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The Central American case

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Abstract

Gangs are popularly considered to be the major security threat facing the Central American region. In focusing on the origins and dynamics of gangs in the region, this article seeks to broaden conceptualisations of non-state armed groups by expanding the theoretical optic from a narrow focus on war and post-war contexts to a wider spectrum of settings, actors, and motivations. It highlights a category of actors that does not explicitly seek to overthrow the state, but rather progressively undermines or assumes certain state functions. The article also reveals how efforts to contain and regulate gangs flow from their imputed motives, with interventions influenced by whether they are conceived as a criminal or political threat. At the same time, coercive regulation tend to be favoured even when such repressive interventions exacerbate gang violence, for reasons that reveal the deeper underlying political, social and economic challenges facing the Central American region.

Introduction

Gangs are routinely excluded from theoretical and policy debates on "non-state armed groups" or NSAGs. Rather, the acronym tends to be reserved to clusters of individuals who comrpise rebel opposition groups, guerrillas, localised militia, or civil defence and paramilitary forces. In other words, discussions of NSAGs are narrowly confined to groups operating in opposition to the state – often impelled to action by "greed" or "grievance"[1] – and generally with a view to taking it over.[2] Conceptualisations are thus embedded in a state-centric framework wherein the state is not just a key referent, but according to Alston, "the indispensable and pivotal one around which all other entities revolve".[3] Consequently, efforts to engage and contain NSAGs tend to focus on their (il)legitimacy and the extent to which they can be made to comply to the prescribed norms and rules of state action.

At the same time, however, as other authors in this special issue make clear, signficant ambiguity persists concerning the conceptual parameters of the concept. Interpretations are frequently dependent as much on the circumstances and motivations of the observer as the (actual) interests and characteristics of the observed. Tellingly, human rights scholars such as Clapham (forthcoming) advocate for as broad a definition as possible including "every entity apart from states". Likewise, Alston (2005) includes a host of entities ranging from rebel groups and terrorist organisations to religious associations, militant civil society organizations, private corporations and businesses and even some international agencies.[4] Certain researchers have also focused on the environment(s) in which non-state armed groups operate, or else their attributed or imputed motives, in order to articulate coherent forms of classification.

While it is recognised that the "types" of NSAGs are dynamic and fluid, there is nevertheless a tendency in the literature to focus primarily on their manifestations in war or post-war contexts.[5] This is largely due to the centrality attributed by international relations scholars and policy makers to (liberal) state building and the consolidation of the monopoly over violence in fragile post-war settings. NSAGs are thus frequently cast as explicit threats, spoilers and a "cause of instability around the globe".[6] Yet an increasing number of studies reveal that such groups also originate and thrive in non-war situations.[7] Moreover, they can also be understood as alternative and legitimate nodes of authority to the state, particularly when the latter is perceived to be ineffectual and/or repressive.[8] Indeed, gangs provide a

compelling example of both of these observations, as is well evidenced by the contemporary Central American context.

This article provides a descriptive overview of the regional gang panorama in Central America, in order to highlight its underlying logic and dynamics. It seeks to broaden the theoretical debate on NSAGs beyond a narrow treatment of guerrilla and rebel groups fighting to purposefully assume control of the state. In particular, it seeks to account for non-state armed groups that despite perhaps undermining the state by virtue of their violence, are not consciously seeking direct control over all (or even any) of its institutions. It also reveals a complex dialectic shaping gang-state relations – including the instrumental 'criminalisation' of the former by the latter as a means of concealing more fundamental social and economic injustices and disparities. The article is divided into three sections, beginning with a brief overview of violence in contemporary Central America, before then characterising the differentiated origins and dynamics of gangs operating in the region. It concludes with an assessment of state-led policy response to Central American gangs and related implications for future scholarship on non-state armed groups.

Violence in contemporary Central America

Violence is on the upswing in Central America,[9] with the region currently exhibiting amongst the highest rates of reported homicide and criminal victimisation in Latin America and indeed the world.[10] While the annual global homicide rate was estimated by the WHO to be approximately 8 per 100,000, in the Americas the figure was over 20 per 100,000, and in Central America above 30 per 100,000.[11] Homicidal violence is described by policy makers and public health researchers as one of the primary population health issues facing societies across the region,[12] with perpetration and victimisation of violence particularly concentrated amongst young males between 15 and 34 years of age.

There are many determinants shaping the temporal, demographic and spatial dynamics of violence. The World Bank, for example, attributes the rise in Central American violence to "a complex set of factors, including rapid urbanization, persistent poverty and inequality, social exclusion, political violence, organized crime, post-conflict cultures, the emergence of illegal drug use and trafficking and authoritarian family structures".[13] The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) also emphasizes the role of geography and weak institutions; with an estimated 90 per cent of the cocaine supplies destined for the US passing through Central American states from Andean production centres, organised crime and violence are both enmeshed and entrenched.[14]

One of the most visible faces of the new Central American panorama of violence is the gang phenomenon. Gangs are by no means an uncommon social phenomena. They can be observed in most societies around the world, although the vast majority of what are identified as "gangs" are often little more than ephemeral groups of youth who gather on street corners and engage in behaviour that is frequently labelled "anti-social". Gangs in the proper sense of the term are much more definite social organisations that display an institutional continuity that is independent of their membership. They have fixed conventions and rules, which can include initiation rituals, a ranking system, rites of passage, and rules of conduct that make the gang a primary source of identity for members. Gang codes often demand particular behaviour patterns from members, such as adopting characteristic dress, tattoos, graffiti, hand signs, and slang, as well as regular involvement in illicit and violent activities. Such gangs are also often – but not always – associated with a particular territory, and their relationship with local communities can be either oppressive or protective (indeed, this can change from one to the other over time). Central American gangs clearly correspond to this second type of institution.

Although gangs have long featured in Central American societies, certainly well before the wars of the 1980s and early 1990s, they have experienced unprecedented growth and attention in the past two decades. Estimates of the total proportion of contemporary regional violence attributable to gangs vary wildly from 10 to 60 per cent,[15] while they have been accused of a whole slew of crimes and delinquency, ranging from mugging, theft, and intimidation, to rape, assault, and organised/petty drug dealing. More recently, there have even been attempts to link gangs to incipient revolution and global terrorism. A 2005 US Army War College publication contends that Central American gangs constitute a "new urban insurgency" that had as an ultimate objective "to depose or control the governments of targeted countries" through "*coups d'street*" (sic), for example.[16] Similarly, Anne Aguilera, the head of the Central America office of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs branch of the US State Department recently asserted that gangs were "the greatest problem for national security at this time in Central America".[17] Although gangs are unquestionably a significant security concern, such obviosuly sensationalist pronouncements suggest that they remain profoundly misunderstood and betray a profound lack of understanding of their underlying logic.[18]

The Gangs of Central America

Reliable information on the scale, dynamics and demographics of Central American gangs is scarce. Official statistics are especially problematic owing to chronic underreporting, deficient data collection, and issues of political interference.[19] Publicly available figures indicate that there are some 70,000 gang members operating in Central America. By way of contrast, a host of NGOs and academics contend that the number is likely much higher, as many as 200,000, while the UNODC provides a range that goes up to as many as 500,000 gang members.[20] Even a lower estimate suggests that the numbers of gang members rivals the armed forces of most countries in Central America: Nicaragua and Honduras have armies of about 12,000 soldiers each, El Salvador 13,000 soldiers, and Guatemala 27,000.[21] While there is comparatively limited reliable quantitative data available on gangs, there are an increasing number of qualitative studies suggesting that gangs constitute primary actors within the contemporary regional panorama of violence.[22]

Qualitative studies also reveal considerable diversity amongst gangs in and between countries in the Central American region. Specifically, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are currently experiencing more severe levels of gang violence than Nicaragua, for example (although violence in this latter country is much higher than generally reported[23] – while the problem is of a completely different – and lower – order of magnitude in Costa Rica and Panama. Likewise, the distribution of violence within these countries varies greatly, even if the overwhelming majority of gang violence can definitely be said to occur in urban areas, particularly in capital cities (which are often primate settlements within the national context). This is not entirely surprising. Gangs are very much urban manifestations since a critical demographic mass of youth in inevitably necessary for a gang to emerge.

There is in fact a strong correlation between violence-affected urban spaces and gang consolidation, size and distribution. Certain studies have reported that up to 15 per cent of youth within gang-affected communities may ultimately join a gang. Other assessments suggest that on average, the figure is likely closer to 3 to 5 per cent. Gangs tend to register between 15 and 100 members, although the average size is approximately 20-25 members.[24] Moreover, gangs are not evenly distributed within cities. Although the association between poverty and gang violent is neither causal nor systematic, gangs are more likely to emerge in poorer and marginal sections of the urban landscape. There are of course many exceptions to the rule: a study in Guatemala's capital found that neighbourhoods falling within the

metropolis' bottom quartile in terms of impoverishment suffered from comparatively less gang-related crime than neighbourhoods falling within the second-to-last quartile.[25]

The vast majority of real and potential gang members are male youth.[26] There is also evidence of all-female gangs operating in Nicaragua and Guatemala.[27] The age range of gang members can be highly varied, although a 2001 study based on some 1,000 interviews with gang members conducted by researchers at the *Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública* (IUDOP) in El Salvador found that the average gang member in the country was 20 years old, with a mean age of entry into the gang of 15 years of age. Nicaraguan gang members have been found to fall between 7 and 23 years old, while the age of Guatemalan and Honduran gang members ranges from 12 to 30 years of age.

Most studies of Central American gangs have highlighted the difficulties of systematically pinpointing specific factors explaining gang membership. Stereotypical "determinants" such as family fragmentation, domestic abuse, or a particular psychological make-up are not consistently significant, and the only factor that has been reported as systematically affecting gang membership is religion, insofar as evangelical Protestant youths in Nicaragua tend not to join gangs.[28] The IUDOP assessment found that some 40 per cent of respondents claimed to join gangs in order to "hang out", 21 per cent because they had gang member friends, and 21 per cent in order to avoid from family problems. The study also found a partial correlation between youth unemployment and gang membership: 17 per cent of gang members were employed, and 66 per cent actively characterised themselves as "unemployed".[29]

The emergence and spread of gangs are commonly linked to structural factors, including the pervasive *machismo* that characterises Central American societies (many gang codes are clearly expressions of a heightened masculinity). Other influencing factors include high levels of social exclusion and inequality, the long history of war and its aftermath in several countries,[30] the unregulated availability of weapons (it is estimated that there are over two million unregistered small arms in Central America),[31] as well as the widespread absence of the state and concomitant "local governance voids" that gangs seek to fill as "micro-political" social forms.[32] Considering that these factors affect Central American youth universally, but not all youth become gang members, they must be seen more as contextual variables than determinants, however.

A more significant variable shaping the formation and consolidation of gangs is migration. Even if there is frequently a tendency to talk about Central American gangs generically, a distinction must be made between "*maras*" on the one hand, and "*pandillas*" on the other. *Maras* are a phenomenon with transnational roots, while *pandillas* are more localised, home-grown entities that are the direct inheritors of the youth gangs that have long been a historic feature of Central American societies. *Pandillas* were initially present in certain countries emerging from war during the 1990s, but are now only significantly visible in Nicaragua – and to a lesser extent in Costa Rica (where they are often called "*chapulines*") – having been almost completely supplanted by *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The contemporary manifestation of the *pandilla* phenomenon finds its origins during the transition from war to peace in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, demobilised combatant youth in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala returned to their home communities and faced situations of heightened uncertainty, insecurity, and socio-economic flux within a broader context of state crisis and fragility. Drawing on what was effectively a traditional organisational vehicle for youth collective action, some of these young men formed localised vigilante-style self-defence groups in an attempt to provide a measure of order and predictability both for themselves and their local communities, with many community members embracing these early gangs as the sole predictable source of

order and authority. From these relatively fluid and organic beginnings, *pandillas* rapidly began to develop particular behaviour patterns, which included engaging in semi-ritualised forms of gang warfare that were regulated by strict codes and expectations, including in particular protecting local territories and residents.[33]

Clear parallels can be made with past gangs insofar as these often emerged as informal defence organisations in illegal squatter settlements. The *pandillas* of the mid and late 1990s were however much more numerous and also more violent than their predecessors, partly due to the legacy of war and insurrection which provided youth with unprecedented martial skills.[34] They also became much more institutionalised than past gangs – which tended to be generationally ephemeral – giving themselves names – examples from Nicaragua include *los Dragones*, *los Rampleros*, or *los Comemuertos* ("Eaters of the Dead") – and developing hierarchies and rules that persisted over time, irrespective of gang member turnover.[35] Thus, to interpret *pandillas* solely as a form of post-conflict violence would be rather limiting, insofar as contemporary gang members were often born after the war in Nicaragua ended. Ultimately, *pandillas* can best be interpreted as localised institutional responses to the circumstances of insecurity, exclusion, and uncertainty that affected many Central American countries during the 1990s and 2000s, even if there were significant variations both between and within different societies.

The *maras*, on the other hand, are groups that can be directly linked to specific migratory patterns. Formally, there are just two *maras*, the *Dieciocho* (18) and the *Salvatrucha* (MS). They are present only in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras within the Central American region, although they have reportedly begun to extend into Southern Mexico as well. The origins of the *maras* reside in the 18th Street gang in Los Angeles, a gang founded by Mexican immigrants in the Rampart section of the city in the 1960s, although it rapidly began to accept Hispanics indiscriminately. The 18th Street gang grew significantly during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the influx of mainly Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, who sought to incorporate into the gang in order to feel included as outsiders in the US. In the latter half of the 1980s, a rival – possibly splinter – group founded by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees emerged, known as the "*Mara Salvatrucha*" (a combination of "Salvadoreño" and "trucha", meaning "quick-thinking" or "shrewd" in Salvadoran slang).[36] The *Dieciocho* and the *Salvatrucha* rapidly became bitter rivals, and frequently fought each other on the streets of Los Angeles.

The two groups were also heavily involved in the violence and looting that accompanied the 1992 Rodney King riots. As a result, the State of California subsequently implemented strict anti-gang laws and prosecutors charged young gang members as adults instead of minors, sending hundreds to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. By 1996, the US Congress established the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act which ensured that non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison were to be repatriated to their countries of origin. Even foreign-born US naturalised felons could be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they served out their prison terms. As a result, between 1998 and 2005 the US deported almost 46,000 convicts to Central America, in addition to 160,000 illegal immigrants caught without their requisite permits.[37]

Central America's northern triangle – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – received over 90 per cent of the deportations from the US.[38] Many of these deportees were members of the 18th Street and *Salvatrucha* gangs who had arrived in the US as toddlers but had never secured legal residency or citizenship. Many had joined gangs as a way to feel socially included in a receiving country that routinely impeded their integration. Owing to their sense of exclusion from the US and following their arrival in countries of "origin" that they seldom knew, it is unsurprising that they reproduced the structures and behaviour patterns that had provided them with support and security during their time in the US.

Deportees rapidly began to found local "*clikas*", or chapters, of their gang in their communities of origin, which in turn rapidly began to attract local youth and either supplanted or absorbed local *pandillas*.[39]

Each *clika* is explicitly affiliated with either the *Mara Dieciocho* (as the 18th Street gang is known in Central America) or the *Mara Salvatrucha*. But while *clikas* from different neighbourhoods affiliated with the same *mara* will often join together to fight other groupings claiming allegiance to the opposing *mara*, neither gang is a real federal structure, and much less a transnational one. Neither the *Dieciocho* nor the *Salvatrucha* gangs answer to a single chain of command, and their "umbrella" nature is more symbolic of a particular historical origin than demonstrative of any real organisational unity, be it of leadership or action.

In many ways, the federated nature of the *maras* is more of an imagined social morphology than an actually occurring phenomenon, based on the fact that the steady flows of deportees from the US share a common language and reference points. To this extent, although the *maras* can be conceived as (very loose) networks of localised gangs, these do not necessarily communicate or coordinate either within or between countries. Certainly, there is little evidence of any cooperation between *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, and even less with the original putative "mother gangs" in Los Angeles. Rather, the ties that exist are more akin to a common sense of social identity, founded organically on individuals' experiences of gangsterism in the US, deportation, and stigmatisation in Central America.

The migratory origin of the *maras* is a crucial factor explaining why Nicaragua does not have *maras*. Not only does Nicaragua register a very low deportation rate from the US – less than 3 per cent of all Central American deportees are Nicaraguan – but Nicaraguans who have emigrated to the US have mainly settled in Miami. According to US census data, only 12 per cent have settled in Los Angeles, where they account for just 4 per cent of Central Americans in the city, while in Miami they represent 47 per cent – where contrarily to the more "open" gangs of LA, the local gang scene is dominated by highly exclusive African-American and Cuban-American gangs which do not let Nicaraguans join them.[40] This is also a potentially important factor explaining why Nicaraguan *pandillas* are not as violent as *maras*, and by extension why El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are more violent than Nicaragua. The transnational transposition of US gang culture in the Northern three Central American countries has arguably had much more brutal results due to the fact that it is clearly less embedded within a local institutional context than traditional Central American *pandilla* culture, and therefore less rule-bound and constrained. At the same time, it is important to note that the *mara* phenomenon is not simply a foreign problem imported by deportees, but rather has evolved and grown in response to domestic factors and conditions.

In contrast to sensationalist accounts linking Central American gangs to migrant trafficking, kidnapping, and international organised crime, it seems that both *pandillas* and *maras* are mainly involved in small-scale, localised crime and delinquency such as petty theft and muggings.[41] These activities are frequently carried out on an individual basis, although the *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are also increasingly collectively involved in the extortion of protection money from local businesses and the racketeering of buses and taxis as they pass through the territories they control. Both *pandillas* and *maras* however make use of military-style weaponry such as AK-47s and explosives such as fragmentation grenades. The 2001 IUDOP survey of Salvadoran gang members mentioned above for example found that 25 per cent of those questioned admitted to having committed a murder in the past year, while 25 per cent refused to answer the question.[42] Even so, most *pandilla* and *mara* violence is circumscribed, occurring as it does in the poorer, local communities from which the gangs emerge rather than wealthier neighbourhoods. The majority of gang violence in fact tends to be directed against rival gangs, as was for example

starkly illustrated by the occurrence of tit-for-tat prison warfare between rival incarcerated gang members in Guatemala.[43]

Nevertheless, both *pandillas* and *maras* have become increasingly involved in narcotics trafficking and dealing over the past decade.[44] It is worth recalling that the consumption of drugs has long been associated with the gang lifestyle, as well as the fact that Central America has become a transit point for most cocaine traffic between the Andean countries and North America.[45] Drug trafficking in Central America tends to be decentralised, however, with shipments passing from small local cartels to other local cartels, members of whom extract a profit before narcotics are then passed on to the more organised Mexican cartels. The role that gangs – both *maras* and *pandillas* – serve is principally as the local security apparatus of the smaller cartels, or as modest street vendors connected to larger players on an informal basis. Gangs on their own are neither involved in the large-scale, transnational movement of drugs nor in wholesaling, although certain studies suggest that the leaders of these small, local cartels are often ex-gang members who have "graduated". At the same time, there is compelling evidence that involvement in drug trafficking and dealing is leading to the elaboration of more violent behavioural patterns among both categories of gangs.[46]

This can however also be linked to the fact that increasingly large swathes of the urban poor in Central America are finding themselves able to access fewer and fewer licit economic opportunities. Having to survive as best they can outside the formal ambit of the state, they generally do so based on "ruthless Darwinian competition", with competition "for the same informal scraps, ensur[ing] self-consuming communal violence as yet the highest form of urban involution".[47] Such processes are reinforced by the new patterns of segregation and exclusion that have emergence in Central American cities as a result of their market-led urban re-modelling, for example through the proliferation of gated communities and closed condominiums, as well as the transformation of transport networks.[48] Such patterns of segregation and exclusion are also related to the emergence of new forms of (repressive) state governance. On the urban plane this has involved patterns of regular police patrolling in wealthier areas of the city and on the new roads on the one hand, and the unpredictable, arbitrary, and violent patrolling of slums and poor neighbourhoods on the other.[49] This has served to precipitate localised conditions of terror and to symbolically demonstrate the power of the elite-captured state.[50] The most visible facet of this new approach is the implementation of a "war on gangs" by Central American states over the past five years.[51]

Mano Dura: *The war on gangs*

The opening salvo of the veritable "war on gangs" currently raging in Central America was El Salvador's adoption of a "*Mano Dura*" ("Iron Fist") policy in July 2003. The directive advocated the immediate imprisonment of gang member for having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public, a crime punishable by two to five years in jail and applicable to gang members from the age of 12 and older. Between July 2003 and August 2004, approximately 20,000 pandilleros were arrested, although 95 per cent of them were eventually released without charge when the *Mano Dura* law was declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court for violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A new "*Mano Super Dura*" package of anti-gang reforms was rapidly approved, which respected the provisions of the UNCRC but stiffened the penalties for gang membership to up to 5 years in prison for ordinary gang members, and 9 years for gang leaders. Although under the new law the police is required to demonstrate proof of active delinquent behaviour in order to arrest an individual, El Salvador's prison population has

doubled over the past five years, from 6,000 to 12,000, 40 per cent of which are gang members.[52]

Honduras implemented a comparable policy called "*Cero Tolerancia*" ("Zero Tolerance") almost simultaneously in August 2003, which was also partly inspired by Rudy Giuliani's eponymous policy in New York. Among the measures that this package promoted was the reform of the penal code and the adoption of legislation that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership, a penalty which was later stiffened to 30 years, as well as provisions for better collaboration between the police and the Honduran army in urban patrolling. Guatemala likewise adopted its "*Plan Escoba*" ("Operation Broomsweep") in January 2004 which, although not as draconian as the Salvadoran *Mano Dura* and the Honduran *Cero Tolerancia,* still contained new provisions allowing minors to be treated as adults, and the deployment of four thousand reserve army troops in troubled neighbourhoods in Guatemala City. Nicaragua similarly regularly implemented a range of anti-gang initiatives from 1999 onwards, although these were of a significantly "softer" nature.[53] Although these crackdowns have been very popular with the general public in all the Central American countries, they have also been vigorously opposed by human rights groups who are concerned with the potential abuse of gang suspects. More ominously, organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have presented evidence – corroborated by the US State Department in 2005 – of the existence of paramilitary death squads in Honduras and El Salvador that are deliberately targeting gang members, and often youth more generally, in collusion with state authorities.[54]

Central American states have also initiated unprecedented regional cooperation in order to deal with gangs. During a September 2003 summit of heads of state, gangs were declared to be "a destabilising menace, more immediate than any conventional war or guerrilla". By January 2004, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua agreed to lift legal barriers to the cross-country prosecution of gang members, whatever their nationality. In March 2005, Presidents Saca of El Salvador and Berger of Guatemala agreed to establish a joint security force to patrol gang activity along their common border.

Central American states have also sought to involve the US. Although initially resistant to participate in anti-gang initiatives, the US position changed in June 2004 after the Honduran Minister of Security, claimed that a suspected Saudi member of Al Qaeda, Yafar Al-Taya, had arrived in Salvador in order to meet with gang leaders. Although an unfounded and likely spurious assertion, by December 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs. In February 2005 it announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts. Following a new (and no less ludicrous) claim by the Honduran Minister of Security to have thwarted a Colombian FARC-*mara* plot to kill President Maduro in April 2005, Central American military leaders formally called on the US Southern Command for assistance in the creation of a multinational force to tackle organized crime and youth gangs, although this has yet to be implemented. Likewise, the Merida Initiative, in coordination with the US, also emphasises security provision enhancement in Central America and Mexico,[55] with the objective to counter the trade in drugs, reduce weapons trafficking and confront gangs and organised crime.[56]

Such heavy-handed policies have clearly been widely supported,[57] partly due to the visibility they afford political leaders and their constituencies, but also because in many ways they mimic the principle kind of response that states plagued by NSAGs have adopted around the world. As such they arguably serve to classificatory function, by drawing implicit parallels between gangs and other violent organisations that they are not necessarily equivalent to, even if they can be said to belong to the same spectrum. Having said, that, although there are some reports that different anti-gang initiatives significantly reduced

crime, there is evidence that these interventions have been generating significant changes in gang dynamics, with increasing reports that the widespread heavy-handed repression of gangs is leading to their becoming more organized and more violent.[58]

This is something that was well illustrated by the tit-for-tat violence that certain *maras* engaged in with the Honduran authorities following the implementation of *Mano Dura*. Specifically, on 30 August 2003, one month after the promulgation of the new anti-gang legislation, gang members attacked a bus in the Northern city of San Pedro Sula in broad daylight, killing 14, and leaving 18 wounded, as well as a note to President Maduro ordering him to withdraw the law. The following month, in the town of Puerto Cortes, a young woman's head was found in a plastic bad with a note addressed to President Maduro saying that this was a response to the extrajudicial assassination of a gang member by the police. Over the course of the following year, more than 10 decapitated corpses were left in various cities with messages from gang members to the Honduras president, each time in response to a putative extrajudicial killing, and on 23 December 2004, in Chamalecon, gang members again attacked a bus and killed 28, once again leaving a message claiming revenge for the May 2004 death of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire. Similarly gruesome events have been reported in El Salvador and Guatemala.

The "war on gangs" has reportedly also led to *maras* changing their behaviour patterns in less violent but nonetheless insidious ways. For one, gangs are attempting to become less conspicuous. For example, gang members in El Salvador have begun to use less obvious signs and symbols, including in particular getting rid of tattoos and no longer keeping their hair in the short-trimmed *rapado* style, in order to avoid being arrested. They have also become more mobile, with the emigration of *maras* into Southern Mexico widely attributed to the repression.[59] While this might be interpreted as gangs losing ground vis-à-vis Central American states, their underlying evolutionary trajectory suggests otherwise. The transformation of Nicaraguan *pandillas* between the 1990s and the 2000s is a case in point. These moved from being institutions that attempted to create localised forms of social order and belonging to organisations promoting parochial forms of drug dealing instead. Rather than protecting local neighbourhood inhabitants, gangs acted to ensure the proper functioning of local drug economies solely in the interests of their members and associated local dealers – more often than not ex-gang members – through the imposition of localised regimes of terror based on fear, threats, and widespread acts of arbitrary violence.[60] By 2007, however, *pandillas* in Nicaragua seemed to be disappearing, as most gang members were "retiring" and not being replaced by a new generation, with a small minority joining more professional and de-territorialised criminal organisations that emerged around drug trafficking.[61] This professionalisation is ominous, insofar as the corrosive role that organised crime can play in developing contexts is well-known,[62] and clearly has much more wide-ranging consequences than youth gangsterism.

While a tendency toward heavy-handed responses persists in Central American countries, there recently appears to be an increasing evolution from "first" to "second generation" policies.[63] First generation initiatives such as *Mano Dura* can be characterised as *enforcement-first*, combining aggressive crack-down operations with increased penalties to deter gang membership. Interventions are executed by the state security apparatus together with reforms on the judicial and penal systems, as well as, in many cases, extra-judicially.[64] Rehabilitation is seldom integrated into such strategies, which can therefore contribute to the stigmatization of gang members and prevent their reform and ultimately reintegration into society. In the wake of the significant criticism that such activities have generated, *Mano Dura* programmes are being increasingly complemented – although not necessarily replaced – by *Mano Amiga* (friendly hand) and *Mano Extendida* (extended hand) interventions focused on incentivizing demobilization from gangs. These second generation activities are typically

more *compliance and voluntary-oriented* and combine carrots with sticks to address the risks and symptoms of gang violence.[65]

The question remains, however, to what extent such second generation initiatives truly represent a transformation in Central American policy culture. In a detailed study mapping out the incentives governing the institutional and organisational framework regarding youth violence reduction in Nicaragua, José Luis Rocha traces how the government's promotion of second generation policies is in many ways highly cosmetic, and principally aimed at pleasing potential donors and raising international funds. On the ground, government action remains much more "first generation" in nature.[66] Similar dynamics are evident in other Central American countries, furthermore underscored by the fact that there is little empirical evidence that second generation approaches are actually achieving major changes on the ground.[67] What this ultimately suggests is that there may well be ulterior motives on the part of Central American states to continue to stigmatise and treat gangs in a way that associates them with insurgents and other "classic" NSAGs. Ultimately social policy choices inevitably reflect to the political and economic dynamics underlying any given society, and seen from this perspective, perhaps the biggest obstacles to the coherent application of "second generation" gang violence-reduction politics in Central America is the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of societies in question, and the hugely unequal political economies that they display,[68] but which are obscured by discourses laying the blame on gangs that must be cracked down upon at all costs.

Conclusion

Gangs constitute a very real but much misunderstood feature of the Central American panorama of violence. There is no doubt that a significant proportion of regional violence is attributable to the phenomenon. Even so, gangs constitute in the main a local level security challenge rather than the transnational threat that the media and some policy outlets make them out to be. Although they are clearly linked to an array of deep-rooted factors such as the long legacy of war, *machismo*, and the availability of small arms in the region, they are also an immediate symptom of growing inequality and exclusion, and as such a reflection of deeply iniquitous social processes. Most research on gang formation emphasises the role of social and economic variables such as marginalisation, rapid and unregulated social change, and lack of meaningful opportunities. Moreover, both a careful appraisal of the origins of gangs, as well as their evolution over time suggests that although they may well often emerge in post-conflict contexts, these are not necessarily determining of their emergence.

The contemporary Central American landscape of violence clearly suggests that gangs can be conceived as important non-state armed groups despite the fact that they lack ambition to overthrow the state. Gang violence tends to be only indirectly eroding or undermining the state, often emerging instead as a result of state weakness, as gangs seeks to potentially fill in for the absence of certain state functions. But the dialectical relationship between gangs and state institutions must be carefully interrogated. The proposition that gangs can be seen as NSAGs is clearly supported by the fact that the presence of gangs more often than not leads to a violent state reaction, which effectively treats them as an enemy "other" in a manner very similar to its treatment of more conventional rebels or insurgent organisations. This more often than not leads to an upsurge of collective and inter-personal violence, however, as the case of *mara* violence following the implementation of *Mano Dura* in Honduras dramatically illustrates, and can lead to a transformation in the nature of gang violence.

The repressive approach adopted by Central American governments has in many cases exacerbated the problem, precipitating a tit-for-tat spiral of violence and radicalising the gangs. Repression simply does not remedy the underlying factors that contributed to gang

formation and consolidation in the first place, and is leading to the rise of more organised crime. Although second generation initiatives have been promoted, these have yielded few concrete results, largely because the form of social policy within any given social context will ultimately inevitably reflect to a greater or lesser degree the political dispensation and economic dynamics of a given society. As such, arguably one of the biggest obstacles to developing a coherent approach to gang violence in Central America is the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of societies in question, and their hugely unequal political economies.[69]

This of course takes us beyond the relatively straight-forward dilemmas associated with policy paralysis, and begs the question of why some Central American governments are undertaking visible and widely-publicised crackdowns on gangs. In many ways, they divert attention from the fact that states are otherwise doing little to remedy to the admittedly much more tricky issues of to exclusion, inequality, and the lack of meaningful employment creation. Put another way, gangs have become convenient scapegoats. They allow certain actors to avoid addressing basic social and economic challenges and allow those in power attempt to maintain an unequal *status quo*. This is a potentially important insight in relation to NSAGs, insofar as they are rarely considered from this perspective, in terms of the functions that their being classified as such play within the wider political economy of both intra- and inter-state relations. It also suggests that the tensions and conflicts that lead to the emergence of NSAGs are very much systemic, and cannot be understood solely in terms of narrowly conceived impulses linked to simplistic rational utility frameworks.[70]

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NOTES

[1] P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War', *Oxford Economic Papers, Oxford University Press*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (October 2004), pp.563-595.

[2] See, for example, S. Kalyvas, *The Sociology of Civil Wars: Warfare and Armed Groups* (New Haven CT: Yale mimeo, 2003). See also R. Shultz, D. Farah, and L. Itamara (2004), "Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority", INSS Occasional Paper 57, USAF Institute for National Security Studies. According to the Transnational and Non-State Armed Groups project of Harvard University and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, for example, the "expression 'non-state armed groups' …is used generically to describe armed groups — both transnational and national — that have the capacity to challenge the state's monopoly of legitimate force". See http://www.armed-groups.org/home.aspx.

[3] P. Alston, *Non-State Actors and Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.3.

[4] Ibid.

[5] There are some rare exceptions, however, including recent studies on heavily armed gangs in the Delta region of Nigeria who appear to be threatening the country's oil production and supply routes. See, for example, K. Oruwari, (2006) "Youth in Urban Violence in Nigeria: A Case Study of Urban Gangs from Port Harcourt", Nigeria Delta Economies of Violence project working paper no. 14, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, http://geography.berkeley.edu/ProjectsResources/ND%20Website/NigerDelta/WP/14-Oruwari.pdf.

[6] Richard Shultz, Douglas Farah and Itamara Lochard 'Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority', 2004INSS Occasional Paper 57, USAF Institute for National Security Studies, Colorado, 2004, pp.x.

[7] Carolyn Moser and Dennis Rodgers 'Change, Violence and Insecurity in Non-Conflict Situations', ODI Working Paper No. 245, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2005.

[8] David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005). As Carolyn Holmqvist rightly cautions, "an emphasis on the 'positive' functions served by membership of an armed group should not be seen as giving license to such group's existence: but a more subtle understanding of reasons for their longevity is fundamental for devising effective strategies to counter their existence" Carolyn Holmqvist (2005: 49) 'Engaging Armed Non-State Actors in Post-Conflict Settings', in Andrew Bryden and Hans Hanggi (eds), *Security Governance in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2005), pp.45-68.

[9] For the purposes of this research, Central America consists of the geographical isthmus that includes Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

[10] Geneva Declaration, *The Global Burden of Armed Violence* (Geneva: Geneva Declaration and Small Arms Survey).

[11] See WHO, *Violence*, 2008, available online at: http://www.who.int/topics/violence/en/ (accessed 10 June 2008).

[12] See R. Briceno-Leon, "Urban Violence and Public Health in Latin America: A Sociological Explanatory Framework", *Cadernos Saude Pública*, Vol. 21, No. 6 (2005), pp.1629; Jennifer Hazen and Chris Stevenson, *Public Health Interventions*, Small Arms Survey 2008 (Geneva: Small Arms Survey).

[13] World Bank, *Urban Crime and Violence in LAC: Status Report on Activities, Sustainable Development Department, Latin American and Caribbean Region*, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2008), pp.3.

[14] See UNODC, *Annual Report 2008: Covering Activities in 2007* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008), pp.38, available online at: http://www.unodc.org/documents/about-unodc/AR08_WEB.pdf.

[15] UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire* (Vienna: United Nations Publications, 2007) pp.64.

[16] See M.G. Manwaring, *Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2005); M.G. Manwaring, 'Gangs and Coups D'Streets in the New World Disorder: Protean Insurgents in Post-modern War', *Global Crime*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4 (2006), pp.505-543. A follow-up report by the same author published in 2008 further contended that gang violence constituted "another kind of war (conflict) within the context of a 'clash of civilizations' …being waged …around the world" (M.G. Manwaring, 2008: 1) A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty: Gangs and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica, and Brazil, Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

[17] See T.C. Bruneau, 'The Maras and National Security in Central America', *Strategic Insights*, Vol. IV, No. 5 (2005), available online at: http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2005/May/bruneauMay05.asp (taken from Salvadoran newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* on 8 April 2005). See also Shultz et al (2005) at http://www.usafa.af.mil/df/inss/OCP/ocp57.pdf.

[18] See S. Huhn, A. Oettler and P. Peetz, *Exploding Crime? Topic Management in Central American Newspapers*, GIGA Working Paper No. 33, German Institute of Global and Area Studies: Hamburg, 2006.

[19] S. Huhn, A. Oettler and P. Peetz, 'Construyendo inseguridades: aproximaciones a la violencia en centroamérica desde el análisis del discurso', GIGA Working Paper No. 34, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, 2006, pp.8-13.

[20] UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America* (note 2), pp.60.

[21] R.L. Millett and O.J. Perez, 'New Threats and Old Dilemmas: Central America's Armed Forces in the 21st Century', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2005), pp. 59.

[22] For an overview, see S. Huhn, A. Oettler and P. Peetz, 'Construyendo inseguridades: aproximaciones a la violencia en centroamérica desde el análisis del discurso', GIGA Working Paper No. 34, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, 2006, pp.8-13; as well as M. Liebel (2004) 'Pandillas juveniles en Centroamérica o la difícil búsqueda de justicia en una sociedad violenta', *Desacatos*, Vol. 14 (2004), pp.85–104. The most comprehensive general study is undoubtedly that reported on in the three volumes produced by a conglomerate of Central American research institutes (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, and IUDOP, *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica* Vol. 1, (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2001); ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, and IUDOP, *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica: Pandillas y Capital Social* Vol. 2, (San Salvador: UCA Publicaciones, 2004); ERIC, IDIES, IUDOP, NITLAPAN, DIRINPRO, *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica: Políticas juveniles y rehabilitación* Vol. 3, (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2004). Three further overview studies have also been published recently: USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gangs Assessment* (Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2006); Demoscopía, *Maras y pandillas, comunidad y policía en Centroamérica* (San José: Demoscopía, 2007); and the work of the "Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y Estados Unidos" project coordinated by the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México's (ITAM) Centro de Estudios y Programas Interamericanos (CEPI), whose output is available online at: http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/index.html. The country that has been studied in greatest depth is Nicaragua: J.-L. Rocha, 'Pandilleros: la mano que empuña el mortero', *Envío*, Vol. 216 (2000), pp.17-25, J.-L Rocha, 'Pandillas: una cárcel cultural', *Envío*, Vol. 219 (2000), pp.13-22; J.-L. Rocha, 'Tatuajes de pandilleros: estigma, identidad y arte', *Envío*, Vol. 258 (2003), pp.42-50; J.-L. Rocha, 'El traido: clave de la continuidad de las pandillas', *Envío,*Vol. 280 (2005), pp.35-41; J.-L. Rocha, 'Pandilleros del siglo XXI: con hambre de alucinaciones y de transnacionalismo', *Envío*, Vol. 294 (2006), pp.25–34; J.-L. Rocha, 'Mareros y pandilleros: ¿Nuevos insurgentes, criminales?', *Envío*, Vol. 293 (2006), pp.39-51; J.-L. Rocha, *Lanzando piedras, fumando 'piedras'. Evolución de las pandillas en Nicaragua 1997-2006*, Cuaderno de Investigación No. 23, (Managua: UCA Publicaciones, 2007); J.-L. Rocha, 'Del telescopio al microscopio: Hablan tres pandilleros', *Envío* Vol. 303 (2007), pp.23–30; J.-L. Rocha, 'Mapping the labyrinth from within: The political economy of Nicaraguan youth policy concerning violence', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 26, No 4 (2007), pp.533-549; J.-L. Rocha and D. Rodgers, *Bróderes Descobijados y Vagos Alucinados: Una Década con las Pandillas Nicaragüenses, 1997-2007* (Managua: Envío, 2008); D. Rodgers, 'Un antropólogo-pandillero en un barrio de Managua', *Envío*, Vol. 184 (1997), pp.10-16; D. Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death: Violence, Pandillas, and Social Disintegration in Contemporary Urban Nicaragua', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of

Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, UK, 2000; D. Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2006), pp.267-92; D. Rodgers, 'The state as a gang: Conceptualising the governmentality of violence in contemporary Nicaragua', *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2006), pp.315-30; D. Rodgers, 'Managua', in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (eds), *Fractured Cities: Social Exclusion, Urban Violence and Contested Spaces in Latin America* (London: Zed, 2007; D. Rodgers, 'When vigilantes turn bad: Gangs, violence, and social change in urban Nicaragua', in D. Pratten and A. Sen (eds), *Global Vigilantes* (London: Hurst, 2007); and D. Rodgers, 'Joining the gang and becoming a broder: The violence of ethnography in contemporary Nicaragua', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 26, no. 4 (2207), pp.444-461.

[23] D. Rodgers, 'The state as a gang' (note 2).

[24] ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, and IUDOP, *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica*, (note 2); and D. Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2006), pp. 267-92.

[25] PNUD (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo - United Nations Development Programme), *Informe Estadístico de la Violencia en Guatemala* (Guatemala: PNUD, 2007).

[26] The fact that most gang members are young men, and that Central America suffers the highest male youth homicide rates in the world - see P.S. Pinheiro, *World Report on Violence against Children* (Geneva: United Nations, 2006), pp.357 - indirectly supports the notion that gangs are an important factor within the regional panorama of violence, even though they are by no means the only vector of violence in Central America.

[27] See D. Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002' (note 2); and A. Winton, 'Using 'Participatory' Methods with Young People in Contexts of Violence: Reflections from Guatemala', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2007), pp.497-515.

[28] D: Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002', (note 3). It can be speculated that this is perhaps because the totalising nature of evangelical Protestantism is such that churches constitute a complete organisational framework for their members that is institutionally equivalent to that provided by the gang.

[29] M. Santacruz Giralt and A. Concha-Eastman, *Barrio Adentro: La Solidaridad Violenta de las Pandillas*, (San Salvador: Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 2001).

[30] Despite the introduction of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes in the wake of various peace agreements, large numbers of ex-soldiers and militia were only partially integrated back into civilian life. See, for example, Robert Muggah, *Securing Protections: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming), for a review of DDR programmes. In many ways, however, demobilization-related gang violence can be seen less as a function of war than of the return to peace.

[31] See W. Godnick, R. Muggah and C. Waszink, 'Stray Bullets: The Impact of Small Arms Misuse in Central America', Small Arms Survey Occasional Paper No. 5, Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2003 for a description of arms collection activities throughout the region.

[32] D. Rodgers "Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002', (note 4). K. Koonings and D. Kruijt, *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 1999); K. Koonings and D. Kruijt, *Armed Actors: Organised Violence and State Failure in Latin America* (London: Zed, 2004).

[33] See D. Rodgers "Living in the Shadow of Death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002', (note 5).

[34] Ibid, (note 6).

[35] "Maturing out" is a universal feature of youth gangs; as *pandilleros* in Nicaragua put it, "there are no old gang members". D. Rodgers, 'Living in the Shadow of Death: Violence, Pandillas, and Social Disintegration in Contemporary Urban Nicaragua' (note 2). There is evidence to suggest that this is not quite as clear-cut in the case of *maras*, which are widely reported to have gang members ranging up to 30 years old, and from which it is said to be very difficult to "retire" (see Demoscopía, *Maras y pandillas, comunidad y policía en Centroamérica* (note 2); International Human Rights Clinic, *No Place to Hide: Gang, State, and Clandestine Violence in El Salvador* (Massachusetts: Human Rights Program, Harvard Law School, 2007).

[36] The origins of the word "*mara*" are unclear. It has been widely suggested that it is derived from the word "*marabunta*", a term used to describe a particularly vicious species of ants in certain South American countries. The fact that this does not include El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras makes it an unlikely proposition, although considering the US origins of the *maras*, it might be speculated that the term derives from the classic US horror film "The Naked Jungle" (1954), in which an army of *marabunta* ants devastate a plantation in Brazil despite the best efforts of Charlton Heston, which was remade for television in the early 1980s. This is purely speculative, although it is interesting to note that this putative link was also mentioned in the first study of gangs ever carried out in Central America (D. Levenson et al., 'Por sí mismos: Un estudio preliminar des las "maras"

en la ciudad de Guatemala', Cuaderno de Investigación no. 4, Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala, Guatemala, 1988).

[37] USAID, *Central America and Mexico Gangs Assessment*, (Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2006), pp.18-19.

[38] Ibid, pp.18-19.

[39] This seems to have occurred almost universally in El Salvador and Honduras, but there still exist more localised *maras* in Guatemala, whose origins go back to the mid-1980s, and who are arguably closer in nature to *pandillas* (see D. Levenson et al., 'Por sí mismos'(note 2); E.C. Ranum, 'Diagnóstico Nacional Guatemala', Proyecto "Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y Estados Unidos", Centro de Estudios y Programas Interamericanos (CEPI) del Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), 2006, available online at: http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/docs/Diagnostico_Guatemala.pdf). The general trend, however, is for these to be increasingly absorbed within *Dieciocho* and *Salvatrucha mara* structures (see D. DeCesare, 'The Story of Edgar Bolaños', in L. Kontos, D. C. Brotherton, and L. Barrios (eds), *Gangs and Society: Alternative Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). According to Demoscopía, *Maras y pandillas, comunidad y policía en Centroamérica* (note 3), pp.49, deportee gang members are becoming a minority as the rate of deportation from the US declines, and are taking on more "veteran" roles, influencing *mara* behaviour through their prestige rather than actually taking part in gang activities.

[40] J.-L. Rocha, 'Pandilleros del siglo XXI' (note 2).

[41] According to C.M. Ribando, 'Report for Congress: Gangs in Central America', *Congressional Research Service*, report RL34112, 2 August (2007), pp.1-2: "Gangs are generally considered to be distinct from organized criminal organisations because they typically lack the hierarchical leadership structure, capital, and manpower required to run a sophisticated criminal enterprise. Gangs are generally more horizontally organized, with lots of small subgroups and no central leadership setting strategy and enforcing discipline. Although some gangs are involved in the street-level distribution of drugs, few gangs or gang members are involved in higher-level criminal drug distribution enterprises run by drug cartels, syndicates, or other sophisticated criminal organisations". As Geoff Thale, the Research Director of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), has testified before the US Congress, gangs are just one example of a whole spectrum of violence in Central America, which also includes intra-familial violence, street crime, politically-motivated crimes, drug-related violence, traditional organized crime, state violence, and human rights violations (cited in: C.M. Ribando, 'Report for Congress' (note 2), pp.3.

[42] M. Santacruz Giralt and A. Concha-Eastman, *Barrio Adentro*, (note 2).

[43] On 15 August 2005, newly imprisoned members of the *Dieciocho mara* attacked members of the *Mara Salvatrucha* in El Hoyon prison near Guatemala City, killing 30 and leaving more than twice that number seriously wounded. A retaliatory attack by members of the *Salvatrucha* in the San José Pinula juvenile detention centre on 19 September 2005 killed at least 12 and wounded another ten.

[44] International Human Rights Clinic, *No Place to Hide* (note 2); D. Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002' (note 7); J.-L. Rocha, *Lanzando piedras, fumando 'piedras',* (note 2)

[45] See UNODC (2007) *Crime and Development in Central America* (note 2).

[46] See J. Aguilar, 'Los efectos contraproducentes de los Planes Mano Dura', *Quorum*, Vol. 16 (Winter 2006), pp.81-94, International Human Rights Clinic, *No Place to Hide* (note 3); D. Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua, 1996-2002' (note 7); D. Rodgers, 'When vigilantes turn bad' (note 2).

[47] M. Davis, 'Planet of slums: Urban involution and the informal proletariat', *New Left Review*, Vol. 26 (2004), pp.28. See also D. Rodgers, (2006b) 'The state as a gang' (note 2), pp.315-30; and D. Rodgers, 'Slum wars of the 21st century: Gangs, *Mano Dura*, and the new geography of conflict in Central America', *Development and Change* (forthcoming).

[48] Managua's notoriously abysmal road infrastructure, for example, was transformed in the space of just three years through a massive concentrated investment in the constitution of a highly selective network of good quality, high-speed roads that connect the spaces of the rich – the international airport, the presidential palace, the gated communities, the malls – and have no traffic lights but only roundabouts, meaning that those in cars avoid having to stop – and risk being carjacked – but those on foot risk their lives whenever they try to cross a road (see D. Rodgers, 'Disembedding the City: Crime, Insecurity, and Spatial Organisation in Managua, Nicaragua', *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004), pp. 113-24; D. Rodgers, 'A Symptom called Managua', *New Left Review*, Vol. 49 (January-February 2008), pp.103-120.

[49] See E. Pieterse, *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development* (London: Zed Books, 2008), and D. Rodgers, 'Slum wars of the 21st century (note 3).

[50] See D. Rodgers, 'The state as a gang' (note 4).

[51] See J. Aguilar, 'Los efectos contraproducentes de los Planes Mano Dura' (note 2); M. Hume, 'Mano Dura: El Salvador responds to gangs', *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (2007), pp.739-751; and D. Rodgers, 'Slum wars of the 21st century (note 3).

[52] M. Hume, 'Mano Dura: El Salvador responds to gangs' (note 2).

[53] Although Nicaragua has gained a reputation for focusing on "preventative" rather than "repressive" anti-gang policies, the evidence of its practices on the ground tends to belie this. See J.-L. Rocha, 'Mapping the labyrinth from within' (note 2). Even if overall the Police response to gangs has not been as violent as in other Central American countries, partly because of the less violent nature of the *pandillas* compared to the *maras*.

[54] See F. Faux, *Les Maras, Gangs d'Enfants : Violences urbaines en Amérique Centrale* (Paris : Autrement, 2006).

[55] The Merida Initiative was launched following US President George W. Bush's trip to Latin America in March 2007, where security was emphasized by Mexico and Central American leaders.

[56] US Department of State, *The Merida Initiative Fact Sheet* (Washington DC: Bureau of Public Affairs, 2008), available online at: http://www.state.gov/r/pa/scp/2008/103374.htm.

[57] See, for example, A. Forter, (2004) 'Youth Gangs and Human Rights in Central America: A Comparative Study on Policy and Law', Paper presented to the University of Chicago Human Rights program workshop, Winter 2005, which surveyed citizens in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

[58] J. Aguilar and L. Miranda, 'Entre la articulación y la competencia: Las respuestas de la sociedad civil organizada a las pandillas en El Salvador', in J. M. Cruz (ed), *Maras y Pandillas en Centroamérica: Las respuestas de la sociedad civil organizada* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2006), pp.42. The Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence (CCPVJ) has shown that *Mano Dura* policies can be linked to a dramatic surge in youth violence in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – up to 40 per cent in the first three years of implementation (R. Gutiérrez, 'Central America: Harsher Measures Don't Cut Crime", *Inter Press Service News Agency (IPS News)*, 1 November 2006, available online at: http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=35337.

[59] J. Aguilar and L. Miranda, 'Entre la articulación y la competencia' (note 2), p.49.

[60] See D. Rodgers, 'Living in the shadow of death: Gangs, violence, and social order in urban Nicaragua' (note 9); D. Rodgers, 'Managua', in K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (eds), *Fractured Cities: Social Exclusion, Urban Violence and Contested Spaces in Latin America* (London: Zed, 2007); D. Rodgers, 'When vigilantes turn bad: Gangs, violence, and social change in urban Nicaragua', in D. Pratten and A. Sen (eds), *Global Vigilantes* (London: Hurst, 2007).

[61] Rodgers, unpublished research. Another reason for the decline in *pandillerismo* is that the rise of these criminal organisations has left no sociological "space" for youth gangs.

[62] See M. Glenny, *McMafia: Crime Without Frontiers* (London: Random House, 2008).

[63] See, for example, N. Colletta and R. Muggah, 'Rethinking Post-War Security Promotion', *Journal of Security Sector Management*, (Winter 2009), for a review of first and second generation policies.

[64] In Honduras, organisations like London-based Amnesty International and Casa Alianza have also reported that death squads are killing youngsters suspected of belonging to gangs, often merely because they sport tattoos. The NGO Casa Alianza has documented 2,778 murders of young people below the age of 23 between 1998 and July 2008. Most of the victims were members of *maras*. Because these murders are usually not investigated, the perpetrators enjoy total impunity.

[65] See D. Rodgers, R. Muggah, and C. Stevenson, 'Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions', Small Arms Survey working paper, Small Arms Survey, Geneva, 2009.

[66] J.-L. Rocha, 'Mapping the labyrinth from within' (note 3).

[67] Certainly, the few studies that exist are notable for their lack of evidence for successful large-scale interventions (see for example N. Barnes, 'Resumen Ejecutivo', Proyecto 'Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y los Estados Unidos', Centro de Estudios y Programas Interamericanos (CEPI) del Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), 2007, page 9, available online at: http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/docs/Resumen_Ejecutivo_Espanol.pdf).

[68] See D. Rodgers, A symptom called Managua' (note 3).

[69] See D. Rodgers, A symptom called Managua' (note 3).

[70] See P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, 'Greed and grievance in civil war', (note 2).