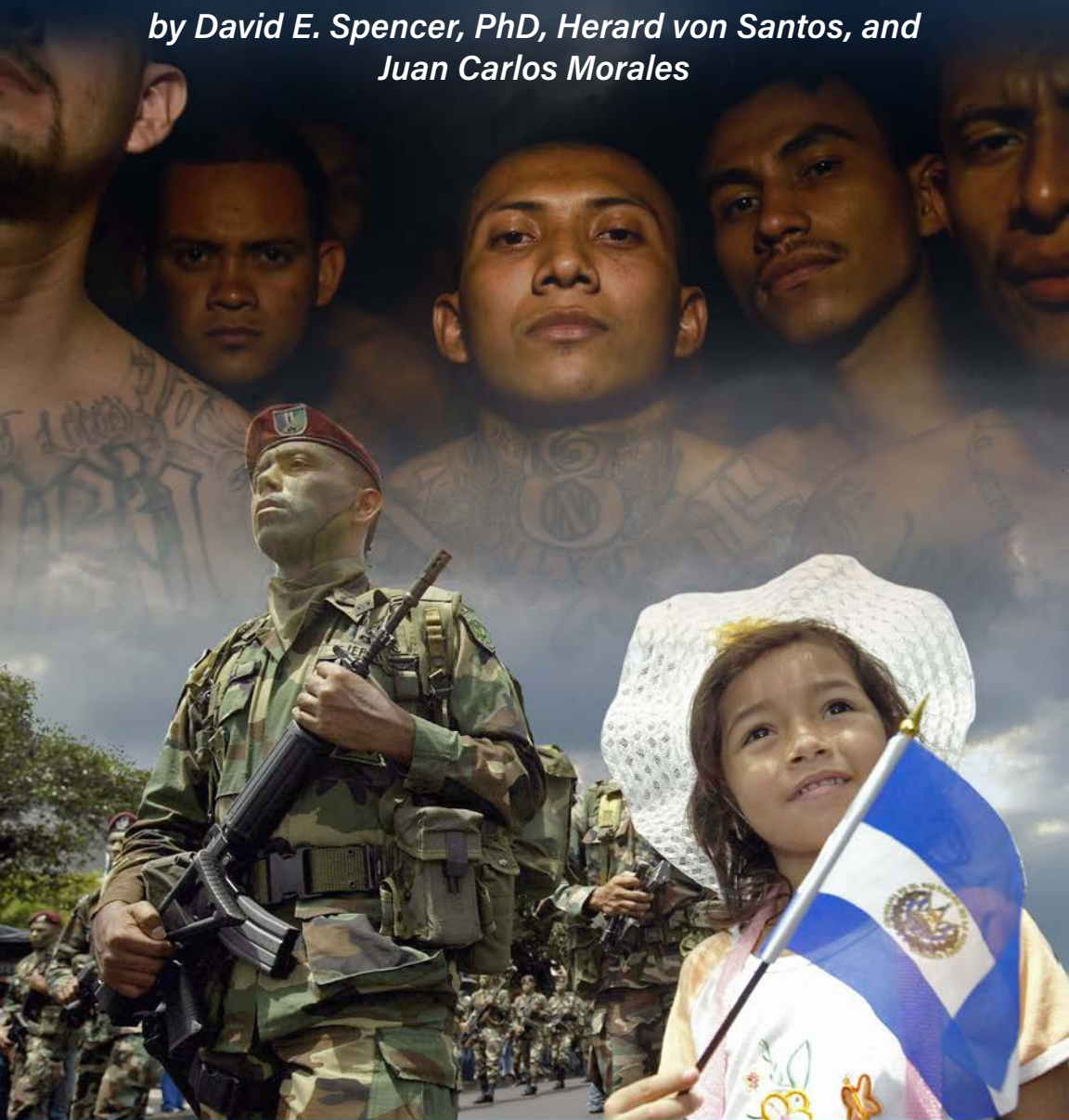


ADVERSARIAL SYSTEM ANALYSIS OF THE SALVADORAN GANGS

*by David E. Spencer, PhD, Herard von Santos, and
Juan Carlos Morales*



WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER *for*
HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES

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Cover concept: Three elements of Salvadoran society are reflected in the cover photo: members of the MS-13 gang that operate throughout the country, the soldier representing the state security forces, and the young girl representing Salvadoran society.

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Author Biographies:

Dr. David Spencer has been a professor at the William J. Perry Center since 2006. He has worked in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as a country director in the office of Counternarcotics & Global Threats and the office of Western Hemisphere Affairs. He earned his PhD from George Washington University.

Herard von Santos is a writer of military history and political affairs in El Salvador. Before becoming a full-time author he served as a prosecutor for the Salvadoran Department of Justice. He is a veteran of the 1979-1992 Civil War, achieving the rank of Captain in the Salvadoran Army.

Juan Carlos Morales is the former editor of the magazine *Revista Policía y Seguridad Pública*. He was also the director of research at the National Academy of Public Security (ANSP). He has taught international relations at the University of El Salvador and earned his master's degree at the José Simeón Cañas Central American University.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Gangs have existed for many decades in El Salvador. They did not receive a lot of attention until the 1990s. The gangs prior to the 1990s were more like the stereotypical gangs that people usually think of: misguided youth, mostly involved in petty crime and solicitation. They were not considered a very serious threat to personal or national security at that time.

These gangs called themselves by a variety of names, but by the 1980s people were calling them “*maras*” as a general term for all gangs. The word “*mara*” is a Salvadoran slang word which means group of friends or gang in the sense that it refers to a tight knit group of buddies that frequently socialize together. If you are out socializing with your friends and your wife calls you to ask where you are, the answer is that I am here with “*la mara*” meaning I am here with my group of pals, the guys that one plays poker with or drinks a few beers or any other similar typical male social activity. The word is still used in this way, even though it has developed an increasingly negative connotation due to its association with the extremely violent criminal gangs. This is important because there has been a lot of speculation about the meaning of the word that in the authors’ opinion is improbable and counterproductive.

Local gangs tried to raise their profile during the civil war by taking advantage of chaos of war to acquire high power weapons. For example, during the guerrilla offensive of 1989, the FMLN brought large numbers of additional weapons to arm the population which they believed would join them in an insurrection. This didn’t happen except for a few people. Among them were some of the gangs, but instead of fighting government troops, they used the weapons to commit armed

robbery and as a result, the guerrillas forced the gangs to give back the weapons or face the consequences. The gangs today in El Salvador did not really evolve from these original gangs, but rather were founded in the United States, from the children of immigrants who migrated from El Salvador for a variety of reasons, in particular, fleeing the civil war during the 1980s.

These kids growing up in the tough neighborhoods of suburban Los Angeles were soon exposed to gang culture and found it desirable for either reasons of status or self-preservation in tough neighborhoods to join or form gangs. In general, Salvadoran and Central American youth joined one of two gangs, the existing Mexican Barrio 18 gang, or the newly created Mara Salvatrucha Stoners. The latter was a drug using, rock and roll gang that developed a reputation for their quickness to kill rivals with their favorite weapons: machetes or knives.

The gangs evolved and morphed. The once Mexican Barrio 18 gang was eventually taken over by the Salvadorans and other Central Americans. However, they retained the Mexican-American or chicano street culture of the original Mexican leadership. On the other hand, the Mara Salvatrucha adopted the chicano culture from their association with the Mexican Mafia. The relationship will be explained later in this study, but the influence was profound, converting the Mara Salvatrucha Stoners into the Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS-13. It became one of the many Mexican Mafia subordinate gangs in the Los Angeles area.

The issue that propelled the Salvadoran gangs to prominence was their penchant for violence. At first they killed outsiders, but somewhere early in the history somebody from one of the gangs killed someone from the other and a blood feud developed between the MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang that has persisted to the present. The savage nature of this feud has been the main reasons that the Salvadoran gangs have developed such a terrifying reputation in the United States and throughout Central America.

United States prisons started filling up with Salvadoran gang members. To deal with the problem, the U.S. government began deporting them back to their countries of origin. However, there were serious unintended consequences of this policy because the Central American countries were ill-equipped to deal with the deported criminals. First, the lax laws in these countries didn't keep the deportees in jail, and the jails were poorly run with low security and high levels of corruption. The jails became havens rather than places of punishment for the gangs. They also became finishing schools for the local recruits that were flocking to the gangs in large numbers. So, instead of solving the gang problem, deportation exacer-

bated the issue. The policy failed to eliminate gangs from the United States and sent hardened gang members into the midst of vulnerable populations in Central America that were ideal recruitment environments for new gang members and structures. Many of these subsequently migrated legally and illegally to the United States, reinforcing the gangs there. So not only did gangs get stronger in the U.S. but they were created all over Central America. The Salvadoran gangs became transnational criminal organizations.

Their transnational nature is probably the second aspect, after violence, that makes the Salvadoran gangs such a serious threat. They consolidated in the United States. They also consolidated in the so-called Central American Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. From there they soon spread north into Mexico and south into Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Salvadoran gang *clicas* (what the gangs call the local groups) have also appeared to a lesser degree in many European countries like Spain, Italy, and Portugal. In general, wherever a Salvadoran population exists, the gangs eventually follow.

The different *clicas* are not part of monolithic organizations, but rather are more like franchises. There are certain common rules, guidelines, symbols and beliefs, but the gangs have a great deal of autonomy at the national level, and sometimes even local level. Nevertheless, as will be discussed, the MS-13 in the United States, Honduras and Guatemala, cooperate a lot with the MS-13 in El Salvador. They also consider the 18th Street Gang as their enemy in each of these countries. So, while there is national autonomy, there is also international recognition and allegiances. This means that many gang crimes are coordinated and carried out across two or more borders. This makes it more difficult to investigate and prosecute them and conversely gives the gangs a great deal of maneuver space. Gang members wanted in the United States often flee to Central America and Mexico, and vice versa.

In El Salvador, the government tried to deal with the gangs by extirpating them. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, they developed polices known as “hard fist” and “super hard fist.” This basically gave the police the right to arrest people that looked like gang members and judges to impose harsh sentences for gang affiliated activities. However, this backfired as the jails were still finishing centers. Additionally, the jails served to recruit other criminals in jail for non-gang related offenses. Finally, instead of protecting society from the gangs, the jails turned into fortresses to protect the gangs from each other.

Protected from outside threats, the security problems of the jails turned them

into business centers for the gangs. Illicit rackets were run from prison, murders were ordered from there and gang leaders met to develop strategic plans. While many of these prison vulnerabilities have been greatly reduced, the prisons continue to be important command, control and finishing centers for the gangs. Overall, rather than hurting the gangs, the mass jailing of gang members helped them consolidate, become more sophisticated, and develop greater cohesion.

As mentioned previously, the main problem of the Salvadoran gangs is their prolific violence. They kill their rivals and those that oppose them without mercy or hesitation. They kill non-gang members who don't follow their rules within their areas of control and others from outside who inadvertently wander into their territory. However, perhaps more disturbing is that they kill for the enjoyment of it. Killing is a requirement of full membership and killing is a regular activity of the *clicas*. Where other gangs might kill rarely and for specific reasons/purposes, the *maras* kill regularly and seemingly for pleasure, albeit almost never randomly. Their nearly total disregard for life, both their own and of others, instills fear in the societies where they exist.

In the mid-2010s, the gangs figured out that their violence had an extortionary effect on their ability to negotiate or manipulate society and the government to get things they wanted. When they wanted to negotiate with societal or government representatives, they ordered increased or decreased number of homicides depending on whether they were trying to force a concession or show good will to coax a favor. Such a cold attitude toward the value of human life is hard to fathom because of how foreign it is to conventional societal values, but it is precisely this callousness that gives the gangs power. The government has everything to lose in contrast to the gangs in the short term. Paradoxically, in the long-term, violence is the gangs' greatest weakness because it is what causes people to reject them.

Nevertheless, as the state fails to eliminate or significantly reduce the power of the gangs in El Salvador, the people have resigned themselves to their presence and, as a result, the gangs have started to become institutionalized. The older generation of the gangs is gentrifying while simultaneously the criminal groups are being joined by large numbers of young recruits. This institutionalization of the gangs means that not only are they expanding, but they are establishing deep roots as they become increasingly embedded in Salvadoran society. This has serious security, political, economic and social implications and means that the gangs cannot be merely "extirpated" as a security threat, but rather must be dealt with as a holistic problem. This is a much more difficult task. This study aspires to develop

a holistic assessment of the Salvadoran gangs in the hopes that it can contribute to this type of comprehensive solution.

Chapter II: The State of the Literature

Hundreds of books, articles and studies have been written on the gangs. The works range greatly in size and quality and can be divided into four broad categories: anecdotal, sociological phenomenon, criminal organization, and political actor. All four make important contributions to the understanding of the gangs. Within those four general categories are two focuses: the first examines the gangs in the United States, and the second that looks at the gangs as either a country or regional phenomenon. We will examine both, but mostly those that focus on El Salvador. Doing a full literature review is outside the scope of this paper, but we will briefly review some representative samples of the different categories of literature.

The principal author of this report, David E. Spencer, has a particular soft spot for the anecdotal works. This is because some of the literature to first catch the attention of the American public were the anecdotal publications. The first that we should mention is *This Is for the Mara Salvatrucha: Inside the MS-13, America's Most Violent Gang* by the journalist Samuel Logan published in 2009, which tells the story of the MS-13 in the United States through the lens of Brenda Paz, a young Honduran immigrant. She was one of the first persons who informed U.S. law enforcement about the Salvadoran gang and revealed a lot about how they were organized and operated on the U.S. mainland. Due to her inability to isolate herself from her former friends, she paid for her indiscretion with her life. This well-written and sobering book opened the eyes of many outside law enforcement to the growing threat that the MS-13 gang was becoming within the United States.

A second work is Juan Jose Martinez' *A Year Inside MS-13*, originally published in Spanish in 2015 and in English in 2019. The author, an anthropologist, spent a year inside the MS-13 in El Salvador. This is a very good social-cultural account that tells what it's like for the gang members on the ground in the Salvadoran neighborhoods. It discusses the complex dynamics that exist between the gang members, the local population, and the rival gangs. It is told in a series of stories that are well-written and compelling.

A third work published in 2018 by Juan Jose Martinez and his brother Oscar Martinez is titled, *The Hollywood Kid: The Violent Life and Death of an MS-13 Hitman*. It is another representative work of this genre, telling the story of the MS-13 through the eyes of Miguel Angel Tobar. This work provides some important details about the MS-13s origins in Los Angeles during the 1980s and the importance of the influence of the Mexican Mafia on the gang. Like the previous work it

reveals a lot about the social-cultural dynamics of the gang in El Salvador.

While all of these works are important, they are not analytical. They reveal the gangs from the perspective of individual gang members, and their interaction with the communities they come from and dominate. But they don't question or attempt to verify the accounts of the sources. The integrity of the authors is not being questioned here. They are more than anything else, social commentaries. The authors are trying to make points using powerful representative stories, and that is a valid form of literature. However, these stories allow for significant gaps. So, for example, Brenda Paz, in Sam Logan's book, mostly interacted with gangs on the East Coast, so a lot of the history and complexity on the West Coast is missing. The opposite can be said of Oscar and Juan Jose Martinez' work about the Hollywood Kid, which have detailed descriptions about the history and dynamics on the U.S. West Coast, but not so much on the East. The gaps can be filled by reading many accounts, but all are somewhat lacking. While the reader obtains valuable insights into the gangs, these sources cannot be relied on to develop strategies or countermeasures, although they do serve as references and indicate where analytical research could be done.

Scholarly work has been done along the general lines of looking at the gangs as criminal organizations or sociological phenomenon. An example of the former is the study that American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, and Insight Crime headed by Steven Dudley, Hector Silva Avalos, and Juan Jose Martinez, did for the United States Department of Justice in early 2018 entitled *MS13 in the Americas: How the World's Most Notorious Gang Defies Logic, Resists Destruction*. This very thorough study is focused on the interests of the Department of Justice, that is how a criminal organization is organized and operates. It is impossible to not include some data on the sociological aspects of the organization, but the study makes conclusions about how they are distributed geographically, how it is organized, how it is governed, and its modes of operation. In other words, the focus is on the organization and its modus operandi which is what we call the criminal organization approach. This is a very important study with some very useful insights about the gangs.

The social approach is represented by such works as Florida International University's *The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador*. The publication put out by the university's The Street Gangs in Central America Research Initiative. This center, funded by the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and U.S. Agency

for International Development (USAID) has done studies on the gangs in each one of the Central American countries that it published in both Spanish and English. We will only refer to the study on El Salvador, which is the focus of our research. This excellent study focuses on the demographics of the gangs, who was in the gangs, which gangs they were in, levels of poverty, why they joined the gangs, the importance of belonging to the gang, how and when they left the gangs, and probably the major question of interest to the sponsors, whether or not rehabilitation of gang members was possible. This study does not exclude information about organization and modus operandi, but it is more interested at looking at demographic and social data and recommending solutions along those lines.

The fourth category of study are those that look at the gangs as a political actor. This is perhaps the most controversial category of gang study and are often hotly disputed by those from the other categories, but particularly the social approach.

First in this category is Max Manwaring's work entitled *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency* published by the Strategic Studies Institute at the Army War College in 2005. Manwaring is an expert on insurgency and counterinsurgency and did work on the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador in the 1980s. In this work, he develops the concept of generations of gangs. First generation gangs are traditional gangs that are local turf oriented, are horizontal in their organizations, and are focused on petty extortion and crime. Second generation gangs are oriented towards business, such as drug trafficking, and making money, are more centralized in their leadership, and cover more territory to even include other states. Third generation gangs are those that include the characteristics of the previous two generations plus sophisticated transnational operations and political ambitions. It basically asserted that third generations were very similar to insurgencies and should be combated essentially as such.

This caused quite a stir when it was published for two reasons. First, the notion of approaching gangs as an insurgency was controversial to say the least. Second, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs shared some aspects of his definition of second and third generation gangs, but not many others. In 2005, this paper was on the fringes of the research on central American gangs. It was way ahead of its time. In 2021, it is much more reasonable, but still causes hesitation.

Second is a series of papers and reports published both publicly and privately by Douglas Farah. In the 1980s, Mr. Farah was a reporter for the Washington Post in Central America and covered the insurgency in El Salvador. In recent years, he

has become a consultant through his company IBI consultants. His papers have been published in a number of venues to include FIU, National Defense University (NDU) and the William J. Perry Center (WJPC). His arguments can be summarized by the WJPC publication that he co-wrote with Kathryn Babineau in 2018 entitled *The Rapid Evolution of the MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras: from Gang to Tier-One Threat to Central America and U.S. Security Interests*. His assertions are also repeated in his article written with the same co-author entitled *The Evolution of MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras*, published by NDU in the journal *Prism* in 2017. His primary assertion is that “The Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13) gang is now a tier one criminal, political, military, and economic threat in the Northern Triangle” because it has evolved politically, militarily and economically to challenge the survival of the state. This includes direct involvement in partisan politics, particularly elections, moving increasingly towards drug trafficking to include direct ties to the Mexican Cartels, and acquiring greater quantities and quality of weapons.

Farah’s arguments have been controversial and received quite a bit of push-back. In particular a very strong reaction by Carlos Garcia and Juan Jose Martinez, author or co-author of some of the literature already reviewed here. Garcia’s and Martinez critiques were both published in *Insight Crime* in 2016 entitled *6 Common Misconceptions About the MS13 Street Gang*, and *International Terror and the Gangs of Douglas Farah* respectively. Farah responded via letter that was also published in *Insight Crime* entitled *The Nature of the Maras: Douglas Farah - a Rebuttal*. He claims that Martinez’ critique is about ideological differences and perhaps professional jealousy. He asserts that Garcia’s critiques were mostly due to misunderstanding of the scope and context of the article that Garcia was critiquing. The main point here is to illustrate that the political actor literature elicits strong criticism.

To view gangs as an insurgent type organization, a particularly simplistic conceptualizations in this sense, is to miss the mark and to unleash state action that could be counterproductive. On the other hand, to dismiss the political actor argument out of hand threatens to miss the mark as well. There is clearly evidence of the gang’s involvement in politics. The question is not whether it exists or not, but what does it mean? Is this involvement opportunistic and sporadic or deliberate and systematic? The answer will determine very different government responses.

All of these approaches have value, but to some degree an analogy is that the existing categories of literature is similar to the story about the multiple blind men describing an elephant. Each assesses the elephant very differently depending on

which part they touch. Here the differences are not as great but the emphasis, particularly of the latter three categories (criminal organization, sociological and political actor) all seem to be describing very valid, but different aspects of the same phenomenon. The solution is a more holistic approach to analyzing the gangs. This is what this study attempts to do

Chapter III: Research Approach

This study sought to find an approach that overcame the gaps in the current literature. The challenge was not so much to do something fundamentally different, as the studies mentioned above have been generally very good, but rather bring them together into a single approach.

Criminal approaches tend to look at gang members and actions. This is perhaps the most common approach that has been employed to understand and combat gangs. Knowing who they are and what they do helps the state make arrests and prosecute the individuals for crimes committed. It assumes that by punishing the responsible individuals, it will dissuade others from following their example. It also assumes that the gangs are essentially social anomalies. In Spanish, this idea is expressed elegantly through the term “*anti-sociales*” or anti-socials, which is applied to criminals of all types. The term embodies the concept that like cancer cells in the body, if removed, will allow the rest of society to progress normally.

This approach has clearly been inadequate in El Salvador as the multiple “hard fist” campaigns have done little if anything to reduce the number of people joining the gangs while simultaneously creating huge prison populations across the country. This failure has caused some to reject the criminal approach and turn to a sociological approach to understand gang behavior and allure.

In essence then, the criminal organization approach has been incomplete. While they are good at identifying gang members and their criminal acts, the visible dimensions of the problem, perhaps they are failing to see other significant activities and dimensions of the organization that underlie the gangs ability to survive and prosper, even during the heaviest iron fist policies in which the state had essentially declared war on them.

The sociological approach looks at some of these underlying and sometimes invisible factors; how society is structured and functions or, in this case, malfunctions. It looks at the contradictions in society and the dynamics that lead to the creation, maintenance, and growth of the gangs. Solutions coming from a sociological approach often focus on existing conditions, education, opportunity, poverty, and living conditions. Sociological solutions may correctly seek to address root causes of criminality and seek to solve long-term societal problems. However, this approach tends to produce lasting results only if the policies emanating from them are sustained long-term. For example, they often focus on economic development and education as solutions, both very laudable efforts. However, due to political

cycles of 4-8 years, strategic patience is often lacking to let these programs play out, and because of this the effects tend to be chronic instead of sustained.

Furthermore, sometimes these approaches eschew enforcement solutions advocated by the criminal approach. This does nothing to solve the short-term criminal threat against the populations. They also often fail to account for the new social dynamics that are created by the gangs themselves that prevent root causes from being addressed. It is akin to trying to solve a person's - infected with parasites -- nutritional problems by feeding them more without first getting rid of the parasites. The parasites grow much stronger by absorbing all of the nutrients, while the patient only benefits marginally, if at all. So, sociological approach solutions, while well-intentioned, are also incomplete. The original problem that produced the threat to security may well be lack of opportunity stemming from poverty, but now the violence has added its own self-reproducing dynamic, and poverty cannot be reduced to increase the opportunity without first significantly reducing the violence. Programs aimed at solving socio-economic problems without simultaneously increasing security can end up strengthening the gangs, rather than healing society.

The more novel political actor approach emphasizes the gangs' involvement in politics and their direct threat to state sovereignty, whether it be through political action or through violence. The problem with this approach can be two-fold. First, that authors can advocate treating the gangs as insurgent or terrorist groups, which while they may share many of the same characteristics, are not the same. The second problem is the interpretation by the readers, who think the authors are advocating that solution.

This is why the political actor approach is controversial, although not without merit because, as we shall see, as the gangs have gotten stronger and more prolific. Almost inevitably, they have naturally begun to cross into the political realm. Whether occasional and opportunistic or deliberate and systemic is up for debate but ignoring this aspect can be just as fatal as only focusing on security or the socio-economic dimension.

The Adversarial Systems Approach

In the end we chose to employ the adversarial system approach. The adversarial system approach goes beyond the sociological, criminal or political actor approaches by attempting to be holistic, examining all dimensions of an organization

that have an impact on its *raison d'être*, organizational dynamics, and evolution. In other words, it attempts to not only look at what's visible about an organization (members and events), but the dynamics that are driving the system in its current direction that are both visible and invisible. It also attempts to examine them across all dimensions of its action or behavior.

This is important because as we have just discussed, when a state tries to act on only the visible elements of an internal threat, it often fails to make significant headway against that threat. As long as the other dimensions continue to exist, the organization can survive and regenerate when the state tires of what appear to be never ending and fruitless unidimensional actions or campaigns.

The hope of this study is to tease out some of those less visible dimensions of the Salvadoran gangs by using the adversarial systems approach. The gang system is considered adversarial because they challenge the sovereignty of the state over the population and territory to which it has internationally recognized claim. The word enemy was rejected because it seemed too harsh a term that implied the need for a war, and the word rival because the term was too benign. The gangs are not benign because they considerably alter the state of security and the social life of the population. An adversary is less than an enemy but more than a mere rival.

This approach was originally developed by the Colombian Military under the leadership of then Minister of Defense Juan Carlos Pinzon, and much of the intellectual leadership came from then Brigadier General Alberto Jose Mejia¹ to analyze the FARC insurgent organization in their planning of the Sword of Honor Campaign in 2011-2012. The Sword of Honor Campaign and its branches and sequels brought the FARC to the negotiating table which ended in the peace agreement that was signed in November 2016.

While the Salvadoran gangs are not by any means a political insurgency, they share many characteristics in common with insurgencies and impact national sovereignty in similar ways, even if the gangs' strategic objective is not to take over the Salvadoran state like the FMLN's objective was in El Salvador during the 1980s, or like the FARC's was in Colombia.

Prior to the Sword of Honor Campaign, the Colombian military had mostly analyzed the FARC in terms of its order of battle and military plans (very similar to the criminal organization approach). This led to attrition or body count strategies

¹ Juan Carlos Pinzon was later named Ambassador to the United States and General Mejia later became Army Commander and then General Commander of the Colombian Military.

(reminiscent of iron fist policies) as well as to the most prolonged conflict to date in Latin American history. Among other things the prolongation of the conflict was due to the analysis never addressing or ignoring the non-order of battle aspects of the guerrillas (socio-economic and political). It merely looked at units, numbers, weapons, locations and violent actions.

It was only when the government forces were able to understand the whole system, both military and non-military aspects of the FARC, that more effective strategies were adopted that led to the conclusion of the fighting.

Similarly, in El Salvador a succession of *Mano Dura* (Hard Fist) policies led to vastly increased arrests and jailing but did little towards reducing the influence of the gangs. It was reasoned that a similar holistic approach, adapted from Colombia and modified to be more appropriate to a gang criminal organization, could be useful to analyze the gangs in El Salvador. This holistic approach attempts to identify important aspects of the gangs that perhaps weren't previously considered in the development of public security strategies to reestablish public order in El Salvador.

The basic method of this approach is to figure out all of the dimensions in which an organization, group, or entity is having an impact or interacting with the nation and society, and then investigating and developing an understanding of each and every one of those dimensions and the degree to which the organization acts in each one. The sum of these dimensions and their interactions form the system.

The first task then is to figure out what those dimensions are for the group in question. Many of these aspects were identified from the literature that we have reviewed above. Some came from other sources. Some were adapted from the Colombian work on FARC but were not simple transpositions of the Colombian FARC analysis. That would miss the nuances unique to El Salvador and the gangs. They were modified to better fit gangs with criminal objectives, rather than an insurgent organization with political-military objectives. Each of the identified dimensions will be the headings of each of the chapters of the study for which we will attempt to do an in-depth description and analysis.

After significant research, discussion and review, the aspects of the gangs we have decided to look at for this study are ideology, strategy, leadership and control, the gang member, violence, politics, territoriality, resources, and popular support. As can be seen, this is essentially a combination of the criminal organization, social dimension, and political-actor approaches rolled into one.

The research for this study was carried out between 2018 and 2020. It is al-

most certain that some of the information will already be out of date by the time this study is published. Even so, it is a good snapshot of the overall impact on Salvadoran society at the date of its writing, and many of its contents will continue to hold true over time.

We should clarify that this study is about the gangs in El Salvador, specifically the Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS-13 and the Barrio 18 gangs. It more heavily examines MS-13 because much more data was available on that gang than Barrio 18. It does not focus on the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs outside of El Salvador although it is impossible to understand the gangs in El Salvador without some discussion of their franchises and associates both regionally and internationally.

Chapter IV: Ideology



Caption: The “Devil’s horns” of the Mara Salvatrucha gang are painted on the wall of the prison in Tonacatepeque, El Salvador.

Photo credit: Jan Sochor via Getty Images, with permission

Many persons dismiss the idea of the gangs having an ideology. Perhaps it is because they conceive of ideology in only the political dimension. This study claims that to the contrary, Salvadoran gangs have a very well-developed ideology, although it is not traditional like democracy or socialism.

Ideology can be defined as a set of aims and ideas that directs one’s goals, expectations, and actions. In this sense, the gangs in El Salvador display a clear ideology that governs their behavior. Although to many people, the gangs may seem like a group of violent and chaotic people who do whatever they want and use force to prevent others from stopping them, they are in fact guided by a set of concepts and rules that impose hierarchy and order to their behavior. Their behavior towards members of the gang is far different than their behavior towards non-members, which may be one of the reasons that people perceive them as being chaotic.

The Salvadoran gang’s ideology is heavily influenced by the “Mexican Mafia” *Sureños* (Southerners) system, which is not from Mexico but rather is a sort of

federation of the Mexican American gangs in Southern California. The Mexican Mafia or “La Eme” (The M) originated in the California prison system during the 1950s as a means of Hispanic prisoners organizing to protect themselves against the predations of members of white and black gangs in prison. It later turned into a money-making enterprise for its members by obligating Hispanic gangs on the outside to pay “taxes”. These gangs complied because non-compliance led to isolation, physical assault and even death in prison of the gangs that didn’t pay the “tax”. The Mexican Mafia umbrella meant that when in prison, Hispanic gang members of affiliated gangs would be protected by other organized and affiliated gang member inmates. If you weren’t part of the Mexican Mafia association, you were on your own, which meant that you were easy prey to more organized groups, Whites, Blacks, Asians and even the Mexican Mafia itself.

Since most gang members eventually ended up in jail, and while in prison, required allies and protection, compliance was a good investment.² This system made the Mexican Mafia extremely rich and influential. The Mexican Mafia charges monthly sums to be part of the system and runs businesses outside of jail through its surrogate members. The gangs that belong to the Mexican Mafia system are known as the “Sureño System.”

The Mara Salvatrucha was originally known as the Mara Salvatrucha Stoner, a hard-rock, hard drug using, Satanic-oriented type of gang.³ Inured to violence because of the civil war in their home country, the Mara Salvatrucha Stoners were known for their lack of hesitation to use violence, especially with blades and machetes. Because of this, other gangs feared them.

In the first couple of years of the 1990s, the Mexican Mafia asked the Mara Salvatrucha to pay its quota of taxes. Most of the cliques or *clicas* refused and the Mexican Mafia gave the greenlight to all gangs in the Sureño system to kill Mara Salvatrucha on the outside. Furthermore, they were denied protection when they were incarcerated. After over one hundred Mara Salvatrucha were killed the gang gave in and submitted to the Mexican Mafia.⁴

Under the influence of the Mexican mafia, the Mara Salvatrucha transformed its modus operandi, adopting the fashion, speech, culture, and gothic tattoo styles

² Michael Montgomery, “Gangster Reveals Mexican Mafia Secrets,” *National Public Radio*, September 6, 2008 at <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94333325> accessed on June 29, 2020.

³ Oscar Martinez and Juan Jose Martinez, *The Hollywood Kid: The Violent Life and Death of an MS-13 Hitman*, New York: Verso, 2018, p. 42.

⁴ MS-13 and Mexican Mafia Historical Gang Ties, *Perplex News*, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM_ho-zo9gYQ, accessed on July 10, 2020.

of the Mexican Mafia. As gangs affiliated with the Mexican mafia, they added the number 13 to their names, symbolizing “M” the 13th letter in the alphabet, to show participation in the Mexican Mafia confederation. This confederation included the gangs like Hawaiian Gardens 13, Florence 13, Playboy 13, and eventually Mara Salvatrucha which dropped “stoner” from their name and added the 13 in its place to become Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS 13.⁵ However, belonging to “La Eme” didn’t mean that on the streets these Hispanic gangs were at peace with each other. To the contrary they battled each other viciously, vying for business and territory, but when in prison, those rivalries were left behind and they banded together under control of “La Eme” to defend themselves against non-Hispanic groups.⁶

Nevertheless, the Mexican mafia was not only a prison insurance system, but also exercised strategic control from time-to-time as it gained power and influence. For example, in November 1995, the Mexican mafia issued three orders to the Sureño gangs which it transmitted by TV, radio, and in the newspapers. These orders were called the “Hispanic Peace Initiative.” They included taking over drug areas controlled by Black gangs; taxing illegal-alien drug dealers operating in Sureño controlled areas; and stopping drive-by shootings.

The order to end drive-by shootings was an attempt to reduce the death and injury of innocent bystanders which was making the gangs unpopular and causing a police crackdown which was seriously affecting the Mexican Mafia’s lucrative drug business. The drive-bys had to stop to reduce the pressure on this business. The gangs were instead encouraged to continue killing each other in face-to-face “walk-ups.” However, some Hispanic gangs were loath to give up drive-by shootings and the members of those gangs that failed to obey were attacked and often killed when they reached jail for disobeying the directives.⁷

While to date, no MS-13 member has become a “carnal” or full member of the Mexican Mafia, a few of the top US leaders of the MS-13 have been sponsored for membership that for a variety of reasons failed to get a unanimous vote. One can only become a “carnal” with a unanimous vote. Nevertheless, one or two of these same leaders do work closely with the Mexican Mafia and are considered

⁵ Oscar Martinez and Juan Jose Martinez, *The Hollywood Kid: The Violent Life and Death of an MS-13 Hitman*, New York: Verso, 2018, p. 44.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Valdemar, Mexican Mafia: The Most Dangerous Gang, Police: *Law Enforcement Solutions*, April 12, 2010, at <https://www.policemag.com/373488/mexican-mafia-the-most-dangerous-gang> accessed on June 29, 2020.

“comrades.”, a prestigious but slightly lower category.⁸

Because of the aforementioned, the Mexican Mafia was influential in the development of the Salvadoran gangs’ code of conduct. This was because the consequences of disobeying that code of conduct when one went to jail were catastrophic, so they became an ingrained part of the Salvadoran gangs’ code of conduct as well. These Mexican Mafia code included:

1. A member may not be an informant or rat.
2. A member may not be a coward.
3. A member may not raise a hand against another member without approval.
4. A member must not show disrespect for any member’s family, including sex with another member’s wife or girlfriend.
5. A member must not steal from another member.
6. A member may not be homosexual.
7. A member must not lobby against another member or cause dissension within the organization.
8. Membership is for life.
9. It’s mandatory to assault/kill all dropouts.
10. La Eme comes first, even before your own family.
11. A member must not interfere with another member’s business activities.⁹

The latest list of MS-13 rules is attached as an annex to this study. Virtually all the Mexican Mafia rules except the prohibition against homosexuality are reproduced in the MS-13 list. Nonetheless, the MS-13 continue to be significantly homophobic.

This code of conduct expresses several ideas that are fundamental to Salvadoran gang ideology as well. The first is the idea that the gang becomes the most important aspect of a person’s life above all else. The only acceptable attitude is total loyalty to the gang and that once in, the association is for life. Showing total loyalty to the gang gives a member honor. Those that are disloyal to the gang lose their honor and must be eliminated. Providing information to the police and cowardice are considered forms of disloyalty. Desertion is another form of disloyalty and is punished with extermination.

⁸ MS-13 and Mexican Mafia Historical Gang Ties, *Perplex News*, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM_ho-zo9gYQ, accessed on July 10, 2020.

⁹ Chris Blatchford (2008). *The Black Hand: the Bloody Rise and Redemption of “Boxer” Enriquez, a Mexican Mob killer*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009, p. 44.



Caption: Gang graffiti on the wall of a neighborhood. These signs are used to mark territory and identify the gang, in this case the MS-13 and the specific clica Guazapos Locos. This warns other gangs and authorities who may attempt to operate in this area. It is prohibited to clean this graffiti on pain of death. The sign also contains a warning to the inhabitants of the neighborhood: "Ver, Oir, Callar" - "see, hear and shut up". This is a shortened version of the entire phrase: "Ver, Oir y Callar si su vida quiere preservar" (See, Hear and Shut up if you want to preserve your life).

Photo credit: El Salvador National Police

The second is that cohesion within the gang and honor is maintained by showing respect to other members of the gang. This is done by respecting his person, his family, his property, and his business.

The homophobia of the gangs stems from this aspect as homosexual activity is seen as a violation of respect for other gang members. This is probably because many men who go to prison without protection are raped by other prisoners. Men in prison perform homosexual acts, even though they are heterosexuals on the outside due to their lack of access to females and because forcing another man to have sex with you is a form of domination and forced submission. To the Sureño gangs, this type of homosexuality is dishonorable.

These concepts, total loyalty to the gang, honor, and respect for other gang members promotes a high level of cohesion within the in-group. This does not apply to the out-group, everybody else, and especially rival gangs towards which behavior is completely opposite. The implacable savagery displayed against enemies and outsiders creates fear and, from this fear, respect. Respect and deference by non-gang members for the gang is vital and gives the gang members their sense of importance. It also gives them power by removing feelings of helplessness in a hostile world.

There are three additional ideas that underpin the ideology of the gangs and those are self-defense, territory, and the gang organization. The origins of the Salvadoran gangs are migrant Central American, mostly Salvadoran children, who went to Los Angeles, California where they were victimized by other Latin Americans, particularly those belonging to pre-existing Mexican gangs. Barrio 18 was a Mexican gang that Central American youth were allowed to join. They eventually coopted it (a kind of “if you can’t beat them, join them” response), while MS-13 was formed by Central American, but mostly Salvadoran youth that were seeking to form their own gang to defend themselves against the other gangs. So, in this sense the fundamental purpose for their existence was self-defense from other gangs.

The best way to defend the group from predatory gangs was to dominate a finite territory and keep other gangs from entering that area. This did several things. First, it provided the group with a defined objective in their quest for self-defense. Second, it gave them an identity distinct from others (“we’re from here, they’re from there”). Third, dominating territory allowed the gang to exploit its economic resources, and have a ready pool of young men, and today increasingly young women from which to recruit.

A key and increasingly prominent idea among the Salvadoran gangs is the need for the formation of a “gang nation.” Gang members are “citizens” of this gang nation. This gang nation has an “army”, long-standing traditions, a path to “citizenship,” a means of upward mobility, organizational structure, a pseudo court system, and a pseudo-democracy in which the members can participate in decision-making.¹⁰

While the gangs do not seem very interested to date in taking over any formal state, the “gang nation” is not only the gang territory within a single state but the linking together of different “islands” of the gangs across the various nations. The linking across many nations is probably feasible due to cell phones and social media technology, as the different islands can communicate and follow each other’s activities at the push of a button that is essentially available to all from any location. As we shall discuss this development of a gang nation works in fits and starts, but the idea and effort have persisted over the years.

The “gang nation” is necessary because the members feel that they are not protected by their formal states nor have access to the means of upward mobility

¹⁰ Alejandro Hernández Jacky, “Inkin’, Taggin’, Flashin’, and Flowin’”: Defining Group Identity Through Mara Salvatrucha Expressive Culture,” Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2012, p.10.

within its structures, such as education or jobs. This makes them feel like they do not really belong to any nation besides the one they have created for themselves, nor that any formal nation even really wants them as citizens.¹¹

Their anti-social behavior reinforces both the concept of their belonging to the gang nation and their alienation from the formal state because it provokes the state representatives to act against them, jail them, and even kill them. It is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy or vicious cycle with alienated persons acting anti-socially, being rejected, banding together, and being rejected as a group and so on. The concept of a gang nation is reflected in the gang's strategy to unify all the homologous gangs across the world.

In El Salvador, the concept of the gang nation as the sum of its members has been extended beyond the gang members alone to the communities in which the gang members live. A recent interview with a gang leader revealed that the gangs claim that they are merely taking control of the territory that the state has abandoned, and that they have become the only real representatives of the communities. Through their actions, they are forcing the state to pay attention to the communities.¹²

According to the gangs, Salvadoran society is broken, due to poverty and social disintegration, so the only real force that exists in these communities are the gangs.¹³ An MS-13 member claimed that the government were responsible for the continued strength of the gangs because they wouldn't give people a hand. According to their logic, if they had jobs and opportunities, they wouldn't be in the gangs.¹⁴

Sexism

Until recently the ideology of the Salvadoran gangs was highly misogynist. This is reflective of traditional Latin *machismo* culture which tends to view females as being inferior and weak with some notable exceptions.

Except for mothers and grandmothers, women are looked down upon and disrespected. This is reflected by their terms for females associated with the gangs.

¹¹ Hernandez Jacky, p. 11.

¹² Vice News, Gangs of El Salvador, November 30, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGG7lRJJkJK>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Vice News, Gangs of El Salvador, November 30, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGG7lRJJkJK>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

A female gang member or girlfriend is called a “*haina*” which comes from the Mexican slang word “*jaina*” meaning “vagina.” This word both strips women of their humanity and turns them into objects that are to be used for male pleasure.

Within the gang world, women are objects to be possessed and, while a gang member can have more than one girlfriend, he is not allowed to have sex with the women belonging to other gang members. As societal values are changing, this value is beginning to change within the gangs as well. Until recently, women played little role in the gangs other than to support their gang member boyfriends, bear their children, hide their weapons, money, and drugs, and otherwise back up the gang. Historically, there have only been a small number of full female gang members. Recently however, it seems that attitudes have opened more towards women as regular gang members and not just *hainas*.

Women have been found to have value beyond sex because they are usually less suspected of being gang members which allows them to carry out a number of tasks with greater facility than males. For example, they can act as assassins because they can get close to a target where a man would find it more difficult. They can also approach targets for extortion without being suspected and suddenly draw a weapon trapping a target between paying up or being killed. By the same token they can often carry out intelligence more easily than men or cause men to drop their guard by appealing to their libido.

On the other hand, women themselves have demanded to be allowed to join the gang to demonstrate their value, and distinguish themselves from the “*hainas*”, to avoid the abuse these women suffer.¹⁵ While women have been allowed into the gang since the early days, their full membership was the exception rather than the norm.

Women could choose to be initiated by going through the 13-second beat down or by having sex with the gang members. Only those females that chose the 13-second beat down over sex, the same way the males joined, were respected. Women who chose to be initiated by having sex were not really seen as true members but rather sexual objects, little better than *hainas*.¹⁶

However, as attitudes towards the value and or capabilities of women have shifted in society in general, this is starting to be reflected in the gang’s values as

¹⁵ Las Pandilleras Mas Locas de El Salvador, *Noticias El Salvador*, 2017, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWrYknJ-KJE&t=3s> accessed on June 17, 2020.

¹⁶ Juan Martinez D’Aubuisson, Así viven y mueren las mujeres pandilleras en El Salvador, *Revista Factum*, March 11, 2016 at <https://www.revistafactum.com/asi-viven-y-mueren-las-mujeres-pandilleras-en-el-salvador/> accessed on June 17, 2020.

well. Nevertheless, the gangs appear to still be more *machista*, misogynist, and homophobic than society in general.

Religion

The Salvadoran gangs have a tortured relationship with religion. On the one hand, their acts reject and violate conventional religious rules and norms. For example: thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not commit adultery¹⁷ and other Christian commandments are violated regularly. There is a general rejection of religion in this sense. However, they also are superstitious about the effects of interference with religious authorities. While gang members have been known to steal property from religious authorities, priests, pastors, missionaries, and others, they generally avoid harming them.

There seems to be a deep-seated feeling that harming religious authorities will bring down the wrath of God on the gang and gang members. While gangs commit the most heinous crimes without hesitation, they seem to believe that deliberately harming religious representatives will provoke a more intense type of divine anger. Therefore, it is essentially taboo to kill or injure a priest or pastor. In their minds, extortion, theft and murder of normal citizens does not elicit the same wrath of God.

Pragmatically however, religious representatives have often proven to be the only people to reach out to gang members and their families in times of crisis, suffering, and prison. It was Father Colindres of the Catholic Church who was the intermediary between the government and gangs during the gang truce negotiations of 2012-2014.¹⁸ Religious personnel also stay out of gang business and do not inform police or interfere with gang activity. Consequently, religious representatives are often the only people that are allowed freedom to come in from outside, move around gang territory, and leave without molestation.

Perhaps because of this, one of the few ways out of the gang is through religious conversion, particularly to Protestant or Evangelical sects. Where other forms of requests to leave the gangs are not respected, being religiously converted and coming to Jesus is. These converts are often moved to better jails for gang

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible* Exodus 20 verses 13-15.

¹⁸ Carlos Martínez y José Luis Sanz, La nueva verdad sobre la Tregua entre pandillas, El Faro, September 11, 2012 at <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/La-nueva-verdad-sobre-la-Tregua-entre-pandillas.htm> accessed on June 29, 2020.

member converts. They are allowed more family visits and otherwise are treated better by prison officials. Converts are often let out earlier and many return to the gangs to continue evangelism within the ranks of those on the outside. Because of this, many imprisoned gang members convert.

There is a lot of suspicion within the police and outside the gangs that conversions are insincere, but rather motivated to obtain better jail conditions. Furthermore, they suspect that converted gang members communicate using scriptural references as codes for messages about criminal activity. It is not clear if this is true, but this is an area for further research. What is clear is that the gangs have a complicated relationship of rejection and respect with most religious authorities, one that is a combination of both superstition and pragmatism.

Chapter V: Strategy

Even though no document has ever been captured outlining a gang strategy, it is the finding of this study that MS-13 think and act strategically. Their strategy is not contained in a formal western-style document that outlines gang strategic objectives, specific objectives, lines of action, ways, means, or measures of effectiveness. Nevertheless, there is a lot of evidence of strategic objectives and lines of action to accomplish them in the long term.

Plan 503

The gangs in El Salvador have been thinking strategically for at least 14 years, if not longer. In 2007, Salvadoran Police intelligence discovered that the MS-13 was developing a so-called “Plan 503.” This plan was named 503 after the international country code to call El Salvador via telephone. There was no document ever written, but intelligence gathered from gang leader’s conversations outlined the basic lines of effort of Plan 503.

The lines of effort of Plan 503 included unification of all the MS-13 across the globe to carry out large-scale transnational operations; ceasing the war with Barrio 18 in El Salvador to carry out joint operations against the state; improve the military capabilities of the MS-13 by increasing the number of military weapons (at least 2 M-16s and 2 AK-47s) per *clica*; getting training in guerrilla tactics to include training in explosives; forming a strike force that could directly combat the state; getting out of the extortion and kidnapping business and conversely taking over the drug trafficking business because extortion and kidnapping were causing people to reject them; and finally, consolidating relationships with the political parties, particularly those on the left. The chart below attempts to organize each one of these elements into lines of effort in different areas as would be done in a normal multi-spectrum strategy.¹⁹

International	Unify all of the MS-13 across the globe to and carry out large-scale operations.
National	Cease the war with Barrio 18 in El Salvador and carry out joint operations against the state.

¹⁹ Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) Intelligence documents about Plan 503 viewed in October 2008.

Military	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Improve the military capabilities of the MS-13 by 2) increasing the number of military weapons (at least 2 M-16s and 2 AK-47s) per <i>clica</i>. 3) Get training in guerrilla tactics. 4) Get training in explosives. 5) Form a strike force that can directly combat the state.
Economic	Get out of the extortion and kidnapping business and take over the drug trafficking business because extortion and kidnapping causing people to reject them.
Political	Consolidate relationships with the political parties, particularly those on the left.

Looking back at this plan approximately 14 years later, several things stand out. First, that the plan does indeed demonstrate strategic thinking. Second, that while not all the objectives were accomplished, significant progress was made in all of the areas. Third, that virtually all the objectives or evolutions of the objectives remain part of the MS-13 strategy today.

Current Gang Strategy

As mentioned earlier, to date, no gang strategy document has been captured. However, the leaders have identified a number of strategic lines of effort through different *wilas*²⁰ that have been intercepted by the Salvadoran authorities. From these lines of effort, we can deduce the strategic objectives by grouping the different lines of effort into similar categories. The lines of effort are remarkably consistent with Plan 503 showing strategic thinking over time. We believe that the strategic objectives of the gangs, particularly the MS-13 are the following:

- a. Develop a force that can confront the state security forces on an equal or superior footing.
- b. Acquire political legitimacy to become a permanent part of the national political milieu.
- c. Develop a robust and formal economy that permits the acquisition and sustenance of the aforementioned force.
- d. Acquire permanent control of several highly profitable transnational criminal activities.

²⁰ *Wila* is a type of written message by a gang leader to other gang members.

The chart below outlines our deduction of the current gang strategy and its lines of effort:

Table 2. Gang Strategy	
Strategic Objective	Lines of Effort
Develop a force that can confront the state security forces on an equal or superior footing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --Develop and consolidate relationships with the Mexican Cartels. --Gang alliances to confront the state. --Increase the military capability of the gangs to confront the state. --Acquire greater firepower (military weapons, explosives) --Increase military training
Acquire political legitimacy to become a permanent part of the national political milieu.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --Formal recognition of the political parties. Negotiate with them. --Politically mobilize part of the population to vote in specific manners. --Negotiate jail privileges, aid programs for their structures and social base in different areas (government, international, NGOs, etc.) --Win over the population by providing security and employment, not just coercion.
Develop a robust and formal economy that permits the acquisition and sustainment of the aforementioned force.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --Win over the population by providing security and employment, not just coercion. --Economic investment in the local economy and its long-term domination.
Acquire permanent control of a number of highly profitable transnational criminal activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --Develop and consolidate relationships with the Mexican Cartels. --Gang alliances to confront the state. --Territorial control of mobility corridors outside their traditional areas. --Maintain the relationship with homologous gangs in the region: Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico, and the United States. --Establish areas of control in Mexico, United States, Spain, and Italy

Following is a discussion of how the gangs appear to be developing each of the lines of effort to achieve their strategic objectives.

Develop and consolidate relationships with the Mexican Cartels. At least as early as 2012, the Mexican Federal Attorney General’s office claimed they had evidence that a very close relationship existed between the MS-13 and some of

the Mexican cartels, such as the Zetas and the Beltran Leyva organization. The purpose of this relationship was to help the cartels move drugs through Central America into Mexico.²¹ They also claimed that much of the growing savagery between rival drug trafficking cartels was due to techniques taught by the Salvadoran gangs to the Mexican cartels to cause fear among the population, the state, and their rivals. While it is doubtful that the Mexican cartels needed anyone to teach them savagery, the relationship was confirmed in a 2019 trial in which former gang leader, “Noe” testified that he had sought to develop a relationship with the Zetas and made agreements with them to traffic drugs and weapons in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. This agreement resulted in the MS-13 receiving between 200-400 kilos of marijuana worth 500 dollars per kilo, and nine kilos of cocaine through Honduras worth a total of 112, 500 dollars.²² It was not clear from the testimony if this was a one-time agreement or a recurring event.

In 2018, the Salvadoran Attorney General’s office asserted that the MS-13 and El Chapo Guzman met on two occasions, the second time shortly after he escaped from jail for the second time. The purpose of these meetings was to work out an agreement between the gangs and the Sinaloa Cartel.²³

Maintain the relationship with homologous gangs in the region: Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua. There are clear indications of relationships between and across the various same gang affiliations in the various countries. This has existed for some time. During the 2019 mega trial resulting from Operation Cuscatlán²⁴ in El Salvador, testimony was given that the MS-13 leadership in El Salvador had sent people to various parts of the world to expand the gang. Specific names were given of people sent to Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama.²⁵ However, while the Salvadoran gangs seem to be able to influence their Central American affiliates, evidence suggests that command and control over these gangs is a very different matter.

²¹ La estrecha relación entre pandillas salvadoreñas y los carteles mexicanos más violentos, *América Economía*, July 22, 2012 @ <https://www.americaeconomia.com/politica-sociedad/sociedad/la-estrecha-relacion-entre-pandillas-salvadorenas-y-los-carteles-mexicano> accessed on January 25, 2020.

²² Decapitaciones, Drogas y Armas: El eterno vínculo entre la Mara Salvatrucha y los Carteles Mexicanos, October 11, 2019 @ <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/10/11/decapitaciones-drogas-y-armas-el-eterno-vinculo-entre-la-mara-salvatrucha-y-los-carteles-mexicanos/> accessed on January 25, 2020.

²³ Marianna Hernandez, Mara Salvatrucha Estrecha Lazos con Carteles Mexicanos, September 24, 2018 @ <https://breaking.com.mx/2018/09/mara-salvatrucha-estrecha-lazos-con-carteles-mexicanos/> accessed on January 25, 2020.

²⁴ Operation Cuscatlán was a major operation in 2019, in which charges were brought against 426 members of the MS-13 based on informants and intelligence. 373 of the defendants were convicted.

²⁵ Fiscalía El Salvador, Sentencia Definitiva Caso Cuscatlan, February 6, 2020, p. 165.



Caption: A member of the MS-13 gang in the Chalatenango prison, north of San Salvador, in March 2019.
Photo credit: Marvin Recinos via Getty Images, with permission

Some history is useful here. The Salvadoran gangs originated in the United States, and initially many of the activities carried out in El Salvador were done by order of gang leaders in the United States. However, by 1999, the gangs had become stronger in El Salvador than in the United States and they began to resent control by elements outside El Salvador. A rebellion occurred in which a number of gang leaders who had been deported from the United States that were exercising control over the Salvadoran gangs on the orders of leaders still in the U.S. were murdered.²⁶ In this way, the gangs in El Salvador won a great deal of autonomy from the gangs in the United States even if they remained affiliated and connected through family and friendship ties.

Despite this national assertion of autonomy, and likely similar events in Honduras, Guatemala and elsewhere, the unification of all the Salvadoran gangs distributed across the globe into a single crime federation has been a constant objective of the Salvadoran national *ranfla*. Plan 503 contemplated the unification of all

²⁶ Herard von Santos, 'Las pandillas salvadoreñas y su comportamiento delictivo: Prospectiva de sus formas organizativas y expansión territorial para el próximo decenio 2015-2025', *Revista Policia y Seguridad Publica*, Diciembre 2014, p. 189.

the MS-13. Sometime in the 2010s, Salvadoran gang leaders sent members into other Central American countries and Mexico to “grow the gangs” and to develop agreements to get increasingly involved in drug trafficking.²⁷ This coincides with two Plan 503 lines of effort, developing the global alliance and getting increasingly involved in drug trafficking. Some progress seems to have been made, as between 2014 and 2016, there began to be increasing direction and control of U.S. affiliates by leaders in El Salvador, especially on the east coast such as in New York, Maryland and Virginia.²⁸ The West Coast has been more resistant to Salvadoran control as they are much more heavily influenced by the Mexican Mafia.

The effort mentioned in the 2019 Operation Cuscatlán trial to send Salvadoran gang members to other Central American countries indicates that the goal of unifying the gangs under a single command remains intact. Nevertheless, while liaison and advice between El Salvador and regional gangs is evident, there is still little evidence that the El Salvador leadership has managed to successfully exercise increased command and control over Honduran or Guatemalan affiliated gangs. Because of this, unification under a single leadership seems to remain an elusive goal.

The fundamental obstacle to global unity is disagreements over who should exercise control. While, as will be discussed later, there does seem to be fairly vertical control and discipline within the *clicas*, *programa*, and *ranfla* of a single organization and sometimes control over a group of *programas* due to consensus between their leaders, absolute command and control over even the entire national organization, much less the regional or transnational affiliates, is not a reality. The control over U.S. East Coast and West Coast *clicas* is due to migrant gang members with direct links back to their *ranflas*. This is what holds them together. This kind of cohesion at the regional and international level is scarce.

In this sense, the gangs can be thought of as franchises much like McDonalds or Burger King. Each store is independently owned and operated, although to be able to be called by the brand name and use the logos, the franchises have to follow certain standards. That said, if we compare “franchises”, there is a lot more discipline, cohesion, and organization within the MS-13 franchise than the Barrio 18.

²⁷ Pandilla salvadoreña MS13 buscó alianzas con carteles de México y Guatemala, EFE, October 11, 2019 at <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/mexico/pandilla-salvadorena-ms13-busco-alianzas-con-carteles-de-mexico-y-guatemala/50000545-4084403> accessed on March 26, 2020.

²⁸ Por Héctor Silva Ávalos, ‘MS13 Members Imprisoned in El Salvador Can Direct the Gang in the US’, *Insight Crime*, December 5, 2016 @ <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/ms13-members-imprisoned-in-el-salvador-can-direct-the-gang-in-the-us/> accessed on March 16, 2020.

There is constant communication between the gangs in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States, but how much influence or control is exercised by one over the others is not clear and seems to fluctuate from leader to leader and transaction to transaction.²⁹

Often this communication and coordination of the gangs at the regional level is done to carry out very specific crimes, often of an opportunistic or technical nature. In 2014, Salvadoran MS-13 members were captured in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Santa Barbara and Copan, Honduras. According to the Honduran paper reporting the arrests, the Salvadorans were in Honduras teaching their Honduran affiliates how to send encrypted messages.³⁰ This is only one of many such examples of affiliated gang members from one country being found in a neighboring country doing work in cooperation with their franchises from that country.

Establish areas of control in Mexico, United States, Spain, and Italy. At the Operation Cuscatlán trial, testimony was given that like missions to Central America, individuals were sent by the MS-13 to the United States, Mexico, Spain, Italy, and Brazil to spread and expand the gangs.³¹

United States

Both MS-13 and Barrio 18 originated in the United States. The MS-13 started in the United States during the 1980s. Barrio 18 was originally a Mexican gang started in the 1950s. It was substantially taken over by the Salvadorans in the 1980s and 1990s. Its longevity and Mexican origins explain why Barrio 18 outnumbered MS-13 by five to one in the United States. The connections between the United States and the Salvadoran gangs run deep.

Since 2012, the number of Salvadoran gang members in the United States has rapidly increased. It is claimed that the resurgence, in particular of the MS-13, is directly related to the surge of unaccompanied Central American minors that crossed into the United States between 2012 and 2016. During those four years,

²⁹ Herard von Santos, 'Las pandillas salvadoreñas y su comportamiento delictivo: Prospectiva de sus formas organizativas y expansión territorial para el próximo decenio 2015-2025', *Revista Policia y Seguridad Publica*, Diciembre 2014, p. 194.

³⁰ Policia de Honduras detiene a tres supuestos pandilleros salvadoreños, *La Prensa*, February 24, 2014, at <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/policiales/477198-98/policia-de-honduras-detiene-a-tres-supuestos-pandilleros-salvadorenos> accessed on March 26, 2020.

³¹ Op City Fiscalia, 2020, p. 161.

approximately 300,000 unaccompanied minors crossed the border with Mexico into the United States and were resettled among the general population.³² A majority of these Central American youth are not gang members, but the surge in unaccompanied minors allowed a significant number of gang members to infiltrate the United States along with them. Significantly, the upsurge in MS-13 crimes has occurred in areas where a high concentration of minors were resettled. The states most affected were California, Maryland, New York, and Virginia.³³ The crimes committed were major felonies such as murder, attempted murder, sexual assault, extortion, conspiracy/racketeering, drug trafficking, and sex trafficking, not minor nuisance crimes normally associated with youth gangs.³⁴

However, sources claim that despite this, MS-13 continues to be only loosely organized in the United States, better described as a “federation of teenage barrio cliques that share the MS-13 brand” notwithstanding efforts from El Salvador to control them, especially *clicas* on the East Coast.³⁵ In 2018, there were approximately 10,000 MS-13 members and 50,000 Barrio 18 members in the United States.³⁶

Mexico

At the beginning of 2014, it was reported that there were at least 70 different MS-13 cells or *clicas* throughout Mexico.³⁷ The Salvadoran gangs are thought to serve as foot soldiers for the drug cartels particularly to control territory.³⁸

Law enforcement personnel from both El Salvador and the United States asserted that the MS-13 has established itself in several locations with the cooperation of the Mexican cartels, particularly along immigration routes from Central America to the United States. Specifically, they assert that the gang controls the

³² Jessica M. Vaughan, MS-13 Resurgence: Immigration Enforcement Needed to Take Back Our Streets, February 21, 2018, at https://cis.org/Report/MS13-Resurgence-Immigration-Enforcement-Needed-Take-Back-Our-Streets?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpfHzBRCiARIsAHHzyZq9OE5apM7Qri833kkg5cJx0eA1ZmZJolwPu-bD-vMWTJHjg-zhYKf0aAp_YEALw_wcB accessed on March 26, 2020.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jose Miguel Cruz, Five Myths about MS-13, *Washington Post*, June 29, 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-ms-13/2018/06/29/5860f1c4-7b17-11e8-93cc-6d3beccdd7a3_story.html, accessed on March 27, 2020.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Patrick Corcoran, Mexico Justice Department Flags Growing Mara Presence, *Insight Crime*, January 1, 2014, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-justice-department-flags-growing-mara-presence/>, accessed on March 27, 2020.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

north-south train that many immigrants ride known as “*La Bestia*” (The Beast). Although corroborating open source information on the gang’s control of “*La Bestia*” was not found, there is anecdotal evidence that the gangs extort and rob Central American migrants using the train. Several of these accounts have been published in the press.³⁹

A surge of Salvadoran gangs was noted in 2017 when by mid-year state authorities had detained over ten times the number of Salvadoran gang members than they had captured in all the previous year. They were pretty evenly divided between the two major Salvadoran gangs, with 45 percent affiliated to MS-13 and 55 percent to Barrio 18. In terms of citizenship, 44 percent were Salvadoran, 20 percent Honduran, and 36 percent were Mexican citizens.⁴⁰ The important number of Mexican citizens indicate the significant recruitment of locals, which is an important indicator of intent to establish permanent local structures. The increase in Central American gangs coincided in a duplication of state homicides compared to 2016, and three times as many as 2015.⁴¹

Spain

The gangs have also become a problem in Spain. In 2014, Spanish authorities identified “consolidated” MS-13 *clicas* in Barcelona, Tarragona, Gerona, Madrid, and Alicante. They also identified indications of attempts to form *clicas* in Cáceres, Melilla, Castellón, Lleida, and Valencia.⁴² The Spanish authorities asserted that the expansion of *clicas* in Spain was part of a strategy being directed by leadership back in Central America.⁴³ They clarified that prior to 2012, the Spanish authorities had detected “pseudo-maras” or individuals and groups of people adopting the dress, culture and even identity of MS-13 without actually being members of the gang.⁴⁴ What signaled the change was the attempted murder of a member of the Latin Kings in Alicante in 2012 by members of the MS-13. This led to a two-year investigation and the arrest in 2014, of 28 individuals, two of which were gang

³⁹ “Me tiré del tren al ver a los maras”: Carlos, *El Imparcial TV*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8x4CvkoBds>, accessed on March 27, 2020.

⁴⁰ Parker Asmann, Are Central American Gangs Growing in Southern Mexico?, *Insight Crime*, July 19, 2017 at <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/central-american-gang-growing-southern-mexico/> accessed on April 1, 2020.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jesús Duva, La mara Salvatrucha arraiga en España, *El País*, March 30, 2014, at https://elpais.com/politica/2014/03/29/actualidad/1396110792_713723.html, accessed on April 1, 2020.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

members in their 40s, one in Barcelona and one in Alicante. These older men had been sent to take control of the *clicas* in Spain. This led to the discovery of documents discussing money being sent from El Salvador to Spain to set up a chain of bars and restaurants in Alicante to launder gang money in Europe.⁴⁵

The arrests in Alicante and Barcelona revealed that in 2012, the MS-13 had sent two members to Spain, one to Barcelona and one to the little town of 25,000 inhabitants known as Ibi in Alicante Province. Their mission was to establish an MS-13 program in that country under a plan called “Program 34.” With up to 10,000 dollars from El Salvador, they managed to establish additional *clicas* in Madrid, Barcelona, and Girona.⁴⁶ They acquired a used car dealership through which they obtained additional finances and laundered crime money. The *clicas* also earned money through marihuana and cocaine trafficking. They set up a network to transport, store and distribute the drugs. Furthermore, each gang member had to pay 100 euros per month into a central account. The foot soldiers robbed houses and supermarkets to pay their quotas.

As they began to expand, they began to run up against other preexisting gangs. To push rivals out of their way, they began to make plans to murder key members of the rival groups, even sending experienced shooters from El Salvador to Spain to plan and execute the operation. It was this series of murders, attempted murders and planned murders that alerted the Spanish authorities.⁴⁷ While this effort was frustrated by the Spanish Police and Civil Guard, at the time there is no doubt that subsequent efforts have been made.

Italy

In Italy, Salvadoran gangs first came to the Italian authorities’ attention in 2008 when violence broke out between members of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 in Milan. An MS-13 *clica* was particularly active in Milan under a leader known as “Kamikaze.” This *clica* had taken control of public parks, subway stations and parking lots. They regularly committed robberies and attacked other gangs such as the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Univision, Megajuicio a la Mara Salvatrucha: así intentó la banda extenderse por Europa, Univision Noticias, February 20, 2018 at <https://www.univision.com/organizaciones/mara-salvatrucha/megajuicio-a-la-mara-salvatrucha-asi-intento-la-banda-extenderse-por-europa> accessed on April 1, 2020.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



Caption: 1) A photo provided by the Salvadoran National Police of maras armed and equipped like the military or the police. 2) A well-equipped gang member in a rural area with an M-16 carbine automatic rifle used by the Salvadoran military and an equipment harness with at least four magazines and body armor underneath his harness. 3) A gang member displaying an East German AKM in good condition. He is also wearing some type of body armor. In the background is another gang member with a M-14 equipped with a scope. The East German AKM was used during the civil wars of the 1980s, particularly in Nicaragua. Some of these weapons were obtained by the FMLN guerrillas towards the end of the civil war. 4) This is the new face of the maras: no visible tattoos, if any at all, and no identifying clothes. These gang members are posing at a rural camp, all but one equipped with a variant of the M-16 rifle.

Photo credit for all photos: El Salvador National Police

Latin Kings Chicago, Barrio 18, Trebol, Comando, and Nieta.⁴⁸ The *clica* also carried out at least two attempted murders. This provoked the Milan Police to launch Operation Marero in 2013, in which twenty-five MS-13 members were arrested.⁴⁹

It is believed that through 2013, there wasn't much of a connection between MS-13 in Italy and the gang leadership back in El Salvador. In fact, information obtained by the police indicated little interest on the part of the local *clica* in establishing that connection.⁵⁰

It seems likely however, that after Operation Marero and the descent of the local MS-13 gang into chaos, that at least some members of the gang sought for some form of supervision from El Salvador to reorganize and restore the *clica*. However, this thesis is not totally confirmed. Some indications that this might be the case are that in December 2017, a 33-year-old gang leader was captured in Como, not too far north of Milan with the cooperation of U.S. authorities from ICE. Also, it is thought that a murder carried out in 2019 was either ordered from El Salvador, or that it was advised from the leadership in Central America.⁵¹

Increase the military capability of the gangs to confront the state. In Plan 503, the MS-13 gang leaders attributed their victory in a campaign against an enemy identified as the “*picaros*” to their possession of 500 rifles and 2,000 pistols and other things, presumably some type of weapons (maybe grenades, explosives, or Light Anti-tank Weapons (LAW) rockets which the gangs have been known to use from time to time). However, they also noted that this had not been decisive as the enemy had recovered and acquired new strength. In addition, they admitted that many gang members were falling to the state and that the gang was riddled with infiltrators. In other words, that despite some tactical successes, that the gang was strategically weak. To remedy this, they talked about developing a strategy that included significantly strengthening their military capability.⁵²

Merely acquiring a larger arsenal was not enough. They discussed developing a strike force that could fight the government on a more equal footing as the guer-

⁴⁸ Giovanni Giacalone, The MS13 in Italy: Dynamics and Evolution of the Infamous Salvadoran Gang, *InsideOver*, November 29, 2019, at <https://www.insideover.com/society/the-ms13-in-italy-dynamics-and-evolution-of-the-infamous-salvadoran-gang.html>. Accessed on April 1, 2020.

⁴⁹ Charles Parkinson, Italy Police Dismantle ‘MS13’ Gang, *Insight Crime*, October 10, 2013, at <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/italy-police-dismantle-ms13-el-salvador-gang/>, accessed on April 1, 2020.

⁵⁰ Op Cit Giacalone.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² El Salvador National Police, *Plan 503*, 2008. Police Intelligence Analysis.

rillas did during the civil war with weapons, organization, tactics, and discipline.⁵³ This has been a strategic objective of the gangs ever since.

The gangs have made progress in this effort as within the *clicas* an increasing number of gang members have been designated as “shooters.” In addition, these shooters are often grouped into teams that are designated “shock forces.”⁵⁴ These shock forces are increasingly well armed and well trained.

Recent gang operations have demonstrated military skill that did not exist previously. To develop this growing skill, the gangs have resorted to several sub-lines of effort. First, they sought to acquire increasing numbers of military grade weapons. This has been a gradual process with the quality and quantity of military grade weapons increasing over time. The El Salvador gangs have not achieved the kind of qualitative level in military weapons that we see in the Mexican cartels. Not every member of the *clicas* has a military-grade automatic weapon, and the weapons that have been captured to date are overwhelmingly those left over from the Central American conflict in the 1980s or stolen from the national arsenals of Central American countries. Mostly these are variants of the M-16 family and Warsaw Pact manufactured AKMs that were favored by the warring parties during the Cold War. However, what is clear is that an increasing number of gang members are carrying military assault rifles.

Clicas are responsible for acquiring their own pistols and revolvers. Each *clica* does this according to the number of members and their resources. They sometimes also acquire military rifles. A captured notebook from a *clica* in Ahuachapan detailed the purchase of seven 9mm pistols, two .45 caliber pistols, one .38 caliber revolver, one FN FAL rifle, one AR-15, and two AK-47s. Along with ammunition and accessories this purchase cost them 26,300 dollars.⁵⁵ However, the central leadership has also been making a sustained effort to centrally control and acquire an increasing number of military grade weapons for the gang.

According to Noe, in 2016 alone, the MS-13 acquired more than 100 firearms including: M-60 machineguns, AK-47, AR-15 and M-16 automatic rifles, M-1 .30 caliber carbines, shotguns, pistols, hand grenades, body armor, and ammunition worth more than 300,000 dollars. This money was drawn from a general fund collected from the different gang *clicas*. The weapons were distributed to *clicas* in the

⁵³ El Salvador National Police, *Plan 503*, 2008. Police Intelligence Analysis.

⁵⁴ Fuerzas de Choque.

⁵⁵ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 520.

Western, La Libertad, San Salvador, the Paracentral, and Eastern zones.⁵⁶

Noe knew of two specific purchases of M-60 machineguns from corrupt military officers in 2014. He gave details about the first purchase. He didn't provide details about the second purchase.⁵⁷ They also prioritized the purchase of hand grenades because of the damage they caused and psychological impact they have on the population and on the government.⁵⁸ Grenades have been a favorite weapon of the gangs since at least Plan 503. Between 2009-2010, *La Prensa Grafica* documented a rash of 22 attacks with hand grenades that killed seven people and wounded over 100. This same report indicated a four year pause and then the attacks starting again in March 2015, documenting another twelve grenade attacks through September of the same year.⁵⁹ It is likely that grenade attacks have continued since then.

There are also *wilas* that discuss the importation of up to 500 weapons from the Mexican cartels.⁶⁰ This was confirmed by testimony from Operation Cuscatlán which indicated that the plan was to buy 500 automatic rifles from Mexico, enough to equip each of the 248 *clicas* with two rifles to create elite shock cells within each *clica*. The creation of those shock cells began in 2016.⁶¹ It is not clear if the weapons from Mexico were actually acquired as none of this weaponry seems to have been captured yet by the Salvadoran Security Forces. Another *wila* discussed acquiring weapons from Nicaragua, particularly what Salvadoran government authorities identified as rocket propelled grenades.⁶² Should this be true it would represent a qualitative leap in gang firepower.

Noe calculated that in 2019 the MS-13 in El Salvador possessed between 600 and 700 rifles, over 1,000 pistols, and that they spent around 700,000 dollars a month on weapons and ammunition.⁶³

The *Fiscalia* (Attorney General) concluded that according to their information they were not certain the gangs had developed the capability of an Army oriented towards confronting the state on an equal footing to carry out a war, but rather that their weapons were more to guarantee their domination of territory and

⁵⁶ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 515.

⁵⁷ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 516.

⁵⁸ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 516.

⁵⁹ Jessica Ávalos, Pandilleros MS usaron granadas extraídas de la FAES para ataques, n.d. at <https://www.connectas.org/pandillerosusanarmas/> accessed on April 15, 2020.

⁶⁰ *Wila* viewed by authors courtesy of the Ministry of Public Security.

⁶¹ Op Cit. *Fiscalia* 2020, p. 183.

⁶² *Wila* viewed by the authors courtesy of the Ministry of Public Security.

⁶³ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 516.

to secure their business, even though they did believe that the gangs had acquired a large arsenal that was being used to generate a significant amount of violence.⁶⁴ The authors agree with this assessment. This does not mean that things could not escalate quickly in the future. The whereabouts of the weapons allegedly acquired in Mexico and Nicaragua is still unknown.

More than weapons, a significant issue for the gangs has been obtaining enough ammunition for their weapons. Up until 2018, police and military sources interviewed by the authors indicated that one of the great advantages that government authorities had in firefights with the gangs, even when they were carrying military rifles, was that they generally only carried a single magazine of ammunition, where police and military carried between four and seven.

This meant that they could not sustain firefights with government authorities and were thus at a serious disadvantage. The tendency was for the gang members to fire a few shots and retreat, or to only fire on police and military patrols when they enjoyed surprise or another overwhelming advantage. Otherwise they tended to avoid contact.



Caption: These photos, a series of still shots from a very low resolution video from a cell phone captured by police, show gang members going through military training in a rural camp. Except for the dates, this could have been a video from the FMLN during the 1980s.

Photo credit: El Salvador National Police

⁶⁴ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 524.

While this was still true in 2020, interviews conducted in late 2019 with soldiers and police indicated that the firefights they were having with gang members were intensifying. Dead gang members killed in the firefights were frequently carrying up to four magazines of ammunition, and the captured military rifles were in better condition than those generally captured previously. This indicates that there is a trend of gradually increasing the quality of weapons available to the gangs and the quantity of ammunition they carry.

The gangs have also focused on acquiring increased military training. In the early days, there were reports of ex-guerrillas providing training to the gangs. As the veterans of the civil war grow older, this source of military knowledge is drying up. This has been complemented by individuals that had served in the military since the war, either being coerced or paid to provide training to the gangs.

In some cases, gang members were infiltrated into the police and military for this purpose, although often the training aspect is of secondary importance for the infiltrators. Their primary mission is to reduce the impact of military and police operations on the gangs by providing warning and intelligence to the gangs.

Sometimes former soldiers are now recruited by the gangs for their military skills. However, most of the former soldiers to which the gangs have had access have only basic military skills, so the gangs have had to turn elsewhere to acquire more advanced training. In some cases, the gangs were able to get it from active cadre of the Salvadoran military. In the Operation Cuscatlán trial, testimony was given that gang members were given sniper training by an active-duty military instructor over the course of six months. During the period of instruction, training lasted two hours a day several days a week, and the instructor was paid 500 dollars (a month's pay for him) for every session.⁶⁵

The Salvadorans have also sent gang members to train in Mexican paramilitary camps at least as early as 2011. It was reported that in Ilopango, Barrio 18 was selecting their toughest members to go to Mexico and Northern Guatemala to receive military training from the Zetas.⁶⁶ It has been reported that the MS-13 began sending their members for paramilitary training by the Zetas at least as early as 2012.⁶⁷ It may be recalled that many of the Zetas were either ex-members of

⁶⁵ Op cit, Fiscalía 2020, p. 392.

⁶⁶ Ioan Grillo, Maras and Zetas: an alliance from hell, *GlobalPost*, April 04, 2011 at <https://www.pri.org/stories/2011-04-04/maras-and-zetas-alliance-hell> accessed on March 23, 2020.

⁶⁷ Decapitaciones, drogas y armas: el eterno vínculo entre la Mara Salvatrucha y los cárteles mexicanos, Infobae, October 11, 2019, at <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/10/11/decapitaciones-drogas-y-armas-el-eterno-vinculo-entre-la-mara-salvatrucha-y-los-carteles-mexicanos/> accessed on March 23, 2020.



Photo title: Starting in 2013, prison authorities witnessed a series of events in which gang members would suddenly organize themselves into squad (9-12 persons) and platoon size groups (30-40 persons) and carry out a number of synchronized physical and unarmed combat exercises. Since the prisoners had been kept in separate cells, it was unknown how they organized and trained for these demonstrations.

Photo credit: National Police

the Guatemalan Special Forces known as the *Kaibiles*, or of the Mexican Army Special Forces known as the *Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE)*. This military skill and training is what led to their rapid ascension in Mexico in the first decade of the 2000s. Despite the fracturing of the Zetas in recent years, recent *wilas* indicate that new alliances have been made with the Sinaloa Cartel and that gang training continues in the paramilitary camps of this cartel.⁶⁸ It would seem that perhaps this effort has not only continued but intensified by the results back in El Salvador.

Videos taken by prison guards or captured from gang member cell phones between 2018-2019 show the gang prisoners carrying out a variety of military training exercises. The first is a series of videos showing incarcerated gang members

⁶⁸ *Wila* shown to the authors by the Ministry of Public Security, September 2019.

carrying out close order and martial arts drills in a prison yard displaying impressive displays of synchronization, discipline, and skill. What is more impressive is that according to the prison authorities, the gang members had not been able to meet up and practice these formations beforehand. How they trained for them and coordinated their synchronized display is unknown.⁶⁹

The second set of videos was of gang members carrying out a series of fire and maneuver exercises in rural camps somewhere in El Salvador. They reminded the authors of similar videos taken during the early stages of the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992) in which guerrilla recruits were shown being trained to conduct operations against the state security forces. Except for the dates, the content of the videos was nearly identical. An increasing number of rural training camps have been found since 2015, and firefights between the gangs and police/military are occurring in rural terrain.

A final video that demonstrates qualitative improvement shows a gang member firing an M-16 family rifle into a gully under the instruction of another person who is off camera. Since the gang member is aiming as he fires, the viewer can assume that there are targets that have been identified or set up in the gully. However, these are not visible in the video. When the gang member finishes firing, the off-camera instructor gives an order that cannot be understood and the gang member clears the weapon and puts it on safe. The gang member then turns to talk to the invisible instructor, but rather than turn with the weapon, he pivots his body in such a way that he continues to point the cleared weapon towards the gully, rather than turning with the weapon pointing towards the instructor. This sequence of firing, clearing the weapon, securing it, and then keeping the weapon pointed at the target while on a range, even if the weapon is empty, are safety techniques that are common to the military, but not normally associated with gangs or civilian amateurs. This increased professionalism has had an impact on the “battlefield”.

While this project was being researched, the gangs attacked several police installations. All followed a very similar pattern, so one representative case will be described here. On January 18, 2019, the National Civilian Police Traffic Sub-directorate was attacked by the MS-13. In the press it was described as a drive-by, but in fact it was much more professionally organized and executed.

Surveillance video showed a car make several drives around the installations over the space of a couple of hours. This appears to have been a target recon-

⁶⁹ Interviews with prison authorities, January 2019.



Caption: Inmates at the Izalco prison, northwest of San Salvador, during a prison security operation after President Nayib Bukele ordered an emergency to prevent gang leaders from directing homicides from their jail cells.

Photo Credit: Abaca Press and Alamy photos, with permission

naissance, and the car later was discovered to be stolen. Subsequently, the same vehicle pulled up to within about 200 meters of the building. Several gang members descended from the vehicle and formed a “stack,” a military formation used to conduct urban operations. The stack advanced to within about 100 meters of the objective and then pivoted and came online. They then lifted their rifles and fired at the guard post of the building. Luckily the police guards were not looking through the window at the time, so they remained unharmed by any of the bullets that hit the post. The gang members then pivoted, reformed the stack and advanced back towards the car where they got in and drove calmly away. At another point they abandoned this car and boarded another stolen car to get away.⁷⁰

That same day a police vehicle in San Miguel Department was ambushed by the gangs and two policemen killed. The police that investigated the incident indicated that the ambush had been professionally carried out using techniques like

⁷⁰ David Marroquín, Siete supuestos pandilleros irán a juicio por atacar Subdirección de Tránsito Terrestre de la Policía, *elsalvador.com*, February 12, 2020 at <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/pandillas-juicio-ataque-subdireccion-pnc/685895/2020/> accessed on March 23, 2020. The video was viewed by the authors shortly after the attack occurred.

those employed by the guerrillas during the 1979-1992 civil war. A reconnaissance had been carried out, police patrolling habits had been noted, and an ambush location chosen. Care was taken to camouflage the shooters' locations and references chosen to serve as aim points to hit a moving target. The result was a successful ambush and two policemen killed.⁷¹

In conclusion, the gangs are clearly getting technically better in their use of violence and this is most likely the result of deliberate training from people with professional knowledge and skills.

Attain formal political representation at the municipal level (to date). The gangs realized early that they could play a role in politics by allowing or disallowing political campaigns in the neighborhoods they dominated. So, candidates made deals with the gangs, either giving them money or promises on the condition of election. However, as the power of the gangs grew, so did their demands. Conditions for political support included food, money and even jobs for gang members and their supporters. This helped the gangs to expand and consolidate their own social support base. However, these types of arrangements worked both ways. The increasing closeness of the gangs to mayor's offices has also resulted in the mayors making demands and asking favors of the gangs.⁷² At first, the gangs were opportunistic about their influence on politics. They saw political campaigning as an opportunity to extort money, goods, and services, like any other business. Campaigning was negotiated at the local level with the *clicas*. However, the gang truce made the *maras* aware that they had national influence and could negotiate deals that would benefit the gangs across the entire country. Since 2012, the gangs have forced political parties to make national level deals, to the point that no political campaign can hope to win an election without negotiating with the gangs.

Formal recognition of and negotiations with the political parties. While there has been no formal recognition by the political parties, there is clear de facto recognition by the major political parties. In a 2017 trial, a witness identified as Nalo de Las Palmas testified that between 2012 and 2014, the two main parties (FMLN

⁷¹ Pandilleros ametrallan a patrulla de la PNC y matan a dos policías en San Miguel, solonoticias.com, January 18, 2019, at <https://www.solonoticias.com/2019/01/18/pandilleros-ametrallan-a-patrulla-de-la-pnc-y-matan-a-dos-policias-en-san-miguel/> accessed on March 23, 2020.

⁷² Felipe Puerta, Héctor Silva Ávalos and Steven Dudley, Symbiosis: Gangs and Municipal Power in Apopa, El Salvador, *Insight Crime*, November 2, 2017, at <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/symbiosis-gangs-municipal-power-apopa-el-salvador/> accessed on April 1, 2020.

and ARENA) gave MS-13 350,000 dollars to influence the elections.⁷³ In a 2019 trial, a witness only identified as “Noé”, indicated that MS-13 has been influencing elections for some time. Political parties pay the gangs to tip the scales in their favor.

Several sources have alleged different payments by parties to the gangs to til the elections in their favor. For example, in 2014, the FMLN gave the gangs money to help Salvador Sanchez Ceren will the elections.⁷⁴ In 2015, ARENA party paid the MS-13 69,000 dollars in exchange for votes in the municipal and legislative elections of that year.⁷⁵

Politically mobilize the population to vote in specific manners. According to Freedom House, gangs “mobilize” populations for elections by making deals with political parties in which the parties pay the gangs for specific political support or activity. According to the police, all parties have engaged in this activity. These payments are to allow or prevent parties from holding rallies in gang-controlled areas. The parties have also paid the gangs to coerce or intimidate voters into casting ballots for a particular candidate or party. The gangs can also be paid to provide security for their events or voting. The presence of gang members encourages some voters and discourages other voters from voting in particular ways. Sometimes parties make deals with the gangs to deliver certain areas in exchange for special access to those politicians once in power, or social services for the families of gang members.⁷⁶

Negotiate jail privileges, aid programs for their structures and social base in different areas (government, international, NGOs, etc.) In 2012, the combined leadership of Barrio 18 and MS-13 issued a statement at the beginning of the gang truce which asked for: fair application of the law, better treatment/conditions in jails, social support and economic aid to gang members to reintegrate into the work force, educational opportunities, and non-discrimination. Jail conditions

⁷³ Decapitaciones, Drogas y Armas: El Eterno Vinculo entre la Mara Salvatrucha y los Carteles Mexicanos, October 11, 2019, @<https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/10/11/decapitaciones-drogas-y-armas-el-eterno-vinculo-entre-la-mara-salvatrucha-y-los-carteles-mexicanos>, accessed on January 25, 2020.

⁷⁴ Carlos Martínez y Roberto Valencia, “El FMLN hizo alianza con las pandillas para la elección presidencial de 2014,” El Faro, May 6, 2016, at <https://elfaro.net/es/206005/salanegra/18560/El-FMLN-hizo-alianza-con-las-pandillas-para-la-elecci%C3%B3n-presidencial-de-2014.htm>, accessed on October 20, 2020.

⁷⁵ Op cit, Decapitaciones, Drogas y Armas.

⁷⁶ Freedom House: El Salvador Political Rights, at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/el-salvador>, accessed on August 12, 2020.

were eased to facilitate negotiation.⁷⁷ Since then, this has been a constant demand of the gangs and the leadership has ordered increases and decreases in murders as leverage to pressure the government to make concessions to their demands.

For example, in the interim period between Nayib Bukele's election and his inauguration, the gangs increased their violence to attempt to force the incoming president to negotiate. Among their demands was to improve prison conditions that had been significantly tightened since the end of the gang truce.⁷⁸ Bukele's answer to the violence was to make a major show of force in the streets and to crackdown in the jails by terminating all cell phone coverage of the area around the prisons and to remove the phone booths. Nevertheless, the gang members found a way around the restrictions.⁷⁹

There was a historic drop in gang murders shortly after Bukele became president, but many analysts think it had much less to do with the iron fist policies, and more to do with a decision by the gangs to reduce the homicides for an unknown reason, perhaps in the hope of negotiating after the show of force.⁸⁰

It is possible that the phone crackdown could have been partially responsible since all murders have to be approved by the *ranfla*, many of whom were in jail, and had not yet developed ways to communicate. Bukele did not lift the restrictions, and consequently the murder rate spiked again. In reaction, Bukele ordered humiliating crackdowns on gang members in jail, to include placing members from different gangs in the same cells. In the past this had resulted in systematic bloodshed.⁸¹ The message was clear, while Bukele wasn't going to negotiate the improvement of prison conditions, if the violence didn't stay low, he could make things infinitely worse.

In conclusion, the 2012-2013 gang truce gave the gangs the illusion that they could negotiate better prison conditions. However, better prison conditions result-

⁷⁷ Siniša Vuković and Eric Rahman, The Gang Truce in El Salvador, at <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-gang-truce-in-el-salvador> accessed on August 12, 2020.

⁷⁸ Associated Press, El Salvador: Gangs try to force incoming leader to negotiate, April 30, 2019 at <https://apnews.com/59e59d5d2aac46fcb82994072c9c8828> accessed on August 12, 2020.

⁷⁹ Sandrine McDuff, El Salvador Inmates Defy Phone Ban With Toilet Paper, Toothpaste, *Insight Crime*, July 15, 2019, at <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/el-salvador-inmates-defy-phone-ban-toilet-paper-toothpaste/> accessed on August 12, 2020.

⁸⁰ Alex Papadovassilakis, El Salvador's Peaceful Month Not Due to Bukele Security Plan, *Insight Crime*, August 5, 2019, at <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/el-salvador-peaceful-month-bukele-security-plan/> accessed on August 12, 2020. Also see Crisis Group, Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador, July 8, 2020, at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/81-miracle-or-mirage-gangs-and-plunging-violence-el-salvador> accessed on August 12, 2020.

⁸¹ El Salvador Orders Further Prison Gang Crackdown, RepublicWorld.com, April 29, 2020 at <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/el-salvador-orders-further-prison-gang-crackdown.html> accessed on August 12, 2020.

ed in more crime, both economic and murder that was being directed from the jails. This forced the government to crack down. However, this has not stopped the gangs from continuing to push for negotiations that include improved prison conditions, though under the Bukele government attempts to convince and coerce the administration to do so have seemed to fail.

Territorial control of mobility corridors outside their traditional areas. A look at territorial trends: location of gangs, the relative power of *clicas*, gang attacks, and confrontations between the gangs and the state show a growing number of these indicators are occurring in rural areas and along major highways and roadways. A first indicator has been the creation of rural gang camps. Since the mid 2010's an increasing number of rural camps have been detected throughout El Salvador, but particularly in the central and para-central areas. Videos and photos from these camps show gang members going through basic military and weapons training. A lot of them show the gang members doing military drill, different types of tactical advances, and even practicing fire and maneuver. One video viewed by the authors showed the gangs building and spending the night in underground bunkers. The authors, who also did research in El Salvador during the 1979-1992 civil war, noted the similarity of the gang videos with guerrilla propaganda films that were made and distributed during the war. Initial impressions were that these rural camps were mostly for developing a gang force with greater military capabilities to confront both the state and rival gangs.

However, a major National Police gang analyst who did a mapping of these camps was perplexed by many of their locations because, as a general rule, gangs locate in populated areas where there is an economy to be extorted. Many of these camps were located in areas where there was neither economy nor people. However, upon further analysis he noted that they were along routes used to move different things: people, weapons, and drugs. So, while the camps probably are to increase the military capabilities of the gangs, they seem to also have the dual function of increasing control over trafficking routes.

Visits to several of the military task forces responsible for combating the gangs reinforced this analysis. The authors were briefed on the various task forces' operations. One of the subjects discussed was the nature and number of gang incidents and confrontations with military authorities. It was notable that virtually all of the incidents occurred in rural, not urban or suburban areas, and that these were increasingly along the flanks of highways such as the main north-south high-

way from the Honduran border in Chalatenango down to San Salvador; the main east-west Panamerican Highway from San Salvador to San Miguel; the highway between San Vicente and Zacatecoluca; and the coastal road between La Libertad and Zacatecoluca. There were probably others, but the authors weren't able to visit all of the Task Forces. This clustering of incidents in rural space along the flanks of the major highways seemed to confirm the gang analyst's assessment. The car bombs on the highway between San Salvador and La Libertad in February 2018, and then on the highway from Chalatenango to San Salvador in July of that same year may be indicative of the move to exercise increasing control over these routes.⁸² This would coincide with the gangs stated goals to take over the drug trafficking business in El Salvador and arms trafficking. The locations also coincide with known routes for cocaine and weapons which are brought in from Honduras.

However, another National Police leader disagreed with this assessment and felt that instead, the increasing number of gangs in the rural areas was an indication that police policies and operations were pushing the gangs out of the urban areas and into the rural zones, so this presence was not an indication of spreading gang control, but rather increased loss of control in the urban areas.

While it does seem that in parts of the country, aggressive police action through special anti-gang units has driven them out of some urban neighborhoods, it is unclear if all of the increased presence of the gangs in the rural areas can be explained solely by increased police action. Certainly, this was not the opinion of several gang analysts within the Salvadoran National Police. Time will tell which analysis is correct.

Gang alliances to confront the state. Since Plan 503, the gangs have aspired to putting their differences aside and making common cause against the government. While they have never completely succeeded in stopping the inter-gang bloodshed, since in some ways the need for their existence is defined as by the need to defend against the other gang, there have been periodic episodes of truce and cooperation.

The gang truce of 2012 in which the government induced a ceasefire between the two groups to negotiate was one of the first major experiences. Oscar Armando Reyes, alias "Sharky", a Barrio 18 gang leader in the Izalco prison stated "you

⁸² EFE and DPA, Estalla carro bomba y deja dos heridos en El Salvador, *Prensa Libre*, February 11, 2018 at <https://www.prensalibre.com/internacional/estalla-coche-bomba-y-deja-dos-heridos-en-el-salvador/> accessed on April 9, 2020 and Video: Coche Bomba Explotó en El Salvador, Noticias Ya, July 9, 2018, at <https://noticiasya.com/washington-dc/2018/07/09/video-coche-bomba-explota-en-el-salvador/> accessed on April 9, 2020.



Caption: Members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang are escorted by police into the high security prison at Zacatecoluca in El Salvador in 2017.

Photo Credit: DPA picture alliance with Alamy photos, with permission

know that if there is a death in the MS-13 gang that it affects the 18 and if there is a death in the 18 it affects the MS, so they want us to enter into a confrontation, but we aren't willing to get sucked into this game, and we remain strong to the end".⁸³ However, there were too many differences between the groups to make it last for long. By mid-2013, the homicide rate began to rise until it reached a peak in the first half of 2015.⁸⁴

However, suddenly the murder rate dropped by around 50%, from about 14 a day to 6-7 per day. On May 25, 2015 the two major gangs announced that they had again agreed on a truce the week before as evidenced by the significant reduction in the homicides in the previous days. Some analysts thought that the purpose of this truce was to send a message to the population that the reduction in homicides had much more to do with the gang's decisions, than the policies and actions of

⁸³ El Salvador: tras la tregua, las pandillas piden "diálogo" y "trabajo", *Infobae*, June 19, 2012, at <https://www.infobae.com/2012/06/20/1052751-el-salvador-la-tregua-las-pandillas-piden-dialogo-y-trabajo/> accessed on August 13, 2020.

⁸⁴ Barrio 18 (M18), *Insight Crime*, August 13, 2020, at <https://es.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-crimen-organizado/barrio-18-perfil-2/> accessed on August 13, 2020.

the government.⁸⁵

While these truces did not last, they did mark the beginning of increased cooperation between the gangs when sharing common interests vis-a-vis the government.

There was even talk in August 2015 of fusing Barrio 18 and MS-13 into a new gang that was supposed to be called Mara-503. Some people thought that this was the idea of Raul Mijango, the principal government negotiator in the gang truce. While this is uncertain, Mijango did state that the gang leaders were seriously discussing unification.⁸⁶

Although this effort to unify didn't seem to prosper, El Salvador's two main gangs have moved toward forming a common front with a coordinating committee and a nonaggression pact that prohibits the invasion of other gangs' territories and kill missions targeting members of rival gangs.

El Faro maintained that Barrio 18 and MS-13 managed to hold coordination meetings for several years. These meetings served to stop killing between the factions. In 2013, the government stopped allowing the meetings to be held in prison as part of the gang truce. However, the gangs found ways around this prohibition. In April 2016, they began to hold coordination meetings outside of prison, with no need for external facilitators. These face-to-face dialogues result in agreements that are then passed to the top leaders for final approval.⁸⁷

Sometimes the gangs have cooperated in surprising ways. For example, during one of the discussions the authors had with the Salvadoran Police intelligence, they were shown a *wila* which discussed the purchase of automatic rifles from the Mexican cartels. The police asserted that MS-13 and Barrio 18 were pooling funds to come up with the cash to purchase the weapons together. This surprised the authors since although the weapons were being acquired to give the gangs the increasing ability to confront the state, they could as easily be turned on each other to gain the upper hand in their permanent rivalry.⁸⁸

However, this kind of rival collaboration to acquire a much coveted or needed

⁸⁵ David Gagne, Pandillas de El Salvador se atribuyen disminución de homicidios durante la beatificación de Óscar Romero, *Insight Crime*, May 29, 2015 at <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/noticias-del-dia/pandillas-el-salvador-atribuyen-disminucion-homicidios-beatificacion-oscar-romero/> accessed on August 13, 2020.

⁸⁶ Sam Tabory, Gobierno de El Salvador alerta sobre alianza de maras: informe, *Insight Crime*, August 15, 2015 at <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/noticias-del-dia/gobierno-salvador-alerta-sobre-alianza-maras-informe/> accessed on August 13, 2020.

⁸⁷ Carlos Martínez, Gangs Find Common Ground in El Salvador Crackdown, *Insight Crime*, July 11, 2016, at <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/gangs-find-common-ground-in-el-salvador-crackdown/> accessed on August 13, 2020.

⁸⁸ Interviews with Salvadoran National Police Intelligence, September 2019.

asset is not unheard of among rival violent groups. In Colombia, after years of extermination warfare and incompatible rival ideologies, the FARC and paramilitary groups in various parts of that country made agreements to share drug trafficking and logistics routes. In general, as long as either side stayed within the agreed bounds, there was peace, even if they occasionally tested each other through surges of violence for perceived violations of the agreement. While the rivalry remained, the need to export cocaine and import weapons and logistics was greater than their need to fight each other. There seems to be a similar situation to that of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 in El Salvador.

One of the measures taken by Nayib Bukele during his April 2020 prison crackdown was to group rival gang members together. It was feared by some and hoped by others that this would provoke bloodshed in the prisons. However, some observers felt that these policies could backfire and instead of unleashing a war between the rival gangs, sharing prison cells and other harsh treatment could actually facilitate the gang's long desired for unity against a common enemy.⁸⁹ There have been no reports of major killings of jailed gang members resulting from these joint imprisonments.

Win over the population by providing security and employment, not just coercion. The authors believe that the biggest double-edged sword for the gangs is extortion as a primary means of income. On the one hand it is the financial lifeblood of the Salvadoran gangs. It is the main way they sustain themselves. On the other hand, it is one of the major causes of popular rejection.

Until recently the major incentive to paying extortion was to avoid violence, and while that continues to be a major motivation, there has been a subtle shift in the attitude of the gangs, particularly the MS-13. The gangs have started to provide security from other gangs and criminals in exchange for the extortion money paid. This has significantly reduced other forms of criminality in the areas dominated by the gangs.

Providing security to the local people and businesses in exchange for their extortion payments has earned the gangs some support, as the gangs are much more efficient at security than the police. Because of the highly inefficient Salvadoran justice system, people are often not arrested for misdemeanors and those that are,

⁸⁹ Marcos Alemán, El Salvador's jail crackdown on gang members could backfire, Associated Press, April 29, 2020, at <https://apnews.com/d8643205d614d11d413f655d49a0487b>, accessed on August 13, 2020.



Caption: A Salvadoran army vehicle maintains security near a shopping mall in San Salvador in July 2015 following gang attacks on bus drivers in the Central American capital.
Photo Credit: Jose Cabezas and Reuters photos, with permission

are often released within a few hours. Furthermore, corrupt police often collaborate with criminals by doing intelligence for the criminals and then taking a cut of their earnings from the criminal proceeds. Bottom line, the police and justice system are often not very efficient. On the other hand, the gangs are much more so.

The gangs warn other criminals to stay out of their territory or suffer the consequences. In general, criminals who defy the gangs are usually caught and murdered. The gangs favor killing someone they catch with bladed weapons, but generally they kill them slowly to cause as much pain and suffering as possible. The reason to do this is to send a message to other would-be transgressors of what will happen to them if caught. It only takes one or two of these killings for others to get the message, so that when the gangs are providing security, nobody bothers the inhabitants except the gangs.

Because the gangs are far more efficient (not necessarily fair) at administering their informal justice, and they set clear rules, many of the local inhabitants support them. Such was the sentiment expressed to the authors at a local market controlled by MS-13. Vendors are happy because they don't have to worry about petty theft, so they take home all their earnings except the quotas they pay the gangs. While they don't like paying the quotas that the gangs demand, they are

very appreciative of the extra security, so in the end it is not all negative. When gangs don't provide security, there is far more resentment.⁹⁰ A recent study on extortion made similar findings.⁹¹

In some areas, especially where there are a lot of gang families or support for the gangs, the gangs will even provide work and food for the population.⁹² In areas visited by the authors the gangs had often acquired businesses like bread stores, restaurants, car washes, auto repair shops and other businesses through which they launder their money. The gangs were the employers, usually hiring relatives or other trusted locals to work in those businesses. In one case the authors observed that they controlled a bus line that operated in and around Soyapango and were providing jobs to their social base.⁹³

The gangs also use their influence in local government, or participation in citizens committees to steer economic develop programs or social assistance to their constituencies.⁹⁴ As the gangs move more toward providing services for the populations in their areas of control, they gain greater popular support. The more they gain popular support, the more difficult it will be to combat them.

Economic investment in the local economy and its long-term domination.

When gang members were deported from the United States to El Salvador they began to carry out such criminal activities as drug trafficking, street dealing, murder for hire, extortion of institutions and small businesses, kidnapping and weapons trafficking. These have been the mainstays of the gang economy throughout their history. However, as the gangs have evolved so has their economic activity.

A controversial topic has been the degree to which the gangs have been involved in drug trafficking. Several past publications have asserted that this was a major source of income for the gangs. Those claims were exaggerated in the past. For the most part, until recently, the gangs were involved in drug trafficking, but were not major players. Their role was more one of street vending, than trafficking. Extortion was always a far more important source of income. That said, the gangs have always had their eye on drug trafficking due to how lucrative it was, and how

⁹⁰ Interviews conducted by the author with San Salvador market vendors, July 2019.

⁹¹ *Insight Crime, Una Cultura Criminal: Extorsión en Centroamérica*, la Iniciativa Global Contra el Crimen Organizado Transnacional, May 2019, p. 39.

⁹² Gustavo Arias Retana, Así funcionan las pandillas en El Salvador, *La Nación*, August 8, 2015, at <https://www.nacion.com/el-mundo/politica/asi-funcionan-las-pandillas-en-el-salvador/MOKLTQVSTSGORALFVU-3V6E6ZWM/story/> accessed on August 14, 2020.

⁹³ Visit to gang-controlled neighborhoods carried out by the authors in February 2019.

⁹⁴ Interviews with USAID personnel, U.S. Embassy February 2019.

shifting to that business would allow them to reduce their reliance on extortion which was causing them to be rejected by the population.

In Plan 503, the MS-13 was already discussing strategically reducing its dependence on extortion and kidnapping and increasing its involvement in drug and weapons trafficking. The leadership perceived that not only were these businesses more lucrative, but they would also make the gangs more powerful. However, in the same discussions they recognized that the business was currently being dominated by other organizations and that it would have to go to war with these organizations to take over the business. One of the motives for unity between MS-13 and Barrio-18 was that it was felt that this would make the gangs strong enough to win the war for the control of drug trafficking.⁹⁵

In Honduras, the MS-13 has successfully made significant inroads into the drug trafficking business. This is facilitated by the fact that Honduras is a natural geographical hub for shipping drugs from South America to the United States. There is a significant volume of cocaine that passes through Honduras on its way north to the United States market. The impact of MS-13s domination of certain sectors of the cocaine business has been described in depth by Douglas Farah and Katherine Babineau.⁹⁶

The volume of cocaine trafficking through El Salvador is much lower because it is not a natural waypoint and is almost completely bypassed by major trafficking organizations. Therefore, even if the gangs completely dominated the business, it could probably never completely replace other sources of income. While it is clear that the gangs of El Salvador have not achieved a total domination of the drug trafficking, it is also clear that drug trafficking is an increasingly important part of their economy.

⁹⁵ National Civilian Police, Plan 503, document viewed by the authors on June 23, 2009.

⁹⁶ Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, "The Evolution of MS 13 in El Salvador and Honduras," *Prism*, Vol. 7 No. 1, 2017, p. 60.

Chapter VI: Leadership and Control

Currently the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs are organized at three levels of operation for which there are rough equivalents in conventional military doctrine known as: strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

Strategic Ranfla

At the strategic level is the “*ranfla*” as it is called by both the MS-13 and the Barrio 18 organizations. The *ranfla* is a type of council composed of the oldest and most renowned gang members. They make decisions by simple majority through a vote. There are some members of the *ranfla* that are in jail and others that are on the outside. Even though there are many members of the *ranfla* in jail, decisions are not made without the votes of all the members. There is a lot of debate, dissenting opinion and even fracturing between the members of the *ranfla* known as *ranfleros*. For example, we see this fracturing in the division of the Barrio 18 gang into Revolutionaries and Southerners. We also see it in the emergence of the MS-13 dissidents, known as the MS-503. These splinters and dissidences can and are brought under control through murder campaigns, but sometimes those campaigns fail, and the fracturing only increases. For example, the Revolutionaries and Southerners have become a fairly permanent feature of Barrio 18, where MS-503 has increasingly been reduced. However, despite this occasional fracturing there is a lot of unity and discipline within the gangs at this strategic level and as we shall demonstrate, consistent and coherent strategic guidance comes out of the leadership.

Notwithstanding the sometimes fracturing of the *ranfla*, within the structures of the organization controlled by a single *ranflero*, there is generally very strict hierarchy and discipline. The consequences for making an independent decision without the approval of the *ranfla* member are severe and the normal punishment is the murder of that individual. The degree of control exercised by the *ranfla* is reflected in various captured *wilas*⁹⁷ in which gang members of a *clica* ask for permission to tattoo different parts of their body. The *wilas* include the name of

⁹⁷ A *wila* is a written communication, usually in the form of a petition (going up) or a directive (going down) that is shared among gang members. The *wilas* are often written in code and hidden in the most ingenious ways to get past government security measures. In addition to the ingenious ways they are hidden, they are often written in a series of codes, some much simpler and some highly complex, to avoid deciphering by government authorities until the contents are no more than history.

the requester, their history in the gang to justify their wearing of the tattoo, the specific part of the body where the tattoo would be located, and a general description of what the tattoo was going to look like.⁹⁸ The fact that this level of detail is necessary to get a tattoo approved is indicative of how even the smallest decision requires the permission of the respective *ranflero*.

Operational Programas and Tribus

At the operational level the MS-13 has what they call *Programas* (programs) and what the Barrio 18 call *Tribus* (tribes). The Program is a determined grouping of *clicas*. There are programs with a few *clicas* and programs with hundreds of *clicas* distributed across the whole country and even transnationally.

The program is almost a completely autonomous unit. It administers the resources generated by the *clicas* of the program and distributes the resources as needed: weapons, ammunition, vehicles, clothing, lawyers, funeral expenses, and more back to the *clicas*. Program leaders are known as *corredores de programas* (program runners). They approve the selection of *palabrerros*, moderate internal conflicts, organize joint actions and are the representative of the program to other program leaders. The Salvadoran Prosecutors office recognizes 49 programs in El Salvador, while *El Faro*, a highly respected Salvadoran newspaper that does in-depth investigation on the gangs, counts 54.⁹⁹ It is not clear why the two numbers differ.

In Barrio 18, the head of a Tribu is known as a *palabrero* or person with the word, and is a person generally trusted by the *ranfleros*. In both MS-13 and Barrio 18, an important job performed is to pass the petitions of the *clica* or cancha members up to the *ranfleros*, and more importantly, to pass the decisions of the *ranfleros* back down to the *clicas* and *canchas*. They are also in charge of enforcing the decisions made by the *ranfla* within their own program or tribe. To send the requests up to the *ranfleros*, the *corredor* or *palabrero* meets with the *clicas* or *canchas* to vote on decisions they want made, and these decisions are sent via messages to the *ranfleros* who approve or deny them.

⁹⁸ *Wila* captured by the police, examined by the author in January 2019.

⁹⁹ Carlos Martínez, Lo que es necesario saber sobre la MS-13 para entender la Operación Jaque, *El Faro*, August 11, 2016, at <https://elfaro.net/es/201608/salanegra/19067/Lo-que-es-necesario-saber-sobre-la-MS-13-para-entender-la-Operaci%C3%B3n-Jaque.htm>, accessed on April 1, 2020.

Tactical Level Clicas and Canchas

At the tactical level are the *clicas* or *canchas*. The average number of gang members to be considered a separate *clica* or *cancha* is around 20 members. There is no fixed number of members required to form one as the variables are in constant flux, such as murdered gang members, wounded, jailed members, the size and importance of the territory they control, the prevailing illicit economy, etc.). Small *clicas* and *canchas* can number 10-15 members and the largest units can have 50 or more homeboys.¹⁰⁰ Each *clica* has a leader, known as a *palabrero* (person with the word), and their substitutes: second and third words (*segunda y tercera palabra*).¹⁰¹ The *clicas* and *canchas* main task is to control their identified territory by extorting money from all economic activity within the territory, and keeping interlopers and outsiders out, often through homicide. They also recruit new members into the gang. This will be described in greater depth later.

As mentioned before, they make decisions through a simple vote by all the members. However, the final decision on how to proceed must make its way up through the *corredor/palabrero* and to the *ranfla* or *rueda* (wheel). Some previously authorized actions can be decided at the operational level (tribe or program), but others must go up to the *ranfla*. It is not known exactly what decisions qualify for decision-making at the lower level, but for example, all murders committed by the *programas* and *clicas* are approved personally by the *ranfla*. Also, given that even tattoos are approved by the *ranfla*, there is probably not a whole lot of decisions that are left up to the leaders at the tactical and operational level. Those levels of leadership exist to execute and enforce the *ranfla*'s decisions.

The Evolution of Leadership and Control

Supposedly the gangs are horizontal organizations. At least this was how it was supposed to be in the beginning. In theory, every “*brincado*” (initiated) member of the gang enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other gang member. The only difference is supposed to be the “respect” that a gang member has earned from his level of commitment and experience in actions on behalf of the gang. So

¹⁰⁰ Carlos Martínez, Lo que es necesario saber sobre la MS-13 para entender la Operación Jaque, *El Faro*, August 11, 2016, at <https://elfaro.net/es/201608/salanegra/19067/Lo-que-es-necesario-saber-sobre-la-MS-13-para-entender-la-Operaci%C3%B3n-Jaque.htm>, accessed on April 1, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

a newly “*brincado*” homeboy is supposed to enjoy equal rights and privileges to the historic homeboys that are part of the leadership of the organization.¹⁰² In reality, the gangs have always had hierarchy, and the mythological horizontal nature of the gangs has proved to be somewhat of an organizational headache, impeding levels of cohesion and organization within the gangs. In Orwellian terms, all gang members are equal, but some gang members are more equal than others. As a result, the histories of both the MS-13 and the Barrio 18 have been fractured. The MS-13 has developed a relatively more hierarchical and disciplined organization and ways of doing business, while the Barrio 18 has clung to their more horizontal traditions, which has resulted in greater fracturing, and in some ways less strategically threatening to the state as the MS-13. In the United States Barrio 18 has far more members. In El Salvador, MS-13 is larger.

Initially, the gangs were formed by youths that were mostly deported from the United States. Consequently, the gang members in El Salvador looked to their leaders in the United States for guidance. As the number of locally recruited members increased, the willingness to follow directives from the distant leadership began to wane.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the Salvadoran gangs had one of their first notable internal crises due to a power struggle and the lack of strong internal leadership. Some state agencies said the dispute put at risk the existence of the gang as the local gang members, notably from Cuscatancingo, rebelled against the leaders from the United States. Others imposed themselves by force as national level leaders ordered a surge of violence that later became the common way that these groups operated to solve disputes.

This situation forced the leaders in the jails and those in the United States to make a significant course correction in terms of modifying internal rules to recover the leadership and control over the gangs at the local, national, and international levels. They made the local organizations more democratic by allowing them to make decisions through simple majorities within limited parameters. They removed the deported U.S. gang members from the *clicas* and located them in new higher-level structures for criminal activity known as “*programas*.”

This internal crisis was the second opportunity for the state to act forcefully in all areas to take advantage of this temporary weakening to annihilate the gangs, but they let the opportunity slip through their grasp and the gangs regained their

¹⁰² Ibid.



Caption: Salvadoran Army soldiers patrol the Amaya Community in San Salvador after families were threatened with death by members of the MS 13 gang.

Credit: Jose Cabezas and Reuters photos, with permission

strength during 2000-2001. In part this was due to the anti-gang strategy adopted by the government, the so-called *Mano Dura* (Hard Fist) and *Mano de Hierro* (Iron Fist), Citizens Committees, and so forth. These polices created a situation that forced the gang leaders in the United States and in the streets of El Salvador to adapt.

Cohesion

Cohesion is defined as “the action or fact of forming a united whole” or in a physical sense “the sticking together of particles of the same substance.” In an organization then, cohesion is the degree to which the members feel united to that organization and the degree to which, when a decision is made, the organization moves in unity towards fulfilling that decision.

In the gangs, cohesion is built and maintained through several means, structures, and rules. We have already described the structures at the tactical, operational, and strategic level. These give order and structure to the gangs that allows them to maintain command and control over the gang members. However, the notion of equality between the members both increases and decreases cohesion by,

on the one hand making each gang member feel like his voice and vote count, but on the other hand, because of this very characteristic to make it difficult to make a unified or coherent decision.

Within the MS-13, the rules to reduce friction have increased over time and they are continually evolving. Annex 1 is a snapshot of the rules as they existed in 2019. The trend is towards increasing verticality and hierarchy and away from horizontal decision-making, precisely because the flatter the organization, the more difficult it is to be cohesive, so over time the rules favor increasing vertical control and increasingly limited horizontal spheres of action. This is more evident among the MS-13 than Barrio 18.

MS-13 rule number 2 is the first rule of vertical cohesion because it calls on the gang member to never deny the gang, that is to never reject or betray the gang. The gang becomes a person's first priority, their new family, or at least supra-family as loyalty to the gang is more important than any other loyalty including family, country, and God. This rule helps ensure that gang members will "stick together" when things are tough, as to deny the gang results in punishment by death.¹⁰³ Traitors are hunted down and killed even years after the alleged betrayal.

Rule 12 reinforces this notion as it states that it is forbidden to divide the gang, and if this is done, the punishment is death.¹⁰⁴ This may have been a recent rule as the MS-13 went through a period where a division among the leadership produced a splinter group known as MS-503. It seems that most of MS-503 has been eliminated and most of the *clicas* reintegrated back into MS-13.

The tendency towards verticality is particularly notable within the *clicas* and *programas* where at the national level *ranfla* there is much more equality and debate in terms of decision-making. The lack of verticality at the national level remains high due to the constant jailing of the top leaders and the increased security measures by government authorities which isolate the jailed leaders from their *programas* and *clicas*. This prevents constant oversight and control which can and does occasionally cause schisms between the *ranfla* in jail and the *ranfla* out of jail. However, as we have seen, the gang leaders and members constantly find ways to overcome their isolation from their structures, so it is a constant game between the gangs and the state to develop stricter isolation methods on the state side and to neutralize those measures on the gang side.

¹⁰³ See Annex 1, rule number 2.

¹⁰⁴ See Annex 1, rule number 12.

Some of the rules are formal and written and some un-written that establish the boundaries and punishments for those that violate the rules. The punishments are usually violent and cruel, designed to send a strong message to its members about the consequences of breaking them and keep the members in line. Lower-level punishments include 13-second beat downs and some more drastic punishments. There is little in between beat downs and death, although sometimes there are unspecified corrective measures. Expulsion from the gang is rarely an option. Once in, essentially never out, and even those that are allowed out for various reasons are always under the shadow of the gang for the rest of their lives. As mentioned previously, the regulation has become so strict, that to even get a tattoo and what it looks like requires permission.

However, the rules do not only govern the members; they govern the leaders as well. Leaders that violate rules can be demoted, punished, and executed. They have obligations towards the gang such as taking care of the gang's economy. This means ensuring that the gangs have ways to make money, but also the wise administration of that money; to keep the gang economically solvent, to spend the money prudently, and to save money for emergencies and times of need. The fact that the leaders also have rules and obligations towards the gang members helps maintain cohesion because it helps gang members know that they are not totally at the mercy of whatever the gang leaders say. So, while internal discipline for the gang members called homeboys is tough, the leaders must follow rules as well and can be sanctioned if they do not.

Another means of generating cohesion is that within each gang and *clica*, there is a senior member who is designated as a sort of gang "political officer," similar in function to the commissars of the Communist organizations of the past. This person oversees the writing and maintaining of the history of the *clica* and indoctrinating homeboys in the ethos and mythology of the gang and the *clica*. This helps inculcate each gang member with a set of beliefs and ethos that then governs their behavior. Unlike the rules and punishments which are a negative means of cohesion, the gang history and mythology is a method of positive reinforcement for gang members. This teaches why the gang exists, about past heroes and villains, the behavior that is expected of the members to be heroes and become part of the gang history and mythology. It fosters a sense of belonging and common beliefs and values.

An event that originated externally to the gang that increased cohesion was the gang truce. The gang truce both helped the gangs come together as well as dem-

onstrate the level of national influence they had achieved. During the gang truce which ran from March 2012 to May 2013 (technically the truce is still in place, but since May 2013, the homicide rate returned to the previous levels), the gang leaders recovered control of their gang structures, consolidated their leadership, purged dissidents, and kept the government in check by controlling the homicide rates. This helped them increase their cohesion. They demonstrated their cohesion by being capable of drastically increasing the number of murders in a relatively short period of time (by giving their subordinate structures quotas of deaths, or order the murder of police, military, or prison guards) when they weren't getting what they wanted from the government.¹⁰⁵

In conclusion, while there are fault lines within the gangs that from time to time erupt into fracturing and fratricide, there are also several factors that generate significant cohesion. Several variables contribute in both directions, but overall the gangs, particularly the MS-13, show a great deal of cohesion when examined at the general level. There are plenty of specific exceptions to this rule, but the rule still holds.

¹⁰⁵ This information was acquired from several written gang directives known as *wilas* that were captured from gang members during different operations and which were made available for our examination during the course of this investigation.

Chapter VII: The Gang Member

There is a great variety in the characteristics of gang members, nevertheless there are certain tendencies among “average” members. They tend to be from urban and densely populated neighborhoods, where poverty, unemployment or underemployment are common. In these areas, life is hard and uncertain. They tend to have lower levels of education. Many are from broken homes where there is minimal presence of the father at home, and sometimes the mother as well. The grandmother is the head of the family in these cases.

Even though women (mothers and grandmothers) are authority figures to the common gang member, this does not extend to female peers. Machismo and discrimination against women has been notable. Only a few years ago, women did not have leadership positions within the gangs. The so called “*hainas*” were almost a type of sexual ornament or trophy that were shared among the gang members and leaders. The term “*haina*” used by the Salvadoran gangs is, according to the *Diccionario Latinoamericano*, from a Mexican slang word, originally “*jaina*” which is a corruption of the word “vagina” or the female sexual organ. The males use sex to dominate and control the girlfriend, woman or girl.¹⁰⁶ The fact that the term for a female gang member is a term for her sexual organ is indicative of the value they assigned to women, that is only for male pleasure and little else.

Nevertheless, since 2000 there has been a slow evolution of the views about women in the gangs. By the date of this writing, there were women *clica* leaders. These women have the reputation of being more savage than the male leaders. This slow change of attitude towards women has occurred because of the ease with which women can develop relationships with policemen or soldiers and to infiltrate potential target businesses or state institutions such as the Public Security Academy, the Army, and other places. As a consequence, the *clicas* saw that women were useful for a lot of special work, and then later could be trusted in positions of greater responsibility. Their behavior after being given more responsibility also helped change the attitudes of the men towards them.

For example, several gang women have tried to infiltrate the National Public Security Academy. In 2017, Zuri Yamileth Garcia was captured when she was in her last phase of instruction before being commissioned as a police officer. She

¹⁰⁶ AsiHablamos.com: El diccionario latinoamericano, para poder entendernos at <https://www.asihablamos.com/www/significado/palabra/jaina>, accessed on July 16, 2019.

was accused of being the girlfriend of a gang member from Santiago Nonualco (La Paz) and of having participated in the extortion of the businessmen from that municipality.¹⁰⁷

Another recent example is the case of the Black Widows, a conspiracy by single female gang members of the MS-13 in El Salvador to seduce men, marry them, and get them to buy insurance policies. A few weeks later they would be murdered by the gang, after which the women would claim the life insurance and then share it among the women and the gang.¹⁰⁸ There are many other examples.

The other thing that is important to point out is that since 2000, there has been an evolution of the gang member profile. Even though many of the recruits fit the previously mentioned profile, circumstances have forced the gangs to adapt. In 2000, the different policies of *Mano Dura* (Hard Fist) began to disrupt the normal life of the gangs, thrusting them into a vicious cycle of arrest, processing, freedom, and arrest. This caused a lot of attrition. The initial response was to create the “Lion’s Dens” which were safehouses where they would spend the night. Previously they would spend the night in the street. When the *Mano Dura* policies began the police would patrol the street trying to capture the gang members in the act. If the police didn’t see them in the street, they didn’t arrest them. The “Lion’s Dens” were created to keep the gang members off the street and reduce vulnerability to arrest. However, the Lion’s Den was a temporary fix to wait it out until the state got tired of those roundups. When not only *Mano Dura* continued, but the Super *Mano Dura* policy was implemented, they had to make more drastic changes.

The most distinguishing characteristics of the gangs were their tattoos, their way of dressing and the language they used (to include signs). Little by little they reduced and then eliminated the tattoos, began wearing normal clothes and talking normally in public.

The large number of gang members in jail became a huge expense for legal services, with many lawyers extorting the gang members or not fulfilling their promises to their clients. Several lawyers have been killed and continue to be killed by the gangs due to perceived or real broken promises and price gouging. We can

¹⁰⁷ Pareja sentimental de pandillero se infiltró en la ANSP, *La Prensa Grafica*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Pareja-sentimental-de-pandillero-se-infiltra-en-la-ANSP-20170525-0027.html>, accessed on July 16, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ “Viudas negras”, el grupo que reclutaba solteras y las obligaba a casarse, fue condenado a 15 y 30 años de prisión, *Diario de Hoy*, May 17, 2019, at <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/viudas-negras-el-grupo-que-reclutaba-solteras-y-las-obligaba-a-casarse-fue-condenado-a-15-y-30-anos-de-prision/603788/2019/> accessed on July 16, 2019.

mention just a few examples. In 2016, lawyer Ana María Benítez Quinteros and her law student Jessica Ivonne Pérez Estrada were killed in San Juan Talpa, La Paz.¹⁰⁹ Also in 2016, in San Salvador lawyer Omar Recinos Santos was murdered when he went to receive payment from the gang member he had defended.¹¹⁰ In 2018, the lawyer Juan José Zelaya was murdered by gang members in his house in Usulután.¹¹¹ These are just a few of many cases.

Due to the dissatisfaction with the lawyers, the gangs are reported to have begun sending trusted persons to study law in the different universities of the country. This included both full-time gang members as well as trusted collaborators. At the beginning of 2019, a confidential source reported that of the approximately 1,000 students at the Technological University (UTEC), they had identified 300 with links to the different gangs, which has forced the university to suspend group assignments because there were police and prosecutors studying in that institution and they wanted to protect personal identifying information from getting into the wrong hands. No corroborating information about the proportion of gang affiliated students was obtained from another source, but if true, this is a worrisome trend. If the UTEC is representative of the other law schools in the country, there could conservatively be two or three times the number of gang sponsored law students in El Salvador (600-900) at any given moment.

Besides law, gang members have been allegedly detected studying other professions such as economics, business administration, and communications, among others. It would not be surprising if it was found that they were studying to occupy additional professions such as medical doctors, engineers, and others. The authors did not receive this information but believe that this is something that should be monitored.

The authors conclude that it would be logical that the professional gang members would not part of the regular gang structures (*clicas, programas, canchas, tribus, ranflas*) but rather are part of clandestine gang structures that are exclusively directed by some of the *ranfleros*. The existence of separate structures for the professional gang members have not been reported by other sources, but it would

¹⁰⁹ Asesinan a abogada y a estudiante de leyes, *Diario de Hoy*, 11 de enero de 2016, <https://historico.elsalvador.com/209318/asesinan-a-abogada-y-a-estudiante-de-leyes.html>, accessed on July 16, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Asesinan a abogado que llegó a cobrarle a pandillero que defendió, *La Prensa Grafica*, 20 de abril de 2016, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Asesinan-a-abogado-que-llego-a-cobrarle-a-pandillero-que-defendio-20160420-0039.html>, accessed on July 16, 2019.

¹¹¹ Pandilleros asesinan a un abogado mientras se encontraba en su vivienda en Usulután, *Cronio*, 12 de marzo de 2018, <http://cronio.sv/nacionales/sucesos/pandilleros-asesinan-abogado-se-encontraba-vivienda-usulután/>, accessed on July 16, 2019.

make sense given the logical desire to keep the membership of these lawyers in the gang secret.

Today, the profile of the entry-level gang member may still be essentially the same as it was from the beginning of the gangs. However, beginning in 2000, they seem to be getting more sophisticated and as a consequence, less detectable by the traditional security forces methods.

Recruiting Methods

Currently it is estimated that there are between 40,000 and 60,000 formally incorporated or “*brincado*” gang members distributed across all the groups of El Salvador. In the MS-13, each full gang member has been ordered to have three candidates in different phases of recruitment. Each of these phases has been given a different name. In the order of earliest to most advanced phases these are: *observación, paro, y chequeo*. There is no specific age nor time to be in each phase. The requirements to advance from one phase to the next are not clear. During each phase the recruit demonstrates his loyalty to the gang, participating in and carrying out crimes such as support, extortion, robbery, and murders. Over time, the leader of the *clica* will request permission of the *ranfla* for the person to advance to the next phase. Only the *ranflero* can authorize the progression.

To be chosen to “*brincar*” or become a full-fledged gang member, the candidate has to be completely trusted by the gang; in the *clica*, the *programa* and the *ranfla*. Today, several sources reported that the candidate has to murder at least five people. Before, the requirement was fewer, but in 2019, it was reported to be five people.¹¹² This high number seems excessive to the research team, but it was repeated by several unrelated sources, so it cannot be dismissed without further evidence.

This high number can be indicative of the significant demand to become a member of the gangs. If there are 40,000 full gang members and each of these has three gang members in different phases of recruitment, there may be a total of 160,000 gang members just in El Salvador without considering other Central American countries. Even if the proportion of full gang members to trainees is less, instead of three, one or two for every full gang member, there is still a potential

¹¹² As by the end of 2019, the number of gang homicides decreased greatly by decision of the gang leadership. As a result of more effective government policies, the number of murders required for full gang membership may have been reduced again.

for between 80,000-120,000 gang members. The importance of this number can be seen by comparing it to the wartime numbers of FMLN guerrillas. At the height of the war, the FMLN never attained anywhere close to the numbers of the gangs. At their peak, the FMLN were able to build a force of 14,000 full-time guerrillas and perhaps twice that number in different categories of militias, in other words around 42,000—just a little more than the most conservative estimate of the number of current full-time gang members. The size alone of this force is formidable so it is little wonder the gangs are such a critical security problem.

This also explains why, despite large losses of gang members in battles with the authorities, mostly the National Civilian Police (PNC), the gang capacity does not seem to have been significantly, if at all, diminished. In 2015, the PNC reported that they had killed 320 gang members, in 2016 there were 603, in 2017 they reported 413, and in 2018 they reported 208.¹¹³

Table 3. Number of Gang Members killed by year.				
Year	2015	2016	2017	2018
<i>Killed</i>	320	603	413	208
<i>Firefights</i>	622	650	536	341

For each gang member that is killed, wounded, or arrested, there are several candidates to immediately replace them, so the net impact on the gangs is null. But there is another phase of recruitment that no one has really discussed before, a “pre-recruitment phase” for children between approximately 5-12 years old.

Children in Gangs

Videos captured from the gangs show 4-6-year-old children learning the language and signs of the gangs. At this age they are already being indoctrinated in gang culture and the aspiration to become gang members when they are older. The source of these child recruits is the large number of single parent children in the poor neighborhoods and also the children of gang members that have a great influence over their peers.

Approximately between the ages of 7-8, these children are asked to do favors for the gangs, serving as lookouts, running errands for the *clica* leaders, or taking

¹¹³ Statistics provided by the Policia Nacional Civil, November 2019.

messages and other things back and forth. This is done because it is considered politically incorrect to search little children without probable cause. Between 9 and 10 approximately, these children are allowed to participate in criminal operations, mostly as lookouts, but also more sinister crimes. For example, it was reported that they will be brought in to observe the gang torturing and murdering an enemy of the gang with knives. Those that show a greater disposition can even be allowed to inflict some of the cuts or stabs on the victim. At 11-12 years old, the children can be taken to commit their first murder.¹¹⁴

An example of this occurred on March 3, 2016, in San Juan Opico, La Libertad, when members of the Barrio 18 gang murdered 11 electrical workers in the search for members of the MS-13 to avenge a Barrio 18 member who had been murdered the previous day. They didn't find any MS-13 members, so they decided to kill the workers. A video that was subsequently captured shows a veteran gang member teaching a young boy, approximately 12-years old, how to kill one of the workers with a machete.¹¹⁵

This aspect of gang recruitment has been essentially ignored until now, but it means that the gangs are developing a big pool of candidates from which they can select for the formal recruitment process. This creates a sustained production line that guarantees the continuation of the gangs over time. How many of these candidates exist is completely unknown and the state has, to date, spent little effort disputing this group of children with the gangs.

It also means that when the formal recruitment process begins, these children have likely already become pathological killers. Most of the government programs to recover gang members have been directed towards persons who are either already full gang members or those in the formal recruitment process. The existence of pre-recruitment phase of indoctrination and grooming would seem to explain why most of the recovery programs have not been very successful to date, because the socialization and psychological formation has already taken place much earlier making it far more difficult to recover them when they are older.

¹¹⁴ Interviews with members of the FBI vetted unit, 2018 and 2019.

¹¹⁵ Pandillero sobre masacre en Opico: "Matamos a la gente que no era, que no andaba metida en nada" Diario de Hoy, 23 de mayo de 2017, <https://historico.elsalvador.com/353503/pandillero-en-opico-matamos-a-la-gente-que-no-era-que-no-andaba-metida-en-nada.html> accessed on July 17, 2019.

Chapter VIII: Violence

Tactics



Caption: Sports teammates pay their last respects to their friend Marco Pimentel who was murdered by gang members along with his mother and three other relatives in San Salvador in February 2019. Photo credit: Jose Cabezas and Reuters photos, with permission

The gangs have been slowly but systematically developing increased capabilities as they adapt to each new police plan to neutralize them. This has resulted in the creation within the organization of new specialties to defend and overcome the police force attacks. The gangs are still clearly inferior to the state in terms of firepower, training, availability of material resources (weapons, vehicles, specialized equipment, etc.). However, the gang's connection to the Mexican cartels has provided them with the opportunity to get advanced military training and the use of military weapons. A *wila* recently discussed sending 500 gang members to Mexico to receive military training and to bring back a similar number of military weapons.¹¹⁶ Another *wila* talks about acquiring rocket propelled grenades in Nica-

¹¹⁶ Policia Nacional Civil intelligence document consulted in November, 2018.

ragua.¹¹⁷ To date, the weapons from Mexico and Nicaragua have not been detected, but it has been observed that that the paramilitary operations conducted by the gangs recently demonstrated greater discipline and more advanced tactics, which could be an indication of military training in places like Mexico.

This has also resulted in the development, equipment and training of larger paramilitary organizations that have seen the deployment to the countryside and the establishment of camps in these areas, which is far from their traditional areas of control.

Many of these camps are located on or near logistical corridors, maritime routes, and movement corridors for contraband, drugs, or human trafficking. This seems to indicate that the gangs are keenly interested in controlling these key areas with their armed elements to control specific criminal enterprises. This is a change from the past where they were solely focused on controlling urban space with not very sophisticated elements, mostly teams of trigger men within the normal gang structures.

Because of this, it is believed that they will continue to refine their combat capabilities and tactics. An example of this is the attack on the headquarters of the Traffic Police, where the analysis of the closed-circuit TVs around the station showed that rather than a drive by shooting that was reported in the news, the gang cell conducted a reconnaissance prior to the operation, then executed the operation in a disciplined military formation that are only used regularly by trained military or police forces. The skilled employment of assault weapons is evident and little to no improvisation was evident.¹¹⁸

The gangs have also used an increasing number of car bombs and explosives in their attacks on the PNC and Salvadoran military (Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador or FAES). In February 2018, a low-powered car bomb detonated on the highway between San Salvador and La Libertad, wounding two policemen that tried to move what appeared to be an abandoned car.¹¹⁹ In July 2018, another car bomb detonated along the highway between Chalatenango and San Salvador, wounding

¹¹⁷ Policía Nacional Civil intelligence document consulted in January, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Seis supuestos pandilleros capturados por atacar a la División de Tránsito Terrestre de la Policía, *Diario de Hoy*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/seis-supuestos-pandilleros-capturados-por-atacar-a-la-division-de-transito-terrestre-de-la-policia/619930/2019/>, accessed on July 17, 2019. Also see Atacan División de Tránsito en San Salvador, *El Mundo*, January 19, 2019, <https://elmundo.sv/atacan-division-de-transito-en-san-salvador/> accessed on July 17, 2019.

¹¹⁹ Explosión de coche bomba en carretera al Puerto de La Libertad: dos heridos del CAM de Santa Tecla, *La Prensa Gráfica*, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Explosion-de-coche-bomba-en-carretera-al-Puerto-de-La-Libertad-dos-heridos-del-CAM-de-Santa-Tecla-20180211-0011.html>, accessed on July 17, 2019.

two additional policemen.¹²⁰ Finally, in April 2019, a car bomb exploded on a soccer field in Soyapango when the police attempted to investigate a fake dead person inside the vehicle. The incident resulted in the wounding of the two policemen.¹²¹

Weapons



Caption: Prior to the Bukele government, there were increasing clashes between the gangs and the security forces with escalating increases in deaths and injuries. In this photo, Salvadoran Army soldiers bury one of their fallen colleagues.

Photo credit: El Salvador National Police

The use of homemade weapons has almost completely disappeared in the gangs and is now almost exclusively found in the detention centers. The current weapons requirements of the gangs are assault weapons and explosives including hand grenades.

Today, when there are confrontations between the gangs in the rural areas, the main weapons being employed by the gangs are assault rifles while in the urban areas they continue to be mostly pistols and revolvers. In other words, where in the countryside, we see an increased use of military weapons much like guerrillas of the civil war, in the city the action is more like traditional confrontations with armed criminals.

¹²⁰ Cabo y policía lesionados tras explotar “coche bomba” en Chalatenango, El Mundo, July 7, 2018, <https://elmundo.sv/cabo-y-policia-lesionados-tras-explotar-coche-bomba-en-chalatenango/>, accessed on July 17, 2019.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Training

The training of their paramilitary elements has been advancing just as some analysts predicted. Their connections to the Mexican drug cartels have given them access to more advanced training than they could obtain locally from ex-military or former guerrillas. The cartels combat experience and knowledge of the Mexican Army tactics, techniques, and procedures are more current than those learned locally.

Today we see the employment of tactical formations, paramilitary organization (squads and platoons), and deliberate ambushes with remote control explosives often detonated by cell phones.

The paramilitary structure will continue to grow in sophistication, developing increased capabilities that will allow them to fare better in armed confrontations with the security forces. Meanwhile, their hit and trigger men will continue becoming more skilled, but mainly because of practical experiences versus planned training.

Technology

The gangs have been using technology available on the open market that helps them accomplish their objectives. They transfer money through cell phone apps (such as Tigo Money) to launder money from their illicit activities. They establish surveillance of the movement of the Police and Army using video cameras, cell phones, and even drones. They use other associated technologies, such as remote-control devices to detonate explosives (e.g., Chalatenango car bomb) The use of technology will increase as the gangs become familiar with them, sees their utility for their purposes, and become experts in their use.

Cell phone technology is used mainly for communications, extortion operations, and the planning of murders. Cell phones are also used to set up an early warning security network around their areas of control.

Cell phones are also used to record events and create propaganda messages. Gang members love to take photos and videos of everything which they store on their cell phones and post to social media. Besides personal use, these videos and photos are used to send messages to multiple audiences to instill fear, to boast about accomplishments, and to recruit new gang members. Ironically, they are also a great source of intelligence for the state.

The gangs often use slang and code words to describe various things or activities. For example, police gang analysts talked to the authors about reports and *wilas* mentioning “galactic falcons.” The police analysts believe that galactic falcon is slang for drones. If this word is indeed a code word for drones, they are mentioned in two contexts. First, in the context of carrying out reconnaissance for an attack on a high-level target and second as an attack device jury rigged with explosives.¹²² While the attack plan, from the *wila* does seem to have reached an advanced stage of planning, there is no evidence that it was ever close to being carried out. Perhaps the interception of the *wila* prevented the plan from making any more progress. The types of drones required to carry out the tasks described in the *wila* are likely off-the-shelf technology and show that the gangs are trying to think imaginatively about how to incorporate technology into their actions as have many other groups recently such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Mexican Cartels, and some Venezuelan anti-Maduro elements.

A final example is from another police interview where it was claimed that the police had found that the Barrio 18 gang had installed a parallel security camera system to the already existing system owned by the municipal authorities in a market that they controlled. They used this system to monitor criminal activities by non-gang members or rival gangs. If they saw anything suspicious on their system, they would react immediately by sending a gang “reaction force” to verify the situation and take action.¹²³ The investment of time and resources to install this security camera system indicates the importance the gang assigned to controlling the market, probably due to the amount of money that Barrio 18 was making from extorting the vendors. It probably also indicates the difficulty the gang was having maintaining total control of the market. It is not known if this was an exceptional situation, or a standard measure being taken today by the gangs.

In the end, the use of technology should not surprise anyone as it is civilian technology that is readily available and generally affordable by the gangs. The gangs are products of their societies and should be expected to use available technology to achieve their ends.

¹²² *Wila* showed to the authors by Police Intelligence in July 2018.

¹²³ Interview with Police Gang analyst, November 2019.

Chapter IX: Politics

The gangs got involved in politics intuitively since very early in their history, particularly at the local level. When politicians came to campaign in gang-controlled neighborhoods, they were initially just another target for extortion; the gangs allowed them to campaign in the gang dominated neighborhoods in exchange for cash or other payment. As the gangs evolved, earning the acquiescence and even loyalty of the local community political involvement became increasingly important not only through threats and bribes but also in terms of asking for service projects and actions of goodwill.

The gangs discovered that they could influence local elections by encouraging or discouraging residents to vote for a particular candidate. In exchange they would then exert influence on the candidate to carry out certain policies, particularly in terms of requesting payments in exchange for their support or in terms of how municipal funds were invested in the local communities. Some candidates were more willing to cooperate than others, but where gangs were prevalent, they became part of the political calculus no matter which party they represented. Perhaps Leftist parties tended to have more in common with the gangs, but Center and Right parties made their arrangements as well. It was not necessarily a matter of ideology but a matter of pragmatism.

Most of the people that the team interviewed agreed that the gangs became conscience of their ability to affect national politics during the gang truce and negotiations of 2012 to 2014. As they officially reduced the murder rate from 34 to 10 per 100,000, they were allowed to give press conferences, issue press bulletins, make declarations about their respect for women, declare school peace zones, participate in municipal council meetings, and hold public events with diplomatic observers to turn in weapons. They even met with the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza.¹²⁴

In the end, however, the Salvadoran population did not agree with the gang truce. Many felt that the concessions to the gangs in exchange for the reduction of the murder rate were too much. There were payments to the gang leaders, concession of privileges in jail, transfers of gang members to minimum security prisons

¹²⁴ Carlos Martínez, ¿Quién enseñó política a las maras?, *El Faro*, August 26, 2018, at https://elfaro.net/es/201808/el_salvador/22358/%C2%BFQui%C3%A9n-ense%C3%B1%C3%B3-pol%C3%ADtica-a-las-maras.htm?st-full_text=all&tpl=11 accessed on June 8, 2020.

where they were allowed to regain control of their gangs, supposedly in return for them helping negotiate a peace agreement and “demobilize” the gangs.

However, extortion never ceased, and in fact increased. As murders decreased, the police decreased their pressure on the gangs, which allowed them to consolidate their control of the neighborhoods. They became the de facto authorities of their areas, even determining when the police could enter the neighborhood and where they could go. Finally, there were multiple rumors that the murder rate did not decrease to nearly the extent reported in the official numbers. While the number of bodies found greatly decreased, disappearances greatly increased and it was alleged that the vast majority were in fact murdered by the gangs and then buried in secret cemeteries. The conclusion of most observers was that rather than lead to peace, the gangs were greatly strengthened by the gang truce in exchange for very little if any benefit to the state and society.¹²⁵

After the gang truce, the gangs became conscious of their potential for national, not just local or regional, influence and increasingly inserted themselves in national politics. No political campaign was immune to petitions, threats, and extortions by the gangs. No campaign could prosper without addressing the issue of the gangs, and while most were tough in public, in private there were a series of negotiations and payments.

At the local level, the gangs have offered the reduction of violence to mayoral candidates in exchange for the promise of municipal jobs or other benefits. In preparation for these negotiations the National Police chief reported that in 2017, the gangs ordered an increase of murders in order to set up the negotiations with the political candidates to offer them violence reduction in exchange for political favors.¹²⁶

President Nayib Bukele has not been the exception despite his claims to the contrary. Two of President Nayib Bukele’s closest advisers were found to be in regular contact with the gangs, Mario Durán, Minister of Government and Carlos Marroquín, director of Social Fabric since December, 2015.¹²⁷ This was nothing new. Bukele had a long history with the gangs. As mayor, Bukele was accused of

¹²⁵ Alberto Arce y Marcos Aleman, Tregua en El Salvador hizo pandillas más fuertes, *Associated Press*, September 7, 2014 at <https://apnews.com/ce4427683cbd4f7199719424e20a7d0f> accessed on June 8, 2020.

¹²⁶ Tristan Clavel, El Salvador Police Chief Warns of Gang Infiltration in Municipal Elections, *Insight Crime*, November 1, 2017 at <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/el-salvador-police-chief-warns-gang-infiltration-municipal-elections/>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

¹²⁷ David Marroquín, Investigación fiscal involucra a dos funcionarios de Bukele con maras, February 6, 2020, at <https://www.elsalvador.com/eldiariodehoy/nayib-bukele-funcionarios-pandillas-fiscalia/683875/2020/>, accessed on June 8, 2020.

negotiating with the gangs during his tenure to avoid their interference with his capital improvement projects. During the three years of his mandate, he made concessions to the Barrio 18 Revolutionaries gang, ceding them control of some market stalls in the Cuscatlán market. Former staff and gang members also claimed that for his February 2015 campaign Bukele paid money to the three main gangs so they wouldn't boycott his campaign.¹²⁸

During the investigation several sources asserted that the gangs were promoting their own candidates to be elected local mayors or council members. However, no concrete evidence of this was found. Nobody identified a known gang member who was either a candidate or an elected official. Furthermore, nobody identified a candidate that had been sponsored and promoted by the gangs from the ground up. In other words there is no indication that the gangs are yet interested in holding formal power, even if they have discovered the benefits of manipulating and influencing political office.

In the sense of political influence, gangs can and do encourage people to vote or not to vote for a particular candidate. In an interview with Vice News in 2015, a leader of Barrio 18 said that they the gangs controlled and could mobilize around 400,000 votes.¹²⁹ It is not clear if he was only referring to the votes controlled by Barrio 18 or the gangs generically. Either way, if true, it is a significant number of votes that can easily determine outcomes of elections at the local and even national level.

Mobilizing or influencing votes is done in several ways. We have already mentioned allowing candidates to campaign in areas under their influence in exchange for payments or electoral promises. However, the gangs can also campaign for or against candidates, and they can encourage or intimidate people to vote for a candidate and not vote for another. In some cases, gang members have been posted along routes of access to polling stations intimidating the people by implying that they will find out who they voted for and punish those who vote “incorrectly.”

The gangs have not limited themselves to influencing local politics. In a 2017 trial a witness identified as Nalo de Las Palmas testified that between 2012 and 2014, the two main parties (FMLN and ARENA) gave MS-13 350,000 dollars to

¹²⁸ Carlos Martínez, Nayib Bukele también pactó con pandillas, *El Faro*, June 29, 2018, at https://elfaro.net/es/201806/el_salvador/22148/Nayib-Bukele-tambi%C3%A9n-pact%C3%B3-con-pandillas.htm, accessed on June 8, 2020.

¹²⁹ Vice News, Gangs of El Salvador, November 30, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGG7IRJkJK>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

influence the elections.¹³⁰ In a 2019 trial, a witness only identified as “Noé”, indicated that MS-13 has been influencing elections for some time. Political parties pay the gangs to tip the scales in their favor. In 2014, the FMLN gave them money to help Salvador Sanchez Ceren win the elections. In 2015, the ARENA party paid the MS-13 69,000 dollars in exchange for votes in the municipal and legislative elections of that year.¹³¹

The FMLN cut a deal with the gangs to support FMLN for the 2014 presidential elections. A video was acquired by El Faro that recorded a February meeting after the first round of elections in 2014, between an FMLN Legislative representative from Usulután, Arístides Valencia, and representatives of the MS-13, and both factions of Barrio 18. Later two of the same Barrio 18 members met with ARENA. One of those who met with the FMLN’s Valencia was an MS-13 leader known as “El Chivo”, and a member of the Sureños faction of Barrio 18, known as “Rafael”. The FMLN had not won a sufficient advantage to obtain the presidency. The plan had been to win a first round victory with the help of the gangs. During the meeting an evaluation was made of the work the gangs had done on behalf of the FMLN during the electoral campaign and plans were made detailing what the gangs would do on behalf of the FMLN during the second round of elections. The gang members thanked Valencia for the meeting and perhaps as an excuse for the disappointing results, said that this was the first time they had gotten involved in politics at this level. They also claimed that there had been insufficient coordination with the party. In particular, they complained that on election day, the FMLN points of contact didn’t answer their phones when the gangs called to ask for instructions. Also, they didn’t have sufficient transportation to get to the polling stations since they couldn’t openly use public transportation.

Valencia asked the gangs to maintain their commitment to the FMLN, and these in turn requested logistical support, such as transportation, and money to do such things as pay for the renewal of DUIs (*Documento Único de Identidad* or Single Identification Document, the national identity card) for gang members whose documents were too deteriorated to vote. It was clear from the conversation that there had been several previous meetings between the gangs and the FMLN

¹³⁰ Decapitaciones, Drogas y Armas: El Eterno Vinculo entre la Mara Salvatrucha y los Carteles Mexicanos, October 11, 2019, <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/10/11/decapitaciones-drogas-y-armas-el-eterno-vinculo-entre-la-mara-salvatrucha-y-los-carteles-mexicanos/>, accessed on January 25, 2020.

¹³¹ Ibid.

and that future meetings were being planned.¹³²

One of the methods used by the gangs to influence the results of the 2014 presidential elections was the confiscation of DUIs and or threatening citizens that were going to vote for ARENA. A protected witness told the Prosecutor's office that members of the Barrio 18 gang Revolutionaries faction intimidated voters by telling them that they had to vote for the FMLN party during the 2014 presidential elections. Another witness testified that two Barrio 18 leaders known as "Nalo" and "Donkey" gave out money to leaders of local gangs "*canchas*" to go around pressuring people to vote for the FMLN, and to confiscate DUIs from members of the ARENA party. This was done prior to the first round of presidential elections. They were also told that for the second round of elections they were not to confiscate the DUIs but to instead tell people not to show up at the polls if they were going to vote for ARENA, and if they did anyway, they would have to move out of the neighborhood.¹³³

In April 2016, national leaders of both factions of the Barrio 18 gang confirmed to *El Faro* that they had cut a deal with the FMLN party to support the elections of 2014. The gang leaders claimed that the FMLN had violated their agreement and that they were terminating all the agreements that had been made in years past to generate electoral support for the FMLN in their communities and to impede voting for the opposition. They further accused the government of hypocrisy for accusing ARENA of having met with the gangs, when in fact the FMLN had actually made a deal with them for electoral support at the highest levels and claimed that Benito Lara, an FMLN legislative representative, and the first Minister of Justice and Public Security in the Sanchez Ceren government, Medardo González, then FMLN General Secretary, and José Luis Merino, a top FMLN leader and financier had been the FMLN delegation that negotiated the agreement. Barrio 18 claimed that they had promised to reduce police action against the gang and to seek a path for dialogue. According to *El Faro*, the MS-13 had also been part of this deal and were also terminating their agreement with the FMLN due to

¹³² Carlos Martínez y Roberto Valencia, "El FMLN hizo alianza con las pandillas para la elección presidencial de 2014". *El Faro*, May 6, 2016, at <https://elfaro.net/es/206005/salanegra/18560/El-FMLN-hizo-alianza-con-las-pandillas-para-la-elecci%C3%B3n-presidencial-de-2014.htm> accessed on June 10, 2020.

¹³³ David Marroquín, "FGR investiga decomiso de DUI por pandilleros". *El Diario de Hoy*, May 10, 2016, at <https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/188955/fgr-investiga-decomiso-de-dui-por-pandilleros.html> accessed on June 10, 2020.

unfulfilled promises.¹³⁴

Meetings also took place between the FMLN and the gangs before the first round of the 2014 presidential elections and after the first round of the elections around the same time that the gangs were meeting with representatives of ARENA. ARENA accused the gangs of impeding ARENA party members from going to the polls.

In the communique, the gangs also accused Representative Guillermo Gallegos, from the *Gran Alianza Nacional* (GANANAL) party, of having broken promises as well, and instead of negotiating with the gangs, ordering their elimination by force. They announced that they would never again allow their canchas (local zones) from being used by the FMLN or GANANAL to seek votes and politically organize the people in those neighborhoods. “We have given orders to our territories to not allow FMLN and GANANAL activities, nor the display of their symbols such as flags, T-shirts, hats, etc... Whoever declares war on us cannot expect that we will host them in our territories,” gang leaders announced.¹³⁵

ARENA also approached the MS-13 and Barrio 18 during the 2014 presidential campaign. A video was discovered from February 2014 in which Ernesto Muyschondt, then Vice President of ARENA, and the then ARENA mayor of Ilopango, Salvador Ruan, met with leaders of the MS-13 and the two factions of Barrio 18. The ARENA delegation offered that if the ARENA candidate won that they would ease the maximum-security regime at the Zacatecoluca jail, known as “Zacatraz” where the main historical leaders of the gangs were serving time. Muyschondt also asked the gangs what they thought about former guerrilla Facundo Guardado as a potential minister of Security and Justice.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Carlos Martínez, “Pandillas aseguran que tenían pacto electoral con el FMLN” *El Faro*, April 18, 2016, at https://www.elfaro.net/es/201604/el_salvador/18455/Pandillas-aseguran-que-ten%C3%ADan-pacto-electoral-con-el-FMLN.htm accessed on June 10, 2020.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Gabriel Labrador y Carlos Ascencio, “Arena prometió a las pandillas una nueva tregua si ganaba la presidencia.” *El Salvador: El Faro*.net, 11 de marzo de 2016.

Chapter X: Territory

Distribution

According to Vice News the gangs began spreading across the country when the government carried out intense operations in the major cities to eliminate them after the end of the gang truce. They claimed that the gangs have been migrating away from the areas where they are being heavily attacked.¹³⁷ This fits the narrative of the police leadership with whom the authors spoke. However, there could be other reasons as well to include expanding growth and control to dominate communications, commerce, and mobility.

Territorial Control

A Department of Justice funded study categorized gangs as three types: corporate, territorial, and scavenger. Corporate gangs focus their efforts on making money. Territorial gangs focus their efforts on possessing territory, and scavenger gangs have little structure and focus on belonging to the group.¹³⁸ Understanding the category that a gang fits into can help explain how they exercise territorial control. The authors posit that it is possible for a gang to belong to more than one category as it evolves and there is in fact a logical evolution from scavenger to territorial to corporate although some gangs may skip different phases altogether or remain in one or another for a variety of reasons.

For example, the Mexican mafia, one of the major influences of the Salvadoran gangs, is a corporate gang that really never had a territorial phase due to its dominance in prison. It is possible that it originally started out as a scavenger gang as belonging was important to band together to defend themselves against other groups in prison. However, if this is the case, it jumped from scavenger to corporate without passing through the territorial phase. On the other hand, the MS-13 may have gone through an initial scavenger phase, but it jumped to territorial so quickly that it is debatable whether there was really much of a scavenger phase. Perhaps the scavenger phase of Barrio 18 happened when Salvadoran migrants be-

¹³⁷ Vice News, Gangs of El Salvador, November 30, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGG7IRJkJK>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

¹³⁸ Bureau of Justice Assistance, *Addressing Community Gang Problems: A Practical Guide*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 1988, p. xvi.

gan joining the Mexican gang. However, it soon transitioned to territorial when the Salvadorans took over Barrio 18 and it became largely a Salvadoran and Central American gang.

Another thought is that a gang can display characteristics of multiple types simultaneously, or that as they transition from one phase to the next, they display mixed characteristics depending on place, people, and time. So, in the case of the Salvadoran gangs, as time moves forward they predominantly display the characteristics of a territorial gang, but at the same time increasingly showing the characteristics of a corporate gang.

According to Abby Cordova, a gang's control of territory is a survival and empowerment strategy. Territorial control allows them to protect themselves both from the state and other rival gangs. It empowers them because as they dominate terrain, it gives them freedom of action which in turn helps them strengthen their organization.¹³⁹

We see this in the territorial control and expansion of the gangs in El Salvador. The *clicas* began as little neighborhood groups that proved themselves a nuisance in a variety of places where illegal immigrant gang members were deported to. However, over time they began to increasingly dominate all life in those neighborhoods and then expand their domination to adjacent neighborhoods.

One of the author's personally witnessed this expansion over time in the town of Opico where he had friends that ran some corner stores. At first, the gangs were just a nuisance, easily told to leave or they'd call the police when they came to ask for "rent." Then as their control expanded, they had to acquire a pistol and threaten the gang members with armed violence if they didn't leave them alone. Then the gangs murdered another small business owner in the neighborhood and the friends decided it was better to pay "rent." Finally, the rent became too much, and they decided to sell the home and store in Opico and move into a gated community with armed security guards closer to San Salvador.

They still maintained a store on the outskirts of Opico where the gangs had yet to expand, however, the process started all over again and as of 2019, they were getting ready to sell the second store because the gangs had expanded out to dominate the territory in this area. What has saved them so far is that this is the only store within several miles and many of the gang members families rely on this

¹³⁹ Abby Cordova, Living in Gang-Controlled Neighborhoods: Impacts on Electoral and Nonelectoral Participation in El Salvador, *Latin American Research Review*, April 10, 2019, at <https://larrlasa.org/articles/10.25222/larr.387/> accessed on June 30, 2020.



Caption: A map captured from gang members shows where weapons were cached in a particular neighborhood. There are at least 17 firearms and 10 grenades shown in the map.

Photo credit: El Salvador National Police

store, so there was pressure on the gang not to charge too much rent so the store stayed open.

Where Opico was once a safe, sleepy little town to the northwest of San Salvador, today it has become completely dominated by the MS-13. Going into town as a stranger is not a safe activity anymore. It is also where 11 electrical repairmen were murdered by rival gang Barrio 18, seeking revenge on the MS-13.

It has been reported by many that gang consolidation of territory experienced a qualitative increase during the gang truce that began in 2012. The gangs reduced their violence and the government greatly reduced police operations in the most gang-influence neighborhoods. This vacuum was taken advantage of by the gangs to increase their control over the neighborhoods, to dictate what citizens could and couldn't do. Extortion greatly increased, and although dead bodies on the streets decreased, the number of disappearances greatly increased. Most people did not experience greater peace. Quite the opposite, they were increasingly harassed and controlled by the gangs in their communities.¹⁴⁰ When the truce ended and police operations resumed, the police found their freedom of action far more limited in terms of what they could do in the most gang influenced neighborhoods.

Increasingly, communities across the country are becoming like this, totally dominated by the gangs to the point where ironically, the police enter the towns only with the permission of the gangs. The authors visited a neighborhood in Soyapango that was so dominated by the gangs that the policemen were confined to their station. They were not allowed to patrol the streets. Furthermore, they

¹⁴⁰ Will Grant, Shaky truce: Is El Salvador's gang war really on hold? *BBC Mundo*, January 22, 2014 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-25711892> accessed on August 18, 2020.

walked inside the station with no weapons. It was clear that they were confined to the premises and did not leave while on duty there. While the police may be forcing out the gangs from some parts of the country, it is also clear than in many areas the opposite is true.

As the gangs expand their control and grow their numbers, they need more money, both because they have greater expenses but also because growing territorial domination gives them the basis and rationale for greater ambition. Ambition spawns plans which require more money. This is why the concept of expansion into the rural zones along major roads and routes for the trafficking of multiple illicit products like narcotics, weapons, and people is a logical expansion.

Territorial expansion has brought them into conflict with other criminal organizations resulting in initial conflict usually followed by either expulsion or accommodation. In gang-controlled territory, other criminals are either blocked from operating in the territory, or they have to pay a cut to the gangs for permission to operate. A good example are the street vendors, performers, and beggars that operate at various intersections across San Salvador. Police gang analysts told the authors that each of them pay rent to the gangs and there is usually a gang member or two that are providing “security” and making sure that they don’t cheat the gangs of their cut.

Sometimes the gangs are beaten back by organizations that have more money and more firepower. Drug traffickers are a good example. As long as they maintain their superiority, they can keep the gangs at bay, but the gangs are relentless. They have a seemingly never-ending supply of people so, no matter how many are killed, they don’t let up. Also, the gangs are savage and merciless in their methods. Most other criminal organizations don’t have the human resources or the cold blood to permanently withstand the gangs. However, in some cases, peace between the gangs and organized crime has been achieved by having the gangs provide security or carry out contracted tasks on behalf of organized crime in exchange for a cut of the profits.

The relationship between the specialized drug traffickers and the gangs has been highly debated for the last several years. Many assertions were made that the gangs were largely earning their money through either drug trafficking or working for the drug traffickers. These assertions have proven mostly false as will be discussed in the resources section of this paper. El Salvador is not a major transit zone for drugs, so the business is not that big in the first place, and in the second place, it does not seem that the gangs have yet been able to dominate the drug trafficking

organizations. It appears that accommodations between the gangs and the drug trafficking organizations consist of grudging respect, with occasional and sporadic cooperation, but more integrated actions are non-existent. The Salvadoran gangs have a better relationship with the Mexican cartels than they do with Salvadoran drug trafficking organizations. A sign that the gangs are reaching the apex of territorial control would be if they were able to eliminate or subordinate more powerful organized crime. That has not happened yet.

One of the signs of increasing gang territorial control is the gentrification of the gangs. As their domination consolidates, they begin to settle, build families, acquire houses, property and establish permanent businesses. This has begun in El Salvador. A friend of one of the authors lives in a gated community in San Salvador. This community was developed to keep gang members out under the assumptions that gangs were poor, street youths. However, today there are third and fourth generation gang members with families. Some of the oldest gang members are in their 50s and even early 60s. They buy property like any normal citizens, but they are not normal. In the friend's neighborhood, first one house was purchased by a gang leader and then two or three more houses were acquired by other gang leaders, and their families moved in. They have not caused any major problems to date, but their presence makes long-time residents uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the gangs do dominate most of the neighborhood outside of the gated community making it necessary to enter and exit the community by vehicle. It is no longer safe to take a bus or walk to the neighborhood stores.

In general, gang territorial expansion has been gradual, but systematic, and inexorable. As their territorial control has expanded it has become more difficult for people to evade the gangs, avoid paying rent, and increasingly likely that businesses and property belong to the gangs or their surrogates. As gang control has been consolidated, the gangs have projected territorial control out to mobility corridors between gang dominated areas.

The overall effect is that it is harder and harder to find parts of the country where there is not gang control or at least gang influence. It is fatal to enter the totally gang dominated areas for an outsider. In areas where gang control is getting stronger it is not safe to enter at night, and if in the area, to go out at night. In the areas where gangs are beginning to encroach, people need to watch their wallets and be careful of increased petty crime. In areas where gangs are absent, people can generally walk around without taking special precautions. The latter type of areas is increasingly scarce, although they do still exist.

There are also some areas that the gangs don't touch like tourist areas, recreation areas, and major shopping malls due to high levels of security, and because some gang members like to go there for recreation too. This is not a unique situation to the gangs in El Salvador. During the war against the FARC in Colombia and during the civil war against the FMLN in El Salvador, both guerrilla organizations generally avoided operating in what was known in both countries as "the pink zone." These were major entertainment areas in both countries where both the guerrillas and the members of the military went to eat out, drink, dance and otherwise be entertained. It should not be surprising that there are similar "neutral zones" with the gangs.

Over time, non-gang influenced areas are shrinking, and although many of them are being disputed strongly by the police, the overall trend of gang influenced territories is increasing.

Chapter XI: Resources

An El Salvador Central Bank study on the cost of violence to the 2014 economy, that is often cited, concluded that violence and criminality cost the national economy just over four billion dollars a year.¹⁴¹ However, this is not the amount of money that is going into the coffers of the gangs because it included government spending on controlling violence, lost opportunity costs, and finally the direct value of money or other assets lost to crime.

The study calculated that the value of money or property that was lost to crime was 1.303 billion dollars. This included extortion, home invasions, and personal assaults. Since there are many criminal groups and individuals in El Salvador, the home invasions and assaults cannot be attributed to the gangs, even if they are responsible for a portion of them. However, extortion is the specialty of the gangs and the study calculated that 756 million dollars was extorted from the Salvadoran economy in 2014.¹⁴² While the gangs are not the only extortionists in El Salvador, they do represent the vast majority, so if 90% were attributed to the gangs that would represent a total of around 680 million dollars, with the two major gangs each roughly responsible for half or around 340 million dollars per gang. It is known that this wasn't the gangs' only source of income, so potentially the incomes could be higher.

However, other respectable sources claim that the figure is far lower. According to El Faro, the MS-13 and their rival Barrio 18 gangs are not very sophisticated transnational enterprises. They don't even play in the same league as the Mexican drug cartels, or the Japanese or Russian mafias to whom they are often compared.¹⁴³ This was also the same evaluation by Department of Justice officials interviewed by the authors in the United States and El Salvador during 2018 and 2019. Based on evidence and documents acquired during Operation Jaque in July 2016,¹⁴⁴ El Faro calculated that the MS-13 annual income was around 31.2 million

¹⁴¹ Margarita Peñate, Kenny de Escobar, Arnulfo Quintanilla y César Alvarado, *Estimación del Costo Económico de la Violencia en El Salvador 2014*, REDIBACEN, April 2016 p. 40, at <https://www.bcr.gob.sv/bcrsite/uploaded/content/category/1745118187.pdf> accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁴³ Óscar Martínez Efrén Lemus, Carlos Martínez, Deborah Sontag, La mafia de pobres que desangra El Salvador, El Faro, November 20, 2016 at https://www.elfaro.net/es/201611/salanegra/19580/La-mafia-de-pobres-que-desangra-El-Salvador.htm?st-full_text=all&tpl=11 accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Operation Jaque was the first major operation carried out by Salvadoran Justice against gang finances. Over 120 arrests were made and much money and property were seized.

dollars per year.¹⁴⁵ This is about 10% of the amount of the Central Bank estimate that can be attributed to that gang. While further research needs to be carried out to understand and perhaps reconcile these widely divergent estimates, what is not in dispute is how the gangs make their money.

While still needing more information, perhaps the key to reconcile the two very different calculations (30 million dollars versus 300 million dollars) of gang income can be found in recent evidence given in court. According to a former *ranfla*, the amount that the national leadership of the MS-13 receives from the programs is around two million dollars a month, or 24 million dollars a year. A million dollars a year come from the Central Zone, the Paracentral Zone provides over 250,000 dollars a month, and the Eastern Zone deliver around 350,000 dollars a month.¹⁴⁶ This is not the total amount earned by the gang, but the number acquired from quotas from the *clicas* and *programas* that were passed up to the *ranfla*. This number is much closer to the El Faro numbers, but there is an important difference.

What explains the different estimates in gang revenue? The amount testified to in court was the amount that the *ranfla* was making from quotas from the *clicas*, not the entire income of the gangs. El Faro may be calculating the amount that is earned by the *ranfla* and the Central Bank figure may be measuring the amount earned by the overall gang. This is why El Faro's calculation was around 10 percent of the total amount of the money being assessed by the Central Bank.

This is a reasonable assumption as it is similar to practices in other countries such as the FARC where each front had its own economy and were expected to send a certain quota of their earnings to the Secretariat. In this manner it was accurate to say that the overall organization brought in around 500 million dollars a year, but documents captured from the Secretariat indicated much less income was obtained by the governing body.¹⁴⁷

Most of the FARC's money was spent on the local forces and its needs. Similarly, most of the gangs' income would be spent by the *clicas* on the *clicas*. If MS-13 "central" is earning 31.2 million dollars, it might not be a stretch to calculate that the total amount of money brought in by the *clicas* is around 300 million plus dollars. If they are earning around 300 million dollars a year and approximately 30

¹⁴⁵ Óscar Martínez, Efrén Lemus, Carlos Martínez, Deborah Sontag, La mafia de pobres que desangra El Salvador, El Faro, November 20, 2016 at https://www.elfaro.net/es/201611/salanegra/19580/La-mafia-de-pobres-que-desangra-El-Salvador.htm?st-full_text=all&tpl=11 accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 525.

¹⁴⁷ Instituto Internacional de Estudios Estratégicos, *Los Documentos de las FARC: Venezuela, Ecuador y el archivo secreto de Raul Reyes*, IISS: London, 2011, pp. 245-289.

million a year is paid to the *ranfla*, and there are 20,000 members of the MS-13, then the amount they earn per gang member is around 13,500 dollars. When you count the recruits and families that depend on the gangs, this is not an exorbitant amount. MS-13 and Barrio 18 leaders are not known to live in luxury, and the gentrified members mentioned above are relatively scarce. Nevertheless, this is an area that needs much more research.

Extortion

Extortion is traditionally, and continues to be, the principal source of gang income. As mentioned previously, the MS-13 in particular, is having discussions about how to move further away from extortion because of the rejection it causes of the gang among the population. The MS-13 has successfully done this in Honduras due to their massive involvement in drug trafficking, possible because of that country's status as a major hub for shipment of narcotics from South America north to the United States. El Salvador is largely bypassed by drug trafficking, so this has not been possible.¹⁴⁸

The gangs are present in 94 percent of El Salvador's municipalities and are reported to extort at least 70 percent of all businesses. Fear prevents people from denouncing extortion to authorities because the justice system can be penetrated, which means that people can get hurt for denouncing extortion and because the justice system is not very effective in punishing this crime. Between 2013 and 2015, 7,506 reports of extortion were made to the Salvadoran National Police. This resulted in only 424 convictions and the punishments for extortion are not that severe. Gang members are soon out on the streets again to continue to extort and exact revenge on those that provided information to the authorities.¹⁴⁹

A particularly favorite source of extortion is public transportation. The transportation association recently reported that they pay about 18 million dollars per year in extortion to the gangs.¹⁵⁰ They also extort informal transportation provid-

¹⁴⁸ Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, *The Evolution of the MS 13 Gang in Central America's Northern Triangle: From Gang to Criminal-Political Force*, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, March 28, 2017, p. 10.

¹⁴⁹ Molly O'Toole, Micro-extortion by gangs is costing El Salvador millions of dollars a year, \$10 at a time, Quartz Daily Brief, June 17, 2017, at <https://qz.com/1008580/micro-extortion-by-gangs-is-costing-el-salvador-4-billion-a-year-10-at-a-time/> accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Redaccion Contrapunto, Transportistas aseguran que persisten las extorsiones con una cuota anual de \$18 millones, *Contrapunto*, December 19, 2019, at <https://www.contrapunto.com.sy/politica/sociedadcivil/transportistas-aseguran-que-persisten-las-extorsiones-con-una-cuota-anual-de-18-millones/12166> accessed on April 15, 2020.

ers, the bread stores, *pupuserias*, beer stores, corner stores, businesses, markets, sugar cane farms, grocery stores, taxis, and brothels. The amount charged each day was reported to be on average 14 dollars a day.¹⁵¹ The Central Bank estimated that the amount of money paid in extortion by all parties across the nation in 2014 was 756 million dollars.¹⁵²

Drug Trafficking

The Salvadoran gangs have expressed an interest in getting more involved in drug trafficking since at least 2007. However, the constant accusations in various publications and other media that they are major drug traffickers or mostly financed by drug trafficking is not correct. This seems to be different for the MS-13 in Honduras, but this study is about the gangs in El Salvador.

The Salvadoran gangs are by and large not drug trafficking organizations such as the Mexican and Colombian cartels because they do not generally ship or represent a major participant in the shipping of drugs from the countries of production to the countries of consumption. Rather, most of their narcotics related activity is participation in the retail of drugs to consumers in their own countries. Early reporting on gangs discussed their heavy use of drugs, but whether those reports were accurate or not, today, all but marihuana is prohibited for consumption by MS-13 members and only at sanctioned parties (see Annex 1).

In 2012, the MS-13 National *Ranfla* met and agreed that all drug trafficking would be centrally controlled. The *clicas* could no longer buy cocaine and crack from independent sellers, only from the National *Ranfla* which would centrally acquire cocaine for the gang. How much they bought depended on the need or how much they sold. The motivation for centralizing narcotics retail seems to be to concentrate drug trafficking profits in the hands of the National *Ranfla*. Also, central purchase would presumably guarantee a better price and therefore higher profit margin. This would provide the national leadership with a ready source of cash to use as a slush fund. The profits from the street sales would be used to finance the criminal enterprises of the overall organization such as the acquisition of military weapons.¹⁵³

The National *Ranfla* called for a collection to be made from all the *clicas* to

¹⁵¹ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 503.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁵³ Sentencia Definitiva 2020, p. 506.

buy the drugs. They had the connections with the drug traffickers who would sell them a few kilos at a time, up to six or so. They would pay 12,500 to 13,000 dollars per kilo and the sale would produce a profit of between 3,000 to 5,000 dollars from each kilo.¹⁵⁴

If they converted the cocaine into crack-cocaine, they could make more money. Each kilo of cocaine produces about 46 ounces of crack which is worth around 450 dollars per ounce. Profits from crack-cocaine produced a profit rate of 7,000-10,000 dollars per kilo of cocaine.¹⁵⁵

How much cocaine or crack was distributed depended on the *programa*. The San Cocos program received 25-26 kilos per month. The Acajutla program received six kilos. It seems that the reduced amount distributed to the Acajutla program in comparison to the San Cocos program is that despite the centralized purchase directive, the Acajutla program had its own source of cocaine which was the fast boats that plied their way along the Pacific Coast to Guatemala and Mexico as the drugs made their way north to the United States.¹⁵⁶ If the average number of kilos per program is ten per month, in other words 480 per month at the national level, and the average profit earned is around 5,000 dollars per kilo, this means a net income of the gangs from the sale of cocaine is around 2.4 million dollars a month or 28.8 million dollars per year.

While much of the MS-13's cocaine comes by land from Honduras, a growing amount of cocaine is reaching El Salvador by sea. The *clicas* and *programas* located along the coast are becoming some of the largest, most powerful, and best armed in the country.

El Salvador is not generally a way point for drug shipment from South America to the United States like Honduras and Guatemala. El Salvador is largely bypassed. However, the coastal *clicas* like the La Union, Fulton, Hemsptead, and San Cocos *clicas* have become important logistical support for the different drug boats plying the Pacific and have their own sources of cocaine. The *clicas* leave plastic barrels filled with gasoline, lubricants, and food that is picked up by passing go-fasts who then resupply and make payments by leaving cocaine in the barrels. The cocaine is then taken by the *clicas* and sold on the streets of San Salvador either as cocaine or as crack-cocaine. It is not 100 percent clear how these deliveries are coordinated or payment enforced. Claims have been made about GPS tracking devices and other methods. However, the investigators were not shown concrete

¹⁵⁴ Op cit Sentencia, p. 506.

¹⁵⁵ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 507.

¹⁵⁶ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 508.

evidence of how this is done. No matter what the precise method, the gangs are acquiring more money, status and power as a result. This has been confirmed by recent court testimony.¹⁵⁷

The MS-13 National *Ranfla* also centrally controlled marihuana distribution to get more money for the gang. They were shipping in 200-400 kilos of marihuana every three weeks to a month from Guatemala. Each kilo cost the gang between 450 to 500 dollars depending on the quality.¹⁵⁸ Between 30-40 kilos of marihuana was smuggled into the jails every week or two weeks. It was smuggled into the jails hidden inside juice boxes. The National *Ranfla* earned around 25,000 dollars every 2-3 weeks to a month from this activity.¹⁵⁹ Since about 10 times that amount was entering the country more broadly, this would indicate an approximate profit rate of 330,000 dollars per month and nearly four million dollars a year. So total profits for the MS-13 per year are somewhere around 30 to 34 million dollars from drugs. This is actually quite modest compared to the hundreds of millions of dollars earned by other organizations. Nevertheless, it is not insignificant and seems to be growing in importance, serving as a source of ready cash to buy weapons and develop other major gang projects. Evidence given at a recent trial indicates that the gang leadership is looking to increase the profits from drug trafficking by purchasing the drugs wholesale in Mexico and then ship it to El Salvador versus buying the kilos from intermediaries that take a cut.¹⁶⁰ They were also discussing plans to make the *clicas* in Mexico direct suppliers of *clicas* in the United States.¹⁶¹

The biggest problems the MS-13 has been having is how to centrally collect the money. The *clicas* are dispersed and because it is a lot of money there is a lot of temptation to either not turn over the money or to not turn over all of it. This has led to a lot of mutual suspicions, accusations and even murders within the MS-13.¹⁶² This kind of internal friction over money was also common among the FARC in Colombia.

Money Laundering

Today the MS-13 is increasingly involved in laundering money which has created

¹⁵⁷ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 508.

¹⁵⁸ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 507.

¹⁵⁹ Sentencia Definitiva, pp. 506-507.

¹⁶⁰ Sentencia Definitiva, pp. 514-515.

¹⁶¹ Sentencia Definitiva, p. 515.

¹⁶² Sentencia Definitiva, p. 515.

large amounts of discretionary “legal” money at its disposal. One of the major laundering methods is the stealing and selling of used cars. They have also invested in property to include motels, bars, restaurants, parking lots and other places.¹⁶³

Insight Crime identified five ways that the MS-13 launders money:

Auto-theft and resale

The gangs steal cars in the United States, Mexico, and Honduras and then transport them to El Salvador where they are “legalized” and then sold a couple of times to launder them before “reselling” them in used car lots. In Operation Jaque, it was found that one of the major defendants, Dennie Antonio Gonzalez Mirando, was linked to the importation and sale of 2,000 used cars.¹⁶⁴

Shell companies and property

The MS-13 uses criminal proceeds to purchase property. This is a favorite method because there are few regulations on transactions. This has long been a favorite way to launder money by criminal groups across the Americas. Operation Jaque also detected MS-13 owned money laundering shell companies such as hotels, bars, restaurants, diners, bread stores, car washes, parking lots, and brothels. These are run as legitimate businesses purchased with illegal money, or as high petty cash businesses infused with large amounts of illegal money that can be passed off as legitimate purchases.¹⁶⁵

Law enforcement representatives told the authors that often the gangs acquire these businesses by threatening or pressuring the owners to sell or turn over the businesses to them at below-market prices. These businesses are often turned over to gang family members who then run them on behalf of the gangs.

¹⁶³ Marianna Hernandez, Mara Salvatrucha Estrecha Lazos con Carteles Mexicanos, September 24, 2018, @ <https://breaking.com.mx/2018/09/mara-salvatrucha-estrecha-lazos-con-carteles-mexicanos/> accessed on January 25, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Felipe Puerta -5 Ways the MS13 Launders Money, *Insight Crime*, September 7, 2018, at <https://www.insight-crime.org/news/analysis/5-ways-ms13-launders-money/> accessed on April 20, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.



Photo Caption: Video capture of plastic barrels floating off the coast of La Libertad filmed from a private yacht. These barrels are filled with gasoline, food and other supplies for the go fasts with cocaine heading north from South America. The contents are paid for in kilos of cocaine which the traffickers place in the empty barrels. The barrels are retrieved by the gangs and the cocaine is sold on the streets.
Photo Credit: author

Small Businesses

Operation Jaque also revealed that several of the businesses that had been extorted by the gangs were now being forced/used to launder the gang's money. This was a technique employed by the FARC in Colombia and is a kind of variant on the Stockholm Syndrome in which victims are turned into co-conspirators by changing the relationship from a purely parasitic one, to a more symbiotic one where the business owner, although continuing to be a victim, also enjoys some of the fruits of the gang's crimes. The gang provides the money to buy product that is sold by the small business. In return they demand 70% of the profits.

MS-13 in particular seems to be increasingly concerned with developing this type of cooperative relationship with the population as a way to win them over to protect the gang against the state, versus merely victimizing the population and keeping them in check through fear.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Loan Sharking and gambling

Gangs also loan money to locals at very high interest rates. This is reported to be more common in Honduras than El Salvador. The interest rate is typically 30 percent per day. Failing to pay or paying late can risk severe injury or death. In other cases, the MS-13 organizes unofficial lotteries and betting games with better odds than state-run lotteries.¹⁶⁷

Money Transfers

The gang asks or forces victims to deposit money into their bank accounts and or make electronic transfers through legal means such as Western Union. This includes remittance services offered by phone providers such as Tigo Money to collect extortion or receive money from abroad. Transfers can be made of up to 750 dollars per month with only a Tigo SIM card¹⁶⁸ and identification card. The bank accounts that receive the money are usually not the gang members themselves but multiple family and friends to reduce the probability of detection by financial intelligence units.¹⁶⁹

Investment

Through either legal or illegal means, the gangs seem to be acquiring more and more businesses. The authors observed bakeries, market stalls, corner stores, car washes, used car lots, buses, and bus lines that were asserted to belong to the gangs. If the interviews are to be believed, the gangs seldom if ever pay market price for these businesses. They are either turned over as payment for overdue extortion accounts or are sold for deep discounts to the gangs either because of loss of business or gang threats against the owners to sell or suffer the consequences.¹⁷⁰ These were being operated as legitimate businesses and reportedly being managed by the families of gang members.

It is probable that many of the businesses were being used to launder money from other criminal activity, but they were also being used to make money through

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ A SIM card is a Subscriber Identity Module card that can be used in cell phones to store data.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Interviews with Salvadoran National Police, July 2019.

normal economic sales. Sometimes it was reported that this was done with a twist. For example, at the markets the gangs will determine that a certain item such as tomatoes will be particularly profitable that day. The word will go out that only the gang sponsored stalls will be allowed to purchase tomatoes from the supply trucks on pain of death. This monopoly on the product allows them to set a price that will earn them more profit from that product.¹⁷¹

The increasing ownership of stores and businesses shows an increasing “gentrification” of the gangs, particularly the leadership. Where gangs used to hang out in the “destroyer” houses, basically hovels with members of the *clica* living the “crazy life,” now an increasing number have acquired regular houses and even residences in middle class and reportedly even upper-class neighborhoods. This may be because the gang leaders are increasingly middle-aged people, in their 40s, 50s and even a few in their 60s. This corresponds with the natural desire of people to settle down and have a more stable life that is not as characteristic of the younger generation. It may also indicate a move from a more egalitarian to a more stratified system with different privileges for members that have been gang members longer and have leadership roles. While this goes against the ethos of the gang, it is also a natural human tendency.

¹⁷¹ Interviews with Security Ministry authorities, July 2019.

Chapter XII: Popular Support

Over time the gangs have become more concerned about their acceptance and even support from the local population. Initially they used violence and terror to keep the population in check. While this worked to some degree, it also caused many people to feel anger towards the gangs and to inform on them. Gradually over the years, the gangs have taken measures to avoid giving the population cause to hate them. This is reflected in some of the gang rules that were divulged in 2019. From a list of 56 rules, there were six specifically directed at reducing the population's rejection of the gangs. This included:

1. Don't rape or sexually assault women, children, or old people. The punishment is death.
2. It is prohibited to kidnap because of the social scandal that it causes. The punishment is death for those that participate.
3. It is no longer allowed to dismember people and scatter body parts around as was done before. The punishment is execution.
4. It is prohibited to carry out massacres. The punishment is execution.
5. It is prohibited to burn people because of the social impact that it causes. The punishment is death.
6. It is prohibited to kill children. The punishment can vary from an unspecified punishment to death.¹⁷²

It is interesting that the punishment for all the violations against the population is death. The only one that varies from that is possibly killing children. Perhaps, this is because sometimes children are killed accidentally and the lesser punishment is for these types of accidents, in contrast to deliberate killings which would be punished by death. It can also be because many of the young gang members are between 14 and 18, legally minors. Sometimes the gangs are also accompanied by younger aspirants that can be between 9 and 11 years old. Some of these children wield weapons so under circumstances killing them might be an act of self-defense or the defense of fellow gang members. This is a curious departure from death being prescribed for crimes against the population. The overall severity of punishment for crimes against the population indicates that the gangs are getting very serious about gaining, or at least not losing popular support.

Over time, more and more of the population are connected to the gangs.

¹⁷² Sentencia Definitiva, pp. 124-125.

There are approximately 60,000 gang members and as many as 500,000 people that depend on the gangs for their livelihood. This means that approximately one in twelve people in El Salvador have ties to the gangs.¹⁷³

As mentioned previously, the gangs are increasingly becoming business owners and providing jobs. They are increasingly providing security from other criminal groups or individuals. They are also increasingly influencing political leaders to provide resources to gang constituents and families. They increasingly provide a sort of efficient, even if not “fair,” justice to the inhabitants of the neighborhoods they dominate. As a result, there is increasingly less rejection of them in these neighborhoods, and since they have extended their dominion to an increasing proportion of the country, more and more people can be considered their constituents. In the end, more and more people are developing a sort of accommodation with the gangs that will be difficult to change in the near future without a significant counter effort.

¹⁷³ Vice News, Gangs of El Salvador, November 30, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGG7IRJkJK>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

Chapter XIII: Conclusions

What unique contributions does this study make to the body of previous studies on the Salvadoran gangs? The Adversarial System Approach has indeed allowed us to develop a holistic view of the gangs that bring together the characteristics of the criminal organization, sociological and political actor approaches. The gang system is all of these things and these areas need to be understood to develop correct strategies to deal with the gangs without making the mistake of overemphasizing one approach at the expense of another. This is important to avoid leaving significant gaps that lead to failures to adequately counter the gangs because they can take refuge in the aspect of the gangs that is being ignored or underemphasized and then regenerate once the government tires of their failed policy.

This approach reconfirms the strengths of the previously described approaches, but it also adds some previously ignored insights.

First, this study has revealed that the gangs do have an ideology. It is not what we typically think of as ideology. It is not formally a political ideology, although it has political impact. It is not an ideology to take control of a state, but it is an ideology to weaken the state and establish a parallel gang nation in the territories that they dominate both nationally and transnationally. This has a significant political impact at both the national and transnational level. It certainly challenges all of the social norms and structures that have been part of traditional society. Most importantly, it is an exclusionary ideology, one that only values the members and potential members of the in-group (the gang) while devaluing and dehumanizing the value of the members of the out-group (other gangs and those not in the gangs). This is one of the most significant challenges of this ideology and it can be taken advantage of by the states that are trying to combat these phenomena because most of the Salvadorans are part of the out-group.

An ideology creates a narrative to explain the world and the way that it is. It creates a way to interpret reality. The challenge to states is not just that it needs to fix the problems that gave rise to the narrative because changing a reality doesn't necessarily change the interpretation of that reality and doesn't necessarily convince members of the gangs to switch their loyalty from the gangs back to the state. In fact, people can be convinced that the reason the state is improving conditions or paying more attention to problems is a positive result of the gangs. So not only does the state have to combat the objective conditions surrounding the gangs, but also to combat the narrative. Like counterinsurgency - although combating the

gangs is not counterinsurgency - neutralizing the gangs also means neutralizing their ideology. To date, this does not seem to have been a significant or high priority aspect of counter-gang strategies.

Second, the Salvadoran gangs, particularly MS-13, think and act strategically. While their strategy doesn't look like a conventional strategy that institutional strategists are familiar with, nevertheless it exists. This is reflected by clear lines of effort that have been consistently carried out over time toward strategic goals at the international and national level. While it was not developed or is executed the way that formal states develop and execute strategies, often in an uneven hit and miss fashion, nevertheless it does exist and it is being executed. The progress towards the accomplishment of the lines of effort have been evident over time. The progress has been slow, but systematic.

One of the problems with counter-gang strategies is they have not, as far as the authors are aware, taken the gangs' strategy into account. While they may touch on many of the gang's strategic lines of effort, it is logical to assume that if the entire strategy was taken into account in the development of counter-gang strategies, they might be more successful.

Third, this study has focused on how gangs recruit and expand their organization. This appears to be one of the significant strengths of the organization. The gangs are continuously recruiting and expanding and have developed a sort of production line that has both informal and formal phases. The formal phases are well known, those of *observación*, *paro*, and *chequeo*. Each full gang member is supposed to have one of each and to recruit new candidates as they advance and are initiated "*brincado*" into the gangs to become full members. That means that there are potentially somewhere between 120,000 to 180,000 recruits in different phases of incorporation. Even if these numbers are more modest, perhaps more around 60,000, it is still a large number of replacements, and makes it very difficult to reduce the gangs even if all of them were jailed.

These recruits are drawn from an additional pool that appears to be part of an informal phase of preparation to join the gangs that starts with children of 5-7 years old. This pre-recruitment criminal socialization, education, and incorporation of the children has been scarcely discussed in any of the literature. The process is such that it prepares a broad pool of eligible candidates to join the gang. Furthermore, the criminalization of these youth begins early, as young as 9-10 years old, and has a huge impact on the social and psychological development of these individuals. This means that when these individuals begin their formal recruitment

process by the gangs, their criminal behavior may already be pathological and very difficult to change, no matter the program. The authors of this study believe that this informal recruitment process needs a lot more attention if the state is to have any hope of having a significant impact on the recruitment and expansion of the gangs.

Fourth, much more work needs to be done to understand the finances of the gangs. This study makes an insufficient effort. There is a lot of variation in the estimates of the amount of money going into the coffers of these organizations. Estimates have varied widely, between 30 and 350 million dollars per gang per year. Understanding the true level of gang finances can be important to be able to adequately counter the gangs.

No matter the true amount, what is obvious is that the gangs are “gentrifying.” In other words, they are attempting to become a more permanent part of the economy. The gangs have gone from extortion in order to take care of immediate economic needs to investing their money so as to generate long term ways of keeping and making money. This includes the acquisition of property, businesses, control of marketplaces, buying houses for their families, and so forth. Yet the gangs baffle many analysts because the leadership generally do not live ostentatiously as do the leaders of the Mexican drug cartels, Colombia, or European mafias. Many leaders continue to live in humble dwellings in poor neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the visible yet anecdotal observation of the gangs embedding into the legal economy, even if through illegitimate means, is an indication of “metastasis” of the gangs within Salvadoran society. This should be of great concern to the national authorities.

Fifth, the increasing interference of the gangs in politics is of great concern. The inability of any political party to campaign or hope to be elected without making deals with the gangs is ominous. This means that no electoral competition is truly free and fair. While no democratic system is perfect, making sure that elections are as free of malicious influence as possible should be a great priority for any democratic state.

Furthermore, the pre-electoral interference of the gangs in political campaigns results in post-electoral “extortion” or influence of the elected officials, siphoning off significant resources to favor the gangs and their social base, rather than benefiting all of the electorate. Currently this seems to occur mostly at the municipal level, but this could soon have a greater impact at the national level. This may be happening to some degree now.

There is significant suspicion that the counter-gang strategy of President Nayib Bukele is a lot of theater and really represents hidden negotiations with the gangs, the terms of which are unknown. The state's ability to deal with the gangs and develop the counter-gang narrative as mentioned above depends a great deal on whether or not the public believes the state and is willing to make the sacrifices that will be necessary to truly solve the gang problem. The level of necessary trust today is questionable.

Sixth, it is clear that the gangs continue to acquire greater military capabilities. To date, they do not have nor perhaps seek the full capacity to confront the state as the FMLN guerrillas did during the 1979-1992 civil war. However, it is also clear that their training, skills, and weaponry are gradually becoming more sophisticated and of better quality. Both gangs – MS-13 and Barrio 18 – appear to be sending their members to be trained by Mexican drug cartels. Recent violent operations against the state demonstrate the skills they are acquiring. While there are persistent rumors of the acquisition of more sophisticated weaponry, there is yet little evidence of this. However, there is evidence that an increasing proportion of the gangs are equipped with military rifles and as importantly are carrying more ammunition which allows them to sustain confrontations with the state. Also, more attacks against the state are being carried out with explosives. While relatively low level in terms of technology and power, its increasing use is a concerning trend.

Finally, the state will never make progress against the gangs unless they carry out a holistic, joint and interagency, long-term strategy that both seek to reduce the short-term levels of insecurity and the long term and systemic causes that produce the context that stimulates the existence and expansion of the gangs.

Annex 1

MS-13 Rules¹⁷⁴

(main author's translation)

1. Don't raise a weapon against one or more gang members of the same gang. The punishment is death.
2. Don't deny the gang. They who do it will be punished according to the norms of his clica that can run from a cut (13-second beat down) for punishment to losing their life.
3. Don't slander one or more members of the clica of the same gang. Who does will be punished according to the slander. If it is of death, they'll be killed. If it is for correction, they'll cut him (13-second beat down) and if it is for punishment, they'll punish them. Example, not being allowed to come to a gang meeting or other gang activity.
4. Don't rape or sexually assault women, children, or old people. The punishment is death.
5. Don't remove the gang letters. Whoever does it without clica or gang permission is executed.
6. Respect the Corredor and the oldest members of the clica or gang.
7. Don't steal from the clica or the gang. This means keeping money from selling drugs or from collecting "rent" (extortion).
8. Don't consume crack cocaine. Whoever does is put to death.
9. Respect the woman or family members of the members of the clica or gang in general. This is punished according to the severity that can result in the death of one or more people.

¹⁷⁴ Sentencia Definitiva, 2019, pp. 123-124. These are the rules as they existed in 2017.

10. Don't kill members of the same gang. Whoever does it is called a "peseta" and is executed by whoever did it and all the participants.
11. Respect the rule of the gang and of the clica. Disobedience to these rules is punished according to the request of the clica to which they belong.
12. You cannot divide the gang. They that do it are eliminated, that is, are killed.
13. Don't steal weapons from the clica. Whoever does it is executed according to the petition of the clica whether they pay for it or they are killed.
14. Don't drink alcohol or beer unless the clica or gang has a party. Whoever does is punished by a cut (thirteen-second beat down) or 13 hits with a bat. If the violator is a Corredor or Ranflero, they lose their position and they are punished. If it happens more than 13 times the clica decides if they expel them or execute them.
15. Don't transfer from one clica to another without authorization from the one you belong to. The consequence is a correction or 13-second beat down and you cannot change clicas without previous authorization.
16. Respect the boundaries and the internal regulations of each clica. For whoever fails to respect this, the clica will request a punishment for that gang member.
17. Don't leave the country without authorization from the clica or gang. If someone does it, they are corrected where the gang finds them and then the same makes them return to the home country.
18. Don't steal within the clica nor in territory of the other clica without consulting or asking permission from the clica where the robbery will be committed. If it is done the perpetrator is corrected, that is beat down for thirteen seconds and punished by not being allowed to share an opinion when decisions of their clica are made. If they have personal "rents" they lose them during the period of the punishment and they cannot participate

in meetings

19. It is prohibited to have sexual relations with the women of gang members from the same clica to which the boyfriend or husband belongs. The punishment depends on the clica to which the boyfriend or husband belongs and can run from punishment to death.
20. It is prohibited to stir up the territory of another clica or program such as killing someone, abandoning a body, or firing, resulting in the police capturing or killing the gang members of that place and capture weapons or drugs. The punishment goes from a beat-down or death for those that do it.
21. It is prohibited to extort without authorization of the clica or the gang. If it is the clica, the permission has to come from the Clica Corredor or the Programa Corredor. This action is punished. If it is committed by the Clica, or Programa Corredor or a Ranflero, they are removed from their position and they are punished by no position within the gang for six months.
22. It is prohibited to kidnap because of the social scandal that it causes. Those that do it are executed.
23. It is prohibited to dismember people like was done before, that is to leave parts of the body scattered around. Those that do it are executed.
24. It is prohibited to kill a gang family member without previous consultation nor justification for their murder. Whoever is going to do it has to talk to the gang member whose family member they are.
25. It is prohibited to carry out an action without the permission of the gang. For example, to carry out a murder without first requesting permission.
26. When the member of a clica is arrested, he must tell the police which gang he belongs to so they don't detain him with rival gang members or civilians. If that happens and later he says that he is from the MS gang, and then they take him to a prison where there are MS, he will be considered a

peseta and they have the green light to kill him.

27. It is prohibited to carry out massacres. He that does it is punished by death.
28. It is prohibited to burn people because of the social impact that it causes. The punishment is death for those that commit this.
29. It is prohibited to kill children and, if someone does it, they can be punished with an unspecified punishment or executed.
30. It is prohibited for a clica to recruit one or more individuals without asking permission from the gang. If it is done the initiation is canceled and the clica is punished.
31. A gang member cannot be expelled from a clica without there being another clica to receive them. This is to prevent this gang member to be without control. The clica has to make the decision whether they will let them go or kill them.
32. No gang member that has withdrawn can retain a position within the gang.
33. Every member of the gang that wants to become a Christian has to let the clica and the gang know.
34. Every member of the gang that has been a Christian and wants to continue being one, must let the Clica Corredor know and the latter let the Programa Corredor know, and the latter let the Ranfla know.
35. It is prohibited to get tattoos, even if one has been started. To get one permission has to be asked from the Clica Corredor. They have to ask the Programa Corredor and they have to ask the Ranfla.
36. It is prohibited for members of a clica to steal from the chequeos of others.
37. It is the obligation of each clica to inform the gang when there is a change

of Clica corredor. If they don't, they'll be corrected.

38. The Program Corredors are elected by their programs in general.
39. All the ranfleros are responsible for their members. If they don't, they'll be relieved.
40. It is the obligation of the ranfla to be careful with the gang economy.
41. Report all criminal actions carried out by the clica or programa in their zone of operations. If not the Clica Corredores or Program Corredores where the crime has been committed, even if they did it, will be corrected.
42. It is the responsibility of the gang to have representatives whether they are called clica corredors, program corredors, or ranfleros. No matter if they are in holding cells, jails, or in other countries, they must be organized.
43. It is the responsibility of every clica to have one or two corredores. They should be represented in the jail. If there isn't a corredor that is free, the follow up is controlled by the corredor in jail.
44. In terms of clothing, you cannot use clothing that makes reference to the Mexican flag as those are the colors used by the Barrio 18. Whoever uses this clothing will be punished by a 13-second beat down.
45. Don't do the countdown of the initiation on the phone from the jail.
46. It's prohibited to give water to a person after having been corrected (beat down).
47. The following rules apply to those in jail: don't see the visitor of another prisoner and much less insult them. This is punished by a cutting down, that is a beat-down of 13 seconds, and it is prohibited to get close to that visitor.
48. Respect the lock-up and let-out schedule. Violations are punished by a

13-second beat down.

49. The jail beds are distributed by clicas and these are distributed according to their members.
50. Respect the authorities and support them if there are sick.
51. Cell phones can only be possessed by Ranfleros, Program Corredors, and Clica Corredors, and prisoners that have been in a long time.
52. A prisoner can only carry out extortions by phone if they are authorized by the clica. If this is violated, they will be cut down (13-second beat down) and punished.
53. Don't go up on the roof without the authority's permission like they do when they fix an antenna or hang clothing.
54. Don't carry firearms nor sharp objects that must be hidden in the caches.
55. Don't attack the authorities that make searches.
56. The prisoner who joins work programs or shops that quits without having finished is corrected.



William J. Perry Center *for*
Hemispheric Defense Studies

National Defense University
Abraham Lincoln Hall
260 5th Avenue, Building 64
Washington, DC 20319-5066