Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Eighteenth Street Gang are associated with much of the contemporary violence in northern Central America. Both groups, however, originated in the United States, where they are considered two of the country’s major Latino gangs (Diaz, 2009). Both gangs emerged in marginal neighbourhoods of Los Angeles where Mexican immigrant labourers and Central American refugees settled. Faced with everyday struggles of survival and integration, the children of some of these low-income families ended up joining a gang. In the United States, MS-13 has developed a reputation for spectacular violence, a notoriety that has been fanned by the media (Martínez, 2019). Gang suppression and deportations have helped spread MS-13 and the Eighteenth Street Gang across the United States and northern Central America (Müller, 2015). In El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, mano dura (iron fist) policies fuelled gang growth and violence. Gang violence now contributes to the forced migration of Central Americans to the United States, where many of them hope to seek asylum. Increasingly, however, asylum-seekers are discouraged from even crossing the US–Mexico border (HRF, 2017), and undocumented immigrant youth are falsely labelled as gang members in order to render them deportable (Hlass and Prandini, 2018).

This chapter analyses how MS-13 and the Eighteenth Street Gang emerged and evolved, particularly in Central America. I argue that the “gang problem” did not undergo an inevitable transformation, but was manufactured through the intersection of three kinds of policies: US foreign policy; US immigration and refugee policy; and US and Central American gang policy. The chapter is divided into four substantive parts. The first examines the evolution of MS-13 and the Eighteenth Street Gang in Los Angeles and Central America. The second section analyses the political nature of the mano dura gang policies and their effects. The third part discusses the implementation and aftermath of a gang truce implemented in El Salvador between 2012 and 2013. The fourth section explores the gangs’ territorial control and their relationship with state institutions and political parties. I conclude with some reflections on street gangs as a symptom of social problems and as a form of resistance against the conditions of social oppression that give rise to gangs.

The roots of Central America’s “transnational” gangs

The social and political exclusion that, for decades, had marked Central America culminated in civil wars (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua) and military rule (Honduras). The conflicts
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were prolonged partly because, at the height of the Cold War, the United States propped up ultraconservative, reactionary governments in the region in an attempt to thwart a perceived communist takeover in the Western Hemisphere. US administrations delivered essential economic and military aid to Guatemala and El Salvador, and maintained a military presence in Honduras to support the Contras counter-revolutionary forces in unseating Nicaragua’s Sandinista government and to prevent El Salvador’s Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) from taking power. During the war, El Salvador alone received $4.5 billion in military and other aid from the United States, as well as military training at the notorious School of the Americas (Gill, 2004; Hayner, 2011, p. 49). People hit hard by the protracted political violence fled north, in many cases to California, including an estimated one million Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees (Coutin, 2011, p. 576). But they struggled to obtain asylum in a country that partnered with Central American regimes in suppressing guerrilla movements. The sanctuary movement, a network of congregations that formed in response to the United States’ restrictive asylum policy, provided shelter and protection to Central American refugees (Perla and Coutin, 2010). Nevertheless, many families in exile were essentially compelled to live clandestine lives. In Los Angeles, the birthplace of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Barrio Dieciocho (Eighteenth Street Gang), these refugees had little choice but to settle in impoverished, over-crowded neighbourhoods rife with crime and gang activity. In addition to encountering racial discrimination, culture shock, and language barriers, parents had to work long hours for paltry wages. The strains of undocumented immigrant life often gave rise to domestic abuse and child neglect, and youth experiencing this multiple marginality (Vigil, 2002) became affiliated with groups such as the Eighteenth Street Gang or formed their own gang, MS-13.

The United States has a long history of street gangs that dates back to the early 1820s (Howell, 2015). The aftermath of the American Revolution saw the arrival of large groups of European immigrants in New York City, then the principal port of entry to the country. The young metropolis received these low-skilled, low-wage labourers with woefully inadequate housing stock and public services, and the ensuing conditions of marginalisation gradually gave rise to crime and gangs (Howell, 2015). Over the coming decades, street gangs developed and expanded in the Northeast and other regions of the United States. Law enforcement, policy, and media narratives recurrently cast gang activity as a problem of immigrants. Indeed, the Chicago School, which pioneered gang studies in that country, supported this idea (Thrasher, 1927). Since the early days, however, gangs have been a marker of the socio-economic and demographic changes that American society has undergone (Hagedorn, 2008; Hayden, 2005). These transformations include not only economic restructuring, racial inequality, segregation, underfunded schools, and poverty (and the despair it produces) but also the impacts of ineffective immigration and criminal justice policies (Garland, 2009; Massey and Pren, 2012). This was no different when the major Latino gangs began to take shape.

From the 1920s onwards, Southern California’s economic boom sparked an increase in Mexican immigration to the Southwest of the United States. The first Chicano (Mexican-American) gangs emerged in the 1930s in the Boyle Heights and Pico Gardens areas of Los Angeles (Howell, 2015). But the growth of Chicano gangs really picked up in the following decade. The controversial Sleepy Lagoon murder trial fostered resentment against Mexican-Americans and ended up unleashing a media-fanned moral panic about rising Mexican-American juvenile delinquency. The subsequent Zoot Suit Riots, prompted by racially motivated attacks on Mexican-American youth, led many young Chicano men to idolise the gang members who fought in the uprising (Delaney, 2006, pp. 53–56). The emergence of the Eighteenth Street Gang in the 1960s was followed, in the 1980s, by the formation of Mara Salvatrucha in the Pico-Union area of Central Los Angeles (Fogelbach, 2010–2011). Like earlier generations of
street gangs, both groups developed in response to the discrimination and victimisation of marginalised immigrant youth (Ward, 2013). Both gangs have since spread throughout the United States and the Northern Triangle of Central America. Law enforcement estimates once put their numbers at tens of thousands of members worldwide. But the US National Gang Intelligence Centre, which last published its National Gang Report in 2015 (NGIC, 2015), has, for unknown reasons, stopped providing disaggregated gang membership figures. In the past, these estimates had been questioned, since states may rely on different definitions of gangs and gang members (Finklea, 2018). The criteria for gang definition and gang member identification vary widely, making gang membership notoriously hard to track. There is a striking difference, for example, between critical social science research that sees gangs as amorphous youth groups adapting to changing socio-economic conditions and law enforcement agencies, concerned with arrests and sentencing enhancements, which statically define gangs as intentional and cohesive delinquent groups (Hagedorn, 2008). The absence of transparent data makes it difficult to determine the size and scope of the gangs.

Domestically the United States has sought to tackle major Latino gangs predominantly through suppression (Greene and Pranis, 2007). For more than a decade, federal law enforcement has even been pushing for the application of federal organised crime statutes to street gang operations, notably the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations (RICO) Act (Diaz, 2009). Such legislation provides for extended criminal penalties and targets gang leaders for arrest in order to induce the dissolution of the entire gang. To date, gang prevention and intervention programmes remain few and far between. They are typically carried out by non-profit organisations, such as Homies Unidos (Los Angeles) and Barrios Unidos (Santa Cruz), both run by former gang members (Guerra Vásquez, 2005; Hurtado and Sinha, 2016), and Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles), led by Father Greg Boyle (Freemon, 2008). Rare are government-supported comprehensive gang strategies, such as the Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) programme, implemented by the Los Angeles Mayor’s Office (Urban Institute, 2015), and the Montgomery County (Maryland) Department of Health and Human Services’ Positive Youth Development Initiative, which is administered by a former gang member and Barrios Unidos leader.

The United States’ regional approach to street gangs is not much different. Law enforcement views the Eighteenth Street Gang and MS-13 as transnational organised crime groups with a presence as well as communication and financial ties spanning several countries (Finklea, 2018). The perception of gang networks embedded in immigrant communities and responding to a centralised command structure echoing the hierarchical structure of police organisations (Hallsworth, 2013), rather than of autonomous, loosely connected groups claiming a symbolic allegiance, informs the mistaken belief that the gang problem can somehow be uprooted with deportations (Zilberg, 2011). In addition to repatriations of foreign citizens, the United States provides security assistance to the Northern Triangle countries that is meant to improve information sharing and gang enforcement operations (Meyer, 2019).

The deportations since the late 1980s were stepped up after the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which made crimes retroactively applicable for deportable subjects (Brotherton, 2018). These expulsions returned gang members to countries they barely knew and whose language they barely spoke. The street gang subculture they brought with them became a source of fascination for media hitherto unaccustomed to tattooed, flamboyantly dressed strangers, especially for local youth in search of identity and belonging. Barrio gangs existed in Central America since the 1960s (Levenson, 2013; Wolf, 2011). These territorial crews brought together disaffected adolescents who lingered at street corners, dabbled in drugs, and liked to party. But while they may have been a neighbourly nuisance, they never constituted a public security threat. The political violence focused everyone’s
attention on the armed actors. When the transitions to democracy began, the Central American countries directed their energies and resources toward rebuilding shattered infrastructure and economies, not toward what was then an incipient social problem. The peace accords that ended the wars in El Salvador and Guatemala mandated a series of institutional and socioeconomic reforms that met with elite resistance and were only partially, if at all, implemented. Security sector reforms, which required the military to hand over public security responsibilities to newly created civilian police forces, coincided with spiralling violent crime. Back then, the mainstream press virtually glamorised the gang lifestyle, noting how the deportees embodied power and status for alienated teenagers (Valencia, 2018, p. 36). Lacking desperately needed reinsertion opportunities, the returning gang members fell back on the social support networks they were familiar with. Existing gangs dissolved or were absorbed by the Eighteenth Street Gang and Mara Salvatrucha, which both began to grow and, in the following decade, to develop in unintended ways. In 2005, the Eighteenth Street Gang in El Salvador split into two rival factions, Sureños and Revolucionarios (Martínez and Sanz, 2014).

Gang members initially fought their rivals with knives and homemade weapons. Gradually they moved to using commercial firearms capable of inflicting more lethal violence, and both the use and sale of drugs became more habitual. In the socially disorganised neighbourhoods of the capital cities and other major urban centres where the gangs were concentrated, they became a growing source of insecurity for local residents. As the gang presence became more perceptible, interest in gang studies grew. The University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) at San Salvador’s Jesuit University spearheaded much of this research. This included, notably, a gang survey that employed gang members as co-investigators and the *Maras and pandillas in Central America* series that examined gang development, social capital deficits in gang-affected communities, and responses to gangs in the region (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2001, 2004; ERIC, IDIES, IUDOP, NITLAPAN-DIRINPRO, 2004; Cruz, 2006). These studies began a tradition of gang research that, at least in the case of El Salvador, continues to this day (Rosen and Cruz, 2019). Police responded to gang activity through standard law enforcement. Their chief concern at the time was not street gangs but criminal groups, often comprising demobilised fighters, which carried out armed robberies and kidnappings. It was abundantly clear from these developments that Central American countries had long lacked a coherent gang policy that saw the gang not just as a crime problem but as a social problem emerging from a specific socio-historical context.

**Mano dura: the politics of violence**

In the early 2000s, the Northern Triangle governments launched *mano dura* (iron fist) policies, ostensibly to crack down on street gangs and homicides. The strategies entailed graffiti removal, joint police/military anti-gang squad patrols, and neighbourhood sweeps to round up suspected gang members, often in the presence of journalists who filmed and photographed this display of force. Honduras and El Salvador even adopted anti-gang legislation that criminalised gang membership and permitted the police to arrest gang youth based on symbolic identifiers, such as tattoos or clothing (Jütersonke et al., 2009). Many of the arrested were released for lack of evidence of a criminal offense, but even so, gang-related mass arrests exacerbated the overcrowding of Central America’s decaying and poorly managed prisons. The *mano dura* policies, launched largely with electoral objectives in mind, were penal populist strategies that offered seemingly simple solutions (arrest and incarceration) to a complex problem (gangs as a symptom of social exclusion). The policies enjoyed widespread popular backing, at least as long as the public could be convinced that gang suppression was essential and effective (Wolf, 2017).
Media coverage was instrumental in raising the visibility of gang enforcement operations and in shoring up public support for an abusive, and ultimately counterproductive, approach to gang violence reduction (Wolf, 2017). With their ties to Central America’s economic elites, mainstream media companies are mostly unsympathetic to investigative journalism and make the news a for-profit business that relies heavily on routinised reporting and official sources (Wolf, 2019). Media coverage of gangs and gang policy dehumanised gang members, depicting them as categorically criminal and relentlessly violent individuals who were out to terrorise local communities. Gang development was portrayed as stemming from individual character deficiencies rather than structural dislocations. Gang prevention and intervention were dismissed in favour of a punitive strategy (Wolf, 2017). Unsurprisingly, these understandings of gangs, and of the factors contributing to their growth, made some policy interventions seem more sensible than others. Surveys of security perceptions, most systematically conducted in El Salvador, showed that media messages were critical in shaping public opinion on the subject. Media content influenced people to think that street gangs had become a national problem and that mano dura policies were successfully diminishing gang violence, even when evidence to the contrary was mounting (Wolf, 2017).

Gang suppression was accompanied by a notable spike not only in homicides but also in extortion (Cruz, 2010). Gang youth abandoned the practice of soliciting voluntary contributions in their neighbourhoods and began demanding large, regular payments, initially only from transport companies, in order to support imprisoned gang members and their families. The groups toughened their recruitment process and asked their members to avoid visible tattoos and dress more conventionally (Aguilar Villamariona, 2006). Women’s roles shifted from gang members to one of girlfriends, mothers, or nannies, or to one of gang collaborators who help collect extortion fees or smuggle drugs and firearms (Santacruz Giralt and Ranum, 2010, pp. 206–211). The detention of gang members in segregated prisons, a decision that was meant to reduce inter-gang conflict, allowed gang members to connect and socialise more than in the past. This helped the groups become more cohesive and strengthen their leadership structures. Crimes, often planned and ordered from behind bars, were committed by street-based gang youth with increasingly indiscriminate and brutal violence.

The mano dura strategy provoked resistance from political opposition parties and civil society groups which condemned the human rights violations and criticised the lack of a comprehensive gang policy. Some NGOs pushed for gang policy reform; others modelled gang prevention and intervention programmes they felt governments ought to implement. Homies Unidos-El Salvador was, until a lack of funding forced its closure in 2012, the only organisation run by and for gang members in the country. It worked to defend the human rights of gang members and also pioneered the idea of helping them access jobs and social services in order to encourage their desistance from active gang life (Wolf, 2017). Gang members and their families periodically protested the adoption of anti-gang legislation and especially the abysmal prison conditions (Aguilar, 2010). In addition to severe overloading and a crumbling infrastructure, these included unpalatable food, inadequate hygiene and medical services, and the glaring absence of genuine rehabilitation programmes. By 2006, the mano dura strategy was abandoned in name, but not in practice, when the violence it kindled incurred a political cost that governments were, for some time, unprepared to assume (Cruz, 2011). Despite continuing high rates of violence, much of it related to the presence of gangs (UNODC, 2019), in Honduras and Guatemala, street gangs have since been displaced from the public agenda by issues such as electoral fraud, the killings of human rights defenders, public corruption, and the fight against impunity. Not so in El Salvador. There gang violence remains a major concern, as does the war on gangs that was unleashed, paradoxically, by ostensibly leftist FMLN governments in power between 2009 and 2019.
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El Salvador’s gang truce (2012–2013)

The Northern Triangle countries have, over the years, seen a series of inchoate attempts to negotiate gang truces. The most advanced ceasefire, and the one with the most potential to achieve a sustainable reduction in gang violence, was approved by the Mauricio Funes administration (2009–2014). Funes, a former television journalist, ran on the FMLN ticket and helped secure that party’s first presidential victory. Acknowledging the adverse effects of mano dura policies, his government pledged to take a radically different approach to crime and gangs with a National Policy of Justice, Public Security, and Coexistence (MJSP, 2010). But financing problems of this plan, an unexpected homicide spike in late 2009, and charges of incompetence by the media and the private sector intensified pressures to resume a punitive strategy. The mid-2010 Mejicanos massacre, which saw Dieciocho members riddle one bus with bullets and set fire to another and injure and kill almost two dozen passengers (Wolf, 2010), added to the government’s hardening stance on gangs. That same year, new anti-gang legislation was adopted. Amid growing differences between Funes and the FMLN, in late 2011, the president replaced Security Minister Manuel Melgar with General David Munguía Payés, hitherto the defence minister. Melgar, a former guerrilla commander whom the United States considers responsible for a wartime attack that killed US military personnel, had delivered disappointing results. Munguía Payés was given a free hand to reduce homicides by any means necessary and spoke of stamping out the gangs (Sanz and Martínez, 2012). But El Salvador’s cycle of violence was temporarily disrupted by a gang truce.

In March 2012, El Faro, a digital newspaper committed to investigating issues such as organised crime and public corruption, published the first of a series of pieces on the ceasefire (Martínez et al., 2012). El Faro claimed that the government had negotiated the agreement to lower the murder rate, a deal which reportedly included generous cash payments to gang leaders. But the exposé came at a time when the truce mediators had yet to create strong political leadership and a communication strategy to connect with the public. In 2011, the Organisation of American States (OAS) had conducted a security sector assessment and concluded that, without a different approach to street gangs, El Salvador would not find peace. After discussing its review with the government later that year, the OAS was invited to observe and verify the gang mediation process (Blackwell, 2015). Working alongside local mediators, the team saw a pause in the violence as a necessary first step toward dialogue and social opportunities for gang members and communities.

As part of this process, incarcerated historical gang leaders were transferred to lower-security prisons. Communications between these leaders and street-based gang members had been curtailed by the mano dura policies, and restoring these links was deemed vital to encouraging adherence to the truce. Gang leaders recognised that the violence had been hurting families and communities and hoped to return the gangs to their identity-based origins. They asked for a repeal of the anti-gang law, an end to police harassment, improved prison conditions, and social opportunities (Cruz, 2019). In return, the gangs carried out symbolic disarmaments and committed to ceasing violence and recruitment and to disclose the location of clandestine graves. The Delegation of the European Union supported the process, but the United States Embassy boycotted it (Van der Borgh and Savenije, 2019). Federal law enforcement agencies worried about the consequences of a truce, and the United States Department of the Treasury (USDT, 2012) even designated MS-13 a significant transnational criminal organisation. This designation makes it illegal for US citizens to deal with its members and hampers the implementation of US grant-reliant reinsertion projects.

The truce coincided with a sharp decline in homicides, from a daily average of 14 to 5 murders (Martínez, 2013). In the communities where the ceasefire was implemented, the respite...
in violence allowed people to slowly start to live again. The gangs, however, maintained their territorial control and refused to give up extortion in the absence of alternative sources of income. Salvadoran society remained sceptical of the truce, partly because of its perceived lack of transparency (IUDOP, 2013) and partly because of generalised distrust toward both the gangs and the FMLN. After about a year, the mediation process crumbled amid ongoing difficulties to build the required political and public support. President Funes endorsed the truce and claimed credit for a lowered homicide rate. But he consistently distanced himself from the dialogue with the gangs and did not help make it work. The truce provoked disagreements in the FMLN, which thought the initiative constituted a weak electoral platform and had always viewed the gangs favourably as allies in its own electoral strategy but not as autonomous territorial groups. These internal conflicts meant that Funes lacked the support of much of his security cabinet and FMLN-controlled ministries. In addition, party-connected sources in police intelligence provided *El Faro* with misleading information in order to sabotage the process.

The ceasefire broke down amid difficulties to help gang members access education and job opportunities and faltering government support for gang integration once Munguía Payés, whose appointment as security minister was declared unconstitutional, had returned to the Defence Ministry. In the 2014 presidential elections, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), the elite party whose administrations had launched the earlier mano dura policies, proposed to militarise public security and rejected negotiations with perceived criminal groups. This prompted the FMLN to also discards a gang truce. Soon after the main political parties had turned their back on a mediation process, the homicide rate spiralled to a daily average of 18 killings or an annual per capita murder rate of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants (Rentería, 2016), making 2015 the bloodiest year in the post-war period. Luis Martínez, the attorney general at the time, considered the gangs terrorist groups and began prosecuting individuals who had played an active role in the truce. *El Faro*, whose reporting may have contributed to the demise of the ceasefire, has since made the need for one a central part of its writings on violence and security. The current lack of political and public support for a gang truce, however, makes a restart of the earlier initiative unlikely in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, engaging with gang members on how they can be part of society without resorting to violence not only permits a more nuanced understanding of their subjective experiences but is indispensable for the creation of alternative restorative justice and security policies that could allow communities to come together and heal.

The government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014–2019) committed, at least on paper, to the same comprehensive security policy as his predecessor (CNSCC, 2015). It carried out some limited social prevention (ICG, 2017) and continued previous efforts at improved prison management and prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration (ICG, 2017). Mostly, however, the Sánchez Cerén government struggled with the complexities of the post-truce context. Police officers and soldiers not only have had to contain rising violence but have themselves been the targets of ambushes. Catching the victims off guard, the attacks are ostensibly carried out by gang members to resist suppression. The Sánchez Cerén administration responded to these attacks by declaring a war on gangs (Rauda Zablah, 2016). This latest offensive has seen police officers perpetrate abuses against youth in gang-affected communities (SSPAS, 2019). The most egregious human rights violations have been occurring in connection with “confrontations” between police officers and gang members, events that tend to cause few casualties among the former but a high number of fatalities among the latter. According to the official account, the law enforcement agents merely repel attacks. Human rights investigations (PDDH, 2019), however, point to a pattern of extrajudicial executions of gang-affiliated and non-affiliated persons, followed by crime scene cover-ups. The United Nations Special...
Rapporteur for Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions found a six-fold increase in such killings between 2014 and 2016 (OHCHR, 2018). This state-sponsored aggression drives much of the violence but has done nothing to diminish the power of the gangs it has tried so hard to break.

**Local power brokers**

Over the years, the gangs have not only tightened their territorial controls but also transformed their relationship with state and government institutions and with political parties. In order to deter rival gang infiltration and attacks, gang members have established stricter controls over neighbourhoods and the access routes to them, for example, questioning people and checking their identity cards, thus restricting the mobility of those not from the area. These barriers obstruct merchandise deliveries, the undertaking of surveys, studies, NGO projects, and even the provision of government services. Students attending school in rival gang territories are vulnerable to threats or physical harm and often drop out of education. In the absence of the state, gangs have created alternative spaces of governance. In some communities, their members have sponsored parties, helped build sports fields and carry out cleaning and health campaigns, or even mediated conflicts (Murcia, 2015, pp. 24–25).

Increasingly, the gang presence is a factor for internal displacement and forced migration (Cantor, 2016). Those who refuse gang demands, such as recruitment, extortion payments, or romantic relationships, and work in or with law enforcement have little choice but to flee from their homes. This drop-by-drop displacement of individuals or families, but rarely of entire communities, has remained relatively invisible. Its magnitude has not been systematically measured (IDMC, 2019), nor have adequate victim assistance and protection programmes been put in place (Cristosal, 2019). The governments of El Salvador and Guatemala have been loath to acknowledge that forced displacement due to violence is even occurring (Fundación Heinrich Böll, 2019), for admitting as much would be a tacit acknowledgement that the state has lost much of its territorial control and ability to safeguard the population. Civil society activism, particularly strategic litigation (Cristosal, 2018), has raised the media visibility of the issue. But this advocacy has yet to help achieve the implementation of more effective policies addressing the security–development–migration nexus.

The direct or indirect influence of gangs in state institutions, especially the security sector as well as the criminal justice and prison system, has become a growing concern. Gang members have been found to be working in the police academy, the police, and the Armed Forces. But state agents, who often live in gang-affected neighbourhoods, are also threatened or bribed into collaborating with gang members. Such ties permit gang members to get training, acquire uniforms, firearms and ammunition, and obtain intelligence, expose protected witnesses and sabotage law enforcement operations. In Honduras, police, prosecutors, and judges have colluded with gang members (El Heraldo, 2016), whereas in Guatemala, mid- and senior-level police and military officers have been arrested for leaking information to gang members or laundering money for them (Puerta, 2018). El Salvador’s former police chief Ricardo Meneses was dismissed for gang and drug trafficking ties (Silva Ávalos, 2018). Although the scale of the problem is unclear, it was reported that the El Salvadoran Armed Forces expelled 638 of its members due to gang ties between 2010 (when such cases were first registered) and 2018 (Hernández, 2018). In 2018 alone, 547 officers resigned from that country’s police force due to death threats and violence (Flores, 2019). While background checks seek to prevent the recruitment of gang members, they may inadvertently bar people from certain jobs simply for living in gang-affected communities or having gang members in their extended family.
The gangs have also developed relationships with local governments (across the political spectrum) and with political parties (particularly during election times). For example, in Aguilares, a town north of San Salvador, the local gang approached successive mayors to request access to workshops and jobs and to extort a monthly sum of several hundreds of dollars. Feeling they had little choice but to comply, the mayors diverted funds from construction projects and gave gang members jobs in public works. In Apopa, one of the Salvadoran municipalities that participated in the gang truce, the ARENA mayor at the time permitted the local gang to use official vehicles to transport drugs and firearms and to spend public funds on gasoline and drug-fuelled parties (Huerta et al., 2017). Elías Hernández has since been convicted for illicit association and is considered an illustrative case of how politicians and gangs have collaborated for mutual benefit. For the gangs, this relationship brought money and jobs; for the mayor, it brought votes and a hold on power. Few cases have been as well documented as that of Hernández, but it is safe to assume that it is not an isolated one.

Since the demise of the gang truce, El Salvador’s main political parties have adamantly rejected a return to any form of dialogue with the street gangs. In private, however, these same parties have negotiated access to gang-affected communities for electoral campaigning, most recently in the 2019 presidential poll. Moreover, since at least the 2014 presidential election, the main political parties have secretly paid off the gangs in return for their voter mobilisation (Lemus and Martínez, 2018). These agreements show that the parties are well aware of the influence the gangs wield through persuasion or intimidation and have understood how to use it to their advantage. At the same time, it is clear that the gangs have become inevitable social actors. Governments and political parties may be loath to acknowledge the gangs, yet the private meetings and pacts afford the gangs the very legitimacy they have been publicly denied. The fact that any involvement with the gangs is illegal under the current gang law, yet is in practice unavoidable, underscores the absurdity of the entire approach to gangs. The persistent denial of rights and opportunities will, in the end, be met with defiance and resistance, violently if necessary. Gang members’ interests, abilities, and potential contributions might be put to better use if they were brought into the licit space.

Conclusion

The official narrative in both the United States and Central America has painted MS-13 and the Eighteenth Street Gang as criminal structures. This depiction makes gang suppression seem the necessary and only viable response. Yet, although the gangs have security ramifications, they are essentially a symptom of structural social problems that successive governments have failed to address. The reluctance to do so contributes, along with political and electoral interests in short-term security improvements, to the enduring preference for mano dura policies. Street gangs arise in communities marked by protracted exclusion, and some youth, if deprived of the means to live a dignified life, respond to these conditions by joining a gang. This is not to justify the injuries gang members inflict. Problematically, however, they tend to be seen foremost as perpetrators, when it is also essential to understand them as victims of structural and state violence. Directing the analytical gaze towards the reasons for gang membership helps recognise that responses that do not enable young people to heal and to integrate into society will never effectively reduce the violence and transform gang-spawning communities.

Former gang members have for many years been working for gang violence prevention. In California, Homies Unidos and Barrios Unidos are positive examples of efforts to heal community violence. In Central America, where there is less openness to gang peace-making and intervention, there have been few such organisations. In El Salvador, the local chapter of
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Homies Unidos closed due to lack of funding, and OPERA’s work came to a halt when its director was arrested in 2016 under a multi-country law enforcement operation targeting MS-13. Dany Romero, himself a former MS-13 member, had denounced extrajudicial killings of suspected gang members and was accused of using the NGO to attack the state (Mackey, 2016). As activists, former gang members face not only the stigma of past gang membership but also the suspicion that they remain involved in crime and violence. Both in human rights advocacy and in truces, gang members have important contributions to make yet often find it difficult to convince society that they are genuine about change. Truces are meant to reduce the violence so that safe spaces for dialogue can be created. They are meaningful initiatives, provided they incorporate legitimate social and economic opportunities for gang members. Those wielding political power have readily used the gangs for their own purposes but have been much less receptive to the idea of sharing resources with historically marginalised populations. Creating and maintaining spaces for dialogue about alternatives to gang suppression will remain challenging. But without such spaces, the violence will continue. Surely, this is not in any society’s interest.

Notes

1 Interview with Paolo Luers, former truce mediator, San Salvador, 13 July 2016.
3 Ibid.
5 Interview with Paolo Luers, former truce mediator, San Salvador, 13 July 2016.
6 Conversation with Mario Girón, advisor to the mayor of Aguilares, 29 July 2016.

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Sonja Wolf


