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Gangs, urban violence, and security interventions in Central America

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Urban Violence and Security Promotion in Central America

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Abstract

Urban violence is a major preoccupation of policy-makers, planners, and development practitioners in cities around the world. States routinely seek to contain such violence through repression and its exportation to and containment at the periphery of metropolitan centres. Yet urban violence is a highly heterogeneous phenomenon and not amenable to reified diagnosis and coercive intervention. Muscular state-led responses tend to overlook and conceal the underlying factors shaping the emergence of urban violence, as well as the motivations and means of so-called "violence entrepreneurs". This is very obviously the case of urban gangs in Central America, which are regularly labelled a "new urban insurgency" threatening the integrity of governments and public order. This article considers both the shape and character of Central American gang violence and attempts at reducing it, highlighting the complex relationship between these two phenomena. We advance a threefold approach to measuring the effectiveness of interventions, focusing alternately on discursive, practical and outcome-based criteria. In this way the article demonstrates how, contrary to their reported success in diminishing gang violence, repressive first generation approaches have tended instead to radicalise gangs, potentially pushing them towards more organised forms of criminality. Moreover, although credited with some modest successes, more preventive second generation interventions seem to have yielded more rhetorical advances than meaningful reductions in gang violence.

Keywords

gangs—crime—Central America—violence reduction—policy interventions

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Urban Violence and Security Promotion in Central America

Introduction

Urban violence is fast emerging as one of the major preoccupations of policy-makers, planners, and development practitioners in cities and municipalities around the world (cf. UN-HABITAT, 2007). Although targeted prescriptions to reduce armed violence are emerging from multilateral and bilateral agencies, research emphasises how urban violence is highly heterogeneous, multi-causal and not readily amenable to reified solutions (Small Arms Survey, 2007; Geneva Declaration, 2008). In particular, interventions designed to promote security often overlook the underlying determinants shaping the emergence and severity of urban violence, as well as the origins, motivations and means of so-called "violence entrepreneurs" (Collier et al., 2003). This is strikingly the case in relation to urban gangs throughout Central America. Their actions are routinely described as a "new urban insurgency" that threatens the integrity of governments and needs to be violently crushed (e.g. Manwaring, 2005; 2006). In some cases, gangs are explicitly connected to the surge in violence that accompanies narco-trafficking (US, 2008; CNN, 2009). This article argues that the reality may in fact be very different. The relationship between Central American urban gang violence and state-led attempts at violence reduction is not as straightforward as often portrayed.

The article is divided into five parts. The opening section presents a panoramic overview of urban violence in Central America, emphasising the uneven distribution of urban violence, and how violence is conditioned by a range of proximate and structural factors. The next section issues a descriptive review of gangs in contemporary urban Central America, tracing their origins, their underlying logic, and the ways in which they are socially constructed as a "threat" to public order. The third and fourth sections critically assess so-called first and second generation violence reduction strategies—known as *mano dura* ("hard hand") and *mano amiga* ("friendly hand") respectively—adopted by public authorities in Central America to address urban gangs. The final section then introduces a threefold approach to measuring the effectiveness of gang-related interventions, focusing alternately on discursive, practical and outcome-based criteria.[2] The analysis highlights how contrarily to their reported success in diminishing gang violence, first generation approaches have actually tended to radicalise the gangs, potentially pushing them towards more organised forms of criminality. Meanwhile, second generation interventions appear to be more rhetorical than practical in nature.

I. Urban Violence in Central America

Central America features amongst the highest rates of reported homicidal and criminal violence in Latin America and indeed the world. The annual global homicide rate was approximately 7 per 100,000 in 2004, while in South America it was 25 per 100,000 and in Central America it soared above 29 per 100,000 (Geneva Declaration, 2008; WHO, 2008; UNODC, 2009). In contrast to virtually every other region, South and Central America feature the fastest and most dramatic temporal escalation of (homicidal) armed violence since 1999. Demographically, the perpetration of (and victimisation by) violence appears to be

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[2] This framework for measuring 'effectiveness' is drawn from Muggah and Krause (2006) and their analysis of peace support operations in Haiti.

concentrated primarily among young males aged 15 to 34.[3] And spatially, statistical assessments undertaken by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) have detected that households in cities with more than one million inhabitants were over 70 per cent more likely to be victimised than households in cities of between 50,000-100,000 inhabitants (Gaviria & Pagés, 2002: 190). In 2006, for instance, more than 40 per cent of reported homicides in Guatemala occurred in Guatemala City, home to less than 20 per cent of the country's population (cf. Matute & García, 2007).

This stereotype of young, increasingly violent men in big cities is frequently advanced by media and political commentators in order to render causal claims between urbanisation, violence, and gangs (Caldeira, 2000). As such, rampant urbanisation is said to lead to the growth of uncontrollable slums that foster criminal activity, the rise of gangs and ultimately, the violence (Brennan-Galvin, 2002; Buvinic & Morrison, 2005). Echoing this conventional wisdom, some criminologists and sociologists contend that urban density is robustly associated with crime and narco-trafficking since greater concentrations of people inevitably trigger competition over limited resources, expanding stresses and social anomie (Naudé et al., 2006: 73; van Dijk, 1998: 63; Glaeser & Sacerdote, 1996).[4] Human geographers also tend to attribute spiralling rates of urban violence to unsustainable urbanisation and the resulting social and ecological disequilibrium (cf. Brennan, 1999).

Nonetheless, there is reason to be cautious about proclaiming an immediate correlation between city size or density and rates of urban violence (Jütersonke et al., 2007, Rodgers, forthcoming b).[5] The factors shaping the specific panorama of violence across Central America are wide-ranging, and certainly more complex than the simple model proposed above. The World Bank, for example, recently attributed the rise in Central American violence to "a complex set of factors, including rapid urbanization, persistent poverty and inequality, social exclusion, political violence, organized crime, post-conflict cultures, the emergence of illegal drug use and trafficking and authoritarian family structures" (World Bank, 2008a: 3). The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), for its part, emphasises the role of geography and weak institutions as aggravating rates of violence; with over 80 per cent of the US's cocaine supply passing through Central America states from Andean production centres, it is little wonder that organised crime violence is deeply entrenched (UNODC, 2007: 38). For its part, the US government's Joint Forces Command has honed in on narco-trafficking, weak institutions and porous borders as key factors shaping violence in neighbouring countries (US, 2008).

Crucially, urban violence is both a result of, and a catalyst for, transformations in urban governance and spatial organisation (see Moser & Rodgers, 2005). In many middle and lower-income cities, for example, sections of slums and shantytowns have assumed the character of forbidden gang and crime zones beyond the control of public security

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[3] Although a worrying spike in violence directed against women is also emerging. For example, Guatemala reported more than 560 cases of female homicides registered in 2005, while in Honduras, more than 195 women were murdered during the same period and almost 80 in 2006 (Muggah & Stevenson, forthcoming).

[4] The US government, for example, described the growth of gang and drug related violence in Mexico as an 'internal conflict' observing that the "government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state." See US (2008).

[5] Indeed, a recent global review of more than 67 major cities with populations ranging from 6,000 to 14 million persons revealed few clear patterns or trends (Geneva Declaration, 2008; UN-HABITAT, 2006; also Jütersonke et al., 2007: 165).

forces. As a result, middle- and upper-income residents may feel the need to build (higher) walls and elaborate (more expansive) security systems to shield themselves, giving rise to a Manichean landscape of 'safe' gated communities and 'violent' slums. Real and perceived violence mutually reinforce each other to create what Agbola (1997) aptly describes as an "architecture of fear". The result is a fragmentation of public space, a progressive breakdown of social cohesion through the generation of new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination, and potentially more violence. Urban violence can thus be understood as intricately linked to the structural dynamics of urban agglomeration, as well as to the competing interests of—and power relations among— social groups. The next sections attempt to detail such a panorama through the lens of gangs and the policy responses they have engendered.

II. The Gangs of Central America

One of the most visible expressions of Central American violence is undoubtedly the gang. Although gangs as a social phenomenon have long featured in Central American societies, their growth and influence over the past two decades is unprecedented. In an effort to deal with them, regional and domestic policy-makers have sought to link gangs with the spectacular rise in urban violence and disorder more generally.[6] Accusations range from homicide, muggings, theft, and intimidation, to rape, racketeering, extortion, kidnapping and the narcotics trade. Likewise, international observers are increasingly linking gangs to insurrection and internal conflict in so-called 'weak' and 'fragile' state: in 2005, for example, the US Army War College described the region's gangs as constituting a "new urban insurgency" with the goal "to depose or control the governments of targeted countries" through "*coups d'street*" (sic).[7] These sentiments were echoed in more recent publications of the US Department of Defence which called for the 'stabilization' of gang-inspired unrest (e.g. US, 2008).

Although gangs are unquestionably a major concern in Central America, a closer inspection of sensationalist claims reveals how they are profoundly misunderstood (cf. Huhn *et al*. 2006a). Certainly, reliable information about Central American gangs is scarce and official record keeping is problematic owing to underreporting, deficient data collection, and political interference (Huhn *et al*. 2006b: 8-13). Basic consensus on the size and scale of gang membership is similarly lacking. While official figures speak of some 69,000 gang members operating throughout the region, estimates from private sources and academics indicate that the number could be as high as 200,000 (UNODC 2007: 17, 60). Even the lower estimate implies that there are more gang members than military personnel in Central America: Nicaragua and Honduras register approximately 12,000 soldiers each, while El Salvador and Guatemala report 13,000 and 27,000 military personnel respectively (UNODC, 2007; Millett and Perez, 2005: 59).

While quantitative estimates are suspect, a number of qualitative studies reveals how gangs play a central role in shaping the dynamics of urban violence across the region.[8] Crucially,

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[6] According to UNODC (2007: 64), the total proportion of contemporary violence in the region attributable to gangs varies widely from 10 to 60 per cent.

[7] See Manwaring (2005; 2006). A follow-up report by the same author published in 2008 further contended that gang violence constituted "another kind of war (conflict) within the context of a 'clash of civilizations' …being waged …around the world" (Manwaring, 2008: 1).

[8] For an overview, see Huhn et al. (2006b); also Liebel (2004). The most comprehensive study is undoubtedly the one reported on in the three volumes produced by a conglomerate of Central American research institutes

though, these qualitative studies also highlight the tremendous diversity between countries and cities in the region. Specifically, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are experiencing much greater levels of gang violence than Costa Rica and Nicaragua, although it should be noted that violence in the latter is much more virulent than generally reported. Moreover, the distribution of violence within all of these countries varies across time and space, it appears, however, that the overwhelming burden of gang violence occurs in urban areas, including in particular capital cities.

Gangs are very much urban manifestations, in large part because a critical demographic mass of youths is essential for them to emerge. Evidence suggests that up to 15 per cent of youths within gang-affected communities can end up joining—although most studies indicate that on average the figure is somewhere around three to five per cent. Gang sizes range from 15 to 100 members with an average membership of 20 to 25 (ERIC et al. 2001; Rodgers, 2006a). Much like urban violence as such, gangs are not evenly distributed within cities. They are more likely to emerge in poorer areas, although the correlation between poverty and gang violence is neither causal nor systematic. Indeed, a study in Guatemala city found that neighbourhoods falling within the metropolis' bottom income quartile suffered less gang-related crime than neighbourhoods falling within the second-to-last quartile (PNUD, 2007).

The vast majority of gang members are male.[9] Nevertheless, there is evidence of female gang members and all-female gangs operating in Nicaragua and Guatemala (Rodgers, 2006a; Winton, 2007). The age range of gang members, however, is variable. For example, a 2001 survey of 1,000 gang members administered by the *Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública* (IUDOP) in El Salvador detected an average age of 20 and a mean entry age of 15. Nicaraguan gang members appear to fall between the age of 7 and 23, while the age range of Guatemalan and Honduran gang members is between 12 and 30. In interrogating their motives for joining the gang, the IUDOP assessment found that 40 per cent claimed to have done so in order to "hang out", 21 per cent because they had gang member friends, and 21 per cent in order to evade family problems. The study also detected a partial correlation between youth unemployment and gang membership: only 17 per cent of gang members were employed, and 66 per cent actively characterised themselves as "unemployed" (Santacruz Giralt & Concha-Eastman, 2001).

There are considerable challenges in pinpointing specific factors that explain gang mobilisation and membership. Reified "determinants" and proximate factors such as family fragmentation, domestic abuse, or a psychological constitution do not appear to be consistently significant. One factor that appears to systematically affect gang membership relates to religious affiliation, insofar as evangelical Protestant youths in Nicaragua tend not to join gangs (Rodgers, 2006a).[10] By way of contrast, gang mobilisation tends to be linked to

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(ERIC et al., 2001; 2004a; ERIC et al., 2004b). Three further overview studies have also been published recently: USAID (2006), Demoscopía (2007), and the work of the "*Pandillas juveniles transnacionales en Centroamérica, México y Estados Unidos*" project coordinated by the *Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México's* (ITAM) *Centro de Estudios y Programas Interamericanos* (CEPI), available online at: http://interamericanos.itam.mx/maras/index.html. The country that has been studied in greatest depth is without doubt Nicaragua (see Rocha, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Rocha and Rodgers, 2008; Rodgers, 1997, 2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c).

[9] The fact that most gang members are young men, and that Central America suffers the highest male youth homicide rates in the world (Pinheiro, 2006: 357), indirectly supports the notion that gangs are an important factor within the regional panorama of violence.

[10] It can be speculated that this is perhaps because the totalising nature of evangelical Protestantism is such that churches constitute a complete organisational framework for their members that is institutionally equivalent to

broad structural factors. These include, *inter alia*, pervasive *machismo* (many gang codes are clearly expressions of a heightened masculinity), high levels of social exclusion and horizontal inequality, legacies of authoritarianism and armed conflict (and their aftermath),[11] and the unregulated availability of weapons (it is estimated that there are over two million unregistered small arms in Central America).[12] Likewise, gangs often make up for the comparatively weak presence of the state and concomitant governance deficits (Rodgers, 2006a; Koonings & Kruijt, eds., 1999; 2004). Another significant structural variable is migration, including the deportation and return of convicts from North to Central America, discussed at more length below.

Even if there is frequently a tendency to talk about Central American gangs generically, a distinction should be rendered between "*maras*" and "*pandillas*". *Maras* constitute a phenomenon with trans-national origins, while *pandillas* are more localised, home-grown groups that are the direct inheritors of the youth gangs that have been a historic feature of Central American societies. *Pandillas* were initially present throughout the region during the post-conflict period, but are now only significantly visible in Nicaragua—and to a lesser extent in Costa Rica (where they are often called "*chapulines*")—having been almost completely supplanted by *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Although differentiated according to shape and character, the contemporary Central American-conflict *pandilla* phenomenon essentially originated as a local response to post-conflict volatility. After demobilised combatant youths returned to their home communities and had to contend with heightened socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity, they coalesced as *pandillas* that were initially effectively vigilante-style neighbourhood self-defence groups. From these relatively fluid and organic beginnings, they rapidly assumed specific behaviour patterns that included engaging in semi-ritualised forms of gang warfare. These clashes were themselves regulated by customary codes and expectations, including the protection of local community inhabitants (Rodgers, 2006a). Post-conflict *pandillas* were thus more numerous and violent than their predecessors, due in part to the military skills acquired during the war. They were also more institutionalised than before, developing hierarchies and rules that persisted in spite of heavy membership turn-over.[13]

The *maras*, on the other hand, are linked to specific migratory patterns. There are reportedly just two *mara* groups, the *Dieciocho (18)* and the *Salvatrucha (MS)*, operating in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The *maras* emerged directly from the *18th Street* gang in Los Angeles, a group initially founded by Mexican immigrants in the 1960s. The *18th Street* gang expanded during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the influx of mainly Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees who sought to incorporate into the gang as a form of social inclusion. By the latter half of the 1980s, a rival—possibly splinter—group founded by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees emerged, known as the "*Mara Salvatrucha*" ("*Salvatrucha*" being a combination of "*Salvadoreño*" and "*trucha*", meaning "quick-

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that provided by the gang. Faith also appears to play a "protective" function in the case of urban violence in Rio de Janeiro (Dreyfus et al., 2009).

[11] Despite the introduction of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes in the wake of various peace agreements, large numbers of ex-soldiers and militia were only partially integrated back into civilian life. See Muggah (2009; forthcoming).

[12] See Godnick et al. (2002) for a description of arms collection activities throughout the region.

[13] "Maturing out" is a universal feature of youth gangs; as *pandilleros* in Nicaragua put it, "there are no old gang members" (Rodgers, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that this is not quite as clear-cut in the case of *maras*, which are widely reported to have gang members of up to 30 years old, and from which it is said to be very difficult to "retire" (see International Human Rights Clinic, 2007).

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thinking" or "shrewd" in Salvadoran slang). The *Dieciocho* and the *Salvatrucha* rapidly became bitter rivals, and frequently fought each other on the streets of Los Angeles. As levels of intolerance began to grow and US immigration legislation acquired a more restrictive character, US-based gang members were repatriated to Central America.[14] Between 1998 and 2005 the US deported almost 46,000 convicts to Central America, in addition to 160,000 illegal immigrants caught without the requisite permit. Three countries—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—received over 90 per cent of the deportations from the US (USAID, 2006: 18-19).

These deportee *mareros* rapidly reproduced the structures and behaviour patterns that had earlier provided them with support and security in the United States. They subsequently founded local "*clikas*", or chapters, of their gang in their communities of origin, which in turn rapidly began to attract local youths and either supplanted or absorbed local *pandillas*.[15] Contrarily to sensationalistic media claims, although each *clika* is explicitly affiliated with either the *Mara Dieciocho* or the *Mara Salvatrucha*, and while *clikas* from different neighbourhoods affiliated with the same *mara* will often join together to fight other groupings claiming allegiance to the opposing *mara*, neither gang is a real federal structure, much less a transnational one. Neither the *Dieciocho* nor the *Salvatrucha* gangs answer to a single chain of command, and their "umbrella" nature is more symbolic of a particular historical origin than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action. In many ways, the federated nature of the *maras* is more of an imagined social morphology than a real phenomenon, based on the fact that the steady flows of deportees from the US share a common language and reference points.[16]

The extent and scale of urban violence attributed to *pandillas* and *maras* is likely to be overstated. In contrast to the numerous alarmist accounts linking Central American gangs to migrant trafficking, kidnapping, and international organised crime, it is clear from qualitative studies that both *pandillas* and *maras* are principally involved in small-scale, localised crime and delinquency such as petty theft and muggings.[17] Such activities are typically carried out on an inter-personal basis, although *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are also increasingly involved collectively in the extortion of protection money from local businesses

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[14] The two gangs were also heavily involved in the violence and looting that accompanied the 1992 Rodney King riots. The state of California soon implemented strict anti-gang laws, and prosecutors began to charge young gang members as adults instead of minors, sending hundreds to jail for felonies and other serious crimes. This was followed in 1996 by the US Congress' Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison were now to be repatriated to their countries of origin, and foreign-born American felons could be stripped of their citizenship and expelled once they served their prison terms.

[15] According to Demoscopía (2007: 49), deportee gang members are becoming a minority as the rate of deportation from the US declines, and adopting "veteran" functions, influencing *mara* behaviour through their prestige rather than actually taking part in gang activities.

[16] To this extent, although the *maras* can be conceived as loose networks of localised gangs, these do not necessarily communicate or coordinate either within or between countries. Certainly, there is little evidence of any cooperation between *maras* in El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, and even less with the original putative "mother gangs" in Los Angeles. Rather, the ties that exist are more akin to a sense of identity, founded organically on individuals' common experience of gangsterism in the US, deportation, and stigmatisation in Central America.

[17] According to Ribando (2007: 1-2), "gangs are generally considered to be distinct from organized criminal organizations because they typically lack the hierarchical leadership structure, capital, and manpower required to run a sophisticated criminal enterprise. Gangs are generally more horizontally organized, with lots of small subgroups and no central leadership setting strategy and enforcing discipline. Although some gangs are involved in the street-level distribution of drugs, few gangs or gang members are involved in higher-level criminal drug distribution enterprises run by drug cartels, syndicates, or other sophisticated criminal organizations".

and the racketeering of buses and taxis as they transfer through the territories they control. It is also true that their resort to high-calibre firearms including AK-47s and fragmentation grenades has increased the lethality of specific outcomes.[18] Nonetheless, most *pandilla* and *mara* violence appears to be spatially circumscribed, isolated in large part to poorer peripheral communities from which the gangs emerge, and is also often inter-gang.

While the scale and virulence of Central American gang violence may be less odious than widely claimed, the type of urban violence committed by *pandillas* and *maras* is qualitatively transforming. As mentioned above, Central America serves as a transit point for at least 80 per cent of all cocaine shipments between the Andean region and North America (UNODC, 2007). There is an increasing amount of evidence suggesting that the involvement of local gang members in drug trafficking and dealing is leading to both types of gangs evolving towards more violent behaviour patterns (Aguilar, 2006; International Human Rights Clinic, 2007; Rodgers, 2006a; 2007b; Rocha, 2007a). Trafficking itself appears to be decentralised, with shipments passing from Colombia to Mexico between smaller localised Central American cartels, each extracting a cut. *Maras* and *pandillas* tend to serve as a local security apparatus for the smaller cartels, or as informally connected street vendors. Gangs are seldom involved in the large-scale or trans-national movement of narcotics, nor do they wholesale, although certain studies suggest that the leaders of these small, local cartels are often ex-gang members who have "graduated" (Rodgers, 2006a; 2007a).

Gang violence is ultimately embedded in a wider crisis of exclusion and spatial segregation. It cannot be conceived narrowly as a function of rational choice or endogenous factors isolated to gang-affected communities. Owing to the scarcity of alternative (legal/legitimate) economic opportunities, some commentators describe survival in Central America, including for gang members, as "ruthless Darwinian competition" with tensions emerging over "the same informal scraps, ensur[ing] self-consuming communal violence as yet the highest form of urban involution" (Davis, 2004: 28; see also Rodgers, forthcoming a). Such processes are reinforced by new patterns of segregation and exclusion in the region's cities as a result of liberal market-led urban renewal and design. These tend to lead to the proliferation of gated communities and closed condominiums, as well as the fortification of urban transport networks (Rodgers, 2004; 2008). Also affected are forms of municipal governance, exemplified by the intensive patrolling of a city's wealthier neighbourhoods and transport hubs coupled with unpredictable, arbitrary, and often violent entrances of security forces in slums and poorer areas.[19] These latter interventions precipitate localised conditions of terror and symbolically demonstrate the power of an elite-captured state (Rodgers, 2006b). The most visible facet of this new approach is the launching of a "war on gangs" by Central American governments over the past five years, the subject of the next section.

III. Mano Dura: A war against gangs

The opening salvo of the veritable "war on gangs" underway in Central America was El Salvador's adoption of a "*Mano Dura*" ("Iron Fist") policy in July 2003. A harbinger of repressive approaches to gang control, the *Mano Dura* approach advocated the immediate imprisonment (for up to five years) of youths as young as 12 who displayed gang-related

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[18] The 2001 IUDOP survey of Salvadoran gang members mentioned above, for example, found that 25 per cent of those questioned admitted to having committed a murder in the past year, while a further 25 per cent refused to answer the question. See Santacruz Giralt & Concha-Eastman (2001).

[19] This spatial segregation mirrors, in many ways, the *favela* slums of Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro (see Dreyfus et al., 2009).

tattoos or flashed gang signs in public. Between July 2003 and August 2004, roughly 20,000 *mareros* were arrested, although approximately 95 per cent of them were eventually released without charge after the *Mano Dura* law was declared unconstitutional by the Salvadoran Supreme Court for violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Hume, 2007). A new "*Mano Super Dura*" package of anti-gang reforms was subsequently advanced, which respected the provisions of the UNCRC but stiffened the penalties for gang membership by lengthening prison sentences. Although under the new law the police required proof of active delinquent behaviour in order to arrest an individual, El Salvador's prison population doubled in just five years, from 6,000 to 12,000 prisoners, 40 per cent of whom are allegedly gang members (Hume, 2007).

Other Central American states soon followed El Salvador's lead. Honduran authorities implemented an analogous approach —"*Cero Tolerancia*" ("Zero Tolerance")—in August 2003. Inspired in part by former New York mayor Giuliani's eponymous policy, it featured a reformed penal code and legislation that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang membership. Eventually, however, the penalty was stiffened to 30 years, and provisions were made to securitise the response to gangs through intensified collaboration between the national police and the army during urban patrols. Meanwhile, Guatemala's authorities adopted "*Plan Escoba*" ("Operation Broomsweep") in January 2004, which although not as draconian as *Mano Dura* or *Cero Tolerancia* nevertheless featured provisions allowing minors to be treated as adults and the deployment of 4,000 reserve army troops in troubled neighbourhoods in the capital. For its part, Nicaragua regularly implemented a range of anti-gang initiatives from 1999 onwards, although these were of a considerably "softer" nature.[20] While these crackdowns were very popular amongst the general public in all Central American countries, they were also vigorously opposed by human rights groups. More ominously, entities such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International presented evidence—corroborated by the US State Department in 2005—of the existence of paramilitary death squads in Honduras and El Salvador that are deliberately targeting gang members, and often youths more generally, moreover in collusion with state authorities (see Faux, 2006).

Central American states have also initiated unprecedented forms of cross-border cooperation in order to deal with assumed transnational linkages amongst gangs. In September 2003, a regional summit of heads of state declared that gangs were "a destabilising menace, more immediate than any conventional war or guerrilla" (cf. Rodgers, forthcoming a). By early 2004, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua agreed to lift legal barriers to the cross-country prosecution of gang members, whatever their nationality. By mid-2005, the Presidents of El Salvador and Guatemala decided to establish a joint security force to patrol gang activity along their common border. The Central American states also sought to involve the United States which, though initially reluctant to adopt an assertive role, soon assumed a more muscular and aggressive approach following the proliferation of unfounded allegations connecting gangs to "terrorist groups" such as Al Qaeda and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2004 and 2005.[21] The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has

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[20] Although Nicaragua has gained a reputation for focusing on "preventative" rather than "repressive" anti-gang policies, empirical evidence of its practices tends to belie this (see Rocha, 2007c), even if overall the police response to gangs has not been as violent as in other Central American countries, partly because of the less violent nature of the *pandillas* compared to the *maras*.

[21] In early 2004, for example, the Honduran minister of Security, Oscar Alvarez, rather ludicrously claimed that a suspected Saudi member of Al Qaeda, Yafar Al-Taya was harbouring connections with gang leaders. In April 2005, he followed this up with a new (and no less ludicrous) claim to have thwarted a Colombian FARC-*mara* plot to kill President Ricardo Maduro.

created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs, and has announced the creation of a liaison office in San Salvador to coordinate regional information-sharing and anti-gang efforts.

Inevitably, hard-handed measures are frequently supported by the public owing to the visibility such interventions afford.[22] But while official reports claim that anti-gang initiatives generate significant reductions in criminal violence, most evidence indicates that these effects are temporary and tenuous. Crack-down operations against gangs tend to generate perverse effects—including a greater predisposition to excessive acts of brutality and new forms of adaptation to avoid capture. Indeed, repressive tactics frequently encourage members to become more organised and violent,[23] as is well illustrated by escalatory violence in Honduras in the wake of *Mano Dura*.[24] Similarly processes have been reported in El Salvador and Guatemala.

At the same time, the "war on gangs" has reportedly encouraged a number of *maras* to adapt and alter their behaviour in favour of less violent ways, and indeed, an increasing number of studies suggest that gangs are attempting to become less conspicuous. For example, gang members in El Salvador now tend to deploy less obvious signs and symbols, abandoning their tattoos and short-cropped hairstyles to avoid detection. Others are more mobile: the emigration of *maras* into Southern Mexico is widely attributed to repressive policies in Central America (Aguilar & Miranda, 2006: 49). More generally, gangs are widely reported as being less involved in crimes such as homicides. El Salvador's reported homicide rate of 41 deaths per 100,000 people in 2004 for example rose to almost 60 by 2007, while the proportion of these homicides deemed to be related to gangs simultaneously declined, for example (Reisman, 2008). While such changes are interpreted by some analysts as evidence that gangs are "losing" ground to the authorities, there are indications that this may not be the case.

The transformation of Nicaraguan *pandillas* between the 1990s and the 2000s is a case in point. These gangs shifted from efforts to create localised forms of social order and belonging to becoming organisations promoting parochial forms of drug dealing instead. Rather than protecting local neighbourhood inhabitants, gangs acted to ensure the proper functioning of local drug economies in line with the interests of their members and associated local dealers—more often than not ex-gang members—through the imposition of localised regimes of terror based on fear, threats, and widespread acts of arbitrary violence (see Rodgers, 2006a; 2007a; 2007b). By 2007, however, *pandillas* seemed to be disappearing, as most gang members were "retiring" and not being replaced by a new generation, with a small minority joining more professional and de-territorialised criminal organisations associated with

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[22] See, for example, Forter (2004), who surveyed perceptions of violence and victimisation among citizens in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

[23] Aguilar & Miranda (2006: 42). The Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence (CCPVJ) has shown that *Mano Dura* policies can be linked to a dramatic surge in youth violence—up to 40 per cent in the first three years of implementation—in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (Gutiérrez, 2006).

[24] On 30 August 2003, one month after the promulgation of the new anti-gang legislation, gang members attacked a bus in the Northern city of San Pedro Sula in broad daylight, killing 14, and leaving 18 wounded, as well as a note to President Ricardo Maduro ordering him to withdraw the law. The following month, in the town of Puerto Cortes, a young woman's head was found in a plastic bag with a note addressed to President Maduro saying that this was a response to the extrajudicial assassination of a gang member by the police. Over the course of the following year, more than 10 decapitated corpses were left in various cities with messages from gang members to the Honduras president, each time in response to a putative extrajudicial killing, and on 23 December 2004, in Chamalecon, gang members again attacked a bus and killed 28, once again leaving a message claiming revenge for the May 2004 death of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire.

narcotics trafficking. This professionalisation is ominous, insofar as the corrosive role that organised crime can play in developing contexts is extremely well-known (cf. Glenny, 2008).

IV. Mano Extendida: A new paradigm?

There appears to be a subtle shift from what we describe as "first" to "second generation" policies of containing urban gang violence in Central America. As the previous section showed, first generation initiatives such as *Mano Dura* can be characterised as *security-, or enforcement-, first*. They combine aggressive, militarised crack-down operations with increased penalties to deter gang membership. Interventions are executed by the state security apparatus and are combined with frequently draconian reforms to the judicial and penal process. Rehabilitative and developmental programmes are weakly supported, if at all. Paradoxically, first generation policies tend to contribute to and exacerbate the routine stigmatisation of gang members, thus preventing their reform and ultimately meaningful reintegration into society. Owing in large part to mounting criticism and evidence of these perverse effects, *Mano Dura* programmes are in some cases giving way to—but not replaced by—*Mano Amiga* ("friendly hand") and *Mano Extendida* ("extended hand") interventions. In theory, these second generation interventions focus not just on symptoms, but also risks of gang violence. They are typically 'voluntary' and place a greater emphasis on generating compliance through a combination of incentives.[25]

Figure 1: Second Generation Armed Violence Reduction

As the figure above shows, second generation activities come in a range of shapes and sizes. Such interventions feature host of activities ranging from voluntary weapons collection, temporary firearms carrying restrictions, and alcohol prohibitions, to environmental design in slums and targeted education and public health initiatives focusing on "at-risk youth" and even single female-headed care-giving households. Examples in Central America include APREDE (*Alianza para la Prevención del Delito*) in Guatemala, which stresses community approaches to reinserting gang members, JHAJA (*Jóvenes Hondureños Adelante, Juntos Avancemos*), offering employment opportunities in the formal and informal sectors for ex-gang members, and *Homies Unidos*, a collective of ex-gang members in El Salvador working with youth and gang members to highlight alternatives to violence, but also to transfer marketable skills.

While varying in intent and design, second generation efforts feature an evidence-led and "integrated" approach to urban violence prevention and reduction. Because action plans tend to be formulated by municipal authorities and service-providers in concert with public and private security actors, academic institutions, and civil society, they can also unconsciously adopt a more participatory and inter-sectoral approach. These interventions purposefully seek to build-up confidence and legitimacy from below through the deliberate engagement of local actors. They are dependent, however, in large part on comparatively robust and credible local public authorities and civil society engagement—institutions that may nevertheless be weakened by prolonged episodes of chronic violence (Muggah, forthcoming).

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[25] See, for example, Colletta & Muggah (forthcoming) for a review of second generation security promotion, including gang violence reduction programmes.

Building interventions on the basis of a grounded appreciation of local context is a key innovation of these second generation interventions. For example, community-driven demobilisation and reintegration activities targeting erstwhile gang members, community, and targeted weapons collection initiatives all emphasise the importance of building on local values and norms associated with the reproduction of gangs and gang violence. At best, they aim to reinforce coordinated public and private sector responses and to provide mentorship, risk education, and alternative livelihoods for would-be perpetrators and victims, especially boys and young men, in poor and marginal communities (WOLA, 2008).[26] But where partnerships with the public are developed in deliberative or factional ways, the marginalised may be excluded, and partnerships themselves may fall under the sway of more powerful local groups and political associations that seek to influence these institutions (Muggah and Jütersonke, forthcoming).

V. From rhetoric to outcomes: Assessing the effectiveness of second generation interventions

While neatly packaged in theory, second generation interventions have yet to prove themselves in practice. We outline a threefold approach to determining their effectiveness. The first element is *discursive* and considers how second generation approaches feature (or not) in normative declarations, such as legislation, decrees, policies, and public statements. Assessing discursive effects entails an interpretive approach in order to determine how these initiatives are distinguishable from prior activities and the way in which they delimit a "discursive field in which specific policy initiatives can be pursued in a coherent way" (Muggah and Krause, 2006: 131). A second benchmark to measure effectiveness is *practical*—whether there is evidence of qualitatively new initiatives, new modes of acting and behaving, and new actors and coalitions. In other words, are rhetorical commitments being converted into deeds? The third and arguably most important criterion relates to the *outcomes* of second generation activities—are they contributing to meaningful improvements in safety and security such as reductions in homicidal violence and visible decreases in gang membership? While such information is of course difficult to assemble, it is nevertheless crucial to (measuring) the "success" of the second generation enterprise itself.

When considering *discursive shifts*, it remains unclear the extent to which second generation initiatives truly comprise a transformation in Central American policy culture. In a uniquely detailed study mapping out the incentives governing the institutional and organisational framework regarding youth violence reduction in Nicaragua, for example, Rocha (2007c) judged the government's discursive promotion of second generation policies to be principally aimed at appeasing potential foreign donors and securing international funds. In practice, however, government action remained ostensibly "first generation" in nature, even if not as violent as its Northern Central American counterparts, where similar dynamics are evident. Nevertheless, second generation initiatives are clearly being heavily promoted by multilateral and bilateral development agencies working in the region, and are part of a new conceptual consensus within policy circles that cannot be ignored (Muggah and Stevenson, forthcoming). It could be the case that the much anticipated rhetorical turn has yet to fully take hold.,

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[26] Other gang-violence reduction programmes that appear to have contributed to sharp reductions in armed violence in the US include 'Identity' (Montgomery County, Maryland), Community Mobilization Initiative (Herndon, Virginia) and Gang Intervention Partnership (Columbia Heights, Washington DC). Examples of Central American activities include Group Ceiba (Guatemala), *Paz y Justicia* (Honduras) and *Equipo Nahual* (El Salvador).

At the level of *practice*, even where levels of financial investment in first generation initiatives far surpass those being accorded to second generation programmes (Hartnett, 2008: 5), examples of the latter are clearly being implemented in the region, particularly by multilateral and bilateral development agencies. Under the rubric of "citizen security" and "violence reduction", the World Bank, IADB[27], World Health Organisation (WHO), [28] the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Habitat Programme (UNHABITAT), the UN Office for Drug and Crime Control (UNODC) and others are invested in an array of activities designed to promote greater compliance and a focus on voluntary approaches to addressing urban violence and gangs. For example, the World Bank developed a Small Grants Programme for Violence Prevention (SGPVP) in 2005 as part of a wider crime and violence prevention initiative, which included a focus on gangs. In keeping with the second generation framework outlined above, the agency seeks to support "community-based" and municipally-driven approaches to reducing weapons availability and re-engineering the attitudes and behaviour of gangs who might use them. In 2006, eleven out of 100 project grants were received in Honduras and Nicaragua to prevent gang violence and empower vulnerable urban communities.[29] Table one schematically reviews a sample of first and second generation initiatives that have been implemented in Central America during the past decade.

Table 1: From first to second generation violence prevention in Central America

It is perhaps at this level of 'practice' that second generation activities are most visible. Owing to the trans-national dynamics of gang violence, a number of regional second generation activities are fast emerging. Examples of this include the SICA (*Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana*—Central American Integration System) and UNDP-led armed violence prevention activities. Similarly, the REDCEPAZ (*Red Centroamericana para la Construcción de la Paz y la Seguridad Humana*—Central American network for the Construction of Peace and Human Security) consists of a constellation of non-governmental organisations active throughout Central America. The networks undertakes a wide variety of activities that might reduce weapons supplies (through amnesties and voluntary collection), promote activities for at-risk youth (peer-to-peer mentoring and reintegration programmes), and advocate enhanced national and sub-regional policies associated with violence reduction (by enhancing legislation in line with international sandards).[30] Likewise, in Central America, an Inter-American Coalition for the Prevention of Violence (IACPV) was launched in 2000. Comprised of a collection of internationally- and regionally-focused organisations, it advocates for strategies intended to confront criminal violence with non-coercive strategies in the Americas (IACPV, 2008).

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[27] The IADB has supported large-scale citizen security and crime prevention interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean since the late 1990s and developed considerable expertise in this regard.

[28] The TEACH-VIP curriculum, developed by WHO and a network of injury prevention experts in 2004 (WHO, 2008), and TEACH-VIP Youth developed by PAHO and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) (cf. Muggah and Stevenson, forthcoming), serve as key training components for medical professionals, students and partners in El Salvador in terms of violence prevention and care.

[29] Among the projects selected by the World Bank are: *A Smile without Violence* (Honduras); *Strengthening of Productive Businesses Belonging to Former Gang Members* (Honduras); *Promoting Peaceful Living and Conflict Negotiation in Schools with the Participation of Girls, Boys and Adolescents* (Nicaragua); and *Looking for a Change: Violence Prevention Contribution in Five Municipalities of Chinandega* (Nicaragua). See World Bank (2008b).

[30] Key members of this network include the Arias Foundation (Costa Rica), FESPAD (El Salvador), CIPRODEH (Honduras), IEEPP and CEI (Nicaragua), IEPADES (Guatemala), and SERPAJ (Panama). This group of organisations share tasks, funding, and priorities, as well as national and technical expertise relating to publications, information exchange, meetings, and other forms of collaboration.

When it comes to *outcomes*, however, there is comparatively meagre evidence of effective impacts across time and space. Indeed, in the Central American countries that now long ago emerged from war, including Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, homicidal violence appears to be rising or remaining stable—sometimes equivalent to peak periods of armed conflict.[31] For example, El Salvador's national homicide rate was 45.5 per 100,000 in 1995. By 2005, the rate had actually risen to 48.8 per 100,000. More alarming, the homicide rate among El Salvador's youth population rose from 74.7 per 100,000 to 92.3 per 100,000 over the same period (Waiselfisz, 2008). Likewise, in Guatemala, the national homicide rate increased from 20.9 per 100,000 (1995) to 28.5 per 100,000 (2005) and from 29.2 per 100,000 to an astonishing 55.4 per 100,000 for youths. By comparison, national and youth (homidide) rates have fallen dramatically in Mexico and Colombia.[32] While a more effective spatial unit of analysis to measure the outcomes of second generation activities would be the city and in particular the poorer, slum areas, such data is seldom available.

Indeed, in spite of an avowed commitment to evidence-based approaches, most second generation activities have so far failed to develop comprehensive and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Indicators are also frequently poorly developed, documented, and analysed. Generally, there is little empirical evidence that second generation approaches are actually achieving major change beyond the rhetorical (Barnes, 2007). And while absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence, there are few empirical assessments measuring clear correlates between second generation interventions and corollary reductions in homicidal violence or real and perceived victimisation. To the contrary, just as there is a sense among critics that first generation interventions appear to radicalise gangs rather than destroy them, there is some concern that second generation interventions tend to be all smoke and no fire.

Conclusion

Gangs constitute a real but much misunderstood feature of the Central American panorama of urban violence. While there is little doubt that they are involved in significant levels of violence, gangs are highly heterogeneous and connected more to localised insecurity rather than the transnational menace ascribed to them by the media and certain policy-makers. Although they are fundamentally connected to certain deep-seated issues such as the long legacy of war, *machismo*, and the availability of small arms in the region, they are also the consequence of increasing (regional and national) inequality and exclusion, and as such a reflection of deeply iniquitous social processes. A growing cadre of researchers are highlighting broad social and economic phenomena such as exclusion, marginalisation, rapid social change, and lack of opportunities as the central determinants shaping the contemporary emergence of gangs in Central America.

Central America's heavy-fisted attempts to arrest its gang trouble is not working. Instead, the repressive approach adopted by most governments in the region appears to have exacerbated the problem, precipitating a tit-for-tat spiral of violence and radicalising actual and would-be

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[31] Since the end of civil war in all three countries there has been an explosion of criminal violence—especially in urban areas. Although under-reporting and under-recording is significant, in Nicaragua, for example, the absolute number of crimes tripled between 1990 and 2003. Crime perception surveys confirm rising fear amongst the population at large. See Rodgers (2004).

[32] Waiselfisz (2008) observes that national homicide rates in 1995 were 64 and 17.3 per 100,000 for Colombia and Mexico respectively. By 2005, the rates had declined to 43.8 and 9.3 per 100,000.

gang members. Seen more broadly, these actions reflect a progressive securitisation of social space anticipated by Agamben (2005). They also forecast the exceptionalism of security-first responses to problems of under-development and the way they expand opportunities for a (liberal) minority at the expense of the majority (Duffield, 2008). Repression cannot remedy the underlying societal contradictions that generated the gangs in the first place, and are instead contributing to the escalation of more organised—and in some cases, flagrantly violent—crime. Much has been said and written about a newly emerging "second generation" of policy responses to gangs. Adopting a multi-pronged approach to measuring effectiveness, this article has demonstrated that such initiatives—far from serving as a panacea—have in fact yielded mixed results. While there is piece meal evidence of certain discursive and practical gains, the outcomes of second generation efforts to reduce urban gang violence are still far from clear.

There is a recurring challenge facing those who seek to support gang violence reduction initiatives. This is that the design and implementation of social policy within any given set of circumstances will inevitably mirror the political dispensations and economic dynamics of the context in question. As such, arguably the single biggest obstacle to developing a coherent approach to urban gang violence in Central America is the deeply entrenched oligarchic nature of the societies in the region. This takes strategic intervention beyond the relatively straight-forward dilemmas associated with policy paralysis, particularly given that Central American governments can be seen as very much undertaking their visible and widely-publicised crackdowns on gangs in order to avoid taking action on much more tricky issues related to exclusion, inequality, and the lack of job creation. Put another way, it seems that gangs have become convenient scapegoats on which to blame the isthmus' problems and through which those in power attempt to maintain an unequal *status quo*. At the same time, however, they also simultaneously embody the risks of violent social action that will inevitably erupt in the face of attempts to preserve an unjust society.

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