

# **Making Sense of Central American Maras**

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Why are Los Angeles-born gangs, Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Calle 18, the largest gangs in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala? Why are those same gangs barely visible in Nicaragua, Panama, or Costa Rica? Why are there Crips and Bloods in Belize? What relationship do these gangs have to the civil wars of the past decades? Are gangs a new form of “terrorists” threatening to take over their home countries? Are they hell-bent on infiltrating the US?

This essay seeks to use the tools of social science to shed some light on these issues. It will discuss the roots of the mara problem in Central America; the nature of the gangs there; and what policies might provide the best solutions. As we’ve learned from other contexts, when policy is not based on good research, or is distorted for ideological reasons, disaster can result.

My credentials to write on this issue are mixed. I have been doing gang research for the past 25 years in the US, mainly in Milwaukee and Chicago. I’ve studied gangs comparatively around the world for the past ten years and have been a participant in several international studies.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, I have not personally done research in Central America, so my understanding is based on my interaction with social scientists from many countries, a review of relevant literatures, and my US and comparative research experience. This essay is about a way to think about gangs, not an empirical study.

## **What are the roots of the gang problem in Central America?**

All countries have gangs or unsupervised youth groups of some sort, but the nature of the gang problem is always specific to a region, country, city, and the local neighborhood. The “father” of gang research, the University of Chicago’s Frederic Thrasher, commented long ago “no two gangs are alike.”<sup>2</sup> How youthful alienation and rebellion take shape, whether through different kinds of youth groups, violent or criminal gangs, sports, politics, or even religion, depends on the context.

So what is the context of gangs or maras in Central America? The region has gone through decades of violent civil war with tens of thousands of families fleeing their war-torn countries for better opportunities in the United States and elsewhere. Economies have been shattered and large numbers of urban youth live in poverty. Displacement, poverty, uncertain futures, sharp political divisions, and a large youth population are prime conditions for the growth of gangs.

In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, civil wars had plunged those nations into violence and sparked the migration of tens of thousands to the United States and other countries. Honduras was the base of operations for US support for the “Contras” in Nicaragua and the Honduran military waged a crackdown on domestic dissent. Belize, though a predominately mixed racial, English not Spanish-speaking country, had a stagnant economy with large migratory flows to the US. Panama did not experience civil war, but did live through US intervention with the arrest of Manuel Noriega in 1990. Panama also abuts Colombia and has long been a cross-roads for drug trafficking. Costa Rica has had the most peaceful past decades of all Central American countries.

These differing contexts begin to explain the very different kinds of gang activity in each country. It is in the war torn and repressive countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala that the MS-13 and Calle 18 are found. Elana Zilberg and others have carefully documented the experience of immigrants from these countries in Los Angeles barrios and the “transnational spaces” they occupy. El Salvador alone saw 400,000 people flee to Los Angeles. As immigrants from Central America came to Los Angeles barrios, many parent-less or traumatized youth joined neighborhood gangs like MS-13 and Calle 18. As these youth got in trouble, thousands were deported or returned to their home countries and brought their gang traditions with them. <sup>3</sup>

In Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, gang members returning from Los Angeles possessed powerful cultural symbols that appealed to alienated youth. In Nicaragua, however, most refugees fled to Miami, not Los Angeles. Deportations were not as prevalent and if youth joined South Florida gangs, they were local and did not develop a national or transnational identity like MS-13 or Calle 18. The dominant ethnic group in Miami were Cubans who enjoyed better economic conditions than Mexican Los Angelênos, and more open US support. The absence of refugees from

civil war- free Costa Rica and Panama to the US by itself explains the absence in these countries of LA gangs. Both countries, however, have a history of local youth gangs.

The LA connection also explains gangs in Belize. An estimated 40,000 Belizians, nearly 20% of its entire population, live in Los Angeles. Belize is a racially diverse, English speaking country. Dark skinned, English speaking youth who moved to LA therefore identified with the Crips and Bloods, not the Spanish-speaking, Latino MS 13 or Calle 18. Those that returned brought the cachê of black “South Central” gangs with them. The Belizian gang scene may be changing though, with 30,000 Spanish speaking refugees from El Salvador crossing to settle in Belize. <sup>4</sup>There is little research on girls and women in any Central American gangs, but international experience leaves little doubt of substantial female gang involvement.

It is not the case that “ultraviolent” LA gangs “took over Central America” as Ana Arana claims in her oft-cited article in *Foreign Policy*. <sup>5</sup> She states that maras originated with the deportation of 20,000 “young Central American criminals,” from “the slums of Los Angeles” back to countries “they barely knew.” A change in US immigration law in 1996 allowed anyone sentenced to more than a year in prison to be summarily deported. In 1996, 30,000 people were deported under this statute and by 2003 that number rose to 80,000.

Research on the long history of gangs in Central American countries might have tempered Arana’s rhetoric. We know from 1980s studies of gangs in Central America by Deborah Levenson, and more recent studies by Mario Carranza in El Salvador and José Luis Rocha in Nicaragua that gangs had existed in those countries since before the civil wars. This is consistent with youth literature around the world that finds poor boys and girls nearly always form unsupervised groups or gangs. <sup>6</sup>

Once these gang youth returned from LA, the powerful cultural symbols of their gangs influenced existing youth groups. This process is familiar to me. In my own research, gangs in Milwaukee, 100 miles north of Chicago, formed in the 1980s and adopted the names and symbols of Chicago gangs. Some youth were from families who fled Chicago’s gang violence, but most were local youth, struggling to make meaning in their lives and mesmerized by Chicago gang culture.

Similarly in Central America, youth deported or returning from Los Angeles diffused their LA gang culture to youth who knew LA only from watching “Boys in the Hood” and listening to “Ice Cube” rap. While I have not done research in Central America, I suspect that most gang members there are like those in Milwaukee: neighborhood kids who are alienated, scared, damaged, or rebellious adolescents, not invaders from another city. These youth respond to the images of well-known gangs, but most are the children of families who have endured years of turmoil and stress. Their gangs may have a “transnational name,” like MS-13, but their activities are likely predominately local.

To summarize, gangs and groups of alienated youth have been present in all countries prior to civil wars. Patterns of emigration and return appear to largely explain the prevalence of gangs with ties to Los Angeles in specific countries.

### **The Nature of the Gang Problem in Central American Countries.**

One reason the gang problem in Central America is so difficult to understand is the intense political rhetoric from some US politicians. This rhetoric has been given support by Washington think-tankers who begin with some important aspects of gangs in the global era, but then draw some empirically unjustified conclusions.

Former US House Speaker Newt Gingrich, in a 2005 Fox TV special said, “Fueled by the global nature of the drug trade, gangs are increasingly international operations...With the infrastructure in place to move and distribute drugs across the border, the danger exists that they will use their network to, for the right price, traffic terrorists and weapons into the country...After all, why wouldn't two groups -- one driven by greed and the other by hatred -- collaborate to further their goals.” No evidence is provided to support this ideological-based contention. James Clifford, the head of an Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Central American Task Force, said at the time the FBI “determined that there is no basis in fact to support this allegation of al-Qaeda or even radical Islamic ties to MS-13.”<sup>7</sup>

FBI statements and lack of research have not stopped politicians from trying to create a moral panic, linking gangs to immigration policy.

Presidential candidate Tom Tancredo’s sensationalist TV ad decries “Violent Central American Gangs Now on US Soil.” Tancredo’s ad is a collage of pictures of slaughter and scary-looking tattooed youth who are “Pushing Drugs. Raping kids. Destroying Lives. The Consequences of Open Borders.”<sup>8</sup> Never mind that these gangs originated in the United States, not Central America, and they grew strong as the result of deportation, not open borders. Gingrich and Tancredo’s shrill statements serve to demonize gangs and pander to xenophobic sentiments in order to influence US immigration and criminal justice policy.

In looking at the nature of the Central American gang problem, one way to begin would be to examine levels of violence by country. Statistics on homicide are not very reliable, but a survey of the most recent data, even if only roughly accurate, emphasizes the wide variation between countries.

**Most Recent Central American Homicide Rates<sup>9</sup>  
per 100,000 population**

<b>Honduras</b>	<b>42.5</b>
<b>El Salvador</b>	<b>31.5</b>
<b>Guatemala</b>	<b>25.4</b>
<b>Panama</b>	<b>9.6</b>
<b>Costa Rica</b>	<b>6.2</b>
<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>6.2</b>
<b>Belize</b>	<b>5.8</b>
<b>United States</b>	<b>5.6</b>

The main point is that there is a major gap between levels of violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala and the other Central American countries. Clearly, the countries with the highest rates of violence are post-conflict societies with immigration ties to Los Angeles. MS 13 and Calle 18 are the largest gangs in countries with the highest rates of violence.

US politicians like Gingrich and Tancredo attribute the violence to the nature of these gangs, and see them as a threat to US homeland security as well. Their analysis is lent credence by the work of the Strategic Studies Institute’s Max Manwaring, who sees street gangs as “the new urban insurgency.” Manwaring, a retired army colonel, John Sullivan, Robert

Bunker and other military analysts link terrorism and revolution to what they term “third generation” gangs. <sup>10</sup>

Their analyses stand out because they are among the few to address the role of gangs in a globalized world. They properly see the failure of the state as promoting the rise of non state actors of various types linked to the drug trade and underground economy. In Africa, for example, scholars talk of the “criminalization” of the state, as warlords and militias exercise power and usurp the state’s legitimate right to use violence. <sup>11</sup> My own work focuses on a “world of gangs” that are permeable and capable of transforming into illicit businesses, para-militaries, or political actors.

While delinquent peer groups are still the most common form of gang, it is clear that many have gone well beyond garden-variety crime. Shattered economic conditions and the state’s inability to provide basic services and security have been the catalyst for the strengthening of gangs and other non state actors who fill a social and economic vacuum.

Research on post conflict societies in Africa has found that the conclusion of civil war often leads to an array of armed groups, some made up of former child soldiers, as the state is unable to provide adequate jobs, education, services, or security. Gangs and other armed groups are a spontaneous and *normal* phenomena in such anarchic times. Additionally, the *neither War nor Peace* 10-nation study documented that “children in organized armed violence” were a world-wide phenomenon in countries with high levels of inequality but that did not experience civil war. The decline of the state in the Third World and reduced social spending in the west have resulted in self-organization of many types of groups of armed young men as well as institutionalized, or long-lasting gangs in many cities around the world. <sup>12</sup>

Manwaring defines this permeability of the form of the gang, of armed and alienated young men — and sometimes women — as “a mutation of insurgency.” For Manwaring and other military thinkers, gangs have naturally evolved into political actors who “have an irrevocable need to depose an incumbent government.” According to this reasoning, gangs can be classified as being “First Generation” or territory-based; “Second Generation” or illegal business-based; and “Third Generation” or focused on seizing power. <sup>13</sup> However, Manwaring produces no credible research evidence to support this “generic” typology or “natural” evolution. Other

research has found that social movements are increasingly aimed at democracy, cultural rights and basic improvements of living conditions, not state power. Thus the involvement of gangs with social movements is not necessarily part of a conspiracy to topple the ruling class.

Globalization and neo-liberal policies are indeed “downsizing the state” throughout the world. But the politicization of “gangs” or non state actors is only one possibility, and may not be all negative. Gangs are more likely to be involved in illicit activities that entail corruption of state officials while eschewing politics. In fact, since involvement with politics is the course most likely to invite government repression, a “laissez-faire” or “live and let live” policy is more common among those running illegal businesses. Research on street children, child soldiers, children in organized armed violence, and violence in post-conflict societies all point to a variety of forms of non state actors, consistent with the social movement literature. The notion that gangs will undergo some inevitable evolution into an “insurgent” form intent on seizing state power is unsupported by research. Such thinking misunderstands the implications for gangs of the decline of the state in the global era.

What research does show is that the weakening of states creates problems, but also brings forth new social actors from the margins of societies who might be mobilized for democratic reconstruction. To conclude this essay, an overview of what we know about policy toward gangs is essential.

### **Democracy and the Reduction of Violence.**

High rates of violence and democracy are incompatible. Violence by nature dehumanizes and treats “the other” not as a fellow subject, but as an object. Democracy, on the other hand, provides procedural guarantees against authoritarian power, but sets conditions for free action of all citizens, regardless of class, gender, race, religion, or ethnicity.<sup>14</sup>

Central American countries with a high homicide rate also have a high rate of state violence. The direction of causality, however, cannot be assumed. In other words, the common perception is that gangs cause violence that in turn brings a violent response from the state. But in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, high levels of state violence have existed for decades.

Which came first? It is a safe bet that some sort of interaction explains high levels of violence by both state and non-state actors.

We can learn more about this from an insightful analysis of gangs in Nicaragua by José Luis Roca. After explaining the absence of MS-13 and Calle 18 in Nicaragua by patterns of migration, Roca goes on to relate how Nicaragua has implemented a more inclusive social policy toward the gangs. No extremely repressive laws have been passed and death squads do not roam the cities. While Nicaragua has a high number of small arms, like other Central American countries, the prevalence of guns has not led to high levels of post civil war violence.<sup>15</sup>

In Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, Roca reports “mano dura,” “super mano dura,” the “Zero Tolerance Plan,” the “Broom Plan,” and other anti-mara laws characterize state policy. The repression of the past decades has continued in these countries with both state and “death squad” violence against maras and political opponents. The horrific killings of prisoners in Honduras, death squads in Guatemala, and massacres in El Salvador are absent in Nicaragua, as well as in the comparatively less violent Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize.

Nicaraguan mara policy treats gang youth as children and promotes social inclusion, not exclusion. Note that this does *not* establish a causal link between softer polices and less violence. But neither does it rule out that harsher policies may produce a more severe gang problem. What appears to be a safe judgment is that there is an interaction between the two forms of violence. In order to deescalate gang violence, it seems logical that the state must also deescalate repressive acts in locally specific ways. Military victory is unlikely to succeed, or may have horrific, and unanticipated side effects on democracy and civil society.

From my own comparative perch, it seems to me that maras in Central America are an example of a basic problem in this globalizing world. That problem begins with extreme economic polarization, where survival must be fought for and knowledge of unprecedented wealth creates bitterness. Over half of the world’s population, or more than 3 billion people, are younger than age 25. Almost a quarter of the world’s youth population lives in conditions of extreme poverty, or less than one US dollar per day. One result of such conditions is the expansion of the underground economy and

street organizations. When young people cannot live by formal means, they will find their own. <sup>16</sup>

But poverty alone does not explain gangs or other forms of resistance. Democracy, meaning the inclusion of all strata in political life, is often merely a formalistic shell. If democracy means the freedom only of the market and consists only of rights on paper, those without access to power will turn inward or explode. If youth see no hope, why should we be surprised at nihilism in their culture and actions? A lack of real democracy means some youth will inevitably turn to armed, oppositional organizations for both survival and meaning. A real commitment to democracy would mean a determined effort to improve living conditions as well as to seek understanding among all social actors and to welcome their non-violent participation in society. “All social actors” includes the gangs.

Violence mars the capacity of people to see one another as people, to admit and live with their differences. It obstructs the capacity for diverse groups to work together. This holds for both gang violence and state violence. The real heroes are those who take the first step toward peace.

**Bio:** John Hagedorn is an Associate Professor of Criminology, Law, and Justice and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Illinois-Chicago’s Great Cities Institute. He has been studying gangs and violence for the past twenty years. He is the author of *People & Folks: Gangs, Crime, and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City* and co-editor of *Female Gangs in America: Essays on girls, gangs, and gender*. He is edited the recent *Gangs in the Global City: Alternatives to Traditional Criminology*. His forthcoming book, *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*, will be released by the University of Minnesota Press in 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> Hagedorn, John M. 2008. *A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

— 1998. *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime, and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City: Second Edition*. Chicago: Lakeview Press.

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<sup>2</sup> Thrasher, Frederic. 1927. *The Gang: A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

<sup>3</sup> Zilberg, Elana. 2004. "Banished from the Kingdom." *American Quarterly* 56:759-779.

<sup>4</sup> Hayden, Tom. 2004. *Street wars : gangs and the future of violence*. New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton.  
<http://www.tomhayden.com/articlesLA2.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Arana, Ana. 2005. "How the Street Gangs Took Central America." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June.  
<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20050501faessay84310/ana-arana/how-the-street-gangs-took-central-america.html>

<sup>6</sup> Levenson, Deborah. 2003. "The Life that makes us Die/The Death that makes us Live: Facing Terrorism in Guatemala City." *Radical History Review* 85:94-104. Carranza, Marlon. 2004. "Detention or Death: Where the "Pandillero" Kids of El Salvador are Heading." Pp. 209-228 in *neither War nor Peace: International Comparisons of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence*, edited by Luke Dowdney. Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras; Rocha, José Luis. 2007. "Strategies to confront youth violence — Experiences from Nicaragua an Central America." Paper presented at *In War as in Peace* Conference. Loccum, Germany.

<sup>7</sup> <http://gangresearch.net/Globalization/terrorism/newtgang.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://teamtancredo.org/>

<sup>9</sup> From disparate sources located by author.

<sup>10</sup> Manwaring, Max G. 2005. "Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency." Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute; Sullivan, John P., and Robert J. Bunker (Eds.). 2006. *Networks and Netwars*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND;

<sup>11</sup> Reno, William. 1998. *Warlord politics and African states*. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

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<sup>12</sup> Dowdney, Luke (Ed.). 2005. *neither War nor Peace: International comparisons of children and youth in organsed armed violence*. Rio de Janiero: 7Letras.

<sup>13</sup> *Third Generation Gang Reader*. Los Angeles: National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center - West.; Arquilla, John, and David Ronfeldt (Eds.). 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Touraine, Alain. 1998. *What is Democracy?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

<sup>15</sup> Rocha, José Luis. 2007. "Strategies to confront youth violence — Experiences from Nicaragua an Central America." Paper presented at *In War as in Peace* Conference. Loccum, Germany.

<sup>16</sup> Castells, Manuel. 2004. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Volume II: The Power of Identity: Second Edition*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.

2008. Making Sense of Central America Maras. Air & Space Power Journal (Summer), Spanish ed. <http://www.airpower.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2008/2tri08/hagedorneng.htm>. Google Scholar.

Hume, Mo. 2007. "Young Men with Big Guns": Reflexive Encounters with Violence and Youth in El Salvador. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26, 4: 480-496. CrossRef Google Scholar.

Hume, Mo. 2009. The Politics of Violence. *Diego Rivera Hernández, Raúl* 2017. Making Absence Visible: The Caravan of Central American Mothers in Search of Disappeared Migrants. *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 44, Issue. 5, p. 108. Central American governments have struggled to address the gang problem. From 2012 to 2014, the government of El Salvador facilitated a historic and risky truce involving the country's largest gangs. Generally, experts agree that most gangs have a name and some sense of identity, which can sometimes be indicated by symbols such as clothing, graffiti, colors, and hand signs that are unique to the group. Gangs are thought to be composed of members ranging in age from 12 to 24, but some gang members are older adults and others are younger, often forcibly recruited.<sup>6</sup> These definitions are evolving.

Gangs in Central America. Honduras enacted a penal code amendment that made maras illegal and established sentences of up to 12 years in prison for gang membership.

2008b. "Making Sense of Central American Maras." *Air & Space Power Journal* 20 (2): 42-48. El Salvador-United States Transnational Corridors GIS Interactive Atlas. Within the world of the gangs or "maras", there reigns extreme animosity and a constant threat of lethal violence against foes. In the face of all this, the gang offers its members a strong sense of social inclusion and a deep sense of belonging, providing them a chance to be "someone": demonstrating themselves valuable, brave, daring and deserving of respect. Student gangs offer strong social inclusion for those that defend the honor of their school, violently imposing themselves on rival students. Yet there are few connections being drawn between the weakening of Central American rural agricultural economies at the hands of CAFTA and the rise in migration from the region in the years since. In general, the U.S. takes no responsibility for the conditions that drive Central American migrants to the border. U.S. empire thrives on amnesia. There can be no common-sense immigration "debate" that conveniently ignores the history of U.S. intervention in Central America. Insisting on American values of inclusion and integration only bolsters the very myth of American exceptionalism, a narrative that has erased this nation's imperial pursuits for over a century. As the British immigrant rights refrain goes, "We are here because you were there." Source for information on Central American Common Market (CACM): *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture dictionary*. Under the free-trade provisions, intra-Central American trade grew dramatically from \$8.3 million in 1950 to \$32.7 million in 1960 to \$213.6 million in 1967. Central America experienced considerable economic growth in the 1960s and into the 1970s, averaging 5.8 percent per year. Most of the growth took place in the urban industrial sector under the stimulus of the common market. The common market, by creating a regional market free of most trade barriers, made feasible a greater degree of industrial development than would have been possible in five separate markets. The common market's im