

# Are the *Maras* Overwhelming Governments in Central America?

Steven C. Boraz and Thomas C. Bruneau

**V**IOLENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA has grown so much in the last half decade that Colombia is no longer the homicide capital of the region. In fact, it now ranks fourth in that ignominious distinction behind El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.<sup>1</sup> The violence is mostly due to the phenomenon of street gangs, also called *pandillas* or *gangas*, but most often *maras*. They have grown in number, sophistication, and stature and have largely overwhelmed the security forces of Central America's fledgling democracies. Altogether, these *maras* represent a significant threat to the security of the countries in the region. Numerous national, binational, multinational, regional, and hemispheric conferences have sought to address the problem.

## Origins of the Maras

The *maras* emerged from conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua during the 1980s. Thousands of people fled north, including a large number of young men who had fought on the governments' side or with the insurgents. Many of these young men went to Los Angeles, but because they were poorly educated, few were able to find work. In a city already structured in terms of gangs, their familiarity with guns and armed combat was their one advantage. Some were incorporated into such neighborhood gangs as the African-American Crips and Bloods; the Mexican-American, illegal-immigrant gang EME; and the Mexican Mafia. Some of the men, especially those from El Salvador, joined the multi-ethnic 18th Street Gang. Other Salvadorans founded the *Mara Salvatrucha* (Group of Smart, or savvy, Salvadorans) *I3*, or *MS-13*, to compete with the 18th Street Gang because they believed the Salvadorans in that gang were traitors.<sup>2</sup> (The new gang gave itself the number 13, as in 13th Street, where many Salvadorans had settled.) As most of what the *maras* were (and are) involved in was criminal activity, they were arrested and put into prison, where they further defined their gang identities and honed their criminal skills.

When federal anti-immigration laws toughened and the civil conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala ended, many gang members were deported to their countries of origin as soon as their prison sentences ended.<sup>3</sup> Once they returned to San Salvador, Guatemala City, or San Pedro Sula, the *maras* established themselves in the countries' war-torn societies. *Clicas* (cliques, cells, or groups) deported from the United States established MS-13 in San Salvador in 1992, replacing less violent and less sophisticated gangs. The 18th Street Gang became M-18 and was established in El Salvador in 1996 with three *clicas*.

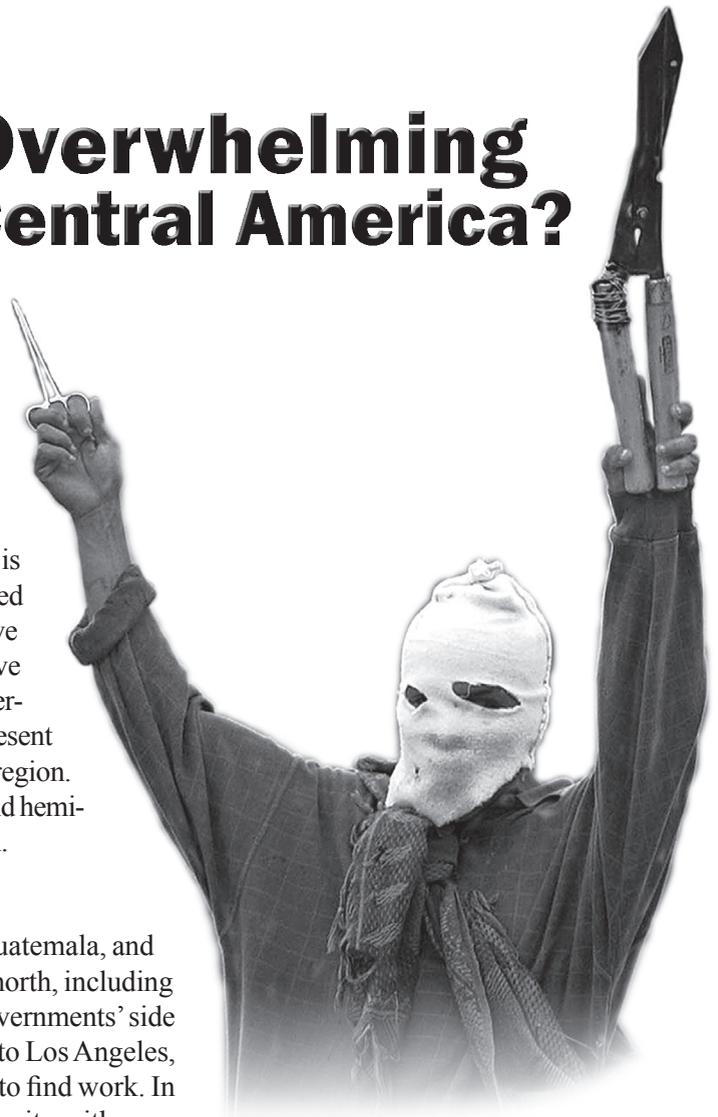


PHOTO: A gang leader shows the weapons with which he killed 13 inmates at the Pavoncito penitentiary, south of Guatemala City, 24 December 2002.

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**Location, organization, and numbers.** El Salvador’s National Police (PNC) say there are 36,000 gang members in Honduras, 14,000 in Guatemala, 11,000 in El Salvador, 4,500 in Nicaragua, 2,700 in Costa Rica, 1,400 in Panama, and 100 in Belize. That’s nearly 70,000 in the region.<sup>4</sup> In addition to MS-13 and M-18, there are *Los Cholos* (The Half Breeds), *Los Nicas* (The Nicaraguans), and *Los Batos Locos* (The Crazy Boys) in Guatemala; *La Mau Mau* (derived from the name of rebels in Kenya and a New York gang in the 1950s) and *La Maquina* (The Machine) in El Salvador; *La Mau Mau*, *Los Batos Locos*, and *Los Rockeros* (The Rockers) in Honduras; and the Gerber Boys and *Los Charly* in Nicaragua.<sup>5</sup>

The *maras* are not just a Central American phenomenon; they are transnational. MS-13, for example, reportedly has 20,000 members in the United States, 4,000 members in Canada, and a large presence in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> The numbers fluctuate—mara membership being dynamic, and gang membership is difficult to gauge.

Mara organizational structures are elaborate, flexible, and redundant. A leadership cadre often has another cadre to back it up. The maras can function as networks, with extensive transnational linkages. They have internal functional branches specializing in recruiting; logistics; attacks; intelligence collection and propaganda; and murder, drug trafficking, and extortion. Figure 1 depicts a typical organizational diagram.

**Behavior.** The national police in El Salvador say maras are involved in selling drugs; extortion;

prostitution; homicide; and illegal movement of drugs, people, and arms across borders.<sup>7</sup> They increasingly arm their members with heavier weapons, including M-16s, AK-47s, and grenades, which the mara are reportedly improving their skills at using.

There is much more that is disturbing about the maras. They define themselves in contrast to the rest of society and to other gangs by wearing unique tattoos, using their own symbols and graffiti, and communicating through a special language and unique hand signals. Each mara has its own elaborate internal rules as to when a gang member can fight, what the punishment will be for certain behaviors, and what is required if a fellow clica member is killed. The use of violence is probably the most defining characteristic of the maras. Indeed, their unique vocabularies emphasize brutality and criminal activity. Initiation, ascension into leadership positions, and discipline are all based on violence. To enter the MS-13 mara, for example, a prospective gang member must agree to be beaten for 13 seconds by 4 members of the gang without putting up any resistance and protecting only his face and genitals. Later, as part of the ascension process, new members have to kill a person for no other reason than to show they can. This is called *sangre afuera, sangre adentro* (blood outside, blood inside). If women are strong enough, they undergo the same initiation rite. If not, they have to have sex with all the male members of the mara. The maras fight continuously, not only against the

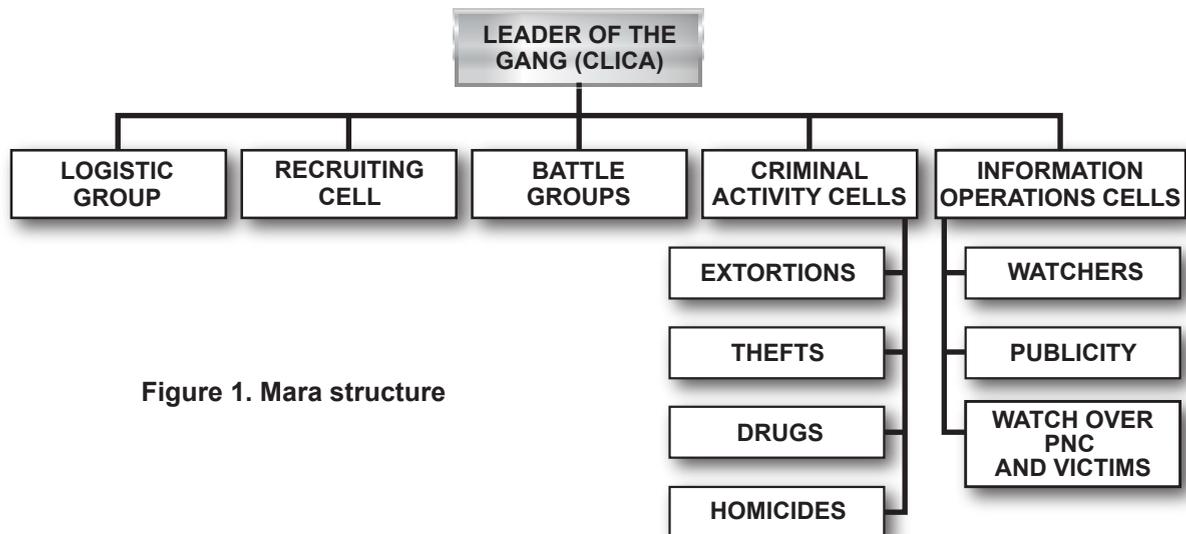


Figure 1. Mara structure

Source: PNC El Salvador

authorities, but against each other for turf, markets, and especially for drugs. As part of their aggressiveness, some gangs mutilate and decapitate their victims.

## Responding to the Maras

Each country in the region has responded in different ways to the mara problem. In 2003, Honduran President Ricardo Maduro forced a change in his country's penal code, establishing a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership. Soon after, he increased the sentence to 30 years and put the army on the street to back up the nation's 8,000 police officers.<sup>8</sup>

In El Salvador, President Tony Saca pushed anti-gang legislation known as *Super Mano Dura* (Super Hard Hand) through Congress.<sup>9</sup> Salvadoran authorities now arrest youths simply for having gang-related tattoos or flashing signs, and gang members serve up to five years in prison (gang leaders up to nine). Additionally, San Salvador and Washington have developed an exchange program between PNC and FBI personnel, and El Salvador has developed some rehabilitation and prevention programs (with questionable success).

President Oscar Berger and the Guatemalan Congress have also approved new anti-gang laws, although these are not as draconian as the ones adopted in Honduras and El Salvador. Four thousand reserve army troops now support a government presence in troubled neighborhoods in Guatemala City, and a new interior minister's sole purpose is to fight crime. Guatemala has also instituted some programs aimed at preventing crime and assisting at-risk youths, especially former gang members.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to *Mano Dura*, President Martin Torrijos of Panama launched *Mano Amiga* (Friendly Hand) to offer at-risk youths positive alternatives to gang membership. The program seeks to provide access to theater and sports activities for some 10,000 Panamanian youths.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these national efforts, many bilateral, multilateral, and regional efforts aim to combat the maras. For example, Berger and Vicente Fox, Mexico's president, agreed to establish mechanisms to fight mara drug trafficking along their border. Similarly, Berger and El Salvador's Saca agreed to set up a joint security force to patrol gang activity



Guatemalan women weep after the discovery of four dead members of an indigenous family, two of them minors, killed approximately 800 meters from the Guatemalan National Congress in the capital, 3 August 2006.

AFP

along their border. In January 2004, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran, Nicaraguan, and Dominican Republic officials created a database on crimes to better track movements of criminal organizations. Saca proposed a "Plan Centroamerica Segura" (Central American Security Plan) to the Central American Integration System (in Spanish, SICA), in June 2004 at the Summit of Central American Presidents. SICA held an "Anti-mara Summit" in April 2005 where the presidents of all the Central American nations were joined by representatives from Mexico and the United States. More recently, the Spanish Ministry of Interior, with the participation of seven Central and ten South American countries, plus Mexico and the Dominican Republic, met to discuss the issue in March 2006. In April 2006, the government of El Salvador met with the FBI for a very large anti-gang regional conference.<sup>12</sup>

All in all, the region's governments are now paying great attention to regional coordination, and many different U.S. departments and agencies have become involved.

## Impact of the Maras

The maras present a serious threat to the democracies, economies, and security of Latin America. They overwhelm the governments, the police, and the legal systems with their sheer audacity, violence, and numbers. One telling statistic is that at least 60 percent of the 2,576 murders committed in El Salvador in 2004 were gang-related, and the trend continued in 2005.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the governmental responses outlined above, the high level of violence and the difficulty

these countries have in dealing with the maras raise serious questions about the governments' ability to maintain law and order. For these new democracies, any challenge as strong as the maras aggravates already existing doubts about democracy as a viable, effective system of government.

To be successful, a democracy must have legitimacy. Latin America's new democracies have not yet established the authority needed to earn legitimacy. Political elites in Guatemala and Nicaragua, right up to the level of president, have been proven corrupt, and the two countries' political systems function poorly. Already challenged by historical and current problems, these new democracies now have to contend with maras that make a travesty of public services.

In El Salvador, the maras have established small businesses. Needless to say, they compete unfairly. They use violence against competitors, and they rent themselves out to other businesses, such as bus companies, to intimidate their competition. The maras' behavior corrupts other businesses because

it perpetuates itself and can result in a spiral of violence. Some who monitor maras wonder what they do with the money they make. They do not pay taxes, and their facilities and equipment are inexpensive. Will they buy up legitimate businesses and pay off government officials, including the police?

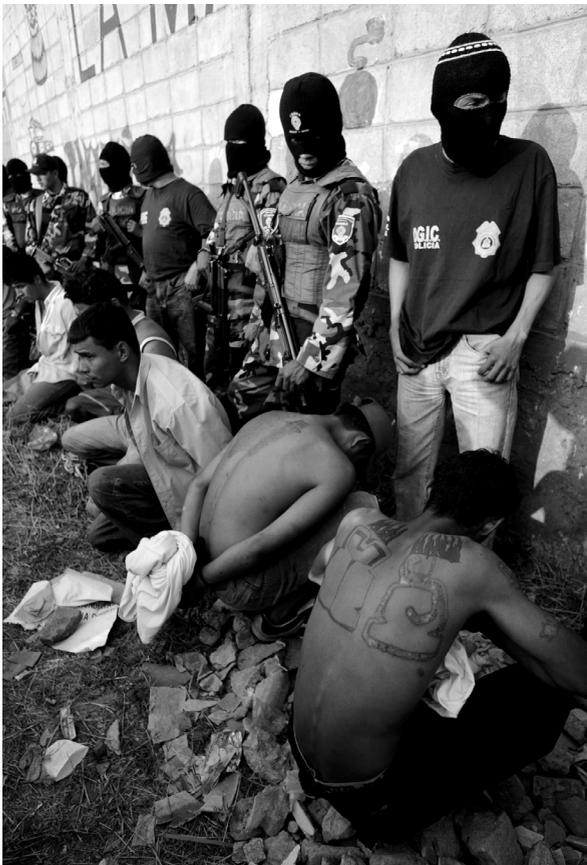
El Salvador's National Police believe that the maras are trying to penetrate police forces, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and political groups. If this is accurate, it shows that the maras can think and act strategically. The concern is that they may further jeopardize democracy by making themselves available for hire to interest groups and radicals who have not been successful in the new democracies' elections.

"National security," or, more precisely, the security of the nation-state, refers to the safeguarding of the state's sovereignty over the territory and population within its borders, and implies that the state should have policies to confront any threat to that sovereignty. "Public security" connotes the maintenance of civil order necessary for basic societal functions (for example, commercial transactions, transportation, or communications) and the rule of law. "Citizen security" alludes to the capacity of individuals and groups to enjoy or exercise their political, economic, and civil rights.<sup>14</sup>

The maras threaten all three security levels. Citizens cannot go about their business without fear of being robbed or killed in their neighborhoods. Businesses such as commerce and transport are prevented from operating unless they pay off the maras. Whole sections of cities, such as Guatemala City and Tegucigalpa, are under the control of maras, which, of course, fight each other for control of turf. When international organized crime employs maras, entire sections of countries, such as the Peten in Guatemala, slip from the state's sovereign control.

In sum, the maras pose serious challenges to all levels of security, to economic development, and to democratic consolidation. It cannot be emphasized enough how tentative and fragile these Latin American political and economic systems are following decades of authoritarianism and internal conflict. It would not take much to destabilize them. Guatemala's recent past provides a case in point.

With their violence, networks, and emerging strategies, maras can pose challenges that will be even more serious in the future, particularly if they build



REUTERS

Police officers detain gang members as part of a government plan to crack down on violent youth gangs or 'maras' in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 14 April 2005.

on their current ability to intimidate political parties and support radical groups. There are signs of this happening now, and if it works, given the maras' ability to communicate and learn, more such outrages can be expected. The fear is that Central America will go the way of Colombia, with the loss of state control over great swaths of the country and the expansion of organized crime based on narcotics and terrorism. In Central America, unlike Colombia, the threat is located in the urban areas, and is not due so much to government neglect as to a lack of resources. The motivation now appears to be present to do something.

## What to Do?

All Central American countries want to respond to the maras in some meaningful way. Because the maras operate in a networked fashion, governments must do the same. It takes networks to fight networks.<sup>15</sup>

The SICA-sponsored agreement among the Central American nations (and the Dominican Republic) commits each country to strengthen efforts against the maras by developing regional strategies for improving security, by sharing information and intelligence, by creating a regional rapid reaction force with broad jurisdiction, and by creating programs to keep at-risk youths out of gangs.<sup>16</sup> Even so, implementation at a national or, even better, local level, requires overcoming such impediments as a lack of personnel, vague police powers, questionable legality/constitutionality, judicial unwillingness to enforce the laws, the legal systems' vulnerability to intimidation and corruption, and criticism by UN entities and NGOs.

Further, the merging of police and military/national intelligence can be difficult because these organizations' goals are often diametrically opposed: police want to prosecute criminals based on evidence gathered *after* a crime has been committed whereas national intelligence agencies attempt to provide warning of *pending* activity. This is not to say that police never attempt to disrupt operations, or that military and governmental intelligence agencies do not reflect on past activity to support analysis; however, police want the legal means to take people to trial while national agencies function in a broader context. To make any headway against the maras, it will take focused effort, detailed intelligence-sharing agreements, the granting of broad jurisdictional authority to

national and international forces, the incorporation of technology, and coordination among regional and international partners.

To our knowledge, there is no credible evidence linking the maras to terrorism. This is clearly good news for the United States considering the ease with which gang members cross the borders into this country.<sup>17</sup> Further, while the maras are a crime problem in cities across the United States, the situation in most of Central America is much more serious because of a lower level of economic development and the fragility of the new democracies and their institutions. As a result, in Central America the maras challenge all levels of security and have the potential to frustrate economic development and democratic consolidation. Clearly, there is work to do at many levels of government to put best practices and policies into place to fight this growing threat. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. In 2005, the number of homicides per 100,000 was as follows: El Salvador, 54.71 (3,761 homicides); Honduras, 40.66 (2,836); Guatemala, 37.53 (5,500); and Colombia, 33.76 (14,503). These figures are widely cited. See <<http://luterano.blogspot.com/2006/01/el-salvador-pain-murder-rate-highest.html>>.

2. "Mara" means "people rioting or out of control." The word is ultimately derived from the name for a carnivorous swarming ant. "Salva" refers to those coming from El Salvador, and "trucha" means savvy or streetwise.

3. Between 2000 and 2004 an estimated 20,000 criminals were deported to the countries of their birth. See Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs* 84, 3 (May/June 2005): 100.

4. These data are from the PNC in El Salvador. They are more conservative than other data we have seen.

5. Dennis Rodgers, "We Live in a State of Siege: Violence, Crime, and Gangs in Post-Conflict Urban Nicaragua," Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, September 2002.

6. See Arian Campo-Flores, "The Most Dangerous Gang in America," *Newsweek*, 28 March 2005; Armando Salinas Torre, Secretario Particular del C. Subsecretario Subsecretaría de Población, Migración y Asuntos Religiosos, 5 January 2005, in *Gaceta Parlamentaria* 88 (8 Feb 2005), <[www.senado.gob.mx/srgsp/gaceta/?sesion=2005/02/08/1&documento=6](http://www.senado.gob.mx/srgsp/gaceta/?sesion=2005/02/08/1&documento=6)>.

7. This information comes from PNC studies, our interviews in El Salvador and Guatemala in the first two weeks of April 2005 and March and April 2006, and newspaper accounts in the United States and Central America.

8. Clare Ribando, *Gangs in Central America*, Congressional Research Service, 10 May 2005.

9. Saca's predecessor, President Francisco Flores, initiated the original *Mano Dura* laws in August 2003.

10. Stephen Johnson and David B. Muhlhausen, "North American Transnational Youth Gangs: Breaking the Chain of Violence," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounders* 1834 (21 March 2005), 11; and Ribando.

11. Ribando.

12. Natalia Gómez Quintero, "México y Guatemala van contra 'Maras,'" *El Universal* (Mexico), 22 February 2005; "Central America Creates Security Force," *The Guardian*, 4 March 2005, <[www.guardian.co.uk/world/latest/story/0,1280,-4840032,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/latest/story/0,1280,-4840032,00.html)>; "Maras en Centroamérica: de las guerras civiles a la ultraviolencia callejera," *La Hora* (Guatemala City), 30 March 2005, <[www.lahora.com.gt/05/03/30/paginas/nac\\_4.htm#n3](http://www.lahora.com.gt/05/03/30/paginas/nac_4.htm#n3)>.

13. Ribando.

14. We have found the straightforward definition used by Douglas A. Kincaid very useful. Interestingly enough, it comes from an article on El Salvador and Guatemala. See Douglas A. Kincaid, "Demilitarization and Security in El Salvador and Guatemala: Convergences of Success and Crisis," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 42, 4 (Winter 2000).

15. See Phil Williams, "Transnational Criminal Networks," in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001). Ronfeldt and Arquilla have published other important works on networks and their implications.

16. Extraordinary Meeting of the Chiefs of States and Governments of the Countries of the Central American Integration System, <[http://www.sieca.org.gt/publico/Reuniones\\_Presidentes/DECLARACION\\_CONJUNTA\\_01-04-05.htm](http://www.sieca.org.gt/publico/Reuniones_Presidentes/DECLARACION_CONJUNTA_01-04-05.htm)>.

17. According to the Salvadoran National Police, more than 2,500 MS-13 members from 6 Central American countries were arrested in and deported from the United States in 2005.