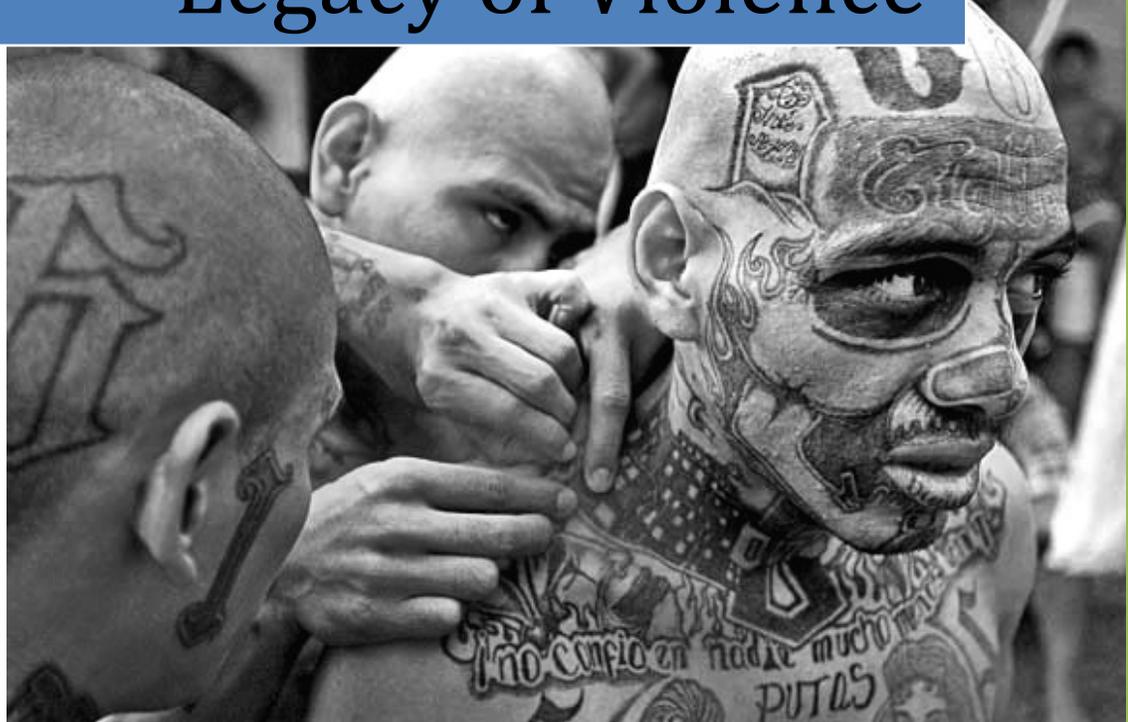


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The Maras in Central America: A Legacy of Violence



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BACKGROUND

The days of violent civil wars in Central America have finally come to an end. And yet the legacy of violence continues. Many of the states most affected by the years of conflict find a new terror replacing the old: violent and well organized international gangs. These gangs, or Maras, engage in drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal arms trafficking, extortion, and violent crime. The two most formidable of them all call themselves the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Mara Barrio 18 (M-18). Both use the same tactics, work toward the same goals, and operate in the same territory. And yet they are arch enemies. Little is known about the origins and histories of these two Maras. Most agree that they first developed as large numbers of Salvadorian refugees arrived in U.S. cities such as Los Angeles after fleeing civil war at home. Immigrants banded together as existing U.S. gangs targeted them. However, U.S. police forces arrested many of these gang members, or Mareros, for their crimes, and deported them back to their home countries.

Upon arrival, the deportees used the tactics they learned in the U.S. to reorganize, forming new Maras and recruiting new members. Both MS-13 and M-18 expanded their localized activities, becoming international, organized crime organizations in nations such as El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and the U.S. Consequently, law enforcement agencies find them more and more difficult to battle.

A number of factors contribute to the expansion of the Maras. First, the unfortunate location of the Central American isthmus between the world's largest cocaine producer and the world's largest cocaine consumer sets the stage for international crime. Also, weak economies and stark inequality leave millions of city-dwellers with nowhere to turn. Many youths face limited prospects and as a result, find the idea of gang life, and the perceived economic benefits

it brings with it, appealing. Few attend school and therefore lack the education necessary to find a stable, legal and well-paying job. Gang members force others to join who would not normally become members. In addition to the social factors, national police forces and justice systems find themselves severely overextended and saturated with corruption. Until recently, national law enforcement agencies throughout the region treated the Maras as a national problem, failing to share information and coordinate activities on an international level. To make matters worse, governments lack thorough and accurate information about the structure, size, and even the members of these organizations. Thus, the Maras have expanded to the point that they threaten the future of the societies they call home.

Due to the public outcry for safety and rule of law, governments cannot ignore the problem of international gangs. They need a new approach; one that addresses the causes of gang involvement while utilizing effective response policies. The issue requires local, national and international action. Eliminating the Maras demands long-term commitment, cooperation and a multi-faceted approach. The public will not wait any longer.

PREVENTION

Support NGOs to rehabilitate society: Gang members, and society as a whole, suffer the spiritual, psychological and emotional effects of the prolonged violence in Central America. According to the former Honduran Minister for Defense, Federico Brevé, rehabilitation from this trauma forms a key element in preventing Mara involvement. He acknowledges that Central American governments lack the resources to create such programs and that often, government-run rehabilitation programs realize little success. Brevé suggests that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play an important role in reintegrating and providing support for those who have left gangs, and also for families and youth. Currently, a variety of NGOs exist which

work to heal these communities and individuals. Their programs discourage delinquency, provide alternatives to Mara involvement and address relevant social issues. With more financial backing and governmental supervision, NGOs may expand their services to better provide for their communities' needs. Even where gangs do not yet pose a threat, the rehabilitation of society is crucial to preventing gang involvement.

Focus on Youth: For many urban youths, few real opportunities exist for work or for involvement in their communities. Many youths do not attend school. Thus, they lack the education necessary for securing a stable, legal, and well-paying livelihood even if such opportunities arise. Additionally, evidence shows that those youths that are unemployed, uneducated and lack a sense of hope for the future stand a higher chance of joining gangs. According to Washington State University's Mark Moreno, governments must implement programs which encourage school enrollment, especially for those in the "hump years", or between 12 and 14 years of age. Also, there must be some sort of middle ground for those unable to attend prep schools or universities. The creation of trade schools and more accessible high schools would give youths a reason to stay out of gangs (Moreno 2008). President Francisco Flores of El Salvador implemented one possible approach, called the "Mano Amiga" (friendly hand) program. Other solutions, such as compulsory military service and community involvement initiatives (such as sports facilities and community centers) historically yield little success. Communities, NGO's and governments must pull together to provide young people with the opportunities and incentives which will occupy their time and give them necessary life skills. Once youths join gangs, society can do little to save them. Prevention is crucial.

Combat Poverty: Many experts challenge the link between poverty and Mara involvement. Nicaragua, for example, although the poorest of the Central American nations,

occupies the position of the second safest, right behind Costa Rica. However, most do not dispute that economics play a role in furthering the Mara problem. Youths participate in Maras in part because they expect economic benefits, even though gangs generally encourage more poverty. Also, urban populations consistently grow faster than national economies, leaving many unemployed or underemployed. Policy makers propose a number of solutions in order to alleviate the situation. One possibility available to policymakers involves the newly implemented Central American Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA. While the effectiveness of this treaty is controversial, it presents an opportunity to increase foreign investment in Central America. Another option comes in the form of a U.S. Aid Program to Central America. This economic aid would promote development in hopes of stimulating economic growth, curbing drug trafficking and eliminating the Mara presence. Many Central American governments desperately need funds to combat the Maras effectively. However, as with any aid, its effectiveness may be limited by a government's ability to manage those funds. In the long-run, governments must strive to encourage investment and reduce unemployment and underemployment. This in itself requires a multifaceted, committed approach, which might not feasibly be addressed now. Addressing the causes of poverty requires both U.S. assistance and the implementation of strong national programs.

Reduce Inequality and Marginality: A nation's level of inequality proves a much more reliable indicator of Mara presence than does its degree of poverty. Coincidentally, Central America hosts some of the highest levels of inequality in the world. The UNODC stresses that the ways in which society views poverty and other forms of inequality profoundly influences youths to join Maras (UNODC 2007). Thus addressing urban poverty (through employment and education) and improving living conditions in slums (through granting secure tenure, for

example) attend to important aspects of economic inequality. Also, governments need to confront the presence of discrimination and marginality. In Central America, economic wealth and political power traditionally aligned themselves along ethnic lines, with those of European descent winning every time. This inequality gives gang members justification for their crimes and a reason to band together against the state and the wealthy. Governments must respond by reducing the sentiment of inequality and marginality within society. This may include recognizing indigenous rights, enforcing peace when applicable, and focusing on inequality "hotspots" (such as slums). They must enforce policies that both favor the poor and serve their needs. These solutions present difficult, long term obstacles. However, governments must send a message to the public that they are combating inequality in order to overcome the Maras and create a more just and stable society.

Joint Anti-Corruption Organization: The Maras, and other types of organized crime, thrive on the corruption rampant at all levels of government in Central America. In many countries, corruption extends all the way from the police force, to the justice system, to the legislating bodies. The obstacle to eliminating such widespread corruption is obvious: corrupt officials work for their own benefit and fight to keep the systems that enable them to do so. Therefore, all Central American governments must collaborate with a strong international organization, such as the World Bank, the UNODC or the OAS. This organization would identify and prosecute corrupt politicians, policemen, judges and other officials. It must remain politically independent and wield a certain level of legal authority. Nations could preserve sovereignty by working jointly with the independent organization in contributing personnel and funding as well as in respecting its decisions. The UN and the Guatemalan government established such a partnership, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala

(CICIG), in 2007 (The Economist 2008). Corruption in Central America maintains a historical link to organized crime, instability, civil wars and stunted economic growth. Today, corruption continues to promote crime and to allow criminals their freedom. Unless nations address and eliminate this phenomenon, no other progress will ever be made.

Increased border security: The augmentation of border security between the Central American nations, Colombia, Mexico and the U.S., would ideally cut down on drug, arms and human trafficking, and would limit collaboration between gangs. This solution addresses the international presence of the Maras and targets their sources of funding. Only with money can Maras operate. Increased border control would also involve security benefits. However, this solution costs significant amounts of money, which would necessitate U.S. backing, without proving especially effective. Maras operate outside of the law and would easily avoid border security. Furthermore, past experience shows that borders are difficult to patrol. Corrupt officials make them even more porous. Increased border security may serve as a small part of a larger response. However, due to the limited funds available to Central American governments and the nature of the Maras, this approach represents a less than practical solution.

INTERVENTION

International organization designed to share information and coordinate activities: According to Congressional Research Services (CRS), the U.S. arrested more than 1,374 members of MS-13 in the United States since 2005 (CRS 2006). This represents only a small percentage of Mareros arrested over the last few decades, many of which are illegal immigrants. Often, the U.S. gives the receiving government little information about the criminal record of the deportees, which some argue severely limits those nations' ability to target gang activity. The U.S., Mexican, Central American and Colombian nations must develop an organization with the

goal of sharing operational, tactical and intelligence-related information. By doing this, governments can combine forces to jointly confront the issue and maximize their resources, instead of only stepping on each others' toes. Also, local actors, such as major cities, must cooperate. The Organization of American States (OAS) and INTERPOL could promote this cooperation. A collaborative approach will apply the experiences of past U.S. anti-gang measures, focus on detaining the ringleaders of gang activity, and facilitate the arrest and conviction of suspects. This would strengthen agencies and give them a fighting chance against gang activity. However, the U.S., who has a strong interest in finding a solution to the problem, must contribute the much needed funding.

Gain access to more thorough and accurate information: The lack of thorough and accurate information regarding Maras' members, tactics and operations poses another key challenge to confronting these groups. Law enforcement agencies require this information in order to gather evidence against suspects, stop the spread of Maras and combat corruption. According to USAID's "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment", little research is available regarding gangs, and national information proves both inconsistent and unreliable (USAID 2008). Often, so called "facts" blatantly contradict each other and statistics vary widely. Organizations such as INTERPOL and national law enforcement agencies could play a part. Also, national governments must make accurate intelligence-gathering and research a priority. Finally, communities represent a knowledge base not frequently tapped. Community members know the cliques in their area and can report on their activities. Thus, police forces need to gain the trust of communities, enabling them to gather this type of information. Without it, law enforcement agencies can only take shots in the dark.

‘Mano Dura’, etc.: One current Central American policy, ‘Mano Dura’ (Hard Handed), applies the militarization of the police force, military involvement, and stringent crime-suppressive and anti-gang measures in hopes of eliminating the Central American Maras. Currently, El Salvador (with ‘Mano Dura’ and ‘Super Mano Dura’), Guatemala (with ‘Plan Escoba’), and Honduras (with the Cero Tolerancia y Libertad Azul plans) are using this strategy (CCPVJ 2007). This policy benefits society in that it strengthens those enforcement institutions crucial to fighting gangs. However, ‘Mano Dura’ carries with it serious implications for the existence of democracy, freedom and human rights in these nations. Legally, civil rights receive a lower priority than state security. Also, "Mano Dura" focuses on police intervention instead of viewing the gang problem more holistically. The policy gives police widespread discretionary powers and makes gang membership itself illegal. Nevertheless, according to the NACLA Report on the Americas, 80% of arrests result in release due to a lack of evidence (NACLA 2008). Furthermore, gang members went underground as a result of the crackdown, making it more difficult to identify and arrest these individuals. Maras thrive on a sense of “Otherness” (Moreno 2008). ‘Mano Dura’ is a government's desperate response to public demands for safety and finds some support among the Central American public. However, due to the threats it poses to civil liberties and democracy, the presence of low conviction rates, and the one-sidedness of the approach, ‘Mano Dura’ does not form an effective response to gangs in Central America.

Strengthen and involve military: As a result of constant violence and insecurity, much of the Central American public shows growing support for the strengthening of their nation’s military and the creation of a partnership with its police forces. According to the UNODC, the Military often possesses certain strengths which would enable it to deal with gangs better than police forces. Soldiers receive better training, draw more respect, and maintain better funding

than the police. Joint intervention would bolster the patrolling and intervention capabilities of police forces and would maximize scarce funding (UNODC 2007). However, a number of serious drawbacks result from involving the military. First, military personnel do not receive adequate training for police tasks, although providing them with the necessary skills would not present an insurmountable task. Secondly, Central America has a long history of authoritarian military governments and these nations' militaries played an important role in numerous internal conflicts (UNODC 2008). Employing a nation's military against its people presents a risky policy option at best, especially considering the history of the area. Also, the current militarization of Central American police forces tends to alienate them from their communities and results in low levels of trust between the two groups. Even if the public expects military involvement or considers it routine in the context of combating the Maras, it would constitute a dangerous policy option for Central America and would not prove effective at eliminating gangs.

Improved Police Forces: National police forces throughout Central America must confront a number of overwhelming obstacles in order to tackle the Maras. Many forces are overextended and demoralized. Concurrent with rising crime rates, the public demands the development of a stronger and more efficient police force. However, despite the important role policemen play as investigators and protectors, police intervention does not in itself constitute a solution to the gang problem. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), higher police to population ratios do not necessarily correlate with lower crime rates. Police forces must balance prevention with intervention and must efficiently focus their resources on gang "hotspots". Another limiting factor involves prominent levels of police corruption, which breed public distrust. According to the UNODC, only 2% of murderers in Guatemala will ever see justice, and police officers continually participate in drug-related, gang-related and

corruption-related crimes (UNODC 2008). In order to resolve this, governments must devote all possible resources to evaluating police and judicial effectiveness, ensuring accountability and developing a stronger, more independent law enforcement system. USAID and INTERPOL should cooperate with nations to achieve this goal (CRS 2007).

New method of dealing with gang members when arrested: Currently, the standard method of dealing with arrested Mareros involves sentencing them to prison. The benefits of this system include the fact that it separates gang members from society in a place where they can do the public no harm. Also, prisons should ideally provide a constructive environment for rehabilitation. However, the past shows that placing gang members in prison amounts to a counterproductive measure at best. These facilities act as a sort of headquarters for gang activity, as inmates continue to coordinate with the outside (Brevé 2007). In addition to this, operating penal facilities proves extremely expensive. Despite highly overcrowded conditions, governments do not possess the financial resources to expand. Furthermore, youths who do jail time have dismal chances of escaping the Mara lifestyle. Most prisoners become repeat offenders. Once released, the majority find that society rejects them. Furthermore, putting Mareros in jail does not alleviate the socio-economic conditions that put youths at high risk for gang involvement. Threatening harsher sentences will not act to curb crime, and prisons do not rehabilitate inmates. One possible solution includes work teams and community projects for delinquent youths. Although jails form an integral part of the justice system and protect society from violent offenders, prisons must not be viewed as society's final answer to the Maras.

Freeze Suspected Bank Accounts: Governments must use legal methods as well as preventative and interventional approaches when combating the Maras. It may not always be possible to cut the major sources of funding to Mara members (such as trafficking and corruption)

with short-term national policies. However, governments can confront the rich and powerful leaders of organized crime and limit their access to capital. In order to do this, the bank accounts of suspected Mara and organized crime leaders should be frozen. Also, governments throughout North America, Latin America and even Europe should cooperate to ensure that those under criminal investigation for organized crime or Mara involvement do not have access to the funds they need to escape or to continue operations. Banks must strengthen monitoring systems which detect money laundering (WOLA 2007). Without access to such funds, these individuals and organizations cannot operate. This requires the empowerment of the justice system, legislative support for the fight against the Maras, and accurate intelligence on Mara operations. While this option empowers the justice system to better address those most implicated in organized crime, it will not prove useful until governments tackle other long term concerns related to the existence of the Maras.

Community Resistance: Due to the high level of Mara violence throughout Central America and the inability of governments to adequately respond to it, individuals and communities must both protect themselves and provide a safe haven for youth. Governments might employ a powerful weapon against the Maras by enabling communities to create armed civilian patrols, drive the Maras out of their neighborhoods and defend themselves against gang violence, threats and extortion. This model replicates the armed civilian groups which organized in the terrorized neighborhoods of Medellín, Colombia. The advantages of this approach involve a dramatic reversal of the trend of violence in those areas, the expulsion of gangs, a decline of their influence on society and a significant reduction in the pressure on youths to join gangs. Yet, various risks must also be taken into account. First, because these groups are locally organized, there is no external accountability and therefore no check on their power. Secondly, the

formation of these groups in Colombia contributed to the undermining of the government's sovereignty and its influence in the region. Thus, in extreme cases of public insecurity and where the benefits outweigh the risks, communities should band together in order to defend themselves and expel the Maras. Governments could thus tacitly support armed and unarmed community protection organizations while choosing not to create policy regarding it.

PREFERED RESPONSE

In order to be truly effective, the response to the Maras must involve many parties, reach all levels of society, include both prevention and intervention, and focus on short-term as well as long-term goals. Implementing such a multi-faceted response will prove difficult. However, four policies must take priority.

First and foremost, Central American governments need to address corruption within the public realm. In many nations, corruption at all levels of society impedes the creation and maintenance of infrastructure and destroys the justice system. Criminals thrive, while the poor and powerless reap the consequences of a broken administration. Nothing can be done without first addressing this issue, even if that initially only involves eliminating corruption within the government itself. The strengthening of the OAS and the UNODC in this area would allow outside actors to target those involved. In the end though, national governments must make eliminating corruption a priority.

After addressing this issue, governments must find a balance between prevention and intervention policies. Currently, according to Mark Moreno, efforts tend to place the most emphasis on intervention, which tends to receive more public support, while giving prevention a minor role. This must change, despite the political downsides of the policy. Governments need to focus their resources on reaching at risk urban youths between 12 and 14 years of age. They must

create education opportunities and find alternatives to jail time for as many youths as possible. NGOs must continue to strengthen families and provide support for youths.

Governments should also strengthen the justice system. This involves the demilitarization of police forces as well as the increased funding of its activities and training of its members.

Finally, the Central American and U.S. governments must collaborate with a joint organization that maximizes resources and coordinates activities. This organization could also play a role in gathering intelligence, a much needed aspect of gang intervention. Interpol should be asked to strengthen its role in this task.

Ultimately, there is no single policy response which will effectively eliminate the Maras. Central American governments lack in both funding and efficiency. Also, Maras result from extremely complicated social, political and economic issues. While a number of things must be done, it is neither economically feasible nor politically realistic to attempt them all.

However, governments presently have the power to take various steps. These will give them the tools to better manage and restrain the Maras. We may not boast the ability to save those involved in Maras now. However, with a shift in our approach, we may have a fighting chance of saving tomorrow's generation from the violence and pain of today.

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