

## Central American gangs

Gang violence is a major problem in Central America, especially in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Youth gangs, *maras*, engage in extortion, robbery, theft, drug and weapons trafficking, bribery, rape and contract and random killings. What seems to be a security problem at first implies various social dimensions.

Gang violence certainly threatens the lives and overall well-being of the population. Still, the effects are much worse for the gang members: Life expectancy of a *marero* is extremely low. Often they die before they are 18. Victims of *mara* aggressions are predominantly other gang members. Rivalry and acts of revenge between the two major *maras* – Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 – cause high numbers of casualties. Gang members regard rival killing and the neighborhood protection of their neighborhoods and *homies* as their duty and honor.

Adequate statistics on exactly what percent of criminal activity in these countries can be ascribed to youth gangs do not exist. Yet, they are blamed for a large portion of crime, including violent acts committed by other aggressors. Politicians tend to place a large amount of emphasis on the problem while the mass media fill programs with sensationalized reproductions of violent events. The result is widespread panic that has drastic effects on the everyday life.

### 1.1 Trans-national network

Crime itself is a fundamental problem: Its perception, however, worsens the situation. Discussions about crime combine media reports, personal and second-hand experience. The escalation of violence and its perception has profoundly harmed the foundation of society. Public places are avoided, and those who can afford to, live in gated communities and heavily protected houses. Public confidence in democracy is low. Democratic political culture and, as a consequence, integration and participation of all citizens can barely evolve. In addition, internal instability impedes foreign investment and the overall economic climate.

The reasons for the existence of Central American youth gangs are as wide-ranging as their impact on social life. Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 were originally founded in Los Angeles, US, by mostly Central American immigrants. Voluntary returns but mainly deportations in the 1990s brought gang members to Central America. Governments ignored this influx in its early stages.

*Maras* are attractive to children and teenagers for different reasons. Hopelessness and lack of opportunities, which many Central American adolescents face, are just two. Combined with a longing for acceptance, respect and belonging, *maras* might appear as an attractive alternative.

Youth gangs offer a strong social network and solidarity – including capital punishment when this solidarity is violated.

Identification with the *mara* is very high among its members. Brutal initiation rituals, symbols like tattoos, dog tags, slang vocabulary and hand signs, as well as changing a new member's name to a *marero* name contribute to this identification. The individual loses significance while the group always comes first. This also means that leaving the gang can be fatal.

Hence, not only the effects but also the causes for the existence of *maras* can be found in Central American societies. *Maras* are not a direct result of poverty; *mareros* do not steal to eat. Neither are they a direct result of the political regime; *maras* are not guerilla groups planning a coup d'état. The criminal act is the end in itself. Thus, it can be considered as an indirect effect of poverty and the political regime: the lack of education, opportunities and social advancement are to some extent responsible for the attraction of the youth gangs. While this cannot be considered a unique Central American phenomenon, causes and effects are very drastic in this region.

## **1.2 No sustainable policies**

Central American governments seem to be unable to cope with *maras*. Political response has been almost exclusively repressive. Although there have been some short term decreases in violence, the policies do not contribute to any sustainable solution. On the contrary, the governments forgo fundamental principles of rule of law and human rights while *mano dura*, the strong hand, misses the mark. Military forces are deployed inside the cities. Together with the police, they detain suspected *mara* members without any evidence. A tattoo may be a sufficient reason to identify gang membership, which itself is considered a crime.

Prisons are internally controlled by gangs while crime and recruitment continue outside. In addition to official repressive policies, vigilantism is common, along with drive-by shootings of suspected gang members in *mara*-dominated neighborhoods. These cases of random executions are hardly ever solved. It is uncertain if and how these death squads are linked to official powers.

Support for repressive policies is not hard to find in a scared population. For years, elections have been won on "zero tolerance" campaigns. Yet, as a reaction to the failing *mano dura*-policies, new initiatives have been introduced such as intervention and prevention strategies. However, other developments such as the reinstitution of the death penalty in Guatemala represent a failure to change the policy of repression.

It remains to be seen if new policy initiatives will be successfully implemented. Prevention strategies, social rehabilitation efforts and long term structural and social reforms must follow from the recognition that youth gangs are more than a security threat.

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## **1.3 Resources on Central American gangs**

### **1.3.1 Official perspective**

#### **Committee on Hemispheric Security**

The Committee on Hemispheric Security of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States highlights issues concerning gangs involved in criminal activities. Resolutions and Special Meeting documents are available on the website.

#### **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**

UNDP is the UN's global development network and has offices in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The UNDP carries out projects and studies on violence.

#### **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**

UNODC conducts research and projects in Central America on drugs and crime. The study *Crime and Development in Central America* includes a chapter about youth gangs.

### **1.3.2 Academic perspective**

#### **Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS)**

ILAS, part of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), analyzes political, economic and social development processes in Latin America and the Caribbean. Its current research project, "Public Spaces and Violence in Central America," examines the social discourses on crime in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

#### **Inforpress Centroamericana**

Inforpress Centroamericana offers weekly news and analysis of trends and events throughout Central America. Various publications discuss violence, crime and political reactions.

#### **Latinnews.com**

Latinnews.com is a subscribers-only source of political, strategic, economic and business intelligence on Latin America. Central American youth gangs are discussed in several publications.

#### **Latinobárometro**

Latinobárometro carries out an annual public opinion survey in 18 Latin American countries. The organization offers data, analysis and publications.

#### **Revista Quórum**

The Revista Quórum is an Iberoamerican social science journal. Central American youth gangs are discussed in the 16th edition.

#### **Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (UCA)**

The Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (UCA) and its Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP) in San Salvador offer publications and surveys on topics of relevance in Central America including violence.

### **1.3.3 Private perspective**

Amnesty International (AI)

AI highlights the failings of Central American governments and societies on human rights issues.

América Central, by Friedrich Ebert Foundation

Projects on “Seguridad Ciudadana” are key activities of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a German political foundation in Central America.

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

WOLA aims to promote human rights, democracy and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. WOLA runs a Central American Youth Gang program and offers several related publications.

### **1.3.4 Commentaries**

A new UN body tries to fix a broken justice system, by The Economist

The 19 March 2008 article describes the malfunctioning of the Guatemalan justice system.

Centroamérica, sitiada entre el crimen y la repression, by El País

This article by Juan José Dalton in El País on 14 April 2008 outlines the problem of *mara* crime in El Salvador and how repressive policies have failed to improve the situation.

How the Street Gangs Took Central America, by Foreign Affairs

This article by Ana Arana in Foreign Affairs May/June 2005 presents an overview of the Central American gang problem being an US-import.