

Deportation Feeds a Cycle of Violence in Central America

By Sam Logan with Ben Bain and Kate Kairies reporting from Washington, DC | March 14, 2006

Since the early nineties, criminal gang networks operating across the border between the United States and Central America have exploded in power and number. The gangs take advantage of loopholes in international immigration and deportation policies to spread their influence through extreme violence.

The Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, has become one of the “Most Wanted” of these gangs. What began as a loosely-connected group of Salvadoran immigrant youth banded together for protection in the join-or-die gang culture of Los Angeles has now grown into a transnational criminal hydra involved in murder, extortion, and some gun and drug smuggling.

U.S. deportation policies aggressively send undocumented gang members back to their home countries in Central America. They export U.S. gang culture and hardened criminals to countries whose internal security forces are ill-equipped to deal with the new threat. The street gangs have rapidly grown beyond being just a neighborhood problem to presenting a real national security threat in these countries.

Criminal deportees bring tactics, organization, and other criminal skills learned in U.S. prisons. These abilities translate into more sophisticated networks that have created a web that spans across Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Over time this network has made some links with organized crime, acting at times like foot soldiers to help with smuggling, assassination, and other duties.

Street gangs remain distinct from organized crime. But they have become a leading cause of insecurity in Central America. The region’s history with clandestine death squads, drug and gun smuggling, corruption, and violence during the U.S.-supported “dirty wars” provided a propitious culture for the gangs’ insertion into society. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation as well as national police in three Central American countries actively seek solutions to break this 20-year-old cycle, but U.S. authorities and their Central American colleagues face a difficult game of catch-up.

Born in the USA

The civil wars that ravaged Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in the 1980s displaced tens of thousands of Central Americans from their homes into Mexico and the United States. Many of these families settled in cities in the United States close to the Mexican border. Cities such as Los Angeles absorbed large communities of Central Americans who sought to carve out a space in the city’s poor neighborhoods that had been controlled by Mexican street gangs since as early as the 1950s.

The word “mara” loosely translated from Spanish means group or gang. Salvatrucha, in Salvadoran Spanish slang, means a streetwise Salvadoran. Mara Salvatruchas is a term that refers to Salvadoran immigrants who formed gangs in the 70s and 80s to protect themselves from their rivals in the street gangs that dominated Los Angeles at that time.

The number 13 marks the position of the letter “m” in the alphabet and is a nod to the Mexican Mafia, a gang that controls the prisons in Southern California. Put



A tattooed Central American gang member. Photo: IndyMedia.



together, the name “MS-13” states membership of a gang, primarily made up of Salvadorans, that holds allegiance to the Mexican Mafia in Southern California.

The MS-13 formed in California, but over the years has spread into Central America due to transnational movement of gang members through choice or deportation. Since the mid-90s, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has actively deported tens of thousands of convicted criminals back to their countries of birth in Central America.

After September 11, 2001, INS was absorbed into U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). ICE, working with the other DHS components, presents a more comprehensive approach to tackling transnational gang violence. However, years of questionable deportation policies have left the organization with a formidable challenge.

In many cases, deported individuals were brought to the United States at a young age. So when they are deported to Central America, they have little to depend on in their home countries, outside of gang connections.

The MS-13 is now an established presence in Central America. It actively recruits young men and women, who in turn eventually find themselves back in the United States as illegal immigrants. This cycle, fed in part by U.S. deportation strategies, has increased MS-13 numbers in both Central America and the United States, where there is now a significant MS-13 presence on both the east and west coasts.

Over the years, the MS-13 grew and members moved beyond Los Angeles into other U.S. cities. MS-13 presence has been spotted in over 33 U.S. states as well as the District of Columbia. There are an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 MS-13 members in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

As the MS-13 grew throughout the United States their clashes with rivals from the M-18 gang, as well as other street gangs, earned MS-13 members a strong reputation for brutal violence. It is widely known that the MS-13 weapon of choice is a machete.

Recruitment is often self-selective, targets pre-adolescents, and more often than not leads to a life of crime where the only escape is through serious injury or death.

Gang Life

When he was nine, Luis, a former member of the Mara Salvatrucha street gang, started hanging out with gang members in Southern California. By the time he was 13 he was considered an unofficial member of the MS-13. His official membership began when he was “jumped in.” This process is part of gang law that requires that new members be jumped by a small group of peers who punch, kick, and otherwise pummel the new member for the duration of the initiation ceremony. Enduring the beating is a show of toughness and loyalty to the gang.

“When it became law that everybody had to get jumped in, my homeboys said, ‘Hey, you want to keep chillin’ with us, you’re gonna have to get jumped in,’” Luis told the IRC Americas Program. “I was 16 or 17 when I got jumped in,” he said.

Once young men and women pass through this tough initiation, they join a large group of peers who provide support, protection, financial stability, and companionship. Luis explained that, although in the United States he has never seen kids as young as seven or eight jumped in, he has seen 7-year-old kids already covered with MS-13 tattoos in Central America. “They’re basically homeless children,” he said.

Street gangs create social networks that rely on crime to finance what is essentially a lifestyle that allows youths to survive in a world where there are limited opportunities, a lack of parental presence, and little to no hope for a chance at a better life.

Luis lived for a time in Virginia with his mother, and then eventually moved back to California to live with his father and aunts, but there was no central parental figure in his life. So his chosen family became his street gang.

“When I grew up and everything I joined the gang, I felt as though I owed something to them, because they were there for me when I actually needed someone,” Luis explained.

“They showed me love; they bought me shoes, clothes, stuff like that. So I felt comfortable with them. I didn’t sense any danger, or any fear that they were going to get me in trouble. I only had positive thoughts. I knew what they did, but they explained to me why they do what they did.”

In the slums of Los Angeles and other cities in California, the kids that come from broken or separated families in marginal immigrant communities quickly fall into gangs. It's unavoidable, according to Luis.

"If you walk down the block, there is another gang there. Every block is a different gang, so people who live over there, especially in neighborhoods where there are gangs, it's not like you really have a choice," he said.

Getting Out

During a high speed car chase with police about five years ago, Luis lost his left leg after he flew through the front windshield of his car in a head-on collision. While recovering in the hospital, family members pleaded with him to see his survival of the crash as a miracle, and a reason to consider if staying in MS-13 was worth dying for.

"It did work. That's when I decided to chill, and I did chill for a while because I was in recovery. But then I ran into some friends at a party a few months later, and they wanted me to come back into the game. I couldn't say no, because I knew if I didn't do something to prove I was still chillin' with them, they would try and mess me up, even stab me, for not being loyal to them."

When the other members of MS-13 asked Luis to do a car-jacking to prove he was still in the gang, they left him alone at the scene when a local cop approached and caught Luis stealing the car, landing him in jail. After being betrayed by his friends, "the last thing I wanted while in prison was to hear from MS ... I was so angry, and felt like I had been betrayed, almost like I had been set up," he explained.

Back on the streets after serving some time for the car-jacking, Luis continued to question what kind of friends his gang buddies really were, guys who had forced him to commit a crime, and then abandoned him in the face of police heat. Even though his mind was now filling with thoughts of leaving MS, he continued to run with the gang, and was eventually arrested again, this time for possession of cocaine. Luis is still in the United States, working to stay there and break out of the cycle that has trapped so many other gang members.

Deportation Policy Exacerbates the Problem

U.S. immigration authorities began aggressively targeting illegal immigrants within the U.S. prison system in 1996. Many prisoners were deported back to their home countries upon completion of their prison terms.

In many cases, young men who were arrested for assault, drug dealing, or other relatively low-level profit-making criminal activity entered the prison system. U.S. immigration authorities then identified them as not having proper documentation and tagged them for deportation.

Many of these young men came to the United States as children in the 1980s with their parents to flee the civil wars in Central America. They do not have strong familial connections in Central America, and in some cases do not even speak Spanish well. Often their "return" to their homeland is like arriving alone in a foreign country.

The growing problem of the MS-13 in Central America highlights inadequate immigration controls and poor deportation policies. To effectively tackle the problem requires binational efforts that combine immigration reform, changes in deportation policies, as well as domestic security measures. It also requires U.S. policies to effectively handle the realities of immigration as well as manage foreign nationals, both legal and undocumented, living in the United States.

In fiscal year 1997, the INS deported 111,794 illegal foreigners. Over half had been convicted of a crime in the United States. It was the first time the INS had deported over 100,000 illegal residents in one year.

"In that process [the United States] has managed to export U.S. gang-style culture, customs, and contacts," said Geoff Thale, a Senior Associate for Central America at the Washington Office on Latin America.

Gang members that are sent back to their home countries bring with them more sophisticated methods, organizational strategies, and contacts in the United States—all facilitating a more aggressive and organized criminal enterprise. These factors combine to create a loosely-tied network of street gangs that have complete control over towns and suburban areas in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

Their often illegal status in the United States has thrust the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's section of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to the forefront of U.S. authorities' strategies. This national security and international staging approach has caused some friction with local officials who would prefer to deal with it within their own security strategies.

Central American Security

Meanwhile, Central American governments have taken a zero-tolerance approach to dealing with street gangs. While many observers agree that the gang problem is a symptom of large-scale social problems rooted in poverty, unemployment, and limited opportunity, government officials have harnessed popular support among voters through promoting policies commonly referred to as "hard hand" and "iron fist" or *mano dura* in Spanish.

Mano dura policies specifically target street gangs, also referred to as *pandillas*. In El Salvador, the *Super Mano Dura* policy is made up of four axes, Salvadoran spokesman for the Ministry of Government, Porfirio Chica, told the Americas Program. They are: prevention, rehabilitation, combating crime, and reinsertion. Yet the policy, when implemented, often leads to national police officers targeting young men and women for arrest based on tattoos, loitering on certain street corners, or simply association with known gang members. Cops who arrest gang members see many of them released within 24 hours due to lack of evidence pertaining to real crimes. "Of the 10,000 street gang members currently located in the Salvadorian criminal database, over 3,000 currently reside in prison," Chica said, adding that "because of a tendency for criminals to organize themselves in prison we have taken the leaders and placed them in separate maximum security prisons."

These policies have spurred an unofficial war between gang members and the police. Politicians and other members of Central America's elite social classes have also been accused of paying individuals, including off-duty police officers, to hunt down and assassinate gang members. The retaliation to these street vigilante actions from MS-13 members has been brutal, violent, and widespread.

Carmen Aida Ibarra, a researcher with the Guatemala-based Myrna Mack Foundation, told the Americas Program that "corruption plays an important role

because it is the principal factor that impedes the deconstruction of clandestine groups." Private individuals or interests perpetuate the illegal violent activities of these groups by paying them not to kill communists but young gang members.

Five years after El Salvador's civil war ended in 1991, the country boasted the world's highest death rate per capita, with over 150 deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants. Polls showed that during this time, some 46% of the population believed that citizens retained the right to deliver justice with their own hands.

While authorities have been targeting gang and criminal violence, the success of polices like *mano dura* remains debatable.

"El Salvador still holds the region's number one spot for per capita homicides," Ricardo Montoya, analyst with the Research Foundation for the Application of Law, a Salvadoran research organization, said in a recent interview. Montoya explained that crime, particularly homicide, has increased in El Salvador since the first application of *mano dura* politics in 2003.

In 2005 there were 3,812 homicides, the highest figure in seven years. This is an average of ten to 12 murders a day in a county of some 6.7 million people. According to the Legal Medical Institute, over 80% of those killed were shot in the head.

Guatemala currently registers over 100 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, and many of those killed are young men believed to be associated with street gangs. In 2004 some 5,553 youths were killed in Guatemala, according to Emilio Goubaud, director of the Association for the Prevention of Crime, a Guatemalan organization.

Perhaps the most public display of street gang activity happened in Honduras in December 2004 when a group of MS-13 members attacked a bus with automatic rifles. They killed 28 civilians and wounded 12 more. Their attack is considered to be retaliation for *mano dura* policies promoted by the Honduran government. Specific death threats, left in a note found at the scene of the crime, were made to Honduran President Ricardo Maduro and Congressional leader Lobo Sosa.

Transnational Cooperation

“When [gang members] came out of the prison systems of the United States and went back [to their home countries], that’s when they became more formalized. Then what happened is that the environment down there was right for these kinds of criminal activities and it just spread,” Stanley Stoy, acting director for the FBI’s MS-13 National Gang Task Force, told Americas Program.

Stoy explains that the FBI began looking at the MS-13 more closely in late 2004 due to its level of violence and transnational presence. The FBI has been active in Central American countries, especially El Salvador, assisting with intelligence gathering and promoting professionalism in the national police. On Sept. 7, 2005 the FBI participated in a day-long, large transnational operation that included more than 6,400 federal agents and other officers in 15 U.S. states, Mexico, and Central America. The operation netted 659 arrests of MS-13 and other transnational gang members: 77 in the United States, 232 in El Salvador, 162 in Honduras, 98 in Guatemala, and 90 in Mexico’s Chiapas state, which shares a border with Guatemala.

The operation’s success demonstrated the benefits of transnational cooperation, but some analysts warn that there are still over 100,000 street gang members in Honduras. Other estimates show that there are as many as some 600,000 street gang members in El Salvador.

While these numbers may be inflated, they illustrate the extent of the problem. On Sept. 1, 2005, El Salvador even took the step of deploying 1,000 soldiers to reinforce police efforts to contain street gangs there.

Experts like Geoff Thale agree that military involvement is likely to exacerbate the problem, as other heavy-handed actions have done, rather than bring a rapid solution. Increased professionalism among Central American police officers is perhaps the quickest route to improving security there. U.S. deportation practices should be more sensitive to Central America’s street gang problems. But root causes based in poverty and limited opportunity in Central American countries must be addressed before this endemic security problem can be adequately combated.

The FBI says that there is no link between MS-13 and al-Qaida or other terrorist groups, but experts believe that the MS-13 and other street gang groups have become more and more involved with the elite organized crime groups that traffic guns and drugs in the region.

If this is the case, then what used to be a regional problem could very well stretch into a hemispheric phenomenon, where Colombian and Mexican organized crime elements outsource their dirty work to Central America’s street gangs. The recent efforts by U.S. authorities and their Central American counterparts represent a good start in tackling this complex, multi-faceted transnational problem. What remains to be seen, however, is whether this new concerted, multi-national approach can undo two decades of problematic, uncoordinated efforts.

“It may develop into something much greater if we didn’t address the problem,” said Stoy of the FBI. “We realize that if we didn’t do anything toward this problem or to prevent its entrenchment here in the United States it would overtake us.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Operation Community Shield targets street gangs nationwide in the United States:

<http://www.ice.gov/graphics/investigations/comshield/index.htm>

The Myrna Mack foundation works to promote justice, peace and human rights in Guatemala:

<http://www.myrnamack.org.gt/fundacion.htm>

The Washington Office on Latin America, based in Washington DC, continues to work on promoting human rights in Latin America. Their Central American program has focused particularly on street gangs.

http://www.wola.org/central_america/central_america.htm

The FBI has worked to contain the growing presence of MS-13 in the United States. This is Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative Division, Cris Swecker's statement to the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere House of International Relations Committee, April 20, 2005:

<http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/swecker042005.htm>

More information on El Salvador's "Super Mano Dura" plan can be found here:

<http://www.libertadcondignidad.org/getinformed/anti-gang.htm>

Amnesty International's Open Letter on the Anti-Mara Act, legislation that first began targeting street gangs in El Salvador:

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/elsalvador/document.do?id=2BFAB2F2B633905080256E1B00478D43>

CRS study on Central American gangs from last year:

<http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress05/swecker042005.htm>

2004 U.S. DOS Country Report on Human Rights in El Salvador, released February 2005:

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41760.htm>

MS-13 member makes ICE most wanted list:

http://www.ice.gov/graphics/news/insideice/articles/insideice_052305_Web2.htm

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