Gangs and Violence Reduction in Central America

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Urban violence is a major preoccupation of policymakers, planners and development practitioners in cities around the world. States routinely seek to contain such violence through repression, as well as through 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 in turn 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 radicalize gangs, potentially pushing them towards more organized 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

Introduction

Urban violence is fast emerging as one of the major preoccupations of policymakers, planners, and development practitioners in cities and municipalities around the world (see UN-HABITAT, 2007).
Although targeted prescriptions to reduce armed violence are emerging from multilateral and bilateral agencies, research emphasizes how urban violence is highly heterogeneous, multicausal 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 (see, for example, Manwaring, 2005, 2006). In some cases, gangs are explicitly connected to the surge in violence that accompanies narco-trafficking (USJFC, 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 it is often portrayed.

The article is divided into five parts. The opening section presents a panoramic overview of urban violence in Central America, emphasizing the uneven distribution of urban violence and how violence is conditioned by a range of proximate and structural factors. A subsequent 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 in turn on discursive, practical and outcome-based criteria. The analysis highlights how, despite their reported success in diminishing gang violence, first-generation approaches have actually tended to radicalize the gangs, potentially pushing them towards more organized forms of criminality. Meanwhile, second-generation interventions appear to be more rhetorical than practical in nature.

Urban Violence in Central America

Central America is home to some of 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

1 This framework for measuring ‘effectiveness’ is drawn from Muggah & Krause (2006) and their analysis of peace support operations in Haiti.
America it was 25 per 100,000, and in Central America it soared above 29 per 100,000 (Geneva Declaration, 2008; WHO, 2008; UNODC, 2008). 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 victimization by) violence appears to be concentrated primarily among young males aged 15 to 34. 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% more likely to be victimized than households in cities of 50,000–100,000 inhabitants (Gaviria & Pagés, 2002: 190). In 2006, for instance, more than 40% of reported homicides in Guatemala occurred in Guatemala City, home to less than 20% of the country’s population (see 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 urbanization, violence and gangs (Caldeira, 2000). Rampant urbanization 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, Prinsloo & Ladikos, 2006: 73; van Dijk, 1998: 63; Glaeser & Sacerdote, 1996). Human geographers also tend to attribute spiralling rates of urban violence to unsustainable urbanization and the resulting social and ecological disequilibrium (see 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, Krause & Muggah, 2007; Rodgers, forthcoming b). 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 (2008a: 3), for example, recently attributed the rise in Central American violence to ‘a complex set of factors, including rapid urbaniza-

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2 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).

3 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 USJFC (2008: 36).

4 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; see also Jütersonke, Krause & Muggah, 2007: 165).
tion, 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’. The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), for its part, emphasizes the role of geography and weak institutions as aggravating rates of violence: with over 80% of the US’s cocaine supply passing through Central American states from Andean production centres, it is little wonder that organized 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 (USJFC, 2008).

Crucially, urban violence is both a result of, and a catalyst for, transformations in urban governance and spatial organization (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 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.

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 policymakers have sought to link gangs with the spectacular rise in urban violence and disorder more generally.\(^5\) Accusations range from homicide, muggings, theft and intimidation, to rape, racketeering, extortion, kidnap-

\(^5\) According to UNODC (2007: 64), the total proportion of contemporary violence in the region attributable to gangs varies widely from 10% to 60%.
ping and the narcotics trade. Likewise, international observers are increasingly linking gangs to insurrection and internal conflict in so-called weak and fragile states: 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). These sentiments were echoed in more recent publications of the US Department of Defense that called for the ‘stabilization’ of gang-inspired unrest (see, for example, USJFC, 2008).

Although gangs are unquestionably a major concern in Central America, a closer inspection of sensationalist claims reveals how they are profoundly misunderstood (see Huhn, Oettler & Peetz, 2006a). Certainly, reliable information about Central American gangs is scarce, and official record-keeping is problematic owing to under-reporting, deficient data collection and political interference (Huhn, Oettler & Peetz, 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 & Perez, 2005: 59).

While quantitative estimates are suspect, a number of qualitative studies reveal how gangs play a central role in shaping the dynamics of urban violence across the region. Crucially, 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, though the distribution of violence within all of these countries varies across time and space, it appears that the overwhelming burden of gang violence occurs in urban areas, including in particular capital cities.

6 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).

7 For an overview, see Huhn, Oettler & Peetz (2006b); see 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 (ERIC et al., 2001, 2004a,b). 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,b, 2003, 2005, 2006a,b, 2007a,b,c; Rocha & Rodgers, 2008; Rodgers, 1997, 2000, 2006a,b, 2007a,b,c).
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% of youths within gang-affected communities can end up joining – although most studies indicate that on average the figure is somewhere around 3–5%. 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’s 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. 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 ages 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 a gang, the IUDOP assessment found that 40% claimed to have done so in order to ‘hang out’, 21% because they had gang-member friends, and 21% in order to evade family problems. The study also detected a partial correlation between youth unemployment and gang membership: only 17% of gang members were employed, and 66% actively characterized themselves as ‘unemployed’ (Santacruz Giralt & Concha-Eastman, 2001).

There are considerable challenges in pinpointing specific factors that explain gang mobilization 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). By way of contrast, gang mobilization tends to be linked 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

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8 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.

9 It can be speculated that this is perhaps because the totalizing nature of evangelical Protestantism is such that churches constitute a complete organizational framework for their members that is institutionally equivalent to 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).
authoritarianism and armed conflict (and their aftermath), and the unregulated availability of weapons (it is estimated that there are over two million unregistered small arms in Central America). Likewise, gangs often make up for the comparatively weak presence of the state and concomitant governance deficits (Rodgers, 2006a; Koonings & Kruijt, 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 transnational origins, while pandillas are more localized, 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 demobilized 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-ritualized 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, owing in part to the military skills acquired during the war. They were also more institutionalized than before, developing hierarchies and rules that persisted in spite of heavy membership turnover.

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

10 Despite the introduction of disarmament, demobilization 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).
11 See Godnick (2002) for a description of arms-collection activities throughout the region.
12 ‘Maturing out’ is a universal feature of youth gangs; as pandilleros in Nicaragua put it, ‘there are no old gang members’ (Rodgers, 2000: 173). There is evidence to suggest that this is not quite as clearcut 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).
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-thinking’ or ‘shrewd’ in Salvadoran slang). The Dieciocho and the Salvatrucha rapidly became bitter rivals, frequently fighting 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. 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-thinking’ or ‘shrewd’ in Salvadoran slang). The Dieciocho and the Salvatrucha rapidly became bitter rivals, frequently fighting 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. Between 1998 and 2005, the USA 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% of the deportations from the USA (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. Contrary 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 USA share a common language and reference points.

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 organized crime, it is clear from qualitative studies that both pandillas and maras are principally involved in small-scale, localized crime and delinquency such as petty theft and muggings.\textsuperscript{16} Such activities are typically carried out on an interpersonal basis, although maras in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras are also increasingly involved collectively in the extortion of protection money from local businesses and the racketeering of buses and taxis as they transfer through the territories the gangs 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.\textsuperscript{17} 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\% 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 decentralized, with shipments passing from Colombia to Mexico between smaller localized 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 transnational 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

\textsuperscript{16} 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’.

\textsuperscript{17} The 2001 IUDOP survey of Salvadoran gang members mentioned above, for example, found that 25\% of those questioned admitted to having committed a murder in the past year, while a further 25\% refused to answer the question; see Santacruz Giralt & Concha-Eastman (2001).
commentators describe survival in Central America, including for gang members, as ‘ruthless Darwinian competition’, with tensions emerging over ‘the same informal scraps, ensuring 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.¹⁸ These latter interventions precipitate localized 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.

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 tattoos or flashed gang signs in public. Between July 2003 and August 2004, roughly 20,000 mareros were arrested, although approximately 95% 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 (Hume, 2007). A new ‘Mano Super Dura’ package of anti-gang reforms was subsequently advanced, which respected the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 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% 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

¹⁸ This spatial segregation mirrors, in many ways, the favela slums of São Paolo and Rio de Janeiro (see Dreyfus et al., 2009).
Tolerance) – in August 2003. Inspired in part by former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani’s policy of the same name, 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 securitize 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. While these crackdowns were very popular among the general public in all the 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 among 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’ (see 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. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has created a special task force focusing on Central American gangs, and has announced the creation of a liaison

19 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.

20 In early 2004, for example, 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 Honduran President Ricardo Maduro.
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. 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. Crackdown 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 organized and violent, as is well illustrated by escalatory violence in Honduras in the wake of Mano Dura. Similar 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 (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 localized forms of social order and belonging to becoming organizations promoting parochial forms of drug dealing instead. Rather than protecting local neighbourhoods...

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21 See, for example, Forter (2005), who surveyed perceptions of violence and victimization among citizens in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

22 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% in the first three years of implementation – in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (Gutiérrez, 2006).

23 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, along with 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 ten decapitated corpses were left in various cities with messages from gang members to the Honduran 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 deaths of 105 gang members in a prison following a suspect fire.
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 localized regimes of terror based on fear, threats and widespread acts of arbitrary violence (see Rodgers, 2006a, 2007a,b). 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 deterritorialized criminal organizations associated with narcotics trafficking. This professionalization is ominous, insofar as the corrosive role that organized crime can play in developing contexts is extremely well known (see Glenny, 2008).

**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 characterized as security-, or enforcement-, first. They combine aggressive, militarized crackdown 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 stigmatization 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 being 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 on risks of gang violence. They are typically ‘voluntary’ and place a greater emphasis on generating compliance through a combination of incentives.24

As Figure 1 shows, second-generation activities come in a range of shapes and sizes. Such interventions feature a 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

24 See, for example, Colletta & Muggah (forthcoming) for a review of second-generation security promotion, including gang violence reduction programmes.
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 intersectoral 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).

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 demobilization and reintegration activities targeting erstwhile gang members and community and targeted weapons-collection initiatives all emphasize 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). But, where partnerships with the public are developed in deliberative or factional ways, the marginalized 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 & Jütersonke, forthcoming).

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 & 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 incen-

25 Other gang violence reduction programmes that appear to have contributed to sharp reductions in armed violence in the USA include Identity (Montgomery County, MD), the Community Mobilization Initiative (Herndon, VA) and the 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).
tives governing the institutional and organizational 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 & Stevenson, forthcoming). It could be the case that the much anticipated rhetorical turn has yet to fully take hold.

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, the IADB,26 the World Health Organization (WHO),27 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Habitat Programme (UN-HABITAT), 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 the availability of weapons and re-engineering the attitudes and behaviour of gangs who might use them. In 2006, 11 out of 100 project grants were received in Honduras and Nicaragua to prevent gang violence and empower vulnerable urban communities.28 Table I schematically reviews a sample of first- and second-generation initiatives that have been implemented in Central America during the past decade.

26 The IADB has supported large-scale citizen security and crime prevention interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean since the late 1990s, and has developed considerable expertise in this regard.
27 The TEACH-VIP curriculum, developed by the WHO (2008) and a network of injury-prevention experts in 2004, and TEACH-VIP Youth, developed by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) (see Muggah & Stevenson, forthcoming), serve as key training components for medical professionals, students and partners in El Salvador in terms of violence prevention and care.
28 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).
Table I: From First- to Second-Generation Violence Prevention in Central America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First generation</th>
<th>Second generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Development of national commission to implement small arms controls; weapons-collection initiatives; community policing activities; increased NGO and civil society participation in arms transfer controls, such as violence monitoring/surveillance programmes, risk education, television advertisements and advocacy materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>UNDP-supported initiatives targeting at-risk youths involved in narcotics trafficking; interventions focusing on children associated with armed groups; urban programmes such as ‘Municipalities Without Weapons’; public and private population health programmes targeting risk factors for violence; legislative reforms associated with international arms controls and civilian possession; the National Commission of Citizen Security and Social Peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Debate over a national arms control policy; UNDP-led interventions focusing on at-risk youth; municipality-level conflict resolution committees; community policing targeting high-risk areas; national commissions to investigate threats received by representatives working in the field of, or fields related to, violence and its impacts; NGO and civil society participation in armed violence programmes (working with at-risk youth, awareness-raising programmes, protection and judicial reforms).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>UNDP-organized small arms control, and security and justice reform project; violence-monitoring database; NGO participation in armed violence programmes (including awareness-raising and judicial reforms).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>UNDP-supported at-risk youths and violence reduction programmes in pilot sites; legislative reform on international and domestic arms controls; establishment of national guidelines for arms storage/stockpile management and civilian possession; targeted community policing; public health projects focusing on armed violence risks and symptoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>UN and government efforts to promote the empowerment of civil society/NGOs working against and researching armed violence; faith-based awareness-raising of the risks of arms among at-risk youth; legislative reforms associated with arms controls.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Muggah & Stevenson (forthcoming)
It is perhaps at this level of ‘practice’ that second-generation activities are most visible. Owing to the transnational 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 nongovernmental organizations active throughout Central America. The network 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 subregional policies associated with violence reduction (by enhancing legislation in line with international standards).29 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 organizations, it advocates for strategies intended to confront criminal violence with non-coercive strategies in the Americas (IACPV, 2008).

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.30 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 (homicide) rates have fallen dramatically in Mexico and Colombia.31 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 are seldom available.

29 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 organizations share tasks, funding and priorities, as well as national and technical expertise relating to publications, information exchange, meetings and other forms of collaboration.

30 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 among the population at large; see Rogers (2004).

31 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.
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). Also, 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 victimization. To the contrary, just as there is a sense among critics that first-generation interventions appear to radicalize 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 localized insecurity rather than the transnational menace ascribed to them by the media and certain policymakers. 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, marginalization, 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 radicalizing actual and would-be gang members. Seen more broadly, these actions reflect a progressive securitization of social space anticipated by Agamben (2005). They also forecast the exceptionalism of security-first responses to problems of underdevelopment 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 is instead contributing to the escalation of more organized – 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 multipronged 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 piecemeal 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 straightforward dilemmas associated with policy paralysis, particularly given that Central American governments can be seen as very much undertaking their visible and widely publicized 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’s 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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