Comparing anti-gang approaches and policies

Gang violence

Since the end of the civil wars in Central America in the 1990s there has been considerable fear of violent street gangs, or *maras*. The countries in the region have implemented various anti-gang policies and approaches, with mixed results.

After decades of civil war and political repression, peace agreements were signed in Central America in the 1990s. These agreements triggered democratization processes in the region. But while political violence has decreased, criminal and social violence have risen. Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are now among the most violent countries in the world. It is not only street gangs causing the violence in these countries. The expansion of the drugs trade and increase in kidnappings, theft and domestic abuse are also important causes. Yet street gangs attract the most media attention and are often seen as the principal cause of insecurity in the region. ☞

Street gangs have terrorized the populations of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala since the mid-1990s. Local gangs that emerged from deprived neighbourhoods have joined one of the two transnational gangs that originated in the US and which are sworn enemies of each other: the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* (the Eighteen Street Gang). The local gangs have converted themselves into 'cliques' and obey the codes and rules of larger gangs. But this did not occur in Nicaragua, even though it also experienced a civil war and suffers from extreme poverty. Nicaragua has its own street gangs, but they are still strongly linked to local neighbourhoods and are proportionally less violent than their counterparts in neighbouring countries.

Transnational street gangs or *maras*
Emigration and deportation are important factors in the rise of transnational gangs. During the political repression and civil wars of the 1980s, there was substantial migration to the US. In contrast to the Nicaraguans, who mainly migrated to

Summary

- Criminal and social violence in Central America has increased since the end of the civil wars in the 1990s.
- The media points to gang activity as the leading cause of violence in Central America, but this is highly contested.
- In Nicaragua, police have succeeded in keeping gang violence from escalating through a preventive policy targeting cooperation with local communities and the creative use of their investigative powers.
- In other countries highly restrictive anti-gang policies have not been able to keep the problem from worsening.

Costa Rica where there was virtually no problem with street gangs, many Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans sought safety and employment in the US. Large groups of migrants ended up in the poor neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, a city that already had a large Latino community and a long-established gang tradition. The children of these migrants were often harassed at school and on the street by competing youth gangs of different ethnic backgrounds. The Eighteen Street Gang welcomed young immigrants from Central America who were struggling to fit in with their peers. For many of these young people membership in the gang offered both an identity and safety; it combined the promise of friendship, solidarity and respect with protection against harassment and intimidation by other gangs. However, the price of membership was that they had to defend to the death the name and honour of the gang, in particular from insults, humiliation and assaults from their rivals.

In the early 1990s, the US authorities began deporting large numbers of arrested or convicted youngsters – particularly those suspected of being gang members – to their countries of origin. From that point, Central America's gang problem worsened badly. The style and attitude of the big-city gangs from the US made a huge impression on young people from deprived neighbourhoods in Central America. The new way of dressing, moving, speaking and communicating through hand gestures associated with gangs

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Member of the Mara Salvatrucha shows gang signs inside the Chelatenango prison.

were enormously attractive, as was the promise of close mutual connection and solidarity. This new gang culture led to extreme hostility toward members of rival gangs. Confrontations between gangs intensified rapidly to life-and-death struggles.

Initially, it was mainly gang members who had been deported from the US who formed new cliques of the two large gangs – *Mara Salvatrucha* and Eighteen Street Gang – in the towns and cities of Central America. But in the years that followed many of the existing neighbourhood gangs became cliques of the two large gangs. Over time, local youths began to assume leading roles in the cliques. As a result, identification with the local neighbourhood became less important and members began to identify primarily with their gang and its associated symbols. ☞

Despite the accusations against street gangs made by police and politicians, the exact extent to which the *maras* have increased insecurity and crime is unclear. For example, statistics published by the National Civil Police of El Salvador do not confirm the claim made by President Saca that 60% of crime in his country is committed by gang members. However, gang members made up for between 7.1% and 24.9% of people arrested for murder between 2003 and 2006; gang member arrests for extortion increased from 0% in 2003 to 14.6% in 2006. Such statistics are not yet available in Honduras and Guatemala.

Causes

There are different ways to assess the causes of street gang formation. A common approach in Central America is the 'epidemiological model', which was developed by the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO/OPS). This model looks at the factors that can lead to violence and membership of street gangs, and the factors that can prevent it. José Miguel Cruz, a researcher at the Central American University (UCA) at San Salvador, classified 27 risk factors and divided them into 10 categories. Major categories included social exclusion, a culture of violence, rapid urban growth, migration, disorganization at neighbourhood level, drugs, family problems, presence of gang members and the existence of long-term violent practices, such as cycles of revenge.

These factors come to life in the approach adopted in 2004 by Caroline O.N. Moser of the University of Manchester, UK, and Cathy McIlwaine of the University of London. Moser and McIlwaine focus on the perspective of the people living in deprived areas. Family problems and abuse drive young people onto the streets. There, pressure from friends to participate in organized violence with promises of alternative income, leadership and power make street gangs an attractive option. Juan José Sosa and José Luis Rocha of the Central American University at Managua emphasize how different factors come together in a process **>**

of street socialization of young people from the neighbourhood. For many youngsters the street represents a temporary escape from everyday problems within the family (such as child abuse), social exclusion and poverty (such as overcrowded homes, limited resources and insufficient food). They are pressured by peers to learn to display courage and show no fear, to establish a reputation for themselves and to defend it, and above all to appreciate the effectiveness of violence and threats to achieve their aims. These values – 'the code of the street' – are learned and practiced on the streets. The process has a highly polarizing influence on youth gangs, because the group rewards the ability to maintain a position in relation to peers and gangs from other neighbourhoods.

Government policy

In their analysis of gang control programmes, Malcolm Klein of the University of Southern California and Cheryl Maxson of the University of California classify official anti-gang programmes as political, ideological or bureaucratic according to the way they develop. Such programmes or policy can be described as political if they are initiated within the framework of a political or electoral agenda. Ideological programmes are largely generated by the law enforcement agencies and strongly reflect the value system of the police. Anti-gang policy classified as bureaucratic is developed by local government or ministries, and is designed to match the capacity and experience of the institutions that have to implement it.

There are remarkable differences in anti-gang policies across the various countries of Central America. In 2002 El Salvador and Honduras declared the gangs to be a national security problem and developed a strict public safety policy. This policy was largely based on a political agenda, as evidenced by the names of the programmes alone: *Operación Liberdad* (Operation Freedom) and *Plan Super Mano Dura* (Super Iron Fist Plan). The programmes involved the deployment of the military and were accompanied by rapidly drafted and introduced *'anti-mara'* legislation, which criminalized membership of a street gang such as *Mara*

The Eighteen Street Gang and the *Mara Salvatrucha*

The Eighteen Street Gang was originally formed by Mexican-American youths (Chicanos) from the 18th street in Los Angeles, which grew to be one of the largest gangs in the city during the 1980s. The name *Mara Salvatrucha* refers to a group of friends (*Mara*) of Salvadoran origin (*Salva*) who see themselves as 'smart' (*trucha*). This gang was formed in the early 1980s when a group of young Salvadoran heavy metal fans got together under the name *Mara Salvatrucha Stoner*. Many of the original members ended up in prison, largely for drug crimes, and adopted the Mexican-American gang culture they learned there. Although the two groups were friendly in the beginning, the relationship turned sour, leading to bloody hostilities in the early 1990s that have lasted to the present day.

Cycle of violence

'Violence only leads to more violence' is a popular saying often used to connect child abuse with violent behaviour later in life. The idea is that gang members are raised primarily in families where violent punishment is the norm. Although there is definitely support for the 'cycle of violence' theory, it is certainly not an absolute rule that explains the existence or behaviour of street gangs. Apart from individual risk factors, it is important to examine social processes within neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods whose residents are not capable of collectively intervening and finding shared solutions to problems – that is to say, neighbourhoods that don't demonstrate 'collective efficacy'– are much more vulnerable to groups of youths taking control of public spaces and indulging in violent and delinquent behaviour. Social fragmentation within communities coupled with group processes within and between groups of young men constitute an important starting point for anti-gang programmes. This type of programmes should be more effective than family intervention aimed at countering individual risk factors or a repressive police strategy focused on increasing the probability of individual gang members landing in prison.

Salvatrucha or Eighteen Street Gang. Despite the intense media coverage, observers rapidly gained the impression that this had 'more face than substance'. Guatemala hesitantly followed the example set by its neighbours with its *Plan Escoba* (Broom Plan), but on a smaller scale and without banning membership of gangs.

The approaches in Guatemala and Nicaragua are more ideological, although there are considerable differences in approach to dealing with gang violence. In Guatemala the police conduct patrols with the help of soldiers and hunt down gang members. In Nicaragua the emphasis is on prevention: the police try to establish a relationship with the local community in the neighbourhoods concerned and to organize them into committees for social crime prevention under the banner of safety and crime prevention. But the burden of organizing such prevention falls primarily on the police, who receive relatively little help from other government agencies or NGOs, and sometimes little support from residents.

The repressive policy pursued in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala seems to be largely counter-productive. During police operations, which mostly take place in deprived neighbourhoods, suspected gang members are arrested and locked up. Although many are immediately released by the courts, the result is that the prisons are overflowing. The lack of supervision in custodial institutions has helped *Mara Salvatrucha* and Eighteen Street Gang become better organized in jail; they regard prisons as 'universities' for their members. Despite the increased number of imprisoned gang members, homicide rates have risen, and the number of people who fall victim to crime has remained generally the same. Meanwhile the perception of insecurity among broad sections of the population has
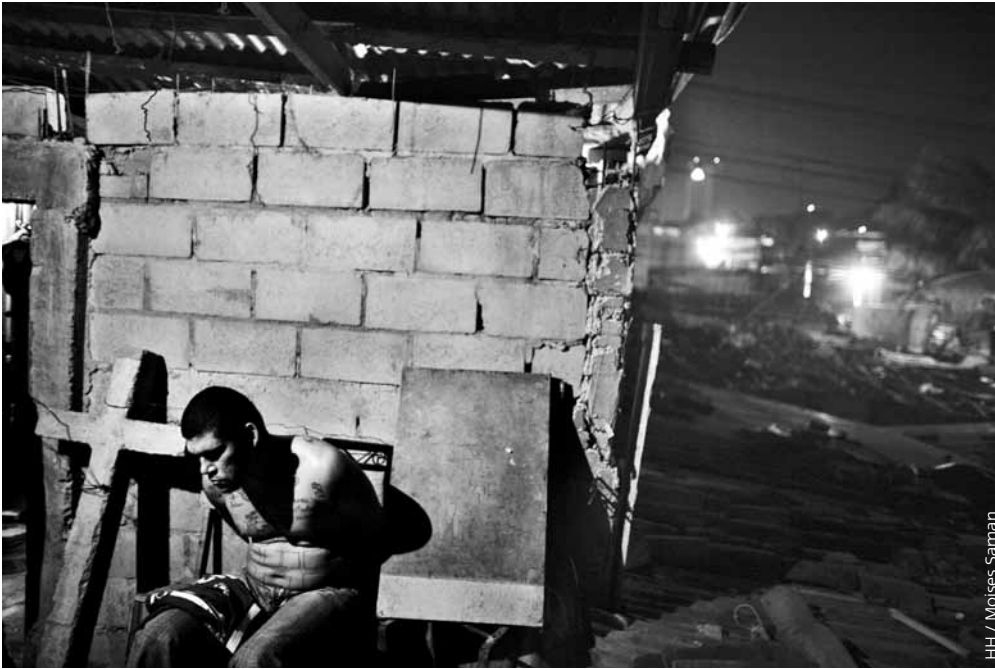
Member of the Eighteen Street Gang sits handcuffed after being arrested by Salvadorian Special Police.

remained the same or has declined only slightly. Hence, the question remains: how much of this violence are street gangs responsible for?

Nicaragua's national police focus on the early identification of gang formation and activities and on demobilizing gangs. Youngsters and their families are called to account for their violent and criminal behaviour. Police attempt to weaken the gangs' position by threatening prosecution of the leaders and offering training and work experience to members who quit the gang. If the members are open to talking to police and the local community, the police attempt to reach peace agreements between neighbouring gangs and to organize an official ceremony at which the gangs hand in their weapons in exchange for study grants. The police are by no means always successful in dismantling the gangs, but Nicaragua is managing to prevent the escalation of the problem. Furthermore, the transnational gangs such as *Mara Salvatrucha* and Eighteen Street Gang have not managed to establish cliques in the country. Nevertheless, Nicaragua has been confronted with the same trends as its neighbours: violence in terms of homicide figures has increased in recent years; the proportion of the population that has become the victim of crime has remained the same and perceptions of insecurity have also decreased. ∎

Street gangs and organized crime

The authorities in Central America usually refer to and label street gangs as 'organized crime'. Although little is known about the criminal activities of gangs, they are likely very different from organized crime, which focuses on material gain and therefore has a more hierarchical leadership structure. The activities of gangs are usually more fragmented, opportunistic and based on individual contacts. For instance, involvement in the drugs trade is mostly limited to the sale of drugs in and around the neighbourhood of a clique. Only some gang leaders seem to make the step to distribution of drugs, employing members of their clique. The relationship between street gangs and the drugs mafia is ambivalent. On the one hand *narcos* don't like the presence of the gangs in the areas of their activity. On the other hand they pay members of street gangs to do particular jobs. The amount of money, firepower and violence controlled by the *narcos* is usually much greater than those of gangs. Street gangs have, however, become much more active in the field of extortion, where they do compete with others, and in some cases even with other cliques. For the victims the situation is chaotic; for instance, a public transport or a distribution company has to pay various cliques to cross their territory.

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👆 A longer version of this article, with notes and references, can be found at **www.thebrokeronline.eu**.