DEMOSCOPÍA S.A

Findings of an integral study

Maras and gangs, community and police in Central America

Table of Contents

Maras and youth gangs, community and police in Central America

Title of the original publication:
Maras y pandillas, comunidad y policía en Centroamérica
(F&G Editores, Guatemala 2007. ISBN : 978-99922-2-380-2)

DEMOSCOPÍA S.A
Dr. José Alberto Rodríguez Bolaños (Project Director)
Dr. Jorge Sanabria León, (Research Coordinator)

Consultants:
MSc Vania Solano Laclé (Anthropologist)
MSc Elena Arce Badilla (Anthropologist)
MPhil Angel Ocampo Álvarez (Philosopher)

Researchers:
María Andrea Araya Carvajal (Psychologist)
Patricia Soley Alfaro (Psychologist)
Jennifer González Zamora (Psychologist)

The field study which forms the basis of this publication was financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI).

The production and printing of this publication was financed by SIDA only.

Swedish Embassy in Guatemala
PBX: (+502) 2384 7300
Fax: (+502) 2384 73 50
ambassaden.guatemala@foreign.ministry.se

Printed by Edita, 2008

Art. no.:SIDA48600en

ISBN 978-91-586-4076-4

This publication can be downloaded/ordered from www.sida.se/publications

Preface

Over the past decade, youth gangs have come to constitute a serious problem for public security in Central America. The situation has generated increasing levels of fear among the general population and has become a theme of great concern also within government circles. This has been the case in particular for the countries located in the region's northern triangle – El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. However, also Nicaragua and Costa Rica have, to some extent, experienced a similar development concerning the growth of violent and criminal youth gangs.

While the existence of criminal youth gangs is not at all new in Central America, the systematic use of violence and the brutality shown by the new type of gangs is no doubt unprecedented – something which today is embodied in the very concept of the *maras*.

Although it would be incorrect to make the *maras* the main culprits for the rapid increase of violence during recent times in Central America, they clearly do represent a major and very real problem which deserves greater attention in order to improve both the security situation for the citizens and future prospects for the region's youth.

History as well as social sciences show that youth delinquency is primarily a group phenomenon reflecting complex social and economic situations. Consequently, for the design and carrying out of effective and successful action programs profound, specific and updated knowledge is required.

It is in this context that the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) – with support also from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) – decided to finance a regional and multi-disciplinary study on the *maras* and other violent youth gangs, an applied study with a solid empirical base and characterized by a contextual approach focusing not only on the gangs but bringing into the picture also the neighbours, the local community and the police.

The objective of the present publication – which constitutes a condensed version of the study carried out by a team of researchers from the company Demoscopía S.A. – is to facilitate a more comprehensive as well as constructive and action-oriented public discussion, concerning both the need to immediately address the current situation and to develop policies and measures for prevention.

Ewa Werner Dahlin
Swedish Ambassador to Guatemala,
El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, Nicaragua and Costa Rica

Prologue
The Current Study in the International Context of Scientific Work on Gangs

Dr. Juanjo Medina
Dr. Pedro Mateu-Gelabert*

In 1927, Frederic Thrasher, one of the founding fathers of the Chicago School of Sociology, published his book entitled *The Gang*. This study was the starting point for investigations into youth gangs and their role in the dynamic of youth crime. Thrasher's work was followed by many academic publications which, over the century, contributed to documenting and attempting to explain the phenomenon of delinquent gangs as a social phenomenon, in the large cities of North America (for a review: Klein, 1995). Although definitions given for gangs or *maras* vary, one very widely endorsed definition is as follows:

> "Stable groupings of youths which have a group identity based on participation in violent or delinquent acts, and which offer identification patterns to their members, allowing them to organise their daily lives."

Nowadays the vast majority of studies on this social phenomenon continue to be carried out in the United States (US), where police authorities estimate that there are about 24,000 gangs with about 760,000 members. However, over the past 20 years, investigators from other countries have started to take this social problem more seriously in their own societies. As a consequence, there has been a gradual proliferation of publications and studies which attempt to describe and theorise on the appearance of delinquent youth gangs in countries other than the US. In Europe, for example, Red Eurogang has been particularly active in developing studies on youth gangs and as a result of its activity, a series of studies on the subject has been published (e.g. Decker and Weerman, 2005). Additionally in Latin America and Central America, several studies have been published which attempt to deal with the problem of these gangs (e.g. Rubio, 2007; CEPI, 2007).

Specialist literature has begun to talk about the globalisation of the gang phenomenon (Hagedorn, 2006) with such globalisation being understood as the appearance of gangs in other parts of the world, similar to those traditionally studied in the US. In line with this literature, recent decades have revealed the occurance of a series of socio-economic and cultural changes. These changes have facilitated the reproduction of the conditions responsible for the appearance of delinquent gangs in the large cities of the US, along with their proliferation in more recent years.

The North American criminologist John Hagedorn (2006: 181) has listed a series of factors which, in his opinion, have contributed to the globalisation of gangs. These factors include:

1) The unprecedented concentration of populations in cities, which has occurred on a global scale.
2) The retreat of the State as a consequence of neo-liberal policies and cutbacks in social welfare policies. This has brought about a weakening of social institutions able to control the behaviour of marginal youths while, simultaneously, encouraging a series of vacuums which become occupied by delinquent gangs which question the monopoly of violence of the State.
3) The strengthening of alternative cultural identities has become a means of resistance to marginalisation among young people of both sexes; gangs are just one of these alternative cultural identities.
4) Economic polarisation, increasing inequality and the marginalisation of entire sectors of society have all provided a significant economic impetus to these gatherings of young people.
5) Migratory flows, which are linked to these economic processes and have contributed to the creation of ethnic minority and immigrant groups. This provides a breeding ground for gangs, which are marginalised and geographically segregated in enclaves..

One factor specific to Central America was the mass deportation by the US of *mara* members to their countries of origin. Following the violent riots in Los Angeles, changes in US policy from 1992 onwards saw a shift in regards to the way it sees gang members from other countries, especially those from Central America. The changes in US policy sent many members to prison, this is often cited as a direct cause of the accelerated proliferation of current *mara* groups in the region. From 1996 onwards, after having completed their sentences, many members were deported to their countries of origin, where armed conflicts had already ended. Gradually, the list of crimes which were punishable by deportation increased and even came to include relatively minor crimes. As a consequence, it is estimated that approximately 20,000 delinquents from Central America were deported to their countries of origin (particularly to El Salvador) in the brief period between 2000 and 2004 (Arana, 2005)[1].

It would be wrong to suggest that the gang phenomenon is a recent occurrence in societies outside of North America. In many societies, youth gangs are spoken about as if they were a new social phenomenon. On the contrary, social historians have carried out studies, which provide evidence of the existence of similar groups from over 100 years ago. In any case, even if we accept the historical prevalence of gangs in these societies, this does not mean that the nature and prevalence of these groups has not changed.

Moreover, the simultaneous importation of the models, concepts, methods and theories onto other societies that have been developed in the US throughout the 20th century has been problematic. While youth crime has always been a phenomenon which is mainly of a group nature and the US studies have worked to understand the group nature of youth crime, Central America faces specific situations not seen in these US studies.

---

[1] The vast majority of those deported came from families which had settled in the marginal neighbourhoods of Los Angeles during the 1980s, having escaped war and armed conflict in their countries of origin. After deportation, these young people ended up in countries they barely knew, and in-line with US policy at the time, Central American governments were not notified about the criminal records of these citizens.

The development of scientific knowledge on gangs outside of the US is still in its early stages, having yet to reach the level of conceptual and methodological sophistication, which North American sociologists and criminologists have achieved. While the North American case has close to 100 years of study on this issue, our indication of the series of social changes going on underway in Central America in regards to the role of US policy in regards to the reproduction and proliferation of these groups of gangs. These types of studies that look at Central American gangs, through the Central American experience specifically, will provide a sharper and more relevant perspective. The development of suitable public policies requires an adequate knowledge of the problem and of scientific studies which describe and explain it in its essential dimensions. Familiarization and understanding of both aforementioned components play a fundamental role in the process of developing solutions, which is why studies like the ones presented in this report are so relevant.

About This Study on Gangs in Central America

This publication presents a study financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), carried out by a multidisciplinary team from the company Demoscopía S.A., based in Costa Rica. This study is ambitious in its scope and is a laudable effort to improve our knowledge on the phenomenon of gangs from a methodological point of view. In a recent publication, Professor Malcolm Klein, an international authority on the subject, pointed out the need to employ a comparative method in the study of youth gangs as a requisite for advancing our knowledge on the issue. The use of a comparative method alludes to the need to compare the situation of gangs within different national contexts while at the same time, to require different study methods and to contrast the opinion of different sectors affected by or involved in, this social reality. Thus, the use of a multimethod and multiplace study design is imperative.

The Demoscopía study uses this very type of design where first and foremost, a variety of investigative methods (social surveys, in-depth interviews and direct observations) are used to obtain information from the different social actors involved (gang members, young people who are at risk, families of gang members, residents and shopkeepers in neighbourhoods where gangs operate, representatives of authority and of other relevant organisations etc.). This triangulation of methods is very important given that each one has its own inherent limitations which make it necessary for them to be used in conjunction with others. This enables us to achieve a clearer idea of the reality of youth gangs and their relationship to society. The efforts made by Demoscopía to include different social actors involved in the gang problem in its report, are particularly laudable, as many studies on youth gangs do not have such scope. Second, the Demoscopía study offers a more complete view of the problem of the *maras* in Central America, as the analysis includes several countries of the region. Similarities and differences of the problem in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica are included. At an international level, the few comparative studies of this kind have been comparisons made, *a posteriori*, between investigators working in different countries and deciding to combine their data after it has already been gathered and analysed in the national context.

It is this kind of a *posteriori* collaboration that is problematic given that generally, the designs used by each investigator in their own country, are

not identical and thus, limiting in scope of the validity, relativity and usefulness when taken comparatively against a country with a very different case. There are few international exceptions in which groups of investigators attempt, a *priori*, to design studies comparing the situation in different countries. Unfortunately, these exceptions have either not yet materialised into concrete investigations (as is the case with Red Euro-gang) or they give so much flexibility to investigators in the design of studies in each country, that it becomes difficult to draw comparisons. In some case, these investigations are more modest than the Demoscopía study with regard to the triangulation of methods and sample sizes. Therefore, the Demoscopía study is a worthy effort to improve this situation and it takes its place alongside recent studies along the same lines, such as those carried out by the Center for Inter-American Studies and Programs (2007) or by Mauricio Rubio (2007).

This study, like any other social investigation project, also has its limitations. The design followed an evolutionary process in which new elements were progressively included (new countries like Costa Rica and Nicaragua; new samples, such as female gang members; new versions of the questionnaires with new themes and questions which were reformulated in a more precise manner). These new elements, while helping to provide a better description of the phenomenon in the region on a general level, limit the possibility of conducting specific comparisons between countries. These comparisons are also limited because, when selecting neighbourhoods in each country where the samples were to be obtained, no criteria were used to ensure that neighbourhoods with the same socio-economic profile were being studied.

This means that what may appear to be national differences are in fact differences between neighbourhoods with different socio-economic profiles. Finally, certain investigative methods, for example in-depth interviews with gang members, were used only in certain countries. Therefore, it is advisable to take these limitations into consideration when interpreting the results.

Organisation and Culture

This study documents how gangs or *maras* represent emotive communities which meet a series of emotional needs in the young people that join them. Gangs provide these young people with identities, which allow them to give meaning to their lives in marginalised contexts in which their lifestyle and development options are very limited. Gangs offer an alternative identity which is based on a common vocabulary which comprises the following:

- The importance of a series of initiation rites (however, this application is less widespread than was originally thought).
- Internal norms of behaviour (which are very often infringed and no serious sanctions exist).
- A distinctive external language (which is dynamic, flexible and adopted by people who do not participate fully in the gang), as well as other symbolic referents of belonging and differentiation which are diverse and may present themselves (or not) differently in each gang or clique[2].

These results coincide with comparative studies which note how gangs largely share the functions, contradictions and fluidity of other groups of adolescents and young adults.

[2] The clique is the basic unit of each gang, and is organised around the neighbourhood or district.

At a recent conference, US professor Scott Decker contrasted different ways of conceptualising the organisation of gangs or *maras*. On the one hand, he suggests that the corporate model can be used. According to this model, super-gangs exist which have a national presence characterised by a high degree of vertical organisation and centralised control. These super-gangs are based on the proceeds of black-market activity. Gangs organised according to this corporate model are not very different from organised crime. This vision tends to capture the imagination of the police authorities and the media. It interests the latter because it is an image which sells, and the former because it provides the illusion of a recognisable enemy, which is therefore easier to deal with.

However, this vision has scarce, if any, support in the comparative literature. In this conference, Professor Decker provided examples of police departments in the US which adhered to this vision and were attempting to apply the legal and prosecution instruments applicable to organised crime to the gang problem. These attemps were subsequently abandoned in these new initiatives stated by the US police departments because they didn't respond to the actual reality as police found this kind of super-gang to be non-existent.

The reality of gangs is more complex as they do not exist as formal organisational entities (Fleisher, 2002). They are dispersed, permeable, fluid and unstable social networks of a markedly local nature. In this respect, they are not very different from other groups of adolescents or young adults. As Klein and Maxson (2006) summarise:

> "In most street gangs, leadership is short-lived, members change quickly and the degree of group cohesion is only moderate. Codes of conduct only exist as rhetoric and are easily avoided or contravened. Many street gangs are no more than a grouping of cliques or networks, rather than an individual total and cohesive entity."

However, in Central America and other parts of the world, there is a wide variety of gang types which have differing degrees of organisation. It would be problematic and reckless to, at this point, treat all gangs as if they were one and the same; it is unlikely that Central American gangs fit into this corporate model. In the Demoscopía study, the most common type of gang is the clique or neighbourhood grouping, which varies enormously in terms of size and level of complexity, internal rules and associated sanctions, initiation rites, relevance of external identification signs, etc. This kind of gang model is the one which continually surfaces in studies conducted in other parts of the world.

As in any other social group, these local cliques are made up of people who wield a stronger influence and who occupy positions of leadership. However, this kind of group leadership is unstable and fluid as the control of its members present significant limitations for leaders, particularly in a context where gang members themselves allude to the horizontality of such organisations in terms of decision-making. In this sense, removing gang leaders does not appear to be an effective strategy for controlling the gang problem, given the speed with which they can find new leaders.

* Dr Juanjo Medina holds a Doctorate in Law from the University of Seville (Spain) and a Doctorate in Criminology from Rutgers University (US). He is currently Head Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Manchester in the UK, where he is coordinating several studies on youth gangs in British and European contexts. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Red Eurogang, an international group of youth gang investigators.
Dr Pedro Mateu-Gelabert holds a Doctorate in Sociology from New York University, and is specialised in urban ethnography. He has had many professional documents published and has long experience carrying out qualitative investigations in New York City. In 2000, he was named Principal Research Associate at the National Development Research Institute (New York), working on projects, which explore community interactions, the use of drugs, the drugs market and risk of HIV.

Similar results coincide with those of the Center for Inter-American Studies and Programs (2007) which concluded that:

> While gang-related violence is a problem, it does not have strong links with violence related to drug trafficking and organised crime.
> Only a small proportion of gang members in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have transnational links with other members, organised crime and/or drug trafficking.

In addition, the Demoscopía study serves to illustrate the tension between what some actors in society (public authorities, the media and some members of the community) think about gangs and what is actually observed when data is obtained directly from gang members. We have found that social actors who are not members of a gang, tend to focus on the verticality of these organisations and allude to complex structures with effective coordination and regional cooperation capacities, channels of international communication and links to other criminal organisations with which, on some occasions, would compete and on others would cooperate. Consequently, the corporate model, to which Professor Decker referred, also convinces the authorities in some Central American contexts.

However, it is difficult to obtain direct evidence from gang members or ex-gang members in order to confirm the vision of gangs as business groupings, organised in a quasi-military fashion. In general, gang members deny the existence of regional leaders, at most alluding to cooperation activities of a local nature. Although they refer to contact with drug trafficking, the nature of these links is very vague and requires further investigation, as this type of structure is usually documented by investigations in other parts of the world.

Reflected in patterns present in US studies, it has been observed that in the prison environment, gangs have developed more closed structures, which are characterized by a greater degree of social cohesion. It is possible that this observation on the characteristics of gang development, in the prison environment, has lead to the institutionalization of street gangs and the entrenchment of this as a social problem. Prison, representing the utmost expression of institutionalisation, serves as a space in which a person has no way out. This in turn, promotes and facilitates the appearance of groups, in which there may indeed be greater control over members, as the group acts as a means of survival, providing an additional motivation to serve. In the prison environment, the extent to which these groups gather strength may perhaps, later on, strengthen their presence and the control of the members outside of the prison. Excessive penal repression of gang members and the tolerance of these groups within the prison environment may therefore, be factors which are contributing to aggravating the gang problem.

Based on fundamentally qualitative indicators, which are not particularly robust, the Demoscopía study indicates that in the process of institutionalisation, gangs (particularly in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) have perhaps been able to develop a more solid criminal identity and cement their social and economic base.

Subsequently, this organisation strengthens their power, via involvement in illegal markets, such as that of drugs and by way of widespread practices, such as extortion. While it is beyond doubt that gang members participate in drug trafficking and extortion, it will be important to develop new studies and objective indicators which are more solid and quantifiable in order to allow for these trends to be analysed in terms of

their link to organised crime, level of organisation and sophistication in the structure of gangs and the kind of activities carried out. The development of such indicators would allow us to evaluate how different public initiatives impact this social problem and to develop a more solid body of knowledge than we have at present, which would help in planning public policies to deal with this problem.

In the comparative environment, where police data continues to state that the vast majority (around 90%) of gang members are male, representative surveys of the population suggest that around 40% of people who say they are gang members, are women. The Demoscopía study was initially developed on the vision that the gang phenomenon is fundamentally a social reality that particularly affects males. However, once in the field, the reality of the phenomenon made it necessary to rethink the design of the investigation. Additionally in Central America, although gang culture is firmly rooted in a series of values traditionally considered as being masculine in nature, there is quite clear evidence indicating that very high percentages of women are gang members.

In general, it can be said that women occupy a position of subordination similar to that which applies in other social spheres, although they show clear participation levels in criminal gang activities. Resembling these other social spheres, women also develop specific subordination and resistance strategies within the gangs. Therefore, prevention policies need to be tailored to address this phenomenon and thus, more aptly respond to the particular needs of female gang members.

Activities of Gangs and Gang Members

– The Relationship Between Crime and Gangs

Crime committed by gang members and the fear that their activities introduce in the community, are the main reasons why efforts are made to control gangs and prevent them from forming. One of the most consistent facts to arise in the investigation into gangs is the relationship between membership of a gang and criminal activity. Individuals who join gangs commit more crime than young people who do not, as the gang tends to amplify and encourage more active participation in criminal activity by the young people that join them (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith and Tobin, 2003; Gordon, Lahey, Kawal, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber and Farrington, 2004; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Sharp, Aldridge and Medina, 2006).

Young people who belong to gangs present a higher risk of participation in criminal activities. This is a fact which has been proven in other countries, even by using longitudinal designs. For some time, self-report studies have allowed investigators to clearly establish that young people who claimed to be gang members, presented higher levels of participation in criminal activities. However, discussions in the field of criminology challenged whether this was a correlation, which resulted from a selection effect or a facilitation effect.

The selection model indicates that the only reason for a relationship being found between being a gang member and crime is because young people who join gangs, for a series of complex reasons, are those who initially already presented a greater criminal profile. The saying, 'birds of a feather flock together' may be the correlative reality. The socialisation model proposes that the group structure and dynamic particular to gangs is the key factor in explaining the higher level of participation in criminal activities by gang members. The gang, from this perspective, socialises its members into a lifestyle which is linked to carrying out criminal acts.

The use of longitudinal designs, which allow for a group of individuals to be monitored before, during and after their gang membership, has demonstrated that both models are partially correct. To a certain extent, gangs tend to attract young people who have a higher predisposition for committing crime, while at the same time, the group dynamic within the gangs favours or impels these criminal tendencies.

Time and again, the comparative literature has documented, as does the Demoscopía study, that belonging to a gang is a risk factor which increases participation in criminal activities and drug use among the young people who join them.

The relationship between gangs and criminal behaviour at an individual level is in fact, one of the reasons why gangs receive considerable attention in terms of prevention. Using prevention methods that target the risk factor, that of being a gang member, will therefore, be an effective way of having an influence on rates of criminality.

Another constant arising from studies on gangs in the comparative environment is that when committing crimes, gang members follow the model which US professor Malcolm Klein defines as 'cafeteria style' (a bit of salad, a bit of something else, etc.). As a general rule, gang members are not specialists in a particular group of criminal activities and the criminal activities in which gang members participate are diverse. Some crimes are characteristic of this age group (theft, burglary, vandalism etc.), while others (for example, extortion and murder) may be of a more serious nature and in some cases, point to a greater degree of organisation.

Other Activities of Gang Members

– Work and Leisure

As the comparative literature has illustrated, it would be wrong to think that gang members spend most of their time committing criminal acts or that there are no other facets to their lives which are of interest from a sociological point of view, even from the point of view of controlling and preventing gangs. While it is important to document and understand the criminal activity of gang members, care must be taken not to be carried away by a satanic vision of gang members which does not take into account other aspects of their complex and multifaceted lives.

As suggested by the Demoscopía study, it should therefore, also be pointed out that despite young gang member's participation in criminal activities, they spend most of their time involved in activities common to this age group. Although, they show a greater predisposition for leisure behaviour which is more associated with adults. The US professor Scott Decker points out that gang members spend more time "hangin' than bangin'" or as Marcus Felson states, most of the time, the life of a gang member is much duller than the cultural stereotype on gangs would have us believe. By and large, gang members are young people first and foremost and being part of a gang comes second. As Decker and Van Winkle note (1996: 117):

> "Like most adolescents and young adults, gang members… spend a lot of time just being with their friends – watching TV, drinking beer, sitting down and talking, playing, smoking marijuana, looking for girls. Gang members spend their lives (and generally commit their crimes) in groups, and, generally, these groups are just killing time."

In fact, not only do gang members indulge in other leisure activities common to these age groups, they are also not totally excluded from legal labour markets or from the informal sector of the economy. For a

long time literature in the fields of criminology and economics has offered a simplistic vision of the relationship between employment and delinquency. This literature treated legal and illicit economic activities as being mutually exclusive, while more recent studies tend to offer a more complex vision. In this vision, socially excluded young people develop survival strategies which involve participation in the legal economy and in the informal economy as well as, occasional crime as a way to acquire income (Fagan and Freeman, 1999).

The Demoscopía data on Central America also shows this complex reality in which gang members become incorporated into other economic activities. It is important to note that most work carried out by gang members is unskilled and relatively few are employed in skilled work. Some labour activities include the following: carpentry, brick-laying, selling clothing, working in shops, garages or bakeries, painting, decorating and others. In any case, it is also prudent to bear in mind that when these groups are asked about individual and collective sources of income, those most frequently mentioned are robbery and the sale of drugs.

It is also interesting to point out that the Demoscopía study notes that gang members contribute economically to their families. This is a significant piece of information from a political-criminal point of view. There is increasing awareness in the comparative academic environment of the impact that prison has on the families of delinquents and the communities where they live. There are theoretical approaches which suggest that excessively repressive criminal policies tend to undermine the social fabric of neighbourhoods where delinquents live, when they are removed from their environments. Hagedorn (2002) has posited the crucial role played by the informal economy in the economic life of marginalised neighbourhoods where young people have few alternatives in order to generate sufficient incomes.

The imprisonment of gang members obviously has a direct impact on their families and communities, which should not be underestimated. Fagan and associates (2003), for example, were able to document, in New York, how the heavy reliance on imprisonment in crime policy contributed to the deterioration of the social fabric of these neighbourhoods in turn, causing worsening crime levels in those neighbourhoods.

Violence, Drug Dealing and Extortion

Despite all of the above, it is clear that, as the Demoscopía study and the comparative literature suggest, violence does play a key role in understanding gang culture. Since the pioneering study by Thrasher, the idea of violent conflict between groups has been associated with the study of gangs. It is this conflict, which somehow cements the group, gives it a purpose and reinforces its cohesion. Practically all studies on gangs point out the central role of violence in gang culture. Although, as Vigil (1988) points out, this is most often presented in the form of an omnipresent threat than in the form of behavioural manifestations. As Horowitz (1983) notes, a gang member has to be prepared to respond to violence at any time.

Decker and Van Winkle (1996) have developed a theoretical explanation of gangs, which takes the role of this threat into consideration[3]. According to these authors, the threat of physical violence contributes to the appearance and strengthening of gangs at several levels.

- In many neighbourhoods, gangs form as a mechanism of defence and protection against other external groups, whether it be other gangs, police actions or against other ethnic or immigrant groups.

[3] See also Mateu-Gelabert (2002, 2003).

- The threat of physical violence, whether real or imagined, increases the level of solidarity within gangs. For Klein (1971), the internal cohesion of gangs grows in proportion to the perception of the threat posed by rival gangs.
- The vengeful nature of gang violence also contributes to making them stronger. Each new violent incident leads to another, which expands the circle of affected individuals, resulting in an escalation of weapons proliferation and the perception that, if you are not in a gang, you are in a vulnerable situation.
- Many young people join existing gangs as a way to ensure their personal safety, however paradoxically, being a member of one of these groups increases the risk of becoming a victim of violence.
- This process, which leads young people to develop a tough image facilitated by their tattoos and stories of war and violence, means that society perceives them as a threat and seeks to distance itself from them, deny them opportunities for rehabilitation and social insertion, therefore, contributing to the perpetuation of the problem.
- The rejection by society of the gang member makes it difficult for them to establish relationships and to carry out more conventional activities, which would make it easier for them to leave the gang.

In a context where the threat of violence, either real or imagined, is always present (either by other gangs or by the authorities), gangs provide a false sense of security to these young people and therefore become an adoption mechanism. We say a false sense of security in the sense that belonging to a gang would also increase the risk of becoming a victim of violence, according to the comparative literature and the Demoscopía data. The threat of violence serves to cement the social cohesion of these groups. In fact, there is an awareness in Europe and the US that the sensation of the fear of violence may play an important role in motivating young people to join gangs. In response to this, an effective way to make gangs less attractive would be to develop public policies aimed at ensuring the safety of young people so that they are not forced or motivated to join gangs as a protection mechanism in marginalised contexts (Mateu-Gelabert, 2004).

With regard to other criminal activities, which are often linked to gang activity, the Demoscopía study suggests that gangs in the Central American region are playing a more important role in drug trafficking and that having become a strategy for survival for these marginalized youth, cements their social and economic base. Participation in disorganised, spontaneous drug dealing, which is often done more at an individual level rather than being an activity coordinated by the gang, is something which has also been documented in the comparative literature on gangs.

The Demoscopía study also refers to a phenomenon which points out the particular impact of the maras or gangs in some Central American communities. This phenomenon we are referring to, is the impact of the extortion of shopkeepers and residents by gangs. In the comparative literature, with the exception of some studies on gangs in the Chinatown areas of some US cities, references to extortion are generally of the anecdotal type. As such a widespread social practice, the level of extortion documented here certainly does not find a parallel in studies carried out elsewhere and would therefore, be an indicator of the particular entrenchment of these gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (the only countries for which we have data in this regard).

Risk Factors and Causes

What makes the difference between young people who join gangs and those who do not? The differentiation between what distinguishes this question from the question of why gangs appear or develop, is fundamental. However unfortunate is the fact that in much of the regional literature, these two questions are often confused and answered in a disorganized amalgamation factors. For example, as we will see later on, both Anglo-Saxon studies and Central American studies explain the origin of gangs by referring to macroeconomic and social factors (social marginalisation, the lack of social capital and collective efficiency). Though, to explain why gangs develop tells us little about why certain young people living in neighbourhoods which have the appropriate conditions for gangs to develop, join them. Many studies suggest that only a minority of young people within these marginal communities join gangs[4].

There is a growing number of investigations which, using more sophisticated methodology, particularly longitudinal designs, attempt to understand the factors which distinguish young people who join gangs from those who do not. Generally, these risk factors are grouped into a series of categories: individual risk factors (peculiarities of the psychological nature of these individuals), family risk factors, as well as, those associated with their educational context, the type of friendships they have and the district or neighbourhood they live in.

A recent systematic review of Anglo-Saxon literature points out the following as being important risk factors for joining gangs: having delinquent friends, having presented problematic behaviour and having suffered from a series of negative events during childhood. In the same regard, empirical investigations point to having attitudes favourable to breaking the law, lack of parental control and supervision, as well as, a close relationship with problematic friends. Other factors which have also been studied and have not been endorsed by the literature are as follows: low self-esteem, coming from poor families, living in a single-parent household, a distant relationship with parents, living in bad districts or neighbourhoods and attending unsafe schools (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

What have we learned about risk factors for joining gangs via the studies conducted to date in the Central American region? In reality, none of the regional studies analyse this issue sufficiently. The most that the few quantitative studies carried out manage to do was attempt to assess with what frequency some variables, considered by the comparative literature as risk factors, presented themselves in the gang population. However, as groups for comparison made up of non-gang member youths are not used, we cannot assess whether the effect of these variables on the group of gang members is particularly high or not. The only way to assess whether these variables mark the difference between gang members and non-gang members is by incorporating youths who are not part of a gang into the study. This is what the Demoscopía study and a recent study financed by the World Bank have started to do in the region.
There are a series of risk factors which, in accordance with the Demoscopía study, can serve to identify those young people particularly vulnerable to the attraction of gangs. First of all, there are factors which indicate a problematic family environment and second, there are factors which are expressive of certain lifestyles and indicators of a rapid transit towards adult roles for which young people are not prepared.

---

[4] We would like to point out that the characteristics of the design of our study prevent us from directly evaluating the way in which the community context affects the development of gangs or is a relevant factor in understanding gang membership.

A factor which is clearly visible in the Demoscopía study is that the family environment from which gang members come, is more difficult than that from which young people at risk come. Gang members are more likely to come from a violent family environment in which a situation of family abandonment has occurred or a family where somebody has died or a family with a background of abuse. Therefore, it is not surprisingthat young gang members are more likely to have bad memories of their childhoods and that a higher percentage of them no longer live with their original family. The comparative literature has suggested that a negative family environment may lead to greater dependence on the peer group and the extent to which this peer group has antisocial tendencies could contribute to the start and cementing of criminal careers.

With this in mind, it is significant that a considerably larger percentage of gang members, than young people at risk, cite meeting up with their friends as an activity they always carry out and that a considerably larger percentage of gang members, than young people at risk, claim to have family members or friends in gangs. The Demoscopía investigators are correct to point out that, although coming from a problematic family background is a risk factor for joining a gang, the majority of men who join gangs do not come from this kind of environment. Interestingly to the contrary, in the case of women, it is correct that the majority do come from violent family environments.

The Demoscopía study also notes how the families of gang members and residents of gang areas, as well as other social actors, tend to identify these kinds of family factors as being significant. However, when recommending solutions, they tend to opt for preventative programmes of a wider social nature which have an effect on the life opportunities of these young people.

The Demoscopía study also suggests that gang members are more likely to be involved in a common-law union than young people who are at risk. The latter are more likely to be either married or single. Despite gang members being less likely to be married, they are more likely to have children than non-gang members. Also, gang members are less likely to be still attending an educational institution. All these are indicators that would appear to point towards a faster apparent transit into "adult life", in the sense that a series of adult roles are adopted more quickly (becoming a father, being in a relationship) and a faster abandonment of roles more typical of their age (fewer links to school). In part, this profiles gang members as young people and adolescents who are losing their youth and running to adopt adult roles for which they are perhaps not ready.
There are very few studies which investigate risk factors for men and women but, in general terms, there are three pieces of data which have arisen from investigations conducted in other countries (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

- We were able to identify fewer risk factors for women than for men.
- Risk factors of joining a gang for women, for the most part, are factors which also serve to predict the risk inherent in joining a gang for males.
- It appears however, that there are some risk factors which are specific to women – in particular, factors related to behaviour in school and integration in school life.

In this sense, the Demoscopía study is correct to include women in the analyses. The Demoscopía results present two fundamental conclusions.

First, risk factors applicable to men also apply to women and second, especially stronger in some cases, in relation to family factors (bad childhood memories, violent family environment, death and abuse in the family), the differences between female gang members and women at risk are much more pronounced than these differences in men.

Why does this situation occur? One possible explanation lies in the existence of different socialisation patterns for men and women. Women, particularly when they are younger, are subject to greater informal control by society than men. There is room for speculation that breaking these patterns of informal social vigilance requires precisely what our data shows: a greater incidence of risk factors, as it is more difficult for women to indulge in deviant conduct. This is due to the presence of more pronounced, informal control mechanisms in society. When women do display high-risk behaviour, of which joining a gang could be interpreted as an example, the factors which drive people to behave in this way are acted out in stronger ways.

The comparative literature insists that investigation into these risk factors is a useful instrument for prevention. Those responsible for intervention programmes interested in secondary prevention efforts, i.e., those aimed at high-risk groups, should use the information on risk factors which is stronger and has wider empirical support in order to ensure that their actions are aimed at the young people who are in most need of support (Klein and Maxson, 2006). These factors may be used to identify the audience for secondary prevention programmes (prevention programmes orientated towards young people who are at risk) and also, social policies aimed at having an effect on these factors may also have an impact in this regard.

Diverse social actors agree that, above and beyond the relevance that these psychosocial risk factors may have in understanding why certain young people in marginal communities (and not others who share this social environment) join gangs, there is also a series of economic, historical, political and social macrostructural factors which are more useful when attempting to understand why gangs appear and become institutionalised in these communities.

In summary, although the profile of gang members is very diverse, there are several characteristics which are more common among gang members than among young people who have grown up in the same social environment and yet, do not join gangs. Programmes orientated towards preventing gangs from forming could therefore, benefit from knowledge of these characteristics. However, we need to bear in mind that not all gang members are going to present these characteristics. Prevention programmes which attempt to develop prosocial associations among young people in marginal areas, give support to their parents and family members and help to provide young people with a safe environment conducive to their development. Such actions affect the factors which may be motivating groups of young people in these areas to quickly adopt adult roles for which they are not prepared. These prevention programmes may be useful when confronting the problem of delinquent gangs.

Community and Family

Very few studies have concerned themselves with properly documenting the relationship between gangs and their social environment, existing links and the relationships which are formed between gangs, gang members and other local residents or their family members and the impact that gangs have on the life of these residents and their own families.

In any case, although few studies exist in the comparative environment, there are some which have attempted to explore this issue and which allude to its complexity. Gang members are members of the community and belong to family networks which form part of the social capital of these communities. This, as several studies have documented, limits the ability of communities to control the behaviour of gang members (Pattillo, 1998). In her study of Chicana gangs in the US, Horowitz (1987) documents, for example, a certain tolerance of the violence committed by these gangs as a result of this overlap. This tolerance, which varies in degrees and which can be fragile, is generally maintained by way of a process of active informal negotiation between residents and gang members. She maintains that the meaning of gang violence is articulated within a cultural framework of the concept of honour, which allows residents to understand gang violence. Rodgers (2006) draws similar conclusions when talking about his study of a community and its gang in Nicaragua.

This literature also documents how the community, on occasion, benefits materially from the social and economic contribution of the gang. Venkatesh (1997), in his study of very marginal areas of Chicago, for example, talks about loans and credits, home deliveries, help for relatives in prison, organisation of sporting activities, control by society of delinquent street activity, etc. This does not mean that there is no ambivalence or that this assistance is easily accepted or that the acceptance is unanimous and without resistance by neighbourhood groups. Though, in some contexts, the ways in which the State retreats, and the power of gangs increases through their growing links with drug trafficking, are significant determinants when deciding whether or not to accept assistance from gangs, particularly in a context where there are important emotional bonds and relationships with gang members.

Other investigators also point out how the difficulties these communities have in receiving State attention reduces their ability to control the behaviour of the gangs (Zatz and Portillos, 2000). Desmond Arias (2006), when analysing this issue in Rio de Janeiro, posits how in the context of Latin America, the complex relationships of clientelism partly facilitate the role of these criminal organisations as community mediators, making the treatment and control of these groups even more complex. Considerations of this kind are important as any efforts to appeal to the community in controlling gangs must be made via the use of strategies which go beyond the social segregation of the gang member. As the gang member, although they are perceived as the cause of many problems affecting the community, continues to be a part of it and continues to be a neighbour, cousin, brother, father – and therefore, an integral part of the community's social networks (Venkatesh, 1997).

The data presented by Demoscopía insists on some of these issues such as, the complexity of the bonds between the community and the gang in the sense that the gang member never ceases to be a member of the community and that, in turn, community maintains strong emotional and instrumental links with the gang member and the gang. Despite this, the community is aware that gangs are associated with worsening conditions in these neighbourhoods and districts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the dominant sensation is a combination of fear and compassion. It is important to point out also that there is a demand for prevention programmes and a significant predisposition to participating in and supporting them.

In accordance with the Demoscopía data, the family has, for obvious reasons, a complex relationship with gang members who are relatives. In

any case, it is very clear that in general, they are opposed to this situation and actively look for mechanisms to facilitate the reintegration of gang members who are relatives. The family itself suffers in its internal functioning and in its relationship with neighbours as a consequence of the fact that one of its members belongs to a gang. Therefore it is also necessary to develop welfare policies which cater for the needs of these families. In light of the Demoscopía data, it seems clear that the families of gang members can play an important role in the reintegration of their relatives and they deserve more support in this task. Certainly, some family members act as social reinsertion actors with an important role in supporting those gang members who leave the *maras*. This appears to be a critical point when designing effective community programmes.

The relationship between the maras and the community in which they develop is very complex and the *maras* are not isolated from the neighbourhoods in which they develop. *Mara* members are fathers, friends, neighbours and sons and we must insist as well, on the fact that not all members of the community where the *maras* develop, belong to them. Citizens who live in these communities are the ones who suffer their criminal activities most directly. Prevention programmes which seek to "root out" the *maras* do not often take into account their relationship with the community in which they live. Heavy-handed policies, which treat all residents of neighbourhoods where the maras operate as suspects, serve only to promote gang membership and to alienate the most effective support group in facilitating a way out from the *maras*.

The Media

When the authorities are asked where they obtain most of their knowledge on gangs, the most generic reply is: the media. When these authorities are asked what their least reliable source of information on gangs is, they also report it being from the media. The paradox is, that those responsible for taking measures against the gang problems mostly rely on media for information, which may not always be the most reliable source.

The Demoscopía study attempted to deal with the quality of information on gangs in the Central American region in an exploratory fashion. Their conclusions confirm that the information on the *maras* is not reliable and is markedly skewed towards isolated facts, limited versions, official sources, stereotypes and a certain magnification of the phenomenon rather than a wider context of the facts, more extensive approaches, more diverse sources and media initiatives with regard to journalistic angles which go beyond newsworthiness.

When the Demoscopía investigators ask different social actors about their opinion of the media, these opinions on the conduct of the media vary substantially depending on the populations consulted. Those opinions of *mara* members and former *mara* members are ones of criticism and rejection; those of young people not involved in the *maras* and neighbours are mostly positive; the opinions of family members are negative, but less negative than the opinions of *mara* members. The perceptions of informants from public administration, the judiciary, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and churches were very diverse but, had a generally negative emphasis on the work of the media.

Even when bearing in mind that their effects may be determined by multiple factors, the media do not contribute to generating an integral vision of the *mara* phenomenon among the population: they limit citizens' vision regarding the complexity of the problem and do not encourage a quality, public debate on the issue. Moreover, by magnifying and stere-

otyping the phenomenon, they may exaggerate the true power of the *maras*, distorting the behaviour of citizens, the authorities and *mara* members themselves. While respecting the principle of freedom of the press at all times, it is important to promote more responsible practices from the public authorities in terms of their conduct, as well as, a more professional attitude from those working in the media, when giving information on this problem.

Police, Community and Gangs

As the USAID (2006) report pointed out, Central American governments, particularly in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, have opted for policies of police repression and a toughening of criminal legislation, rather than other types of preventative policy. This contrasts with the absence of prevention and rehabilitation programmes for mara members, highlighted by neighbours and family members of these young people in the Demoscopía study.

The experience accumulated in other countries demonstrates that heavy-handed policies generally only serve to cement the presence of gangs and further marginalise the sectors affected by this social problem (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Policies which are mainly based on repressive approaches also cause serious problems in a region where the criminal justice system is deemed inefficient by both internal and external observers (USAID, 2006), has little regard for human rights (Amnesty International) and as the Demoscopía study points out, has serious corruption problems.

The Demoscopía study documents the existence of a rather generalised dissatisfaction with the police. This is linked to a perception, shared by many social actors including the police, that police corruption constitutes a serious problem which limits the ability of this institution to act effectively against gangs. The study also notes that there appears to be a climate of mutual mistrust between the police and the residents of areas where gangs operate. This climate of distrust clearly makes it difficult to develop close bonds of collaboration. In this context, it does not seem viable to propose an exclusively police-based solution to the gang problem. Curiously, although the police mainly use traditional tactics to control the gang problem, the police themselves consider that more creative and innovative preventative approaches are necessary.

Other aspects that the Demoscopía study highlights with regard to police action, particularly in relation to the *maras* in Central America, are as follows:

As the salaries paid to police officers are low, these are supplemented by the bribes they receive from *mara* members; this serves as "payment" for letting them do what they want.

As the police play the role of accomplice in ensuring the territorial control of the *maras*, the community is unprotected as the community cannot approach the police as they see them as benefactors from *mara* activity. The part of the report which points to the symbiosis between the *mara* and the police, in certain contexts, seems to be critical. In light of this, any policies for preventing the *maras* must contain elements of police corruption prevention. The CEPI (2007) study also concludes that it is fundamental to investigate and eliminate the participation of police authorities in gang-related activities and in violations of the human rights of young people. It is necessary to rebuild trust and communication between the police and the community; in turn, mechanisms of community control must be implemented as well as, a need for better control of

police duties. Some specific measures could include: increasing the salaries paid to police officers and improving their training, introducing programmes to improve the relationship between the community and the police (police-community meetings with community leaders, shop owners), adopting measures which make it easier for people to report corruption anonymously (by post or telephone) and strengthening police units which fight against internal corruption.

Leaving the Gang

Leaving the gang is not an easy process nor does it often appear to be a very appealing option as it primarily means rejecting friends, having to live in a context where the development of more conventional life projects are limited and the society in which they live will continue to stigmatise the gang member. However, this does not mean that it is impossible to leave a gang nor does it mean that people leave gangs infrequently. Those who study gangs using longitudinal designs (those that monitor a sample of young people over a long period of time in order to observe changes in their behaviour and circumstances) have noted that most gang members end up leaving gangster life behind (Thornberry et al., 2003). In the same way that the "delinquency and age curve" suggests that most people stop committing crime once the transition to adult life has become consolidated, these longitudinal studies have begun to show similar processes in relation to links with gang activity. While our knowledge may still at a very basic level, a recent review of the literature, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) concluded that most studies on the process of leaving gangs are descriptive. Their interviews with gang members in the US city of St. Louis suggest that the process of leaving the gang is the result of the combination of these individuals maturing and becoming older. Additionally, and interestingly, gang members often reconsider their gang membership after having experienced a first hand situation of violence. According to these authors, this suggests that one possible strategy is to intervene with assistance and rehabilitation methods following violent incidents, when gang members may be at their most open to considering leaving the gang. Facilitating the process of leaving gangs by way of welfare policies, to support those who do want to change their life, is certainly one of the most publicised control mechanisms in the comparative literature on gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006). The Demoscopía study shows that although gang discourse talks about the existence of rules which prohibit members from leaving, this very discourse includes a series of exceptions to the rule. In the study itself, it can be seen how, in most situations of this type, these rules do not appear to be backed up by strong sanctions (which does not mean that in certain instances they do not occur). In fact, significant percentages of gang members express a desire to leave, although the lack of alternatives has a bearing on the possibility of making this desire a reality. Data from in-depth interviews and surveys, conducted by Demoscopía, illustrate that it would be fatalistic to think that it is impossible for gang members to leave, or that they do not want to do so. Although the process of leaving the gang can be very difficult, it is important to point out that there are ways out. Testimonies refer to several escape routes, as well as the role played by the family and other non-governmental institutions, which include the church, in this process. It would therefore, appear that the development of policies which aid the process of leaving gangs and the integration of the former gang member into the labour market, could play an important role in controlling this social issue. We see that the

most common scenario is that, despite the myth, at a given moment mara members do leave the group. It is important, therefore, to develop policies which facilitate this process. The support of families and other community groups is also important, as well as developing programmes which promote employment opportunities.

Lessons in Criminal Policy: Learning from Comparative Experience

At this point, we have been able to resume the main results of the study conducted by Demoscopía and to put these results into the context of the comparative investigation carried out in other countries with a longer tradition and history in the realisation of this kind of study. One resounding question arises, what are the main political-criminal implications of these results? In this section we will present some of them and we will also present a summary of the main lessons learned in the comparative context on the actions taken to deal with gangs. Studies on prevention policies come to the same conclusion: that policies which are repressive or heavy handed have only counterproductive effects. Repressive criminal policies, for example, reinforce gangs as they facilitate contact between young gang members and non-gang members, put gang members from different cliques in contact with each other and reinforce membership of these groups, enabling them to survive the prison environment (Moore, 1991; Scott, 2004). The comparative literature warns of the risk of policies which turn gangs into enemies, as such strategies reinforce processes of internal cohesion. Instead, they recommend prevention policies during childhood, supporting the process of leaving the gang and improving economic conditions in the community (Klein and Maxson, 2006). Excessively repressive criminal policies tend to undermine the social fabric of neighbourhoods where delinquents live when they are removed from their environments. Hagedorn (2002) has posited the crucial role played by the informal economy in the economic life of marginalised neighbourhoods where young people have few alternatives in order to generate sufficient incomes. Irrespective of this, many gang members are fathers and thus, contribute to the economic maintenance of their families. Imprisoning them has a direct impact on the well-being of their families and communities. Fagan and associates (2003), for example, were able to document how policies in New York, which relied heavily on imprisonment contributed to the deterioration of the social fabric of these neighbourhoods, contributed to worsening crime levels. Other regional studies also confirm that the drastic criminal punishment, to which States resort, does not make the gang option appear less attractive but rather, intensifies it and even makes the gang appear a more attractive option (Rubio, 2003; USAID, 2006; FAPPH, 2006). The Demoscopía study echoes these conclusions with similar ones for the region of Central America. For example, the survey on the families of gang members reflects the counterproductive effects of imprisonment policies. The model response to the question on the effects of the imprisonment of their gang-member relatives is that their behaviour became more violent and they became more attached to the mara. The study also notes that gang members contribute economically to their families. In-depth interviews with figures of authority, representatives of social organisations and security-sector representatives, repeatedly show that the development of zero tolerance or heavy-handed policies and mass imprisonments have driven the development and increased organisational efficiency of the maras. This, in the opinion of these interview-

ees, has encouraged attachment to the maras which use prisons as centres for management, recruitment and social cohesion. Public authorities also point out that the institutionalisation of corruption has limited the effectiveness of actions against these violent groups – undertaken in institutional centres and in the neighbourhoods and districts in which they appear. Ironically, the implementation of the most widely applied prevention policies in Central America "heavy-handed policies" falls to the police; an institution that many social actors and their members describe as being corrupt and having, in some cases, benefited from mara activity. Programmes to prevent the mara problem which involve the police, must include systems of control to prevent police corruption, such as mechanisms which facilitate community involvement (monthly meetings between the police chief and the community, making it easier to anonymously report corruption – via post and telephone – at non-police institutions etc.). Decker and Lauritsen (2002) suggest that one possible strategy to encourage people to leave the maras would be to intervene with welfare and rehabilitation methods following violent incidents, when gang members may be at their most open to considering leaving the gang. Facilitating the process of leaving gangs by way of welfare policies, which give support to those who do want to change their lives, is certainly one of the most publicised control mechanisms in the comparative literature on gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006). The data presented in the Demoscopía study indicates that there are some possibilities of intervening, which existing support mechanisms in the community could capitalise on. For example, the survey documents a low level (almost nil) of organisation within the neighbourhood to prevent gang member action. Although no programmes of this kind exist at present, there is widespread interest on the part of neighbours in participating in programmes to prevent mara membership and to aid mara reinsertion in their neighbourhood. Prevention policies initiated by the State, which channel this interest, could establish support measures in the neighbourhood where mara members are active. The data states that not only do neighbours perceive a low level of coordination, they believe that the police are also responsible for the distance between the community and the police. Other data indicates that most police officers interviewed are in favour of preventative policies of a social nature. Including the police in social programmes in collaboration with neighbours may help to improve relations between the police and the community. This will in turn, strengthen a critical alliance for prevention. A very low number of young people that claim to be mara members have taken initiation rites; in turn, a high percentage state that their most frequent activity within the gang is "being with friends". This information indicates that, for many young people, being a mara member is mostly a recreational activity of affiliation. Preventative policies which help to develop programmes for young people (sports clubs, dance clubs or centres with other organised activities) would give adolescents more attractive options than joining a mara. These programmes also help to focus resources on helping those mara members most involved in criminal activities to leave the mara.

The majority of mara members provide for themselves and support their families. Some work legally, some illegally and others combine both options. Programmes for leaving a mara that offer employment opportunities would help mara members to find legal, alternative sources of income while helping them to continue providing for themselves and their families. At the same time, participating in the legal labour market

would be a first step towards (re)integration, while the social stigma associated with their identity as a former mara member would decrease.

Some family members of gang members can play an important role in their reintegration and deserve greater support in their efforts. Family members act as points of initiation and anchoring for (re)insertion. Supporting this family effort with support programmes would be like nourishing "seeds" of (re)insertion, scattered all over the community and thus, very close to mara members.

In summary, prevention policies implemented up until now in Central America have been mostly repressive and the comparative literature, in accordance with the Demoscopía study, find that these measures are counterproductive. Moreover, the Demoscopía data shows that there is a desire on the part of neighbours and family members of those involved in the maras to participate in supporting their reinsertion. The comparative literature shows the community support measures which work best.

With the policies implemented up until now, the police have been the main force responsible for resolving the mara problem. Elements within the police force itself recognise the limitations of this approach, due to the purely repressive nature of policies and the corruption which exists among some of its members. The police could benefit from participating in other prevention policies. For example, the police could work together with community leaders, so that it would be perceived more as an instrument of support to the community rather than a repressive element. Anti-corruption measures would help to purge the police of its corrupt elements, therefore improving its professionalism and the public's perception of its work and they would help police work, as the police would have the collaboration of the community in its task of preventing crime and punishing those who commit it.

The main options seem to be clear: continue to implement repressive but inefficient and counterproductive measures or support communities where mara members live in the tasks of prevention and (re)insertion. In the second option, the role of the police is also crucial; working in conjunction with the community, more effective prevention of crime can be achieved and the fight against mara crime will be more successful, while the (currently very weak) bonds between the police and the community would be very much strengthened.

References

Arana, A. (2005). "How the Street Gangs Took Central America". Foreign Affairs, May–June 2005.

Center for Inter-American Studies and Programs (2007). Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y los Estados Unidos.

Decker, S. and Van Winkle, B. (1996). Life in the gang. Family, friends and violence. US: Cambridge.

Decker, S. and Lauritsen, J. (2002). "Breaking the bonds of membership: Leaving the Gang". In

C. R. Huff (ed.) Gangs in America III (pp. 103–122), Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Decker, S. H., and Weerman, F. (2005). European street gangs and troublesome youth groups: Findings from the Eurogang Research Program. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Desmond Arias, E. (2006). "The dynamics of criminal governance: networks and social order in Rio de Janeiro". Journal of Latin American Studies, 38, 293–325.

Fagan, J. and Freeman, R. (1999). "Crime and Work". Crime and Justice: A Review of Research, 25, 225–290.

Fagan, J., Holland, J. and West, V. (2003). "Reciprocal effects of crime and incarceration in New York City neighborhoods". Fordham Urban Law Journal. 30.

Arias Foundation for peace and human progress (2006). La cara de la violencia urbana en América Central. Costa Rica: FAPPPH.

Gordon, R. A., Lahey, B. B., Kawal, E., Loeber, R., Stouthamer-Loeber M. and Farrington, D. (2004). "Antisocial behavior and youth gang membership: selection and socialization". Criminology, 42(5), 55–88.

Hagedorn, J. M. (2002). "Gangs and the informal economy". In Huff, R. Gangs in America, (pp. 101–120). US: Sage.

Hagedorn, J. M. (2006). "The global impact of gangs". In J. M. Short and L. A. Hughes (ed.) Studying youth gangs (pp. 181–192). US: AltaMira Press.

Horowitz, R. (1983). Honor and the American Dream. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Horowitz, R. (1987). "Community tolerance of gang violence". Social Problems. 34(5): 437–450.

Klein, M. (1971). Street gangs and street workers. Englewoods Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Klein, M. (1995). American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control. New York: Oxford University Press.

Klein, M. W. and Maxson, C. (2006). Street Gang Patterns and Policies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mateu-Gelabert, P. (2002) "Dreams, Gangs, and Guns: The Interplay Between Adolescent Violence and Immigration in a New York City Neighborhood". Vera Institute of Justice, April 2002. On the web: http://vera.org/publication_pdf/157_234.pdf

Mateu-Gelabert, P. (February 2004). "Sueños, bandas y pistolas: la interacción entre la violencia adolescente y la inmigración en un vecindario de la ciudad de Nueva York". Revista Española de Investigación Criminológica. Recovered 1 June 2006, from http://www.criminologia.net

Mateu-Gelabert, P. and Lune, H. (December 2003). "School Violence: the Bidirectional Conflict Flow Between Neighborhood and School". City and Community, 2, 4, 353–368.

Moore, J. (1991). Going down to the Barrio: homeboys and homegirls in change. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Pattillo, M. (1998). "Sweet mothers and gangbangers: managing crime in a black middle-class neighborhood". Social Forces. 76 (3): 747–774.

Rubio, M. (May 2003). Maras y delincuencia juvenil en Centroamérica. Paz Pública, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá. University Institute for the Investigation of Homeland Security, UNED, Madrid.

Rubio, M. (2007). Bandas Latinas. University Institute for the Investigation of Homeland Security. UNED, Madrid.

Scott, G. (2004). "It's a sucker's outfit". How urban gangs enable and impede the reintegration of ex-convicts. Ethnography, 5 (1), 107–140.

Sharp, C., Aldridge, J. and Medina, J. J. (2006). "Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: findings from the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey". London: Home Office Online Report 14/06.

Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A. and Tobin. K. (2003). Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

USAID (2006). "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment". Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs. Office of Regional Sustainable Development, April 2006.

Venkatesh, S. A. (1997). "The social organization of street gang activity in an urban ghetto". The American Journal of Sociology. 103(1): 82–111.

Vigil, D. (1988). Barrio gangs. Austin: Texas University Press.

Zatz, M. and E. L. Portillos. (2000). "Voices from the barrio: Chicano/a gangs, familias and communities". Criminology. 38(2): 369–402.

Acknowledgements

This investigation is the result of the generous and enthusiastic support of several people and organisations who understood the strategic status of the problem of the maras in Central America: the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), namely, Pierre Frühling, Advisor for Latin America; the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), namely, Harry Brautigam, Executive Chairman and Juan Rafael Lizano, Representative for Costa Rica before the CABEI, as well as vital support from all representatives of governments of the region before this banking entity.

We would like to thank the ambassador of the Republic of El Salvador, Milton Colindres, for providing us with access to the political and judicial authorities of El Salvador; likewise, the Office of the CABEI in Guatemala, which diligently cooperated with the work carried out in that country.

Our recognition goes to the group of approximately 20 key informants in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, whose information contributed significantly in the interpretation of data, and whose names we have omitted so as not to compromise their security or that of their families. We would also like to thank the prison directors, surveyors, the young (male and female) mara members, young people at risk and all those residents who bravely contributed invaluable material and resources on which this investigation is based. Without their support, this work would not have been possible. Our gratitude goes to all of them.

All the analyses, criteria and conclusions of this work are those of the authors; therefore, they do not represent official opinion or the policy of the bodies and people who gave their assistance.

Introduction

Knowledge on the phenomenon of the maras and gangs in Central America is inversely proportional to the magnitude of the problem. While there has been a growing number of scientific studies on the gang problem in the region in the past decade, there is still a lot that remains unknown[5]. Increasing and deepening our knowledge on this issue is an essential condition if we want to be able to develop control and prevention policies for this phenomenon.

It is in this context and with this same objective that this investigation seeks to fill some of these gaps, based on a regional comparative analysis covering Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica and through the inclusion of a wider range of actors and the utilisation of a systemic methodology.

Criminal gangs are not a new phenomenon in the history of humankind. Rather, they are a constant theme in diverse eras and civilisations. Although the existence of gangs and banditry tends to be considered as a marginal and dark factor of history, they are, as noted by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, "one of the most universal social phenomena registered by history" (Hobsbawm, 2001: 34). Specifically, Hobsbawm associates the proliferation of criminal gangs with shifts in social structures. This occurs because, in these structural adjustments, the State or the police tends to become disorientated as an initial reaction. If the State persists in neglecting its duties, obligations and the notion of the law as a protective device, as appears to be the case in Central America, gaps will appear that will be filled by some other authority or social dynamic, as ultimatly, the needs of the population do not disappear with the new situation; they persist and will be satisfied in some other way, either legally or illegally[6].

In Central America, the link between structural adjustments and the proliferation of criminal groups has been confirmed. 1985 has been identified in Guatemala, as the year of the emergence of the maras. At this time, the first appearance of the marginal young people were being exposed to social and political violence at a very early age (ERIC, IDIES, IUODP, NITLAPAN and DIRINRPO, 2001–2004). This era

[5] See Table A in the Appendix for a summary of these studies.

[6] An historic example is that of the Italian mafia. The social vulnerability and insecurity of the population in Sicily were the main needs that the mafia came to fulfil. In fact, as Eric Frattini points out (2002: 15) in his studies on the mafia, the first Mafiosi organisations, which surfaced, in the 16th century, were communities, which were dedicated to providing protection.

has particular significance for the region: these were the years that ECLAC has called "the lost decade", in reference to the economic disturbances suffered by Latin American countries and the onerous burden which foreign debt has come to represent on their economies; they were also the years in which structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) started to be applied in the region.

Additionally and equally in importance, were the years of the worsening of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, which ended with the signing of the Peace Agreements in the 1990s. This introduced a new condition which was not paid due attention: the demobilisation of young guerillas and soldiers. This was combined with the presence of low wage levels and unemployment at the same time that these young people were becoming responsible for the economic support of their families and desertion of educational establishments. In addition to all this, the development of communication put the dream of consumerism within the reach of young marginalised people: the Internet, mobile phones, videos, television etc. In this context, violence was not eliminated; rather it took on other forms.

Additional factors to consider, in the context of Latin America, are the growth of the urban population (currently, 80% of the population lives in urban areas), the booming informal economy (Rosales, 2003), youth unemployment (ILO, 2003) and the increase in migratory flows (SIEMCA, 2001). Additionally, the region has one of the highest levels of violence in the world (Buynic, Morrison and Shifter, 1999).

The change in US policy from 1992 onwards is another factor which analysts have identified as important in the rapid expansion of current mara groups in the region, in regard to the treatment of gang members from overseas (particularly from Central America) who had been imprisoned in the US, as a result of these policies. From 1996 onwards, after having served their sentences, these prisoners were deported to their countries of origin, where armed conflict had already ended. Gradually, the list of crimes which were to result in deportation increased, and even came to include relatively minor ones.

As a consequence, it is estimated that approximately 20,000 delinquents from Central America were deported to their countries of origin (particularly to El Salvador) in the brief period between 2000 and 2004 (Arana, 2005)[7].

If we add to this the fact that the United Nations (UN) considers Latin America as "the most unequal region in the world" (UNDP, 2003: 69) and the fact that the youth population is very high (36%–47% of the population in these countries is aged under 14), all factors are present for the phenomenon of the maras and gangs to develop and become consolidated.

While the presence of criminal gangs in general history is not an entirely new phenomenon, neither is it a recent development in the history of Central American societies. However, current maras and gangs display particularities which require direct and specific treatment; they are a complex phenomenon, whose multiple facets make it impossible to reduce them to simple dichotomies.

This investigation is structured in seven chapters, which cover all of the main thematic axes of our study. Our attempt is to characterise the maras and gangs in Central America based on the socio-demographic and psycho-social profile, their social construction of reality and their life dynamic. We also hope to distinguish their factors for and spaces of

[7] After deportation, these young people ended up in countries they barely knew, and in-line with US policy at the time, Central American governments were not notified about the criminal records of these citizens.

socialisation, which includes knowledge of the processes of entry into a gang, remaining in the gang and the processes of leaving the gang, as well as associated structural factors. Moreover, our aim was to learn about the social impact of the mara and gang phenomenon in Central America. To this end, we have found it critical to identify the organisation of the maras or gangs, their families, emotional relationships, drug use and, in general, their community life. In so doing, we aim to identify the organisational and economic development models which sustain the activity of the maras and gangs.

Preventing the proliferation of the maras and gangs in Central America depends on the implementation of protection networks and opportunities for young population to regain their faith in their future plans, allowing those in the current mara cohort to cease their violent activity and those who have yet to join a mara or gang to find a future with better living conditions, therefore to not perpetuate the insecurity of and violence among citizens.

In the cases of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, it is necessary to note that only some components of the investigation were carried out, as these countries were not included in the original proposal. The interest in carrying out this initial incursion lies in the need to, first, have a point of comparison and second, to have preliminary data which allows us to identify the presence of the phenomenon in these countries and its potential development. Therefore, we have treated the data with caution when comparing the five countries and have not made extrapolations of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, but it is important for the reader to also bear this aspect in mind when reading our report. By way of example, we can mention how in Nicaragua, not only have there been no heavy-handed policies, but, on the contrary, preventative programmes have been implemented by different institutions; particularly worthy of mention, is the work of the national police force in preventing youth crime and violence, which has been widely recognised in the country and is a unique experience in the region.

Chapter I
Methodological Approach

General Characterisation

Over 100 years after the publication of the famous study The Gang, carried out by Trasher, the specialist literature has yet to reach an agreement on how to define gangs. This work uses a wide definition which allows us to take account of their diversity which, given the experience in the region, allows for their proper treatment. For our purposes, the following definition of the maras and gangs will be used:

> "Relatively stable groupings of young people which are characterised by the use of urban public spaces and the generation of identity patterns, which articulate the economy and daily life of its members, making no claims of institutionality, and which deploy a counter-power based on initially disorderly violence[8]."

Although, in general, gangs have surfaced as a response to overt elementary needs, at later stages they tend to deploy an ordered violence and are based around a colonised desire to participate in the privileges from which their members have been excluded. They are not based on a desire to modify the conditions which produce such privileges, or on any desire for social emancipation.

A grouping or association is constituted voluntarily and consequently, it is an inorganic collective which can be joined or abandoned; the community, for its part, is of an organic nature, and those who form part of it do not enter into it voluntarily. For this reason, the maras and gangs are always a group or association, even though they are always concatenated to a community.

It should be noted that throughout this text the terms mara and gang and mara member and gang member are used as being equivalent, although the focus of this study brings to light the differences between the groups, which often go beyond the issue of rivalry. It must be taken into consideration, however, that organisations which identify themselves as being linked to the Mara Salvatrucha and Pandilla 18 – which in the common parlance call themselves maras – have not been found in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, although in a few cases they use similar names.

This is the first transnational study which uses the same quantitative and qualitative methods applied to a series of representative samples of the main sectors involved in the gang phenomenon in each country (gang members, young people at risk, members of the community etc.). The infor-

[8] In 2006, Klein and Maxson published a definition very similar to this one.

mation was gathered using methods, protocols and procedures common in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua.
The study combined the use of quantitative questionnaires and in-depth interviews with samples of young gang and mara members, young people at risk (who are not members of gangs or maras), former gang or mara members, relevant members of the community (relatives of mara or gang members, shopkeepers, neighbours), as well as with representatives of public authorities, churches, NGOs, the security sector and the criminal justice system (police, ministry representing the State in criminal proceedings). Press articles on the maras and gangs published in the media were also analysed qualitatively. A strategy was used which allowed us to recognise, by way of cross-referencing the responses of different populations, a series of issues from different perspectives, as well as offering a panoramic vision.

Table 1 indicates the sizes and the composition of the sample in each country[9].

Table 1

Composition of the Study Sample, by Country

Source: Drawn up with the data from the investigation.

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica	Total
Male gang members	122	141	137	98	97	**595**
Young people at risk	125	135	100	118	130	**608**
Female gang members	51	55	50			**156**
Ex-gang members	97	90	160			**347**
Relatives	100	100	100			**300**
Neighbours	200	207	237	125	115	**884**
Policemen	25	25	30			**80**
Shopkeepers and hauliers	100	108	141			**349**
Victims	30	23	30			**83**
Total	**850**	**884**	**985**	**341**	**342**	**3,402**

Selection of the Samples and Instruments used With Each Group

– Mara Members, Gang Members and Former Gang Members

The selection of gang members and former gang members was carried out in stages. First, with the assistance of experts, communities or districts with the strongest presence of these groups were identified (primary sample units: see table B in the Appendix). Once these communities or districts had been identified, local contacts (religious leaders, NGOs, community leaders and even some mara members) were used to approach young people who were active in gangs. This was carried out within their communities, educational establishments, NGOs and church programmes, as well as in penal centres in which they were detained for questioning or sentencing.

The population of mara members and gang members met basic selection criteria, such as: they considered themselves as active members of a mara or gang; they identified their affiliation and were willing to

[9] For more detailed information on the sample and the type of instrument applied, please refer to tables B and C in the Appendix.

share their experiences. Moreover, we managed to obtain the most varied representation possible in terms of the most widely known maras and gangs in each country. In this regard, a sample of female mara members was also generated so as to explore the role of women in gangs. In the case of the former gang member sample, it was necessary for them to recognise themselves as such in order to proceed with the interview.

In Costa Rica and Nicaragua, it was necessary to establish some more general guidelines in order to compare the results of young people in the same generation, with respect to the main themes of the investigation. This was because, in these countries, the gang phenomenon has not become established in the way it has in the rest of Central America (USAID, 2006), in the sense that membership of certain youth groups does not imply the absolute or predominant determination of their daily life. In this way, members from other violent groupings of young people were considered as gang members, such as some hardcore football hooligans and groups dedicated to robbery and assault, among others.

Although a selection criterion by quotas was used, there is not a total balance between the samples of members active in the community and those deprived of freedom, nor between the types of gangs in the most widely known organisations, i.e., the Mara Salvatrucha and the Barrio 18 gang. Nor is there a homogeneous distribution of age ranges, as, given the intrinsic difficulties in a study of this nature, individuals were interviewed as and when suitable conditions to do so presented themselves. In this case, an evidential sample or convenience sample was chosen.

These groups were given a structured questionnaire which included questions on the functioning of gangs, risk factors associated with joining a gang, motivations and attitudes. The quantitative questionnaire version used in Costa Rica and Nicaragua varied slightly from that used in the rest of Central America, but it was adjusted to the particular reality of this phenomenon in the two countries. Motivations and attitudes were also explored via the use of Likert scales (see Appendix) and the sentence completion test (SCT) on prosocial thinking and life projects[10]. Former mara members were also questioned on the process of leaving the gang and the second version of the questionnaire (Questionnaire 2), which was used only with women, and deepened the analysis of the role and participation of female mara members within these social networks. These quantitative questionnaires were complemented with a series of in-depth interviews with leaders both inside and outside prison.

Young People at Risk

This group comprises young people in approximately the same age range, of the same sex and of an equivalent social class, but who do not belong to the maras or gangs. The selection was also carried out in stages. The same communities or districts which had been identified as having a strong gang presence were used, and we proceeded to a probabilistic selection of housing, and, later, young people at risk. These young people were given a quantitative questionnaire similar to that used with young gang members, but which did not include as much information about the functioning of gangs; instead, it explored the impact of gangs on their lives. The inclusion of this population allows comparisons to be made with young mara members in different aspects. Their motivations and attitudes were also explored with the Likert scales and the sentence completion test.

[10] See the relevant section in Chapter 4 for a more detailed explanation about this instrument.

Families of Gang Members

Families were contacted in the same neighbourhoods identified as problematic because of the presence of the maras or gangs. On occasions, relatives of gang members interviewed in this study were chosen; at other times, relatives of gang members that did not form part of our sample of gang members were identified via local contacts. Relatives were given a quantitative questionnaire which investigated the possible bond between the family, the community and the gang.

Residents of Neighbourhoods With a Gang Presence

In the same districts and communities where gang members, their families and young people at risk were recruited, a sample of residents was also selected in a probabilistic manner. Residents were also given a structured questionnaire which attempted to assess the relationship and integration between gangs and communities, as well as their impact on community life.

Public Authorities and Representatives of Criminal Justice, Ngos, Churches, Business Leaders and Representatives of the Social Media

Structured questionnaires were also applied to a series of social actors close to the world of the maras or gangs, including police officers, representatives from churches or NGOs, public authorities, the security sector and members of the judicial authorities. Discussion groups were also held with these groups in El Salvador (1) and Honduras (1). These questionnaires were orientated to collect information on the perception that these groups have of gangs, their origin, impact, activities, and possible solutions they could suggest. The criterion used to select these individuals was their involvement in dealing with the issue and was a selection of convenience.

Economic Actors

A questionnaire was also carried out, which aimed to collect information on the economy of gangs, for which three key groups were identified: residents from communities where the maras operate (the same ones in which the aforementioned sample elements were selected), small traders and carriers of these communities, as well as former mara members. The selection of these samples was also done according to convenience.

Fieldwork

The strategy for collecting information followed the same pattern in each country, with unavoidable adjustments derived from each specific context. The project began in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and, in a later phase, it continued in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, where the gang phenomenon is not as developed. For this reason, a series of components of the study were not implemented in these two latter countries, where the study was concentrated on gang members, young people at risk and community residents.

The fieldwork was carried out after all of the instruments were proven empirically and after having made the respective adjustments. We began with the more sensitive populations, such as gang and mara members both free and in prison, their families, young people at risk, residents or neighbours of the problematic districts, young female mara members, former mara members, police officers and victims. The information obtained via the instruments of the study was complemented by the experiential register of the field coordinators, supervisors and profession-

als. Observations, testimonies and narrations of this kind allowed for a better psychosocial characterisation of the problem.

The process of collecting information from mara members was complex and slow. The application of the instruments, either in the neighbourhoods or in prisons, was affected by the fact that it was necessary to suspend the fieldwork because of a series of situations and factors which altered the data-gathering process, such as incidents of violence, acts of police repression, electoral periods, administrative procedures for the request of permits, confidentiality agreements and informed agreements, checking of the instruments by gang and mara leaders, threats made by police forces to investigation teams (in El Salvador) and threats made by gang members to interfere with the investigation (in Honduras and Guatemala).

Methodological Limitations

This study, like any other, presents methodological limitations which must be taken into consideration when assessing our results. The design of samples changed with the evolution of the fieldwork, as new themes worthy of exploration and analysis emerged. The investigation focused on the problem of the maras and gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and later continued in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and the scope of the study was confined to gang members, young people at risk and residents[11].

Moreover, as was mentioned previously, when selecting the diverse local participants of our study (gang members, young people at risk, neighbours, shopkeepers and others) we referred to experts and specialists in the field to identify communities by convenience and then proceeded to sampling in each one of them. It is important to note that the fundamental criterion is the presence of violent groups or gangs in the neighbourhood, and based on this characteristic we worked with the target populations. The characteristic of the marginal neighbourhood resident is only a coincidence, and not a criterion for location or selection. In the reality of the study, the majority of residents belonged to the category of the popular sector.

Finally, this study, which is ambitious in scope and magnitude, is conceived as a solid approach to the problem and carried out from a systemic perspective. Study areas relating to the structural factors which have given rise to the formation of the maras and gangs remain pending. This study is a solid base for investigating these areas further, although complementary investigations are necessary, mainly those of an ethnographic nature.

Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Until now, Central American studies on the maras and gangs have been based on the supposition that the phenomenon has expanded notoriously in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, while in Nicaragua it is in its early stages and in Costa Rica there are barely a few early signs of the maras and gangs appearing. Often, when people refer to the growth of gangs in Central America, Costa Rica is excluded. The first three countries mentioned share some historical aspects which make their situation more serious, such as the possible connection of gangs with the issue of migration and repatriation, the aftermath of armed conflict and having had to cope with a new economic and political model with less

[11] Data from in-depth interviews is not available for Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

developed social protection networks. It is probably for these reasons that Costa Rica was excluded from empirical investigations on the issue. In Nicaragua, the difference established with respect to the presence and intensity of the gang phenomenon tends to be because of the particular forms of organisation in communities which, in the language of UCA studies, promote better management of social capital and decrease risk factors, especially for the young population.

It is possible that in these two latter countries, social and economic conditions are moving towards an increase in factors of youth vulnerability, providing fertile ground for the development of gang-style groups, hence the need for more attention to be paid to them than has been the case until now. In any case, given that one of the main common axes of the analysis carried out by different investigations has to do with the fact that Central America is considered as a region, and that the globalisation processes faced by each country do not only affect them individually, but jointly. It is necessary, and a priority, to investigate the issue of the maras and gangs from a regional perspective.

The inclusion of Costa Rica and Nicaragua in this study responds to this concern and the interest in establishing parameters which allow the situation of each country to be compared with each other from a regional perspective. Therefore, the opinions of young people from each country, as a generational vision, are taken into account, from a cohort faced with common socio-economic conditions at a given time in history.

However, it was possible to depart from reasonable suppositions on the possible presence and signs of the incidence of gangs in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Thus, even when reference is made to gang or mara members, generally, in analysing the data, it is important to note that in these two latter countries the experience of the presence of youth groupings does not have the same level of sophistication and social impact as it does in the other three countries. A position has been maintained which points out common indicators, as stipulated by the definition used, those which revolve around membership of a gang as a governing element of daily life – key in constructing an identity during adolescence, as well as the proclivity towards violence and high-risk behaviour. A more parsimonious analysis, than that permitted in the space of this report, should devote some attention to the contrast between the different groups based on the singularities of each country. The mara concept does not apply in Costa Rica and Nicaragua therefore, it should be noted that most observations made in this report cannot be generalised in said countries, as they are based on information elements which were not used in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. With this in mind, this study is fundamentally focused on analysing the issue in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and begins to explore some issues relating to the gang phenomenon in Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

This is an important warning to the reader, to prevent them from generalising statements applied here to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Also, it is important to continue to insist on the idea of diversity, which is hidden behind the term mara or gang. As Sullivan (2006: 16) has pointed out: "The problem with studies (on gangs) is that they can impose an archetypal narrative onto a wide variety of experiences which fit into very diverse ecological contexts." The phenomenon of the maras or gangs is a very diverse one. Some authors distinguish up to five different gang modalities, taking into account, among other criteria, that of their institutionalisation in the communities from which they come. It would also be dangerous, therefore, to conclude that there is a single gang

model or one which presents itself in the same way in all countries of the region or even homogenously within each country. The reader must be aware of this when interpreting the results presented here.

Likewise, because of the changing reality of the Central American region, with the aim of facilitating the placement of our contribution into the discussion on the issue, it is important to note that our fieldwork was carried out from November 2005 to October 2006, so there may have been changes to either the policies or actions in each country, which may have affected events in one way or another.

Chapter II
Organisational and Cultural Identity Aspects

Introduction

One of the most controversial aspects in confronting the problem of the maras and gangs is how to offer a satisfactory definition of them. What is a gang? What is a mara? As noted in Chapter I, for the purposes of this study, it is understood that:

> "Maras and gangs are relatively stable groupings of young people, characterised by the use of urban public spaces and the generation of identity patterns; they articulate the economy and daily life of their members, making no claims of institutionality, and deploy a counter-power based on initially disorderly violence."

This definition differs from that used by agencies of the criminal justice system which, in general, presuppose a higher level of formal organisation. Legal definitions also assume the presence of structural or symbolic elements (presence of a name, tattoos and internal rules) which, however, have no reason to be present. The Anti-mara law of El Salvador, passed by the Legislative Assembly on 1 October 2003, for example, defines the maras as follows:

> "Those groupings of people which act to disturb public order, or threaten public decency and morality, and which meet some or all of the following criteria: they meet regularly, claim areas of territory as their own, use signs or symbols as a means of identification and mark their bodies with scars or tattoos[12]."

In this chapter, we shall examine the organisation of the maras or gangs, via the distribution of power within them, as well as the degree to which certain symbolic and cultural aspects are generalised within these groups or social networks. There exists the notion that, in countries where the maras and gangs have acquired a greater level of institutionalisation and have a longer history, the organisational structure and cultural dimensions will have acquired a higher level of sophistication.

Although, traditionally, the maras or gangs have been conceived as being fundamentally masculine organisations, they do also have a significant female presence. The processing of data allows us to explore the role of women in these gangs and the reproduction of unequal power-sharing structures, as well as the strategies used by female mara and gang members to confront this situation.

---

[12] This law was declared unconstitutional on 1 April 2004 by the Constitutional Court of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Republic of El Salvador.

Gangs and the Construction of Identity

Accounts collected during the in-depth interviews, which were conducted in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, all refer to or understand the gang as a "family". The accounts suggest that gang membership is not directly related to the desire to obtain any economic benefit; rather, young people state that the gang meets personal needs which their families did not fulfil, such as recognition and independence. This idea is reinforced in statements made by mara and gang members interviewed who pointed out a lack of attention, support and well-being in their families of origin. By contrast, in the gangs they have gained protection, solidarity, greater trust, increased maturity and affection. Affection is an important bond among gang members. However, although the gang is perceived as a "family", it does not clash with the family of origin, on the contrary, it complements it.

> *"(...) I've spoken to the mothers of my companions who say to me: I want my son to leave; leave him as he is, I said to her, he's got his home; but they could kill him, so long as he's alive and he's careful they won't kill him, don't worry about him, we look after each other (...)."*
>
> (Informant 1, aged 29, former mara member, Mara 18, El Salvador.)

Gang members form a group which not only meets emotional needs; it also provides independence with regard to adult authority. Data resulting from ethnographic observation and questionnaires suggests an organisation of a fraternal nature which they call a "family". Feixa (1998), based on studies conducted on different youth cultures, describes how young people use meeting spaces (streets, bars etc.) as places where they can enjoy a certain level of independence, in contrast with the dominant adult authority in other spheres of their life (family of origin, school or work). As they lack freedom in the home, young people construct "privacy" in "public" spaces, where friends and interaction result in a "family" environment. The camaraderie among young gang members "defends" them against authority, resulting in the confirmation of a new "family", and the creation of a lifestyle which is different from prevailing ones. However, family authority is substituted by the authority which maintains order within the mara or gang:

> *"[Undergoing the initiation rites to enter the gang]... is a pact which shows the person that they are entering a family which is different from the one they had in the past, that this family (...) will be more real, the reality of life."*
>
> (Informant 3, mara leader, Pandilla 18, El Salvador.)

Gangs function as emotional associations, i.e., by participating in them, members gain emotional satisfaction. Affection plays an important role in the existential definition as an individual, as well as at the group level, making them part of a group. Adolescents and young people join gangs at ages at which the pursuit of this identification as a person, and the feeling of belonging to a group, are very important. Consequently, gangs come to fulfil these needs.

The identity of young gang and mara members is based, in the first instance, on this distancing from authority figures, but also on relationships with other young people, particularly in opposition to the members of other gangs. It is an identity of contrast, as they construct this identity in opposition to young people from other groups. In this way, each gang constructs its own style, which is expressed via tattoos, clothing and individual slang. In the words of key social informants, this unique and particular style includes a certain appearance or build, a manner of

walking, the style of moustache used and hairstyles, as a way of distinguishing themselves as a gang member, as well as the language used, the way they speak and their clothing[13].

Organisation: Hierarchy and Power Within Gangs

Introduction

Studies on gangs within the North American and European contexts indicate that, in most gangs, forms of leadership and influence are as diverse as the attempts made to control gangs or maras via the criminal prosecution of their leaders or their incapacitation, which leads only to the formation of new groups.

> *"Like in politics or business, most often it is the system rather than the person who dictates the main action as well as resistance to change"*
>
> (Klein and Maxson, 2006: 195).

As can be deduced from this information, which will be analysed in the following section, the system described as functioning in the mara shows that the disarticulation of one or several members, even leaders, does not seriously damage its organisation or functions, which remain active and can be assumed by new members under the protection of the merits gained.

Klein and Maxson (2006) have documented that leadership tends to be functional, variable, unstable and shared between several gang members, partly because sub-groups within the gangs tend to identify priorities and direct behaviour more effectively than with central leadership or control (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

Territoriality is an important aspect within the organisation of gangs. Territory and its appropriation by gangs is a core aspect which tallies with studies carried out elsewhere with regard to the consolidation of gang identity (Klein and Maxson, 2006; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Consequently, the territoriality of the maras and gangs manifests itself in the use of certain places or areas for meetings or gatherings of the gangs or maras, and, by way of controlling entry to such places, the activities that can be carried out there and the "use" of the activities and resources which exist in them. Recreational and criminal activities are carried out in these spaces, as well as lucrative and trading activities.

The basic and most local group of a gang or mara is called a clique, which is organised within the neighbourhood or district. Several cliques make up a jenga (a space for the coordination of cliques, particularly when there are many in one area), which in turn belongs to a "mother" gang (with its own name). In this regard, the data from current and former mara members, gathered during the in-depth interviews, indicates that the basic territories are not very large (approximately one district). This may be related to the gang's need to maintain face-to-face relations with residents, wield control and its need to carry out its activities successfully and with protection.

This study reveals a strong conflict between gangs for the control and domination of territories; the control and dynamic of gang meetings does not tend to be hidden; on the contrary, the maras or gangs usually appropriate open spaces which are visible to all those who live in the area. This visibility is part of the control they seek to demonstrate, which, in many cases, they do indeed have over the territory and its inhabitants.

The investigation contributes information which shows that the form

[13] See the more detailed discussion on these issues at the end of this chapter.

of appropriation and defence of gang territory means that districts and neighbourhoods do not have the presence of many different gangs simultaneously; rather, each gang tries to control one area and to maintain it as their own, or even expand it. In this regard, mara members seek to ensure that their territory is increasingly large in terms of space, number of residents and people and the number of gang members. In conclusion, the first aspect relevant to the organisation of the maras and gangs is that the conquest and defence of territory occurs at the local level and is, therefore, linked to the construction of identity of the young people involved. This territoriality is, likewise, concomitant to establishing a basic hierarchical structure.

From the following account from a civil servant in Honduras, we can understand how the hierarchical organisational structure and the territorial structure are combined:

> "There are different levels of hierarchy within the groups. First of all, it starts with the aspiring gang member who is a child (...) It is the physical contact which turns them from aspiring gang member to sympathiser, as they talk to the gang, reach out to it, know the members, say hello to them, and go with them. In a way, the gang pressures the sympathiser to be "jumped in" or baptised into the neighbourhood. If the pressure is effective and the individual becomes baptised (the baptism can take many forms) they become a novice, and a member of the gang, and they are given a nickname (...) But over time, certain missions are set for the novice, which are called "ojales", tasks which enable them to pick up "stripes" or hierarchy and become a permanent mara member. They then become a soldier, someone who is permanently in the gang; they are no longer with the family. They are 100% with the gang. Above these soldiers, which are the arms of the gangs, is the master homie, who is the sub-chief, and above that is the chief, the top dog... the leader. This is how the hierarchy is arranged... this is just for one clique. Each clique has this same hierarchy and a grouping of three or more cliques is called a jenga. There is a clique coordinator who leads a jenga, and above these jenga coordinators there is one jenga coordinator."

Two Different Visions:

The Top-Down Image Versus Gang Discourse

In addition to this basic description of the organisation of the maras in Central America – which is generally accepted by all actors with some level of knowledge of the issue – there are also, currently, two very different visions or perceptions. On the one hand, we have the perception that the maras and gangs are very hierarchically organised with clear vertical power structures, controlled centrally and have fluid communication, cooperation and active coordination channels. This image of the problem tends to be particularly prevalent among governmental and official authorities of the criminal justice system. At the other end of the scale, we find the discourse and the accounts of the mara members themselves, who emphasise the horizontal nature of the organisation and reject the idea of a capo or main chief.

In this context, a prosecutor from the Public Ministry of El Salvador commented that:

> "Experience as prosecutors tells us that there are internal chiefs within these groups, regional chiefs, local chiefs and international chiefs. In other words, these groups are not governed only by what is decided here, but by leaders overseas, at least from where these maras

come from, they have originated in cities such as Los Angeles, in the US, from where the Mara Salvatrucha or the Mara 18 come. It is just as much an international structure as it is a local one."

The perception of this kind of vertical organisation encourages the belief that removing gang leaders (see, for example, the Decree by the Legislative Power No 117–2003 of Honduras) is an effective response to the problem, given the assumed vertical and hierarchical structure. Here it is necessary to make a distinction between the sense of verticality, to which, on occasions, the official data on the maras refers and the position of this study, with respect to the pyramid structure of a mara organisation. The vision of verticality outlined above is based on the concept of a rigid model which is unable to adapt to change. However, the data compiled by this study clearly suggests the existence of a certain level of verticality – but within an adaptive model, with the ability to flexibly manage changes in the environment.

In the discourse of mara and gang members who were subject to in-depth interviews in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, it was recognised that in each clique there are members who fulfil conditions for leadership and have a certain ability to distribute tasks among the members – among the homies or homeboys, as mara members call each other.

Among mara members, immigrants from the US, called veterans, enjoy particular prestige, although they do not occupy formal leadership positions in the maras or gangs. They tend to be responsible for consultation and planning; they are referents as to the origin or foundation of groups and collaborate as informants on new actions and on what is happening in other countries.

The ranflero is the administrator of the clique and occupies the role of treasurer and announces the meetings. These are periodical meetings for making decisions, evaluations, planning and regulating guidelines for group and individual behaviour. All members of the clique participate in the meetings in the form of an assembly. There are usually differences in the level of participation among basic members (soldiers), so, in some cases, this participation can be passive to a greater or lesser degree. Next come the positions of first and second word, who lead the meetings and are the spokespeople for the cliques in inter-clique meetings. In very large cliques, third words have been heard of. The soldiers are the basic gang members and occupy different roles according to the mission assigned to them by the group or leader.

"[the structure comprises] the veteran, the ranflero, the first word, the second word, and, in some cliques there is even a third word, depending on the number of young people it has, and then comes the soldier, if you want to call them that. The ranflero is the person in charge of taking and bringing, and has an established superiority; they are above the first word. [The first and second word] are the ones that manage the meetings, control the population, control their homies, and the ranflero calls the meetings. [The ranflero] is like the administrator, and administers weapons, money and things like that, but does not have a direct hierarchy over the entire clique. [The first word and the second word] are those which lead the hierarchy. [The ranflero] is in charge of the money."

(Informant 1, aged 24, former mara leader, Pandilla 18, Guatemala.)

In this reproduced statement made by mara and gang members, we can see that positions of authority are gained according to the way in which members "work". Carrying out a good mission or founding or assuming a new clique are ways in which a member can rise through the ranks with

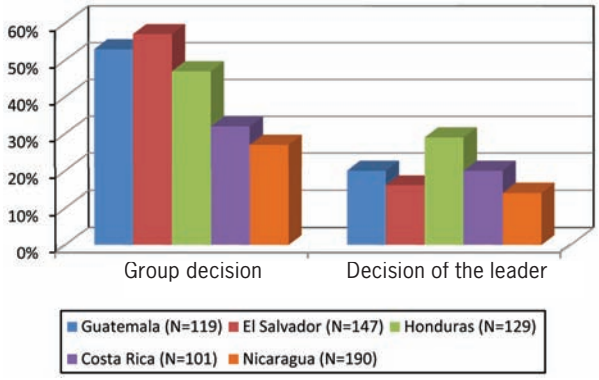
the approval of the group and other leaders. Characteristics which denote status include experience, having been in prison, the responsibilities assumed within the clique, their relationship with members of the mara or gang, avoiding unnecessary exposure of the clique (members' safety) and maintaining the group's territory and intelligence. Leadership is gained by length of gang membership, experience, knowledge, completed missions, looking after members, murders or robberies and reputation. The aforementioned characteristics necessary to be a leader denote an ability to manage models which are more highly evolved organisationally.

There are slight differences in the statements with regard to the organisational structure of the different maras or gangs in the three countries. In El Salvador, informants talk about leaders, palabreros or spokespeople, who direct the meetings and plan, consult and give orders to the rest of the group. In Guatemala, they talk about a coordinator, a supervisor, a leader, the ranflero, the first word and second word (who direct and organise the meetings), the spy and the treasurer. In Honduras, there is also a gatillero.[14] In any case, in the in-depth interviews with mara and gang members, we have observed that not all maras or gangs, even within the same country, use the same terminology to refer to these roles within the group, nor do the same roles exist in all groups.

Moreover, there is an internal discourse which exists in parallel and points towards a horizontal rather than a vertical distribution of power. Mara and gang members state that they all participate in decision-making and give importance to the space that the mara gives to the participation of each member. In this regard, it is interesting to note that mara members do not accept the idea of a boss, and prefer to talk about a leader or leaders. For example, when in the questionnaire gang members were asked about the criteria for accepting new members, the model response in all countries was that this was a group decision (bar chart 1).

Graph 1

Distribution of Authority when Accepting New Members into the Mara, According to Mara Members



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Also, when gang members were asked which activities they carried out daily as a result of orders given by "others", the model response was "none" (bar chart 2).

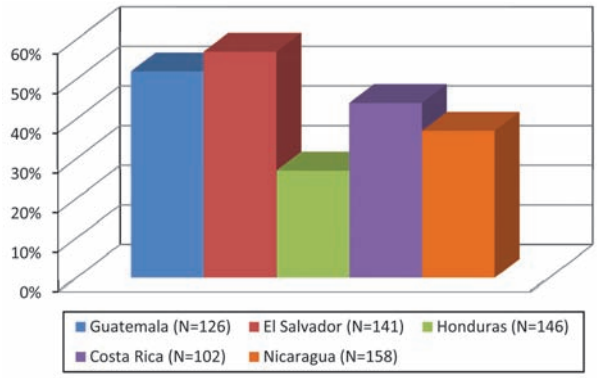
Maintaining participative discourse and constructing forums, like the meeting, does not necessarily mean that all members participate in the same way, nor does it mean that they have the same influence when it

[14] Within the group, the *gatillero* is the person responsible for shooting.

comes to decision-making. It is difficult to assume that in cliques, the ideal conditions for democratic dialogue exist a priori. Like in any other social group, it is obvious that there must be a clear, informal structure of functions within the group and different levels of influence in different spheres among members of the group.

Graph 2

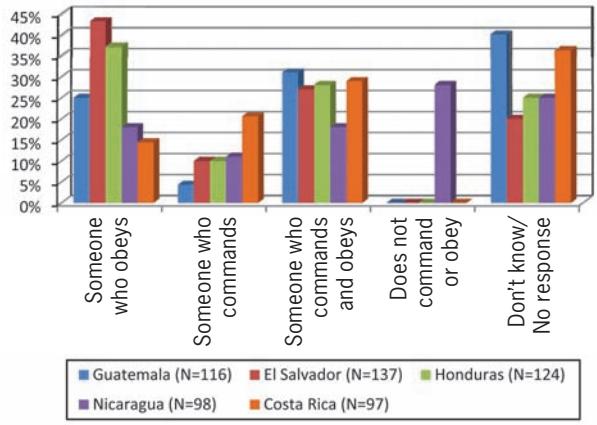
Percentages of Mara Members Answering "Others" that Responded no Activity (Nothing)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Graph 3

Role Assumed Within the Group By Mara Members Interviewed
(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Bar chart 3 clearly shows how although the maras and gangs, at this local level, involve the group when making decisions, the fact that a significant percentage of gang members see themselves as individuals, whose role within the group is simply one of obedience (with higher proportions in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala), illustrates the complexity of the issue. There is a discourse of horizontality, which has certain force and is derived from the model responses in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras, according to which the position occupied is of someone who commands or someone who obeys. However, other significant percentages of mara and gang members in these countries say they occupy a position of subordination within the mara or gang. The fact that there are so few gang members in Costa Rica and Nicaragua who claim to occupy a role of obedience, is perhaps because of the lesser degree of institutionalisation of gangs in these countries with a greater degree of criminal organisation or inclination.

The external discourse on the maras or gangs outlined by the public authorities, points towards a degree of coordination between cliques in regional and national structures, as well as the existence of a series of leaders at these levels. Our interviews with mara and gang members offer little evidence of the existence of these structures, central control or regional or national leaders, although some testimonies point towards the collaboration between neighbourhood cliques and groupings in an anecdotal way:

> *"... look, we meet up, all the leaders, me and all the homeboys, from all over. We just call everyone, arrange the time to destroller and we turn up there, we talk, yeah, and if we want weapons as well, they give us them, they give them to us, we give weapons, that's how our relationship works."*
>
> (Mara leader, El Salvador.)

They also mention the existence of meetings which are attended by some local leaders, but make no mention of any kind of capo or big boss in charge of the organisation, not even regional bosses.

It is possible that those who are sometimes identified as main leaders of these gangs are merely the leaders of particularly large cliques. Moreover, it may also be because of the reluctance by mara and gang members to talk about these issues, or the exaggeration of the presence of these structures and leaders with a real influence at the regional or national level. Finally, it must also be taken into consideration that most of our in-depth interviews with gang leaders are part of what the USAID report (2006) on gangs in Central America considers to be leaders of neighbourhood groups. These leaders have territorial control, they often receive special privileges when they are in prison "and sometimes carry out the orders of regional leaders" (USAID, 2006: 14).

Gangs as a Phenomenon With Dynamic Structures

Public authorities and representatives of the criminal justice system surveyed in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala believe that the gang phenomenon in Central America is undergoing an evolutionary process, as gangs are not static, unchanging structures; they have been transforming with changes in the legal, social and economic environment:

> *"The mara as a living structure, what organisational levels, what levels of technification, will this implementation achieve? They are becoming obliged to implement changes in order to survive this stage. I think that, in the very short term, we will have a new level of structure and technification in the maras that we did not have a short time ago. It seems that their organisation is developing..."*
>
> (Guatemalan authority.)

> *"There is a dynamic particular to the maras, the maras begin as small cells which grow, come to clash with each other, conquer each other, dominate and absorb each other. They become more complex in terms of their organisation, their division of labour, the same as a company does. They grow, become a corporation and then they have their crises just the same as a business corporation does. Like it or not, we are talking about a living organism, which is unlikely to have a short lifespan. They have already passed the embryonic stage, they are in adolescence, and this curve is going to continue and may be prolonged, or it may be shorter, depending on how these factors interact, these factors are, to some extent, concomitant with the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of the State and its institutions."*
>
> (Authority from El Salvador.)

From these statements, we can determine the perception of the evolution of the maras towards socially accepted and stable, particularly business environments.

As some public authorities interviewed have indicated, several factors have driven the development and greater organisational efficiency of the maras and gangs. One of these is their involvement in lucrative activities, mainly illegal ones, an aspect which will be discussed later in the report. Moreover, among the aspects linked to the dynamic of the State and the government actions mentioned repeatedly by interviewees in the three countries, is the development of zero tolerance or heavy-handed policies and mass imprisonment. In their opinion, these aspects have encouraged the reinforcement of this population, so that the mara or gang, in many cases, meets its objectives in prison.

In general, all authorities consulted have reported a worsening and progression of mara activities in the past four years. In their opinion, following the implementation of heavy-handed programmes, the maras have organised themselves better – partly in response to the repression, control and cleansing processes, but also in response to the need for a more effective positioning of power and control. Some informants think that they have developed an organisational structure of a military and business nature, becoming involved in drug dealing, organised crime and extortion against residents and shopkeepers.

The economic questionnaire issued to neighbours and shopkeepers in areas where gangs are active, also clearly reflects this opinion. The vast majority of participants in this questionnaire (61%–87%, depending on the country and the category of the individual interviewed – shopkeeper or resident) think that there have been changes in the way in which the maras and gangs organise themselves over the past four years. Police officers on patrol in urban areas affected by the maras are of the same opinion. When giving details on the changes they have perceived in gang organisation, the most usual categories among their responses are as follows:

- The organisation is more complex and efficient (Guatemala: 43%; El Salvador: 38%; Honduras: 59%).
- The maras have become more violent (El Salvador: 56%; Honduras: 79%).

When asked about their perception of the changes, the model response of mara and gang members was an increase in members in Guatemala (11%) and El Salvador (23%), while in Honduras no reference was made to these types of organisational changes.

Questionnaires on mara and gang members do not point to a greater degree of organisational sophistication or participation in violent or illegal activities in any of the five countries included in this study. However, concern remains about their reluctance to give information on this subject, or the unawareness of "soldiers" on the issue.

It is beyond doubt that developing systems of quantifiable indicators would be very useful in the design and carrying out of political responses to the gang phenomenon, and would allow for a more efficient evaluation of how these groups are evolving and the type of criminal activities in which they are participating. For example, this could be carried out using mechanisms similar to the National Youth Gang Survey (see Klein and Maxson, 2006) or the Expert Survey carried out by Red Eurogang, or ensuring that, in national questionnaires on youth issues, standardised

and reliable indicators are used which allow the gang problem to be quantified[15].

Rodgers (2006), in the only longitudinal study on gangs in the Central American region, conducted in Nicaragua, describes how the neighbourhood group which he studied, as a participant observation, was no longer a traditional[16] neighbourhood gang, and had become more what the literature describes as a specialised[17] gang. While it is not possible to generalise based on only one study of such local dimensions, like the Rodgers study, it is plausible to think that the same forces which caused the transition described by this author in their ethnographic study have been mirrored in other parts of the region.

Although it is indirect, the data provided by residents and shopkeepers in areas where the maras are active points towards a strengthening and increase in criminal identity. In-depth interviews with mara and gang members clearly point to the increasing role of drug dealing in their activities. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that, as gangs have become more institutionalised in the region, they have evolved towards groupings with a greater criminal identity. On the contrary, key informants – residents, former mara members, the police and others – have confirmed this. If, as studies on the issue have noted, the level of cohesion among gangs is directly related to crime levels and their penetration in illegal markets, as well as the repression against them (Klein and Maxson, 2006), the opinions of the authorities reflected here and the experiences of residents and shopkeepers in gang areas would make a lot of sense. They are the daily observers of a process and also the victims of it.

The "opposition culture" (Moore and Vigil, 1989) situates gangs in opposition and contrast with other institutions in society (police, schools, employers etc.), so that any rejection of gangs by these institutions simply reinforces the cohesion and self-sufficiency of the gang. In this regard, Klein and Maxson (2006: 206) note, "the war on gangs justifies the gangs being ready for warfare". As a former mara leader noted:

> *"In other words, the whole thing becomes more bloody, because as they come down harder, so does the gang."*
>
> (Interview 2, former mara leader, Pandilla 18, Guatemala.)

Hence various studies warn about the danger of policies which make enemies of gangs, because such strategies reinforce the internal cohesion processes of these groups. Instead they recommend preventative policies during childhood and support in the process of leaving gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

It is possible that in the institutionalisation of gangs, as a consequence of the persistence of originating factors and the appearance of other new ones which have given them greater purpose (for example, the use of draconian sentences), their criminal identity has become reinforced, as well as their participation in illegal markets. Another issue is that this insertion and reinforcement of criminal identity have been accompanied by the development of regional coordination, cooperation and leadership structures among the different local cliques or groups.

---

[15] See, for example, some of the indicators for surveys conducted by the *Red Eurogang* in Klein and Maxson (2006: 267).

[16] Larger size (around 100 young people), sub-division of the neighbourhood gang into cliques organised according to age, participation in violent disputes to defend the neighbourhood and participation in various crimes of a social, rather than an economic, nature.

[17] Smaller size (around 18 young people), higher levels of violence with an economic, rather than a social, orientation, and a clear link to drug trafficking.

The flexible connection of criminal activities in international networks is an essential characteristic of the new global economy and the social/political dynamic of the information age. There is a general acknowledgement of the importance and reality of this phenomenon, which is backed-up by abundant data – mainly journalistic reports based on facts and conferences of international organisations. However, sociologists, to a large extent, disregard the phenomenon when it comes to understanding economies and societies, arguing that the data is not really reliable and that it is sensationalist. However, if a phenomenon is recognised as a fundamental dimension of our societies, even in the new globalised system, any data available must be used to exploit the connection between these criminal activities and societies and economies in general (Castells, 1997: 194).This study has managed to record these perceptions in the opinion of several populations studied, except among mara and gang members themselves. Consequently, there are two possible hypotheses: either they do not exist, or, if they do exist (without being able to determine the frequency and degree of development), they are apparently quite hidden, as their interpretation is part of a jigsaw, which, like any criminal organisation, does not reflect its real structure and size. If this is common in legal limited companies, what could happen in organisations based on crime? This is where data needs to be interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Organisation and Leadership in Prisons

Throughout the study, in-depth interviews were carried out in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and questionnaires were given to mara and gang members in prison. During these visits, we had the opportunity to observe the behaviour of the interviewees, the prison environment and the interaction between mara members and their environment. It is useful to note that the comparative literature usually finds that the conditions in the prison environment itself facilitate greater social cohesion among gangs operating in this closed environment and also facilitate more vertical power structures, as there is more observation and control over the behaviour of members.

Based on the dynamic observed, we propose the following considerations:

- The criminal authorities have identified some mara or gang members as being gang leaders in these centres. The criminal authorities themselves use these leaders as representatives of the prisoners in discussions on internal matters relating to the administration of the prison.
- Other external organisations, such as NGOs and human rights' organisations, also refer to imprisoned mara or gang leaders as interlocutors.
- Directly observing gang members in prison allows for the leadership given to certain mara or gang members by other detainees to be clearly identified. This is shown as a servile attitude towards them, consulting them when making decisions and the apparent binding nature attributed to their opinions by other gang members in prison, among other aspects of coordination and submission.

Some testimonies made by mara members point to the availability of economic funds that the mara or gang members outside the prison contribute to their counterparts on the inside:

"Money is obtained from every different clique from all over the city... part of this money is sent to the prisons, and from there that money is kept in a bank account or in the account of somebody that can be trusted, and that money is being administered by a treasurer and presided over by a financial manager."

(Informant 10, aged 29, mara leader, Mara Salvatrucha, Honduras.)

In many prisons, drugs, mobile phones and, in some cases, firearms can be accessed.

There are indications that fluid communication channels exist between the outside and the inside of prisons, which sometimes even cross national borders. In El Salvador, we interviewed leaders of the 18 in a modern, high-security model prison; the only one of its kind in the region, where prisoners are isolated, cannot talk to anyone or have visitors, cannot use a telephone or send or receive correspondence. A week later, in an interview in Honduras with other leaders of the 18, they were already aware of our interview with two leaders in the El Salvador prison. Some of our in-depth interviews with former mara members indicate that many instructions come from leaders who are in prison. Prisons have become a centre for logistical planning and action.

Along with our qualitative observations, a comparison of the data in our questionnaire on the situation of mara and gang members in prison as compared with the situation of gang members still on the street, shows differences in terms of the issues previously discussed on leadership and power within the maras and gangs. 51% of mara or gang members on the street (n=254) say they have no daily activity which is governed by any higher command, while this figure fell to 32% when mara or gang members in prison (n=127) were asked the same question. Moreover, 36% of mara or gang members in prison said that they received orders daily to participate in criminal activities, in comparison with 18% of young mara or gang members who were not in prison. Therefore, gangs may have a more determining influence on the behaviour of mara and gang members inside prisons than they do outside them. However, we are talking about a process which, according to studies, is leaning towards increasingly free relationships and is becoming more structured by guidelines and purposes.

The questionnaire carried out on the families of mara and gang members also reflects the counterproductive effects of imprisonment policies. The model response to the question on the effects of the imprisonment of their relatives is that their behaviour became more violent and that they became more attached to the mara (Guatemala: 61%; El Salvador: 29%; Honduras: 46%).

Moreover, there is a generalised perception among the representatives of some NGOs, former public authorities, representatives of international organisations and some security agencies interviewed, that prisons serve as centres for logistical organisation, recruitment[18] and intelligent leadership of the maras and gangs, therefore aiding their activities. Certainly, the reinforcement of gangs as a consequence of repressive criminal policies, for example, by facilitating contact between young gang members and non-gang members, connects gang members from different cliques and reinforces the social cohesion of these groups which are obliged to survive in the prison environment. This coincides with the experience noted by Moore (1991) and Scott (2007) in other parts of the world.

[18] Some of our in-depth interviews document this recruitment function, with gang members who told us that they joined the gang while in prison. This harsh environment means that joining a gang is seen as a means of survival: "I joined when I was already in prison for reasons of survival rather than a desire to join." (Former mara leader, Guatemala.)

Final Comments

The composition of the maras and gangs shows that within them many of the original forms for generating adolescent identities persist, along with a culture of resistance, which was pointed out earlier. However, the description of their current activities, along with their links to the market, with corruption in the police and probable corruption in the political system, allows us to discern a much more flexible and dynamic organisation than that described by their active or dissident members – or than that which is outlined by the authorities.

On the first two levels of organisation, we have very robust data which confirms the following basic platform of the organisation.

1. Basic mara and gang members (aged 12–25/30 years):
   Operational and practical functions
   Short, useful life
   Visible to public opinion.
2. Levels of command and control: leaders both on the street and in prison (aged 20–30):
   Operational intelligence
   Direct, economic beneficiaries.

Moreover, in the context of the world outside of the gang organisation per se, it seems obvious that there are groups and interests which can benefit from, or take advantage of, the existence of the maras and their activities in different ways. However, there remains a question mark hanging over whether there also exists a third level or a third dimension of the same gang organisation, which potentially could be defined as follows.

3. Upper level:
   Strategic intelligence
   Invisible to public opinion (and unknown to basic members)
   Direct and significant economic beneficiaries.

With regard to the existence of this last level, the information available is not solid but comes from several sources. This calls for a more systematic and focused study of the issue.

Gangs as Culture:

Cultural and Symbolic Aspects as Elements of Group Identity

Some authors maintain that the globalisation of cultural elements associated with gangs, made popular by the hip-hop and gangsta rap cultures, has become a resource for resistance, in an alternative cultural identity for young marginalised populations, in the same way that, in other contexts, religious fundamentalism has offered an alternative cultural identity. According to these authors: "The failures of the modern State and the lack of faith in the certainty of a brighter future have strengthened identities of resistance" (Hagedorn, 2006: 188).

Material elements of gang culture and popular and stereotyped wisdom associated with them, their stories of rules and punishments, territory and initiation tests have been repeated ad infinitum in the media, in pseudo-journalistic investigations and other channels of cultural transmission, to the point that any young person, in any part of the world, who has access to the Internet or MTV, has contact with these cultural stereotypes which can be used to construct alternative identities of resistance. This does not mean that the media has generated the gang problem; rather, it has encouraged a language based on similar symbolic elements in different parts of the world.

Symbols such as tattoos, certain clothing, graffiti, or hand signals and other cultural referents, can be used by these groups to gain a unique identity, while initiation rites, rules and sanctions (irrespective of their existence manifested in any behavioural patterns observed) gives the group a discourse which cements a romantic image of belonging, the attraction of an alternative identity and the cohesion of the group[19]. In the following sections, we will present the results of this study on some of these cultural aspects in Central American gangs.

Rules and Punishments

In the in-depth interviews, mara and gang members,including former mara members, made reference to different rules existing in their groups, although this cannot be generalised as applying to all groups. The rules present in the mara and gang rhetoric include the prohibition of the consumption of pega and piedra[20]. Likewise, they state that smoking marijuana or drinking alcohol without permission, or at times not stipulated by the group, is frowned upon. Failure to comply with these rules is generally considered as a minor fault, as explained in the following statement:

> *"(...) the group is very close so that these things, for example, if someone was taking crack inside... it's obvious isn't it, I mean, they see it, see that that person has changed their attitudes, they aren't the same anymore, so those things attract a punishment, which sometimes can be slight."*
>
> (Informant 1, aged 24, former mara leader, Pandilla 18, Guatemala.)

Other rules prohibit stealing in the area controlled by the mara or gang, dealing with other maras or people, going around or attacking alone, committing rape, attacking a member of a rival mara or gang if they are with a non-gang member, drive-by shootings[21] and leaving the mara. Some informants also mention rules on the identifying style of the group, for example, hairstyles, clothing, specific signs and colours which are stipulated within the group.

These rules entail a certain type of behaviour which is expected of the group member. If they do not comply, they may be punished, as the following extract explains:

> *"(If a member) starts doing things that the homies of this sector don't do, then someone goes to talk to them and says to them that 'we're the ones that keep things this way here, for our safety and for the safety of the community – if you do that again you're gonna have problems'. So, they talk to the person, and if they don't get the message then other alternatives are used."*
>
> (Double interview, repatriated mara member and young mara member Guatemala.)

Men and women are punished according to this discourse by way of chequeo, calentamiento or pegadita, which is a collective punishment carried out by pushing the person into the middle of a circle and beating them. Women tend to be chequeadas by other women. According to these statements, violence as a ritual group mechanism plays a role and functions particularly well as an instrument for controlling the behaviour of its members.

It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to specify how closely the discourse corresponds with the reality experienced by these young

---

[19] "Understanding the gang means understanding gang culture" (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: 73).

[20] The term "pega" refers to glue, and "piedra" refers to a by-product of cocaine.

[21] Shooting at a gang member or innocent bystander from a moving car.

people. The investigation carried out in the US shows that, although in other countries there is also a discourse between gang members with regard to rules of internal conduct and punishments, this differs from their actual behaviour. Gang members themselves have developed a whole mythology about rules and punishments of this kind, which in reality have very little validity (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996).

However, this contradiction does not give us the authorisation to infer that no regulations exist within the mara or gang, as, in general, any group or community displays a contrast between the rules and values on which its existence is based, and what happens when these rules are transgressed. The existence of punishments and sanctions are a product of this contrast; political parties, religious groups, civil organisations and, of course, the maras and gangs all display this phenomenon which, at times, can appear as so-called double standards. In reality, no human group lives in harmony, but rather in a conflict between what it wants and what it ultimately does.

Without participant observations, which allow for the observation of the level of correspondence between discourse and action, it is difficult to know whether this is also the case for the maras and gangs in Central America. An example of where this correspondence may contrast is in relation to the prohibition of taking cocaine and its by-products. Although practically all in-depth interviews carried out with mara and gang members mention the existence of prohibitions on taking drugs of this kind, when they were asked about the kinds of drugs they themselves took, there were not insignificant percentages of gang members (one out of every four in almost all countries) who said they took cocaine and its by-products.

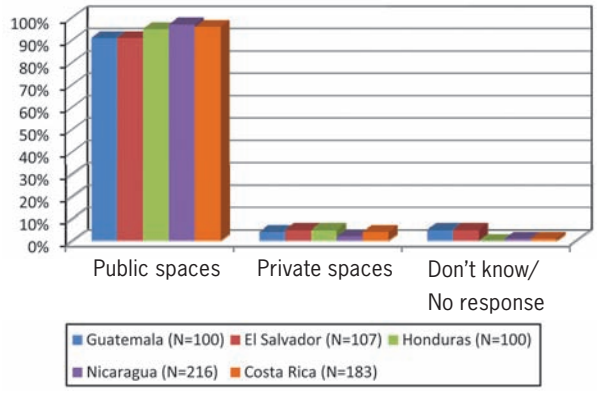
Territory: Social Integration, Identification And Power Base

The maras and gangs define themselves as groups with a significant orientation towards the use of public spaces. The public visibility of these organisations is clearly reflected in our data. As residents and shopkeepers have pointed out, gang members meet in and frequent public spaces such as street corners, streets and parks, among other places.

Territoriality also helps in constructing a group identity, as it is the space in which an historical and biographical relationship is formed which binds mara or gang members together and sets them apart from other maras or gangs.

Graph 4

Meeting Spaces used by Mara Members According to Residents
(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

It is important to understand territory not just as a physical territory, but also as a symbolic territory. The symbolic territory is created on the psychological and emotional levels, usually in relation to a particular physical or geographical space. Frontiers play an important role in this regard, as they are spaces which are structured and can have a meaning and function attached to them which differ according to each group. They are also places of exchange or friction between groups.

Statements indicate that the choice of a mara or gang depends to large extent, on the direct contact that the person has with the mara or gang of their neighbourhood or district. That is, children and young people become attached to things that are close to them, familiar and frequent. So the presence or control of a mara or gang in a district is an important factor in children and adolescents becoming members; for example, if in my district the X mara or gang is active, it is likely that I will feel identified with that mara or gang and I will become a member.

All young mara and gang members who were subject to in-depth interviews said that they approached the maras or gangs due to their proximity in the community, via people close to their family nucleus or at school (through friends and residents). The two statements which follow illustrate this situation:

"I've lived here since I was little and as there were quite a few gangs, some of my school friends were with them and, as I liked it, I liked what they had (...) the tattoos, how they dressed and the way they were (...) I felt envious of them (...) Well, I admired them... because envy's a bad thing, it was more like admiration... (I was) ten years old."
(Mara member, Guatemala.)

"I mean, since I was 13... I've lived in my neighbourhood and the gang was there (...) I saw them every day (...) They looked wild... their habits, their style (...) I watched them, interested (...) They always caught my attention... at 12 years old they always caught my attention, at 13 they enrolled me... And why this gang and not another? Because I liked it... But did you know any others? No, only this one... And did you get involved with this gang because it was the one in your neighbourhood, the nearest one? Yes."
(Leader of Pandilla 18, aged 23, Guatemala.)

In fact, most young mara members and former mara members interviewed had the perception that when they joined they thought that the mara or gang was a space for friends based locally, a hobby, a place for games or "rebane" [playground]. They did not consciously choose to belong to a structured organisation, much less an organisation involved in criminal activities. They also state that the gangs were less violent when they joined in comparison to what they observe now. As they gained experience in the mara or gang, the young people came to know the organisation in its many dimensions (its hierarchy) and the way in which the mara and gangs operate in close relation to violence.

"Well, the first contact I had with members of the gang was when I was about 14, but I wasn't directly involved with them then – I belonged to a group of youths who were rockers, so contact with them was through confrontation, because of differences between them and us, but, but there was no violence between them and us. I mean, that's how I met them, at the time they weren't known as gang members, nor did they have much sway here in Guatemala. I just knew them as cholos, and, in fact, they weren't that established."
(Former mara member, aged 24, Pandilla 18, Guatemala.)

"I thought of it as a pastime, something a bit different, but then, as time went on, I realised it was something more."

(Mara leader, aged 29, Mara Salvatrucha, Honduras.)

"For me, the maras were just a group of guys who looked after a block and they weren't supposed to annoy people from other places, other districts and just live in peace... back at the time when we got involved."

(Former mara leader, Mara Salvatrucha, Honduras.)

Another relevant aspect of the territorial dimension is shown in the defence of territory in the face of external incursions by other groups. This defence has a symbolic dimension which comes from personal identification with the territory, but it is also instrumental in the feeling of protection of the local community and, as we shall see later on, in some cases of protection of the economic base of the mara or gang.

"Well, at that time, it was really important, because it was your territory, where you could move around without anyone hassling you, without anyone challenging you, where you weren't in danger of another gang coming in and killing you, that is the importance of defending it. Unfortunately it is defended by violence, isn't it? If you suddenly see that another group is intervening up to where you are, we're talking about zone one, aren't we? If we see that the Mara Salvatrucha is forming a clique around street 17 and avenue 9, and all that, suddenly you say 'the Salvatrucha guys are in street 17', and we have to get rid of them, either by using bullets or whatever; but there's never any dialogue, there's definitely never been any dialogue. You always, well the gangs, whenever you arrive in a territory you do some graffiti, mark it out. Or when you go to other territories and you see the graffiti which identifies one of the gangs, you definitely know that there's another type of... there or even to identify your own neighbourhood."

(Former mara leader, aged 24, Pandilla 18, Guatemala.)

When necessary, territory is defended spontaneously and with the resources closest to hand:

"as you're not (sic) prepared, suddenly stones, sticks, knives, you do it in whatever way you can."

The ways of appropriating and defending gang territory means that districts or neighbourhoods are not dominated by many gangs; on the contrary, each gang tries to control an area and maintain it as their own, and even expand it. This is an issue which will be debated in more detail in Chapter III.

Moreover, territory is also constructed as a safe place, where members are protected against violence from external groups. However, tensions and confrontations occur, meaning that, despite the imagined security, threats against the lives of mara and gang members, and residents, prevail. With respect to the instrumental dimension of the territory, we can also see, from these interview extracts, how armed logistics operate, along with the economic aspect. Likewise, these aspects come together at a symbolic level, with the idea of power which goes with territory. This reflects the sensation of conquest and domination, upon which their identity is based.

As well as the functions we have already mentioned, territory also fulfils an important economic function for the gang, as it is a source of power from which the gang extracts resources in order to subsist as a group.

"(Territory) is very important because all that brings us income."

(Mara leader, Honduras.)

"... They fight over it mostly for weapons and drugs, because drugs are power and with that they get weapons to fight with anything."

(Former mara leader, Honduras.)

"It is important that the territory covers these places so that rent can be charged."

(Former mara member, Honduras.)

In the case of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, this issue of territory is of special interest, as is the presumed innocence with which young people join the group, without pondering a priori the seriousness of activities this implies. As we have pointed out, the groups studied in these two countries do not present the daily level of consolidation necessary for them to be considered as maras or gangs. However, one of the most interesting findings in these two countries is directly related to the use of public spaces as a meeting place and the setting for their main activities.

The representation of the street as a meeting place and hangout, as well as street corners, parks, steps and other public places which were noted in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, leads us to believe that the symbolic connotation that they acquire is of particular relevance in the process of constructing an identity, as we have mentioned. Likewise, the impact, in terms of the possible perception of this privatisation of public space by residents and its impact on the security of citizens, along with the inclination towards criminal activities, are warning signs of the possible construction of a youth culture which shares some of the most important characteristics which identify gangs.

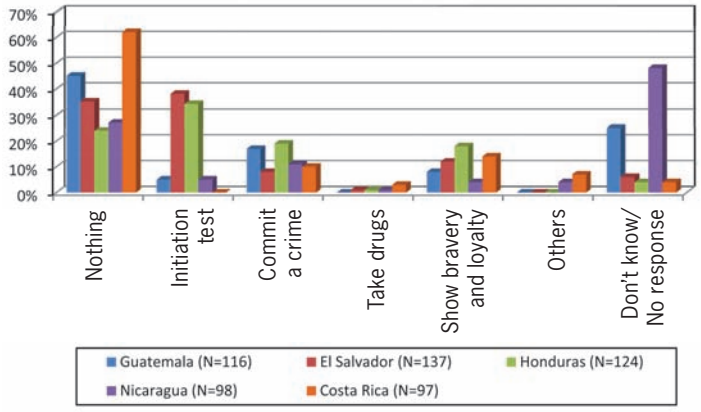
Moreover, in the statements made by mara and gang members in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, and in some of the specific responses with which they provided this study, it is clear that the membership process of the youngest happens because of the proximity in the community and not by way of deliberate recruitment. This presence in public spaces constitutes a pole of attraction which is striking to pre-adolescents who are just beginning their process of identification outside of the family and which, under certain circumstances, can fill the voids of wholesome options which have also been detected in this study. Therefore, this information, on the tendency of current groups towards the privatisation of public space in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, must be considered with special attention.

Rituals for Entry into the Gang

In the gang mythology, and in the words of mara and gang members themselves, the notion of a ritual dimension exists associated with entry into the mara or gang. In-depth interviews with mara or gang members revealed that showing courage and loyalty to the group are fundamental in order to be accepted as a new member. This is achieved through specific actions like, for example, successfully obeying an order or carrying out a task (robbery, assault or murder of a person or rival), or by contributing items and information. In accordance with this discourse, demonstrating courage, having a backbone, knowing how to use weapons, being able to tolerate physical pain and being ready to dice with death are qualities that potential gang members need to prove in order to belong to the group. A test to measure their ability and loyalty is necessary, to establish the frontiers which separate gang members from outsiders, signalling the distance between them and those that do not belong to the gang, a test to separate them from the others.

Graph 5

Activities Necessary to Join the Mara, According to Mara Members



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

However, bar chart 5, based on questionnaires with mara and gang members, clearly shows that a very high percentage of these young people say that they have not had to undergo these initiation rites. In Guatemala, like in Costa Rica and Nicaragua (where the gang tradition is not as strong), most young people reported that they did not have to carry out any kind of initiation test.

In accordance with the statements of mara and gang members gathered in some of the in-depth interviews, a particular and frequently mentioned initiation rite is the so-called brincadera or brinco, at least in the Pandilla 18, the Pandilla 75 and the Mara Salvatrucha. It is a test of physical and emotional resistance to pain, as a certain number of people (three or four) jump on the person who wishes to join and attack them by kicking or hitting them. Some informants mention that, in the case of the Mara Salvatrucha, potential members are hit for 13 seconds and, in the case of Pandilla 18, they are hit for 18 seconds. The symbolism of the mythical origin of gangs in streets 13 and 18 respectively is transferred to the initiation by way of bodily resistance. Consequently, later on, they may get a tattoo as an emblem of personal merit, as will be documented later on in the study.

Other External Symbols

Each gang constructs its own way of identifying itself and, at the same time, of being identified by other groups. The confluence of elements used by young people to publicly display their social identity, which are rooted in language, grooming, cultural creations and focal activities, binds the group together and affirms its identity. Group style can be expressed in many ways, but it adopts certain external characteristics, many of which are notorious, such as tattoos, clothing, haircuts and the use of a moustache, as well as specific or coded gestures or verbal communication.

In the case of the maras and gangs, external signs have certainly played a relevant role. Mara members frequently mention them as differentiating factors between the maras (Guatemala: 39%; El Salvador: 37%; Honduras: 48%), as signs of recognition of the members of their group (Guatemala: 60%; El Salvador: 61%; Honduras: 79%), and as acknowledgement of the members of other groups (Guatemala: 63%; El Salvador: 73%; Honduras: 81.5%).

Possibly, these external signs are also elements of resistance to disqualification. The feeling of resistance is expressed through differentia-

tion, which, instead of being hidden, makes itself felt and asserts an assumed belonging in respect of other groups and the community which surrounds them. In this way, the style or uniform functions as an identifying factor of the group, and therefore is used all the time and in any place, demonstrating their belonging in their daily life.

Likewise, according to the in-depth interviews carried out with mara members in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, tattoos play a role of demonstrating identification and status within the group. Although there are some statements which contradict this, at least in the gangs we studied, there is no total freedom with regard to having tattoos. On the contrary, tattoos play different roles; they can denote the rank or level of command of the gang member, and depend on the task that they have carried out:

> *"The higher leader, look, they're not the same because remember that each tattoo does mean something, the 18 means the same, but remember that we have to do it differently because we don't all have the same respect with the cliques."*
>
> (Informant 2, aged 26, mara member, Mara 18, El Salvador.)

The statements of the interviewees suggest that tattoos must be earned through acts carried out for the benefit of the gang. In this respect, tattoos can be considered as biographies of the lives of mara and gang members, like scars or marks of tasks carried out during which the individual put their life at risk in the name of the group. Like letters on a piece of paper to be seen, they cannot go unnoticed by the group. It is an individual merit, awarded collectively in recognition of individual effort and risk. That is why rank is assigned according to the quantity and meaning of the tattoos, and recognises merit in terms of risk taken and bravery, and, as such, tattoos are a sign of triumph. It is no coincidence, therefore, that gang members tell us that they require permission from the person with the original tattoo in order to copy it.

Some tattoos denote belonging to a group, with letters and numbers which identify the mara or gang. The Mara Salvatrucha, for example, uses the number 13 or the letters 'MS', drawn in different ways. In Pandilla 18, they use the number which corresponds to their gang name. In both cases, we see strange combinations of Arabic and Roman numbers, nomenclature of indigenous languages and sometimes designs which are supposedly owned by the person wearing them. Other tattoos refer to the personal experiences of each individual: life in prison (prisons, towers), the good times and bad times they have experienced (happy face and sad face, clowns), perdition (dice), the death of loved ones, particularly fellow gang members (religious signs, tears), the difficulty of leaving gang life behind (spider webs), and what being a mara member means (three dots which represent the mara, prison and death).

Graffiti, like tattoos, also has a creative aspect, both individually and collectively. Both creations are considered by several authors as cultural products which invert the negative evaluation assigned socially to certain styles, transforming stigma into an emblem (Feixa, 1998). Graffiti serves to mark out territory so that the gang can be recognised by other groups. Numbers, letters and symbols are used which have been identified as the gang's own, the same way in which they appropriate certain tattoo designs as their own.

In fact, the group constructs stereotypes which serve to mark out its identity, but these can be counterproductive, as they cause segregation both from those who no longer want to be part of the group and from those who have already left. The virtues or ranks associated with style,

once outside the gang, no longer have a meaning, and, in contrast, act as potential aspects for their marginalisation in social spaces other than the mara. It should also be noted that studies conducted in the region document how the adoption of these symbols of gang style by young people living in these neighbourhoods does not always mean that they participate fully in gang activities (Rodgers, 2006) and that, therefore, relying on these symbols to identify gang members is significantly less dangerous.

The mara and gang members interviewed have indicated that there currently exists a tendency to abandon symbols of identity (particularly tattoos), so that they cannot be so easily identified by the authorities. Tattoos are undoubtedly one of the most visible elements of gang style, which are more controversial for stereotypes and the persecution which they have generated.

In response to the question: To what extent does stigmatisation of mara and gang members exist in our country? And how does it affect their reinsertion?, a magistrate and a priest responded:

> *"I can't give you percentages, but there is stigmatisation within society towards young mara members or young people with tattoos. It does exist, and there is a kind of fear, and people are right to be afraid, because they see a young person with a tattoo and they immediately think that they are a delinquent... and maybe the person isn't."*
>
> (Informant 1, Magistrate of the Supreme Court of Justice of Honduras.)

> *"They are totally marginalised and are not allowed to become reincorporated. For example, the question of tattoos, someone who has a tattoo cannot find a job, someone who aged 14 had a tattoo cannot find a job at 25... it is totally illogical."*
>
> (Informant 1, Father of the church in the Monterrey district, Honduras.)

Stigmatisation means accentuating social segregation which leads to marginalisation, to the point that they are excluded from basic forms of survival, such as employment, even when they have served the time for their crimes. The stigma ends up becoming a life sentence.

Moreover, in the case of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, we were able to identify some of these symbolic markers. The rudimentary use of tattoos and graffiti follows some of the coordinated principles which guide these customs in the case of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Membership and territoriality are characterised by these marks of belonging. A few groups even share the names used by the maras and gangs.

Analysis By Gang Type

Introduction

To explore the behaviour of gangs, an analysis exercise was carried out on the majority of questions related to the organisation and the activities of the maras, according to the type of gang to which young people say they are affiliated.

The sample is composed of the male population of the two main groups interviewed: The Mara Salvatrucha and Pandilla 18, from the following three countries: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. It is important to note that the samples are not equivalent in terms of the number of gangs or the number of countries (Chapter I: Methodological Approach: general characterisation), so the results must be understood as exploratory. For the validity of the investigation, replies from the mara population in prison in Honduras, at the time of the interview, were excluded in cases where this particular situation could alter the information they provided.

The objective of this type of analysis is to observe the behaviour of mara members in their groups and to recognise whether there are patterns, trends or activities which are characteristic, particular or inherent to a specific form of organisation. This study also allows, through cross-analysis, to perceive whether some behaviours are governed by the national context rather than by the behaviour of the group.

Results

In general, the data shows that there are more similarities than differences in the responses given by mara and gang members, irrespective of their group of reference or their country. In many cases, most responses are grouped into two main categories, with possible frequencies which vary according to the type of gang and/or country. Sometimes there is dispersion of responses within a group, which does not follow a particular model according to their reference group. In other words, from the responses, we cannot infer a systematic homogeneous exercise or behaviour within each group nor between groups – irrespective of their membership or country. However, some results do show a situation common to Guatemala and El Salvador, where different responses are identified between the Mara Salvatrucha and Pandilla 18, and a particular situation in Honduras.

Activities

For example, mara members from the three countries and the two gangs say that they entertain themselves in a similar way – through walks, gatherings and sport. Most of them often share hobbies, such as watching television, going out to nightclubs, visiting their girlfriends and meeting up with their friends. However, going to watch the football, going to the pub or bar, playing pool, playing on gambling machines and going to the cinema are activities which are greatly dispersed, and tend to separate respondents into two groups (50%): those who carry out these activities and those who do not/almost never carry out these activities within each group without presenting differences according to country.

Joining the Mara

With respect to joining the mara, the vast majority of the two groups in the three countries claim that they did so voluntarily. Table 2 shows the average ages at which young people join the maras and the trial period necessary to be accepted. The results show that there are no differences with regard to the type of gang, but the responses do differ in respondents from different countries, as both gangs in Guatemala presented a lower average age for joining the mara. The trial period appears to be the same in all cases, with an average of two months, except in the Mara Salvatrucha of Guatemala. The reason for this situation in Guatemala is unknown, but it may be in relation to joining this gang at a younger age, so more investigation would have to be made into the entry restrictions or limits on children.

The responses with regard to what they had to do to be accepted into the mara show that members of the Mara Salvatrucha of Guatemala carried out murder and violence against rivals (46%) with a much higher frequency than other groups and in other countries. In Honduras, Pandilla 18 (12%) and the Mara Salvatrucha (11%) responded in a similar way, but in lower numbers. Half of those in Pandilla 18 in Guatemala and El Salvador answered "nothing", as did 28% of Pandilla 18 members and 25% of Mara Salvatrucha members in Honduras. 72% of

Mara Salvatrucha members in El Salvador and 25% of those in Guatemala mentioned an initiation test; as well as 52% of Pandilla 18 members in Honduras. Robbery was mentioned by members of the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala (12%) and in Honduras (7%). This shows that there is a great dispersal in relation to this topic.

With respect to the benefits of having joined the mara or gang, the responses are diverse: the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala mainly state protection, power and recognition; the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador mentioned protection, power and brotherhood; the Mara Salvatrucha in Honduras indicated recognition, power and brotherhood. Members of Pandilla 18 in Guatemala mostly gave no response or did not know; in El Salvador they mentioned brotherhood and protection and power; and in Honduras, protection, power and brotherhood.

Life in the Mara

The benefits of belonging to the mara also proved varied according to country and to the type of gang. In Honduras, the two gangs answered in a similar way: solidarity, fun and "none". In El Salvador, 29% of Mara Salvatrucha members answered "none" followed, in frequency, by solidarity and fun. Pandilla 18 members mentioned solidarity, "none" (21%) and fun. In Guatemala, the Mara Salvatrucha members mentioned fun, loyalty, honour and solidarity. 43% of Pandilla 18 members did not know or did not respond, followed by solidarity.

In the two gangs in the three countries, violent situations appear to be important as the main bad thing that has happened to them as a result of their belonging to the mara. Legal problems also appeared to be important in the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala (44%)[22]. In Honduras, legal problems were also mentioned frequently in both gangs. In El Salvador, however, the difference between these responses is striking: the Mara Salvatrucha mention enemies (26%) and discrimination (17%); Pandilla 18 members state legal problems (17%) and "none" (26%).

Table 2

Average Ages for Joining the Gang and Trial Period to be Accepted Into the Gang (Months)

	Guatemala		**El Salvador**		**Honduras**	
	Mara Salvatrucha	Pandilla 18	Mara Salvatrucha	Pandilla 18	Mara Salvatrucha	Pandilla 18
Joining age	13	14	16	15	15	15
Trial period	7	2	2	2	1	2

Source: Drawn up based on the questionnaires applied to young gang members.

With regard to the satisfaction mara members feel with their relationship with fellow mara members, in both groups in the three countries, except the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador, the vast majority feel satisfied. In the case of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador, 33% did not know or did not respond, and, among those that did respond, there were higher percentages of partial or total dissatisfaction with regard to other populations. This leads us to believe that, in this particular gang in this country, there must be a negative condition within the group, possibly related to

[22] It is possible that this is also the case for the Pandilla 18 in this country, as 31.3% did not respond, and, of those that did, 24.1% mentioned legal problems. It may be a condition which arises from the national context rather than the type of gang.

group control. This response coincides with the responses given when they were asked what they most disliked about the mara as a dichotomy "everything/nothing". Members of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador answered that they disliked "everything" much more frequently than members of the Pandilla 18 in their country, as was the case with the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala. A particular situation prevails in Honduras, where a significant proportion of both gangs replied that they disliked "everything" (Pandilla 18: 43%; Mara Salvatrucha: 34%).

With regard to leaving the mara, again, differences were noted between the responses of the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala and El Salvador and those of Pandilla 18 in those countries. Those from the Pandilla 18 mostly state that they have no obstacles (Guatemala: 79%; El Salvador: 89%), while 68% of the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala say that obstacles to leaving the gang do exist, and mention death (40%), fear of reprisals (27%) and their own desire to remain in the gang (20%); 43.5% of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador responded "yes" and gave their reasons as internal laws (65%) and the obstacle of the mara (25%). In Honduras, the majority of both groups say that there is no obstacle to them leaving (Pandilla 18: 63%; Mara Salvatrucha: 66%); those who do mention an obstacle mention both death and the fear of reprisals, but less so than in Guatemala and El Salvador.

Hierarchy

When asked about the person on whom admission into the mara of a new member depends, the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala (56%) and Pandilla 18 in Honduras (37%) mention, most frequently, that it depends on the leader of the gang. The other groups mostly mention a group decision, followed by the individual decision of the person who wishes to join the group.

When they were asked about the things that they did with complete freedom every day, both groups from the three countries, except the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador, most often answered that this was restricted to their spare time. 48% of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador responded "anything I want". There is also a dispersal of responses surrounding family activities and work.

With regard to the question on the things they do each day which are ordered by others, the majority of Pandilla 18 in Guatemala (62%) and El Salvador (60%) responded "nothing"; while the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala mentioned criminal acts (37%) and work (30%), and the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador, "nothing" (43%), group responsibility (24%) and work (13%). In Honduras, Pandilla 18 mentioned criminal activity (24%), group responsibility (20%) and "nothing"(18%); the Mara Salvatrucha responded "nothing"(30%) and criminal activity (24%).

According to the responses[23] of mara members on their level of satisfaction with regard to the place they say they occupy within the mara (someone who obeys, someone who commands, someone who commands and obeys), it was found that, in Guatemala, those from the Mara Salvatrucha were much less satisfied than those from Pandilla 18 (table 3). In El Salvador, it was found that 15% of Pandilla 18 members who claim to occupy a role of obedience are dissatisfied. In Honduras, there is a higher level of dissatisfaction within both groups and in different positions of authority.

[23] The percentages must be analysed with care, because of the limitation of the "n" of this cross-reference.

Table 3

Satisfaction Shown by the Gang Members in Relation to the Place that they Have in the Gang, by Gang Type and Country
(Percentages)

	Pandilla 18			Mara Salvatrucha		
	Someone who obeys	Someone who gives orders	Someone who gives orders and obeys	Someone who obeys	Someone who gives orders	Someone who gives orders and obeys
Guatemala	(N=16)	(N=2)	(N=22)	(N=8)	(N=2)	(N=11)
Satisfied	87	100	100	75	50	73
Unsatisfied	12	—	—	25	50	27
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**
El Salvador	(N=40)	(N=5)	(N=17)	(N=16)	(N=8)	(N=19)
Satisfied	85	80	100	94	87	89
Unsatisfied	15	20	—	6	12	—
Don't know/ No response	—	—	—	—	—	10
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**
Honduras	(N=19)	(N=4)	(N=20)	(N=26)	(N=6)	(N=14)
Satisfied	74	75	75	65	83	93
Unsatisfied	26	25	25	31	17	7
Don't know/ No response	—	—	—	4	—	—
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Social Identification and Identity

When mara members were asked what it was that set their mara apart from the others, it is interesting to point out the responses of members of Pandilla 18 in Guatemala and El Salvador, who mention more frequently the positive attributes of their group (supremacy and human qualities in Guatemala, values, principles and human qualities in El Salvador). The Mara Salvatrucha in these countries mainly responded that it was external signs that set their group apart (Guatemala: 95%; El Salvador: 63%). In Honduras, both gangs responded in a similar way (Pandilla 18: external signs 57% and supremacy 17%; Mara Salvatrucha: external signs 53% and indifferentiation 16%). In several in-depth interviews, members of Pandilla 18 tend to consider those of the Mara Salvatrucha as being savage and uncivilised, and point out their qualities of order, coherence and the principles of their group activity in contrast to the Mara Salvatrucha. Future investigations should look more deeply into these differences, which may have a real or subjective basis, but allow us to understand the relationship of otherness between these two groups. Moreover, although it is impossible to say that one gang is more important than the other, in each country, it is interesting to note how each group is situated with respect to the other, as Pandilla 18 states it has supremacy in Guatemala and Honduras, and the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador.

Changes in the Mara

With regard to the changes that mara members perceive in their group since they joined, the responses indicate that in Guatemala and El Salvador, higher percentages of the Mara Salvatrucha perceive an increase in high-risk situations (Guatemala: 30%; El Salvador: 24%) and an increase in the number of members, particularly in El Salvador (39%). 44% of Pandilla 18 in Guatemala either did not know or did not respond and 37% said "none"; in El Salvador, 29% replied "none" and 26% mentioned a higher level of well-being in the group. In Honduras, a significant percentage of the Mara Salvatrucha (47%) said "none" and 15% mentioned a higher degree of well-being in the group, similar responses to those of Pandilla 18 (none: 22%; higher degree of well-being: 20%).

Drug Taking

With regard to drug taking, the responses of those who said they took drugs always, or almost always, showed that most began taking drugs before they joined the group. In contrast, 74% of the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador said they began taking drugs after joining the mara (table 4).

In the three countries, both gangs state, in high frequencies, that the first drug they took was marijuana, with much higher percentages in Honduras (Mara Salvatrucha: 75%; Pandilla 18: 68%). It is striking that the groups of the Mara Salvatrucha in Guatemala and El Salvador frequently mention that they started on cocaine (Guatemala: 24%; El Salvador: 20%) and with crack (Guatemala: 21%; El Salvador: 31%). In Honduras, the second most frequently mentioned drug was cocaine (Mara Salvatrucha: 15%; Pandilla 18: 20%); crack was the least frequently mentioned drug in the two gangs.

Table 4

Distribution of the Start of Drug use in the Maras or Gangs
(Percentages)

	Guatemala		**El Salvador**		**Honduras**	
	Mara Salvatrucha (N=37)	Pandilla 18 (N=21)	Mara Salvatrucha (N=36)	Pandilla 18 (N=23)	Mara Salvatrucha (N=42)	Pandilla 18 (N=42)
Before joining	57	67	64	13	71	86
After joining	8	33	25	74	21	12
Don't know/ No response	35	—	11	13	7	2
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Summary

There are no definite patterns which differentiate the types of gang, except in relation to the internal conditions reflected in several items analysed from the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador. In this group there seems to exist a greater degree of coercion and intra-group violence. Also, the Mara Salvatrucha, both in El Salvador and Guatemala, display a greater degree of external vulnerability related to high-risk situations, which may be related to repressive State policies. The way in which they recognise each other is striking. In this regard, the Mara Salvatrucha appears to be more stereotyped, which may contribute to the discrimination against it and its

vulnerability, which would explain the perceptions of these mara members. Finally, in Honduras, both gangs present fewer differences in the pattern of responses among themselves; however, they differ from the response pattern of other gangs from the other two countries.

Women and Gangs

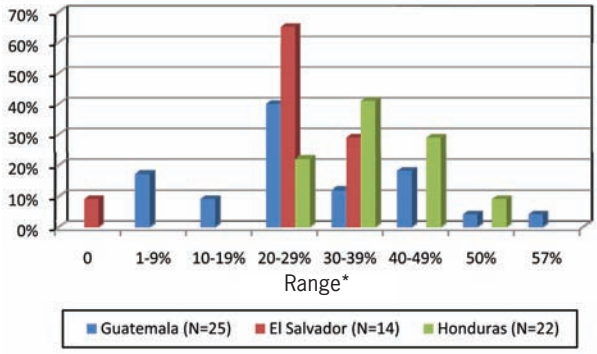
There is very little information available about the role played by women in these groups. This study shall attempt to fill in some of these gaps. In the analysis, women were considered as active members of the mara or gang, mother and companion.

Composition of the Group

According to the responses of young female mara members, with regard to the number of women and men which form their group, practically all groups in the three countries are mostly made up of of men: it is worth noting that, in the case of mixed-sex groups[24], women do not account for over 50% of members. However, the participation of women reaches significant levels (between 20% and 40% are women; see bar chart 6)[25]. Moreover, in Guatemala and Honduras, a minority refer to gangs of women only.

Graph 6

Participation of Women in Maras or Gangs, According to Female Mara Members
(Percentages)



(*) Established using the responses of the number of men and women that make up the group.
Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

In Guatemala, on average[26], there are between 12 women and 32 men per group. In other words, we found that[27] a quarter of the group were women, and that the groups have 44 members on average. Moreover, there are women-only maras or gangs, according to 19% of female mara members in Guatemala; 81% said they knew of no exclusively female maras. 8% of those who said they knew of a women-only group said that they were different from men-only or mixed gangs because they almost never went out to steal.

---

[24] Only in Guatemala a female mara member claimed to belong to a gang in which there were more women than men.

[25] It should be taken into consideration that we are working with very small samples.

[26] Averages which do not include "don't know"/"no response".

[27] We cannot assume that all-male groups do not exist. These results are useful for analysing groups in which women participate. Data from the in-depth interviews carried out on male mara and former mara members give support to the idea of female participation in maras; however, some statements also mentioned that women were prohibited from participating.

In El Salvador, a female mara member responded that all the members were men. It was found that, on average, there are 9 women and 27 men per group. Almost a quarter of the group are women, and, on average, the groups have 35 members. It is important to note that female mara members in this country claimed that they were not aware of any women-only gangs (96% and 4% did not know or did not respond).

In Honduras, no female mara members said that they belonged to a group which had more women than men. It was found that, on average, there are 11 women and 20 men per group. A third of the group are women and, on average, the groups have 30 members. Moreover, 24% of female mara members say that women-only gangs or maras exist; 76% say that they are not aware of any. Half of those who said they knew of a women-only group said that they were different from men-only or mixed gangs because they were less violent and did not commit murder. The other half said that women-only groups were not different, did not know or did not respond.

The Position of Female Mara Members

The data collected suggests that the participation of women in Central American gangs is one of subordination. For example, Feixa (1998) has found that the position of women in youth cultures is structurally different, and that their marginalisation is due, in large part, to the fact that they are centrally situated in a set of activity categories which are, by their nature, subordinate. Although further investigation is needed in this regard, it may be that the fact fewer women participate in activities such as homicide puts them at a disadvantage in relation to the rest of the group. This situation is a reproduction of the traditional system of gender relations, against which the gang does not resist.

Following his investigation into the history of gangs, Eric Hobsbawm concluded that women have occupied three functions within these groups, the most frequent is that of providing sexual company for gang members; another less widely known one is the role of collaborator and link to the outside world; and, finally, the least frequent role occupied by women, a role in which the only thing that distinguishes them from their male counterparts is their gender: the role of female bandit (Hobsbawm, 2001: 157).

Women in maras or gangs are not classified according to the classification proposed by Hobsbawm; up until now, none have occupied only one of these roles exclusively. However, with the exception of becoming a gang boss, the other two roles noted by Hobsbawm –indiscriminately – are among the roles which women occupy within the mara or gang. Reference has been made to women-only maras where leadership is, of course, exercised by a woman.

The fact that typically masculine characteristics and values, such as aggression, bravery and the competent use of firearms, are held in high esteem, means that women and traditional femininity are undervalued within gangs.

> *"... there were (women) before, but not anymore... (...) they don't want women anymore... because they're weak... In everything, in everything (they participated) the same as the men. (...) Yes, they played all kinds of roles... but when they started to have babies they weren't wanted in the gang anymore."*
>
> (Informant 3, former mara member, Pandilla 18, Guatemala.)

Sexual inequality, and the clear disadvantage women have within the maras, is proven in situations, such as unfair rules (in El Salvador it was

reported that men were not punished for infidelity but women were), in decision-making (they are not consulted on important matters or men merely pretend to take their opinions into consideration when in reality they do not), in the hierarchy of the group (in theory it is accepted that women can occupy positions of authority, but they are not accepted as leaders of male cliques) and in the way female gang members are viewed by their male counterparts (they are considered as being gossips, weak etc.).

> *"They all hesitate and all that, there are no women in high positions, I mean, there's only one leader and the women are just others in the mara; yes; they do participate in violent activities, they don't participate in decision-making, sometimes in the meetings they say to us: I think this, that and the other, and you say to them: OK, so that they don't see that they are not listened to, but no, their [the women's] plans are not the same as ours, you know what I mean?"*
>
> (Informant 5, aged 27, mara leader, Mara Salvatrucha, El Salvador).

In this regard, it should be noted that significant proportions of female mara members (Guatemala: 20%; El Salvador: 30%; Honduras: 28%) acknowledge that, as women, they are obliged to carry out work or tasks traditionally assigned to them (washing, cooking, cleaning or serving the men). Moreover, almost all of these same women, who acknowledged the existence of these obligations, stated that if they did not comply with them they were punished with violence.[28]

Some informants stated that, currently, women were prohibited from joining gangs. In Honduras, some respondents said that in the Mara Salvatrucha women were murdered by male members of their gang for refusing to work or carry out certain missions or for "grassing" when they were arrested by the police.

In the Pandilla 18 in El Salvador, female gang members were mentioned, but as a separate group which worked with the male gang members.

> *"They [the women] take decisions among themselves, it depends on the woman, if she has a mature mind, well, yes they do participate in violent activities (...) of course, to brincar into the gang, they have to do something violent."*
>
> (Informant 3, mara member, Pandilla 18, El Salvador.)

In this country, reference was also made to an oganisation of women "attached" to the Mara 18:

> *"The women have their own spokeswomen, who, from time to time, presents a list of concerns (...) the men cannot consult the women on anything, in a certain gang sense, they have their spokeswomen, for their tomato rolls, onion, green chilli... we don't ask [the women's] opinion on anything, and they just present concerns for us to resolve (...) unless we say we're going to punish or remove a member, we ask the spokeswoman for her opinion and we say to her you have her support, I have this, this and this... she is in charge of delivering CVs more than anything, and keeping them in clothes, working, looking for work for them."*
>
> (Informant 1, former mara member, aged 29, Pandilla 18, El Salvador.)

Women have gradually created their own spaces – attached cliques or groups in which they can make decisions, which they communicate to the rest of the group via spokeswomen. For example, according to the "Reporte de investigación sobre pandillas callejeras" (Report of the investigation on street gangs), there are several types of gangs with young

---

[28] It is important to remember that we are talking about very small samples, and that in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, no female gang members were interviewed.

females and women: mixed gangs, whose members are men and women; auxiliary gangs, where female gangs are affiliated to male gangs and autonomous female gangs (Jones et al., 2004). In contrast, young women in Latin America are more often affiliated to a gang of men. The study carried out in Central America provides similar data: women have their own leaders and it looks as if they operate, in general, as a group of female gang members attached to a group of men, and, for specific tasks, accompany the men or carry out missions for them.

In Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, most male gang members say that marriages can take place both within the gang and outside it. However, female gang members in Honduras say that marriage is only permitted within gangs. 52% of female mara members say that relationships with people from outside the gang are prohibited, although they did not indicate to what extent this rule is enforced or whether any kind of punishment exists.

It is clear that relationships between male and female gang members are quite widespread. The questionnaire among female mara members showed that most of them had a relationship with a male mara member (Guatemala: 72%; El Salvador: 93%; Honduras: 72%). Moreover, 20% of female mara members stated that they have had to grant sexual favours to male mara members or mara leaders, and 43% stated that women in the mara or gang had been subject to physical violence by male mara members.

All of this indicates that there is no horizontal integration of women in gangs.

> *"In the past, in many cases, there were female leaders, but now there are hardly any, because they have killed them themselves, because sometimes women aren't like them, if a woman is made to do a mission which involves killing, sometimes she doesn't want to do it because she's a woman, it's not like it is for us, so it becomes easier for them, that instead of the woman being killed by rival gangs, they kill the women, and also, women must only be for their husband, they can't have sexual relations with anyone else, with a nobody, because they kill them for doing that as well... women don't have much to gain, they only lose, more than we do."*

(Informant 3, aged 25, former mara leader, Mara Salvatrucha, Honduras.)

Control over female sexuality manifests itself not only in the restrictions imposed on women in terms of the "choice" of companion, but also in the use of women as sexual objects in initiation rites.

> *"In the past, like I said, they [the women] paid by having sex with all of them, with 13 people, but, at the same time, they were hit as if they were men."*

(Informant 3, aged 25, former mara leader, Mara Salvatrucha, Honduras.)

Women are aware of their oppressed status within the group, as situations in which women have protested at this unfair treatment show. Like the one below:

> *"78 women from the neighbourhood asked me the same question, one bitch got up (...) look, I've got a question to ask you, OK, I say (...) look, she says, how is it that we're all meant to be 18 members, the same as you men, as we the women, the only thing is that you have a penis and we have a vulva, but here there's no difference, here we're the 18 and the 18 don't change, so we're all the same (...) why is it that you men can go around with one girl after another after another, what's that all about? What makes you different, us women want this to stop, and if a man is a traitor, he should be punished as well, and I turned round to her and said, look, that's a good question, well you answer it, look, I said to her, men can be punished, and that load of men got up, like that, and as there were 80 of them, more than the women, they rebelled, we're not going to be punished by this load of women, there was a great conspiracy*

against me, an argument and a debate that came to nothing, it came to nothing, and still now, only the women are punished, not the men."

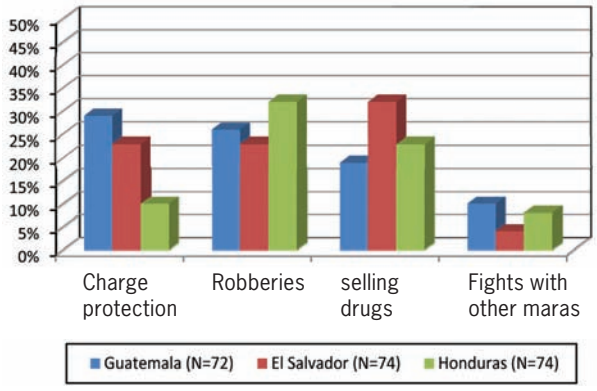
(Informant 1, aged 29, Pandilla 18, former mara leader, El Salvador.)

In the statements made by interviewees on female participation in gangs, reference was made to a principle of equality within the group. Not all male mara members admit to the existence of discrimination against women, although this discrimination is clearly displayed in the different activities and rites, in decision-making and in the hierarchical aspect. There are constant contradictions between what gang members say and reality. It appears that the attempt to construct an alternative culture to the prevailing one clashes with the limitations entailed by a socialisation of certain traditionally patriarchal and authoritarian values and attitudes. The existence of a contradiction between their discourse of "egalitarianism" and their hierarchical, patriarchal organisations is related to the absence of an alternative education, which would give mara and gang members the tools to create egalitarian and equitable communities. Young male mara and gang members end up reproducing hegemonic values, which they occasionally oppose in their statements.

In any case, it should be noted that the subordinate position that women occupy in gangs does not mean that they do not participate in the main criminal activities of gangs. The questionnaire given to female mara members also includes information which gives an idea of the type of criminal activities which fill the time of female gang members. Bar chart 7 shows that the participation of young female mara members in activities such as collecting protection money, robberies and drug dealing is not insignificant.

Graph 7

Activities in Which Female Mara Members Participate, According to themselves
(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Female Mara Members and their Relationship with Drug Taking

The following analysis was carried out taking into account female mara members in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The selection of questions was based on the issue of drugs and drug taking. Although drug taking is not a predominant factor in the group dynamic, it is a persistent factor which should be pointed out.

Relevant sources of initiating drug taking within the family environment of young female mara members include brothers and sisters (23%) and fathers (8%). 14% of women questioned said that none of their family members took drugs. 52% did not know or did not respond, which could point towards a probable distancing from the family environment – with

the subsequent ignorance regarding the activities of its members – or an unwillingness to answer the question.

With minimal variations between the countries of the region, on average, young female mara members said that they spent their money primarily on fulfilling basic needs (44%), personal issues (12%) and personal expenditure (10%). The figures for taking drugs were 17% and for buying spirits 8%. Illegal drugs are not the main area of expenditure for most female mara members; however, it is clear that a segment of the group does spend money on these substances.

When asked about their leisure activities, 13% gave their response as drug taking; and although it is not among the highest percentages, it does recur in a sector of the population of young female mara or gang members. This appears among other leisure activities, including spending time with friends (49%), going for walks, games and spending time with family (17%), board games, electronic games or hobbies (8%). It is clear that having spaces for socialisation and entertainment activities with their peer group is of utmost importance.

A significant segment of female mara and gang members continue to take the same drug on which they started their habit. The first drugs taken were marijuana (53%), followed by cocaine (18%) and glue (13%). When referring to the current time, half responded that they did not take any drugs. However, it must be taken into consideration that most young female mara members interviewed were in prison, so their current drug use may be affected by these circumstances.

Of those who said they took drugs, 53% said they took marijuana, 18% took cocaine and 13% sniffed glue. The most desired and pleasant effects hoped for by taking drugs are linked to feelings of safety and confidence (34%), loss of inhibition and enjoyment (26%) and forgetting (14%). It is apparent that drugs as a substance for consumption are part of a more general problem, such as the social environment, which in turn is a worrying factor which harms young female mara or gang members.

It is important to note that, on average, 51% of young female mara members begin taking drugs before joining the mara or gang. However, after joining the mara or gang drug use continues to be high (44%). This situation leads us towards two possible conclusions: a) drug use is more of a risk factor for female mara members rather than a consequence of joining a mara – drug taking is a social problem which is not only related to the maras and gangs, it is also related to the social environment of the community, school environment and different socialisation spaces – or b) the group dynamic of the mara also encourages drug taking, although it is subject to rules and limitations, as was seen previously.

With regard to the type of payment received for carrying out different specific activities (stealing, drug dealing), 35% received payment in cash, while payment with drugs (30%) is an important option for a segment of the young female mara member population.

Activities required to be accepted into the mara included the initiation rite (28%) and stealing (15%), which were the main activities, followed by drug taking (4%) and having sexual relations (4%). Moreover, obtaining drugs is relevant as a benefit of having joined the mara (11%), after recognition and enjoyment (30%) and fraternity (21%). Again, group cohesion and leisure activities within the peer group acquire a fundamental purpose in the motivations of gratification found within the dynamic of the maras and gangs.

Participation in drug dealing is mentioned frequently (55%) by young female mara members, along with robberies (75%) and fights with other maras or gangs (70%). While it is not the main activity, it was mentioned

frequently in the actions carried out by female mara members within the group.

Among the reasons given by young female gang or mara members for not leaving the group, despite having received explicit help, 7% mentioned their taste for drugs, followed by threats and group pressure (18%) and the fact that they liked the gang (39%).

The previous panorama shows that drug taking is a constant factor within the activities mentioned by female mara or gang members. The data suggests that although drugs, as a substance for consumption, are not one of the predominant factors which induce young females to participate in the dynamics of the maras and gangs, belonging to the group does play a major role in accessing drugs and in sustaining their drug habit.

Intervention and prevention policies which entail decreasing high-risk activities and vulnerability factors in relation to drugs should be focused not only on the internal dynamic of the maras and gangs, but should also take into account the social environment which enables access to drugs and their consumption.

Gang Members who are Mothers

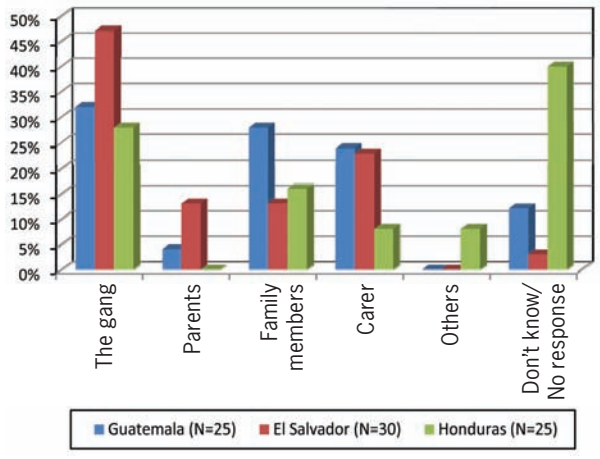
As we have mentioned, female gang members have relationships with members of the gang or with other men. These relationships often result in the birth of a child. How does the gang respond to this situation? Young female mara members state, as a model response, that the behaviour of other gang members in response to pregnant female mara members is one of care and protection. It is interesting that, according to the female interviewees, 30% of newborn babies live with the mara or gang.

In fact, according to the female gang members, it is usually the gang itself which takes responsibility for looking after children or newborn babies. This suggests the importance of developing policies which cater for the needs of these women, when they are pregnant and also of their children, needs which are certainly not met if policies concentrate only on the criminal prosecution of gang members.

This data on motherhood (and fatherhood) highlights two very important aspects on the organisational process of the maras and gangs. First, the possible reproduction down the generations of membership, no longer just by affiliation, and, second, that the presence of a younger generation means that the extended family and community networks become involved. As a consequence, the link between the maras and gangs and communities becomes complex.

Graph 8

Responsibility for the Care of Children Born into the Mara, According to Female Mara Members (Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Chapter III
The Activities of Gangs

Introduction

Crime committed by youth gang members and the fear that their activities generate in the community, are the main reasons why efforts are made to control and prevent crime. One of the facts clearly documented by the literature is that the young mara or gang members commit more crimes than young people that do not belong to gangs. Gangs tend to amplify and facilitate greater participation in crime (Thornberry et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Klein and Maxson, 2006; Sharp, Aldridge and Medina, 2006). There is also documentation that asserts that gangs commit fewer crimes than folklore attributes to them, as the following textual extracts show:

> *"First, and most importantly, we need to acknowledge that gang members spend more time larking around than committing crimes. (…) the activity which attracts our attention to gangs covers a very small part of the typical day of a gang member."*
>
> (Klein and Maxson, 2006: 69).[29]

> *"Serious crimes – both non-violent and violent – are a characteristic aspect of gangs, but the crimes of gangs do not seem as premeditated, organised or frequent as the popular (and official) mind imagines."*
>
> (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: 144).

Nonetheless, criminal activity within gangs is undeniable and many of the studies on the maras have been centred on trying to document and understand it. The comparative literature also stresses that it must be taken into consideration that there are other facets of their functioning that are interesting from a sociological point of view, and even from the point of view of controlling and preventing the gangs. Although it is important to document and understand the criminal activity of the gang members, one must be careful not to get carried away with a stereotypical, folkloric or demonised vision of gang members which does not take other complex and multifaceted aspects of their lives into account.

[29] The textual quotes whose original is in English were translated by the authors.

Crime and Drug Use

As was previously pointed out, one of the most consistent pieces of data in the investigation on the maras and gangs is that, in general terms, the young people who are members of gangs commit more crimes than those who are not. The selection model suggests that the gangs attract youths with a greater propensity for committing crimes, which would explain the differences between gang members and non-gang members. The social facilitation model, on the other hand, suggests that it is the group processes within the gang which elevate the gang members' criminal activity. The strengthening model, finally, suggests that some youths that join the gangs have a greater predisposition to taking part in crime, but that, at the same time, once they join a gang their criminal behaviour increases. The evidence available disagrees as to whether the social facilitation model is the most appropriate or whether the strengthening model is (Thornberry et al., 2003; Lacourse et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004; Klein and Maxson, 2006).

It has been possible to record that gang members generally exhibit greater levels of criminal participation than other young people. This piece of data can be clearly seen in table 5.

Table 5

Crimes Committed by Gang Members and Non-gang Members
(Percentages)

		Yes	No	Don't know/ No response
Guatemala	Gang member (n=116)	64	28	8
	Non-gang member (n=68)	7	93	0
El Salvador	Gang member (n=137)	85	15	0
	Non-gang member (n=86)	14	86	0
Honduras	Gang member (n=124)	87	9	4
	Non-gang member (n=78)	6	91	3
Costa Rica	Gang member (n=97)	75	25	0
	Non-gang member (n=74)	27	70	3
Nicaragua	Gang member (n=98)	80	20	0
	Non-gang member (n=79)	22	77	1

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

A criticism, often directed against the self-reporting or self-incrimination studies, is that they only measure crime which does not tend to result in any type of response from the criminal justice system. It has been possible to record that gang members exhibit greater levels of criminal participation than other young people. This piece of data can be clearly seen in chart 9.

As can be appreciated, Costa Rica and Nicaragua are not the exception, but the trends of those two indicators are very similar to the rest of Central America.

What are the types of crimes committed by the gang members? In general terms, the comparative literature highlights the fact that the gang members generally follow a very varied pattern of crime, and they are not considered specialists in particular categories of crimes; generally they do everything (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

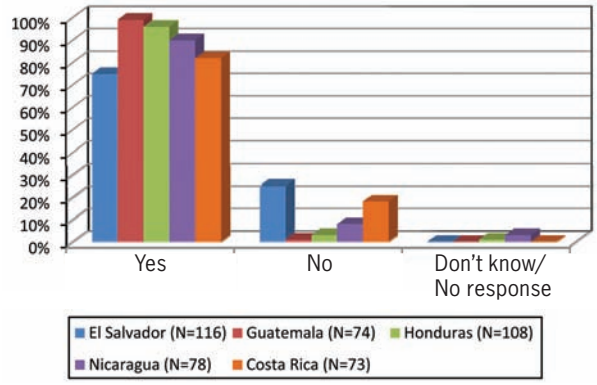
Chart 10 shows the crimes most frequently committed by the gang members in this region. In a context in which the exaltation of violence, the exaggeration of bravery itself and presenting themselves as hard

types is a daily occurrence; the data also has to be taken with a degree of caution. A particular glorifying of violence is indicated in the case of El Salvador and Honduras, where nearly a quarter of individuals who admit having committed a crime point out that this was a murder or an attempted murder. The other extreme would be Nicaragua, where the type of violence committed is generally of a less serious nature. Costa Rica, followed by Guatemala, has the highest figures in respect of theft and public scandal.

Graph 9

Gang Members who Report Having Been Detained or Arrested

(Percentages)

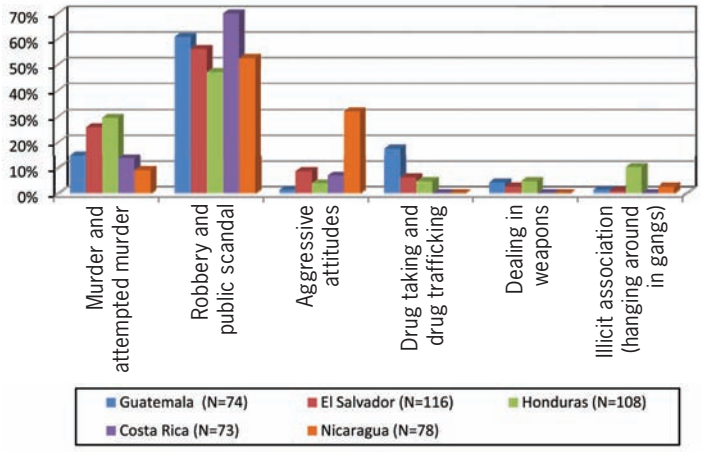


Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Graph 10

Crimes Committed By Gang Members According To Themselves

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

It is worth emphasising, once again, that Costa Rica and Nicaragua do not differ much from the Central American profile, although with less propensity for organised criminal activities and greater inclination towards activities which show less criminal organisation.

The implication of these results is summarised by Klein and Maxson (2006), when they analyse the results of comparative studies:

> *"Efforts that effectively reduce the number of young people who join gangs, reduce the levels of membership of gangs or increase the number of young people that stop being gang members, are efforts that will give rise to a reduction in the volume of*

juvenile crime. The investigation is clear on this point: active participation in street gangs dramatically facilitates the committing of criminal activities. The social policies, the collateral effect of which is an increase in the number of gang members, will increase crime levels, and the policies that reduce participation in gangs will reduce crime"

(Klein and Maxson, 2006: 86).

In the same way that the degree to which gangs increase participation in criminal behaviour can be examined, the manner in which gangs amplify drug use behaviour can be studied (Thornberry et al., 2003; Lacourse et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2004). Table 6 shows a clear contrast in the drug use behaviour among young gang members and young people who are not gang members.

Table 6

Frequency of Drug Use Among Gang Members and Young People at Risk
(Percentages)

	All the time occasionally	Never or almost never	Don't know/ No response
Guatemala			
Gang member (n=116)	46	51	3
Non-gang member (n=68)	0	100	0
El Salvador			
Gang member (n=137)	37	61	1
Non-gang member (n=86)	1	98	1
Honduras			
Gang member (n=124)	65	35	0
Non-gang member (n=78)	0	100	0
Costa Rica			
Gang member (n=97)	56	44	0
Non-gang member (n=74)	12	88	0
Nicaragua			
Gang member (n=98)	29	67	4
Non-gang member (n=79)	4	92	4

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

The gang member data is so low that it is suspicious to the extent that it is outside of what is the normal pattern among young people. Whereas, in other cultural contexts (the US, Europe), the drug use standardisation thesis is spoken of (Parker, Measham and Aldridge, 1998), with this being understood to be a socially widespread practice among young people. This data suggests that, in the region, there is sufficient reproval of drug use that young people with lesser criminal orientation are reluctant to confess their use of drugs. Nicaragua has the lowest rates of drug use compared to the other countries in the region. It would perhaps be possible to speculate that this is because of a smaller penetration of drug dealing in the urban area of Nicaragua, but there is no data that allows this theory to be confirmed.

Bearing in mind that this study does not use a longitudinal design, it is impossible to determine if the participation in crime and the use of

drugs were facilitated or strengthened by the process of joining a gang. However, in the case of drug use, those interviewed were asked if they took drugs before joining the group, for the purpose of assessing the extent to which membership of a gang was a factor which preceded the start of the drug-taking, or vice versa. The results show that the majority of youth gang members start taking drugs before joining gangs (Guatemala: 57%; El Salvador: 44%; Honduras: 77%; Costa Rica: 72%; Nicaragua: 65%). The exception to this pattern is El Salvador, where the amount of young people who start taking drugs before joining the gang is the same (44%) as those that start it after joining it.

Table 7

Type of Drugs Taken By Gang Members
(Percentages)

	Guatemala (n=84)	**El Salvador** (n=67)	**Honduras** (n=92)	**Costa Rica** (n=73)	**Nicaragua** (n=72)
Marijuana	43	30	30	52	25
Glue	2	1	1	0	2
Cocaine and derivatives	26	24	11	19	24
Others	2	0	0	10	2
None	4	30	51	18	8
Don't know/ No response	23	15	7	1	40

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

It is also possible to get an idea of the type of drugs that are used by gang members. Gang members who had acknowledged some form of drug use were asked what type of drugs they are currently using.[30] We see that a significant percentage of individuals in Honduras, followed by El Salvador, state that they are not taking any drug. It is possible that, on mentioning specific drugs in these countries, we may have simply come up against a greater reticence when it came to admitting to drug use. The high level of non-response in Nicaragua should also be noted. In any event, the data appears to suggest that marijuana, as well as cocaine and its by-products, are the drugs preferred by the youth gang members that admit to being drug users.

Daily Activities

Apart from the participation in criminal activities, the gang members spend a fair amount of time carrying out activities that are not very different from those carried out by other young people and adolescents. To a large extent, the gang members are youths first and foremost, and then gang members. As Decker and Van Winkle point out (1996: 117):

> *"Like the majority of adolescents and young adults, gang members…spend a lot of time simply being with their friends – watching TV, drinking beer, sitting and talking, playing, smoking marijuana, looking for girls. The gang members spend their lives (and generally commit their crimes) in groups and, generally, what these groups do is none other than killing time."*

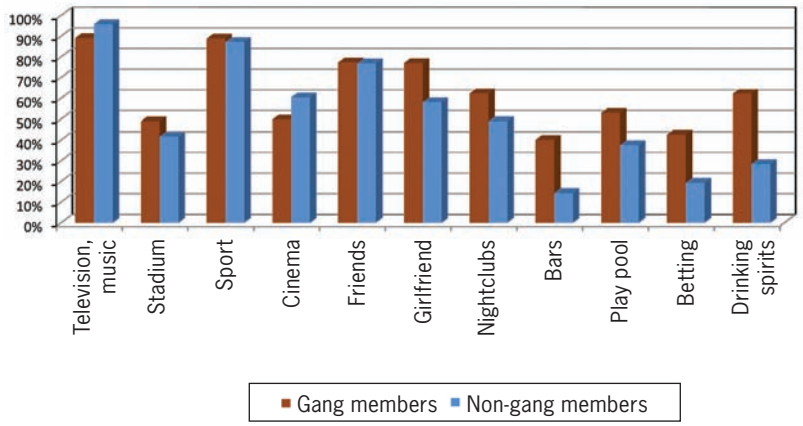
[30] When this question is encoded, only the first answer was taken, so it is not possible to offer data on the use of various substances. The data in table 7 includes the gang members interviewed in prison and it must be borne in mind that it was not always given with the same degree of freedom or that there were restrictions in respect of access. In any event, it may be used as an illustration of the type of drugs that they refer to.

Chart 11 compares the activities carried out by gang members and other young people in their community. The percentages of young people who say that they carry out those activities frequently are compared in this chart. The first thing to highlight is that it can be clearly seen that the percentages are very similar for many of the activities. The second thing is that there is a clear pattern which reflects the fact that they are more prone to taking part in a set of activities perhaps more associated with adult leisure pursuits (going to bars or snack bars, betting games, drinking alcohol, visiting girlfriends, or going dancing). The only activities in which the percentages of young people at risk are greater than those of gang members are going to the cinema and watching television or listening to music.

Graph 11

Leisure Activities of Gang Members and Non Gang Members

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Legal Work and Mara Members

For a long time, criminological literature and the economy have offered a simplistic view of the relationship between employment and crime. This literature considered legal and illegal economic activities as mutually exclusive, while more recent studies tend to offer a more complex view in which socially excluded young people develop survival strategies which involve participation in the legal economy, but also, at the same time, in the informal economy, and also in occasional criminal forms of getting income (Fagan and Freeman, 1999). In that respect, the generalised impression is that mara members do not work and that they are outside of any productive legal activity within the market. Analysing the opinions of the male mara members, male gang members, ex-male mara members and ex-male gang members themselves, as well as the female active and retired mara members, the results are shown in table 8.

Table 8

Participation of Gang Members in Non-criminal Gainful Activities

(Percentages)

Guatemala	Male gang members (n=116) 57	Ex-gang members (n=57) 61	Female gang members (n=25) 44
El Salvador	Male gang members (n=137) 62	Ex-gang members (n=50) 76	Female gang members (n-=30) 60
Honduras	Male gang members (n=124) 26	Ex-gang members (n=100) 40	Female gang members (n=25) 32
Costa Rica	Gang member (n=97) 64		
Nicaragua	Gang member (n=98) 28		

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

It is important to note that the majority of the work that mara and gang members do is of an unqualified nature, and only few of them are categorised as qualified. Included among the work activities are: carpentry, bricklaying, selling clothes, shopwork, working as a mechanic, baker or painter, etc.. In any case, it should also be recalled that when these people are asked about sources of individual and collective income, the most frequently mentioned are theft, drug-selling and collecting protection money from local residents and shopkeepers. In the words of the mara members interviewed:

> *"What funds me is my workshop, I get my earnings from that. I am making four balconies and I'm earning two thousand, five hundred Colones, and I make that in two days. (…) The gang is not the same; there are members who do not work. What do they live on? Naturally they have to steal. (…) The government do not allow us to have our own company. We used to have a disco, (…) and we lost it; the police were all over it – they did not leave us alone. We had a go with a restaurant, and it didn't work out – we sold everything. We've never tried because we are afraid of the government."*
>
> (Mara leader, El Salvador.)

> *"Many of use work, we wash cars; we work to be able to have resources and to have money. Here anyone can be a volunteer, to have a little bit of money, because emergencies arise – you get injured, and things that we have to pay for to get out of it."*
>
> (Mara leader, El Salvador.)

It is also interesting to record that, according to our questionnaire with the ex-mara members, the gang members contribute financially to their families (Guatemala: 45%; El Salvador: 80%; Honduras: 85%). This is a significant piece of data from a criminal policy point of view. The mara behaves even more as its own source of gainful activity for its members. That is a modification of a model which ended up remaining. It is not a fragile structure of ephemeral existence.

There is increasing awareness, academically, regarding the impact that imprisonment has on families and the communities of the criminals.

There are theoretical approaches which suggest that excessively repressive penal policies tend to undermine the social fabric of the neighbourhoods in which the criminals live.

Hagedorn (2002) raised the point that the informal economy has a crucial role in the economic life of marginal communities where the youths have very few alternatives to generate sufficient income. Besides that, a high percentage of the gang members, as will be seen in Chapter IV, are fathers, and contribute to the financial upkeep of their fathers. Their imprisonment obviously has a direct impact which should not be underestimated on their families and communities. Fagan and his colleagues (2003), on the other hand, were able to document, in New York, how the penal policies, by favouring imprisonment and contributing to the deterioration of the social fabric of those neighbourhoods, have helped to worsen the levels of crime therein.

On the other hand, in the case of Costa Rica, it is stressed that the young people interviewed have a greater level of education and have a higher proportion of paid work: these indicators are slightly lower in Nicaragua. In the case of Costa Rica, it is possible that belonging to multiple different groupings, together with the incipient development of the phenomenon studied here, explains this differentiated psychosocial profile. In Nicaragua, it is added that it is possible that the higher levels of community organisation have a neutralising effect for the most vulnerable young people.

Economic and Criminal Activities of the Gangs:

Violence Between Gangs and the Conflicts in Defending Territories

Since Thrasher's pioneering study, the idea of conflict between groups has been associated with the study of gangs. It is this conflict which in some way cements the group, gives it meaning and reinforces its cohesion. Almost all studies on gangs highlight the central role of violence and force in gang culture. In the case of Vigil (1998), this is presented more often as a conflict of force, in the form of omnipresent threat. As Horowitz (1983) points out, a gang member has to be prepared to respond to violence at any time and, therefore, to strengthen his identity based on force.

Decker and Van Winkle (1996), and in the same way Mateu-Gelabert (2004, 2003), developed an explanation of the gangs which takes the role of this threat or force in question. For these authors, force – threat of physical violence – contributes to the birth and reinforcement of the gangs on various levels:

- In many neighbourhoods, the gangs are formed as a defence mechanism and protection against outside groups, whether they be other gangs, the actions of the police or other ethnic or immigrant groups.
- Force, whether this perception is a reality or imaginary, increases the level of solidarity of the gangs.
- For Klein (1971), the internal cohesion of the gangs grows in proportion to the perception of the threat that contrary gangs represent.
- The retaliatory nature of the gangs' violence also helps to strengthen them. Each new violent incident leads to another one, expanding the circle of individuals affected, to a continuous escalation of arms and to the perception that if you are not with a gang you are in an unprotected position. Many young people join already established gangs as a form of guaranteeing their personal safety, although, periodically, being a member of one of these groups increases the risk of becoming a victim of violence.

- This process, which leads young people to develop an image of "hard types", with their tattoos, stories of war and violence, means that they are perceived as a threat by society, which seeks to distance itself from them, closing doors on them for their rehabilitation and social reintegration, and thereby helping to perpetuate the problem.
- The social rejection of gang members makes it difficult for them to establish relations and carry out more conventional activities that would facilitate them leaving the gangs.

In their study of gang members in the city of San Luis (US), Decker and Van Winkle (1996) observed how violence plays a central role in rhetoric on protection against real or imaginary threats and on revenge for wounds and injuries committed or imagined against them. Some of these issues are reflected in the evidence gathered by our in-depth interviews:

> *"(…) the other gang wanted to jump on me forcibly and, of course, it was something that I didn't like about them. Because, (…) I was truly nothing. (…) Then the dudes threw me around and hit me, (…) I didn't want to be in that gang. Then I decided, at that moment, to bump off the other gang, which was the 18 gang. Why? To get revenge for what they did."*
>
> (Mara leader, El Salvador.)

In Central America, especially in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the origin of much of the antagonism between the maras and gangs is the division between two large groups, the Mara Salvatrucha and the Pandilla 18. As a mara leader in El Salvador stated:

> *"It's a war, brother."*

Generally these conflicts appear to be related to disputes on territory and situations of revenge:[31]

> *"(…) here we see them killing a friend of ours, someone that perhaps all of us here are friends of, (…). And you realise that they were from that neighbourhood over there, you hear it said that they are 18 (…), and you hear it said from here that they're starting to recruit people and then they'll give themselves a name. So hatred comes out of that because they are losing people from their neighbourhood; it's neighbourhood rivalry and power."*
>
> (Ex-mara member, Honduras.)

> *"The territory is big (…) it may be that it is taken by a gang, and that gang won't let another gang come in. When another gang comes in, they kill them along with the others."*
>
> (Ex-mara leader, Honduras.)

> *"The other gang killed him (his cousin). This had a great impact on me. (…) My aunt, out of disappointment, was going to Tijuana. When she was going to Tijuana, she was in her car and a drunk dude came along in a Toyota 4x4 and hit*

[31] In his participating observational study in Nicaragua, Rodgers (2006: 276) observes: "wars" between gangs in which items ranging from stones to grenades and AK-47 rifles are used, sometimes with fatal consequences: "Although these wars between gangs initially seemed to be highly chaotic, they showed very regular patterns, almost to the point of being ritualized. Gang members organised themselves into "companies" and operated strategically. Generally there was a "reserve force", and although the weapons were individually owned, each gang member was distributed among the different "companies" with the aim of balancing up the firearms, except for when an especially powerful "attack squad" was needed for a strategic purpose. The conflicts centred around attacking or protecting a neighbourhood, and the fight is normally focused specifically on damaging or limiting the damage, to both the community infrastructure and its inhabitants, and also symbolically injuring or killing important gang members (their reputation was based on having killed a certain number of persons or on having had some distinguished physical characteristic or a particular mode of behaviour, for example)".

her. (...) She was disabled for the rest of her life. She has to go around in a wheelchair. Because of all this I am still devoted to her, because my mum was taken off to prison… I felt that I had to get revenge for that. And I got revenge for it."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

"I always hated them, because there were a lot of friends from when I was not a mara member, they had killed them, those that I got on with. That's why I also hated them, I never wanted to change to another one."

(Ex-mara member, Honduras.)

"But if you look there, there is someone from the 18 gang there and he is crossed out, and the Mara Salvatrucha gang is there as well, clad or drawn on the wall; this means that there are two neighbourhoods there and there are fights between them. (…) I know a friend who is from one clique from here in area 12 (…) he says that that kid (…) grabbed a couple of grenades and went off to throw them. The dudes were gathered in a house and there were like eight of them. (…) And when they those from the Mara Salvatrucha saw that they were harder, they left right away, (…) the homis already monopolised all of that territory."

(Ex-mara leader, Pandilla 18 gang, Guatemala.)

These disputes are linked to the reproduction of a rhetoric which tends to diminish the adversary and deprive him of his human qualities. Therefore, those from Pandilla 18 gang tell us:

"The Mara Salvatrucha gang members were there, but there were quite a few of them. (…) They'd go on the minibuses from four in the morning to nine o'clock at night to steal from the same people of the district (…) they'd paint on all the walls, they'd get inside the houses, get the people out of their houses (…) for them, to take possession of the houses… The Mara Salvatrucha gang members. (…) They kill each other, rape each other, have sex with each other, leave the women, rape their mothers. (…) They put anyone in their gang. From the street, all that vermin. (…) We are more selective."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

While the Mara Salvatrucha gang tells us:

"Look, the other mara pesters anyone and we don't, unless we're provoked."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

The reproduction of the culture of violence is perhaps understood even better in Central America, if we take into account the high level of violence that has historically existed in the region. It could be argued that this violent past (illegal armed groups, death squads, army and police, special antisubversive bodies) resulted in patterns of behaviour and habits that facilitate the acceptance of, the lack of reaction to and even being accustomed to violence. With all of this background, these young people have internalised and incorporated violence into their lives as a means of survival, or to carry out their activities as a gang. This last comment has greater relevance since violence does not seem to be an ending in itself; it is a resource and a means for defining the power and control of the action. All of the above in accordance with organisational interests and aims.

Despite the importance of violence for understanding the maras and gangs and their members, we cannot stereotypically brand mara members and gang members as fiendish individuals who enjoy carrying out violent acts. Generally, the most common attitude to violence is fatalism,

and, when you display this, you are trying to maintain an identity and not be on bad terms with the group:

"You sometimes see nervousness in your mates, in some cases, as a charge of conscience, like, in some cases. (…) nervousness, adrenaline, things like that, after any violent act. Personally, I am always afraid, the fact that I could not kill was always going to have consequences for me. And it wasn't so much the fact that I was going to end up in jail, no, but the fact that the same could happen to you, and you always react, the only thing is that you don't state it, I mean, suddenly yes, I don't know, it was OK, and perhaps, at some time, you boast about what you could have done."

(Ex-mara leader, Guatemala.)

"I don't feel proud of what I did either. But when I did it, I was afraid, I felt stupid, because I knew the aggro that I had got myself into, you know? You always feel afraid, until you feel sorry, but like you have to do it."

(Mara leader, Guatemala.)

Violence, on the other hand, is something for which the mara or gang member has to be ready for at any time, and which represents a constant threat.[32]

"Getting through the day is quite difficult, because you have to be watching your backs, looking after your friends. You can't be asleep – you can't sleep at night either, because you will be putting the life of your mate at risk. It is quite difficult spending a day in the mara, because I am going to sleep one or two hours and one person has to stay awake. I couldn't sleep more than two hours in 24 hours, so as to avoid all sorts of things. We used to live keeping an eye out for tings."

(Ex-mara member, Honduras.)

"When I went to school as a cheeky lad, I could walk in the street. I didn't have to worry about anyone, (…). The police didn't look at me. (…) I was free. I could do what I wanted. When I went into the gang, this was no longer so. The police used to hound me. Like in school, I highlighted the fact that I belonged to the gang. There were rival gangs there. Then I wasn't safe any longer, walking in the street. I went round with the feeling that they could hit me from any side."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

"The price of violence is clear for mara or gang members – death: they are dead, they died for our gang, they died fighting."

(Ex-mara leader, Guatemala.)

It is interesting to record how the mara or gang members frequently present their actions as a defence of the neighbourhood, for which they collect protection money, as will be seen further on.

"(The maras are)[33] a place and a band of persons, youths who protect the neighbourhood, but people do not take it they are going to protect. But there are the maras that protect the other young people… You have your family in that neighbourhood, so you have to protect that neighbourhood. And the other mara members,

---

[32] As Rodgers (2006) points out in his study of a Nicaraguan gang: "Living in the shadow of death" meant using specific patterns of behaviour in battle, including confronting and deliberately exposing oneself to danger with the aim of provoking the enemy, taking risks and showing bravery, irrespective of the possibilities and consequences, challenging death to do its best. This meant not asking questions or calculating the possibilities, but simply carrying on and acting in a cheerful and exuberant manner, with style.

[33] Clarification of the authors.

who are not from that mara, used to come to be a nuisance, to kill those who are nothing, to bother people (…). You do not think that perhaps our neighbourhood is going there as well and is going to do the same, but you do not notice that; you notice the errors that the others are committing."

(Ex-mara member, Honduras.)

"Looking after people, looking after the area, looking after the civilians. Because that's what we're doing. We're looking after our area…we're looking after our jomboys, looking after the civilians. Why? Because we are not the type of people to annoy civilians."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

"We're looking after the district, so that they are not pestered, but people do not understand that. We are going to steal, but outside of the district; here, in the district out of choice, we don't touch anyone, we go outside."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

The notion that the mara or gang provides a social service to the community is ever present in gang members' rhetoric. Although mara or gang members, through their participation in illegal markets, contribute to the economic life of the community, this does not mean that this relationship with the community is exempt from conflicts and problems. In fact, it is not a symmetrical relationship and, as the mara or gang becomes institutionalised, either by the persistence of the factors which made them start or by the appearance of other contributory factors, it can help to increase the degree of violence as well as its penetration in community life.

The studies of Moore (1991), in Los Angeles, suggested that as the economic conditions in marginal neighbourhoods worsened, in recent decades, and these gangs became institutionalised in these neighbourhoods, their degree of violence also increased. Some testimonies collected by the in-depth interviews seem to point to this trend:

"Before, we only got involved in looking after the people of the district, but from there we developed and were already thinking of greater things. We didn't think about small things. Assaults, thefts, rapes, killings – all bad things that exist in the world. Suddenly, that's why I say to you, the environment, everything changed, because the people no longer put up with much pressure from the gangs. The gangs did not put up with much pressure from the corrupt police. Then many people got together and said, 'well we're no longer paying this' (…). It was never a voluntary thing, but at least it wasn't a violent thing, so, (…) that started to change, from about three years ago. Crimes, assassinations, assaults and kidnappings started to happen. But all of that has a lot to do with drug trafficking. I mean, because drug trafficking started to happen a lot in the gangs, I mean, it found in it the perfect soldier for drug trafficking, not only for using drugs but also for distributing them, the drug trafficker knows that the gangs have a lot of territory, and that they would distribute more."

(Ex-mara leader, Honduras.)

What there is no doubt about is that there is a high degree of violent victimisation in these communities. When the residents of these areas are asked if they have been directly affected by mara or gang members, the percentages are high (Guatemala: 23%; El Salvador: 15%; Honduras: 33%; Nicaragua: 38%; Costa Rica: 30%). Moreover, it is a victimisation which is, if we limit ourselves to the data from the questionnaire, of a fundamentally violent nature, as can be seen in table 9.

In any case, the observation made by Klein and Maxson (2006: 86) serves as a reminder on these issues. Regarding the above, the authors refer to the fact that the criminal activities of the gang members are diverse.

"Emphasising the violence promotes the incorrect stereotype that gang members are criminals who specialise in violence. Gang members commit many violent acts, but they also commit a lot of other crimes."

Table 9

Attacks Received by Local Residents Caused by Gang Members

(Percentages)

	Guatemala (N=27)	**El Salvador** (N=17)	**Honduras** (N=36)	**Nicaragua** (N=59)	**Costa Rica** (N=37)
Assault	30	24	56	31	49
Beating-ups	—	—	—	27	27
Threats	63	71	31	—	—
Murder and attempted murder	4	—	14	—	—
Damage to property	—	—	—	37	11
Others	—	—	—	5	14
Don't know/ No response	4	6	—	—	—

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

The Extorsion of the Local Population as a Source of Income

One of the most common forms of funding the maras and gangs is the collection of protection services and "taxes" from local residents and shopkeepers, as is shown by the following quote:

"Sometimes you would arrive at the shop and say to him, look…because that district was very dangerous like that. Sometimes they would attack and things like that; they would steal chains from people. So we would say to them, 'Look, you're going to give us so much money, like 50 quetzals a week and we'll guarantee that no one will rob you and that nothing will happen to you.' And that's how it was. And so even the people of our community didn't agree with what we were, but nor did they see us as youngsters who had gone off the rails… We didn't let people from outside the district come in, since if anyone that was from there was committing an assault, we dealt with him."

(Ex-mara leader, Guatemala.)

In the economic survey, questions were asked about the problem of extortion in general, in the districts or neighbourhoods where the local residents or shopkeepers live, and also we tried to explore whether those interviewed have to pay protection money to the maras or gangs. According to the data from that survey, the majority of local residents and shopkeepers state that payment takes place in their districts or neighbourhoods (the average for the three countries is 74% for local residents and 77% for shopkeepers). The application of the collection or "tax" is a widely known practice in the community. Nevertheless, the collection frequencies are different; the most common frequency is weekly and daily, as the informants, and even the victims of this situation, said. Table 10 illustrates this.

Table 10

Frequency of "Tax" Collection from Local Residents and Shopkeepers
(Percentages)

Frequency	Guatemala (n=200)	El Salvador (n=208)	Honduras (n=278)
Daily	31	34	46
Weekly	38	21	27
Fortnightly	3.4	6	1
Monthly	10	15	1
Occasionally	9	13.5	17

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

55% of answers are concentrated on daily frequency and 73% on weekly. "When" and "how much is collected" will be analysed from the two categories of informants, which were used: the local residents and the shopkeepers of the neighbourhood or district (tables 11 and 12).[34]

Table 11

Frequency and Amount of the "Tax" Payment, According to Local Residents
(Dollars)

Frequency	Guatemala (n=100)	El Salvador (n=100)	Honduras (n=137)
Daily	2.5	4	2.75
Weekly	10	15	9

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Table 12

Frequency and Amount of the "Tax" Payment, According to Shopkeepers

Frequency	Guatemala (n=100)	El Salvador (n=108)	Honduras (n=141)
Daily	8	10	5
Weekly	20	22	11
Monthly	30	31	15
Occasionally	12	20	15

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

In the case of the shopkeepers, there is greater clarity on the payment according to the four categories. Obviously, it is not possible to obtain accuracy in the data handled by the person interviewed, since the amounts tend to change, as do the periods. These contributions must not be interpreted as exact figures. What is important, from an analysis such as this, is that certain trends can be determined, which show that there are funding models and systems.

As was pointed out, the above data give an idea on the perceptions that the local residents and shopkeepers of these areas have regarding the problem of extortion, which is a different issue from the payment that

[34] It is important to point out that the tariffs vary depending on the country and they move between a maximum and minimum range. The results given here come from the calculation of the average over all opinions, eliminating extreme or distorted data. For example, when asking about daily tariffs, if one of more of those interviewed stated $ 100 or more dollars, this figure is totally taken out of the average of opinions, as it skews the average of the opinions given. It may be that this amount or other similar amounts are made, but they are not the norm in the collection practice.

they make for protection. The main problem of studying this subject matter is the fear of the population of disclosing data that is considered confidential. With the businessman and the local resident we had to deal with the subject matter in a climate of confidence and discretion. Even then, dodging the question or rejection was one of the main difficulties that we had to face. As was stated previously, this is a result of the "crossed protection" which exists between citizens and traders and mara and gang members. The relationship between the mara or gang member and the local resident is influenced by fear and the advisability of not advising what they know.

The estimated number of local residents and shopkeepers who have had to pay the groups gives us an idea of the extent of the phenomenon and its implications in the social and economic scenarios of each country and, therefore, of the region. Table 13 shows that there are a greater number of local residents who acknowledge having paid the maras or gangs compared with shopkeepers. It is very possible that this data is underestimated. It is not easy to accept the fact that you have been the victim of extortion or obliged to pay for "services" not provided or requested. It is easier to give your opinion in respect of others, than in respect of yourself on these matters. As the shopkeeper or businessman is a figure of the community with a higher status than the common status of the citizen, he tends to lower or diminish his emotional weight by denying having been a victim. This is a piece of information which frequently appears with comments similar to the interviews carried out in this population.

For the local residents who say that they have paid, the daily amount is included in table 14.

For the shopkeepers who say that they have paid, the daily amount is included in table 15.

Tables 13, 14 and 15 give a good indication of the population, and an approximate figure of the amounts that are paid to the maras and gangs. The high percentage of local residents who say that they don't know or prefer not to answer the question about whether they have had to pay is quite striking; so it might seem that this is due to dodging the question and not necessarily a real ignorance on the issue. There is perhaps concealment, and therefore it may be expected that the percentage may be higher.

The data collected here tends to vary for a number of factors, such as acts of repression and control, communal relations and policies, rivalries between different groups, negotiations with the police, economic situation of the neighbourhood and others. However, table 19 expresses a statement of the situation in segments of population and of relative normality of the collection process.

Table 13

Local Residents and Shopkeepers who have had to Pay the Mara or Gang
(Percentages)

Country/Informant (n)	Yes	No	Don't know/ No response
Guatemala			
Shopkeepers (n=100)	19	80	1
Local residents (n=100)	28	24	48
El Salvador			
Shopkeepers (n=108)	17	80	3
Local residents (n=100)	34	12	54
Honduras			
Shopkeepers (n=141)	19	80	1
Local residents (n=137)	31	38	31

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Table 14

Amount of "Tax" Paid by Local Residents
(Dollars)

Country	Amount
Guatemala (n=87)	5–2.5
El Salvador (n=60)	8–3
Honduras (n=107)	6–2

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Table 15

Amount of "Tax" Paid by Local Residents
(Dollars)

Country	Amount
Guatemala (n=19)	8.5–5
El Salvador (n=18)	7–4
Honduras (n=27)	8–4

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Table 16

Shopkeepers who say that a Specific Amount of Time has Passed Since the Payment of "Tax" Started
(Percentages)

Frequency	Guatemala (n=89)	El Salvador (n=60)	Honduras (n=86)
Less than one year	13.5	40	9.5
From one to two years	42	13	28
Three years	15	8	14
Four to five years	17	7	27
More than five years	17	12	7.5
Don't know/ No response	8	21	14

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Table 17

Local Residents who say that a Specific Amount of Time has Passed Since the Payment of "Tax" Started

(Percentages)

Frequency	Guatemala (n=77)	El Salvador (n=71)	Honduras (n=91)
Less than one year	27.5	25	10
From one to two years	9	45	28
Three years	10	10	18
Four to five years	23	6	15
More than five years	10	7	7
Don't know/ No response	20	7	22

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

In addition, payment to the maras and gangs is a process which has developed more strongly in the past five years. This is what is shown by the two populations studied, just as the testimonies of the informants analysed at the start of the chapter mentioned.

The population of Guatemala sees it as a more recent process; for El Salvador and Honduras the process started longer ago.

Linked to this collective memory, is the coincidence to a certain extent that such practices are common and systematic in daily life or recent years, although some informants talk of processes of this sort existing for eight and even 15 years. Despite this, they state that the change and a greater organisational development of these processes is much more recent.

To what extent has the collection of tax and security money grown or reduced? According to those interviewed, from both populations, there is a consensus that the payments have not reduced as far as the amount is concerned. There is a general opinion that the amount has increased. A lower number of those interviewed state that it has stayed the same. The trends, per type of population, are as follows:

- Shopkeepers who state that they are paying the same: Guatemala 5%; El Salvador 4.7%; Honduras 9%. Average of those who state that the payment has increased: 93.7%.
- Local residents who state that they are paying the same: Guatemala 7%; El Salvador 12%; Honduras 10%. Average of those who state that the payment has increased: 90.3%.

Out of the whole population that stated that the maras and gangs have varied the amount of the payments in the last three or four years, they were asked whether they remembered how much they used to pay two, three or four years ago, compared to what they are currently paying. Combining what they had to pay and what is said in the community, and calculating the average of what is reported on payments in the past with the average of payments at the moment, the result per type of population is shown in table 18.

Table 18

Changes in Tax Payment, According to Shopkeepers*

(Dollars and percentage variation)

	What they paid	What they pay now	Increase (%)
Guatemala	18	29	61
El Salvador	20	33	65
Honduras	10	15	50

(*) Calculated over one month.

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

This data is reported on the basis of an average week, and it varies a little from other data stated. The reason is that, for this category, we were interested in measuring the approximate percentage change. The population interviewed tends to lean towards two similar, or estimated, figures. This has been a comment which we stated previously.

Table 19

Changes in Tax Amount, According to Local Residents*

(Dollars and percentage variation)

	What they paid ($)	What they pay now ($)	Increase (%)
Guatemala	5	9	80
El Salvador	8	12	50
Honduras	4	8	50

(*) Calculated over one month.

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

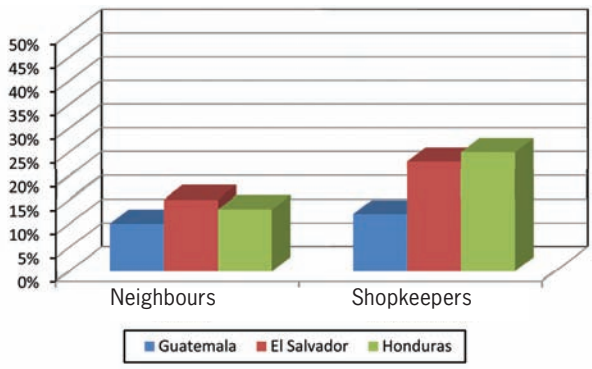
It is interesting that the local residents, in significant percentages, state that these payments are made by legal means, such as bank accounts (Guatemala: 69%; El Salvador: 48%; Honduras: 43%). In addition, both local residents and shopkeepers advise that one of the means used to collect the "tax" is the use of cheques (see chart 12).

Graph 12

Payment of "Tax" Via Cheque, According to Residents and Shopkeepers

(Percentages)

Note: The "N" values upon which the percentages were calculated are as follows: Residents: Guatemala, 30; El Salvador, 68 and Honduras, 137. For shopkeepers: Guatemala, 137; El Salvador, 79 and Honduras, 118.



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Another way of analysing the issue of the financial volume of the extortion is interviewing, not its victims, but the extorters. The estimate of the amount of money that a clique can collect by way of "tax" per country, whether daily or weekly, is shown in table 20.

Table 20

Total "Tax" Collected per day and per Week, According to Ex-gang Member Informants
(Dollars)

Frequency	Guatemala (n=40)	El Salvador (n=40)	Honduras (n=41)
Daily	135	160	140
Weekly	975	1250	925

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

This information is only given by ex-mara members. With regard to the amount of money with which the clique or the individual is left, the trend, per country, can be seen in table 21.

Table 21

Proportion of Collected "Tax" that Remains With Clique, According to Ex-gang Members
(Percentages)

Range	Guatemala (n=40)	El Salvador (n=40)	Honduras (n=41)
10%–30%	16	7.5	5
35%–50%	20	10.5	7.5
70%–90%	12	5	15
100%	38	60	59

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Other opinions are centred around expressions like "what is necessary", "varied", "it depends on what is collected", and a minimum number who do not know the information. Given that the same amount is not always collected, and the margins of freedom vary from one clique to another, it can be stated that the majority of the income is managed initially in the same group, and this could vary between 100% and 50%, or a little less, and that the monies are handled by an already established manager. Therefore, regarding the person(s) who manage(s) or administer(s) the money coming under this heading, we have: Guatemala: 92% stated the leader; El Salvador: 93% stated the leader or spokesman; Honduras: 93% stated the leader or cashier.

Links with Drug Trafficking ond Organised Crime

The in-depth interviews and the discussion groups with key informants (representatives from the security sector, NGO, criminal justice etc.) suggest that the maras and gangs, particularly in countries such as El Salvador, control drug dealing with the support of a system of logistics and armed protection.

> *"(…) using a highly effective organisation system. They take part from children (campaigns) to those that control sales."*
>
> (Key informant, El Salvador.)

Summarising, in the organisation the levels are: the "campaigns", the distributors or sellers and the security. Above these are the leaders that are free and the leaders in prison, and then other levels and interests. On the development of their drug trafficking and drug dealing actions: "In addition to the logistics, they have bullet-proof vests, high-calibre weapons and an information and control network." Another distinctive trait to be highlighted of what goes on in El Salvador is the inclusion of the "street kids" in their activities:

> *"They have cleaned the city of glue sniffers, cleaned and organised them, improved their standard of life and are their first line of action."*
>
> (Key informant from El Salvador and focus group.)

The participation of the maras and gangs in drug dealing is not exclusive to El Salvador, although it is also detected in Guatemala and Honduras. Some informants state that in Honduras, at this level, the maras and gangs do not have the same business development capacity as in Guatemala and El Salvador. The interviews with mara members and ex-mara members certainly acknowledge an involvement in drug dealing and its potential for profit. As an ex-mara member in Honduras pointed out "drugs allow us to get arms to fight with."

It should be stressed that the relationship between drug dealing and gangs is an issue that has been widely discussed by previous studies on the matter in other areas. Studies carried out in the US suggest that although many gang members sell drugs (except for those called "special gangs" (Klein and Maxson, 2006)), they do so individually and not as an organised activity of the gangs. In the light of the testimonies of our key informants, it seems that some of these gangs in the region are indeed involved in drug dealing in a form organised by a clique, which would not exclude the fact that there may also be a lot of drug dealing carried out by unorganised gang members.

It is pointed out, by the authorities, that the relationship between the maras and gangs and the drug dealing networks has been intensifying rapidly and constantly, and is growing as a result of the withdrawal of the State and political, economic and social corruption. Practically all key informants acknowledge that "there are dealings with drugs and organised crime" in the maras or gangs. Some even suggest that, in countries such as El Salvador, the distribution of drugs is changing the control of trafficking and competition with the cartels, although it should be stressed that this is not something confirmed in our interviews with the mara and gang members. In this sense, there are also key informants who state that "little or nothing is known about their negotiations in the area of crime and drugs".

This relationship between organised crime, drug trafficking and the maras or gangs would be given in others areas of the region. For example, informants who belong to the security sector of Guatemala and Honduras tend to conceive the maras or gangs as "the workforce of organised crime". For the transnational networks of organised crime, the benefits of having the support of the maras and gangs could be summarised as: the knowledge and control of the territory where they operate, their efficiency in distribution and the limited damage that people leaving cause them ("they are quickly replaced"). In Honduras, in particular, some informants stress the links between the maras and gangs and organised crime on issues relating to kidnappings, extortion and contract killings.

This relationship between the violent groups and organised crime is possibly more informal and unorganised than what can sometimes be

perceived from reading the social media. In the words of an ex-mara leader in Guatemala who asked who benefited from the activities of the maras and gangs:

> *"People like politicians and drug traffickers. Well, on the one hand, the politicians, because they are greatly linked with drug trafficking. So they are like distractors. And it is a part of society which society itself is not interested in. I mean that it happens, but not with them. So, I think that politics and drug trafficking go hand in hand, and they are not interested in the fact that this group disappears, because they are distractors. On the other hand, they are tools of work for them, to carry out many things. Because, as I say, they have found them to be the perfect soldiers, killing people, turning to hitman gangs, things like that."*
>
> (Ex-mara leader, Guatemala.)

The data from the qualitative interviews and discussion groups with key informants can be supplemented by the data from the economic survey of local residents and shopkeepers from areas of gangs. In these populations there is the perception of a close link between these groups, organised crime and drug trafficking. Table 22 illustrates the perception of the populations studied expressed in terms of "contracts" for carrying out special jobs, specific to organised crime.

Table 22

Local Residents and Shopkeepers who say that Gang Members are Hired for Special Jobs by Organised Crime and Drug Traffickers

(Percentages)

Country/Informant (n)	They are hired	They are not hired
Guatemala		
Local residents (n=100)	88	8
Shopkeepers (n=100)	72	19
El Salvador		
Local residents (n=100)	79	16
Shopkeepers (n=108)	66	21
Honduras		
Local residents (n=136)	78	13
Shopkeepers (n=141)	78	14

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires

Table 23

Local Residents and Shopkeepers who say that Gang Members are Hired for Special Jobs, According to the Type of Crime

(Percentages)

	Guatemala		El Salvador		Honduras	
Activity	Neighbours (n=131)	Shopkeepers (n=90)	Neighbours (n=126)	Shopkeepers (n=110)	Neighbours (n=138)	Shopkeepers (n=126)
Contract killing	40	51	48	37	59	64
Sale and distribution of drugs	16	18	18	16	20	17
Kidnappings and extortion	28	9	11	24	10	10
Assault or theft	14	7	12	16	7	7
Others	2	11	6	5	2	1
Don't know/No response	1	4	2	3	1	2

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

For all populations analysed, the trend is very consistent in linking mara and gang members to organised crime and drug trafficking. The shopkeepers are those who express greater opinions of there being no link between them. Nonetheless, this position, which varies between 25% and 14% between the three countries, does not affect the significant nature of those who do link these phenomena.

Hiring for special jobs is starting to take on certain activities of greater commitment. The investigation team in Honduras extended the financial questionnaire to ex-mara members, and included similar questions in this respect. According to those, 93% of the ex-Honduran gang members acknowledged that organised crime or drug trafficking hires mara and gang members to carry out special missions, in particular contract killing (34%), the sale of drugs (17%) and revenge for debts (5%). There is a significant percentage of ex-gang members who do not answer the question (36%) about the type of missions, which perhaps indicates the taboo nature of the subject matter. These same Honduran mara and gang members state that the maras and gangs receive support or advice from other organised groups, with this being understood to be drug traffickers (35%) or gangsters (10%), although here, again, the modal response is "don't know" or there is no response (44%). What they understand by support or advice is impossible to specify with this item of data: Sale of drugs? Other type of support? In any event, this reflects the need to carry out studies that will go into this issue more deeply.

On the other hand, although organised crime is attributed to these contracts, that is not always the case. One ex-mara leader, in Guatemala, points out the benefits that society gets from the maras and gangs:

> *"Ordinary people, from normal society (benefit) because, sometimes, if someone has any problem, and know any gang member and says to him, 'Look, how much would you want to kill so-and-so?' right, if the gang member wants to do it, he does it, doesn't he, and he gets paid for it. (…) There are people who are against them, but who have also used them. And society doesn't realise all this… There, in (name of neighbourhood), a group (…) of shopkeepers contracted another group of youngsters to kill all of the gang members and was paying them 5,000 quetzals for each gang member killed. So society itself generates its own violence, i.e., it is arming others to kill other people."*
>
> (Ex-mara leader, Guatemala.)

As far as drug trafficking is concerned, the local residents and shopkeepers state that it is a significant activity. The comparative data per country appears in table 24.

Table 24

Local Residents and Shopkeepers who say that the Gang Members Sell Drugs
(Percentages)

Country/Informant (n)	Yes	No	Don't know/ No response
Guatemala			
Local residents (n=100)	88	11	1
Shopkeepers (n=100)	73	19	8
El Salvador			
Local residents (n=100)	87	9	4
Shopkeepers (n=108)	77	20	3
Honduras			
Local residents (n=137)	86	7	7
Shopkeepers (n=141)	87	11	3

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Practically all of the in-depth interviews carried out with mara and gang members highlight drug dealing as an activity that generates income for gang members.

"The money comes from drugs."

(Ex-mara leader, Honduras.)

This is a reality that puts us face to face with more complex models than those expressed in daily communications or in official reports. It is possible to imagine that, based on the various items of data, the organisation goes beyond the street and the jail, and that there are structures of a higher organisational level. In Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the topic of drug trafficking is not an alien one. Therefore, nor should the concern about the possibility that juvenile groupings, such as those considered here, may be brought into the servicing, initially, of drug dealing and then, as has happened in the rest of Central America, of more complex criminal activities, be considered an alien topic.

Chapter IV
Risk Factors and Perceptions on the Causes of the Phenomenon of the Gang Member and Identities

Introduction

Both the Anglo-Saxon and Central American studies explain the origin of the gangs alluding to macroeconomic and social factors (social marginalisation, and the lack of social capital and collective efficiency). Nonetheless, the origin or emergence of the gangs says little about the motivations of certain young people for joining them. Many studies suggest that only a minority of young people within these marginal communities join the gangs.

What differentiates the young people who join the maras and gangs from those who do not? We should differentiate this question from why the gangs emerge and develop.

There is a growing number of investigations that use a greater methodological sophistication, particularly the use of longitudinal designs, to try to understand what are the factors that differentiate the young people who join the gangs from those who do not. Generally, these risk factors are grouped into a set of categories, including those of an "individual nature" (peculiarities of the psychological nature of these individuals) and those of a "family nature" (those associated with the school context, those linked to the type of friendships that they have and to the neighbourhood or district in which they live). Managers of intervention programmes, interested in secondary prevention efforts in risk populations, should use the information on those stronger risk factors which have greater empirical support, to guarantee that their actions are directed at the young people who need them most (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

A systematic review of recent Anglo-Saxon studies, highlights having criminal friends, having shown problematical behaviour and having suffered a series of negative events during one's infancy as significant risk factors for joining gangs. In the same way, the empirical investigation shows having favourable attitudes to breaking the law, the lack of parental control and supervision, as well as attachment to problematical friends (Klein and Maxson, 2006).

Through the studies carried out up until now, in the Central American region, what has been learned about risk factors for joining gangs? Some quantitative studies conducted try to assess how frequently some variables considered as risk factors are present in gang members. Nonetheless insofar as comparison groups made up of young people who are not gang members are not used, it cannot be assessed whether the inci-

dence of these variables in the group of gang members is particularly high or not. The only way of assessing if these variables flag up a difference between gang members and non-gang members is by including young non-gang members in the study.

The results of the analyses are shown in the next two sections, first bivariately for men and then for the women. For reasons of statistical solidity, these analyses are shown cumulatively.

Bivariate Analysis Relating to Risk Factors in Men

There are significant age differences between the young male mara or gang members (average: 21.03, mid-age: 20) and the young men who are not gang members in the same communities (average: 19.52, mid-age: 19).

Table 25, with data on the bivariate analysis of a set of socio-democratic variables and the family environment of those surveyed, shows significant differences between male gang members and young men at risk. Many of these factors are the same as those identified by other studies conducted in the region, in North America and Europe.

Table 25

Risk Factors for Young Men Joining the Maras or Gangs

(Percentages)

	Male gang members	Young men at risk
Marital status		
Single	65	83
Married	5	8
Living together	30	9
You do have children	42	17
Education		
(reached year six of primary school)	65	90
You do currently attend an educational centre	26	46
Your father does know how to read	91	97
Who do you currently live with?		
Family	70	90
Others	30	10
Bad memories of infancy	30	13
Violent family environment	45	25
Family abandonment	42	21
Death in the family	34	20
There is abuse in the family	28	11
You have a relative or friend in gangs	34	13
You always meet up with your friends as an activity	71	48

Note: All of the chi-squared differences are significant. To check if the individuals currently go to an educational centre and to find out who they live with, the male gang members who were interviewed in a prison were excluded from the analyses.

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

With regard to marital status, young male mara and gang members are more inclined to be living together than the young men at risk, while the latter are more inclined, than the young male mara and gang members, to be married or single. Despite a lower probability of being married, young male mara and gang members are more inclined to have children.

On the other hand, young male mara and gang members are less inclined to still be attending an educational centre. All of these are indicators of a possible swift transit to "adult life", in the sense that the adoption of a set of roles specific to an adult (father, participation in a relationship as a partner) is accelerated, and there is a quicker abandonment of roles specific to their age (less links with school or college). This partly outlines the male mara and gang members as young men and adolescents who are prematurely losing their youth, accelerating the adoption of adult roles for those that are not yet prepared for them.

Another clearly visible factor is that the family environment of the male mara and gang members is harder than the one that the young men at risk come from. Young male mara and gang members more frequently advise of a violent family background, characterised by abandonment, abuse and the violent death of a relative. It is not surprising, therefore, that these young men are more inclined to have bad memories of their infancy and, a greater percentage of them has stopped living with their original family. Studies in other areas have suggested that a violent family environment can lead to greater peer group dependence and, insofar as this group may have antisocial tendencies, it can contribute to the start and cementing of criminal careers as far as repetition and professionalisation of crime as a way of life is concerned. In this respect, it is significant that a much higher percentage of male mara and gang members, compared with the young men at risk, quote meeting up with their friends as an activity that they always carry out and that, again, a much higher percentage of male mara and gang members than young men at risk state that they have relations or friends in the maras and gangs.

It must be stressed that the influence of the peer group is one of the risk factors for which there is more solid support (Klein and Maxson, 2006). As Vigil points out (2002: 2):

> *"When socialisation in the street replaces the socialisation offered by conventional carers, this becomes a key factor for the development not only of different attachment links, but also different aspirations and aims, levels and intensity of participation in the gangs and systems of values. With whom you associate, to what you aspire, how you spend your time, and why you have a specific system of values are all things that are strongly connected in street culture."*

A risk factor means that the incidence of a specific characteristic in male mara or gang members is greater than in the reference group – males who do not belong to a gang. This incidence does not exclude the fact that the risk factor may be shared only by a minority of male mara and gang members. For example, it was previously noted that a greater percentage of male gang members (30%) than males not belonging to a gang (13%) had bad memories of their infancy. But if you look at this piece of data more closely, only a minority of male gang members (30%) has this characteristic. This becomes a risk factor because it occurs more frequently in the male mara and gang member population. Twice as many male gang members have this risk factor than males not belonging to a gang, and so it may have to be taken into account as a factor probably associated with the risk of becoming a male gang member, without wishing to say that bad memories of infancy may be present in the situation of all male gang members.

Although statistical analyses suggest that the case of male mara members is presented as coming from a disadvantageous family environment, it can also be clearly seen in the table that the majority do not come from violent families, where there was abandonment or abuse.

What the analysis shows is that any secondary prevention programme could use this type of factor when deciding for which audience its interventions should be intended.

Bivariate Analysis Relating to Risk Factors in Women

There are very few studies that separate the risk factors for men and women, but, broadly speaking, there are three pieces of data that come out of investigations conducted in other countries (Klein and Maxson, 2006):

- Less risk factors are identified for women than for men.
- The majority of the risk factors for joining a gang for women are factors that are also used for predicting the risk of men joining gangs.
- Nonetheless, it seems that there are some risk factors which are specific to women; in particular, factors linked to behaviour in schools and integration into school life stand out.

The results of our bivariate studies are shown in table 26. Two variables used with men (going to an educational centre and with whom he lives) have not been used, since the vast majority of the interviews with female mara members were carried out in criminal centres, and, if we exclude them from the analyses, the sizes of the samples are too small.

Table 26

Risk Factors for Young Women Joining the Maras or Gangs

(Percentages)

	Female gang members	Young women at risk
Marital status		
Single	62	73
Married	3	14
Living together	31	11
You do have children	57	36
Education (reached year six of primary school)	63	91
Your father does know how to read	94	99
Bad memories of infancy	47	16
Violent family environment	63	24
Family abandonment	42	21
Death in the family	41	19
There is abuse in the family	62	13
You have a relative or friend in gangs	40	17
You always meet up with your friends as an activity	71	34

Note: All of the differences are statistically significant in accordance with the Chi-squared test. To check if the individuals currently go to an educational centre and to find out who they live with, the female gang members who were interviewed in a prison were excluded from the analyses. Those differences where there are notable differences from the percentages expressed by the men are marked in blue.

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

The results coincide with the basic conclusions given previously. First, that the risk factors that were used for men are also used for women; second, that in some cases, especially in relation to factors of a family type (bad memories of infancy, violent family environment, violent deaths and abuse in the family), the differences between the female mara and gang members and women at risk are much more accentuated than the differences between men.

More frequently than male mara and gang members, the women come from problematic or traumatic family environments. The higher percentage of the following variables correspond to female mara and gang members and the others to the men: they had bad memories of their infancy (47%–30%), they said that they came from a violent family environment (63%–44%), they indicated the violent death of a relation (41%–34%) and they stated that they came from families where there was abuse (62%–28%).

One possible explanation of this gender contrast is the existence of different patterns of socialisation for men and women. Women, especially when they are young, are subject to greater informal social control than men. It could be inferred that breaking with these patterns of informal social vigilance specifically requires what the data shows: a greater incidence of risk factors. Insofar as it is more difficult for women to behave in a deviant manner, because of the presence of more accentuated informal social control mechanisms, committing this risk behaviour, and joining the gangs could be interpreted in this way, requires a greater strength in the factors which push people to commit this type of behaviour. If we note the percentage of women at risk who refer to the group of friends as a space for socialising (33.5%), this is much less than the percentage of men.

Perceptions on Factors for Joining

Various social agents (officials of the judiciary, representatives of NGOs, high-level politicians, priests, religious ministers and businessmen) from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, agree in stating that family problems are one of the main causes for people joining violent groupings.

In Guatemala, for example, all of those interviewed are convinced that family break-up, irresponsible fatherhood, the absence of any parent, violence, the lack of love and communication are directly related to young people joining maras or gangs.

> *"90% of mara members come from broken families. (…) Family problems are the main cause, family break-up."*
>
> (NGO representative, Guatemala.)

As is made evident in the above quotation, it is thought that the majority of young mara and gang members are the product of what are known as broken-up "dysfunctional families" and this brings with it the consequence of lack of love and direction from the parents to their children, which becomes a risk factor for them joining the mara. The same is the case in El Salvador, where it is repeatedly mentioned that young people go to the street to look for the love and acceptance that they do not find in their homes, since separation and dysfunctional families prevail in their homes; young people see the mara as a refuge since their family situation forces them to seek support in friends who, in the end, become bad influences. In Honduras, the different authorities interviewed very frequently mention family break-up and irresponsible fatherhood as fundamental sources for young people joining the maras or gangs.

> *"I think that the problem of violence is because of injustice; it seems to me that the majority of irresponsible fathers have abandoned their children, which means that the mother has to work, and bad influences arise from this."*
>
> (Opinion leader, Honduras.)

Irresponsibility and abandonment, attributed especially to the paternal figure or to the forced change in the traditional maternal role, constitute a conflict that gives rise to violence, the accent of which is placed on the

family. With this perception, other social dimensions which could contribute more widely to understanding the phenomenon are set aside.

Within the young people at risk group (those who have not joined a gang), a high percentage considers that, among the main reasons that active young people had for joining a mara or gang, are family situations, needs and deficiencies, and the need to join and the need for affection. They also highlight personality problems, mentioning individual activities.

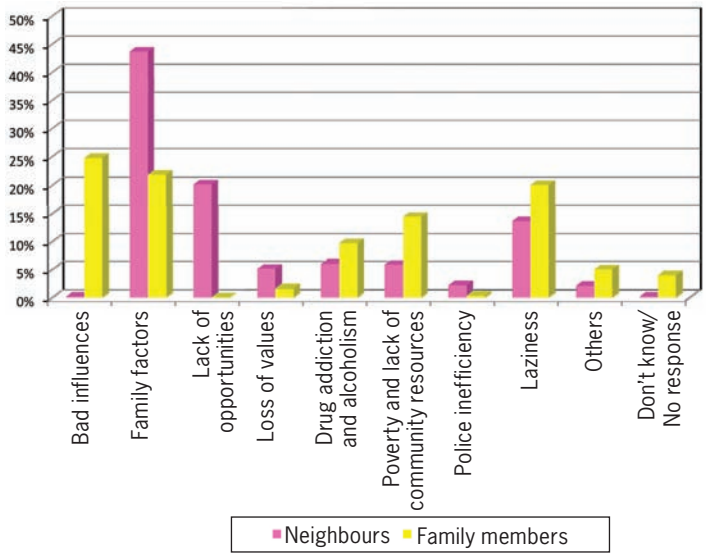
The belief that young people who join the maras and gangs are characterised by having dysfunctional families, with a series of relationship and emotional problems is common in the three countries and in various social sectors. It is interesting to record how neighbours and residents are much more inclined to highlight factors of a family nature, while relatives of mara and gang members point out the role played by the influences of peer groups, which are barely mentioned by neighbours and residents. However, when relatives of gang members compare their own families with those who do not have active members in the maras or gangs, the characterisation is unfavourable – in the majority of cases. In the former, in practically all aspects indicated by them, they think that families who do not have members in the maras and gangs have more moral values, are more religious, comply more with the laws, are more united and have more money and less problems. The families of active young people have a negative concept of their conditions and family environment, compared to other families.

Explaining the whole dynamics of the maras or gangs by deficient factors in the family or the individual simplifies the dimension of the social problem, and it limits the ability to face up to the disadvantageous conditions of life referred to, and, so, only the family and the individual is blamed and society as a system is exonerated. Although, as we saw in our analysis, and also in the review of the empirical comparative literature, there is no doubt that some of these risk factors play a significant role when it comes to understanding that young people in communities where the maras and gangs are present join them. It is important to take into account that these factors, of an individual and/or family type, act as arbitrators of wider macrostructural factors.

Graph 13

Reasons for Young People Joining a Mara or Gang

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Various Perceptions on the Origin of the Maras

The in-depth interviews with authorities, representatives from social organisations and from the security sector, all emphasise that the factors related to the origin and development of the maras and gangs essentially have a structural dimension.

- The failure and withdrawal of the State which abandoned the development of appropriate social politics, resulting in power voids.
- The institutionalisation of corruption, which has come to limit the effective action against these violent groups, both from institutional authorities and from the neighbourhoods and districts in which they arise.
- The deep economic and social changes experienced by the region in the past two decades, which have brought a greater degree of polarisation and urbanisation. Changes which have been complicated by the development of new migratory flows, warlike conflicts and their after-effects.
- The influence of organised crime and drug trafficking.
- The action of governments which, putting the emphasis on repression and on heavy-handed policies have, on the one hand, strengthened the internal cohesion of the these groups and, on the other, brought about a set of social conditions favourable for their development.

It should be pointed out that this type of discourse outlined by the authorities, key informants and other regional experts, does not differ greatly from the approaches outlined by the authors who study the globalisation of the gang phenomenon (see, for example, Hagedorn, 2006).

Some studies suggest that structural factors, such as social exclusion, residential instability, economic decline, poverty and lack of community resources, make communities more liable to the formation of gangs. However, they have also highlighted that more important than these factors of a structural nature are the characteristics which explain the dynamics of the communities and their type of communal life. In accordance with various studies carried out in the US, factors such as social disorganisation, social capital or collective efficiency can have a greater impact on the birth and growth of gangs in specific communities (Klein and Maxson, 2006; (ERIC, IDIES, IUODP, NITLAPAN and DIRINRPO, 2001–2004).

On the other hand, many of the studies previously conducted in the region highlight the same factors as causing the appearance and development of the gang phenomenon in Central America. Santacruz and Concha (2002) highlight inadequate housing development, the after-effects of armed conflict, the privatisation of public space, the weakening of the family and its violence, poverty, juvenile unemployment, the exclusion of the educational system and the problems of drugs (Rubio, 2003). The Save the Children UK studies add rural-urban migration, weak communal interaction and cooperation links, sparse citizen participation and inability to question the State, and also the saturated and ineffective justice system, the illegal economy and demographic growth, amid the lack of public policies (ERIC, IDIES, IUODP, NITLAPAN and DIRINRPO, 2001–2004; FAPPH, 2006), which questions the socio-economic conditions of their origin (Santacruz and Concha, 2002) which mark out the "paths" to gangs (Rubio, 2003).

The UCA study in 2004, shows how strong social capital (interpersonal trust, mutual aid, community participation and a sense of belonging)

hinders the creation of gangs, their networks and their organisation in the community. According to regional studies, the drastic criminal punishment used does not minimise, but rather intensifies and even increases the attraction of gangs (Rubio, 2003; USAID, 2006; FAPPH, 2006).

For their part, Santacruz and Concha (2002) see the connection with armed conflicts (USAID, 2006), in the generational reproduction of representations of reality, mediated by violence and its functionality, which prevails and is expressed in the trivialisation of human life, becoming accustomed to death and pain, the dehumanising of social relations, the weakness of the State and individualism. The rearrangement of a society coming out of a civil war and faced with a different institutional life can be noticed in the maras and gangs, under a different socio-economic model. A link is also acknowledged between North American gangs, the Central American migration to the US, the repatriation of young people who had entered in connection with them and who maintain this contact, and also the deporting of young criminals (Save the Children UK, 2002; ERIC, IDIES, IUODP, NITLAPAN and DIRINRPO, 2001–2004; USAID, 2006; Arana, 2005).

The military demobilisation of young people (FAPPH, 2006), together with the measures of the structural adjustment programmes in the region, have lead to a social model in which the common weal is achieved with high competitiveness, for which large masses of young people were not ready. This model entails the withdrawal of the State, which results in voids in public matters not resolved institutionally. Social adjustments since the 1980s meant the dismantling of the protection network for vulnerable populations. The mara or gang becomes a criminal organisation which springs up in the voids of an entranced society. Finally, the studies agree that being negligent about prevention is one of the indicators of the weakening of the State.

In any case, the approach must consider that there are no variables that have a clear predictive value by themselves or in isolation, but within a set of circumstances which, in variable combinations, can contribute to the joining process, in such a way that it is the specific analysis of these combinations which can produce data on the risk or protection potential of a specific social and family environment. In other words, it is not only poor people or those who come from broken families who are involved, but young people who are faced with variable combinations of adversity and even of despair in the face of possible life plans. This view is confirmed in the case of the women. Likewise, the comparison of some of the most notable characteristics of the psychosocial profiles, which the evidence in this study shows, point in this same direction, as will be seen immediately.

The Assessment of the Media by Mara and Gang Members and others Resident in their Communities

In the surveys of mara members and ex-mara members of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and also of young people at risk in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, they were asked to choose between two antinomic options on the performance of the media (television, radio and newspapers) regarding the activities of the maras and gangs. At one extreme the option "they exaggerate, they invent things" was given and, at the other, "they don't go far enough; they don't publish a lot".

The answers from mara members, non-mara members, ex-mara members, relatives and neighbours show clear differences in respect of their opinion on the work of the media. The mara members and ex-mara

members, and, to a lesser extent, relations of gang members, have unfavourable opinions on the information that is published on the maras and gangs. Neighbours and young people who are not mara members, on the other hand, do feel that they get reliable information from the media.

In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, the gang members have the most negative view on the performance of the media; it is more adverse among Costa Rican gang members than among Nicaraguan gang members. Half of the latter think that the media say the truth about juvenile violence, whereas the percentage of Costa Rican gang members saying this is barely 13%. A quarter of the latter, however, think that the media do not go far enough regarding what they say. The responses of young people at risk and gang members in Nicaragua are very similar, but it is a different situation in Costa Rica.

Table 27 shows that, in the five countries, the young mara or gang members chose (in high percentages) the more unfavourable option; the same happened with the ex-mara members, although the percentage was lower.

Table 27

Opinion of Informants Regarding Media Publication in Respect of Maras and Gangs
(Percentages)

	Guatemala		**El Salvador**		**Honduras**	
	Ex- gang member (n=57)	Gang member (n=116)	Ex- gang member (n=50)	Gang member (n=137)	Ex- gang member (n=100)	Gang member (n=124)
They are objective, they tell the truth	—	—	—	—	—	—
They exaggerate, they invent things	61	80	76	85	78	84
They don't go far enough, they don't publish much	33	12	22	12	21	13
Sometimes the truth, sometimes lies	—	—	—	—	—	—
Don't know/ No response	5	8	2	3	1	3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

	Nicaragua		**Costa Rica**	
	Gang members (n=98)	Young at risk (n=79)	Gang members (n=97)	Young people at risk (n=74)
They are objective, they tell the truth	50	42	13	27
They don't go far enough, they don't publish much	41	46	50	39
They exaggerate, they invent things	8	11	26	29
Sometimes the truth, sometimes lies	—	—	6	—
Don't know/ No response	1	2	5	6
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

When the mara and gang members were asked why they think that about the media, the two arguments most used were that they allocate unfair associations to the maras or gangs, or that they give incorrect information. The sum of these two was: 88% in Guatemala, 76% in El Salvador and 88% in Honduras.

In an in-depth interview, an ex-mara leader also refers to the fact that the media exaggerates or invents certain facts relating to the maras and gangs.

> *"Well, there is not doubt that it is harmful, because sometimes there are things… because it depends on what you see, in the television or in the press, because sometimes they say: gang members hold up a bus and kill… and you know that that's not the case, and that is harmful to you. And the press always gives more exposure to that; in other words, they give too much exposure to many things that are related to gangs – they exaggerate it."*
>
> (Ex-mara leader, aged 24, Pandilla 18 gang, Guatemala.)

For their part, the main reason why gang members in Nicaragua and Costa Rica consider that the media exaggerates and invents is because their information is incorrect. This is what 85% of the Nicaraguans and 81% of the Costa Ricans said. The differences in this respect compared to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are probably because, as the analyses of content carried out in the five countries show, the information on gang activities in Costa Rican and Nicaraguan media is less frequent, they use a greater variety of versions and display less characteristics of stigmatisation than publications from the other three countries, and therefore there are less elements that may lead to the rejection of youth gang members. Possibly, therefore, the gang members from those two countries felt less bothered by their environment, which contributes to generating negative perceptions of the important social players, such as the media.

When asked what type of news item they would like to be published about them, the most quoted was individual vindication (for example, showing favourable news such as improvements in their life, efforts to leave the maras and gangs or other positive aspects on mara activities). Although there were marked differences between nationalities: 26% of Guatemalans, 34% of El Salvadorians and 62% of Hondurans.

In the in-depth interviews, we inquired about the reasons to which they attributed the perceived distortion of the press. Mara and gang members perceive the media as harmful for the maras and gangs because they echo the official version of the events as they are subordinated or sold out to the authority.

> *"(…) The news bulletins here – the journalists sell themselves to the party in power, (…) which suits the government; they say to the government that they are going to publish this, they're not going to publish that… So I think that they are the pits, (…) they are against me, (…).*
> *They have never favoured us; they've only maligned us (…), I lived in a district in San Salvador (…) there was a police post and, during those two and a half years, the police post didn't know that I was an active member of the Pandilla 18 gang. So they come along and make a big conspiracy out of us, (…) in the year 2003. The director of the national civil police and the party in power, ARENA, wanted to fight the kidnappers and the gangs (…). In the La Libertad park, there appeared a disembodied head (…) and suddenly my name appears in the daily paper (…) they (…) handcuff me, they take me prisoner. (…) Suddenly we get a paper and in the paper (…) (name of the gang member) responsible for the head in the La*

Libertad park. I show it to (…), 'Look' I tell him and his is there too, but this happened a few days ago and we were already here for four days (…)."

(Informant, aged 29, a member of the Mara 18, El Salvador.)

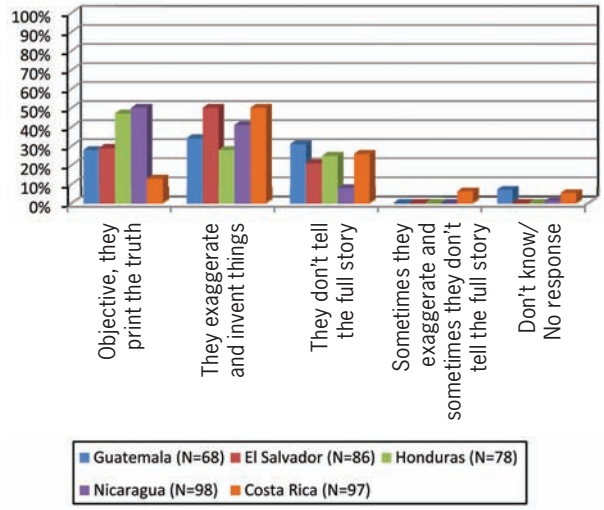
In addition to the submissiveness of the media, the mara and gang members mentioned the following as faults of the press: a) they attribute crimes to them that they have not committed, b) they leave out the participation of other social players in the facilitation and/or profit of mara activities, and c) they leave out the fact that someone hires gang members to carry out criminal activities by contract.

Young people who are not mara members and local residents disclosed very different perceptions from those of mara members and ex-mara members on the performance of the media. The non-mara members and local residents mainly expressed positive opinions on the truthfulness of the media regarding the maras and gangs. Relatives responded negatively, but in a much lower proportion than the mara and gang members. The questions on the subject asked of these populations were not exactly the same; however, the magnitude of the differences allows the diversity between the perceptions about the media of groups not related to the maras or gangs and mara members to be appreciated. Chart 14 shows a solid majority of young people, in Guatemala and Honduras, who are not in the maras, who think that the media is objective and, even, don't go far enough in their information on the maras and gangs.

Graph 14

Opinions of Non Gang Members on the Truthfulness of Publications on Gangs

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Also in Guatemala and Honduras, the majority of local residents express positive opinions on the work of the media. In the case of El Salvador, there is considerable displeasure with the work of the media, both among young people who are not mara members and local residents. This may indicate that the maras and gangs have greater sympathy among members of their community.

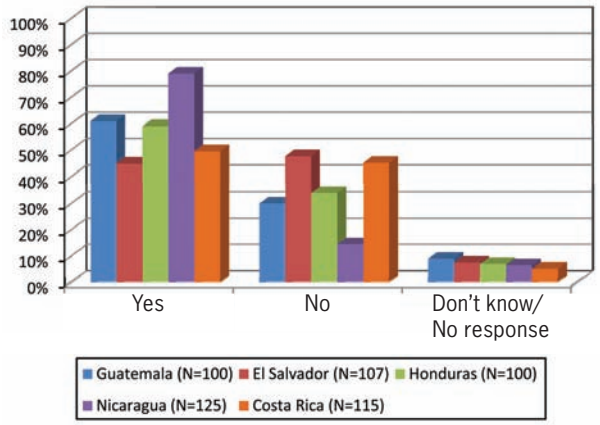
The perception which local residents in Nicaragua have on the media is extensively positive. In Costa Rica, although to a lesser extent, the opinions of those who consider that the media project a real picture of violent groups and gangs also exceeds the negative opinions, as shown in chart 15.

The main reason for the positive perceptions of local residents is that what is seen is what actually happens in the neighbourhood (98% in Nicaragua and 77% in Costa Rica). Those who expressed negative opinions referred mainly to aspects related to television. They exaggerate things by the rating (50% in Nicaragua and 40% in Costa Rica) and the reality of the neighbourhood could never be seen on television (11% in Nicaragua and 42% in Costa Rica).

Chart 16 shows the opinions of relations of mara members. The relatives of mara members in Guatemala and El Salvador, perhaps because of their first-hand knowledge, do not believe that they receive a real picture of the mara and gangs. It is interesting to note that, in the case of Honduras, the majority considers that the media do give a real picture of mara and gang members.

Graph 15

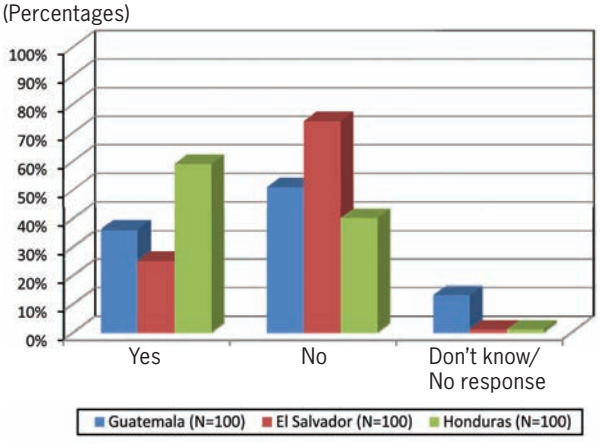
Opinion of Residents on Whether the Media "Reflect The Reality" on Gangs
(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Graph 16

Does the Media Reflect the Reality on Gangs? According to the Families of Gang Members
(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Identities: the Normality of Youth Gang Members

Introduction

As will be seen further on, in official speak and in media speak, a gang member is depicted as an abnormal individual, who is not like other people; whereas the reality is that they are people who, to a large extent, share a set of values, concerns and fears with other people of the same age and social status as them, and who, as seen in Chapter III, spend most of the time behaving like any other young person. There are more similarities than differences between groups of young mara and gang members and young people who are not gang members.

Trying to identify a set of risk factors which can help to better select the beneficiaries of the secondary prevention programmes does not mean that these young men are radically different from others who share the same social environment, at least as far as a set of fundamental social values is concerned.

To analyse these values, the sentence completion test (SCT) was used. The SCT is a psychometric instrument, of a projective nature, for assessing the spontaneous answers of the individuals in relation to three areas of study:

- Sociability
- Interpersonal relations
- Life plans.

The first area of study included trigger points that explore the position of the individuals in respect of four sub-themes of interest.

a) Understanding-function of the law

b) Implication-participation of third parties in personal decisions

c) Understanding-function of religion

d) Attitude towards other persons who have drifted.

In the second area, the attitudes towards the role and the experience of the family were studied, as well as with the peer group. The last area of study, related to life plans is based on the indicators on the organisation of life plans or significant actions in planning the future.

The SCT designed consists of 56 linguistic trigger points, organised in the three areas of study, with a random order of sequence. In addition, except for five of them which deal with particular aspects, the rest of the trigger points were designed in pairs, to enable comparisons between answers from individuals faced with similar appraisals, therefore functioning as a factor for checking the accuracy of the answers and for going deeply into the subject. The result of the responses, in relation to their pair, showed a consistency in the majority of the trigger points in both groups of the five countries, and therefore, in this document, the analysis of a trigger point is taken up again (per pair) and the five trigger points are not included.

The SCT was applied to youth gang members, and also to young non-gang members or young people at risk, of the five countries, in order to have a factor of comparison and contrast between the views of the groups on the subject matters explored.

In general, a broad similarity is seen between the populations of young gang members and non-gang members in relation to the areas analysed. Nonetheless, the data shows that, within the group of gang members, there are different profiles, i.e., through the variety of answers is a significant heterogeneity among both young people who take part in maras or gangs and those from young people at risk.

Sociability

In the five countries, and in both populations, it is considered that the law is necessary, predominantly for social order (59% in gang members; 51% in non-gang members). Second, both populations also speak highly of the law according to its application (19% gang members; 29% non-gang members), with the population of non-gang members mentioning it most. Control of oneself is the third notation with regard to the need for the law, in both populations (7% gang members; 11% non-gang members).

As for the usefulness of the law, both populations, for the five countries of the region, think that is useful when people act against the law (26% gang members; 30% non-gang members). Those not in a gang think that it is useful as a punishment (18%) and for justice (17.5%), while gang members mention that it is useful when somebody does something wrong (20%) and when the law is applied (21%).

The replies from gang members and non-gang members of the region, with regard to who they go to when they have doubts, refer mainly to loved ones (65% and 83%, respectively). Gang members also mention people with experience (13%) and others (10%), while non-gang members give importance to others (7%) and people with experience (4%). It is demonstrated that the population of gang members go more to people other than loved ones than non-gang members.

With regard to religion in the life of the populations interviewed, they reply mainly in terms of education and values (44% gang members; 40% non-gang members). Some gang members respond with their religious affiliation (23%) and spirituality (13%); others respond that it has little or no importance in their lives (14%). Non-gang members reply, more frequently than gang members, that religion has little or no importance in their lives (23%). When an analysis is carried out per country, it is noted that the frequency of this answer is much higher than in Costa Rica and Nicaragua (44% and 39% respectively) than in the three other countries of the region. Other answers from non-gang members, with regard to this item, include the mention of their religious affiliation (19%) and as a life model (9%).

As for the "Everyone who commits a crime is a person…" item, both populations refer to negative personal attributes (85% in gang members and 67% in non-gang members). Those not in gangs also mention that they are blameworthy (18%) and thoughtless (8.5%) 8% of gang members mention that they are blameworthy.

With regard to the application of vengeance, the populations respond differently. Gang members respond that it is applied when there is harm (39%) and at the right time (17%). Gang members also criticize vengeance (34%). For their part, those not in a gang mainly criticise vengeance (37%); they consider that it is applied because of a personal decision or for personal benefit (28%), when there is harm (19%) and at the right time (13%).

As for the consequences of "With enemies or rivals…", both populations from the five countries answer by mentioning the attitude of keeping one's distance and being careful (39% in gang members, 35% in non-gang members). Also, youth gang members mention the presence of problems (31%) and the need for a constructive attitude (14.5%), and also murder or attempted murder (10%). For their part, non-gang members mention constructive attitude (37%) and the presence of problems (16.5%). It is analysed that gang members emphasise more presence of problems or of violent acts as far as enemies and rivals are concerned than young persons at risk, with the latter more frequently mentioning the search for an alternative to avoid the problem or to solve it. They also less frequently

mention murder or attempted murder (1%). It must be stressed that, analysing it on a country by country basis, only 1% of the population of gang members in Nicaragua mention murder or attempted murder and Costa Rica obtains the lowest average data of the five countries.

The gang members' answers in relation to the "If someone harms one or more people..." item, point out blame (34%), followed by the mention of negative consequences (22%), the devaluation of the person doing harm (18%) and an attitude of making amends (17%). For their part, those not in gangs deny having harmed anyone (29.5%) and they also mention blame (27%), they devalue the person doing harm (20%) and they mention an attitude of making amends (16%). Just like in the previous item, there are differences between the replies of the two populations of the region, in that the gang member population expresses more negative consequences and does not directly deny having harmed someone. This reveals a dynamic which demonstrates their greater vulnerability when faced with an act of harm towards others.

As far as the "The time for getting even is…", the gang member population mentions the strategic moment (50.5%) and when harm is inflicted on them (18%). 25% of gang members also classify getting even negatively. Those not in a gang more frequently describe getting even negatively (36%), the situation when harm is suffered (21%), the strategic moment and as soon as possible (17%).

Interpersonal Relations

As for the "When the family fails…" item, those interviewed express various answers in the gang member population of the region, associated with negative consequences: emotional damage (23%) and the disintegration of the family unit (20%). Also, a significant percentage indicates the search for alternative support when their family nucleus fails (21%). Those not in a gang express the same concerns, although the emphasis is on family disintegration (43%), then alternative support (19%) and, finally, emotional damage (19%). The relevance of the family gains more emphasis in the responses of non-gang members; however, gang members express a significant trend which classifies the experience of a family that fails as "negative".

With regard to the "The family must give…" trigger point, there is no great difference between the gang members and the non-gang members of the region. The general response which was expressed was that of valuing emotional well-being (51% gang members; 68% non-gang members), the support and the exemplary image that the family nucleus must show. This item is included in the "In my family, I learnt…" trigger point. A greater preference is seen for the exemplary image that the family has provided the interviewee (52% gang members; 85% non-gang members). Both populations also show the criterion of education and the relationship with others, which, according to the answers of those groups, are provided by the family nucleus.

It is possible to assert that, both gang members and non-gang members of the region see their family as a positive and principle-forming space, which coincides with the low percentages of negative aspects in the previously mentioned trigger points.

In the case of "Friends support me in…", the main answers from both groups indicate the support and help (59% gang members; 38% non-gang members) that they receive from their equals in general, and some specify the importance of that support in resolving difficult situations (11% gang members; 16% non-gang members). Also mentioned, is the influence of

friends in the positive values (10% gang members; 20% non-gang members). The support of friends to do "bad things" is infrequent for both populations of the region (5% gang members; 9% non-gang members); the country by country analysis demonstrates that the Nicaraguan young people at risk answer this category as the main answer (30%).

Finally, with regard to "The loyalty of friends is something…" trigger point, the answers from both populations in the five countries recount a positive value (86% gang members; 60% non-gang members) as the most frequent criterion. Youth gang members indicate "as a component of friendship in relations" in second place (9%), and, as a third option, they value friendship negatively. In the case of non-gang members, the answers are reversed: this negative assessment is mentioned in second place (20%), followed by the component of friendship (14%). In the population of young Nicaraguans at risk, the answers emphasise the negative assessment of loyalty with 73%, which may coincide with the previous trigger point where that population associates the support of friends with doing "bad things".

Life Plans

For "The best time for making a decision is when…" trigger point, young gang or mara members in the five countries opt for favourable conditions (41%) and the need for security and resorting to others for help (12%) as the best time. Young people not in gangs, to a lesser degree, mention favourable conditions in first place (26%), but they have another order of priority in their choice, by giving the following percentages: the present time (25%), help (21%) and the need for safety (18%). Nicaraguan and Costa Rican young people at risk, state the best time is the present time (39% and 44% respectively), followed by asking others for help (36% Nicaraguans; 19% Costa Ricans) and having problems (13% and 10% respectively) and finally, with higher percentages for Costa Rica, come favourable conditions with 15%, and 4% for Nicaragua.

The opinion that both populations have about education is that it fulfils a training function (52% gang members; 47% non-gang members). Youth gang members mention, in order of importance, goals (29%), followed by direction for life (9%). For their part, the young people at risk emphasise the direction for life (27%), which education provides, followed by conceiving it as a goal (18%). In the case of young Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans at risk, the emphasis of the answers points towards education being conceived as a direction for life (54% and 58% respectively), then training (25% and 26% respectively), goals (25% and 8% respectively) and improving one's economic level (4% and 10%). For young people at risk or non-gang members, especially in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, education has a significant meaning as a life plan.

In the trigger point concerning what has to be done to achieve what you want, on average for the five countries, the most popular answers are: fighting (85% gang members; 64% non-gang members), followed by a positive attitude (8% gang members; 21% non-gang members). Then come, as a lower percentage, planning (4% for both populations) and education (2% gang members; 10% non-gang members). This situation varies in respect of the answers from young Costa Ricans, where, although the youth gang members answer with fighting (88% Costa Rica; 85% Nicaragua) as the first option, non-gang members of Costa Rica reply that they must have a positive attitude (43%) and then fight (22%). Education is mentioned in third place (20%). The answers from Nicaraguans not in gangs are largely similar to the answers from Guatemala, El

Salvador and Honduras, except that they give more importance to the role of education to get what they want (12%). The subtle differences between the groups emphasise the order of action that they fall within; despite the fact that fighting is the top answer in both groups, they differ in the subsequent categories, where a positive attitude of moral assessment is more prevalent in non-gang members, plus the importance of education. The latter is consistent with the previous trigger point, where their direction for life is highlighted.

In the "For everything to go well for you, you have to…" trigger point, in both groups, first place goes to the need for personal qualities (80% gang members; 54% non-gang members). In second place, for gang members, is personal effort (17%) followed by personal status (5%). Whereas, the second answer chosen by non-gang members is receiving help (22%), then personal effort (12%) and, finally, personal status (11%). In the case of Nicaragua, a variant is seen in the young people at risk whose main answer is receiving help (50%), followed by personal status (26%) and then personal qualities (23%). Although the emphasis of the answers corresponds to an individual plan, personal effort – the strategy most expressed by youth gang members – coincides with the act of fighting from the previous trigger point, unlike non-gang members, who mention receiving help as a more passive action in the strategy for everything to go well for you.

Summary

A broad similarity is seen between the populations of young gang members and non-gang members of the five countries, in relation to the areas analysed. The data allows it be asserted that, within the group, there are different profiles, i.e., through the variety of answers is a significant heterogeneity between both young people who take part in maras or gangs and those from young people at risk.

Both populations say that they have a concrete and internalised awareness of laws as social order, and they acknowledge that their function is to apply the law when people act against it. Crime is perceived as a negative value and leads to harmful consequences.

A subtle difference points towards the strategies for applying vengeance. Youth gang members emphasise cunning, but more confrontational, activities, and low percentages of them mention actions of extreme violence. Non-gang members criticise the act of vengeance and focus their replies on a constructive solution to the problem. The use of extreme violence in Costa Rican and Nicaraguan youth gang members is less than the average of the five countries.

The youth gang members express clarity in relation to the negative consequences of acts that harm other persons, which demonstrates a dynamic in that the vulnerability directly affects the gang members.

Finally, in relation to life ambitions, a fighting attitude and the emphasis of personal qualities is superior in youth gang members. The answers of those not in gangs stress the importance of receiving help. Education as a direction for life is the priority answer in non-mara members. Therefore, we have to promote access to and attendance of school courses for young people at risk.

Chapter V
The Social Environment: Community and Families of the Gang Members

Introduction

Some studies, which have explored the relationship between the maras and gangs and the social environment, mention the complexity of the subject. The gang members are members of the community and belong to family networks that form part of their social capital. This, as various studies have documented, limits the ability of the communities to control the behaviour of gang members (Pattillo, 1998). In her study of Chicana gangs in the US, Horowitz (1987) documents a certain tolerance on the part of the community towards the violence of these gangs – a tolerance which varies in extent and can be fragile, but which is generally maintained by means of a process of informal active negotiation between the residents and the gang members. This author maintains that the significance of the gang's violence is articulated within the cultural framework of the concept of honour, which allows the residents to understand the violence of the gangs.

This is shown in a similar way by Rogers (2006), in his study carried out in Nicaragua, on speaking about the community and its gang. This literature also documents how, on occasions, the community benefits materially from the social and economic contribution made by the gang. Venkatech (1997), in his study of very marginal areas of Chicago, speaks of loans and credits, messages home, help to parents in prison, organisation of sporting activities, social control of criminal activities on the street etc. This does not mean that there are no contradictions in practice, or that this help is easily accepted, or that acceptance is unanimous and that there is no resistance of the part of groups of residents. In contexts where the State withdraws, the power of the gangs increase and the link with drug dealing appears, and important determining factors appear at the time of accepting, or not, help from the gangs, especially in a context where there are significant affective links and relationships with gang members.

Other investigators also stress how the difficulty of these communities in obtaining attention from the State reduces their capacity to control the behaviour of the gangs (Zatz and Portillos, 2000). Desmond Arias (2006) analyses this issue in Rio de Janeiro and suggests how, in a Latin American context, the complex patronage system relations partly facilitate the role of these criminal organisations as community mediators, while, at the same time, it makes the handling and control of these groups more

complex. Any effort to involve the community in controlling the gangs must be through the use of strategies that go beyond the social segregation of gang members, given that gang members, in spite of the fact that they are perceived as the cause of many of the evils that affect the community, continue being a member of the community networks (neighbour, cousin, brother, father) (Venkatesh, 1997).

This community network, as well as the coexistence of the residents and gang members, is necessary to understand that the gang phenomenon goes beyond the group itself, and that any action plan that is taken, whether this be preventative or a control plan, must necessarily recognise these connections and links which make up the context of the maras and gangs.

As a starting point to present the data collected in this study, the contrast between the perception that the relations of gang and mara members have of them, and the perception that other community neighbours have of them, may be useful. As a general rule, the majority of family members see mara and gang members who are their relatives as young people without opportunities, or victims of the system (El Salvador: 56%; Guatemala: 67%; Honduras: 80%) while for the majority of neighbours, a mara or gang member is, above all, a dangerous person (Guatemala: 70%; El Salvador: 62%; Honduras: 76%; Nicaragua: 53%; Costa Rica: 58%).

Community

It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that the districts and neighbourhoods that were selected were identified by experts as areas with a strong presence of maras or gangs (something which our investigators were able to prove) and, in spite of the high prevalence of mara and gang activity of a negative and illegal nature, the neighbours that live in these communities gave drug addiction or alcoholism as a modal answer on the main problems of their community. In fact, there are not many neighbours who consider the maras or gangs to be the main problem of their districts or neighbourhoods (Guatemala: 18%; El Salvador: 18%; Honduras: 7%; Nicaragua: 10%; Costa Rica: 5.3%).[35] It is difficult to explain this piece of data, although, perhaps, a certain resigned assimilation to the presence of these maras or gangs could be stated, or that they consider other problems to be more serious or that they consider the maras or gangs to be a problem of national or regional security rather than specific to their community. Certainly, almost all of those interviewed acknowledge the presence of the maras or gangs in their neighbourhoods.

However, the maras or gangs have a negative impact on those communities. Table 28 shows the wide range of answers regarding how the maras or gangs affect the residents. The answers include emotive reactions (people are afraid) and behavioural answers associated with those emotive replies (people do not go out after a certain time, people do not leave their house on their own, people have acquired weapons, people do not go to certain places).

[35] On average, crime tends to be mentioned even less frequently.

Table 28

Change in Habits in Local Residents as a Consequence of Gang Activities

(Percentages)

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica
	(N=201)	(N=176)	(N=162)	(N=212)	(N=172)
The people are afraid	28	37	26	47	41
The people do not go out after a certain time	21	15	31	36	50
The people do not leave their houses alone	14	18	19	29	21
The people have acquired weapons	15	5	11	19	19
The people have to pay the gang members	11	11	7	7	4
They people do not go to certain places	7	6	6	13	17
Don't know/ No response	2	6	1	23	10

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires

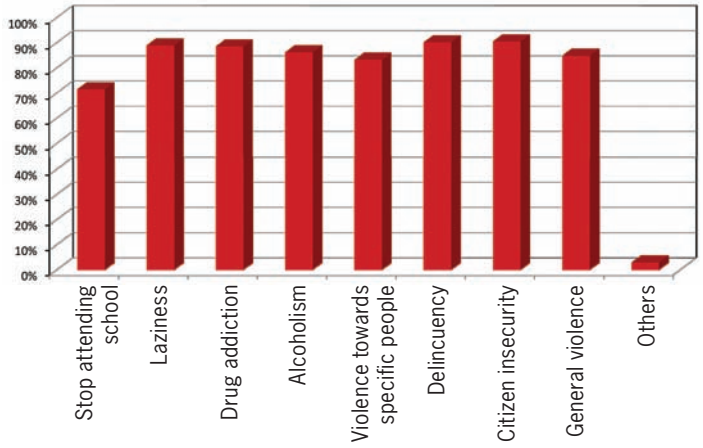
Also, there is the generalised perception among the neighbours that the presence of the maras and gangs has had a negative affect on the interest of children and juveniles in studying or professional training (Guatemala: 58%; El Salvador: 58%; Honduras: 90%; Nicaragua: 77%; Costa Rica: 86%). The reasons outlined point primarily to threats and coercion, and second to being persuaded to join the mara.

Chart 17 shows the percentage of local residents who think that the maras or gangs have increased the problems in their communities.

Graph 17

Problems which have Worsened as a Result of Mara and Gang Activity According to Residents

(Percentages, n=307)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

In fact, within these communities, a percentage of local residents state that they have been directly affected by the activities of the maras or gangs (Guatemala: 23%; El Salvador: 15%; Honduras: 33%; Nicaragua: 38%; Costa Rica: 30%). When asked how they were affected, the replies given are a catalogue of diverse situations of criminal victimisation, including situations of theft, threats and coercion, robberies, damage etc.

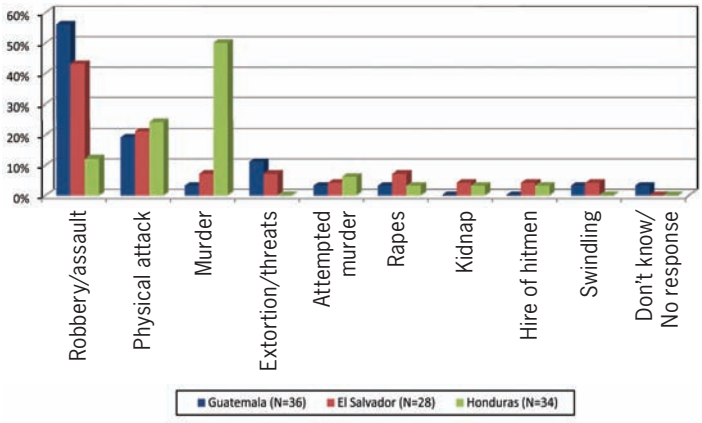
It is certainly noticeable that, in the case of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the impact on the communities is much more drastically weighted than in the rest of the Central American countries. It is possible to infer that, as it has recently appeared, the phenomenon is recorded with greater intensity and also that there are no community networks as in the case of the other countries and, therefore, it continues to be an external phenomenon that affects them.

The economic survey of shopkeepers and hauliers in mara areas also reflects the negative impact of the maras and gangs in this sector of the community. Besides the impact of extortion, described in Chapter III, significant percentages of shopkeepers and hauliers state that they have had to shut their businesses, temporarily, because of the maras and gangs (Guatemala: 17%; El Salvador: 21%; Honduras: 28%).

The negative impact of the maras and gangs also affects other people who are not necessarily members of these communities, and who report having been affected or having relatives who were victims of the violence of these mara and gang groupings. As chart 18 shows, theft and robbery show significant percentages in Guatemala and El Salvador, while in Honduras, murder has the highest percentage. Victims report that the majority of the attacks were committed in groups (Guatemala: 73%; El Salvador: 56%; Honduras: 63%). This shows the expansion of the impact and of the violence of these mara and gang groups, as their impact is felt even outside of the communities where they are located.

Graph 18

Ways in Which Mara Members Attack According to the Victims
(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Curiously, the data that comes from the surveys undertaken with the neighbours also offer a full view of the position of the mara and gang members within the community. A mara or gang member is an individual whose presence and whose activities can result in a negative impact on the life of the community, but, at the same time, he/she continues to be a member of that community with which interpersonal relations are established. This is shown, for example, in that not insignificant percent-

ages of the neighbours say that they are friends of mara or gang members (Guatemala: 19%; El Salvador: 41%; Honduras: 17%; Nicaragua: 40%; Costa Rica: 40%). The emotive response, generally, is a mixture of fear and compassion.

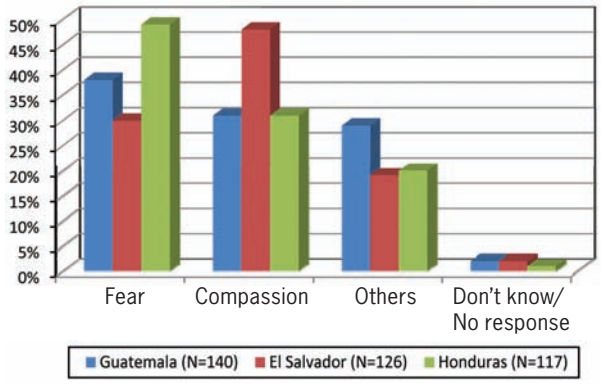
The survey, on the other hand, documents a sparse degree of neighbourhood organisation, almost nil, to prevent the actions of the mara and gang members. The vast majority of local residents state that this type of collective action does not exist in their neighbourhoods or districts (Guatemala: 87%; El Salvador: 88%; Honduras: 90%; Nicaragua: 78%; Costa Rica: 85%). At the same time, they show wide interest in taking part in prevention and rehabilitation programmes for mara and gang members in their neighbourhood (Guatemala: 52%; El Salvador: 45%; Honduras: 66%; Nicaragua: 67%; Costa Rica: 70%).

Also, the majority of the victims confirm that it would be important to work, especially with the neighbours, the relatives of mara or gang members and the authorities. It is possible that the fact that fear is greater in Honduras than in El Salvador, while in El Salvador compassion is highlighted, may be directly related to the extent of articulation of the maras and gangs with the community, filling the voids of power and protection left by the abandonment of these functions carried out by the State, which means, in the case of Honduras, a more defensive reaction, while in El Salvador it is more of being sensitive to the condition of the young people. This is an interesting item of data with regard to the possible development of prevention policies, as indicated by the level of support which these types of policies would receive if they were promoted from the State.

Graph 19

Emotions Felt Towards the Mara or Gang Members by Residents

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Relatives

As was noted in the chapter on risk factors, the vast majority of young gang or mara members still live with their families and identify some relatives as gang members.[36] In the same way, some characteristics of the family environment constitute risk factors for joining the maras or gangs, but what do the families of gang members think? What type of conse-

[36] A piece of data that is reinforced by the results of our survey of relatives of mara and gang members, who, in percentages ranging between 20% and 19% for El Salvador and Honduras respectively and 29% for Guatemala, say that they have more than one member of their family as a gang member.

quences have there been for these relatives because one of their family is a gang member? How have the families responded to this situation and what type of help have they received from outside to deal with it? In this section, these issues, which generally have not received sufficient attention by the literature, will be analysed.

Affective Reaction When Relatives are Mara Members

The majority of families of mara and gang members are concerned that one of their relatives is a mara member (Guatemala: 82%; El Salvador: 91%; Honduras: 87%). The modal response to the question about what is it that most concerns family members of the link that their relatives have with a mara or gang is their possible death (Guatemala: 46%; El Salvador: 47%; Honduras: 49%). Generally, once one of their relatives joins a mara or gang, the family's reaction is a mixture of sadness and pain, deception, worry, impotence, resignation and amazement. Between 44% and 30% of relatives acknowledge some of these feelings. Furthermore, between 28% and 50% of families express feelings of confrontation with their relatives who are mara and gang members, because they belong to these groups. Families of mara and gang members are against the maras or gangs, or they are disgusted, worried or saddened by the presence of their relatives in the maras or gangs.

The Impact on the Family

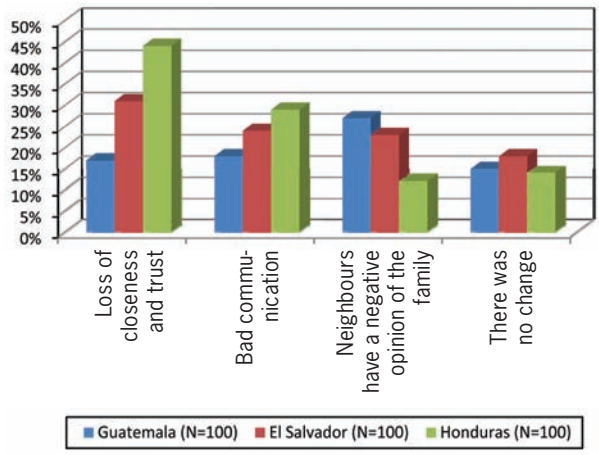
The linking of relatives to maras or gangs has a set of consequences for the dynamics of family life, and for the relationships of the family with their social environment.

Chart 20 shows how only a small minority of families is not affected by one of their family members joining a mara or gang. The families report the weakening or loss of internal functioning processes, such as communication and unity and confidence, in significant percentages in the three countries, however it is most accentuated in Honduras.

Graph 20

Consequences for The Family of a Family Member Joining a Mara According to Family Members

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

It is also significant how a sizeable percentage of families notes a deterioration in the relationship with their neighbours. In general, there is a conflictive relationship with neighbours as a result of the fact that one of their relatives is a mara or gang member. In this respect, between 57% in El Salvador and 63% in Guatemala indicate that their family is seen with prejudice or contempt. In addition, between 41% in El Salvador and 46% in Honduras and Guatemala consider that neighbours avoid having a relationship with them.

This data is partly supported by surveys with local residents of these neighbourhoods that are not relatives of mara or gang members. Almost half of them show concern for sharing the same places as those attended by families of the maras or gangs (Guatemala: 50%; El Salvador: 36%; Honduras: 55%; Nicaragua: 43%; Costa Rica: 49%) and, in general, the reason that they give for this is the feeling of insecurity that this creates in them. Despite this, the majority of the neighbours surveyed also show themselves to be predisposed to offer help to the families of mara or gang members (Guatemala: 66%; El Salvador: 86%; Honduras: 79%; Nicaragua: 86%; Costa Rica: 84%), which indicates possible avenues of intervention for social policy and for achieving a reunion between neighbours and relatives of mara or gang members.

Support for Mara or Gang Members and Help from External Institutions

In general terms, many of these families (Guatemala: 52%; El Salvador: 41%; Honduras: 48%) took measures to prevent their relatives from joining the maras or gangs. As can be seen in table 29, in the majority of cases, the families opt for dialogue as a prevention mechanism.

Table 29

Relatives who say that they have Taken Measures to Prevent their Family Member from Joining the Mara

(Percentages)

	Guatemala (N=52)	**El Salvador** (N=41)	**Honduras** (N=48)
Spoke with him or her	69	88	75
Punished him or her	8	2	4
Sought help through other people	13	5	6
Sought help through aid institutions or organisations	6	5	12
Others	4	—	2
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Not only do relatives report the adoption of measures to prevent their family members from joining, but also they declare support for them to succeed in leaving the grouping once the link with the mara or gang has been consolidated. As shown in chart 21, there are big differences here between the countries, with a greater degree of family support in El Salvador compared with Honduras and Guatemala, with the latter being the country where there is the lowest level of family support for mara or gang members who have already joined gangs.

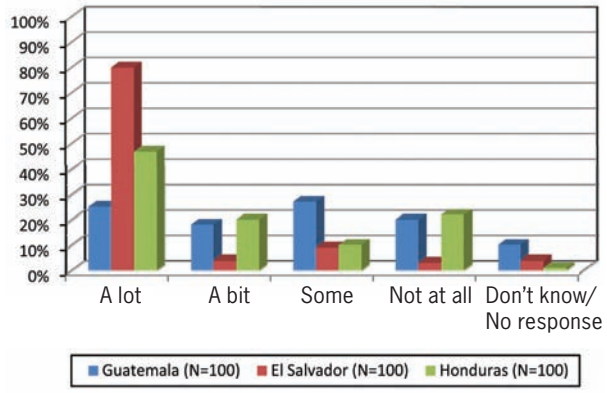
There are other similar measures by families in their search for support for mara or gang members who are from their family. Approximately one third of the families say that they have sought help outside of the family (Guatemala: 34%; El Salvador: 33%; Honduras: 32%), which

may perhaps be of interest for the public authorities. The support institution that they go to most, in all of the countries, is the church (Guatemala: 38%; El Salvador: 50%; Honduras: 19%), which therefore becomes an important point of reference for channelling requests for help to relatives.

Graph 21

Level of Support Given in Helping a Relative to Leave the Mara According to Family Members

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

There are not many families that look for help outside of the family; however, there are even fewer aid institutions that offer support to these families. It is interesting to note this sparse proactive interest shown by the authorities and other institutions for families of mara or gang members. The majority of families have not been visited by the police (Guatemala: 84%; El Salvador: 91%; Honduras: 77%), or by other NGOs or churches who promote prevention or humanitarian aid for mara or gang members (Guatemala: 89%; El Salvador: 84%; Honduras: 89%). The majority of the visits, when they occur, are considered to be good experiences (Guatemala: 87%; El Salvador: 77%; Honduras: 100%), which is important to bear in mind when proposing prevention and rehabilitation policies.

This abandonment by the State is not only noted in the absence of a proactive response, by way of seeking to support the families of mara or gang members, but also relating to the existence of preventative resources in this area. All of these families interviewed say that they are not aware of the existence of programmes in their neighbourhood which are aimed at the prevention or rehabilitation of mara members (Guatemala: 95%; El Salvador: 95%; Honduras: 90%), in the same way that almost all say that there is a need for this type of resource.

We would conclude by saying that although there are risk factors associated with the family (as shown in Chapter IV), the family is also an inevitable part of the solution, since it not only continues to play an important role in the life of the young people, but it also has a very considerable willingness to be part of that solution. The search for help outside of the family is indicative of this predisposition. From a point of view of an assistance policy, it should be taken into consideration, moreover, that the families also become victims of the situation, as their relatives joining the maras or gangs deteriorates their internal dynamics and their internal dynamics with neighbours and their community. This family deterioration could become a risk factor and other members of the family may join the maras or gangs, so it is important to pay attention to this.

The data on looking for support and the support offered by the institutions, show clearly that this is an area in which it is necessary to improve the State's response, whether this be directly or through the support and funding of other institutions (church, NGO, etc.). The current situation shows a considerable demand for prevention and rehabilitation programmes, which is far from being covered by the State.

Chapter VI
Police, Community and Gangs

Introduction

As highlighted in the USAID report (2006), Central American governments, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala, have preferred to be committed to policies of police repression and toughening of criminal legislation, rather than policies of a preventative nature, with reference to confronting the mara and gang phenomenon. These repressive policies are in contrast with the lack of prevention and rehabilitation programmes for mara members, pointed out by the neighbours and relatives of these young people.

The experience accumulated in other countries shows that heavy-handed policies generally only serve to cement the presence of the gangs and marginalise the sectors affected by this social problem even more (Klein and Maxson, 2006). The observations made in Chapter II, regarding the relationship between the maras or gangs and criminal centres, support this thesis. Policies which are essentially based on repressive approaches also raise serious problems in a region where the machinery of criminal justice is characterised as inefficient (USAID, 2006), not very respectful of human rights (Amnesty International) and, as will be seen in this chapter, with serious problems of corruption.

In Costa Rica and Nicaragua, State abandonment on factors which are prejudicial to young people, and the concomitant increase of risk behaviours in young people, as shown by the absence of policies and strategies in this respect, highlight how exposed juvenile groups at risk may drift towards more violent forms or their proclivity to be reunited by organised crime within their structures of social coercion.

In this chapter we will go into more detail on the response of the criminal justice system to this problem, exploring the manner in which persons living in areas affected by the problems of the maras or gangs perceive judicial policies, and the role played by the police will also be analysed.

Police and Corruption

The Police According to Key Informants

The main and first point of contact of the maras and gangs with the legal system is the police. This is a link tinged with diverse types of relationships, which, as will be analysed, drift between legality and illegality. Various informants, each one in their social space, give their assessments and appraisals regarding this relationship.

When the opinions of informants from the security sector are analysed by carrying out in-depth interviews, the image of the police varies from country to country. Qualitatively, the first descriptor that crops up among those interviewed is "corruption". The country where the police are perceived most negatively is Guatemala, followed by El Salvador and, to a comparatively lesser extent, Honduras. No country can claim not to have problems in this respect, although official speak states otherwise. The differences mentioned refer to the intensity of the problems and not to their absence.

Among the population studied, the informants of Guatemala are those with the greatest clarity and extent of criteria regarding the role of the police and their relations with drug trafficking and organised crime. It might seem that, in this area, the problems in this country are more critical and more rooted in the socio-political and economic system. In Guatemala, the participants in the discussion groups, and others interviewed, point out that police corruption has been growing and forming "a framework of corruption" since the middle of the 1980s. For these informants, the generalised phenomenon of the framework of corruption has been characterised from "bribes" to "support work" activities for the drug traffickers. This activity would have developed, mainly, from the 1994 and 1995 period, being supplemented by the logistical support in kidnappings from the 1993 and 1994 period. In the opinion of those interviewed, these processes have been more visible from the year 2000 to date. From the year 2001 onwards, the corruption relationship between government officials, members of parliament and the police has been increasing. As the participants indicate, "the framework of corruption is official". This process gained greatest prominence between 2003 and 2004, a period when members of parliament and the national police were strongly linked.

There are two types of corruption which is important to highlight in this period: the protection of drug traffickers for the border to border sending or transfer of drugs and the "shipment seizure" operations (drugs) from drug traffickers. In the opinion of the participants and those interviewed: "The strength of the Zacapa-Petén, Izabal, San Marcos, Escuintla and Huehuetenango cartels have reached levels of influencing and guiding the appointment of police chiefs in order to obtain their support and reduce competition, both from the police itself and from emerging groups."

According to those interviewed, from 2004 to 2006, there was an increase of cases of "shipment seizure" where ex-policemen and serving policemen took part, and the influence of members of parliament was used. The formal framework is laid down, the appointment of new police chiefs involves a parallel description of functions. From this comes the expression used by different interviewees and participants in discussion groups, who speak of a "drug State" or a "bankrupted State". This expression refers to the State, the power voids and the growing influence of the maras and gangs, and it has an explanatory and analytical meaning with regard to the problem being discussed here. The participation of the officials, as has been pointed out, will include the distribution, the position of intermediaries and the control of the drug market. Consequently, it might seem that the confrontation with the police transcends the areas of maintaining order and legality, and goes into areas of market competitiveness, territoriality and the playing off of interests.

The informants from El Salvador and Honduras approach the problems in a more general manner, making reference to the increasingly

frequent appearance of the "social cleansing" processes. For them, the lack of control of crime and, specifically, of the mara phenomenon, has resulted in disorganised actions outside the law, applying an "informal criminal law", as some officials from the El Salvador's Attorney General's Office call it. The cleansing is awarded or gives rise to the "black shadow", an activity which would be found more in the middle or lower levels of the police. As the informants point out: "There are groups of the police who are allowed to do the cleansing, but surreptitiously." Similar opinions were encountered in Honduras. The permissibility of these actions is problematic; as was pointed out previously, the "war on gangs explains gangs being mobilised". The State is obliged to confront the issue of the gangs, but not with policies which foster processes of internal cohesion of the gangs, at the same time that they destroy the State of Law on which the public policies must be based.

The corruption problem is structural and inherent to the very functioning of the State and society: it is found in the socio-cultural reality of the functioning of the communities, the human links in the network of primary human relations, familiarity and the conditions of forms of specific identity of levels of belonging.

We have to compare the extent of institutionalisation of the corruption framework that may involve the police, and also the freedom of the middle and low levels in the "cleansing operations", with the relationship between mara members and policemen.

With regard to this extent, there is a consensus between the informants and the interviewees of the three countries.

There are primary links from one sector of the police with the maras and gangs. In different cases they are their neighbours: known ones, relatives or simply their like. Laissez-faire and letting things happen, tolerance, bribery or simply business supplementing one's income when faced with low salaries, seems to be a daily reality in this duality. As a young gang member in Guatemala commented, "after mixing with us for a few weeks, the policemen become uniformed mara members." He made this comment not to establish an exclusive reference to the fact that he became a friend or partisan, but in the sense that he would acquire a certain complicity. This is a common opinion among members of the maras and gangs, the key informants and those interviewed. The police seem to play a variety of roles, which, as was pointed out previously, move within a setting of legality and illegality. It is a scenario where multiple interests and commitments come together with the obligations of the post.

The generalised perception that the police in these countries are corrupt is reflected in the results from the surveys of local residents of communities where the maras or gangs are present. Although significant differences are noted between the countries (Guatemala: 36%; El Salvador: 36%; Honduras: 51%; Nicaragua: 16%; Costa Rica: 27%). Costa Rica and Nicaragua, once again, differentiate themselves as societies in which the problem is less serious. The question assesses, in general terms, the behaviour of the police, with which the interviewees assessed the overall performance of the police force. In this respect, here those interviewed in Guatemala gave more weight to the fear of reprisals, which is evidenced in the very high percentage (23%) of "don't knows" or non-response compared with the other countries (El Salvador: 3%; Honduras: 9%). This could explain why here Honduras appears with the police assessed as the most corrupt, unlike other questions (as will be illustrated further on), where it is Guatemala that seems to be considered as having the greatest police corruption.

How Different Population Groups Perceive the Police

None of the populations interviewed has a favourable view of the police authorities. The most critical scenario is in Guatemala, both in the views expressed in the qualitative data and in the data in table 30. Nonetheless, the perception in Nicaragua is significantly less unfavourable than in the rest of the region, possibly as a result of the preventative policy what has characterised it.

Table 30

Informants who State that there is Nothing Good about the Police
(Percentages)

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Costa Rica	Nicaragua
Gang members	(N=116)	(N=138)	(N=124)	(=97)	(=98)
Nothing	46	47	60	—	6
Don't know/ Not reported	47	28	9	44	37
Ex-gang members	(N=57)	(=50)	(=100)		
Nothing	26	52	54	—	—
Don't know/ No response	65	14	12	—	—
Non-gang members	(N=68)	(=86)	(=78)	(=74)	(=79)
Nothing	32	21	17	38	9
Don't know/ No response	29	19	6	4	28
Relatives of gang members	(N=100)	(=100)	(=100)		
Nothing	24	34	24	—	—
Don't know/ No response	68	23	10	—	—
Neighbours	(N=100)	(=107)	(=100)	(=115)	(=125)
Nothing	28	36	17	46	8
Don't know/ No response	39	6	12	6	33

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Although, as shown in table 30, the levels of perception of the populations studied, in terms of assessing the police, show comparative variations, the percentages are high and show a trend of not finding anything good in the police, or not wanting to or not being able to refer to it. This situation raises a concern about the image that the population has of this State body.

It is noticed that the perception among the population of young mara or gang members and their relatives is consistent in Guatemala, and a little less so in El Salvador and Honduras. There are significant differences here between these two populations. As far as ex-mara members are concerned, in their capacity as people recently involved, with all of the implication that may still exist, their perception is significantly consistent compared with the perception of the mara members of the three countries mentioned.

When the population of neighbours and young people not in the maras was analysed, a major similarity was found: both groups tend to classify the police in the same way, showing similar trends. When it comes to establishing differences between the countries, as was indicated previously, Guatemala has the most critical scenario with regard to the police. El Salvador has a slightly less critical scenario and Honduras has the best recognition of the advantages of the police among neighbours, young people not in the maras and relatives of young mara or gang members. Obviously, this does not mean that the sanctioning judgements on the police are abandoned.

The Police According to Neighbours, Shopkeepers and Hauliers

One of the central perceptions in the institutional functioning of a society has to do with the opinions and evaluations that the populations have of its authorities. What do the residents of communities with mara or gang problems think about the police? To what extent are they happy with the performance of the police?

As table 31 shows, the degree of dissatisfaction that the data reflects is high. The is particularly the case in Guatemala, where almost 70% of the population is "very unsatisfied" with the police. This would reinforce the data provided by the in-depth interviews. Costa Rica and El Salvador express similar degrees of dissatisfaction with the police. Nicaragua and Honduras are the countries where there is a greater degree of satisfaction. However, it is worth stressing that, in Honduras, a high number of people did not reply to this question.

Table 31

Satisfaction of Local Residents With the Action of the Police or the Army in their Neighbourhood

(Percentages)

	Guatemala (N=100)	**El Salvador** (N=107)	**Honduras** (N=100)	**Costa Rica** (N=125)	**Nicaragua** (N=115)
A lot	4	14	23	20	10
Some	23	19	29	25	32
Little	32	35.5	22	35	25
Nothing	37	24	4	17	32
Don't know/ No response	4	7.5	22	3	1
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Regardless of the degree of dissatisfaction expressed, there is an extensive perception that the gangs act without the police providing an appropriate response. When the residents of areas with maras or gangs were asked if they have seen that the police acts against the maras and gangs in their neighbourhoods when they commit crimes, nearly half of those surveyed said "no" (Guatemala: 48%; El Salvador: 46%; Honduras: 25%; Nicaragua: 41%; Costa Rica: 47%) – with the sole exception of Honduras, where there is a perception of greater police action or belligerency. This item of data should, in any case, be set in a context with what is pointed out in Chapter III, that almost all of the gang members interviewed have been detained or imprisoned at some time. It is highly likely that the police are not acting in an appropriate manner to control the behaviour of the gangs in these neighbourhoods, but, at the same

time, there is certainly evidence of a police pressure that is repressive, but not necessarily effective or efficient.

It is also clear that, except for Nicaragua where there is a greater tradition of collaboration between authorities and populations, the police response is generally carried out without any coordination with the residents of these communities (Guatemala: 92%; El Salvador: 92%; Honduras: 92%; Nicaragua: 82%; Costa Rica: 89%).

An additional aspect which expresses another dimension of police corruption emerges when residents and shopkeepers of the districts or neighbourhoods are asked: "Where do the mara members get the weapons?" A link with the police is drawn from the answers of these informants (see table 32).

Table 32

Where Gang Members' Arms come from, According to Local Residents
(Percentages)

	Guatemala (N=142)	**El Salvador** (N=134)	**Honduras** (N=201)
They steal them	17	18	29
Complicity with the police and Government officials which includes the police	36	27	26
They buy them 9	8	8	
Contraband	3	19	2
Arms dealers	6	4	4
They make them 0	6	9	
Don't know/No response	28	11	4

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

It is worth noting that the highest category for this population in the arms and suppliers relationship is the police.

In the case of shopkeepers and hauliers of the districts that have maras, the relationship is shown in table 33.

Table 33

Where Gang Members' arms Come from, According to Shopkeepers and Hauliers
(Percentages)

	Guatemala (N=125)	**El Salvador** (N=133)	**Honduras** (N=196)
Assaults, assaults on the police	28	25	53
Complicity with the police	22	12	13
They make them	19	5	10
Organised crime, drugs	8	4	10
Purchases	5	6	7
Contraband	5	12	2
State officials	2	4	2
Don't know/No response	12	29	2

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

The link between the source of the arms and the police is very significant in each of the three countries (Guatemala: 50%; El Salvador: 36%; Honduras: 66%). It is important to point out again that, in the case of Honduras, the police have a less impaired image and are shown less negatively by those interviewed, including relatives of mara members. We imagine that this difference of opinion is due to the programmes that were developed in the last government administration on the subject matter of "safer communities", the objective of which was to get the communities involved with the issues of citizen safety and with the police bodies. This programme had the support of the communities that took part in the project and those who were advised of it; it resulted in very good experiences and expectations. It is possible that these programmes, combined with less confrontation between the police and the maras, announced by the new government, have had an influence in creating a more positive image of the police among the communities and the shopkeepers.

This institutional vulnerability is not exclusive to Central America, nor is it the first time that it is associated with the genesis and dynamics of the gangs. Desmond Arias (2006) advised of the possible link between gangs, institutions weakened by corruption and organised crime, and its impact on the basic rights of citizens.

Table 34 shows the answers in respect of who, out of the police and mara members, decides on the amount of money that must be collected as a "tax".

Table 34

Who Decides the Amount of the "Tax", According to Ex-gang Members

	Guatemala (n=22)	**El Salvador** (n=26)	**Honduras** (n=36)
The police	73	58	50
The mara	9	35	47
Both	9	8	3
Don't know/ No response	9	—	—
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

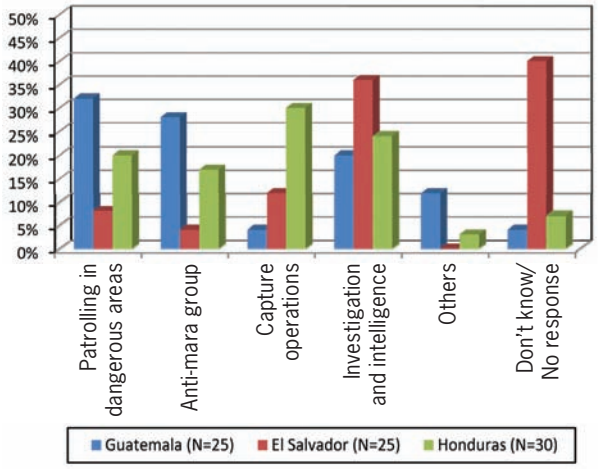
For Guatemala, which has the most critical scenario according to the in-depth interviews, the preponderance of the police is greater in the decision-making ability. 73% say that the police decides. Only 9% say that it is the mara or gang. El Salvador shows a midway trend with a 58%/35% relationship, and, Honduras shows a practically split scenario of 50% against 47% for both parties making the decision. It could be argued that, at a higher level of corruption, the police have greater influence or decision on the amount to be paid. There is a correlation between the qualitative and quantitative data. The trend, with its variations, but in accordance with what has already been analysed, is consistent in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

The questionnaire for policemen investigated the type of measures that are applied to combat the phenomenon of the gangs in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. It can be seen that police investigation, followed by patrolling of more dangerous areas, are the measures most frequently mentioned (chart 22).

Graph 22

Strategies used by the Police to Solve the Mara Problem

(Percentages)

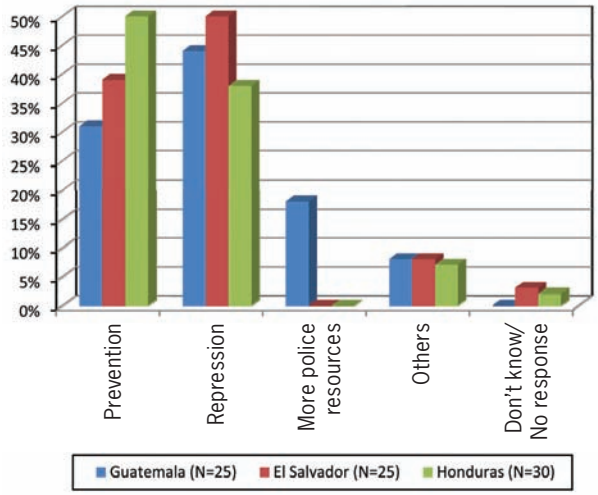


Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Graph 23

Suggestions by Police Officers about how to Solve the Mara Problem

(Percentages)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

It is interesting to contrast this piece of data with that produced when the police were asked about what type of measures they think would be most effective for combating the phenomenon. Here a very significant percentage of the police in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras went for measures of a repressive type; however, an even greater percentage went for preventative measures of a social type – actions in which the police could play an important role, per the police model aimed at problem solving (Goldstein, 1990).

It is interesting to note that not only do the neighbours perceive a sparse degree of coordination or collaboration between the police and the community, but the police authorities also have the same perception. The sample size of the surveys with policemen is small, and the sample is not representative, but the piece of data, even if it taken simply as a qualitative indication, can only suggest a lack of common ground between the

community and the police, which illustrates a possible route for the development of more effective policies.

Table 35

Community Collaboration to Prevent the Presence of Maras and Gangs, According to Policemen

(Percentages)

	Guatemala (n=25)	El Salvador (n=25)	Honduras (n=30)
Yes, it does collaborate	48	24	63
No, it does not collaborate	52	76	37
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

The Police According to Ex-mara Members

The survey with ex-mara members, incidentally, also highlights a high level of police corruption. As to whether the mara pays bribes to the police, the opinions of ex-mara members are in table 36.

Table 36

Payment of Bribes by the Mara to the Police, According to Ex-gang Members

(Percentages)

	Guatemala (N=41)	El Salvador (N=40)	Honduras (N=60)
Yes	88	65	88
No	8	25	7
Don't know/No response	4	10	5
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

According to table 36, the average of the three countries that confirm that there is such a payment to the police is 77%.

The police are ready to acknowledge that corruption is a problem. From a set of structured interviews conducted in the three countries, with active policemen in areas with maras, the answers to the question, "Do you think that there is corruption in the police system?" are summarised in table 37.

Table 37

Existence of Corruption in The Police System, According to the Police

	Guatemala (n=25)	El Salvador (n=25)	Honduras (n=30)
Yes	52	52	52
No	40	28	43
Don't know/No response	8	20	3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

Although the population studied per country was not selected by choosing probabilistic methods but by common sense, and using small samples, a significant trend of opinion of accepting the existence of police corruption is noticed. The forms of corruption that they describe are: bribes, screening information, special payments, concealment and policemen who are also mara members.

It is inferred from the data that there is quite a generalised climate of dissatisfaction with police work, and a quite extensive perception of corruption among different social players, especially in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In addition, not insignificant percentages of residents of the area with gang presence consider that the police do not act against the gangs, and, when it does, it does not coordinate its activities with the community.

The Police According to Gang Members in Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Although the violent groupings of Costa Rica and Nicaragua have not established the negotiating links and relationships already generalised in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, agreements that bring an apparent reciprocity are already identified. Since this section analyses the possibility of development of the links among the gangs in their incipient state with the police, only the cases of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the only countries in this state, are considered.

When asked what has been heard about apparent payments by the members of violent groupings to the police and other groups in authority, the trends are very revealing (table 38).

Table 38

Existence of Payments from Members of Violent Groups to the National Policeand other Groups in Authority, According to the Active Young People
(Percentages)

	Costa Rica (N=97)	**Nicaragua** (N=98)
Yes	65	38
No	22	57
Don't know/No response	13	5
Total	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

According to this information coming from active young people in the gangs in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, there is a deterioration in the levels of corruption in the police. As illustrated, the young people who say that there are payments or bribes to the police represent considerable percentages. Although this data might be exaggerated, insofar as there is the suspicion of a relationship of such nature, the trend is still worrying. The probability of bribes, the payment of contacts, favours and negotiations is present.

If the issues are analysed from the other angle (policemen and other authorities that may have paid the violent groupings to carry out special "jobs and favours"), the (smaller amount of) data collected– including Costa Rica and Nicaragua – shows the same trends between countries and establishes an apparent business relationship, which might appear, for all of the reasons previously indicated, to be a mutually convenient, gainful activity.

Table 39

Active Young People that say that they are Aware of Payments to the Gangs from the National Police

(Percentages)

	Costa Rica (N=97)	**Nicaragua** (N=98)
Yes	65	38
Yes	35	24
No	61	71
Don't know/No response	4	5
Total	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

If there are bribes and buying of favours, there are therefore deals. The data gives us an approximate idea of the estimated amounts in these deals. Based on the average, for example, of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, it is estimated that the amount "traded" is US$68 for the former and US$39 for the latter. This data is in reference to occasional payments. This means that they are not necessarily paid every week or fortnight. In the opinion of those interviewed, the periods are three weeks or a month, although it is possible that they may be repeated in a more systematic manner. What is important is that the process has already begun. Going from a less systematic and formal model, to more systematic processes, is only a matter of time and organisational capacity.

The "success" demonstrated in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, in addition to the processes of globalisation and strategic alliances of the maras and the weakness in the area of prevention and security demonstrated by both countries – but mainly in Costa Rica – plus the interest of groups of active young people in evolving into mara member models, means that the development of the problems in the current circumstances is probable and effective. It may be that the systems for change are not the same, but the possibility of change would seem to exist.

With regard to the existence of other links between the violent groups and the police, the trends that Costa Rica and Nicaragua are showing are quite similar (table 40).

Table 40

Active Young People that say that Links Exist Between the Violent Groups and the Police

(Percentages)

	Costa Rica (N=97)	**Nicaragua** (N=98)
Yes	33	27
No	58	68
Don't know/No response	9	5

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

In addition to the payments, the active young people state other links with the police, with similar values being recorded, but each country also has its special features (table 41).

Table 41

Active Young People that say that there is a Link Between the Violent Groups and the National Police, per the type of Link
(Percentages)

	Costa Rica (N=32)	**Nicaragua** (N=26)
Exchange of information	28	23
Help from the police	3	23
Negative complicity	16	27
Bribe	—	8
Rivalry	—	15
Exchange of drugs	22	—
Friendly relationship	9	—
Conflictive relations	6	—
Deals	6	—
Family links	3	—
Agreement to maintain order	—	4
Don't know/No response	6	—
Total	**100**	**100**

Source: Drawn up on the basis of the questionnaires.

The variables, such as exchanging of information and complicity, are two aspects that coincide among the opinions of active young people of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. For Nicaragua, the categories of rivalry and bribery, although lesser, indicate several varied degrees of links between both groups. Although the percentages are low, they express de facto situations, which indicate processes with a high probability of developing and positioning themselves within the social system. In the case of Costa Rica, in this size of analysis as in others, it is reaffirmed that the drug problem occupies one of the first lines of action of these groups. It has become the means and end of the action of the active young groups and of an apparently small group of the police, but its relevance is as yet unestimated.

Finally, it must be striking that, in Nicaragua, 23% of the young people say that they receive help from the police, thereby possibly highlighting the police action of a preventative nature in which this country has placed its greatest expectation of success, which is different among the other countries of the region, which is also shown in the work of the police by including ex-gang members in their preventative activities and the support that they receive in the operations to ensure order.

Chapter VII
Withdrawal, Leaving the Gangs

"I don't want to be a spokesman, I would like to go to Costa Rica, because I have some mates there and they tell me that life there is a carnival, and that everything is peaceful there; there is not much crime and what I want to do is to rest, I'm not that old, but I already feel old – I feel that life has treated me very badly, and I have to calm down."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

"Future projects? Let's say that in my case I don't think I have a future. Because of my tattoos, first point, the gangs. Because you are really very involved and unfortunately because you already have a tattoo on your face, you can't do anything, you don't accept the reality of life, as I accept my life. And I know that sooner or later, I am going to die. Why? Because of the tattoos I have on my face."

(Mara leader, El Salvador.)

Introduction

While going into a gang is easy, leaving it is not simple process, and it often does not even seem to be something attractive. To a large degree it means giving up friends in a context in which the development of conventional life plans is limited and faced with a society that rejects gang members. But that does not mean that it is impossible or infrequent. Those who study gangs using longitudinal designs have been able to record that the majority of gang members end up leaving behind their life as gang members tales (Thornberry et al., 2003). In the same way, the "crime and age curve" suggests that the majority of people stop committing crime once their transition to adult life is consolidated. These longitudinal studies start to document similar processes in relation to the link to gangs. Knowledge about this area, however, is still at an incipient stage.

In a review of recent literature, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) concluded that the majority of the studies on the process of leaving gangs are descriptive. Their interviews with gang members in the US city of St. Louis suggest that the leaving process is the result of the combination of maturing and getting older, though having been close to a situation of violence which made them reconsider their membership. According to other authors, one possible strategy would be to intervene in an assisting and rehabilitating manner after intense experiences of violence, when gang members could be more open to considering leaving the gang.

Facilitating the process of leaving the gangs by means of assistance policies, which offer support to those that want to do it, is certainly one of the control mechanisms that is most widespread in the comparative literature on gangs (Klein and Maxson, 2006). In this chapter, the leaving process will be explored and the opinions given in this respect by gang members, ex-gang members and their relatives.

Leaving the Gang According to Mara Members

First, the results of the in-depth interviews will be analysed and then we will move on to the results of the surveys. The in-depth interviews allude to the difficulty of the leaving process and even make reference to rules of an informal nature, which make this process more difficult.

> *"(…) desertion, no, if a man from an army deserts he is a traitor, so, many decide to desert because they can no longer stand the pressure from the clique or from the neighbourhood, (...). So, within the rules of the neighbourhood, anyone who deserts is a traitor and so is punished by death."*
>
> (Ex-mara leader, Guatemala.)

> *"It is not impossible, but it is definitely difficult in the way that, when ask your commanding officers, you have to be focused and you have to know, and you have to have all of the paperwork ready, you know. The paperwork is everything that speaks well of you within the gang, in other words (...) it is having killed someone, having done this or that. In other words, the homis take it into account when it comes to giving you permission, you know, what you have done for the gang. Then the homis decide if they will let you break away. It is either a case of you deserve it or you don't deserve it, because of what you have done, you know. (…) It's best they decide if you can leave that way... That is where the gang ends up brawling… They give you the green light and you have a general green light, all of the cliques…"*
>
> (Mara leader, Guatemala.)

Despite these declarations, in which a difficult, risk-laden view is painted, which include death, there are also testimonies in a different sense. In the interviews there are numerous testimonies of situations where gang members leave the gang without serious consequences.

> *"(…) I went out and I felt outside and I was alone, and it was when I started thinking that maybe my family needed me more than them. I went round with quite a large chain which had an 'MS' on it and I took it off, and I left them a piece of paper on the door of the house and told them why I was going (…) A couple of days later I met one of them who was the person who took me to them and he told me how things were, how the rules were with them, that if I was leaving that I should go, but that I should not stay close."*
>
> (Ex-mara member, Honduras.)

According to what is documented in the in-depth interviews, there is set of situations that make the leaving process viable, as they are considered worthy of respect by the gang or mara member. These situations are summarised in the following testimony:

> *"Look (…) if you've belonged to the gang and you don't want to continue in it, to be active, there are three important points that they respect; first, if you have been a Christian, they respect you a lot for that…if it is any other religion, but it really is, and you're not playing with things of God…the second point is that you may already have your wife and your children and you want to be a family, and the third point is that you may have a family and a job and you stay away, that they don't see you taking, smoking and using drugs."*
>
> (Repatriated mara member, Pandilla 18 gang, Guatemala.)

Criminological literature tends to mention factors of a structural type (for example, obtaining a good job, a good stable loving relationship) and cognitive factors (personal transformation) that are critical factors at the time of ceasing criminal careers. These same types of factors can help us to understand why, at a specific time, gang members consider leaving these groupings, as illustrated by the following testimony:

> *"(…) I thank God that I had an experience, I got to know a girl, and it was because of this girl that I started to leave the mara; then I had my own kid and, with my own kid, I started to realise that what I was doing was bad…"*
>
> (Ex-mara member, El Salvador.)

The different testimonies prove that both experiences have been possible. Some young mara members have left the gang by self-exclusion, taking the risk without it being difficult.

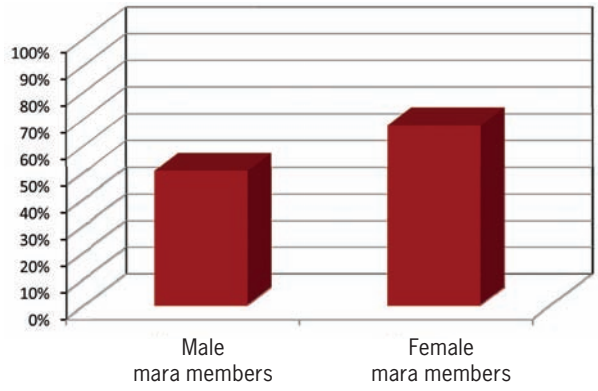
The results of the survey expand on what is documented in the in-depth interviews. Despite the stereotype that you cannot leave, the existence of rules that prohibit leaving and serious sanctions for those who do, when gang members were asked if there is anything that stops them from leaving the mara, the vast majority of the male gang members say that there is nothing (Guatemala: 68%; El Salvador: 69%; Honduras: 65%), and the female gang members say that there is even less to stop them (Guatemala: 76%; El Salvador: 83%; Honduras: 88%). Approximately half of those who say that there is something that stops them from leaving mention possible reprisals from the gang and, also in high percentages, the possibility of dying (it is not clear, however, if this reflects the fear of dying as part of the reprisals from one's own gang or the fear of dying at the hands of enemy gangs).

It is difficult to assess to what extent these reprisals actually happen, but the surveys with ex-mara members suggest, very clearly, that if they do, they are much less extensive than what is thought. Out of a total of 200 ex-mara members interviewed in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, only three of those asked about the consequences of having left the gang mention emnities with the mara or gang, and that is the harshest level of reprisals mentioned.

Graph 24

Possibility of an Alternative Life, According to Male and Female Mara Members

(Percentages, N=377 and 80 for men and women)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

As can be seen in chart 24, a sizeable percentage of the gang members state that, at some time, they were offered some life alternative to leave the group – opportunities which are generally offered, first, by loved ones

and, second, by religious institutions. NGOs are only mentioned in a minority of cases, and programmes carried out by the State are not mentioned at all.

It is important to stress that a large part of ex-mara members say that leaving the mara is a decision that they took by themselves, as was mentioned previously (Guatemala: 51%; Honduras: 36%; El Salvador: 41%).

Despite the stereotype that once in the mara you will always be in the mara and that gang members do not have the will or desire to leave, a high percentage of gang members (between 44% and 53%), express the desire to have an alternative life which lets them leave the gang. Generally, these young people who want to leave will want to have work and educational opportunities that allow them to leave their life as gang members behind. In fact, the majority of gang members acknowledge that they have thought about changing their way of life in the near future (Guatemala: 53%; El Salvador: 75%; Honduras: 68%).

This piece of data is backed-up in the surveys of relatives of gang members. When these relatives are asked if their gang member relatives have told them that they want to leave the mara, it is found that a significant percentage have shown that desire (Guatemala: 27%; El Salvador: 50%; Honduras: 40%). In addition, the majority of these relatives think that their gang member relatives could give up the mara and successfully become reintegrated into society (Guatemala: 62%; El Salvador: 83%; Honduras: 61%).

There is a gap between the high percentages of young mara and gang members who say that they have thought about the possibility of leaving the mara or gang and the lack of alternatives and systematic efforts to make it possible. In this respect, the social agents point out that society discriminates against these young people and does not offer them opportunities for a change of life. They also mention the lack of preparation and organisation that exists in the social institutions to fight this phenomenon. Among the NGO representatives and churches, opinion was almost unanimous that mara members are highly stigmatised by the rest of society, which negatively affects their possibilities of reintegration. Although there is the willingness of mara members to become reintegrated into society, it may be difficult for the change to happen if the opportunities from outside, whether institutional or family opportunities, are not available, or the environment is markedly hostile and tends to stigmatise.

It can be pointed out that leaving the mara or gang is difficult for four main reasons: fear of gang members, the loss of benefits acquired by the staying in the group, the lack of support from the State and the social rejection that exists.

Even so, the data from the in-depth interviews and the survey illustrate that it would be fatalistic to think that it is impossible for gang members to leave the gangs or that they do not want to do so. However difficult it may be for the leaving process to be configured, it is important to stress that there are ways. The families of gang members, firstly, and religious institutions seem to play an important role in facilitating options for these young people. It is very important, therefore, for new policies to be developed that contribute to the leaving process and facilitate alternative life-plan options for these young people. Also, for the high percentage that do not leave, additional information must be collected about the factors which tie them to the gang in order to successfully define appropriate interventions in these cases.

Life Plans

It is important to refer to the elements that allow gang members to be identified so as to think up and possibly build an alternative life plan.

First of all, we have the answer the direct question about having considered changing one's way of life, for example, by means of work or study. A majority of gang members (Guatemala: 53%; El Salvador: 75%; Honduras: 69%) state that they have considered changing their way of life by work and study. Although this also means that a very high percentage has not considered it, both pieces of data suggest, first, the need for different intervention strategies and, second, that considering changing the way of life, as a frequent response, shows a clear possibility of access for intervention programmes. Furthermore, this desire to leave shows that a majority of the young members of these maras or gangs think that there are better life options, which opens the door to a range of possible intervention strategies for the social reintegration of these young people.

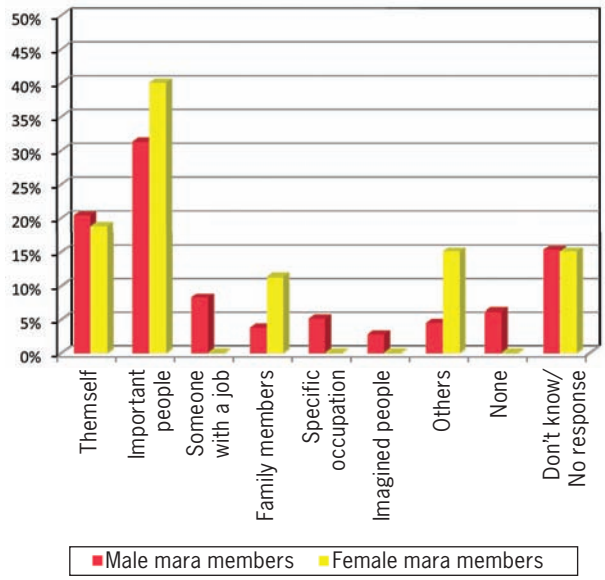
In the case of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, when they are asked how they would like to change their life, they mainly say going back to studying (Nicaragua: 49%; Costa Rica: 44%) and improving their standard of life (Nicaragua: 17%; Costa Rica: 37%).

The question relating to who they would like to become indicates possible courses and models of identification for these young people (chart 25).

Graph 25

Who they Would Like to Become

(Percentages, male mara members (N=377), female mara members (N=80))



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

About 20% of male and female mara members answer that they would like to become "themselves". This piece of data would prove the existence of a certain degree of satisfaction with their current life conditions. However, higher percentages mention that they would like to become an important real personality (for example: sportspersons, singers, actors and actresses). In general, they are personalities who are not controversial, rebellious or criminal. They identify with personalities characterised by high social recognition: famous, with power and wealth.

In the case of young mara and gang members, they also highlight the options for becoming someone with a trade or the mention of specific occupations. Both make clear the desire to have the possibility of obtaining economic income and occupying a recognised, socially accepted place. In addition, in the case of those who indicate specific occupations (bricklayer, preacher), the existence of clearer and more achievable course is seen.

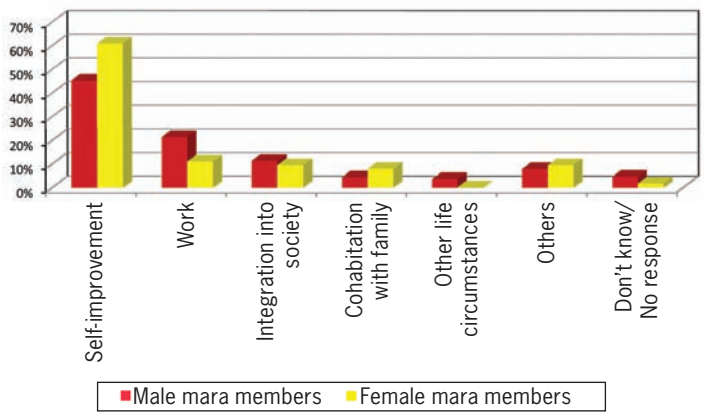
The percentage who do not know or do not respond demonstrated little clarity with regard to the courses for recognising an alternative identification model to the gang.

Another indicator, in this direction, comes from the answers to the question about who they would like to be if they were born again; among other answers, the one related to choosing another life option appears with particular emphasis (Guatemala: 48%; El Salvador: 60%; Honduras: 71%; Costa Rica: 71%; Nicaragua: 98%). In the answers to what type of option they would choose, those of self-improvement, which include study and work, stand out (chart 26).

Graph 26

Life Options Considered by Male and Female Mara Members

(Percentages, men: N=226, women: N=64)

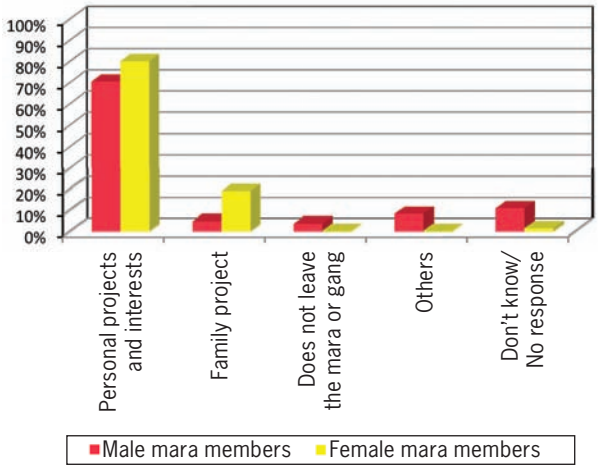


Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

Graph 27

What they would Like to Devote Themselves to if they Left the Mara

(Percentages, male mara members: N=377, female mara members N=80)



Source: Produced by the authors using questionnaires.

It is important to note that the women refer to the self-improvement option to the greatest degree (including: study, general training, being someone important and being a good person). Also, as a life alternative, the women mention the work option to a lesser degree than the men. They also mention family coexistence as an alternative life to the mara or gang to a greater extent than the men. This possibly comes from a patriarchal family option, an interpretation reinforced by the view that the female mara members demonstrate in their replies, about the family as a loving and protective space. Since all of the interviews with the female population were carried out in prison, it must be taken into consideration that imprisonment could bring in a factor of reflection and homesickness which magnifies the loving space of the family (chart 27).

The majority of the young people answer that they would like to devote time to personal plans and interests (such as studying, working, reintegration, rehabilitation) if they left the mara or gang. It is relevant that only a minority of male gang members state that they are not ready to leave the gang (a piece of data that is not even mentioned among the women). This demonstrates the possibility of visualising alternative plans to taking part in maras or gangs. It would therefore be necessary to provide real options for leaving the grouping together with programmes aimed at achieving successful and constructive reintegration.

It is striking that, in the case of female mara members, saying that they want to devote themselves to a family plan increases noticeably, demonstrating differences based on gender. This trend makes it clear that there can be aspects of personal development not covered by identification with the gang, which could be taken up by the programmes aimed at the reintegration of these young people. Mara and gang members state that, in two years' time, they see themselves with an alternative life plan (Guatemala: 33%; El Salvador: 44%; Honduras: 44%; Costa Rica: 77%; Nicaragua: 54%), although this does not always mean finally leaving the group. Also, the possible consequences of the risks arising out of participating in the maras or gangs are demonstrated, as they mention the possibility of being imprisoned (Guatemala: 14%; El Salvador: 5%; Honduras: 15%; Costa Rica: 2%; Nicaragua: not mentioned) or death (Guatemala: 7%; El Salvador: 3%; Honduras: 4%; Costa Rica: 1%; Nicaragua: 1%). In any case, the ability to visualise different options from their current way of life is demonstrated.

It is striking that, in ten years' time, they see themselves out of the mara or gang (Guatemala: 27%; El Salvador: 30%; Honduras: 44%), but, again, the possibility of being dead also crops up (Guatemala: 30%; El Salvador: 24%; Honduras: 11%). This data demonstrates the temporary vision that many gang members have of being a member of a gang, and also the possibility of reintegration of young people belonging to a mara. However, it is also obvious that staying in the gang brings with it serious consequences, including the possibility of dying, being imprisoned and a high social stigmatisation, which would eventually make the real options of successful reintegration into society difficult.

In the case of female mara members, in two years' time they say that they see themselves in an alternative plan (Guatemala: 68%; El Salvador: 60%; Honduras: 60%). The possibility of being dead appears in El Salvador and Honduras in percentages below 5% – in Guatemala it is not even mentioned.

In ten years' time, the percentages of young female mara members that perceive themselves outside of the mara are high (Guatemala: 60%; El Salvador: 60%; Honduras: 64%). However, the projection of having

died increases (Guatemala: 12%; El Salvador: 10%; Honduras: 8%). In all of the countries, the men consider the possibility of dying in considerably higher percentages than the women. For their part, the majority of the women see themselves outside of the mara, while the percentage of men that see themselves outside is much lower.

The contrast between the short-term vision and the ten-year projection demonstrates the greater presumption of one's own death as the time that one remains in the gang passes. The initial optimism becomes pessimism, reflected in the high probability of death. This data reinforces the concern for the possibilities of withdrawal, which should take place in the short term, as leaving is not automatically successful, not only because of the restrictions of the group, but also because of the objective possibilities of achieving it. Also, social policy intervention approach must take account of these differences, which are particularly cut across by the gender component.

Contrary to what is commonly recorded by the media, the public authorities and even NGOs and churches, with regard to the route of no return of entering the gang or the irrevocability of membership, this data suggests that the road to withdrawal is feasible, and there are possible connections on which to design some policies from the vision of the mara members.

As part of these possible future plans, the importance that the family has on their lives is considered. Although the figures of men and women are almost identical, significant differences are seen when the answer is broken down by gender, with regard to why they think this. The men emphasise the benefit itself and the sense of possession or the hope that they place in the family, followed by the role of the protector and provider. The women, for their part, emphasise the family as an authority in which they place the sense of possession, protection and the reforming role, in general, with a positive assessment. Although this piece of data does not necessarily mean that the importance given to the family is an exclusionary value of the participation in gangs, or that the participation prevents having a family, it does highlight the potential related to life plans, which should be taken up in the policies.

It is interesting to advise that there is a clear gender difference in the offers for withdrawal. The men have been offered alternatives for leaving the mara to a lesser degree than the women. The offer comes mainly from the family, but for women it is more accentuated. This is perhaps because of a trend of general culture in which there is a more insistent concern for the fate of the women than for that of the men.

On the other hand, despite the fact that the majority of women state that there is nothing to stop them from leaving the mara, a significant difference is seen in the answers from these populations, which could reveal the existence of a greater relative pressure on the men than on the women. The percentage of women mara members that reply "nothing" to the question about the existence of any hindrance to leaving the gang is higher, in all of the countries, than the percentage of the young male mara members who also replied in this way to the same question. In addition, except for El Salvador, the percentage of those who do feel hindrances to leaving the gang is higher in the men. It is important also to note that 7% of the women who have received an offer of an alternative life say that one of the reasons why they did not leave the mara or gang is the taste for drugs; also, 5% point out the fact that their partner belongs to the gang. Men and women therefore require different considerations when the intervention and prevention programmes are designed.

References

Alfaro, C. (1999). Develando el género: elementos conceptuales básicos para entender la equidad. Costa Rica: Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano.

Arana, A. (2005). «How the street gangs took Central America». Foreign Affaires, May–June 2005.

Berman, M. L. (1997). No robarás ¿Es posible ganarle a la corrupción? Buenos Aires: Editorial del Belgrano.

Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Office of Regional Sustainable Development (2006). Central America and Mexico Assessment. US.

Buynic, M., Morrison, A. and Shifter, M. (1999). La violencia en América Latina y el Caribe: Un marco de referencia para la acción. Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo.

Barth, F. (1976). Los grupos étnicos y sus fronteras. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Briceño, G. Y Chacón, E. (2001). El género también es un asunto de hombres. Costa Rica: UICN.

Capra, F. (1985). El punto crucial. Barcelona: Integral.

Cardoso de Oliveria, R. (1992). Etnicidad y estructura social. Mexico: Ediciones de la Casa Chata.

Castells, M. (1998). La era de la información: economía, sociedad y cultura (Vols. 1–3). Madrid: Alianza.

Cazes, D. (1993). La dimensión social del género: posibilidades de vida para mujeres y hombres en el patriarcado. México: Consejo Nacional de Población.

Chomsky, N. (1993). Año 501: La conquista continúa. Madrid: Libertarias/Prodhufi.

CMF (1998). ¿Quién soy?, ¿quiénes somos?, ¿quién son? Costa Rica: Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia.

Costa, P. O., Pérez-Tornero, M. and Tropea, F. (1996). Tribus urbanas. El ansia de identidad juvenil: entre el culto a la imagen y la autoafirmación a través de la violencia. Barcelona: Paidós.

Dammert, L. and Díaz, J. (2006). «¿Politización de la seguridad o securitización de la política?» Boletín del programa Seguridad y Ciudadanía. Nº2. FLACSO-Chile. http: www. flacso.cl/flacso/biblos.php?code=1747

Decker, S. H. and Lauritsen, J. L. (2002). «Breaking the bonds of membership. Leaving the gang.» In. Huff, C. R. (ed.) Gangs in América, pp. 103–122. USA: Sage.

Decker, S. and Van Winkle, B. (1996). Life in the gang. Family, friends and violence. US: Cambridge.

DeFleur, M. L. and Ball-Rokeach, S. (1989). Theories of mass communication. White Plains, New York: Longman.

Delgado, J. (2005). «La criminalización de la Juventud Centroamericana: el predominio de las políticas públicas represivas.» (Unpublished document).

Delgado, J. (2001). «Políticas de prevención de la violencia y la delincuencia juvenil». Tomado de Foro-taller sobre pandillas y maras en Centroamérica.

Desmond Arias, E. (2006). «The dynamics of criminal governance: networks and social order in Rio de Janeiro». Journal of Latin American Studies, 38, 293–325.

ECLAC (2005). Statistical yearbook for Latin America and the Caribbean. www.eclac.org/publicaciones

Wikipedia encyclopedia: Mara Salvatrucha. http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mara_Salvatrucha.

ERIC, IDIES, IUODP, NITAPLAN and DIRINRPO (2001–2004). Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica (Vols. 1–3). El Salvador: UCA.

Fabregat, C. E. (1984). Estado, etnicidad y biculturalismo. Barcelona: Península.

Fagan, J. and Freeman, R. (1999). Crime and Work. Crime and Justice: A Review of Research, 25, 225–290.

Fagan, J., Holland, J. and West, V. (2003). «Reciprocal effects of crime and incarceration in New York city neighborhoods». Fordham Urban Law Journal. 30.

Feixa, C. (1998). De Jóvenes, bandas y tribus. Barcelona: Ariel.

Ferro, C. and Quirós, A. M. (1994). Mujer y religión. Instituto de Estudios de la Mujer (IEM). Universidad Nacional. Heredia, Costa Rica.

Frattini, Eric. (2002). Mafia, S.A. 100 años de Cosa Nostra. Madrid: Espasa.

FAPPPH. Fundación Arias para la paz y el progreso humano. (2006). La cara de la violencia urbana en América Central. Costa Rica: FAPPPH.

Goldstein, H. (1990). Problem oriented policing. New York: MacGraw-Hill.

Gordon, R. A., Lahey, B. B., Kawal, E., Loeber, R., Stouthamer-Loeber M. and Farrington, D. (2004). «Antisocial behavior and youth gang membership: selection and socialization». Criminology, 42(5), 55–88.

Hagedorn, J. M. (2006). «The global impact of gangs». In J. M. Short and L. A. Hughes (ed.) Studying youth gangs (pp. 181–192). Estados Unidos: Altamira Press.

Hagedorn, John. (2002). «Gangs and the informal economy». En Huff, R. Gangs in America, (pp. 101–120). Estados Unidos: Sage.

Hobbes, T. (1996). Leviatán. México D. F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Hobsbawm, E. (2001). Bandidos. Barcelona: Crítica.

Homies Unidos (1998). Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador. Más allá de la vida loca. El Salvador: UCA.

Homies Unidos, Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, Rädda Barnen and Save the Children USA (1998). Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador. Más allá de la vida loca. El Salvador: UCA.

Horowitz, R. (1983). Honor and the American Dream. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Horowitz, R. (1987). «Community tolerance of gang violence». Social Problems. 34(5): 437–450.

Implications for Corrections. Report No. 161. Research Branch. Correctional Service of Canada, 1–56.

Jones, D. (2004a). «Street Gangs: A Review of Theory, Interventions, and Implications for Corrections». Report No. 161. Research Branch. Correctional Service of Canada. September, 2004. Canada.

Jones, D. (2004b). «Rapport de recherche. Les gangs de rue: examen des théories et des interventions, et leçons à tirer pour le SCC». No. 161, Septembre 2004. Direction de la Recherche. Canada.

Jones, D., Vince, R., Stys, I. and Wilson, C. (September 2004). Street Gangs: A Review of Theory, Interventions, and Implications for Corrections. Report No. 161. Research Branch. Correctional Service of Canada. September 2004. Canada.

Jones, D., Vince, R., Stys, I. and Wilson, C. (2004). Street Gangs: A Review of Theory, Interventions, and Implications for Corrections. Reporte de Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

Klein, M. (1971). Street gangs and street workers. Englewoods Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Klein, M. W. and Maxson, C. (2006). Street gang patterns and policies. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lacourse, E., Nagin, D., Tremblay, R. E., Vitaro, F.and Claes, M. (2003). «Developmental trajectories of boys' delinquent group membership and facilitation of violent behaviors during adolescence». Development and Psychopathology, 15, 183–197.

Lagarde, M. (1992). Identidad de género. Curso ofrecido en el «Olof Palme». Managua, Nicaragua.

Lagarde, M. (1993). Género e identidades genéricas. Metodología de trabajo con mujeres. FUNDETEC-UNICEF. Second edition. Ecuador.

Lagarde, M. (1994). La regulación social del género: el género como filtro de poder. Consejo Nacional de Población. Mexico.

La Fontaine, J. (1985). Drama, ritual y conocimiento secreto. Barcelona: Lerna.

Liebel, M. (2000). «Pandillas y maras: señas de identidad». Revista Envío. http: www.envio. org.ni/articulo.php?id=1161

Mackenzie, A. and Johnson, S. (2003). «A Profile of Women Gang Members in Canada». Report No. 138. Research Branch. Correctional Service of Canada. April 2003.

Maffesoli, M. (1990). El tiempo de las tribus. Barcelona: Icaria.

Mateu-Gelabert, P. (2004, February). «Sueños, bandas y pistolas: la interacción entre la violencia adolescente y la inmigración en un vecindario de la ciudad de Nueva York». Revista Española de Investi-

gación Criminológica. Recuperado 1 de junio del 2006, de http://www.criminologia.net

Mateu-Gelabert, P. and Lune, H. (2003, December). «School violence: the bidirectional conflict flow between neighborhood and school». City and community, 2, 4, 353–368.

Menocal, C. (2006). «Cuando las mujeres ya no le sirven a la mara. Utilizadas como objeto sexual y para cobrar impuestos, tienen una vida muy corta en la pandilla». Prensa Libre, Guatemala. http: www.prensalibre. com/pl/2006/aabril/23/139925

Moore, J. (1991). Going down to the Barrio: homeboys and homgirls in change. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Moore, J. and Vigil, J. (1989). «Chicano gangs: Group norms and individual factors related to adult criminality». Aztlan 18: 34–42.

Ochoa, C. F. (1996). La paz y las relaciones interétnicas. Costa Rica: Universidad para la Paz.

OIT (2003). Tendencias mundiales del empleo. OIT.

Ojeda, I. (2005). «Maras en Centroamérica. Pobreza con rostro de pandilla. De la «guerra de baja intensidad» a la «Super Mano Dura»». http://rebelion.org/noticia.pdh?id=24158

Parker, Meashan and Aldridge (1998). Illegal Leisure. The normalization of adolescent recreational drug use. London Routledge.

Pattillo, M. (1998). «Sweet mothers and gangbangers: managing crime in a black middle-class neighborhood». Social Forces. 76(3): 747–774.

Paz, C. and Ramírez, L. R. (1993). «Derechos Humanos: niños, niñas y adolescentes privados de libertad». Legal and sociological investigation carried out by the Instituto de Estudios

Comparados en Ciencias Penales de Guatemala, coordinated by ILANUD. Guatemala: DISA.

PCO (2003). Programa Construyendo Oportunidades. «Presentación del programa y algunas reflexiones teórico-conceptuales para el trabajo con adolescentes». Secretaría Técnica. San José, Costa Rica.

Quiros, E. (1997). «Sus poderes, mis poderes, nuestros poderes». Article from the «Sentir, pensar y enfrentar el problema de la violencia intrafamiliar» series. Module 5, Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo de la Mujer y la Familia. San José, Costa Rica.

Reguillo, R. (2000). Emergencia de culturas juveniles. Estrategias del desencanto. Colombia: Norma.

Rodgers, D. (2006). «Living in the shadow of death: gangs, violence and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996–2002». Journal of Latin American Studies, 38, 267–292.

Rosales, L. (2003). «Reseña sobre la economía informal y su organización en América Latina». Global Labour Institute (GLI). www.globallabour.org/la_economia_infor mal.htm

Rubio, M. (2003 May) Maras y delincuencia juvenil en Centroamérica. Paz Pública, Universidad de los Andes, Bogota. Instituto Universitario de Investigación sobre Seguridad Interior, UNED, Madrid.

Santacruz-Giralt, M. L. and Concha-Eastman, A. (2002). Barrio adentro. La solidaridad violenta de las pandillas. El Salvador: IUDOP.

Save the Children UK (2002). Las maras en Honduras. Investigación sobre pandillas y violencia juvenil. Honduras: Prinsa.

Scott, G. (2007). ´It's sucker's outfit´ How urban gangs enable and impede the reintegration of ex-convicts. Ethnography, 5 (1), 107–140.

Sharp, C., Aldridge, J. and Medina, J. J. (2006). «Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: findings from the 2004 Offending», Crime and Justice Survey. London: Home Office Online Report 14/06.

Shoemaker, P. J. and Reese, S. D. (1996) Mediating the message. White Plains, New York: Longman.

SIEMCA (2001). «Entradas, salidas, migración bruta y saldos migratorios por grupos de nacionalidad y país de registro». http://www.siemca.iom.int/scripts/foxisapi.dll/Siemca. Consultas.Process?Method=Consultas.

Soto, R. (1998). «Vacilar» en las esquinas (Parte 1). El complejo mundo de las «pandillas» juveniles. «Pandillas Juveniles en la Región Metropolitana», study carried out by the Escuela de Antropología Social de la Universidad Bolivariana para el INJUV, in December 1998. http://www.puntofinal. cl/990625.esp

Strange, S. (2001). La retirada del Estado. Barcelona: Icaria editorial/ Interpón Oxfam.

Sullivan, M. L. (2006). «Are «gang» studies dangerous? Youth violence, local context and the problem of reification». En Short, J. and Hughes, L. A. (ed.) Studying youth gangs, (pp. 15–35). Estados Unidos: Altamira.

Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A. and Tobin, K. (2003). Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

UNDP (2003). «Segundo informe sobre desarrollo humano en Centroamérica y Panamá». http://www.estadonacion.or.cr/Region2003/Paginas/indice.html

USAID Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, Office of Regional Sustainable Development (2006). «Central America and Mexico Gang Assesment».

Venkatesh, S. A. (1997). «The social organization of street gang activity in an urban ghetto». The American Journal of Sociology. 103(1): 82–111.

Vidales R. (1988). Utopía y Liberación: el amanecer del indio. Costa Rica: DEI.

Vigil, D. (1988). Barrio gangs. Austin: Texas University Press.

Vigil, D. (2002). A rainbow of gangs: Street cultures in the mega-city. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Weiler, R. (1994). La Violence chez les jeunes et l'activité des bandes de jeunes. Réponses aux préoccupations communautaires. Fédération canadiense des municipalités. Canada.

Zatz, M. and E. L. Portillos. (2000). «Voices from the barrio: Chicano/a gangs, familias and communities». Criminology. 38(2):369–402.

Appendices
Glossary

Brincadera: a test of physical and emotional resistance to pain, in which a certain number of people (three or four) jump on the person wishing to join and attack them with kicks and punches.

Calentamiento: group punishment carried out by pushing the person into the middle of a circle and beating them.

Chequeo: See *calentamiento.*

Clique: Primary groups which sub-divide the *mara* or gang. They have control over territory at a local level (district or neighbourhood).

Destroller: Corruption of the English *destroyer*, referring to destruction, annihilation.

Drive-by: Shoot from a moving car at a gang member or non gang member.

First word: Has the job of leading the meeting and acting as a spokesperson.

Gangsta rap: Gangsta rap is a sub-genre of rap music in which the lyrics focus more on the stories of gangsters and drugs without conveying a constructive social message. It is principally a thematic sub-genre which is expressed in different sub-styles of hip-hop[1].

Gatillero: Within the group, this person has the job of shooting. It is also used to refer to a person's enjoyment of shooting at something in a violent manner.

Hip-hop: Hip-hop is a cultural and musical movement which came about at the beginning of the 70s in the Hispanic-American and African-American communities of the New York neighbourhoods of Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn[2].

Homeboys: See homies.

Homies: Comes from *homeboys*[3], refers to nearby people (friends from the neighbourhood) with whom they have grown up and whom they trust.

Jenga: A meeting of three or more cliques.

Jomboys: See homies.

---

[1] Taken from http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangsta_rap.

[2] Taken from http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hip_hop.

[3] Taken from http://urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=homey.

Master Jomi/Homie: Occupies the position of sub-chief in a group of homies.

Ojales: Missions or tasks which must be completed in order to gain power within the group.

Pega: Refers to industrial glue used as a drug.

Pegadita: See *calentamiento.*

Piedra: Cocaine derivative.

Ranflero: Has an established hierarchy. Administers the clique's money and weapons and calls meetings.

Second word: Leads the meetings and acts as spokesperson at more important meetings.

Annex

Box A

Empirical Studies on Gangs in Central America

Reference
Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment – Bureau for Latin America and Caribbean Affairs Office of Regional Sustainable Development, 2006.
Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data
Interviews with those responsible for governmental and non-governmental programmes, vulnerable young people, gang members and ex gang members. Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Research and meetings with experts in Washington.
Thematic axes
Effective programmes, original causes, recruitment to the gang, policies of government, donors and organisations, current responses to the issue, security status, border problems, deportations, role of the mass media and gang members in prison.
Investigation design
Cross-section
Design or analysis strategies
Qualitative/expert analysis by country

Reference
La cara de la violencia urbana en América Central – Fundación Arias para la Paz y del Progreso Humano, 2006.
Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data
Interviews with specialists, representatives of NGOs and mara leaders. Quality newspapers and academic theses, recent statistical data from the Judiciary, the national police, Ministry of Health and Ministry of the Interior. International bodies attached to the United Nations. Specialised legislation in each country. Reports on sustainable human development. Various reports on the region. Household survey. Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.
Thematic axes
Definition of gangs. Violence and youth crime. Firearms and youth. Presence of maras and gangs. Origins, consequences and impact of violence. Legal institutional framework. Approach from civil society.
Investigation design
Cross-section
Design or analysis strategies
Qualitative analysis of interviews. Statistical analysis – descriptive. Expert analysis.

Reference
Living in the shadow of death: violence and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996 - 2002 - Dennis Rodgers, 2006.
Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data
The Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández gang in Nicaragua.
Thematic axes
Crime in Nicaragua and its social consequences. Detailed activities of the gang. The dynamics of the gang phenomenon.
Investigation design
Longitudinal
Design or analysis strategies
Ethnographic, case study.

Reference

Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica. Pandillas y capital social – ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2004.

Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data

Opinion poll. International comparative sample between neighbourhoods with a high and low incidence of gangs or families with or without a relative in a gang. Different modes of systematisation in each country.
Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Thematic axes

Sociodemographics; social capital (interpersonal, community and institutional trust; positive and negative community spaces; social support; exposure to violence); presence of gangs in the community. Social contexts with characteristics that interact to sustain the mara and gang phenomenon.

Investigation design

Cross-section

Design or analysis strategies

El Salvador and Honduras: comparison between communities encountering the gang problem and those not. Guatemala and Nicaragua: descriptive analysis of social capital, comparing families containing gang members and those which do not. Nicaragua added a comparison between residents of a community with a gang presence and gang members.

Reference

Barrio adentro. La solidaridad violenta de las pandillas – Santacruz and Concha, 2001.

Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data

Interviews with young gang members of both sexes and former gang members. Convenience sample with replacement.

Thematic axes

Exploration of levels of criminal violence and victimisation. Sociodemographic information, gang membership and interviewee status, reasons for joining or “chill out” age upon joining, benefits, number of members, and presence of repatriated gang members. Family, intra-family violence and criminal records within the family. Use of alcohol and drugs as well as possession of weapons. Criminal violence index.

Investigation design

Cross-section

Design or analysis strategies

Criminal violence index and victimisation index, factorial analysis and Cronbach’s alpha. Questionnaire: pilot test, statistic – descriptive.

Reference
Las maras y pandillas en Honduras. Investigación sobre pandillas y violencia juvenil. Consulta nacional. Plan nacional de atención. Ley especial – Save the Children UK, Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes de Honduras, 2002.
Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data
Young gang members (San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa and two nearby rural communities) young non gang members, parents of gang members. Surveys, in-depth interviews, life stories, discussion groups.
Thematic axes
Study of theoretical approaches. Causal factors. Activities of the gang. Self-perception of gang members. Perception. Public policies and intervention strategies. Strategy recommendations.
Investigation design
Cross-reference
Design or analysis strategies
Quantitative and qualitative analysis. Analysis of interview content.

Reference
Youth gangs and violence in Latin America and the Caribbean : A literature survey. LCR sustainable development working paper no. 4. Urban peace program series. – Dennis Rodgers, 1999.
Sample type/data collection/Informants/origin data
Literature from Latin America and the Caribbean on youth gangs
Thematic axes
Characteristic elements: poverty, specificity, community bonds, drugs, migration. Policies and interventions.
Investigation design
Up to 1999
Design or analysis strategies
Analysis of the literature and of some interventions and policies.

Reference
Solidaridad y violencia en las pandillas del gran San Salvador: Más allá de la vida loca. Homies Unidos, Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, Rädda Barnen of Sweden and Save the Children USA, 1998.
Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data
Questionnaire given to young gang members. Representative sample of AMSS gang members without sample quotas. Discussion group with young female gang members.
Thematic axes
Social characteristics of gang members, life in the gangs, personal stories of gang members, expectations for the future, profile, female gang members. Intervention suggestions.
Investigation design
Cross-reference
Design or analysis strategies
Quantitative and qualitative analysis. Involves young gang members in the process (producing the survey, help in codifying and interpreting)

Reference
Emergencia de culturas juveniles. Estrategias del desencanto. Reguillo, 2000.
Sample type/data collection/informants/origin data
Observation, in-depth interview and group discussion with young people.
Thematic axes
Youth, identity, youth cultures
Investigation design
Longitudinal
Design or analysis strategies
Ethno-methodological. Conceptual theoretical analysis.

Box B

Instruments and Sample Sizes used

		Sample size by country				
Population	**Instrument**	**Guatemala**	**El Salvador**	**Honduras**	**Nicaragua**	**Costa Rica**
Gang or mara members	Questionnaire	116	137	124	98	97
	In-depth interview	6	6	13	87M	92M
	SCT	83M	89M	68M		
	Likert scale	15	18	15		
Young people at risk	Questionnaire	125	135	100	118	130
		(68M/57F)	(86M/49F)	(78M/22F)	(79M/39F)	(74M/56F)
	SCT	53M	96M	73M	74M	79M
	Likert scale	15	18	15		13
Female mara members	Questionnaire 1	25	30	25		
	Questionnaire 2	26	25	25		
Former gang members	Questionnaire	57	50	100		
Relatives of male and female gang members	Questionnaire	100	100	100		
		(20M 80F)	(42M/58F)	(48M/52F)		
Residents	Questionnaire	100	107	100	125	115
		(43M/57F)	(40M/67F)	(33M/67F)	(47M/78F)	(61M/54F)
	Economic survey	100	100	137		
Police officers	Questionnaire	25	25	30		
Shopkeepers and carriers	Economic survey	100	108	141		
Former mara members	Economic survey	40	40	60		
Victims	Questionnaire	30	23	30		

Box C

Sample Sizes used in Semi-structured Interviews

		Sample size by country				
Population	**Instrument**	**Guatemala**	**El Salvador**	**Honduras**	**Nicaragua**	**Costa Rica**
Churches	Semi-structured interview	9	8	9	13	3
Civil servants	Semi-structured interview	6	5	6	2	7
Entrepreneurs	Semi-structured interview	5	0	5	3	1
Press	Semi-structured interview	6	3	4	6	2
Judiciary	Semi-structured interview	3	6	6	7	5
NGOs	Semi-structured interview	5	2	6	5	2

BOX D

Areas where Data was Gathered for the Study

Country/ Department		Interview locations	Population
Guatemala*	**Guatemala**		**1 813 825**
		Villa Nueva	192 069
		Amatitlán	54 930
		Villa Canales	62 334
		Mixco	305 297
		Chinautla	63 463
		Fraijanes	17 580
		Area 6	76 580
		Area 7	139 269
		Area 12	43 398
		Area 13	26 734
		Area 18	198 850
		Area 19	26 644
		Area 21	75 265
El Salvador	**El Salvador**		**2 198 193**
		San Salvador (Las Palmas, Palermo, DINA, Núñez Arrué)	415 346
		San Bartolo	6581
		Colonia El Carmen	1698
		San Martín	1137
		Ilopango	90 634
Honduras * **	**Francisco Morazán (DC)**		**1 180 676**
		Los Alpes	368
		La Peña Vieja	3780
		Las Mercedes	
		Monterrey	
		El Pedregal	4844
		Faldas Del Pedregal	1339
		La Popular	1140
		San Isidro	
		3 de Mayo	
		Las Brisas	1650
	Cortés (San Pedro de Sula)		**1 202 510**
		Ciudad Planeta	
		San Antonio	
		Sinaí	
		Los Ángeles	
		Eben Ezer (Chamelecón)	
		La Rivera Hernández	

Country/ Department		Interview locations	Population
Nicaragua****	**Masaya**	Masaya	162 868
	Managua	Managua	1 015 067
		Tipitapa	128 840
	Carazo	Jinotepe	42 188
	Estelí	Estelí	118 909
	Matagalpa	Matagalpa	132 809
Costa Rica*****	**San José**	Hatillo (15 de septiembre)	54 901
		Distrito Hospital (Barrio Cuba Cristo Rey, Sagrada Familia)	24 175
		León XIII	16 400
		Ipís (Los Cuadros)	26 155
		La Uruca (La Carpio)	27 110
		Patarrá (Los Guido)	28 451
		San Miguel (La Capri)	28 336
		San Felipe (Tejarcillos)	27 089
	Heredia	Heredia (Guararí)	20 191
	Alajuela	El Roble (Infernillo)	42 889
		San Rafael (La Candela)	19 162
	Cartago	San Nicolás (Los Diques)	22 193

(*) National Statistics Institute (INE) data 1994 census.
(**) Directorate for Statistics and Censuses (DIGESTYC) data, 1992 census.
(***) National Statistics Institute (INE) data 2001 and information provided by health centres.
(****) National Institute for Statistics and Censuses (INEC) data, population projections for 2005.
(*****) National Institute for Statistics and Censuses (INEC) data, 2000 census.

Box E

Risk Factors Assessed by Central American Studies

Risk factor	Total studies	Type of analysis
Individual		
Personality development (lack of understanding)	1	Study 8 – survey (9.3% lack of understanding)
Drug use	1	Study 8 – survey (71.9% use drugs)
Family		
Poverty	1	Study 8 – data not specified
Problems in the family nucleus	2	Study 5 – survey (21% family problems) Study 8 – survey (12.3% problems with parents)
Educational		
Exclusion from the education system	1	Study 8 – survey (75.9% do not study and 74.7% have not completed secondary education)
Peers		
Lack of alternative youth groupings	1	Study 5 – survey (40% joined)
Influence of friends	2	Study 5 – survey (20% influence of friends) Study 8 – survey (10.3% influence of friends)
Community		
Marginalisation and social exclusion	1	Data not specified
Lack of employment opportunities	1	Study 8 – survey (74.4% do not work)
National/State		
Emigration and transculturation	1	Study 8 – survey (67.1% deported and 16.3% have been to the United States at some time)
Inefficient institutions and unspecific action plans	1	Data not specified
Historical		
Armed conflict	1	Study 8 – survey (10.2% were soldiers in the army or FMLN fighters during the war)

Likert Scale
of Basic Concepts on Sociability and Pro-social Thinking

Presentation

This scale, applied to *mara* leaders and non-*mara* leaders, deals with basic concepts relating to friendship, family, the self, laws and scruples.

Mara leaders value the importance of friendship in positive and negative contingencies, even when they are being put to the test or when their family is weakened. It is a value expressed with some frequency as unconditional which reflects friendship as it is possibly seen within the mara. Their non-*mara* peers will ponder this with greater restraint. It is subject rather to an individual judgement depending on specific situations, particularly where making commitments or having to carry out activities in step with others are concerned. In the case of *mara* members, it may be that friendship is imperative, with less space for personal deliberation about circumstances which compromise individual action in relation to others. Among non-*mara* members, circumstances relativise this action, placing it more in the perspective of the individual decision.

Among *mara* leaders, personal interest appears to be very marked, although it is relativised when concern for other indefinite persons is mentioned, and even more so where persons close to them are concerned; the personal interest is relativised much less with regard to rivals. However, success is not always influenced by possible harm to third parties. When it is placed in contrast with friendship, one is not subordinate to the other.

Non-*mara* leaders display a greater diversity of positions with regard to different factors associated with the self. There is a tendency to refute the predominance of these aspects in personal success and social projection, but also a consideration towards others when interests are opposed. It could be inferred that they do not attribute much importance to personal abilities and skills, or they place less emphasis on the possibility of dealing with daily dilemmas using only these. It can be supposed that the support of social relationships for example, the family, is much more important. It can be inferred that they do not feel as dependent on their personal abilities as their *mara* member counterparts do.

In general, there is agreement on forgiveness and discomfort with regard to vengeance, respectively. Religion is held in high esteem. Revenge is looked upon favourably. Likewise, there is a certain tendency to submit that no scruples are experienced in taking revenge or settling scores, although it is relativised as a deliberate act of retaliation. The

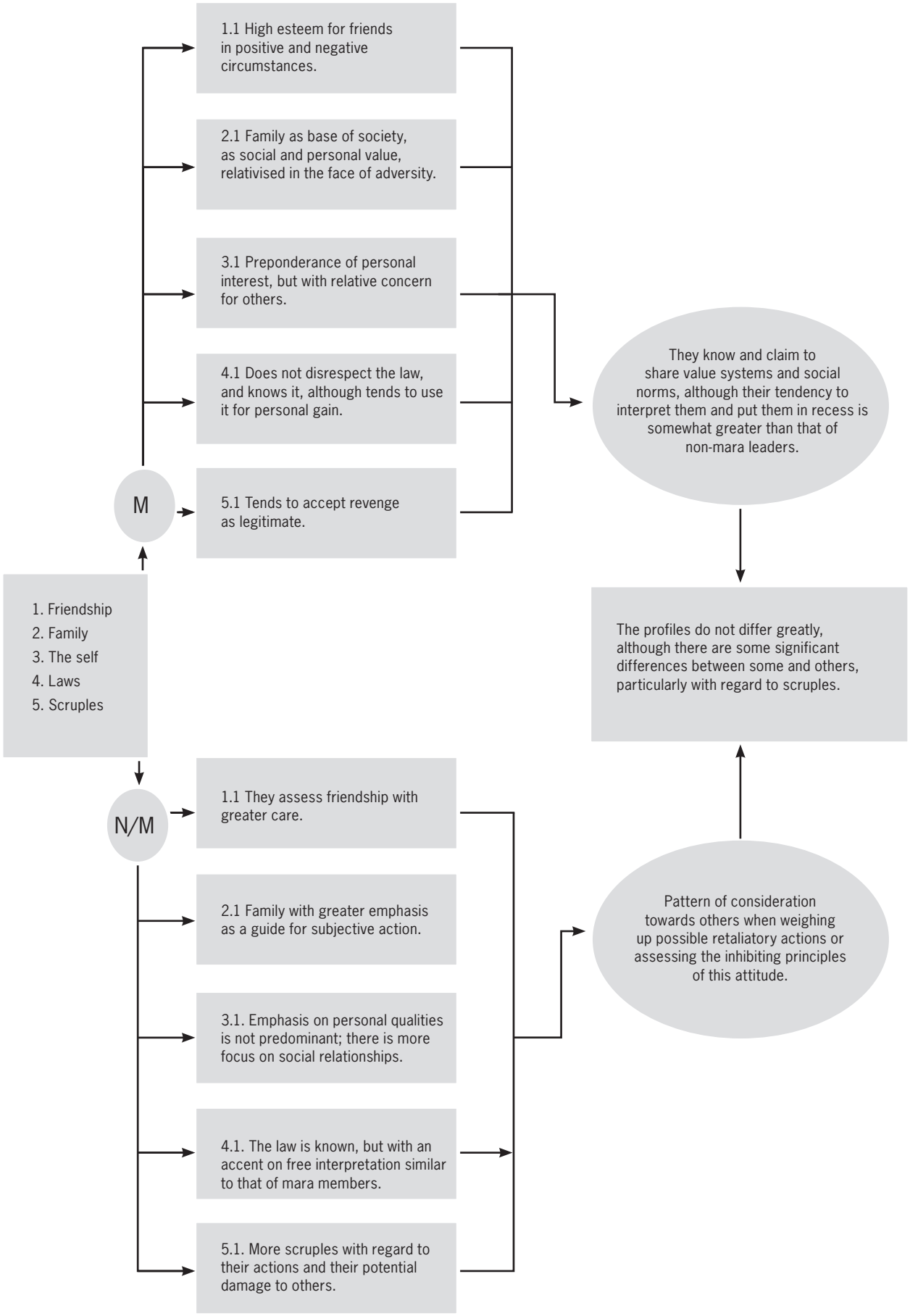
emotional impact on the person as a consequence of getting even or taking revenge appears to be resoundingly considered as positive. The tendency to act without experiencing any scruples before or after a critical situation, or the tendency to evaluate the actions in this way which does not damage personal image appears among *mara* leaders. The intentionality of the act is clearly defined and is displayed with particular emphasis.

In contrast, non-*mara* leaders bear scruples in mind much more when making considerations about their own actions and the damaging effect on others, as well as considerations about these acts in a way which places value on the personal condition. From this position, it may be that they think about the effect of their actions on others more, having more consideration for damage done to others, even under extreme circumstances. Consequently, they may not consider an open attitude of retaliation to be correct, or they are less likely to resort to such attitudes.

By way of conclusion, it is not possible to establish deficiencies in the understanding, social conception or function of the axes studied as an explanation of the attachment to *maras* and gangs, like the deficiencies which act against the consensus, given that *mara* leaders share value systems and social norms systems, although they have a greater tendency to interpret them and put them in recess.

It is preferable to propose that gang and *mara* members are subjects which have passed through a similar socialisation to that of their counterparts. However, the issue of scruples could be an indicator of a life ethic proposed by the *mara* or gang, and as such, would be an aspect of interest for social reinsertion programmes, as confronting the position they manage with respect to their attitudes and the consequences of their actions on others must become a topic for discussion. The potential with regard to the capacity to experience concern for others, even for strangers, and the discomfort for negatively assessed actions, is an aspect which should be considered very seriously in possible interventions.

Diagram 1


1.1 High esteem for friends in positive and negative circumstances.
2.1 Family as base of society, as social and personal value, relativised in the face of adversity.
3.1 Preponderance of personal interest, but with relative concern for others.
4.1 Does not disrespect the law, and knows it, although tends to use it for personal gain.
5.1 Tends to accept revenge as legitimate.
M
They know and claim to share value systems and social norms, although their tendency to interpret them and put them in recess is somewhat greater than that of non-mara leaders.
1. Friendship
2. Family
3. The self
4. Laws
5. Scruples
The profiles do not differ greatly, although there are some significant differences between some and others, particularly with regard to scruples.
N/M
1.1 They assess friendship with greater care.
2.1 Family with greater emphasis as a guide for subjective action.
3.1. Emphasis on personal qualities is not predominant; there is more focus on social relationships.
4.1. The law is known, but with an accent on free interpretation similar to that of mara members.
5.1. More scruples with regard to their actions and their potential damage to others.
Pattern of consideration towards others when weighing up possible retaliatory actions or assessing the inhibiting principles of this attitude.

Investigation Team

In order to respond to the diversity of issues and populations, an interdisciplinary team was established, which was made up of the following professionals.

Box E

Members of the Work Team

Role	Name
Director of the sociological project	Dr. José Alberto
Coordinator of psychological investigation	Dr. Jorge Sanabria León
Anthropology consultant	MSc. Elena Arce
Statistician	Adriana Moya Leiva
Philosophy consultant	MPhil Angel Ocampo

The following professionals participated, at different times, in tasks of research assistance, processing, data analysis and information synthesis.

Box F

Investigation Team

Profession or role	Name
Sociology Assistant	Alexander Araya Lopez
Psychology Assistant	Jennifer González Zamora
Psychology Assistant	María Andrea Araya Carvajal
Psychology Assistant	Patricia Soley Alfaro
SPSS Assistant	Natalia Vargas

Two contributors also participated in the project.

Box G

Contributors

Profession	Name
Journalistic communications analyst	Lic. Eduardo Ulibarri
Projects specialist	MSc Roxana Víquez

Working in conjunction with this professional and technical team, each country had a fieldwork team comprised of a fieldwork coordinator, two supervisors and ten information gatherers.

For work of coding, data entry and quality control, there was a team of eight coders, two quality control representatives and four data entry assistants.

For the preparation of the final report, Doctor Pedro Mateu-Gelabert (Senior Investigator at the NDRI) lent his assistance, as did Doctor Juan José Medina Ariza (Professor in Criminology at the University of Manchester) as external consultants.

As part of the analysis process, several experts participated in the validation of results for each country.

Maras and gangs, community and police in Central America.
Printing completed in the month of October 2007.
F & G Editores, 31 avenida «C» 5-54 zona 7, Colonia
Centroamérica, 01007, Guatemala, Guatemala, C.A.
Telefax: (+502) 2439 8358 Tel.: (+502) 5406 0909
informacion@fygeditores.com www.fygeditores.com

In the past decade, youth gangs have become increasingly prevalent in Central America and have turned into a problem of public insecurity which causes concern to governments and fear among the population. This is particularly the case in the countries of the region's northern triangle – El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala – but increasingly so also in Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

While the existence of criminal youth gangs is not new in Central America, the systematic use of violence and the brutality of current gangs, often referred to as "the maras", are unprecedented.
Both history and social science show that youth delinquency is a complex phenomenon which requires up-to-date, specific and in-depth knowledge to design and apply successful policies and action programmes. It is against this backdrop that the present study should be understood. Carried out by Demoscopía S.A., and financed by Sida and the CABEI, it constitutes an applied regional and multidisciplinary study with a solid empirical basis and a contextual approach.

The objective of this publication, which is a condensed version of the study, is to facilitate a wider, more propositional public discussion. It is hoped that this will lead to effective policies and actions, both with regard to the immediate need to deal with the current situation and for future prevention.

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.

Sida

SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY

SE-105 25 Stockholm Sweden
Phone: +46 (0)8 698 50 00
Fax: +46 (0)8 20 88 64
sida@sida.se, www.sida.se