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How the Street Gangs Took Central America

Ana Arana

WHILE WASHINGTON SLEPT

LAST DECEMBER, a bus driving through the northern city of Chamalecon in Honduras was stopped by gunmen. The assailants quickly surrounded the bus and opened fire with their AK-47s, killing 28 passengers. The attackers, police later revealed, had been members of a notorious street gang known as Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13) and had chosen their victims at random. The slaughter had nothing to do with the identities of the people onboard; it was meant as a protest and a warning against the government's crackdown on gang activities in the country. (U.S. officials subsequently arrested Ebner Anibal Rivera-Paz, thought to be the mastermind of the attack, in February in the Texas town of Falfurrias.)

The attack and the subsequent arrest were only the latest sign of the growing power of Central America's gangs and their ability to shuttle between their home countries and the United States. In the past few years, as Washington has focused its attention on the Middle East, it has virtually ignored a dangerous phenomenon close to home. Ultraviolent youth gangs, spawned in the ghettos of Los Angeles and other U.S. cities, have slowly migrated south to Central America, where they have transformed themselves into powerful, cross-border crime networks. With the United States preoccupied elsewhere, the gangs have grown in power and numbers; today, local officials estimate their size at 70,000–100,000 members. The

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AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Boys in the hood: suspected gang members, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, August 18, 2003

marabuntas, or *maras*, as they are known (after a deadly species of local ants), now pose the most serious challenge to peace in the region since the end of Central America's civil wars.

Nor is the danger limited to the region. Fed by an explosive growth in the area's youth population and by a host of social problems such as poverty and unemployment, the gangs are spreading, spilling into Mexico and beyond—even back into the United States itself. With them, the *maras* are bringing rampant crime, committing thousands of murders, and contributing to a flourishing drug trade. Central America's governments, meanwhile, seem utterly unable to meet the challenge, lacking the skills, know-how, and money necessary to fight these supergangs. The solutions attempted so far—largely confined to military and police operations—have only aggravated the problem; prisons act as gangland finishing schools, and military operations have only dispersed the gangs' leadership, making bosses harder than ever to track and capture.

If Central America is going to make a stand, it must do so quickly. And it must take a new approach, one that is multilateral, combines police work with prevention, and attacks the region's underlying ills.

Only such a multipronged approach has a chance of stemming the growth of the *maras*. Fortunately, the necessary expertise already exists: in the United States, cities such as Boston and San Jose have managed highly successful antigang campaigns that could be emulated south of the border. The problem for Central America is one of political will, funding, and timing. Washington can help with all three, and should do so. Not only does the problem threaten the United States, but it started there, too.

IN THE GHETTO

THE ROOTS of the *maras*' presence in Central America can be traced back to 1992. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, police there determined that most of the looting and violence had been carried out by local gangs, including Mara Salvatrucha, then a little-known group of Salvadoran immigrants. (*Mara* is slang for "gang," and *trucha*—"trout" in Spanish—is slang for "a shrewd person.") In response, California implemented strict new antigang laws. Prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults instead of minors, and hundreds of young Latin criminals were sent to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. Next came the "three strikes and you're out" legislation, passed in California in 1994, which dramatically increased jail time for offenders convicted of three or more felonies.

In 1996, Congress extended the get-tough approach to immigration law. Noncitizens sentenced to a year or more in prison would now be repatriated to their countries of origin, and even foreign-born American felons could be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they served their prison terms. The list of deportable crimes was increased, coming to include minor offenses such as drunk driving and petty theft. As a result, between 2000 and 2004, an estimated 20,000 young Central American criminals, whose families had settled in the slums of Los Angeles in the 1980s after fleeing civil wars at home, were deported to countries they barely knew. Many of the deportees were native English speakers who had arrived in the United States as toddlers but had never bothered to secure legal residency or citizenship.

The deportees arrived in Central America with few prospects other than their gang connections; many were members of MS-13 and

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another vicious Los Angeles group, the 18th Street Gang (which took the name Mara 18, or M-18, in Central America). Local governments—which were desperately trying to rebuild after a decade of civil strife—had no idea who their new citizens really were: the new U.S. immigration rules banned U.S. officials from disclosing the criminal backgrounds of the deportees.

The result, predictably, was a disaster. At first, few Central American officials paid attention to the new arrivals. But the returnees, with their outlandish gang tattoos, their Spanglish, and their antiauthoritarian attitudes, soon made themselves noticed. Shortly after their arrival, crack cocaine was introduced to El Salvador, and related arrests, which had been in the single digits in 1995, climbed to 286 three years later. By 1999, terms such as “crack babies” and “crack dens” had become as common to Salvadoran newspaper readers as they were to readers in Los Angeles. The same trend, meanwhile, occurred in Honduras and Guatemala. “We had these guys arriving in fresh territory and they did what they knew how to do best,” said Lou Covarrubiaz, a former San Jose police chief turned police trainer in El Salvador.

In the following years, the deportations continued. As more and more hard-core gang members were expelled from Los Angeles, the Central American *maras* grew, finding ready recruits among the region’s large population of disenfranchised youth (according to the United Nations, 45 percent of Central Americans are 15 years old or younger). In El Salvador (a country of 6.5 million people), the gangs now boast 10,000 core members and 20,000 young associates; in Honduras (with a population of 6.8 million), the authorities estimate the gang population at 40,000. Their median age is just 19 years old, although their leaders are often in their late 30s and 40s.

Today, the gangs regularly battle each other and the police for control of working-class neighborhoods and even entire cities. Fifteen municipalities in El Salvador are believed to be effectively ruled by the *maras*. Soyapango, a gritty working-class neighborhood of San Salvador that was once home to leftist guerrillas, is now the subject of a fierce turf war between M-18 and MS-13. Municipal bus drivers have refused to traverse the area since three of their colleagues were killed by gang members in April 2004, and an estimated 300 families fled the neighborhood last year.

M-18, with its connections to the U.S. 18th Street Gang (which the FBI calls a “megagang”), is far better organized than its local rival, but in both cases, the *maras* function as surrogate families—albeit ultraviolent ones—for their members. Often recruiting children as young as nine, the gangs initiate their members with beatings: three older members will punch and kick a recruit nonstop for 13 seconds. Once they recover, the new junior gang members engage in robbery or petty crime or serve as lookouts for older members. Their more seasoned comrades, meanwhile, engage in drug dealing, burglaries, and contract killings. The *maras*’ members also act as foot soldiers for pre-existing drug-trafficking networks and for international car-theft rings and run sophisticated alien-smuggling operations. Thanks to their work, overall crime has increased dramatically throughout the region. Honduras today has a murder rate of 154 per 100,000—higher even than Colombia’s, where, despite an ongoing civil war, the murder rate is just 70 per 100,000.

THE STRONG HAND

IN 2002, the embattled Central American republics began to fight back. The charge was led by Honduras, where Ricardo Maduro, a Stanford graduate, was elected president in November 2001 on a get-tough platform. Maduro, whose son had been killed in an attempted kidnapping in 1997, introduced a series of “zero tolerance” laws empowering the government to imprison people for up to 12 years merely on suspicion of gang membership (often determined simply by the presence of distinctive tattoos, which members wear on their necks, arms, and legs).

Maduro’s “*mano dura*” (“strong hand”) approach had an immediate impact, and El Salvador soon adopted a similar program. Many young gang members were quickly pulled off the streets and thrown into prison. Within a year, the Honduran prison system had swelled to 200 percent beyond capacity, leading to several prison riots in April 2003 and May 2004. Guatemala, Panama, and Nicaragua are now considering similar policies.

Despite initial signs of success, however, human rights groups bitterly criticized the new hard-line approach, and local governments soon began to realize what U.S. officials had learned in the early 1990s:

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that tough legislation alone cannot fix the gang problem. Central America was trying to arrest itself out of its gang trouble without providing the sorts of social and educational programs that can keep kids out of gangs in the first place or persuade gang members to defect. According to Covarrubiaz (the former San Jose cop), get-tough programs “work temporarily, but do not address the real problems.”

This soon became obvious throughout the region. The *maras* retaliated against the crackdown by launching a wave of random violence. Shortly after the introduction of the new antigang laws, they began killing and beheading young victims; at least a dozen decapitated bodies were found in Honduras and Guatemala, grisly symbols of the *maras*' undiminished power. As gang leaders were jailed, new leaders sprang up to take their places. MS-13 and M-18 also began to scout abroad for more hospitable terrain, turning their sights first on Mexico and then back on the United States.

HOMeward BOUND

IN TAPACHULA, a Mexican city on the Guatemalan border, the *maras* began to prey on poor immigrants heading north to enter the United States illegally. Maiming and killing these undocumented workers became a sort of marketing message for the gangs: it sent a warning that only those who paid gang-connected “coyotes” (who often charge \$5,000 to \$8,000 a head) to smuggle them into the United States would make it alive.

Meanwhile, MS-13 set up shop in seven Mexican states, from Chiapas, in the south, all the way up to Tamaulipas, on the U.S. border. According to the Mexican National Migration Institute, MS-13 quickly established working relationships with a number of new Mexican drug cartels, helping them wrest control of various U.S. drug markets from more established smuggling rings. As they expanded northward, meanwhile, the *maras* left in their wake what had become their traditional trademark: the tortured bodies of young women.

In the last two years, Central American members of MS-13 have begun to return to the United States itself. This time, however, they are appearing in nontraditional areas, ranging from New York City to suburban Maryland and Massachusetts—anywhere there are

significant Salvadoran populations. Local authorities are often unaware of the newcomers' actual identities, assuming that they come from Southern California. Once ensconced, the gangs grow quickly, using their connections to alien-smuggling rings to ensure a steady supply of recruits. Many of their new members are children who were left behind in Central America when their parents moved illegally to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Now they are rejoining their parents—but often after they have already been recruited by the *maras* in the rough neighborhoods where they grew up.

MS-13 may have originated in the United States during the early 1980s, but the gang that has recently returned to the country is much more dangerous than its original incarnation. The group has grown more sophisticated and developed a taste for (and skills with) more high-powered weaponry (AK-47s, left over from the recent civil wars, are easily obtained in Central America). At the same time, in the Washington, D.C., area, where MS-13 now has an estimated 5,000 members, it has begun using machetes (the traditional weapon of the Central American peasant) as a favorite killing tool.

Throughout the United States, the returning *maras* have quickly engaged in a variety of criminal enterprises. “They are not sophisticated enough to move into financial crime,” said one U.S. official, “but they can earn a lot of money hauling people into the United States.” The gangs engage in car theft and other types of robbery and traffic in stolen documents, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines, using children as couriers and to distract the police. “Having community kids dressing like them and organized in small cliques can deflect attention from the big guys,” said Detective Tony Moreno of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Besides the usual problems caused by such activity, the *maras* have recently raised other, more specific security threats. In September 2004, U.S. officials grew concerned when Honduran authorities reported sighting in Tegucigalpa a known al Qaeda operative named Adnan G. El Shukrijumah, and rumors circulated of a meeting between the jihadists and the *maras*. Central American officials quickly denied that any such meeting had taken place. But the danger of such a link being established remains very real: “If they can smuggle people looking for a job [into the United States],” said Joe Torres, an immigration official, “they can smuggle people interested in terror.”

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BLAME GAME

AS THE Central American gangs have grown, so has the argument over who is to blame for them. Some Central American government officials have accused the United States of inflicting the problem on them, comparing Washington's deportation of gang members to the 1980 Mariel boat lift, when Fidel Castro supposedly emptied his prisons and shipped the inhabitants north to Miami. Meanwhile, U.S. officials, including Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton, think the Central Americans should shoulder the problem alone and favor continued deportations. Such mutual recriminations are typical of the debate over gang problems and help explain why the affected countries have yet to develop a united front to deal with them.

It is unrealistic, however, to expect any of the tiny Central American countries, with their fragile governments, to take the lead in organizing a multilateral approach; that role can only be played by the United States. Yet so far Washington has proved reluctant to take that job. Part of the problem is that for the last 15 years U.S. policy toward Central America has essentially been limited to immigration and drugs, and thus the gang problem has fallen through the administrative cracks, with no agency attempting to formulate or oversee an integrated approach. Responsibility for tracking gang activity domestically falls to several different parts of the U.S. government. The FBI has national oversight over any criminal activity associated with violent street gangs. But MS-13's involvement in alien smuggling has also brought it within the jurisdiction of the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, both divisions of the Department of Homeland Security that track crimes committed near or involving the border.

U.S. law enforcement agencies do all have access to the National Crime Information Center, a federal database that lists gang members who have served prison terms. But according to Wesley McBride, president of the California Gang Investigators Association, a more effective nationwide database of all gang members (convicted and unconvicted) is needed, as well as a standard definition of what gangs are and what constitute gang crimes. As McBride told the Senate Judiciary Committee last year, "no federal agency collects or disseminates gang-crime statistics or demographics in order to establish

the true picture of gangs.” A national gang intelligence center, to be headed by the FBI, will be established at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., next year. But to be effective, such an operation would have to be able to coordinate information from across Central America.

In the meantime, different regions within the United States are tackling the *maras* problem differently, with varied results. A hard-line approach being pursued in Virginia has been criticized by gang experts because it focuses on suppression alone and does not include the two other elements necessary to stamp out gangs: intervention and prevention. “If you do not do the three at the same time, you lose the momentum,” said Moreno of the LAPD. Maryland, on the other hand, is following a more effective process: police there have united with a community and educational task force to introduce a tough law enforcement program coupled with a strict intervention element. The Maryland program features both effective policing and after-school programs that can prevent young kids from joining gangs, as well as intervention programs that encourage members to leave their gangs and protect them from retaliation after they do.

Most experts agree, however, that today’s most effective approach comes from Los Angeles—the city where the *maras* originated (not to mention many other U.S. gangs, including the infamous Crips and Bloods). Los Angeles has experimented with every type of antigang effort. Prosecutors there were the first to launch a federal racketeering case against a gang (the 18th Street Gang) under the tough Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statute. California attorneys used the statute to send more than a dozen gang leaders to federal prison for life without parole and to dismantle the so-called Mexican Mafia. Police have also taken advantage of new laws that forbid gang members from congregating in known hangouts.

Los Angeles’ current approach draws on more than just force. Bratton, the police chief, has warned other U.S. cities not to follow the strategy California used against the gangs in the 1990s, when it focused exclusively on law enforcement. “We think of prison as punishment, but in many instances we’re just reinforcing their loyalty to the gang,” Bratton said. “To them prison is like going to finishing school.” This realization was brought home in 2002, when city crime statistics shot up after a wave of gang members who had

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been sent to jail in the early 1990s were suddenly released and hit the streets. Local law enforcement officers began to rethink their get-tough approach. “We still don’t have enough money, but at least we all agree now that you have to focus on all angles at the same time,” said Father Gregory Boyle, a community activist. “You use suppression today and intervention tomorrow and it won’t work. It would be like saying, I will feed you today, but I won’t clothe you.”

As Los Angeles discovered, to be effective, law enforcement has to work with everyone in a community. Accordingly, in 2003, the city’s police department created task forces called Community Impact Action Teams that paired local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies with citizen watchdog groups and clergymen, who best knew the neighborhoods. Probation and parole officers were also brought into the effort, as well as representatives from local school districts and city and state prosecutors. The program, which mimicked a similar effort in San Jose, has already had a dramatic impact: crime statistics in January 2005 were down 14 percent from a year earlier.

COME TOGETHER

SO FAR, Central America has yet to adopt such a multifaceted approach, nor have the countries there learned to work together or with the United States—despite the fact that the gang problem affects all of them. Instead, El Salvador and Honduras continue to pursue their *mano dura* policies. Meanwhile, the region’s more deep-seated problems—such as dysfunctional politics, rampant corruption, drug smuggling, intense urban poverty, and overpopulation—remain untouched, and the *mano dura* campaigns are only taking attention and resources away from the fight against these larger ills.

Central American governments have also used their highly publicized crackdowns on youth gangs to avoid action on another urgent priority: strengthening local democratic institutions. Since the end of the Central American civil wars in the early 1990s, judicial, legislative, and social reforms have stalled amid partisan infighting, and local political debates remain split along the same left-right fault lines that caused bloodshed two decades ago.

Corruption also remains a persistent scourge and has helped prevent a more effective antigang strategy from emerging. In Guatemala, the Anti-Narcotics Operations Department (the local equivalent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) had to be dismantled in November 2002 after investigators found that 320 of its officials were in the pay of local criminals. Guatemala's parliament has also refused a UN offer to help it fight organized crime, rejecting the establishment of a UN-appointed investigative commission. It is no coincidence that many criminal syndicates there are run by retired military officers with political connections.

The United States needs to help Central America craft a multi-level and multicountry approach to its gang problem. In January 2005, the U.S. Justice Department quietly created an FBI task force to deal with MS-13. The new group will coordinate activities with immigration officials, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, as well as local law enforcement agencies. In a positive first step, the task force has introduced new regulations that will permit U.S. officials to inform their counterparts in Central America about the criminal backgrounds of future deportees. Other signs, however, are less promising. The top-heavy task force has only focused on law enforcement so far. To be successful, the group must be made more international and have its ambit expanded to include helping strengthen Central American institutions. To ensure that the strategy is comprehensive, the gang task force should also include representatives from educational and social services departments.

Regional options effective in one country should be replicated in others. El Salvador's national police, for example, have benefited from reforms suggested and training provided by the U.S. Justice Department's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP). In the last five years, ICITAP has helped El Salvador focus on community policing and improve internal and external communications. As a result, El Salvador is now the only country in the region with a working national emergency police response system, a computerized crime analysis and deployment

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network similar to that used by the New York City Police Department, and an Intranet that connects the precincts internally. Emphasizing such functions was a departure for ICITAP, which usually focuses on intelligence gathering. But it helped El Salvador's police force learn how to serve the community—a lesson the police badly needed. ICITAP also helped El Salvador tighten controls on petty corruption, which had bled budgets, and set up an internal affairs department, which removed 5,000 corrupt cops in three years. Similar tactics should be used in neighboring countries.

The region should also implement a three-pronged approach to gangs, one that includes prevention, suppression, and intervention. Prison systems must be transformed so that they no longer serve as training grounds for new gang members. In California, police now avoid placing competing gangs in the same facilities. Central America should do the same, to avoid the sort of clashes that recently occurred in Honduras and El Salvador when M-18 and MS-13 members were thrown into the same prisons.

School programs should also be developed to prevent young people from joining gangs in the first place. To help pay for them, the United States can teach Central America to harness its business sector to fund after-school programs and job training for low-income youth. In El Salvador, the government has already convinced private groups to fund witness protection programs and jobs for former gang members who choose to join the mainstream. Such efforts should be promoted at a regional level.

To facilitate suppression, police should focus heavily on hard-core gang members who refuse to give up their criminal lives. Central American legislators should introduce antigang and antidrug measures that make it a felony to engage in related activities within a mile radius of schools, which are currently prime recruiting grounds for the *maras*. Probation officers should also be brought into the circle of active antigang officials, since keeping close tabs on gang members after they leave prison is important. U.S. and Central American law enforcement agencies should also exchange information on people smugglers. And Central American leaders should offer reassurances that they will prosecute those caught bringing illegal immigrants to the United States.

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Washington should also help Central America's various police forces establish an integrated computer system that tracks criminals across borders, incorporating data on people smugglers as well. And U.S. immigration policies must be formally changed to provide information on the criminal records of all deportees. Some observers have even suggested that the United States could help bear the brunt of the gang problem by having Central American gang members serve their prison terms in the United States.

Together, such tactics have a chance of stemming the onslaught of Central America's *maras*. The reforms should be instituted as quickly as possible, however. With every day that governments wait, the gangs grow in strength and the danger they pose becomes greater. If Central America hopes to escape the chaos of its past and finally make the transition to stable, democratic governance, it needs to act fast to tackle the *maras*. And the United States must help. 🌐