

Maras and Youth Gangs, Community and Police in Central America



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Prologue

The presence of criminal youth gangs – called *pandillas* in Spanish – has long since become an almost permanent feature of everyday life in Central America even if their number, geographical distribution and exact character have varied over the time and from country to country. However, during the last decade a qualitatively different kind of criminal youth gang has developed and firmly established themselves in three countries of the region – El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. This new type of gang – called *maras* – has rapidly become a major concern for the governments of these countries and a source of deep fear among the population living on the outskirts of cities and in poorer urban districts.

The *maras* consist of groups of youths aged 8 to 35 who aim to control whole neighbourhoods or territories, making membership of the *mara* their lifestyle and identity, and crime their way of life. There are many different branches of *maras*, although the two most feared and well-known are the Mara 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha, both originating in the city of Los Angeles, USA. Estimates of the number of *mara* members in Central America vary widely, but the figure is likely to be in the range of 70,000 to 100,000, with the highest number present in Honduras, followed by El Salvador and then Guatemala.¹

Maras constitute an urban sub-culture of a special kind, giving their members not only a sense of belonging but also of protection, pride and power. Their identity is reinforced by special rites, by a terminology of their own and self-invented symbols, such as their numerous and very visible tattoos. Solidarity with the *mara* is of supreme value, and to betray the group may be punishable by death.

Mara members do not dedicate themselves to crime exclusively – they also participate in the normal labour market and share many leisure time interests with other young people. However, their criminal activities are frequent and include extortion, armed robbery, assault and kidnapping, as well as – increasingly, it seems – retailing drugs on the street.² Murder is commonplace and may also be committed as a reference for

¹ These figures refer to the number of members only; the number of “supporters” is far higher. The presence of *maras* in Nicaragua and Costa Rica is (still) very limited.

² The list of common extortion activities include: daily or weekly payments in order to guarantee that a person’s son or daughter not will be beaten or raped on his/her way to and from school; weekly or monthly payments to prevent *maras* from confiscating a person’s home (installing themselves there instead); payments for the “protection” of shops, bars and other (small) commercial establishments; a daily “road toll” for bus drivers and bus owners etc.

power and controlling group behaviour. They have also been linked to lucrative border-crossing arrangements (from Guatemala to Mexico), trafficking in human beings as well as in arms, and it also appears that they are used as professional “torpedoes” and killers by groups of organized crime.

Their main fight is against rival gangs for control of territory, which is generally identified by graffiti. In this fight, anyone – of any age – who has a friend or family member belonging to a rival gang may be “marked” (raped, or severely hurt) or even killed – in order to humiliate the enemy and convey a message to them. In the three Central American countries which are most affected, a considerable number of municipalities and/or city blocks are effectively under the control of different maras.

In sum, today the maras pose a serious threat to peace and development in the region and these gangs are rapidly spreading within the region, expanding into Mexico – and even back into the United States.

During the last five years, the Central American maras have become a constant and priority theme in official political discourse and an almost permanent issue in the media. In spite of this constant and intense attention, however, scientifically based, concrete knowledge on the maras, about their members and about the context in which they operate, has been very meagre. Consequently limiting the chances of a constructive dialogue on what national and international actors can and should do which has often resulted in a somewhat sterile, general debate for or against the hitherto most common (and seemingly not very efficient) governmental approach – “tough hands” or, as it is called in Spanish, *mano dura*.

It was against this background that Sida in 2005 decided to finance an ambitious applied study on the maras, their dynamics and their context. This study was proposed by Costa Rican researchers from the company Demoscopia S.A. In relation to earlier studies on the theme, this report – which also has received support from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, CABEI – is characterised by a novel combination of features.

Firstly, it is regional in scope concentrating on El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala but, to a certain degree, also including Nicaragua and Costa Rica thereby providing a comprehensive overview and facilitating comparisons within the region. Secondly, it possesses a multidisciplinary character and, thirdly, it rests on a solid empirical base.

This booklet briefly summarises the main results of the regional study on “Maras and juvenile gangs, community and police in Central America”, with the double purpose of providing a scientifically based introduction to the theme, and at the same time serving as a contribution to a concrete discussion – at the national as well as international level – on how to adequately address the issue of maras and how to proceed when it comes to citizen security, crime prevention and a better future for young people in Central America.

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Director

Department for Latin America

The original, full report is available in Spanish, English and Swedish and can be retrieved in digital format from the following web address: www.sida.se/publications

Introduction

On the goals, scope and methods of the study

The principal aim of the study has been to generate empirically validated, comparative knowledge from several countries in Central America concerning the basic characteristics and dynamics of the special kind of violent youth gangs known as maras.

One first set of aspects is related to who they are (in social, demographic and psychosocial terms), why they have joined the gangs and what differences there are (if any) between those joining the maras and other youngsters living in the same neighbourhoods under similar conditions but who do not become gang members. A second theme is focussed on what the gang means to them, how they are organized and what basic rules apply for the members. In this context, a first attempt is also made to gather information on, and analyse, the specific situation of female members. Thirdly, the study also deals with what gang members actually do, both for a living and how they use their time in general. Fourthly, the relationships between gang members and their original families has been studied and analysed, as well as relationships between the gangs and their neighbourhoods and with the police.

Furthermore, the study also attempts to identify new tendencies in the development and performance of the maras, affecting their internal dynamics as well as their mode of insertion into the community and the economic context. Finally, the study also provides important information concerning the availability of support for members wanting to leave the maras as well as concerning the impact of public policies hitherto applied to combat these gangs.

The scope of the study has been decidedly regional in its character, giving emphasis to the three most affected Central American countries (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala) but with reasonable coverage also for Nicaragua and Costa Rica. In gathering the information, similar methods and standards have been utilised in all countries, thus providing the basis for legitimate comparison.

As most (or all) work on maras so far has been limited by a reduced empirical base (both in total numbers and concerning the number of categories), the point of departure for this study was the need for achieving a sample which represented both a broad composition and a sizeable number of individuals interviewed. All in all, 3,400 people became part of the sample, including some 1,100 members and ex-members of the maras as well as almost 1,200 neighbours and relatives and 600 young

people from the same city blocks considered “at risk” but who had not (and did not want to) join the maras. (More details on the composition of the sample can be found in the table below.) In addition to the groups already mentioned, structured interviews were also carried out with representatives from different relevant sectors in each country such as the churches, the judicial system, the business community, government representatives, the media, NGOs etc.

Table 1 Size and composition of sample

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	Total
Male mara members	122	141	137	98	97	595
Female mara members	51	55	50			156
Ex-members	97	90	160			347
Youth at risk	125	135	100	118	130	608
Relatives	100	100	100			300
Neighbours	200	207	237	125	115	884
Police	25	25	30			80
Local business and transport owners	100	108	141			349
Victims	30	23	30			83
Total	850	884	985	341	342	3402

For all the categories included in the table, a structured questionnaire was used first. This instrument was then complemented with other methods (such as in-depth interviews, psychometric instruments etc.) on a selected sample within each group. The group of young people labelled “population at risk” was always chosen from the same city blocks where mara members (and their relatives) were approached and interviewed. A similar method was applied when recruiting members of the categories of “relatives”, “local business and transport owners” and “neighbours”, respectively.

The field work for the study was carried out over a full year, from the first half of 2005 up to mid-2006, with the detailed processing and analysis being finalised at the beginning of 2007. The field work began with the maras themselves, considering that this would probably be the most sensitive and difficult group, an assumption which proved to hold true. The information gathering process among the mara members was complex and slow. Firstly, because it had to be preceded by a process of confidence building undertaken through appropriate local contacts. Secondly, because it was frequently interrupted by events such as violent clashes (between different mara groups or with the police), the arrest of important members or leaders (who had to authorise the presence of the researchers) or serious threats against the researchers, both from the maras and from the police. Interviews conducted with mara members in jail also often proved complicated due to a somewhat lengthy process of permission seeking, both from the mara leader and the prison authorities.

As in all research projects, this study has certain limitations. In this summarised context, two of these should be mentioned. Firstly, while the study no doubt draws on an impressive empirical base, it should be emphasised that the world of gangs and maras in Central America is characterised by a high degree of diversity. What is true of some groups is not necessarily equally true of others. Thus, this study does not pretend to contain

findings representative for all mara groups, but it certainly provides a good basis for a better understanding of key features valid for very important groups currently present in Central America, such as the two most well-known gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS, or MS-13) and the Pandilla 18 (Mara 18, or M-18).

Secondly, the study was initiated in the three most seriously affected countries – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – continuing at a somewhat later phase in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. As the situation in the two latter countries is decidedly less severe, the study was not given the same scope and profoundness here. Consequently, while the presence of data from Nicaragua and Costa Rica does allow for some interesting comparisons, the core of the study is an analysis addressing the situation in the three northern Central American countries.

Finally a word on terminology and definitions. In this study, the terms gang and mara are used as if they were synonymous, even when this is not entirely the case. However, as the study covers five countries with different conditions, for the sake of simplicity this usage of terms has been maintained.

Another key theme of great importance for the delimitation and focus of this study is what do we actually mean when talking about gangs and maras, how do we define them? This was already an important issue some 80 years ago when the sociologist Frederick Thrasher published his groundbreaking study *“The Gang”*, and even if today broad agreement exists concerning what the basic elements of such a definition should be, the exact phrasing still constitutes an issue under debate among social scientists. In this case, the researchers have elaborated a slightly reformulated version of a broadly accepted definition:

The gangs and maras are relatively stable youth groups, characterised by the use of urban public spaces. They provide patterns for the establishment of group identities and the belonging to these groups organizes both everyday life and the economy of their members. Without claiming any institutional framework, they deploy a counter-power which is sustained by initially disordered violence.

1. The Maras as Culture and Organization

Introduction

This chapter presents the maras as an entity that fulfils the emotional needs of their members, establishes some principal features concerning how they are organized (when on the street and when in the prison) and discusses two different perceptions regarding what type of organization they really have come to constitute today. It also presents some information on the situation and conditions for female mara members.

Maras and the construction of identity

In many aspects, the maras may best be understood as a kind of family. They represent emotive communities which cover a series of affective needs for the young people who join them. They provide a sense of belonging and identity and give their members a sense of their life having a meaning, something which – in the marginalised environments where they live – is very scarce or limited. These groups offer an alternative identity, tied to a collective, reflected and reinforced by shared norms and expectations which emphasise:

- The importance of a *series of rites of initiation* (whose application, however, is less generalised than mostly thought)
- *Norms for internal behaviour* (which, however, are often violated without severe sanctions)
- *An external language for identification*, as well as other reference symbols for group belonging and differentiation (such as tattoos, graffiti, etc).

Belonging to a gang, also provides autonomy for the members, relieving them of the adult authority present in other spheres of their life, such as within their original families, at school or at work. Thus, the gang members construct privacy in public spaces, where a new and different “family” is established, a family which protects them and defends them from other authorities. At the same time, however, the power of the original adult authority is replaced by the rules of the gang. The rites of initiation – which (when applied) are related to violence and pain – marks the entrance into the gang.

The emotive dimension of what the mara or gang can provide (including the defence against, or removal of, traditional adult authorities) makes them very attractive to young people in pre-adolescence and adolescence, which is when the majority of mara members join their

groups.³ For the overwhelming majority of the members, affiliation is voluntarily, due to the attraction of the gangs. Active recruitment seems to be very uncommon and forced recruitment is almost unheard of.

Basic characteristics of the organization

The point of departure for the organization of the gangs dealt with here is territory, and the exercise of control over it. This control is externally signalled by graffiti (telling the neighbours in whose territory they live and purveying the message “*Keep out!*” to other groups) and reinforced by the fact that the gang mostly uses public spaces for their activities, criminal as well as recreational. The gang also constantly monitors who enters the block or area, sometimes impeding entrance. Controlling the territory implies being powerful and maintaining a base for certain profitable activities – thus enhancing group identification. It also means possessing a safe place, where other maras cannot easily enter.

The defence of the territory is a primary task, and fights with other groups trying to enter the area are common and may be very violent. City blocks where several groups are present with none of them yielding hegemony are generally very unsafe with high levels of violence.

The basic unit in every gang or mara is called *clica*, which is organized at the local block level. Several clicas compose a *jenga* (which also constitutes an instrument for coordination between clicas from the same zone) and together the jengas make up the specific *mara* such as MS-13 or Mara 18.

Within the organization – where all members call themselves *jomies* or *jombois* – the *veteranos* (members who came to Central America after being expelled from the US) enjoy special prestige but without holding any special formal position. The official positions are relatively few. There is an administrator at the level of the *clica*, called *ranflero*, whose task is to convoke the general meetings (*mirin*) where all members participate and who also functions as the treasurer of the group. Then there are what may be considered local leaders (called *primera palabra* and *segunda palabra*), who preside over the general meetings and also at as spokesmen for the *clica* in meetings at higher levels.⁴

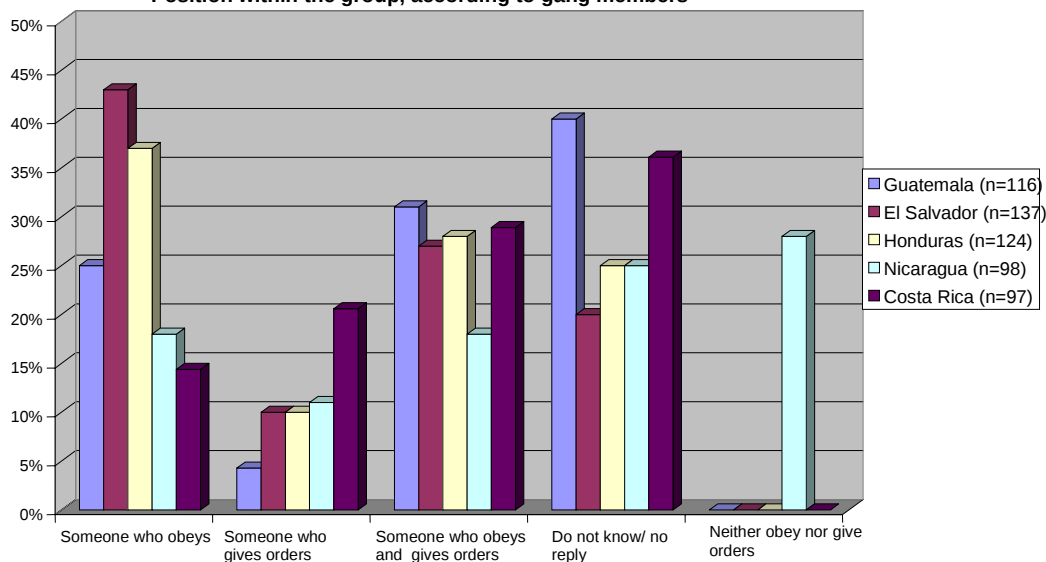
According to the marero narrative, the organization is mainly horizontal and the few different positions which do exist above the level of the common member are gained through excellent performance. Gang members typically reject the idea of *one big boss*, preferring instead making reference to the concept of “leaders”, generally in plural. When interviewed on who decides when it comes to accepting a new member, the majority in all five countries responded: the group collectively. Moreover, when asked what activities they perform each day that have been ordered by others, a majority of mara members responded “none at all”. Interestingly, however, when asked to describe their own position within the group, a considerable percentage of gang members described themselves as “someone who obeys”.

Related to the issue of verticality versus horizontality within the organization, is its power to endure. Concerning this aspect, the maras of Central America seem to be very much like the current gangs studied in the US and in Europe in the sense that the organization easily survives and replaces the loss of one or more members, be they considered leaders or not. Any strategy based solely on targeting gang leaders for arrest will thus fail.

³ Most members seem to enter when they are between 12 and 15 years; but affiliation at ages 8–10 is not uncommon.

⁴ Content-wise meaning first and second speaker.

Figure 1
Position within the group, according to gang members



Rites and norms for gang members

According to gang members themselves, the initiation rite is of great importance. Its purpose is to demonstrate loyalty vis-à-vis the gang and to constitute evidence that the candidate member also possesses the other basic qualities needed, such as courage, knowledge on how to handle arms, ability to resist physical pain and the fear of dying. Once successfully passed, this rite glues the individual and the group firmly together.

Judging from the interviews it seems that the application of an initiation rite for new members (who first have to go through a period of several months as candidate members) is far from generalised; with some 25% to almost 50% of mara members in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala reporting they had to do nothing special in order to enter the gang. A sizeable proportion, however, do report having to perform or go through rites in order to be admitted into the group. The most common form was being exposed to the *brincadera* or *brinco*, when three or four members jump on the person's body in order to cause pain, also kicking and hitting him/her. According to mareros themselves, this practice lasts 13 seconds for Mara Salvatrucha and 18 seconds for the Pandilla 18. Other rather common rites are related to the fulfilment of tasks, which all are criminal activities ranging from robbery and violence against other gangs to outright murder.

Each mara constructs its own identification attributes, reinforcing internal cohesion and externally signalling group belonging. The elements most commonly used are the language, clothing, type of hair cut and moustache and tattoos. The tattoos especially possess great value, reflecting the personal history within the group framework. Tattoos are individual merits which have been approved or given collectively, for efforts made and dangers endured that have benefited the gang.⁵ Other norms frequently mentioned in the narrative of the mara themselves include the following prohibitions:

⁵ Basic categories of tattoos include symbols showing the mara to which the member belongs; personal experiences such as having been in prison, the sorrows and joys of life, enemies overcome, the death of near and dear (particularly other members), the difficulty of leaving the mara, etc. According to some researchers, the type, size and frequency of tattoos carried by each member may be regarded as an attempt to transform a social stigma into something more emblematic.

- the use of crack and glue sniffing
- the use of marihuana or alcohol during hours when certain tasks are to be performed
- committing burglary or assaults within the block controlled by the gang
- maintaining relationships with members from another gang
- telling others about gang matters (treason)
- abandoning the group completely.

The two first prohibitions, in reality appear to be somewhat “soft” when it comes to their application and breaking these rules is considered a minor fault only. Still, they do seem to have a certain regulatory function concerning when it is permitted to “relax”. The following three prohibitions seem to be rather strictly observed, and transgressing these norms is considered to be serious. Concerning the last prohibition often mentioned in texts about the maras – leaving the group completely – there seems to be different causes which may make it permissible in principle (such as becoming religiously involved, establishing a new family or getting a full time job) to become “inactive” or to “calm down”, implying that the concept itself (leaving the group) has different interpretations.⁶

Sanctions for minor faults (when applied) consist of ritualised violence against the culprit performed in group, the offender being pushed into the middle of a circle where he or she is struck by fellow gang members. Severe faults are linked to harsher punishments, including ordering the member to be executed.⁷

Notes on the special conditions for female members

Information on the role and situation of female members of these gangs are scarce, and even if this study made a substantial effort to cover this dimension it proved to be more difficult than initially thought. Information gathered on certain aspects of this issue was far from consistent, making it hard to interpret, and there also seemed to be certain resistance among gang members to talking about this theme.

Women comprise less than half of the group members, but their share continues to be important and is calculated to vary between 20% and 40%. According to a limited, but still considerable number of respondents, there also seem to be some mara groups with female members only.

Female members tend to play a subordinate role within the world of the maras, where typically masculine values such as aggressiveness, boldness and being skilled with arms are applauded. According to the group narrative, female members are entitled to participate in decision making and said to be able to hold important positions; but in reality it seems they are often not consulted when decisions are made and they are never accepted as leaders, commanding male members. Perhaps as a reflection of the surrounding world, female sexuality is also controlled (and sometimes exploited) within the maras, and norms are different for women. Infidelity, for example, is not punished by the group if the transgressor is a male member, whereas female members often receive retribution for this very same behaviour.

The overwhelming majority of female members have a husband or partner within the group, implying that most female members become

⁶ For more on this theme, please refer to the last chapter of this publication.

⁷ Which in mara terminology is to give someone the green light.

mothers while still belonging to the mara. According to the interviews, one third of the children born within the gang continue to stay with their parents and their group.

This is an important fact which should be taken into consideration when discussing how to best cope with the maras, bearing in mind that these violent young adults are also frequently parents living with their children. The fact that children are born within the mara groups brings with it two other consequences that are also of importance when discussing public policies towards them. Firstly, it implies that part of the generational reproduction of the gang may come “from within”, no longer relying entirely on outside affiliation. Secondly, the presence of children born within the mara (who either stay with their mothers in the group or grow up with some relatives outside) automatically means involvement of original family members, thus weaving a complex web of relationships which embraces the gang, their extended families and the communities where they live.

The impact of prison life on the organization and its members

As the field work for this study contained many interviews with mara members and mara leaders in prison (including repeated and in-depth interviews), the researchers enjoyed the opportunity of making certain observations concerning the impact of imprisonment on these gangs.

The principal finding was that – not surprisingly – prison enhanced group cohesion among the members and reinforced the vertical character of the organizational structure. It also became obvious that good communications existed between those in prison and the members outside, providing the imprisoned members with any cash and products needed. In many jails, mara members (particularly the leaders) had access to drugs, cell phones and sometimes even arms. The leaders were also strengthened in their position by the prison authorities, who generally utilised them as spokespersons for discussing matters related to the prison regime.

Communications from prison to the outside world seemed to be fluid not only within the country but sometimes also internationally. In El Salvador, the team interviewed leaders at a high security jail, the only prison in the entire Central American region where the inmates are kept in isolation, without opportunity to talk to others, without receiving visits and no use of mail or telephone permitted. One week after having performed an approved interview with two mara leaders in this prison, the team found out – while undertaking more interviews with leaders from the same mara group but in Honduras – that part of the conversations from the prison in El Salvador were already known. There are also indications that instructions for undertaking different criminal activities are transferred from leaders in prison to their gang members outside – thus signalling that prison does not interrupt the management role of the leadership.

Combining results from the interviews performed in prison with those carried out with family members of imprisoned mara members, as well as with certain authorities and civil society organizations, the picture that emerges concerning the impact of frequent and massive imprisonment (which so far has been the most common policy against the maras) is quite clear:

- the reinforced group cohesion between mara members in the prisons has also led to increased levels of cohesion among members outside
- the maras have become even more violent

- certain jails seem to have become recruitment grounds for new members, young people who hitherto had not joined the mara
- jails do not disrupt communication between members inside and outside.

Two Different Visions concerning the Organization of the Maras

Beyond the basic description of the organization of the maras provided above – which is accepted by most analysts or actors familiar with the theme – two widely differing visions or perceptions concerning the maras current coexist.

On one hand, there is a perception of these gangs as being very well organized in a vertical manner, with a central leadership or command with regional and international connections, making their groups into organized crime rings and also collaborating directly with other powerful actors of this kind, thus increasingly participating in the trade with drugs and arms and trafficking of people. This perception of the maras as a kind of *superpandilla* with businesslike and international characteristics is particularly common in certain circles of government officials and has also been reflected in the words of representatives of the US Government. On the other hand, there is the discourse offered by the maras themselves, stressing horizontality and member participation in the decision-making process.

In this context, the findings from this study can be summarised as follows.

There is ample and robust evidence concerning the existence of two basic levels within the organization:

(i) *Common members or soldiers* (generally 12–25 years old).

This category is dedicated to concrete operations, they are known mareros within their communities, visible to the population and their durability or life span is short.

(ii) *Members in control*; leaders in the street and in the prisons (20–30 years old).

This category concentrates on intelligence for operational matters, gives orders and also benefits directly from gang activities in financial terms.

Beyond these levels *within* the organization as such there are also groups *outside* who can reap benefits (financial as well as political) from the maras; groups who can influence the activities performed by the maras and who may have much to gain from not addressing “the phenomenon” in an efficient manner. Another interesting question is, however, whether or not there is also a third level within the gangs, a level which then might be described as

(iii) *A superior level of (central) command*, with the following characteristics:

- dedicated to strategic intelligence
- invisible to the general public and unknown to common gang members
- reaping sizeable financial benefits from activities undertaken by the gang.

Concerning the existence of such a superior level, the evidence so far cannot be considered to be ample and robust. The indications found by this study that the maras, during recent years, have become more involved in the drug trade and have generalised the mechanism of extortion within their territories may be a reflection of the existence of a central level of management. However, it may also be the case that it is the relative strengthening and institutionalisation of the gangs – generated by the policies so far applied against them – which is mistaken for something much more profound and sophisticated. Indications concerning the potential existence of such a superior level would merit a study of its own.

2. What Gang Members do

Introduction

This chapter shows that whereas mara members are definitely much more involved in criminal activities than other young people, they also have similar interests common to youth of the same age. Moreover, gang members do not exclusively dedicate themselves to crime; frequently they also earn an income from jobs within the legal labour market and they contribute to the family economy. However, the use of extortion within controlled territories seems to have become more widespread and serious, and there are indications that mara members perform services for organized crime rings.

Criminality and drug consumption

The overwhelming majority of studies on gangs and their members – from all latitudes – consistently show that there is a definite connection between being a gang member and committing crime. This finding is once more confirmed by this study on maras and juvenile gangs in Central America.

Whereas most gang members (in a range of 65% to 85%) report having committed criminal activities, the same figure for young people living under comparable conditions in the same urban blocks was in the range of 7–22 % only. Furthermore, almost all gang members reported having been arrested or imprisoned, either for committing a crime or just for being a mara member. The most frequent crimes committed were assaults and robberies, followed by murder or intent to murder.

Another aspect where gang members differ substantially from other young people from the same areas is drug consumption. The following table shows the frequency of drug use among mara members and “youth at risk” from the same neighbourhoods in the five countries.

Table 2. Consumption of Drugs

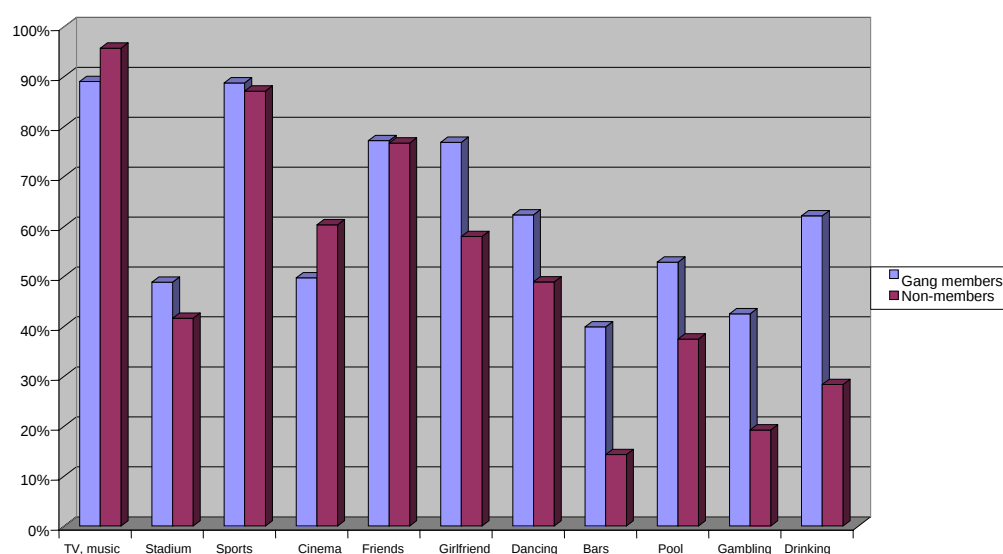
		Always or sometimes	Never or almost never	No reply
Guatemala	Gang member (n=116)	46%	51%	3%
	Non-member (n=68)	0%	100%	0%
El Salvador	Gang member (n=137)	37%	61%	1%
	Non-member (n=86)	1%	98%	1%
Honduras	Gang member (n=124)	65%	35%	0%
	Non-member (n=78)	0%	100%	0%
Costa Rica	Gang member(n=97)	56%	44%	0%
	Non-member (n=74)	12%	88%	0%
Nicaragua	Gang member(n=98)	29%	67%	4%
	Non-member (n=79)	4%	92%	4%

As this study is not of a longitudinal character it is impossible to determine whether – or to what extent – participation in criminal activities was increased (or facilitated) by affiliation to the gang. Concerning the patterns of drug consumption, however, data from the interviews indicate that the majority of the gang members in four of the five countries had initiated their drug use already before joining their respective gang.⁸

Leisure time interests and legal work

Apart from the criminal activities, gang members spend a good part of their time in similar ways as other adolescents and young people. The following figure is based on information obtained from the questionnaires.

Figure 2
Leisure activities among gang members and other youth



⁸ Guatemala 57%; El Salvador 44%; Honduras 77%; Costa Rica 72%; Nicaragua 65%.

At least two conclusions can be drawn from these statistics. Firstly, that concerning many of the leisure activities the degree of attraction is very similar within the two groups. And, secondly, that there seems to be a pattern among the gang members of spending their time in a way which more resembles the preferences of adults (visiting bars, gambling, drinking, etc.)

Traditionally, the standard literature in criminology and economics has been inclined to present a rather simplistic perception regarding the relationship between employment on one hand and delinquency on the other; generally treating them as mutually excluding activities. However, recent studies – such as this one – clearly show that young people from socially marginalised areas develop survival strategies which often combine participation in the legal/formal economy with criminal activities and a presence in the illicit economy.

In all the five countries, gang members show a high degree of participation within the sphere of non-illicit economic activities, ranging from 26% in Honduras to more than 60% in El Salvador. Typically, the kind of work performed falls under the category of non-skilled and heavy manual jobs (construction workers, automotive repair shops, etc) or basic commercial activities such as selling second-hand clothes. In a set of follow-up questions it also became clear that a majority of the mara members (45% in Guatemala; 80% in El Salvador and 85% in Honduras) make regular financial contributions to their families, combining income from the various spheres mentioned above. The fact that the families are faced with negative economic consequences when gang members are detained and imprisoned thus merits consideration when discussing different approaches to dealing with the maras.

Always being ready for violence is demanding

Additionally, the gangs dedicate much of their effort and time in everyday life to maintaining their preparedness for violence. Violence may come at any time and the need to respond to attacks – or to seize the opportunity for performing their own – may present itself whenever. First there is the violence from and towards rival gangs, and then there is the violence related to the police. Being exposed to danger and having the skills to successfully respond or take the initiative are dimensions which consolidate the cohesion of the groups and the identity of their members.

In general terms, the conflicts and violence between different mara groups are almost always related to the rivalry between the two big, traditional and most well-known maras, the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS) and the *Pandilla 18* (M-18). The conflict between these two powerful groups is so intense and relentless that it resembles a kind of civil war or a never ending vendetta.

This dispute also puts its mark on everyday life for most gang members. Being prepared to answer an attack or seize an opportunity to humiliate or exact vengeance becomes important; always thinking in terms of whose territory you may pass through or come close to when moving around is another aspect. This conflict is also reflected in the jargon and narrative of their own group, always belittling the enemy and depriving its members of human qualities while presenting their own gang as possessing other qualities.

The consequences of this rivalry are well expressed in this excerpt, taken from an interview with a mara leader in El Salvador:

“When I went to school as a small kid I could always walk the streets freely. I never had to worry about no one. The police didn’t take

notice of me. I was free and could do whatever I wanted to. But when I joined the gang, this changed. The police started to harass me. And in school, as I openly showed that I belonged to the *pandilla*, members from other groups reacted. I could no longer walk safely in the street; I always felt that they could hit me from everywhere.”

The increased use of extortion within controlled territories

Data from this study indicates that the collection of “taxes” imposed by the maras within their territories has become more frequent and almost institutionalised. These extortion schemes are often strictly applied and generate a steady income for the gang. In the jargon and narrative of the maras, they charge to be able to provide protection to the inhabitants within their areas. However, sanctions for not paying are dramatic (including murder) and thus feared.

In this study, neighbours and small-scale merchants (owners of small shops, bars and means of transportation) in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were asked if they knew about the existence of forced payments to the gang in their neighbourhoods. The average positive answer among the category “neighbours” was 74% and for the merchants 77%. Considering that this question in itself may evoke considerable fear, this response should be interpreted as a massive affirmation of the application of extortion schemes. In a series of follow-up questions, neighbours and merchants were then asked if they themselves had been obliged to make such payments. The results are reflected in the table below.

Table 3. Have you yourself had to make Payments to the Gang?

Country	Individuals interviewed (n)	Yes	No	Don't know/No response
Guatemala	Merchants (n=100)	19%	80%	1%
	Neighbours (n=100)	28%	24%	48%
El Salvador	Merchants (n=108)	17%	80%	3%
	Neighbours (n=100)	34%	12%	54%
Honduras	Merchants (n=141)	19%	80%	1%
	Neighbours (n=137)	31%	38%	31%

As this question is loaded not only with fear but also other feelings such as humiliation, the affirmative figures above are likely to represent substantial underreporting. Concerning the neighbours, the high proportion of people simply avoiding answering seems to constitute a very direct confirmation of this. When it comes to the local merchants, the pattern of response is different. On one hand, affirmative responses within this group constitute a much lower proportion than among the neighbours but on the other hand they very seldom directly avoid the question.

Furthermore, the frequency and level of these forced charges was also studied, as well as the modalities of payment. Daily and weekly payments were indicated to be the most frequent forms (in that order), and while many payments are still made in cash – paying directly to a person known to be a collector for the gang – transfers and deposits in bank accounts held by mara members were also mentioned in surprisingly high proportions (and especially by the local merchants).

Moreover, the data collected clearly indicates that most neighbours and merchants perceive the application of this kind of extortion as something rather new, having started some 2–4 years ago and since become increasingly common. Also payment rates were said to have

been increased, and tentative calculations suggest that the total amount collected by the mara group (*clica*) through these forced payments within their city block may lie in the range of some USD 1,000 per week. These findings are remarkable in an international context (such established structures have not been found in gang studies undertaken in Europe or the United States) and may reflect a particular process both of change and of the reinforcement and institutionalisation of the maras.

Other data reconfirms the change and institutionalisation of the maras. The indications that there are direct relationships between the maras, drug wholesalers and other representatives of organized crime deserves a special mention. So far, there is clear evidence of mara gangs carrying out retail drug trade within their territory. However, there are also indications that they perform services for organised crime rings. These “services” include kidnapping, assault and extortion – but in all of the three countries most seriously affected by the maras, the crime most frequently mentioned as being carried out on commission is murder. This information does not only come from sources who may be questioned as to their intentions (such as political actors wanting to reinforce the so called “tough hand” policies against the maras), but also directly from neighbours and other local sources deemed to be reliable.

3. Why do certain young people become Gang Members?

Introduction

What differences are there between those who enrol in the gangs and those who never become members? This question no doubt seems to be crucial when trying to understand the phenomenon of the maras with the intention of addressing the theme of prevention. However, the answers obtained so far may well be somewhat of a surprise to many people. One main finding is that predictability exists only concerning a small proportion of gang members, another that there is a high degree of similarity between gang members and youth living under similar conditions who never enrol. Consequently, prevention should not focus on individuals only but also consider the broader context.

Two different questions

Many studies on gangs do not make a sharp distinction between what, in reality, are two different questions: (a) why gangs appear and develop, and (b) what characterises the individuals who enrol in the gangs, in comparison to those who do not become members? Often these questions are mixed together and the responses given then constitute a diffuse amalgamation of factors. For example, both current Anglo-Saxon and Central American studies relate the origins of the gangs to overriding macroeconomic and social factors – such as socio-economic marginalisation, the reduction of social capital etc. However, generally only a minority of young people within marginalised sectors and areas do join criminal gangs.

Thus, while this analysis of the general processes and causes behind the formation of criminal gangs may well be true (and useful within a broader sociological and political context), it tells us very little about who the individuals are that actually enrol. This dimension has been the focus of this study, intending to provide a contribution to the improvement of strategies for prevention. In order to achieve this goal, considerable effort was made to study comparable groups of young people within this context – that is, gang members as well as non-members of both genders, from the same neighbourhoods and living under similar conditions. The main findings from this analysis are briefly presented and commented on in the following sections.

Risk factors among boys and young men

The analysis undertaken by the present study shows a series of interesting differences between male youth who are gang members and those who are not. At the same time, however, these differences are not dramatic or applicable to more than a minority of gang members.

Firstly, concerning their current family situation, gang members tend to more often live with a partner and more often have children. Non-members who do live with a partner are more often married than gang members living in couples. *Secondly*, when it comes to education, while the majority of gang members had registered for 6th grade at school, the percentage among the non-members is considerably higher and they also more frequently have continued their studies. *Thirdly*, regarding their childhood and situation when growing up, gang members more often than non-members have experienced domestic violence, have lost a family member and have bad memories from their infancy. *Fourthly*, when considering the current social context and their activities, gang members more frequently have some relative who also is gang member and tend to spend more time with their friends (from the group) than non-members do.

Table 4. Risk factors for boys and young men

		Gang mem- bers	Non-members from same neighbourhood
Marital status	Single	65%	83%
	Married	5%	8%
	Free union	30%	9%
Have children	Yes	42%	17%
Education	Registered for 6 th grade	65%	90%
Currently assisting an educational centre	Yes	26%	46%
Your father is literate	Yes	91%	97%
With whom do you currently live	Family	70%	90%
	Others	30%	10%
Type of childhood memories	Negative/dark	30%	13%
Violent family environment	Yes	45%	25%
Abandoned by the family	Yes	42%	21%
Deaths within the family	Yes	34%	20%
Physical abuse in the family	Yes	28%	11%
Relative or friend being gang member	Yes	34%	13%
Meeting with friends as an activity	Always	71%	48%

In conclusion, when looking for differences between the two groups they definitely do exist. For instance, while only 13% of the non-members have negative memories from their childhood, the corresponding level is more than the double among mara members (30%). However – whereas this no doubt is a high value it still implies that the overwhelming majority of mara members do not have this kind of background, nor do they

come from violent families or were abandoned. Consequently, it would definitely be relevant if programs for secondary prevention applied these criteria, but it would certainly not be enough.

Risk factors among girls and young women

Even if most studies on gangs and the risk for affiliation do not separate the factors by gender, the results to date reported in international literature show three characteristics:

- fewer risk factors have so far been identified for women than for men
- generally the risk factors identified for women also apply to men, and
- some risk factors do seem to be specific or more common for women.

The results from this study show a pattern consistent with the above, and also identify the more common risk factors for girls and young women within the Central American context.

Table 5. Risk factors for girls and young women

		Gang members	Non-members from same neighbourhood
Marital status	Single	62%	73%
	Married	3%	14%
	Free union	31%	11%
Have children	Yes	57%	36%
Education	Registered for 6th grade	63%	91%
Currently assisting an educational centre	Yes	26%	46%
Your father is literate	Yes	94%	99%
Type of childhood memories	Negative/dark	47%	16%
Violent family environment	Yes	63%	24%
Abandoned by the family	Yes	42%	21%
Deaths within the family	Yes	41%	19%
Physical abuse in the family	Yes	62%	13%
Relative or friend being gang member	Yes	40%	17%
Meeting with friends as an activity	Always	71%	34%

Note: Figures in bold (for gang members) show where there are substantial differences as compared with the male population.

The table above bears witness to several and important differences between the male and female gang population analysed in the present study. Female gang members have much more frequently experienced violence within the family and more often have been exposed to other traumatic circumstances. Part of the explanation for these differences may be found in an analysis of the accepted pattern for socialisation of girls, which is both narrower and stricter than for boys.⁹

⁹ Another finding from this study which seems congruent in this context is that a significantly higher proportion of the female members (as compared to the males) had already initiated their drug consumption before entering the mara.

The relative normality of gang members

In mass media coverage as well as in the official discourse, the mara member is generally described as an abnormal person, entirely different from common people. However, conclusions from this study – based on psychometric tests concerning values, social relations and life projects – show that there are striking similarities between the gang members and other youth within the same neighbourhoods, in all five countries.

This applies to almost all the themes analysed, for instance regarding their attitude towards the need for laws and their application; what constitutes a crime; the importance of religion, family and friends; their perception of authorities, government and the police, etc. Concerning differences, the gang members are more violent when it comes to how to resolve certain situations and they also more frequently emphasise the need to struggle in life if an individual wishes to advance. Education as an important instrument for carrying through the personal life project is more frequently mentioned among young people who are not gang members.

Conclusions

While certain characteristics are more often found among gang members than among other young people from comparable conditions, this still only applies to a minority. There are no factors or parameters which per se or by themselves possess predictability concerning who becomes a gang member or not, but rather a specific combination of individual and collective conditions and situations. In general terms there are also more similarities than differences between gang members and other young people from the same neighbourhoods concerning their values and perceptions of the world. This implies that prevention must take the wider context into consideration, instead of trying to identify single factor explanations.

Simultaneously, however, there are certain factors – such as violent environments and violent families – which seem to be indicators concerning propensity to become a gang member (particularly among young women). Applying these expressions as criteria for preventative action would thus probably – besides being necessary for other reasons – also bear importance for reducing gang affiliation.

Another conclusion from the findings of this study is that gang members are young people who, in an accelerated manner, transit towards or are being pushed into “adult life” – becoming parents, living by themselves, leaving school, generating income, etc – thereby rapidly losing their adolescent period without necessarily being mature enough cope successfully with such significant changes. Placed into its context, this observed pattern of personal performance should also be of importance for the elaboration of prevention programs.

4. Gangs and their neighbourhoods

Introduction

This chapter briefly deals with the relationships between the gang members and their immediate social context - their families and their neighbourhoods. This dimension is often overlooked both in the design of gang studies and in the elaboration of policies aimed at addressing and preventing the problem. As this study shows, however, it is a crucial aspect if measures are to become efficient and constructive.

An important and complex relationship

As shown by the relatively few gang studies which do give importance to this aspect, relationships between gang members, their families and their neighbourhoods tend to be contradictory and ambiguous but at the same time strong and of great importance. Gang members make their families and neighbourhoods suffer but they also belong to family networks which constitute part of the local social capital, thereby generally limiting the capacity of the local community to restrict and control the behaviour of the gang.

In the Latin American context – where marginal urban communities often find themselves relatively abandoned by the State – gangs may also step in and partially replace this absence of public resources, authority and power; thus making relationships between the gang and the community even more complex and difficult to deal with for those who may want to intervene. Efforts aimed at really involving the community in gang control must therefore go beyond the segregationist approach which tries to separate gang members from their social context. Rather, it should be understood that even if gang members may be feared by the local population and considered to cause problems, they also belong to this local social web and are simultaneously regarded as neighbours, cousins, brothers and parents living within the same block.

Two groups, two perceptions

Within the neighbourhood, perceptions concerning gang members vary widely, with the extremes represented by their original families on one hand and the rest of the local community on the other. In general terms, the majority of their original families see them as young people lacking opportunity or as "victims of the system" (El Salvador 56%; Guatemala 67% and Honduras 80%), whereas the major part of the local popula-

tion primarily regard them as “dangerous” (El Salvador 62%; Guatemala 70% and Honduras 76%).¹⁰

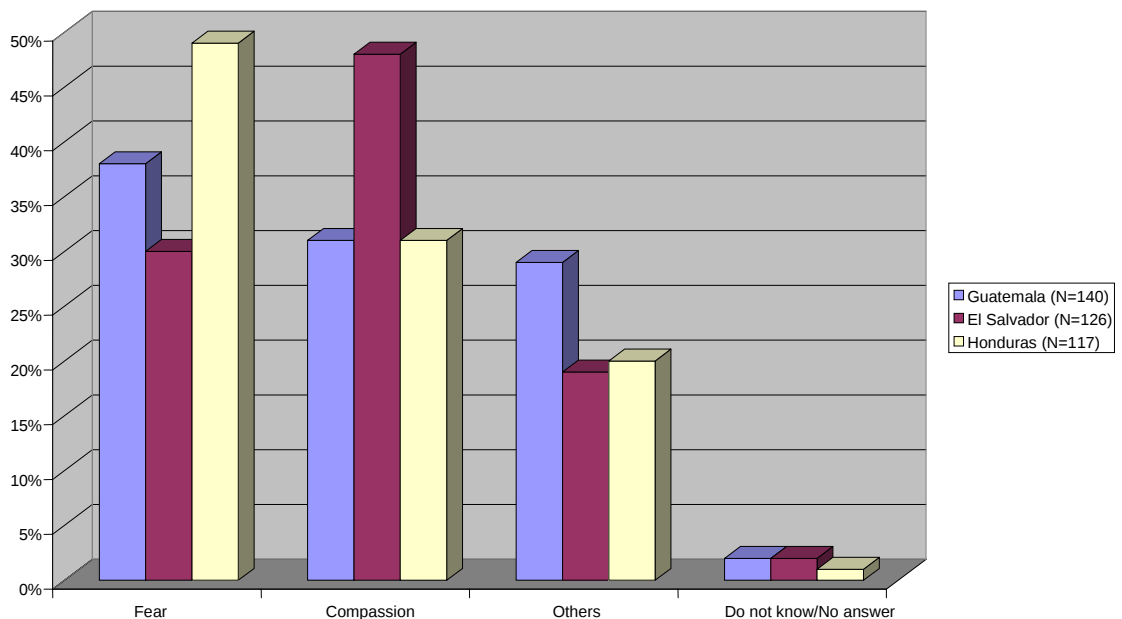
When interviewed concerning the impact of gangs on the community, most neighbours affirm that it has been mainly negative. Apart from aspects such as “people are afraid” and “people prefer not to go out after dark”, a very high proportion of neighbours also responded that the presence of maras on their block had negatively affected interest among other kids and young people to continue studying and/or making efforts to achieve a professional education.¹¹

Between 15% and 33% of the population also declared themselves to have been directly affected by the maras (assault and robbery, threats and extortion, beatings, etc). Moreover, a considerable percentage of people representing small businesses in the relevant neighbourhoods (truck owners, owners of small shops and bars, etc.) reported that (apart from the payment of forced “taxes” earlier mentioned) they had been obliged to temporarily close their businesses down due to the consequences of mara presence in the neighbourhood.

These results notwithstanding, a relatively high proportion of the local population reported being friends with one or more gang members (El Salvador 41%; Guatemala 19%; Honduras 17%). The sum of these findings is seemingly well expressed by the response to the question on what kind of emotions the local population have when it comes to the gang members in their community, which proved to be a combination of fear and compassion.

Figure 3

Emotions generated by mara or gang members, according to neighbours



¹⁰ This differences in perception of gang members are, of course, related to the emotional bonds which still exist with their original families. However, the attitude among relatives may also be influenced by the fact that the first answer among the general public on why certain people become gang members is that it depends on deficiencies within the family. Maintaining that my son or daughter has become a gang member because he/she lacks opportunities in this society and/or is a victim of the system may well be true on a certain level, but also relieves the individual parent of guilt.

¹¹ El Salvador 58%; Guatemala 58%; Honduras 90%.

Two other findings of great interest in this context are, firstly, that the neighbourhoods affected by maras and gangs also seem to be communities with almost no degree of local organization. Asked about community organization or collective initiatives, the overwhelming majority responded that no such thing existed (El Salvador 88%; Guatemala 87%; Honduras 90%). This figure was almost the same in Costa Rica (85%), whereas it was significantly lower in Nicaragua, with 78%. Secondly, the majority of the local population also expressed interest in participating in programs for prevention and reintroduction of gang members in their community (El Salvador 45%; Guatemala 52%; Honduras 66%; Nicaragua 67%; Costa Rica 70%).

Finally, among the gang members' relatives and original family in the neighbourhood, the overwhelming majority were deeply worried by the fact that their son or daughter was a mara member, the main concern being the risk for her or him being killed. Most families with sons or daughters in the mara, also report that this has had negative effects within the family such as loss of confidence and unity and negative internal communications. Importantly, more than half of the families also convey that relationships to neighbours have been negatively affected in the sense that they now are regarded with prejudice or disdain and that they feel that neighbours avoid contact.

High Level of Demand for Outside Support but almost None Offered

According to the families themselves, most of them have tried hard to discourage their sons and daughters from entering the gangs. Even when they failed in these attempts, a high proportion of families (particularly so in El Salvador) maintained contact with their son or daughter in the gang, and continued to make efforts to encourage their leaving. One dramatic finding in this context is the high level of demand for external support and help (through governmental and other institutions) from families who still maintain a firm will to get their son or daughter out of the gang, compared to the very few offers of such support which actually exist.

Governmental and public institutions here seem to be entirely absent – instead of tapping into family and community willingness to intervene – with only non-governmental organizations, mainly the different churches, representing some initiatives within this field. According to the families interviewed, they had almost never been contacted by some entity or institution working proactively, visiting families in relevant neighbourhoods. This applied to the police as well as to the social authorities and other, also non-governmental, organizations. Almost all of the families involved in this study, reported that they had no knowledge whatsoever concerning the existence of any programs in their neighbourhood for reintroduction or prevention concerning gang members (El Salvador 95%; Guatemala 95%; Honduras 90%).

In sum, many mara members have original families and communities who still care, who express a clear will to do something and who are begging for outside support. Once this support comes into existence and find its ways to the communities affected, these families (as well as neighbours who want their areas to improve) are likely to constitute persistent and valuable allies in this difficult and necessary endeavour.

5. Police, Communities and Gangs

Introduction

The police represent the first and also principal contact between the gangs and the legal system. The police are also often the only governmental institution with a sustained presence in the neighbourhoods affected. This situation has been further reinforced by the application of repressive approaches (“tough hand”) against the gangs. Consequently, the character of their relationship to the police is of great importance when discussing both how to address the current situation of gang control and gang abuse and how to start programs for reintroduction and prevention. In this context, the degree of corruption within the police and the lack of confidence among the population constitute serious problems that have to be dealt with.

Corruption within the police

Among the countries covered by this study, perception concerning the police is at its lowest ebb in Guatemala, where citizens are well aware not only of high levels of corruption but also that there are direct links between the police and organized crime, particularly related to drugs. Indications are also strong concerning the existence of social cleansing (extrajudicial executions of gang members and street children), with active police involvement. In El Salvador and Honduras, perceptions concerning the police are somewhat milder but in essence very similar.

In Costa Rica, the police are considerably less tainted and accusations concerning the kind of outright criminal activities mentioned above are rare or non-existent. Still, however, one quarter of national respondents in this study perceived their police as corrupt. Only in Nicaragua are the police held in rather high esteem, with high rates of confidence expressed by the population.

Moreover, a high proportion of former mara members who in this context are sources of special interest confirm that the gangs make regular payments (bribes) to the police. The average number of former gang members asserting this accusation (in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) amounts to 77 %, with a peak of 88 % in both Guatemala and Honduras. This assertion also seems to be corroborated by the police officers surveyed within these same countries who, when asked if they thought that there was corruption within the organization, the majority (over 50 %) answered in the positive.

An additional aspect which reflects yet another dimension of police

corruption emerged when people in the neighbourhoods affected were asked about where they thought the gangs obtained their arms. The most frequent answer to this question (from between 25% to 35% in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) was *from the police*, suggesting another important and direct link with the gangs.

Repressive policies vs. other approaches

As shown earlier, the local population in areas affected by the gangs expresses great concern and would like to see external support to address the situation and for prevention schemes. So far, however, they have only witnessed the expression of repressive policies – consisting of police patrolling, massive arrests etc. – undertaken by a police corps they regard as highly corrupt. Generally they have not seen any lasting positive effects either.

Interestingly enough, an important proportion of the police officers interviewed by the researchers for this study also embrace the idea that preventive activities are needed to resolve the problem. At the same time, they seem aware that such policies would be possible only if relations between the police and the neighbourhood were characterised by confidence and cooperation – something which the police themselves affirm is generally not the case today.

Final reflections

The suffering and problems experienced by many neighbourhoods due to gang activities are exacerbated by widespread police corruption. In this context, the corruption appears so great that there are cases where the police corps itself is linked to the gangs and is actively involved as an accomplice, or even as a guarantee for the continuation of criminal activities.

Where this applies, the gangs and the police thus become allies, with the bribes (or the quota) to the police in reality being paid by the local population through, for instance, the application of extortion schemes run by the gangs. Indications for such a symbiotic relationship between the gangs and the police – leaving the population completely defenceless do exist in several cases.

Even if this situation is still hopefully exceptional, it is clear that any efforts towards policies containing substantial dimensions of prevention and reintroduction will require a definition of how to combat police corruption and build bridges with the local communities.

6. Leaving the Gang: not easy but possible

Introduction

While joining the gang appears to be easy, leaving the group is a difficult process and often not very attractive. The gang offers belonging, identity, protection and friends, and probably also some economic benefits. If a member wants to leave, the gang may work against this and threaten reprisals. Outside the group there is not much on offer for young people from these urban areas, and having been a mara member generally with plenty of very visible tattoos mostly generates social rejection. This last chapter explores the theme of leaving, the desire for another life among gang members and identifies some possible paths for future action.

Rules for leaving in the Group Narrative and in Reality

According to the official discourse or narrative of the group, leaving the gang is prohibited and in principle regarded as deserting, which may imply being sentenced to death. At the same time, however, the narrative also contains certain exceptions to the rule, which may be accepted as valid by the clica or basic gang unit, thus implying freedom from sanctions.

“Listen (...), if you have belonged to a mara group and don’t want to continue, don’t want to be active any longer, there are three important things which they respect. First, if you’ve become Christian they will respect you very much....indeed it could be any religion but it must be for real, you cannot play with things related to God....the second is if you have got a wife and kids and want to make family, and the third when you have a family and can get a job...but you should do this and no fooling around, they should not see you drinking and smoking, using drugs... *(Former mara member, M-18, Guatemala)*

Also without complying with any of these three criteria, you may be able to be leave without problems but it is said to depend on your record and on a decision within the group.

“It’s not impossible but ...you have to ask the other members and you need to have your merits done.....that is, what talks in your favour within the gang...having killed someone, having done this, having done that. This is what they consider when giving you permission or not, what you have done for the gang (...) and if you deserve it or not. *(Mara leader, Guatemala)*

According to this leader, leaving without having consulted or without permission may result in serious reprisals, including being given the green light, i.e. the death sentence.

However, when asked if any impediments exist to leaving the group, a very high proportion of male gang members included in this study responded none at all (El Salvador 69%; Guatemala 68%; Honduras 65%). Interestingly, this level was significantly higher among female members (El Salvador 83%; Guatemala 76%; Honduras 88%).

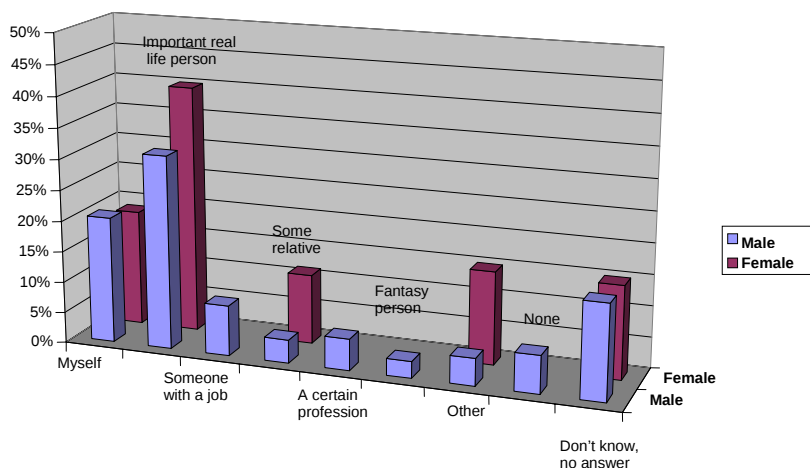
Analysing what gang interviewees state in this context, it may be that they do not really refer to fully and definitely leaving the group, but rather to criteria or permission to “calm down” or “become inactive”. In the real world, however, this appears to be more of an ideological character rather than having tangible consequences – that is, as long as the behaviour of the person leaving is not considered to make him or her an outright traitor.

Many gang members want to leave

Another finding is that a very considerable proportion of the mara members (between 44% and 55%) expressed a desire to lead a different kind of life. Generally, these young people state that they would like to get job or educational opportunities, giving them a chance to leave gang life behind. The majority of the maras admit to having thought about changing their lives in the near future (El Salvador 75%; Guatemala 53%; Honduras 68%). These data are consistent with perceptions within their original families on whether their son or daughter really has wanted to leave the gang or not. Moreover, a strong majority of these relatives also said that they thought it fully possible for their children to leave the gang and become (re)introduced into society – provided they received some external support.

When going somewhat more deeply into the theme of alternative life projects, the majority of the gang members said they would like to exchange their current life with studies or a steady job. Asked about who they would like to become in the future, an important proportion responded “myself”, whereas the majority (like among most other youth) was inclined towards becoming an “important person”. Interestingly, the kind of important people referred to mainly consisted of athletes, singers and actors; that is, personalities who do not represent criminality or being at odds with society but who rather are both famous and widely accepted.

Who would you like to be?
(Male gang members N=377; female N=80)



Other answers with similar implications – having a steady income and being socially accepted – are represented by the categories “be someone with a job” or “hold a certain profession”.

Later gang members were asked what they thought they would be doing in two yearsSection 1 time and also in ten yearsSection 1 time. Concerning the near future (2 years) a sizeable proportion of all respondents, between 33% and 44%, stated that by then they would lead another life, whereas the options of “being in prison” or “having died” together scored from 8% to 21%. When reflecting upon what they would be doing in 10 years time, an important percentage still hoped that they would be leading another life, but with a slightly descending tendency as compared to perspectives regarding the near future (within 2 years). The possibility of being dead scored high, ranging between 11% and 30% for the three countries. These variations in personal perceptions regarding the future rather optimistic when dealing with a 2 year perspective and decidedly less so when the period was extended to 10 years – may be reflecting the combination of a desire to leave with a realistic understanding of the situation. Putting words to such an assessment may sound as follows:

My desire to leave is real and I hope to have left within the near future (2 years in this case). But to leave (and to find something else) is difficult and not at all something given, and if I have not succeeded within this time period, then the odds will be different, also because life as a gang member is dangerous.

Finally, concerning perceptions about the future, answers from male and female members differ in two important aspects. Firstly, a much higher proportion of female members perceive themselves as leading a life outside the gang both in the near future and in 10 yearsSection 1 time and, secondly, a considerably higher percentage of male mara think that they will be dead by then.

Summing up

Leaving the gang is not easy but possible. Leaving is made more difficult due to four principal reasons:

- (i) fear of reprisals from the gang
- (ii) the loss of financial benefits received as a gang member
- (iii) the lack of opportunities “out there” and of support from the authorities
- (iv) prevailing social rejection of people who have been maras

A very substantial proportion of mara members express their desire to leave the gang and to start a new life, dreaming about getting a job or educational opportunities. However, within these areas nothing or almost nothing has so far been offered to gang members, as policies hitherto have been strongly dominated by “tough” or repressive measures.

As the impact of these policies has mainly been counterproductive – strengthening cohesion among gang members and escalating levels of violence – now should be a good moment to apply a more integral approach. Such a new approach should include meeting what appears to be considerable demand among gang members, their families and neighbours for reintroduction and prevention measures.

Halving poverty by 2015 is one of the greatest challenges of our time, requiring cooperation and sustainability. The partner countries are responsible for their own development. Sida provides resources and develops knowledge and expertise, making the world a richer place.



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