

# Strategy Research Project International Fellow

## Gangs in El Salvador

by

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United States Army War College  
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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## **Abstract**

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The violence generated by gangs in El Salvador has become a serious threat to national and regional security. Nowadays, the gang problem has become almost uncontrollable for the security authorities of the country, which adversely affects the civil society and economic development. Gang criminal activity includes drug trafficking, racketeering, trafficking in persons, violence, terrorism and extortion. They use various techniques to raise money and recruit new young members. Due to the increase in violence in recent years, it has been necessary to employ force by both the National Civil Police and the Armed Forces. However, the policies employed have mostly been oriented to repression and very little to reinsertion. The strategies designed by the government have failed due to the lack of support from other public and private institutions.





## **Gangs in El Salvador**

We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and control it effectively, so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, offers to those who commit crimes, a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society.

—Pope John Paul II<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Violence and crime in Central America began to be noticeable and grow significantly from the early 90's. In El Salvador there are 31 deaths per hundred thousand inhabitants, an average of 7 homicides a day.<sup>2</sup> Some governments of the Central American region believe that high rates of violence are mainly due to the proliferation of gangs, drugs in transit through the region from southern countries, and mass deportations of northern countries. On the other hand, the civil society thinks that it is due to lack of employment, family breakdown caused by migration to northern countries, and the lack of government programs that benefit the poor and marginalized by society. However, over the course of time it has been shown that the phenomenon of gangs is mainly responsible for the violence; also the gangs are responsible for the stagnation of economic growth and lack of social peace.

The growth and scope of the actions of gangs has been astonishing, they have taken advantage of the weakness of the judicial system, and the polarization of politics in the country. In this sense the gangs employ young teenagers to carry out criminal activities. The laws for juvenile legislation establish that young people under 15 are not criminally responsible. They should not be held criminally responsible because they have not reached the age that the law establishes to be processed as criminal. In the case of adolescents between 15 and 17, the rules require a special procedure if they

violate the law, they may be punished by up to 15 years of confinement.<sup>3</sup> In addition, this law establishes a series of targeted sanctions, to help the adolescents complete their socialization, as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is one reason why many crimes have gone unpunished. Moreover, due to increasing violence and no effective strategies to stop this scourge on society, death squads emerged clandestinely. These death squad killed gang members regardless of origin, which further aggravated the situation of violence. Finally, the violence poses a serious threat to national and regional security.

The purpose of this investigation is first to present the background of the situation of how gangs emerged. Secondly, to explain how gangs threaten the internal security and economy through drug trafficking, extortion, prostitution, terrorism, and arms trafficking, among some others. Third, to mention some of the strategies taken by the government of El Salvador to counteract gang actions. Fourth, to present some proposals to counter the crime. Finally, to summarize the problem.

### Background

Gangs are the product of a conflict within the Cold War context. The population that inhabited the areas of combat escaped to the United States. In the same way, a huge quantity of combatants who had fought with the Salvadoran Armed Force or with the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerrilla went to the northern countries.<sup>4</sup> Most of these people went to live to the poorest areas of Washington, New York and, especially, in the southern cities of the United States.<sup>5</sup> Due to the low academic level and the illegal immigration situation, most of these people could not find a job.<sup>6</sup>

In cities the familiarity with the handling of arms and armed combat were the only tools. Some of them were incorporated into neighborhood gangs such as the Crips and Bloods whose origin was Afro-American, the Mexico-American EME made of illegal immigrants; and the Mexican Mafia. Salvadorans gathered the multi-racial gangs, 18 Street (M-18).<sup>7</sup>

Other Salvadorans founded the Salvatrucha Gang 13, or MS-13, to compete against 18 Street, because they thought Salvadorans in that gang were traitors.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the reasons by which these gangs keep a true war today, which increases the violence even more.

Once MS-13 and Street 18 were formed, many youth without parents or disturbed by the war, and without job, joined.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime these youth violated the laws; most of them were sent back to their nation, bringing their gang customs with them. This is the gang's genesis in El Salvador.<sup>10</sup>

Once in El Salvador, gangs got established among the people of limited economic resources.<sup>11</sup> The Clicas (cells or groups) sent back from the north countries established the MS-13 at San Salvador after of the armed conflict.<sup>12</sup> Since then, these gangs have been increasing their membership, turning more violent and improving their control in their organization. According to a field study done in June, 2012, it was found that the approximate number reached between the two gangs is 62,000, including the passive members, who are the camp followers, candidates and direct relatives.<sup>13</sup> These gangs are present all over Central-America. It is also believed that these gangs are settled in most of the states of the United States. The United States identifies the MS-13 and M-18 as international criminal organizations, which makes it possible to confiscate their properties.

Gangs result from the following factors. First, because of the immigration to the United States, a consequence of the conflict where immigrants joined criminal gangs.

Second, because of the mass deportation from the United States back to their countries of origin, bringing with them their gang customs. Third, because of the family breakdown caused by the immigration as a consequence of the armed conflict. Fourth, because of the few job opportunities for young people who have low education levels. Fifth, because the young live in excluded areas with minimum access to education and other public benefits. Sixth, because of the inefficient, and, in some cases, corrupt police and legal systems. Seventh, because of the easy access to weapons and high levels of violence between the family and the community.

Since the beginning of the 1990's these gangs began to organize, growing in quantity and improving their criminal activity. Their way of action was focused on street robberies and to a lesser degree homicides. It is necessary to express emphatically that gangs between 2000 and 2010 developed significantly and became racketeers. Therefore, they stopped being street gangs and this made them more violent. At the same time, they extended their range of criminal activity, such as: homicides, kidnapping, extortion, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, falsification of documents, human trafficking, and armed assault, where they get profits in the millions of dollars. They assigned leaders as representatives at the national level and established extreme codes where a member, who betrays them or wants to disengage, is murdered. In this decade they became more dynamic and continued developing. They became skillful in manipulating technology and modern techniques such as the internet, prepaid cell phone, and the Global Positioning System.<sup>14</sup> They adapted very well the global advantages to their illicit activities.<sup>15</sup> Finally, due to the power these gangs have achieved, they have driven the government through nongovernmental entities to

negotiate a truce in order to lower the index of violence, which to date, has not happened. Meanwhile, the government has used all the available resources to counter-attack the crime and keep the internal peace. However, the executed plans do not seem to be successful.

### Threats to Internal Security and Economy

The economy has been shattered by the armed conflict, natural disasters and worldwide economic problems. One expert notes: "The displacement, poverty, uncertain future, severe political division and a numerous young population are ideal conditions for the origin and development of gangs."<sup>16</sup>

Gangs have taken advantage of that fertile environment, which has permitted them to get established in- at the national level. The National Civil Police (PNC) was created as a result of the Peace Agreements in January 16, 1992, between the government and FMLN. This force was organized, trained and equipped quickly with many limitations. Due to this, gangs have exceeded the police capacities.

Tom Bruneau has identified five operational levels of national security challenges associated with the gang phenomenon:

1. They strain government capacity by overwhelming police and legal systems through sheer audacity, violence, and numbers.
2. They challenge the legitimacy of the state, particularly in regions where the culture of democracy is challenged by corruption and reinforced by the inability of political systems to function well enough to provide public goods and services.
3. They act as surrogate or alternate governments in so-called ungoverned areas.

4. They dominate the informal economic sector. They establish small businesses and use violence and coercion, and co-optation of government authorities, to unfairly compete with legitimate businesses.
5. They infiltrate police and nongovernmental organizations to further their goals and in doing so demonstrate latent political aims.<sup>17</sup>

In El Salvador these five levels have almost been reached in their entirety, due to the following: gangs are dynamic and develop according to the environment that surrounds them, which has permitted them to develop the skills and capacities to commit crime; they have grown approximately fourfold more than PNC. The police face many limitations, and crime has exceeded their capabilities. Gangs through their financial capacity pay corrupt public officials to avoid, in several cases, going into prison. In recent years, the way of hiding or covering the criminal actions is by creating informal deals at the national level. However, these deals are really facades. Finally, gangs have made efforts to infiltrate public institutions, specifically the police, judiciary system, and the Armed Forces, which they have achieved to a lesser degree. The foregoing shows clearly that in El Salvador gangs have reached the five operational levels proposed by Tom Bruneau.

In addition, the MS-13 and M-18 gangs are well structured organizations with nationwide presence, which maintain influence and control in the population of the main cities.

The MS-13 has approximately 17,309 active members, with 48 clicas; M-18 conformed by 10,419 active members approximately, with 28 clicas, both gangs spread at the national level.<sup>18</sup> They have a chain of command that is very well identified and

respected by all the members.<sup>19</sup> The gangs to develop the criminal action follow the regulations established from the leader to the last member. Likewise, within the chain of command in the gang organization there are specific tasks.<sup>20</sup> At the head of the organization of gangs, national and international leaders are found.<sup>21</sup> Then, second in command we find the regional leaders named “*palabrerros*” or “*ranfleros*.” This level is in charge of planning and communicating orders to execute criminal activity. The third in command, “in charge of the “*tribu*,” coordinates and executes orders to commit specific criminal acts. This third in command consists of centralized commands and control elements that manage the operational planning, finance, strategy and offer some administrative support to those higher and lower in command.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, national gang cell members who are third in command can manage groups in charge of specific missions (extortion, robberies, drug trafficking, etc) geographically distributed at national level.<sup>23</sup> The fourth in command of the gangs pyramid consists specifically of members living in the neighborhoods--“*vencindarios*.” This is a series of brotherhood clicas or cells who are the people responsible for neighborhoods or specific areas.<sup>24</sup> The individuals in fourth in command are not all members of MS-13 or MS-18. Among them are soldiers or members, camp followers and, aspirants, who carry out the monotone task in the neighborhoods.<sup>25</sup> The fourth in command represents the biggest part of the total gang population, and their ages range from 8 to 18 years.<sup>26</sup>

Gangs in El Salvador have evolved their organization depending on its operation and their objectives set for each stage of its development. In this sense it is believed that gangs have developed and operate in El Salvador through the three generations described by Max G. Manwaring;

### First Generation

This generation also known as street gangs, which its main objective is control of their neighborhood.<sup>27</sup> This type is focused on protecting its members from rival gangs, controlling their territory and carrying out pick pocketing.<sup>28</sup>

### Second Generation Gangs

The purpose of this generation is to get money, also the leadership in this generation is centralized.<sup>29</sup> They develop criminal activities focused on drug trafficking not only in their territories but also throughout the region.<sup>30</sup>

### Third Generation Gangs

As they develop, they become a full-grown organization with broader criminal activities related to drugs, smuggling people, murder, kidnapping and robbery.<sup>31</sup> In my view, gangs in El Salvador develop criminal activities based on the three generations. Public security authorities have clearly identified the persistence areas of each gang. In that sense opposing gangsters who get into an opposing area are killed. The common population is required to pay a tax called "*renta*" otherwise they cannot get in. Gangs also use extreme violence, to such a degree that their victims are found dismembered, with the purpose of causing fear to the population and authorities. They kill police and Armed Force members, then in exchange for not continuing to kill them, they ask that police and military operations cease, with the purpose of having their territories be free to commit illicit and criminal activities. Finally, the gang leaders, who are in jail, have become public figures through the truce between MS-13 and M-18. This truce is promoted by nongovernmental actors. Within the requests made by these leaders to the government, it is to patronize their families and communities with governmental programs, cease military operations, and improve the quality of life in the prisons.



Clearly, gangs in El Salvador operate under the modality of the generations described by Max G. Mainwaring, and therefore with their actions seriously undermine national security.

The gangs' *modus operandi*, in order to keep power, control and money, is as follows: murders accomplished with barbaric luxury, they use murders as a tool to cause fear and respect. According to the Minister of Public Safety David Munguía Payes, most of the victims are members of enemy gangs and the rest are people who do not obey gang requests. Although during the current year these murders have decreased significantly due to military operations, in support of the PNC through Army units deployed throughout the country working permanently with priority in areas most affected by the delinquency; also by the truce between the two enemy gangs.

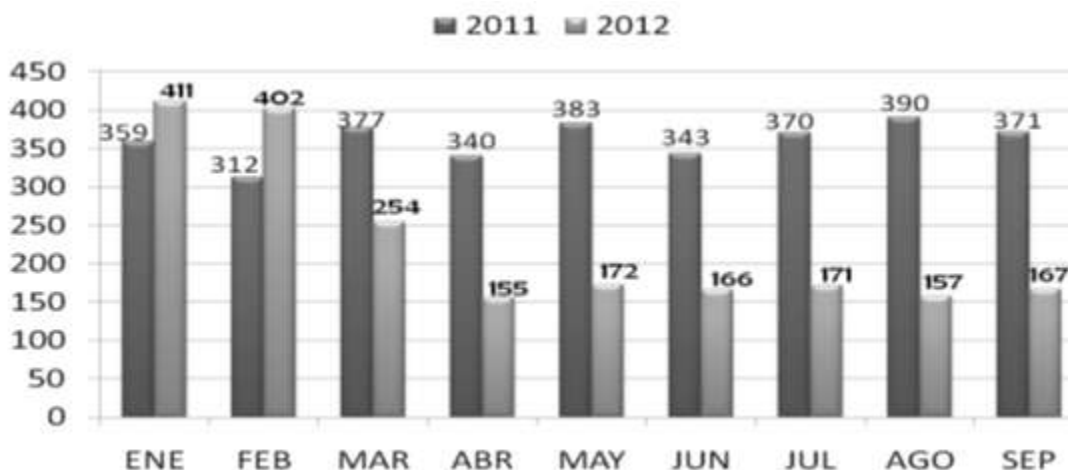


Figure 1: Homicides 2011 and 2012<sup>32</sup>

Kidnapping is accomplished in two ways. The first is to selected victims, who are demanded to give quantities of money according to their economic capabilities and the second is victims at random, who are demanded to give small quantities of money, in both cases, most of the time, people are murdered after the ransom is collected

According to statements made to different media, the Minister David Munguía Payes said that drug, arms and human trafficking, is performed by the gangs in coordination with South American and Mexican drug cartels.<sup>33</sup> They are responsible for giving security to drugs and arms on their way through El Salvador and for this task they receive money and drugs; drugs are later marketed in the country. Most of the women, who are part of the gang organizations, are forced to prostitute themselves. They also have a business network at the national level. Lately, according to PNC information, the criminal gangs have started to falsify driver licenses, personal identity documents, and license to carry weapons. This criminal act has three purposes: the first is to change identity, the second is to drive and carry weapons apparently according to laws, and the third is to make money, which makes the authorities' work more difficult. The armed robberies are done nationally; however, the population which travels by public transportation is the most affected, because of the frequency of these robberies. 2012 will surely finish with the highest record of extortions and million dollars as payment to gangs of the misnamed "*renta*." This is one of the criminal activities that makes the population suffer the most, since all the Salvadorans, at some point, are extorted. However, gangs focus the misnamed "*renta*" on the large, medium and small enterprises, and public transportation. Business owners or public transportation owners who do not pay are intimidated through the transportation unit fire or throwing explosive devices at the stores, "*renta*" and finally they are murdered, which can be considered an act of terrorism. Therefore, those businesses not having the capability to pay make the decision to close, which brings severe consequences to the national economy, therefore, national security.



Figure 2: War Weapons used by Gangs.

### The Strategies of the Government and NGOs

Salvadoran authorities clearly understand that gang activities drastically affect the economy. Also, the authorities assure that part of the economic crisis in the country is created by delinquency. Next, several aspects about how delinquency affects the economy: public and private sectors invest approximately \$1,200 million dollar a year on private security. Delinquency causes \$300 million dollars loss in trade annually, due to the insecurity national and international companies' take the investments to more secure countries. Annually, there is an average about 3,000 extortion complaints, which causes a business to close every day. The public spending due to violence is 15.4% of the gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>34</sup> According to PNC former Director Carlos Ascencio, gangs receive \$9.6 million dollars a year from extortions; he also says that 81% of extortions come from prisons where most of the gang leaders are.<sup>35</sup>

Because of the situation detailed above, the government has implemented the necessary strategies to face the gang problem, based on the mechanisms the constitution of the Republic allows. The initial strategy consisted of repression of crime; however, the police have been exceeded in capability by the delinquency. Therefore,

government uses the Armed Forces as support for public security as part of “Plan Guardianes” (Guardian Plan), “Plan Mano Dura”(Firm Hand Plan), “Súper Mano Dura” (Super tough Plan) and finally, “Campaña Nuevo Amanecer” (New Dawn Campaign). According to article 212 of the Constitution, the President can employ the Armed Forces to keep internal peace, according to the constitution. The “Firm Hand” strategy resulted in more than 17,000 arrests of suspected gang members, of which less than 5% were charged, due to a weak and inefficient judiciary.<sup>36</sup> With this phase of the strategy homicides have decreased, but extortions persist, mainly coming from prisons. The penal system is controlled by the same gangs, due to bribes that corrupt officials. The first phase has not achieved the expected result, that’s why the second phase “New Dawn Campaign” is being applied. This consists of giving security to public transportation to avoid robberies, border protection to avoid any kind of trafficking and finally, the Armed Forces taking control in the prisons to prevent extortion.<sup>37</sup> According to popular opinion, with the employment of the Armed Forces violence has decreased significantly. However, the delinquency problem still holds, because the strategy is not integrated, from repression, to prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration.

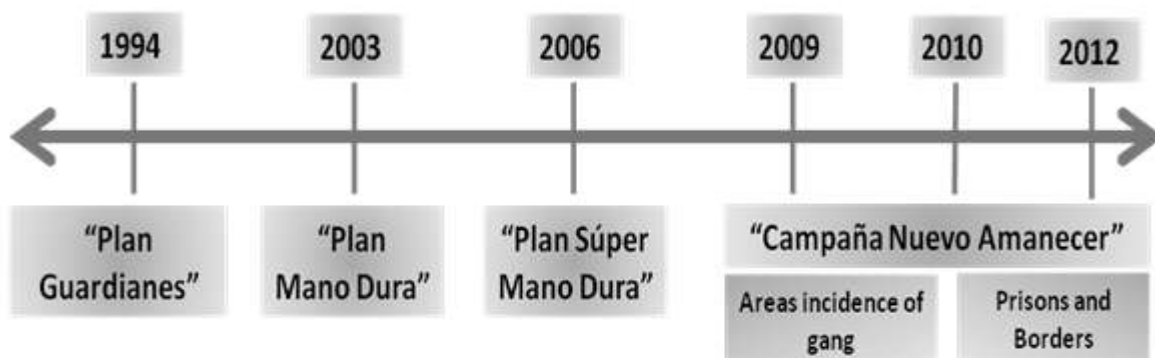


Figure 3: Strategy to Counteract Violence Caused by Gangs<sup>38</sup>

The government accomplishes some activities to prevent convicts from continuing in crime. Also, to prevent youth from being vulnerable to being recruited by gangs through the prison system, the government creates workplaces for gangs and their families to avoid extortion coming from prisons.<sup>39</sup> The government of Taiwan has granted \$2.5 million dollars for this project, which has permitted the opening of centers for agricultural production and for making clothes.<sup>40</sup> It also created the policy of public safety, which consists of carrying out social activities in communities for the young, awareness talks in crime prevention within schools and communities and organizing citizens to denounce crime. This strategy has given positive results, since it has prevented gangs from expanding and has also permitted the PNC to react in time and capture criminals in the act. Simultaneous with crime repression and prevention strategies, the government has strengthened police capabilities and the office of the Attorney General of the Republic and equipped the police with advanced technology for investigation. And it has also created more operational units. In recent years the government has improved the legal context, for instance, the change to the juvenile offenders law to guarantee their judicial treatment when they commit serious crimes, even though they were or not related to gangs. Also, anti-gangs laws have been created.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the government is making efforts to improve the prison system, which consists of getting technology for security personnel monitoring and debugging, in addition to the construction of more prisons to avoid overcrowding. At the same time, the government met with the private sector to ask for the creation of jobs for all those gangsters who want to be rehabilitated and reinserted into productive society.<sup>42</sup> However, this action was only supported by some international enterprises (Grupo

Calvo, League Collegiate Wear, and Rio Grande Foods),<sup>43</sup> while most national enterprises argued this action had electoral purposes. Therefore, it should be noted that rehabilitation and reinsertion do not have programs that are either defined or sustainable by the government or private sector.

According to Matthew Joseph Hartnett, the central government develops a limited functionality as support for the youth prevention programs. According to Hartnett, the government has assumed an unbalanced focus of the gang problem, favoring more repression than prevention, which is shown in the policies executed since 1994.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile national and international NGOs are making a very important effort, focused on prevention and rehabilitation. These organizations direct their work to benefit a vast universe of the Salvadoran youth, among them: students, non-students, single mothers, employed or unemployed young, under-age, gangsters or former gang member, etc.<sup>45</sup> Some organizations develop work through schools or vocational workshops, applying the concept of microenterprises, where the partakers are motivated to learn an occupation, such as: bakers, mechanics, tailors, electricians, musicians, craft-people, etc.<sup>46</sup> Also other organizations develop work through spiritual guidance and at the same time offer food and shelter to those youth in high risk. They also offer scholarships.

It is clear that the support coming from NGOs is important and complementary to the work developed by the government in crime repression. However, NGOs work under their own criteria, but not an integrated and coordinated plan with the government, whereby the desired results are not achieved.

At this moment, the government has used all the legal sources and mechanisms available to stop violence generated by gangs. In spite of everything, violence persists, even though homicides and extortions have decreased with the participation of the Armed Force. According to police and military intelligence analysis, the homicide statistics was, in major part, a consequence of the two enemy gang conflict (MS-13 and M-18). To this situation is added the civil society effort through Monsignors Favio Colindres and Raúl Mijango, who began conversations with both gang leaders within the maximum security prison from Zacatecoluca, for the purpose of establishing a truce between the two gangs. Both agreed to a truce starting on March 3, 2012, with the condition to be transferred to other prisons with less security to coordinate the truce. Also they requested that the government improve the life conditions within prisons and stop the police and military operations. In that sense, Monsignors Colindres and Mr. Mijango became mediators between the gangs and the means to submit requests to the government.



Figure 4: Signing of the Truce between MS-13 and M-18

During the first six months of the truce, there were 7 to 10 murders every day, while homicides decreased approximately 45%, compared with months previous to the

truce. The people appreciated the homicide decrease but a vast sector of Salvadoran society criticized the government because of the negotiation with criminals. The government declared before the media, that the government was only facilitating the truce process, not negotiating. As proof of this, the government arranged for Mr. José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), to be present in the meetings, at the request of the gang leaders. After that, Attorney General David Munguía Payes said that because the truce had been successful, a second phase will be adopted. For this purpose a Humanitarian Commission will be formed to supervise the truce's continuity, this commission will have representative from the government, private sector, civilians and the Secretary General of the OAS.

In short, the gang actions have forced the government to implement all the necessary strategies with the available resources, for the purpose of counteracting the violence these gangs cause. Even though a great effort has been made, the problem is still there. Therefore, it is necessary to look for other choices in which all Salvadoran society takes part to solve the problem.

### Proposals

Youth violence is largely a consequence of high and persistent poverty and inequality levels. In this sense we are clear the solution does not lie in accomplishing repression actions against crime, but it should be integral in all the fields. Therefore, to solve the gang problem there is no strategy to solve it from one day to the next. To be successful it is necessary to plan a comprehensive long term strategy, in which all members of Salvadoran society take part. In order for all of society to take part, it is necessary that the National Security Council press on with internal action fields supported by economic, diplomatic and military action fields, where the three state



powers-Executive, Legislative and Judicial-take part actively without political bias to end once and for all with the violence in the country.

Following are some proposals to create an integrated strategy to counteract the gangs:

- Initially, an integral strategy of inter-institutional security must be created, in which all the institutions related to the crime problem and other Salvadoran society actors take part.<sup>47</sup> This strategy should clearly establish the missions of every institution and social sector according to their nature or field. Actions should be focused on repression, prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion; these institutions could be: PNC, Armed Force, Attorney General of the Republic, Judiciary , communities, churches, Ministry of Education, private sector, NGOs, etc. In order for these institutions to work in a coordinated way through the same action plan, they should be guided by the National Security Council.
- The National Civil Police is constitutionally responsible to keep public security in the country. During the 1980s the Armed Forces was the institution responsible for preventing insurgents from taking power by means of arms. The success of mission accomplishment was possible because the country had an organized military institution with enough units that were disciplined, equipped and well trained. The National Civil Police has many deficiencies in the above aspects, therefore, it is necessary to use the lessons learned and enforce their capabilities to accomplish the legal mission.

Moreover, PNC deploys nationally. Therefore, it should be feasible to be involved in prevention activities through talks to communities and public and private schools.

- The Armed Forces cooperate in public security activities, exceptionally, since 1994. At the beginning it was with small groups of soldiers under the command of police, and in recent years, they have been used with task forces in great magnitude independent of the police. In order for the Armed Forces to be more effective in accomplishing the mission, they must be reinforced in their capabilities by increasing the effective staff, replacing equipment, providing police training, legal protection to accomplishment of the mission, and finally, using the institution in an inter-institutional action plan.
- To enforce those institutions whose role is included in legal aspects, such as: technical equipment acquisition for the Attorney General to purge corrupt officials from the judiciary and prosecution, tougher sentences, executing anti-gang laws against under-age individuals' parents who break the law.

This aspect is important, since doing nothing will not help the PNC and Armed Forces effort in catching criminals. Experience tells us that a small percentage is condemned, and most of them are set free during the following three days, because of lack of evidence or because of weak and inefficient judiciary, or because of corrupt officials.

- In prevention and rehabilitation tasks, NGOs have been doing an important job for the country. However, this one has to be coordinated by the national action plan elaborated by the government. In this way, the effort will be

integrated and duplication of efforts will be avoided, thereby achieving more important results.

- Entrepreneurs from the private system carry out an important role in the reinsertion of gangsters who give up the criminal activities and want to join productive society in this sense it is necessary that all entrepreneurs create jobs in a sustainable way as part of the national plan for rehabilitated gangsters.
- To launch a permanent advertisement campaign about citizen education, through written, television and radial media, focused on primary and secondary prevention; the primary prevention would be directed to the public to inculcate civic values and prevent violence, and the secondary prevention would be directed to gangsters and young in high risk in order to abandon gangs.
- To seek financial support in friendly countries through diplomacy to accomplish the prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion plans, since this problem does not affect exclusively El Salvador; on the contrary, it affects the whole continent. In the same sense, all the Central-American countries should join as a block of solidarity to fight violence in the region.
- Finally, to improve life and prisons' security conditions. First, to install CCTV system monitoring (video-cameras), in order to monitor permanently the convicts' activities and prevent cell phones and drugs from entering prisons. Second, to establish a purging process of the security personnel. Third, to construct more prisons to avoid overcrowding.

The gang problem not only affects a few, it affects the whole population, in other words, it is a national problem. All Salvadorans should be united in a single effort to achieve the much longer peace.

### Conclusions

The gang problem has been growing since the 1990s. From the beginning, the problem was attacked rigorously, using the strategy of the “firm hand,” but due to its complexity, it has not been possible to achieve the expected results. Far from fully achieving the established objective with the “firm hand” strategy, the institutions involved wear down and lose the people’s confidence, due to long operations and the complexity of the problem.

The problem generated by the gangs threatens national power. If the government institutions fail, then whom should the population look to in order to solve the problem? This is the reason why the crime repression with the competent institutions is necessary, but these must have the support of all the actors of society to assure success. Rehabilitation plans in practice only effect camp followers, applicants and newcomers, but not permanent members and leaders. The latter get huge quantities of dollars from extortions and racketeering, therefore, rehabilitation programs are not attractive either for leaders or permanent gangsters. To be effective in striking at the problem, an integrated strategy is necessary.

The extortions must stop completely, since it is one of the main tools they have to maintain logistics for criminal operations. The money they receive from extortions is used to buy: weapons, public officials’ will to infiltrate their members in public institutions, bails and legal advice for those who are arrested, and food and housing for

gang members. Gangsters also market drugs in national and international market, which generates more money.

The PNC, Armed Forces, and the Attorney General have done a coordinated job to stop the gang problem. During joint operations done, most of the leaders and gang members have been captured, but these institutions have faced difficulties in order to accomplish the established objectives. First, most of the captured individuals are released due to judiciary weakness and inefficiency; consequently, criminals lose respect and fear to authorities. Second, the purpose of keeping the leaders in prison is to cut the criminal organizations' command and control, in this way, it will be easier to eradicate gangs. However, prisons have become command posts, due to corruption among the guards.

With the present truce between gangs, homicides have decreased significantly, which the population and international community see as a positive result. The problem is that with the truce, gangs have gained major relevance and have more power than they had before the agreement, and they are getting international and national recognition. This makes them have more capability to threaten the population. Also, they increase possibilities to get more recruits.

Finally, the problem must be treated as a serious threat to the state, and in that sense all the nation's leaders must come together with no distinction of political ideology, to look for a viable solution that is sustainable for the common good of the nation.

## Endnotes

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<sup>21</sup> Manwaring, "A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty," 17.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4

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