

How Street Gangs Took Control of Central America

By ANA ARANA

PART I

In December of 2004, a bus driving through the northern city of Chamalecon in Honduras was stopped by gunmen. The assailants quickly surrounded the bus and opened fire with their AK-47s, killing 28 passengers. The attackers, police later revealed, had been members of a notorious street gang known as Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13) and had chosen their victims at random. The slaughter had nothing to do with the identities of the people onboard; it was meant as a protest and a warning against the government's crackdown on gang activities in the country.

The attack and the subsequent arrest were only the latest sign of the growing power of Central America's gangs and their ability to shuttle between their home countries and the United States. Ultra-violent youth gangs, spawned in the ghettos of Los Angeles and other U.S. cities, have slowly migrated south to Central America, where they have transformed themselves into powerful, cross-border crime networks. The gangs have grown in power and numbers; today, local officials estimate their size at 70,000-100,000 members.

Nor is the danger limited to the region. Fed by an explosive growth in the area's youth population and by a host of social problems such as poverty and unemployment, the gangs are spreading, spilling into Mexico and beyond - even back into the United States itself. With

them, the maras are bringing rampant crime, committing thousands of murders, and contributing to a flourishing drug trade. Central America's governments, meanwhile, seem utterly unable to meet the challenge, lacking the skills, know-how, and money necessary to fight these supergangs. The solutions attempted so far - largely confined to military and police operations - have only aggravated the problem. Prisons act as gangland finishing schools, and military operations have only dispersed the gangs' leadership, making bosses harder than ever to track and capture.

IN THE GHETTO

The roots of the maras' presence in Central America can be traced back to 1992. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, police there determined that most of the looting and violence had been carried out by local gangs, including Mara Salvatrucha, then a little-known group of Salvadoran immigrants. (Mara is slang for "gang," and trucha -- "trout" in Spanish -- is slang for "a shrewd person.") In response, California implemented strict new anti-gang laws. Prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults instead of minors, and hundreds of young Latin criminals were sent to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. Next came the "three strikes and you're out" legislation, passed in California in 1994, which dramatically increased jail time for offenders convicted of three or more felonies.

In 1996, Congress extended the get-tough approach to immigration law. Noncitizens sentenced to a year or more in prison would now be repatriated to their countries of origin, and even foreign-born American felons could be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they served their prison terms. As a result, between 2000 and 2004, an estimated 20,000 young Central American criminals, whose families had settled in the slums of Los Angeles in the 1980s after fleeing civil wars at home, were deported to countries they barely knew. Many of the deportees were native English speakers

who had arrived in the United States as toddlers but had never bothered to secure legal residency or citizenship.

The deportees arrived in Central America with few prospects other than their gang connections; many were members of MS-13 and another vicious Los Angeles group, the 18th Street Gang (which took the name Mara 18, or M-18, in Central America). Local governments -- which were desperately trying to rebuild after a decade of civil strife -- had no idea who their new citizens really were: the new U.S. immigration rules banned U.S. officials from disclosing the criminal backgrounds of the deportees.

The result, predictably, was a disaster. At first, few Central American officials paid attention to the new arrivals. But the returnees, with their outlandish gang tattoos, their Spanglish, and their antiauthoritarian attitudes, soon made themselves noticed. Shortly after their arrival, crack cocaine was introduced to El Salvador, and related arrests, which had been in the single digits in 1995, climbed to 286 three years later. By 1999, terms such as "crack babies" and "crack dens" had become as common to Salvadoran newspaper readers as they were to readers in Los Angeles. The same trend, meanwhile, occurred in Honduras and Guatemala. "We had these guys arriving in fresh territory and they did what they knew how to do best," said Lou Covarrubiaz, a former San Jose police chief turned police trainer in El Salvador.

In the following years, the deportations continued. As more and more hard-core gang members were expelled from Los Angeles, the Central American maras grew, finding ready recruits among the region's large population of disenfranchised youth (according to the United Nations, 45 percent of Central Americans are 15 years old or younger). In El Salvador (a country of 6.5 million people), the gangs now boast 10,000 core members and 20,000 young associates

Today, the gangs regularly battle each other and the police for control of working-class neighborhoods and even entire cities. Fifteen municipalities in El Salvador are believed to be effectively ruled by the maras. Soyapango, a gritty working-class neighborhood of San

Salvador that was once home to leftist guerrillas, is now the subject of a fierce turf war between M-18 and MS-13.

M-18, with its connections to the U.S. 18th Street Gang (which the FBI calls a "mega-gang"), is far better organized than its local rival, but in both cases, the maras function as surrogate families -- albeit ultraviolent ones -- for their members. Often recruiting children as young as nine, the gangs initiate their members with beatings: three older members will punch and kick a recruit nonstop for 13 seconds. Once they recover, the new junior gang members engage in robbery or petty crime or serve as lookouts for older members. Their more seasoned comrades, meanwhile, engage in drug dealing, burglaries, and contract killings. The maras' members also act as foot soldiers for pre-existing drug-trafficking networks and for international car-theft rings and run sophisticated alien-smuggling operations. Thanks to their work, overall crime has increased dramatically throughout the region. Honduras today has a murder rate of 154 per 100,000 - higher even than Colombia's, where, despite an ongoing civil war, the murder rate is just 70 per 100,000.

THE STRONG HAND

In 2002, the embattled Central American republics began to fight back. The charge was led by Honduras, where Ricardo Maduro, a Stanford graduate, was elected president in November 2001 on a get-tough platform. Maduro, whose son had been killed in an attempted kidnapping in 1997, introduced a series of "zero tolerance" laws empowering the government to imprison people for up to 12 years merely on suspicion of gang membership (often determined simply by the presence of distinctive tattoos, which members wear on their necks, arms, and legs).

Maduro's "mano dura" ("strong hand") approach had an immediate impact, and El Salvador soon adopted a similar program. Many young gang members were quickly pulled off the streets and thrown into prison. Within a year, the Honduran prison system had

swelled to 200 percent beyond capacity, leading to several prison riots in April 2003 and May 2004. Guatemala, Panama, and Nicaragua are now considering similar policies.



Despite initial signs of success, Central America was trying to arrest itself out of its gang trouble without providing the sorts of social and educational programs that can keep kids out of gangs in the first place or persuade gang members to defect. According to Covarrubiaz, get-tough programs "work temporarily, but do not address the real problems."

This soon became obvious throughout the region. The maras retaliated against the crackdown by launching a wave of random violence. Shortly after the introduction of the new anti-gang laws, they began killing and beheading young victims; at least a dozen decapitated bodies were found in Honduras and Guatemala, grisly symbols of the maras' undiminished power. As gang leaders were jailed, new leaders sprang up to take their places. MS-13 and M-18 also began to scout abroad for more hospitable terrain, turning their sights first on Mexico and then back on the United States. The next few years would see the power and the violence of MS-13 move first through Mexico and then northward into the United States.

In PART II, we shall look at MS 13's spread through Mexico and then examine the gang's proliferation through the United States.

PART II

HOMEWARD BOUND

In Tapachula, a Mexican city on the Guatemalan border, the maras began to prey on poor immigrants heading north to enter the United States illegally. Maiming and killing these undocumented workers became a sort of marketing message for the gangs: it sent a warning that only those who paid gang-connected "coyotes" (who often charge \$5,000 to \$8,000 a head) to smuggle them into the United States would make it alive.

Meanwhile, MS-13 set up shop in seven Mexican states, from Chiapas, in the south, all the way up to Tamaulipas, on the U.S. border. MS-13 quickly established working relationships with a number of new Mexican drug cartels, helping them wrest control of various U.S. drug markets from more established smuggling rings. As they expanded northward, meanwhile, the maras left in their wake what had become their traditional trademark: the tortured bodies of young women.

In the years from 2000 to 2018, Central American members of MS-13 increasingly return to the United States itself. This time, however, they are appearing in nontraditional areas, ranging from New York City to suburban Maryland and Massachusetts -- anywhere there are significant Salvadoran populations. Once ensconced, the gangs grow quickly, using their connections to alien-smuggling rings to ensure a steady supply of recruits. Many of their new members are children who were left behind in Central America when their parents moved illegally to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Now they are rejoining their parents -- but often after they have already been recruited by the maras in the rough neighborhoods where they grew up.

MS-13 may have originated in the United States during the early 1980s, but the gang that has recently returned to the country is much more dangerous than its original incarnation. The group has

grown more sophisticated and developed a taste for high-powered weaponry (AK-47s, left over from the recent civil wars, are easily obtained in Central America). At the same time, in the Washington, D.C., area, where MS-13 now has an estimated 5,000 members, it has begun using machetes (the traditional weapon of the Central American peasant) as a favorite killing tool.

Throughout the United States, the returning maras have quickly engaged in a variety of criminal enterprises. The gangs engage in car theft and other types of robbery and traffic in stolen documents, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamines, using children as couriers and to distract the police.

BLAME GAME

As the Central American gangs have grown, so has the argument over who is to blame for them. Some Central American government officials have accused the United States of inflicting the problem on them, condemning the US deportation of gang members. Such mutual recriminations are typical of the debate over gang problems and help explain why the affected countries have yet to develop a united front to deal with them.

It is unrealistic, however, to expect any of the tiny Central American countries, with their fragile governments, to take the lead in organizing a multilateral approach; that role can only be played by the United States. Yet so far Washington has proved reluctant to take that job. Part of the problem is that for the last 15 years U.S. policy toward Central America has essentially been limited to immigration and drugs, and thus the gang problem has fallen through the administrative cracks, with no agency attempting to formulate or oversee an integrated approach.

In the meantime, different regions within the United States are tackling the mara problem differently, with varied results. A hard-line approach being pursued in Virginia has been criticized by gang experts because it focuses on suppression alone and does not include

the two other elements necessary to stamp out gangs: intervention and prevention.

Most experts agree, however, that today's most effective approach comes from Los Angeles -- the city where the maras originated (not to mention many other U.S. gangs, including the infamous Crips and Bloods). Los Angeles has experimented with every type of anti-gang effort. California authorities have sent more than a dozen gang leaders to federal prison for life without parole and to dismantle the so-called Mexican Mafia. Police have also taken advantage of new laws that forbid gang members from congregating in known hangouts.

Los Angeles' current approach draws on more than just force. To be effective, law enforcement has to work with everyone in a community. Accordingly, in 2003, the city's police department created task forces called Community Impact Action Teams that paired local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies with citizen watchdog groups and clergymen, who best knew the neighborhoods. Probation and parole officers were also brought into the effort, as well as representatives from local school districts and city and state prosecutors. The program has had a dramatic impact: crime statistics indicate that in January 2018 were down 14 percent from the decade before 2010.

COME TOGETHER

So far, Central America has yet to adopt such a multifaceted approach, nor have the countries there learned to work together or with the United States -- despite the fact that the gang problem affects all of them. Instead, El Salvador and Honduras continue to pursue their *mano dura* policies. Meanwhile, the region's more deep-seated problems - such as dysfunctional politics, rampant corruption, drug smuggling, intense urban poverty, and overpopulation - remain untouched, and the *mano dura* campaigns are only taking attention and resources away from the fight against these larger ills.

Central American governments have also used their highly publicized crackdowns on youth gangs to avoid action on another urgent priority: strengthening local democratic institutions. Since the end of the Central American civil wars in the early 1990s, judicial, legislative, and social reforms have stalled amid partisan infighting, and local political debates remain split along the same left-right fault lines that caused bloodshed two decades ago.

Corruption also remains a persistent scourge and has helped prevent a more effective antigang strategy from emerging. In Guatemala, the Anti-Narcotics Operations Department (the local equivalent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration) had to be dismantled in November 2002 after investigators found that 320 of its officials were in the pay of local criminals.

The United States needs to help Central America craft a multilevel and multi-country approach to its gang problem. To be successful, the gang task force should include representatives from educational and social services departments throughout Central America. The region should also implement a three-pronged approach to gangs, one that includes prevention, suppression, and intervention. Prison systems must be transformed so that they no longer serve as training grounds for new gang members.

Meanwhile in California, better strategies are being implemented. Prison authorities now avoid placing competing gangs in the same facilities. Central America should do the same, to avoid the sort of clashes that recently occurred in Honduras and El Salvador when M-18 and MS-13 members were thrown into the same prisons.

Washington should also help Central America's various police forces establish an integrated computer system that tracks criminals across borders, incorporating data on people smugglers as well. And U.S. immigration policies must be formally changed to provide information on the criminal records of all deportees. Some observers have even suggested that the United States could help bear the brunt of the gang problem by having Central American gang members serve their prison terms in the United States.

Together, such tactics have a chance of stemming the onslaught of Central America's maras. The reforms should be instituted as quickly as possible, however. With every day that governments wait, the gangs grow in strength and the danger they pose becomes greater. If Central America hopes to escape the chaos of its past and finally make the transition to stable, democratic governance, it needs to act fast to tackle the maras. And the United States must help.