in post-war Salvadorian society have remained extraordinarily high. The weaknesses of post-war criminal justice institutions also contributed to the expansion of the gang phenomenon by failing to establish the rule of law or provide for citizen security in the country.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of gang members in El Salvador, rough estimates exist. The National Civilian Police, for example, estimate there are approximately 20,900 members, whereas the government's Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública (National Council on Public Security) calculates upwards of 39,000 members (22,000 in MS-13; 12,000 in the 18th Street (Barrio 18); and another 5,000 in other gangs) (Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública, 2008; *El Nuevo Diario*, 2011).

The factors that lead young people in El Salvador to join gangs are related to socio-economic conditions, and the failure of state policy to effectively deal with the underlying structural factors that generate gang activity. First, gangs often dominate the most marginalised urban areas. In some cases, poverty levels in these areas contribute to the ongoing activity of gangs. The breakdown of the family, social and community structures, lack of basic services, and lack of opportunities for jobs or recreational activities contribute

to a climate of desperation that drives young men in particular to join gangs. Gangs in turn are able to control these spaces with little challenge from law enforcement. Second, in circumstances of high unemployment, gangs offer an alternative means to acquire goods, and they offer social acceptance to these otherwise marginalised youths. Third, there is a direct correlation between school dropout rates and gang activity. In many cases, youths have poor attendance records and dismal grades, which make their retention even harder. A total of 40 percent of Salvadorian children drop out of school before grade 5. Schools lack the resources, both in terms of infrastructure and curriculum, to provide an educational experience that could serve to incorporate young people into society and provide them with hope for the future.

The reaction of the state to this problem has at times made the situation worse. The state has responded to gang activity with hard-line law enforcement tactics. In the worst cases, there are arbitrary detentions, torture and extra-judicial executions (US State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2004). For the most part, these repressive tactics have not deterred gangs from forming and operating, but rather have spurred gangs to consolidate, sometimes coming into direct confrontation with the state.

El Salvador's civil war (1980–1992), one of the most devastating armed conflicts in Latin America resulting in the deaths of more than 75,000 people, left a legacy of violence that is still felt today. Approximately 30,000 soldiers, over 6,400 national police and other security forces, and over 8,500 FMLN combatants were demobilised as a result of the terms of the Peace Accords (Montgomery, 1995; Byrne, 1996; Lungo Uclés, 1996; LeoGrande, 1998; Wood, 2003). Thousands of trained fighters were without jobs and struggling to exist, and thousands of firearms were available. The war engendered a culture in which the use of violence became common and people often used violence as the first response to settle conflicts. Moreover, the demobilisation of paramilitary forces after the Peace Accords in 1992 left thousands of small-calibre arms on the streets. Weapons proliferation is made easier by little or no controls on weapons by the state, easy access to trafficking routes and the availability of weapons cached from the civil conflict. Gangs, therefore, have found easy access to all kinds of weaponry.

Finally, El Salvador serves as a critical point of trans-shipment of drugs originating in Colombia and destined for the US market. Drug trafficking has created sophisticated and well organised crime networks in the country. The resulting flow of drugs into El Salvador also contributes to higher levels of drug consumption and addiction, which in turn may lead to more gang violence (US Department of State, 2008).

In March 2012, El Salvador's two largest street gangs, the MS-13 and the Barrio 18 signed a truce. In return for stopping the violence between them,

the Salvadoran government agreed to transfer 30 of the gangs' leaders from a maximum-security facility to other prisons around the country, increased visitation rights and removed the military from various jails. The truce was brokered by an ex-guerrilla and former congressman, Raúl Mijango, and a military chaplain, Bishop Fabio Colindres. They had negotiated in secret for months prior to the announcement, under the auspices of the Security Minister at the time, retired army general David Munguía Payes. The first hundred days after the truce was signed showed a 50 percent decline in homicides (InSight Crime, 2012). Subsequent reports showed the trend of homicides maintaining their nearly 50 percent drop (InSight Crime, 2013). Despite the dramatic decrease in homicide rates, doubts remain as to the long-term effects of the truce. Surveys have shown that a majority of Salvadorians express little confidence in the truce, and are very sceptical of the gangs' motives. Additionally, analysts have questioned the effects of the truce on overall law enforcement efforts to control transnational criminal networks. Douglas Farah, of the Center for International and Strategic Studies, has argued that gang leaders 'are beginning to understand that territorial control and cohesion make it possible for them to wring concessions from the state while preserving the essence of their criminal character' (Farah, 2012: 1).

Guatemala

Guatemala signed Peace Accords in 1996, ending a 36-year civil conflict that left over 200,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands more maimed and internally displaced (Aguilera Peralta, Bran and Ogaldes, 1996; Torres-Rivas, 1997; Sieder, 1998; Azpuru, 1999; Jonas, 2000; McCleary, 1997; also Figueroa Ibarra in this volume). However, the transition from war to peace has not been a painless passage and peace continues to remain elusive. Since the accords were signed over a decade ago, Guatemala has earned the dubious distinction of being one of the most violent countries in the region and the world, with homicide rates comparable to those in war-torn African countries. The homicide rate in Guatemala was 47 per 100,000 people, compared to 5.7 per 100,000 in the US (USAID, 2006).

Violence is not a new phenomenon in Guatemala. The civil conflict was characterised by high levels of violence, much of it state-sponsored or institutional, the effects of which continue to manifest themselves in the country today. There are significant levels of economic, institutional and social violence in Guatemala. Organised crime networks exploit the weak rule of law to carry out their illicit businesses of money laundering, kidnapping and trafficking of narcotics, contraband, weapons and people (Azpuru, 1999; Jonas, 2000). Youth gangs have emerged on the scene as willing functionaries of these organised crime networks at one end of the spectrum and, at the other,

as their convenient criminal scapegoats. Despite the end of the civil conflict, there are still incidents of institutional violence in the country, including police brutality and extrajudicial killings, as the state attempts to respond to mounting pressure to address high crime levels. Levels of social violence are also high in Guatemala, with a very high incidence of intra-family violence, including domestic abuse, child abuse and sexual violence, all of which contribute to perpetuating the cycle of violence within successive generations (Human Rights Watch, 2007: 206–210).

Youth under the age of eighteen comprise nearly half of the country's population. Many studies have correlated the 'youth bulge' factor with increased potential for violence (Fuller and Pitts, 1990; Goldstone, 1991). The majority of gang members in Guatemala are under 24 years of age. The average age of gang recruits appears to be on the decline, with youth as young as eight years old now joining gangs and taking on low-level functions such as serving as *banderas* (look-outs) and drug distributors in their barrios. According to the National Civil Police, there are over 400 *maras* in Guatemala, with about 14,000 members. The two largest youth gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang, with members comprising approximately 80 percent of the total number of gang members in the country, and 18th Street (Barrio 18), whose members comprise about 15 percent, and the remaining 5 percent made up of other smaller, copycat gangs (USAID, 2006).

A number of factors, socio-economic and contextual, create an environment for gang activity in Guatemala. To a great extent these factors parallel the problems that give rise to gangs in El Salvador. While rural Guatemala is by no means crime-free, crime levels, drugs and gang activity are most intense in urban and suburban areas of Guatemala. The lack of jobs in rural areas and the search for a better life have pushed many Guatemalans to migrate from rural to urban areas. Rapid urbanisation has concentrated the demographic group most inclined to violence—unattached young males. Gang members themselves largely come from poor, marginalised, urban areas, and are products of an environment characterised by overwhelmed and ineffective service delivery, social exclusion and weak social capital, disintegrated families, overcrowded living conditions, and greater population density (Cruz, 2004) (USAID, 2006). In 2000, the average number of children per household in poor urban areas of Guatemala was nearly five (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2005), resulting in large families, often headed by single mothers who must work long hours outside the home to sustain their large families. Fathers are scarce and, where they are a part of the family, alcoholism and domestic abuse are common. As families struggle to fulfil their most basic needs (food, shelter, electricity), other needs are neglected, such as healthy emotional bonds between parents and children, and the transfer of positive values.

While poverty is not the primary cause of crime and violence, it is one of several key factors; over 50 percent of all Guatemalans (and 76 percent of indigenous groups) live in poverty (World Bank, n.d.). The poor are disproportionately affected by gang violence. In many poor neighbourhoods, gangs are involved in extortion by forcing, upon threat of violence, local businesses such as taxi/bus drivers and small business owners to pay *impuestos de guerra* (war taxes).

Youth directly suffer the effects of poverty, which include unemployment, poor education and minimal access to high quality services. Guatemala suffers from the region's lowest public investment in social services and lowest tax collection base (less than 10 percent of GDP) from which to fund these investments. Guatemala scores consistently low on the United Nations' Human Development Indices, including infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy (PNUD, 2006). Service delivery in poor, urban areas is increasingly characterised by increased law enforcement efforts to make arrests, but much less so by improvements in service delivery in the areas of health, education and other critical social services.

Drug consumption is practically a given with gang members. The drug trade is linked to inter-gang violence to control the drug market in local barrios. Drugs are often the motive behind robberies and assaults, intra-family quarrels between drug users and their families, and the murder of drug addicts by vigilante groups perpetuate an environment in which violence is taken for granted (Moser and McIlwaine, 1999).

The survivors of Guatemala's civil conflict inherited a legacy of institutional violence, hostility and injustice that continues to affect the daily lives of Guatemalans (Amnesty International, 2002; Sieder, Thomas Vickers and Spence, 2002). There exists a widespread culture in Guatemala that violence is an acceptable means of resolving conflict and Guatemalans do not have faith in the state's ability to provide anything other than partial and arbitrary justice (Archdiocese of Guatemala, 1999; Schirmer, 1998). The conflict also ensured that weapons would be readily available.

Since the conflict ended, very few weapons have been taken out of circulation. Approximately 2 million arms are estimated to be in the hands of 36 percent of the civilian population. Of these, only approximately 253,500 are legally registered, according to the National Civilian Police. In addition, organised criminal groups are believed to have imported large quantities of arms (Moser and Winton, 2002). Finally, the rapidly growing number of private security firms in the country has also increased the number of firearms (Munaiz and Mendoza, 2007).

In addition, the justice and security sectors in Guatemala are weak, corrupt, overwhelmed and neglected. Judicial impunity has emboldened organised criminal entities and gangs. There are severe shortages of trained

judges, resulting in individuals generally spending days in pre-trial detention before ever seeing a judge. Accused spend weeks, months and often years in pre-trial detention centres where conditions are often worse than prisons. Prisons are overcrowded and lack adequate rehabilitation programmes. Gangs routinely replicate in prison hierarchical and organisational structures exhibited on the streets. Gang leaders arrested are often able with little effort to continue dominating members in prison and commanding gang activity on the outside. The conviction rate in Guatemala, and other countries in Central America, is less than 10 percent for all cases where a complaint is filed (USAID, 2006). Police suffer from weak capacity and lack the necessary equipment and training to deal effectively with gang activity and other crime-related problems. The military is often used to supplement police work with the attendant problems of the militarisation of police work, which thus degenerates further into violations of human and civil rights, perpetuating a culture of violence and making gangs ever more lethal.

Police rarely carry out significant or efficient investigations, and often make arrests only if the perpetrator is caught *in flagrante*. Because of deficiencies in the work of the police, many of those arrested end up going free on technicalities or lack of evidence. In many cases, police send those whom they arrest immediately to pre-trial detention, which is illegal without an order from a judge. Police officers have been linked to the practice of 'social cleansing' against gang members, common criminals and people otherwise considered 'undesirable' – prostitutes, street children, transvestites and other such groups. Some vigilante groups have been known to be engaged in such crimes and have enjoyed a degree of police support. The police also have been accused of abusing people arrested for minor crimes, raping women on police premises and in prisons, torture and other practices that constitute clear violations of human rights (Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA, Guatemala Peace and Development Network, and New York Office of the Rigoberta Menchu Foundation, 2003).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the problem of youth gang violence in contemporary Central America, focussing special attention on the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala. The chapter has provided evidence of the magnitude of the problem; evidence suggests that the region is the most violent in the world and survey results show that citizens express overwhelming concern about the impact of crime on their societies.

Furthermore, the analysis has shown that Central American gangs are a multi-dimensional problem, a result of an evolving interaction of different

factors that include social and political conditions, cultural and historical legacies, and personal and collective decision-making. The emergence of gangs is not limited to patterns of immigration or poverty. To understand the existence of these groups it is important (i) to understand the structures of Central American societies, and the way in which they interact with each gang member's social conditions, personal relationships and community dynamics; and (ii) how the gangs' actions and society's reactions contribute to the reproduction, limitation or reduction of the gangs' existence.

Gangs are, therefore, the product of ongoing social and historical factors. Gangs did not appear spontaneously, and will not disappear, unless the social conditions are addressed. This includes, but is not limited to, overcoming the social pathologies that exclude many young people from productive society; promoting education and social cohesion; improving urban planning; developing a strategy to include immigrants as productive members of society; encouraging community and local acceptance, and participation of former gang members; fighting drug trafficking and drug abuse; creating support networks for those with financial and social disadvantages; and increasing training and job opportunities.

The evidence is clear that the current emphasis on law enforcement has not succeeded. Gang violence is worse today than fifteen years ago. Recent efforts at establishing a truce between gangs in El Salvador, while controversial, provide an opportunity to start dealing with the underlying causes of the violence. The solution must include prevention, rehabilitation and incorporation of gang members into society.

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