

Mara Salvatrucha:

What is It, Why is It Here, and What is to be Done About It?

In 2004, FBI director Robert Mueller declared the Latino street gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) to be “the top priority of the bureau’s criminal enterprise branch” (Campo-Flores 2005). *Newsweek* ran a cover story in 2005 about Mara Salvatrucha entitled “The Most Dangerous Gang in America”. An LAPD detective said, “This isn’t a gang, it’s an army” (Brand 2005). Mara Salvatrucha has spawned a lot of hysteria and publicity, including even a now-discredited rumor of a connection to al-Qaida (U.S. Government 2005). But what is Mara Salvatrucha, really? Is it just a group of juvenile “monsters” committing acts of “senseless violence” (Del Barco 2005b)? Or is it a hyper-organized international network cooperating with terrorists? I would argue that it is neither. While MS-13 is certainly different from an ordinary street gang, it does not have the organization necessary to be a mafia. But it is also not a group of deviant monsters who randomly kill for the pleasure of it. Rather, Mara Salvatrucha is an organization fulfilling a certain function in the lives of its members; only by understanding this function and addressing the societal problems at its root can it be effectively combated.

I have divided my analysis into three parts. In the first, I look at the gang itself: its structure, symbols, activities, and victims. Second, I explore the history of the gang, and the reasons for its behavior. Finally, I discuss the measures being taken, both by private organizations and governments, to deal with Mara Salvatrucha, and I discuss what causes them to succeed or fail. It is important to truly be able to understand an organization that is as widespread and visible as Mara Salvatrucha has become, so that any actions taken with regard to it may have the desired effect, and not serve to

exacerbate the problem.

Part I

If nothing else, Mara Salvatrucha is certainly big--estimates vary widely, but experts say that there are 8,000-10,000 members in the United States, and anywhere from 50,000-300,000 members worldwide (Arana 2005 98; Papachristos 2005 53; Del Barco 2005b; Ribando 2005). Members of Mara Salvatrucha can be found in at least 31 states plus the District of Columbia, and at least three Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Papachristos 2005, 50). The gang is no doubt in Mexico as well, and there are even rumored to be members in Spain and Israel (Del Barco 2005b).

Details are sketchy about the structure of Mara Salvatrucha. Most come from gang members who have spoken to reporters or testified in court, or from police reports on gang activities. One thing that all sources agree on is that MS-13 is territorial. It formed in opposition to other gangs, and it fights them for the control of neighborhoods and territories (Arana 2005, 101). MS-13 is organized into cliques--“geographically defined subgroups” (Campo-Flores 2005). The cliques have names such as the “Marineros” or “Sureño-13” (Cauvin 2006; U.S. Government 2005). Each clique has a single leader, and may have weekly meetings to decide things like “green-lighting”--giving an order to kill (Brand 2005). In San Salvador, there is a clique named the Big Gangsta Locos. It is a group of approximately 30 teenagers, most of whom are 15 or 16 years old. Their leader, Edgar, is 19. According to him, he was given the position because he had lived in Los Angeles (DeCesare 1998). There seems to be little centralized organization above the cliques--the leaders do not want to lose their power (Domash 2005). However, according to the Salvadoran Anti-Drug Commission, the

organization of MS-13 and its rival, the 18th Street Gang, is far more complex, with cliques divided into different functional groups (e.g. recruiting, “delinquent,” “shock,” and propaganda), and a centralized, and a hierarchical power structure existing over the top, including a zone leader in charge of two or three cliques, and a top leader responsible for national organization of the cliques and for maintaining contact with the gang’s foreign branches and with other organized crime groups (Carranza 2004, 213). But while this could be true for some cliques, it is certainly not universal.

Most of the members of Mara Salvatrucha are very young. Kids are recruited as young as 9 to join the gang. The median age is 19, though leaders can be in their 30s or even 40s (Arana 2005, 101). Although there is a trend of people staying in gangs longer than they had in the past, the constant influx of new, younger members keeps the median age down. Women are becoming increasingly involved with the gang, but this varies drastically among cliques (“More Gangs” 2005).

Recruitment practices differ from clique to clique. In parts of El Salvador, gang members openly enter schools in search of new recruits (Hadden 2003). In the United States, it is more likely that youth will seek out the gang on their own. Gangs offer “street protection, refuge from home, an alternative family, and financial security” (DeCesare 1998, 21). They also give “stability, identity, status, and protection” (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006). Often the children who join the gang come from broken homes--a condition which is becoming increasingly relevant with the constant cycle of immigration and deportation occurring between the United States and Central America. Globalization has caused an “unsettling of national citizenship” (Zilberg 2004, 759). The members of transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha fall into the gap between national

identities, straddling both worlds, and sometimes belonging in neither.

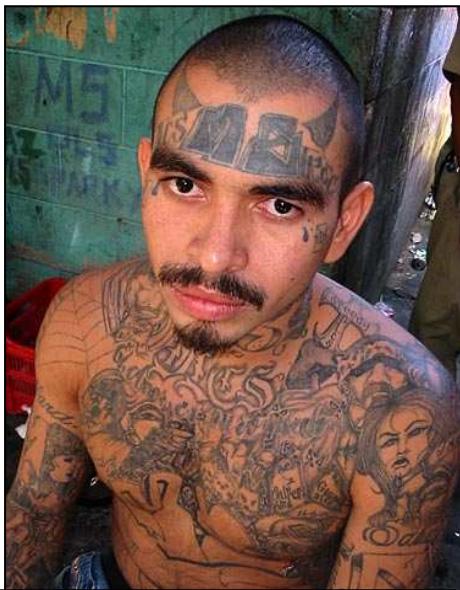
People do not just join Mara Salvatrucha on a whim. Rather, there is an initiation process which takes time and commitment, because once a member of the gang, it is extremely difficult to leave (Carranza 2004, 224). Before being initiated, prospective members undergo a trial period, in which they hang out with gang members, but are not truly part of the gang. They may go to parties held by gang members, and participate in other typical teenage activities with the gang (Carranza 2004, 220; Brand 2005). But once they have officially decided to join, they must undergo an initiation ritual known as being “jumped in.” In MS-13, this means that the prospective member is beaten for 13 seconds by three older members (Arana 2005, 102). In some cliques, withstanding this beating is all that it takes to become a full member of the gang. In others, there is one more step--the recruit must go on a mission. Usually it is some sort of petty crime, or the recruit is sent to act as a lookout for an older gang member on a more serious mission (Arana 2005, 102). After the successful completion of a mission, the new gang member will be given a code name such as “Smokey” or “Shy Boy” (Carranza 2004, 220).

In theory, there are three types of gang membership. *Activos*, or active members, are the full members of the gang who are involved in all of its activities. *Colaboradores*, or collaborators, are involved with the gang in a more peripheral way, either as business partners or friends. *Calmados* are inactive members, who have been given permission to leave in order to work or have a family, but it is disputed whether this state actually exists, because there are numerous examples of former gang members being killed long after ceasing involvement in the gang (Carranza 2004, 212, 224; Del Barco 2006).

It is usually fairly easy to identify members of MS-13. They have a distinctive

style of dress including shaved heads and baggy pants (Hadden 2003), but the most identifying characteristic are the tattoos which cover them “from forehead to ankle” (Del Barco 2005b). The tattoos “commemorate dead homies, girlfriends, gang calligraphy, religious symbols, and even names of streets in Los Angeles” (Del Barco 2005b). Many of the tattoos are homemade, drawn by fellow gang members using simple objects such as a walkman motor, guitar string and the tube from a Bic pen (Kirschner 2004). Tattoos are sign of the permanence of gang involvement--they are very hard to get rid of, and therefore make it extremely difficult for gang members to change their lifestyles. Many employers refuse to hire people with extensive tattooing (Kirschner 2004).

There are other symbols used by Mara Salvatrucha to identify itself as well. In



A member of MS-13 in El Salvador (Del Barco 2005)

the United States, it uses the colors blue and white (the colors of the Salvadoran flag) to identify its territory (Domash 2005). In El Salvador, gang members “mark the highly localized territory of their barrios with the insignia of Los Angeles’s telephone area codes and streets [sic] numbers” (Zilberg 2003). The 13 in Mara Salvatrucha’s abbreviation MS-13 stands for a street in L.A. near where the gang

was founded. Handshakes, signals, and slang also serve to identify Salvatruchas to one another.

There are certain norms of behavior which must be obeyed within Mara Salvatrucha, although again, these vary from clique to clique. Some of the more common

include an absolute prohibition on talking to the cops or hanging out with enemy gang members, and a commitment to protecting one's own territory against incursions from other gangs (DeCesare 1998). According to one member of a clique in El Salvador, "We protect the people here from enemy gangs and thieves who would rob them [...] We never steal from our own barrio" (DeCesare 1998). In some cases these norms are enforced by gang "courts" which give out violent sentences that can be either beatings or death, and which are accepted as legitimate by the members of the gang.

Mara Salvatrucha as a whole is involved in a vast number of crimes including drug dealing, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, immigrant smuggling, prostitution rings, contract killing, automobile theft, stolen documents and document falsification, extortion, kidnapping, robbery, assault, murder, and rape ("More Gangs" 2005; Del Barco 2005b, Hadden 2003; Carranza 2004; U.S. Government 2005). Obviously, not all cliques are involved in all of these crimes. The particular activities engaged in by any particular clique depend both on the territory and the level of organization of that clique.

Cliques engaging in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and contract killing all indicate significant levels of organization and possible connections with other organized crime syndicates. In some cases, MS-13 established relationships with new drug cartels trying to break into the market. The gang helped them to capture a share of the market by killing the competition (Arana 2005, 103). Drug cartels also employ Salvatruchas as foot soldiers for carrying drugs over borders and for dealing on the streets (Arana 2005, 102).

Human trafficking is extremely important to Mara Salvatrucha. Some cliques are content merely to rob illegal immigrants as they travel (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006). Others, however, are actually involved in the process of smuggling immigrants into the

United States. There are three different motivations for this. The first is purely mercenary--smuggling illegal immigrants is a lucrative business, with fees ranging from \$5,000-\$8,000 per person (Arana 2005, 103). As MS-13 started moving into Mexico, they began killing illegal immigrants who did not use gang-affiliated coyotes to smuggle them across the border into the United States, monopolizing the market at some border crossings (Arana 2005, 103). The second reason for MS-13 involvement in human trafficking is to gain new recruits. Children left behind in Central America by immigrant parents join the gangs in Central America, and then are smuggled into the U.S. to reunite with their parents, and to join American cliques of the gang (Arana 2005, 104). The third reason relates to U.S. immigration policy--gang members are constantly being deported,



Photo taken by Michael Wright, December 2005

but they usually try to return immediately to the United States, and Mara Salvatrucha's smuggling network provides a means to do so (Papachristos 2005, 53).

In Central America, one of MS-13's major

operations is extorting money from bus

drivers. Busses are the primary means of transportation in Central America. Gangs force bus drivers to pay a "tax" for crossing through their territory. During the past two years, over 100 bus drivers have been killed for not paying (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006).

Although the media often makes it seem that the victims of Mara Salvatrucha's crimes are "slaughtered for no reason" (AP 2006), this is not often true. Though there are some high profile exceptions, such as the murder of twenty-eight passengers on a Honduran bus in December 2004, most of the victims of Mara Salvatrucha are victims of

intra- or inter-gang violence. (Even the bus incident was not completely random--MS-13 was protesting a recent government crackdown.) Gangs fight each other and the police for control of territories (Arana 2005, 101). When asked about who most of the victims of Mara Salvatrucha were in his area, Ricky Smith, a detective with the Hempstead, NY police department answered that most victims were within the Latino community (“More Gangs” 2005). In El Salvador, gang crime amounts to “poor people killing other poor people” (DeCesare 1998). The victims of MS-13 largely come from within the gang members’ own communities, and often have some connection with the gang.

Part II

To understand the origins of Mara Salvatrucha, it is necessary to know what was going on in El Salvador during the 1980s when it was founded. Although the gang originated in L.A., events in El Salvador created the situation that enabled MS-13 to exist.

For most of the twentieth century, a group of just fourteen families owned all of the land in El Salvador and the military and security forces maintained control of the government apparatus. “The Salvadoran military state was essentially a protection racket: the military earned the concession to govern the country (and pillage the state) in exchange for its willingness to use violence against class enemies of the country’s [...] economic elite” (Stanley 1996, 6-7). The Salvadoran economy was based on export agriculture; the vast majority of the population were peasants who worked in the coffee fields belonging to the elite. There is an “affinity between economies based on export agriculture and internal repression” (Stanley 1996, 5). Periodic crackdowns occurred, the most brutal being “La Matanza” (The Massacre) in 1932, which was the state’s response

to a peasant rebellion led by the Communist party of Farabundo Martí; roughly 25,000 peasants and workers were murdered (Chavez 2004). This situation of extreme inequality and repression continued until 1980, when full scale civil war broke out between the government and leftist guerillas (Stanley 1996, 4).

Though the government was officially fighting against guerillas who had formed a coalition known as the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), it murdered numerous civilians. Government sponsored death squads roved the countryside killing and maiming as they went. “In many communities no one was



The memorial to the civilian victims of the Salvadoran civil war. Photo taken by Rich Warp, December 2005.

spared, as army commanders treated even children--born or unborn--as threats to the state” (Stanley 1996, 2). In total, the civil war killed approximately 70,000 people, with thousands more who were simply disappeared. 500,000 people

became refugees, and many fled to the United States (Chavez 2004). Despite the numerous atrocities committed by and on behalf of the government, government forces nearly lost the war, and would have were it not for massive amounts of aid from the U.S. government who claimed to be fighting Communism (Stanley 1996, 4).

Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled from this terrible situation to the United States, and many settled in Los Angeles. In some cases entire families fled; in others parents would go, leaving behind children to be raised by grandparents or other relatives. Edgar Bolanos, a 19 year old gang member in San Salvador who was interviewed by

Donna DeCesare, said that at the age of three he witnessed the torture and murder of his uncles and grandmother. His mother had fled to L.A., and his father, an FMLN guerilla was in hiding or possibly dead. After six years, his mother finally sent for him and his brothers, all three of whom joined Mara Salvatrucha soon after arriving in Los Angeles. Edgar was eventually deported back to El Salvador, where he remains an active gang member (1998). In some cases, children and teens fled or were sent to the United States by themselves to escape the violence.

The young Salvadoran refugees in Los Angeles faced a difficult situation. They were the new immigrants to an area that already contained many gangs, most notably the 18th Street gang--a gang of Mexican Americans and immigrants, started in the 1960s. The Salvadorans formed their own gang, the Mara Salvatrucha, in response to their need for protection against the already existing gangs (Del Barco 2005b). According to one of the founding members, Ernesto "Smokey" Miranda, the traumas suffered in during the Salvadoran civil war helped to make Mara Salvatrucha an extremely violent gang. He had joined the Salvadoran military at age 14. He says, "In this country, we were taught to kill our own people, no matter if they were from your own blood. If your father was the enemy, you had to kill him. So the training we got during the war in our country served to make us one of the most violent gangs in the United States" (Del Barco 2005b).

In the aftermath of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992, the police "determined that most of the looting and violence had been carried out by local gangs" (Arana 2005, 100). California started passing new anti-gang laws that led to longer prison sentences for gang members. In 1996, the federal government passed the "Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act." The law applied retroactively,

and made deportation the government's most important strategy for dealing with gangs. People who were not citizens, even if they were permanent residents, could, if sentenced to more than a year in prison, be deported. Even immigrants who had gotten their citizenship could be stripped of it and deported after serving time. The list of crimes eligible for deportation was also greatly expanded to include such things as drunk driving and petty theft (Arana 2005, 100). Because 1996 was an election year, it seems likely that this law was passed partly to pander to key interest groups; its consequences have, in many ways, made the problem worse than before.

“In 1996, around 38,000 immigrants were deported after committing a crime; by 2003, the number had jumped to almost 80,000” (Papachristos 2005, 53). The U.S. gave little thought to what would happen to these people upon their arrival in their “home” country--according to one source, when a group of deportees got off the plane in San Salvador, they were given a few condoms and a map and then left to their own devices (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006; Del Barco 2005b). Many deportees had lived in the United States for almost their whole lives--some did not even speak Spanish, and yet they were expected to be able to survive in a country like El Salvador simply because they were born there. According to one deportee known as Weasel, “They might as well’ve put me on Mars” (Soriano 1999). It is little wonder that deportees joined together with their homeboys who had been deported with them and recreated LA’s gangs in Central America, or that they would attempt to return to the United States illegally.

Once the gangs got started in Central America, the problem snowballed. According to Ernesto Miranda, “We didn’t intend to bring the gangs back to our country, but the other rival gangs were growing here and we felt we had to instruct the young

people” (Del Barco 2005b). El Salvador was ripe for the development of gangs. After the end of the civil war in 1992, the army was removed from internal security duties, and a civilian police force was created, but it took time for the police to be trained and to become effective--during this window of opportunity crime grew drastically (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006). Families had been broken apart by the war, and there were many orphans and children living on the streets. The population as a whole was very young--in 1998, fully half of the population was under 18, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of children lived in poverty (DeCesare 1998). Today, children aged 0-14 make up 36.3% of the population of over 6.8 million (U.S. Government 2006). Opportunities were few--the war and the international free market brought about the collapse of the coffee economy (Chavez 2004). Urbanization was extremely rapid; the majority of the population of El Salvador now lives in cities, but there are not enough jobs for them all. Though the official unemployment rate is 6.5%, underemployment is a huge problem (U.S. Government 2006). What worsens this is that now young people know how poor they are compared to the United States, both from their interactions with family members and friends who have lived there, and from television.

In addition to the opportunity and motivation for young people to join gangs, a further enabling factor was the ready availability of weapons. After the civil war, there were weapons everywhere. There are approximately 450,000 firearms circulating in El Salvador, but not even half of them are legal (Carranza 2004). Weapons circulate “*within all levels of society*” (Klare & Anderson 1996). The black market in arms is now one of the major markets of Mara Salvatrucha, but in the beginning it was one of the factors which enabled the gang to form and become so influential. With weapons, it was easy

for the delinquent teens to commit crimes to try and achieve the standard of living they saw advertised all around them and yet was so far away from their own reality.

Though Mara Salvatrucha quickly became established in El Salvador, it did not remain there. Like millions of other immigrants, both legal and illegal, Salvatruchas came back into the United States in search of more opportunities and better lives. Especially among those who had previously been living there and were deported, the desire to return to the United States is strong. “According to Salvadoran police, 90 percent of deported gang members return to the United States as fast as they can” (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006). And, in fact, over the last ten years, authorities in the United States have noticed a definite increase and expansion of Mara Salvatrucha, no matter how many members are deported. But they are not just returning to Los Angeles; rather, Mara Salvatrucha is spreading all over the country, with branches appearing in Washington D.C., Long Island, Northern Virginia, and increasingly, the suburban Midwest as well (Domash 2005; “More Gangs” 2005).

But the gang that is returning is not the same gang that left. Authorities say that it is becoming increasingly sophisticated and organized, with better weapons, better coordination, and better communication among cliques. According to the Guatemalan interior minister, Carlos Vielmann, the gang members now “maintain constant communication. They have a web page and not only synchronize in Guatemala, they synchronize with El Salvador, Honduras, and with the United States” (AP 2005c). Attorney Paul McNulty of Virginia says that there seems to be “some kind of hierarchy beyond the clique” (Campo-Flores 2005). In El Salvador, MS-13 is “highly organized and disciplined [...] with semi-clandestine structures and vertical commands” says Oscar

Bonilla, the director of the National Council for Public Security (Campo Flores 2005). There is also some evidence that organization is increasing within the cliques as well; when interviewed, some gang members said that they all had to contribute a monthly quota for the group, part of which would go towards buying communal weapons for use in the clique's activities (Carranza 2004).

I would suggest that this increasing organization is, in large part, due to the manner in which gangs have been dealt with, especially in Central America. The universal response of authorities in El Salvador and the other Central American nations is to simply throw gang members in jail (Arana 2005, 102). The jails are now extremely overcrowded--the prison population in El Salvador has doubled in the past five years--and they only serve to reinforce gang culture, not to deter it (Johnson & Muhlhausen 2006). Speaking about a prison in Quetzaltepeque, El Salvador, reporter Mandalit Del Barco says, "this entire prison glorifies LA, from the bootlegged gangsta rap blaring from speakers to the murals depicting MacArthur park in LA's Pico Union, home to Salvadoran immigrants" (2005b). In prisons in the United States, gang members form bonds with each other that transcend national borders. When Weasel was deported back to El Salvador from Los Angeles, he ran into other guys whom he had known in prison who had also been deported, and he formed an immediate bond with them (Soriano 1999). Like the vory-v-zakone whose solidarity was formed by the shared experience of imprisonment in the gulags, the identity of Mara Salvatrucha is becoming increasingly tied to prisons. Says L.A. police chief William Bratton, "To them prison is like going to finishing school" (Arana 2005, 106).

The increased solidarity caused by doing time in prison is certainly one reason for

the increasing organization of Mara Salvatrucha, but it does not explain why leaders from California and El Salvador are traveling to the newer branches of the gang in the Midwest and on the Eastern Seaboard to impose their authority over multiple cliques (Domash 2005). Nobody seems to have any answer for why this is occurring, but I suspect that it is partly out of a desire to optimize violence. As the leaders of the gang are aging, they are likely to think more about their futures, and if violence is not optimized, their futures will be short indeed (Compare, for example, the life expectancies of the mafia bosses of Sicily who had optimized violence to those in Naples who had not (Gambetta 1993, 104)). Therefore, the leaders of the gang are moving to consolidate the cliques under a single, hierarchical structure in order to better control their capacity for violence. This is a process that is only just beginning--there is still ample evidence of the continuing decentralized nature of Mara Salvatrucha, but it could potentially change the nature of the gang significantly in the future.

Part III

It is clear that Mara Salvatrucha is not simply an army of monsters bent on committing senseless acts of terrible violence on whomever happens to be convenient. They have some structure and a common identity, and in many ways they operate like a business franchise, with many independent cliques operating under one name, though a centralized structure is not always strongly present. The origins and evolution of Mara Salvatrucha are fairly logical and simple to understand once all of the information is put together. And yet, many of the authorities seem to have little idea of how to combat Mara Salvatrucha, and resort to heavy-handed tactics to deal with it. Only a few organizations seem to have the knowledge and the political will to put useful solutions

into action, and many of these organizations are run by former gang members themselves.

In Central America, the primary method for dealing with gangs is known as the *Mano Dura* or “firm hand.” The most important piece of the *Mano Dura* policies is that “illicit association” is a crime; in other words, it is illegal to be a member of or associated with a gang. The *Mano Dura* policies are modeled after zero-tolerance policies from the United States, but they go further. According to one gang member serving time in El Salvador, “if you have a tattoo, you’re breaking the law, especially if you have a tattoo that makes you belong to a gang” (Del Barco 2005b). In Honduras, the sentence for being a gang member was 12 years in prison; it was recently upped to 30 years. In El Salvador the sentences are lighter but still significant—five years for membership, nine for leadership. In addition, the law allows the conviction of children younger than 12 years of age (Ribando 2005). These laws further strain the already bursting prisons, but they have had little real impact on gang activity. And yet, the governments seem to be inclined to do little else other than further stiffen the penalties. (El Salvador’s newest anti-gang law is creatively named the *Super Mano Dura*.) “The *Mano Dura* campaigns are only taking attention and resources away from the fight against these larger ills” such as “dysfunctional politics, rampant corruption, drug smuggling, intense urban poverty, and overpopulation” (Arana 2005, 107). There is evidence that governments are actually using the public’s fears about the gang problem to further their own political aims. Just before the most recent elections in El Salvador, President Tony Saca replaced the head of the national police force with a party loyalist who had previously held the post and had been ineffective, but his predecessor was needed as a scapegoat (“Will the Police” 2006).

In a way, the hard line governments want the gang violence to continue because it justifies their remaining in power.

The authorities do not use imprisonment only to keep gang members off the street, however. There is evidence that suggests that situations that have led to the deaths of hundreds of imprisoned gang members have been orchestrated by police. In Honduras in 2004, a suspicious fire broke out in the San Pedro Sula prison and killed 104 inmates, most of whom were gang members (Ribando 2005). In Guatemala, members of Mara Salvatrucha were housed in the same overcrowded prisons with their rivals, the 18th Street Gang. In August, 2005, simultaneous riots occurred in seven prisons across the country leaving thirty-one dead (AP 2005c). Inmates said that the weapons were mostly provided by the prison guards who are regularly bribed. A family member of one of the victims said, “Supposedly there is no death penalty [in Guatemala] but a lot of them were killed” (AP 2005b). Sometimes the police do not even bother to incarcerate gang members to exploit gang rivalries. They simply arrest gang members, and then “drop them in enemy territory where they have to fight for their lives” (Del Barco 2005b).

There is another ostensibly illegal method of dealing with gangs in Central America: vigilantism. There are two main types of vigilante groups. The first consists of clandestine organizations such as *La Sombra Negra* (“The Black Shadow”). These groups are formed out of the remnants of the death squads from the civil war, and are responsible for the execution style killings of thousands of young people in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Del Barco 2005b; Mittrany 2005b). The other type of vigilante group is made up of ordinary citizens, who either do not trust the police, or believe that the police are ineffective. These groups patrol their neighborhoods with

sticks and machetes, hiding their faces so that their suspects don't target them for revenge. Sometimes they work with the police, turning over the suspects they capture, but in other cases they mete out their own sentences which they say "work better than the courts" (Reddekopp 2005). Human rights groups are justifiably concerned about both types of vigilante groups, but until the state authorities manage to actually succeed in curtailing the gang problem, I expect that the vigilantes are not going anywhere.

The U.S. has a long history of fighting gangs, and though it has certainly tried a much wider variety of solutions than Central America, many of its solutions are just as ineffective as the *Mano Dura*. The zero-tolerance laws on which the *Mano Dura* was based have not gone away, though they have a "dubious record" at best (Zilberg 2003). The basic U.S. strategy for dealing with Mara Salvatrucha is imprisonment followed by deportation. It is clear that deportation is not solving the problem, and if anything is exacerbating it, and yet it continues to be the key feature of the U.S. anti-gang policy.

In May of 2005, the House passed new legislation to "put gang members in line for long federal prison sentences or the death penalty" (AP 2005b). The list of crimes eligible for the death penalty was expanded, and minimum mandatory sentences were established. Also, the statute of limitations was lengthened from five to fifteen years (AP 2005b). The stated goal of this legislation is two hundred new prosecutions per year.

At a hearing before the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Claims just before this legislation was passed, one of the witnesses testified that the key problem facing the U.S. was the existence of sanctuary laws which prevent local law enforcement from notifying the INS when illegal immigrants are arrested for minor crimes (2005). Despite all of the evidence of its inefficacy, deportation remains the

central pillar of U.S. anti-gang policies.

The United States is also looking for new and creative ways in which to prosecute gang members, and is trying to focus on taking out the leaders of the gang, much in the same way it fought organized crime in the past. In 2004, the FBI created a special task force on MS-13. In March of 2005, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) launched Operation Community Shield, to “gather intelligence, develop sources of information, and to ultimately disrupt, dismantle, and prosecute violent street gangs” (U.S. Government 2005). In the course of this operation, over 100 members of Mara Salvatrucha were arrested (Del Barco 2005a); according to Michael J. Garcia, the assistant secretary for ICE, nine of those arrested were leaders (U.S. Government 2005). Nevertheless, as the current furor over immigration shows, illegal immigration has not abated, and the influx of gang members from Central America, both new and previously deported doubtless continues, no matter how many are arrested.

If governmental actions in Central America and in the United States (at least on a federal level) are so ineffective, what can be done? Some answers can be found in private organizations such as Homies Unidos which work to rehabilitate former gang members, and reintegrate them into society. Homies Unidos formed in El Salvador in 1996, and now has branches both in El Salvador and the United States. In their own words they “are a community-based organization committed to developing creative alternatives to youth violence and drugs through access to alternative education, leadership development, self esteem building, and health education programs” (Homies Unidos). Many former gang members, including Weasel work for Homies Unidos, trying to help their former homeboys to find a better life (Soriano 1999).

Another organization which is having an important impact is a group based in Los Angeles called Homeboy Industries. Established in 1988, the biggest project they are engaged in is providing a free tattoo service. Because many employers will not hire former gang members due to their extensive tattoos, it is extremely difficult for gang members to start new lives. By helping to remove their tattoos, Homeboy Industries helps gang members to reintegrate into society. Once people come in for tattoo removal, Homeboy Industries guides gang members towards career counselors and other useful types of social workers who can further help them to abandon the gang life for good (Kirschner 2004).

One of the more creative solutions to the gang problem is occurring in Guatemala. A reality TV show partly sponsored by USAID is working to help former gang members to turn their skills into valuable business assets. The basic premise of the show is “ten strangers sharing a house for two weeks while they learn the basics of accounting, market management, and public relations.” Members of rival gangs must learn to get along with one another, in addition to learning how to survive the business world. Early accounts say that the show is having positive results (COAV Newsroom 2006).

Local law enforcement is also taking some positive actions in the fight against Mara Salvatrucha and other gangs. On Long Island, the local police departments have formed a task force which focuses on prevention rather than punishment. They go into middle schools and talk to kids about the dangers of gangs, and provide community development programs that give kids alternative activities to joining a gang. The program, though new, already seems to have had results. Though the immigrant population continues to increase, gang activity has leveled off (“More Gangs” 2005).

Los Angeles has had success with similar programs, and police chief William Bratton says it's imperative that communities focus not just on law enforcement, but also on prevention and rehabilitation (Arana 2005, 106).

It is also important to deal with Mara Salvatrucha on an international scale because it is an international issue. Policing, incarceration, and deportation "have transformed the geographies of belonging, exclusion, and citizenship between the once putatively separate cultural and political spheres of the United States and Central America" (Zilberg 2004, 759). Some small steps have been taken in the direction of international cooperation. The U.S. changed its laws so that it can now inform Central American authorities of the background of deportees, so that they know which are gang members (Arana 2005, 110). Also, USAID has been working with the Department of Justice and its International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program to create a community policing program in El Salvador that will incorporate aspects of both law enforcement and community development, to hopefully create a more effective means of combating gangs (Ribando 2005). Among the Central American countries, progress has also been made. In March of 2005, El Salvador and Guatemala set up a joint security force to patrol their border, and in April 2005 there was a summit of Central American leaders to discuss information sharing regarding transnational gangs (Ribando 2005).

Conclusion

Though there has been progress made in dealing with the issue of transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha, truly useful solutions remain all too often hidden behind paranoid rhetoric and sweeping generalizations that are frequently inaccurate. Too often government officials get caught up in the politics of dealing with gangs, wishing to look

tough rather than conciliatory, and thus they often miss the most effective solutions.

Though it may be helpful in an election to portray gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha as the next big threat that needs a strong government hand to crack down and save the people, it is clear that this is not the case. Mara Salvatrucha is certainly an extremely violent organization, but it is also one that can be understood. It is not an army of juvenile killing machines--it is a group of young people who band together for solidarity, respect, family, identity, and protection. The gang gives them something that, at least in their view, society has been unable to provide. Therefore, in order to deal with Mara Salvatrucha effectively, the underlying social problems which cause it must be dealt with, such as poverty, unemployment, and broken homes. It does no good to merely treat the symptoms of the problem when the causes are ignored. It will require a new generation of politicians with the political will to avoid falling into easy stereotypes and traps to effectively solve the problem of Mara Salvatrucha.

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