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Structure, Behavior, and Influence of Salvadorian Gangs and Their Implications for the Rule of Law in the United States and El Salvador

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Research in Brief

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Introduction

Going beyond a doorstep defense of U.S. security requires developing strategic responses to serious threats at some distance from U.S. borders. One such threat is that of third-country nationals who use Mexican territory as a gateway to enter the U.S., often legally, to engage in criminal activity or to commit political violence. This project extends existing studies of transnational criminal gangs in Central America to anticipate methods and approaches that could be used by third-country nationals to commit crime or politically-motivated violence in the United States. The two primary objectives of this study include: 1) further understanding the organizational structure and sophistication of transnational criminal gangs and their capacity to facilitate mobility and migration through Mexico into the U.S.; and 2) further understanding the dynamic social networks of transnational criminal gangs and their capacity to facilitate mobility and migration through Mexico into the U.S.

Background in Brief

Currently, there is little intelligence, research, or systematically gathered data that can provide field operations officers, intelligence specialists, or policymakers within the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, or Department of Defense with a description of the migration and mobility patterns of transnational gangs between the U.S. and Central America, through Mexican territory; or that can provide them with a framework for understanding the mobility patterns of third country nationals and how such persons, using methods similar to

those of transnational gangs, enter the United States. As a consequence, results of this research attempted to provide information to policymakers on some of the methods criminal organizations might use to enter the U.S. for the purpose of engaging in crime and/or politically-motivated violence.

The current project supported the work of the ICE National Gang Unit in a number of ways, particularly as it relates to their international program. First, the project provided a more thorough understanding of the scope, nature, and methods that third-country nationals use to enter the U.S. through Mexico. It is recognized that third-country nationals (non-U.S. or Mexican citizens) wishing to enter the U.S. (legally and illegally) often travel through Mexico for a variety of reasons related to geographic proximity, economics, and culture. Recently, some policymakers have voiced concern that the southern border is particularly vulnerable to a third-country national entering the U.S. to commit crime or politically-motivated violence, more information is need on this topic.

Second, the project examined the organizational capacity of a well-known Central American gang, MS-13. We were particularly interested in whether the migration patterns of transnational gangs from a third country were different or unique from other groups. One possibility is that transnational gangs are more organizationally sophisticated, and that they have increased capacity to navigate through Mexico and into the U.S. Another possibility is that transnational gangs have established deep informal social networks that extend from El Salvador, into Mexico, and the U.S. because of their prior

involvement in transnational crime, and these social networks result in their increased capacity to enter the U.S. If third-country transnational gangs do possess organizational structures or have unique social networks that permit increased capacity to enter the U.S. it poses a unique security risk to national security that should be further understood.

A Multi-Methodological Research Design

The research design for this project was purposefully constructed to gain a comprehensive view of the organizational structure, migratory patterns, and social networks of Central American gangs. It brings together multiple sources of data in order to get a clearer picture of the gang members that move between the US and Central America, and to help explain, clarify, and corroborate issues surrounding transnational gangs. In particular, the study sought to examine: 1) the scope of the gang problem in El Salvador and the United States, 2) the criminal activity engaged in by MS-13 in El Salvador and the United States, 3) the organizational structure of MS-13, and 4) the methods and approaches that could be used by third-country nationals to enter the U.S.

In-depth interviews. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with local gang experts in the U.S. and Central America to describe the migration and mobility patterns of transnational gangs between the U.S. and Central America. In the end, data were collected from 71 stakeholders, representing about fifty agencies. Among those interviewed more than 30 were from the Los Angeles area, 18 were from the

Washington DC corridor, and more than 35 were from El Salvador.

Gang expert survey. The El Salvador Gang Expert Survey asked police gang experts at the sub-station level to report on the scope and nature of the gang problem within their sub-station. The survey instruments were sent to the police commissioner, who was responsible for the collection, maintenance, and dissemination of intelligence in the agency. The instruments were then sent through inter-departmental mail to each substation's inspector who was asked to complete the survey instrument. Data were collected by the PNC from January through June 2011. It resulted in a response rate of 96.2% (n=76).

Salvadorian deportee survey. Surveys were conducted with recently detained Salvadorians who were being deported from the United States back to El Salvador. In-depth in-person surveys focused on migration and mobility patterns between the U.S. and El Salvador, including co-occurring criminality and social networks. We collected survey data from deportees who were apprehended and detained in the Los Angeles Enforcement and Removal Operations Field Office (LA ERO). Data were collected over three periods in each facility in 2011. In Mira Loma data were collected from March 7 through March 11, May 23rd through May 25th, and June 27th through June 28th. In Santa Ana data were collected from April 5th through April 6th, May 31st through June 3rd, and June 29th through June 30th. Because of their relatively small number we interviewed all Salvadorian detainees. Of the 424 eligible detainees, 11 were eligible but were not approached because we could not locate them in the facility and 18 declined to

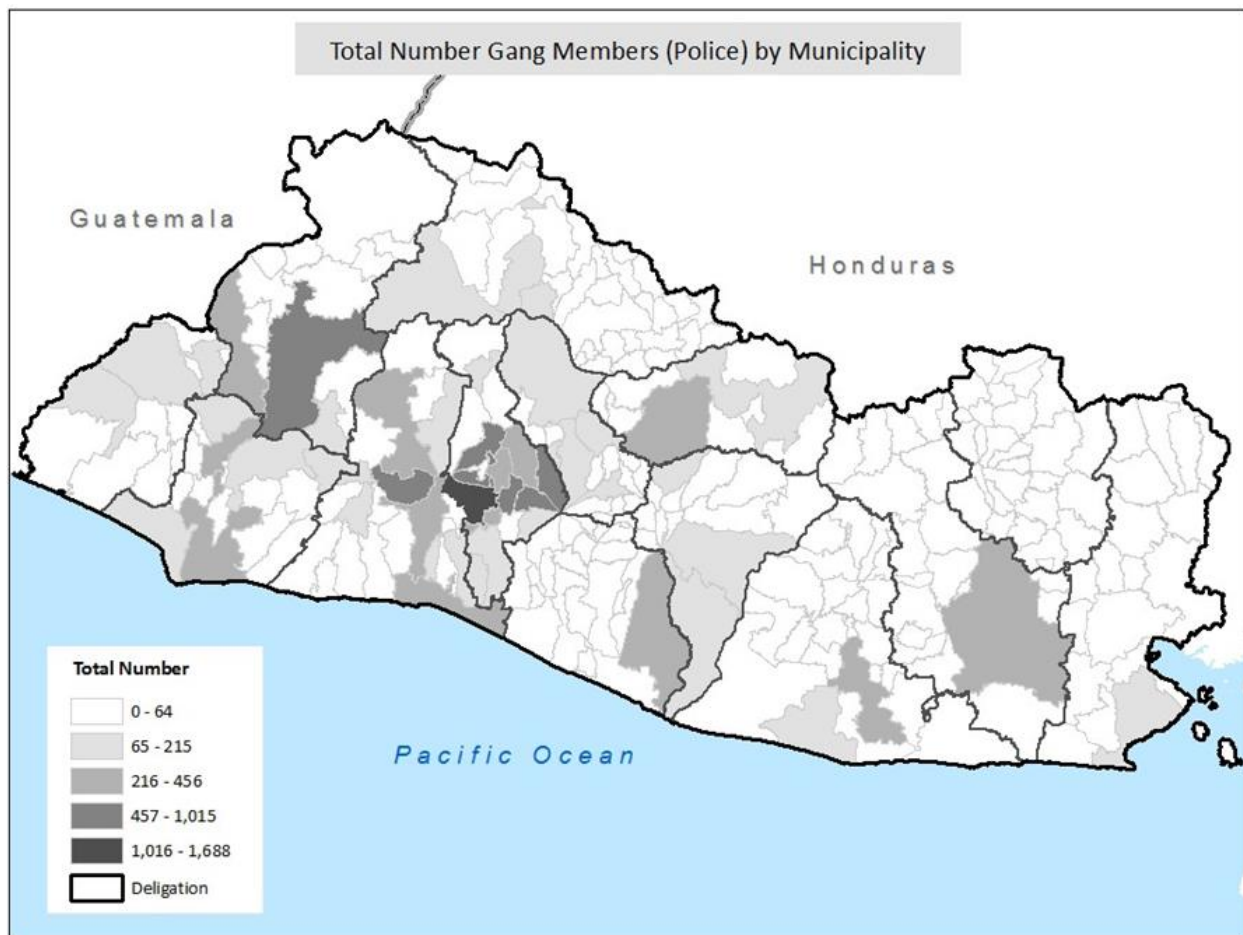
participate in the study. This resulted in a final sample of 395 Salvadorian detainees, or a response rate of 93.1%.

Salvadorian gang member survey. We interviewed active Salvadorian street gang members in El Salvador. Most of those recruited for participation in the study were located in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. In the summer of 2011 youth were recruited on the streets in the neighborhood through a snowball sampling methodology. Two Salvadorian outreach organizations provided initial introductions to two Salvadorian clique leaders. These clique leaders in turn referred active street gang members to us to be interviewed. The two clique leaders in the neighborhood were provided with a \$10 incentive for every individual who was referred and was affiliated with a gang. Those individuals who completed the interview were in turn asked to serve as an intermediary, and provide the names of other gang members who might be eligible to participate in the study. All participants were provided with a \$30 incentive for participating in the study. All surveys were voluntary and anonymous. In the end, we interviewed 89 Salvadorian gang members.

Scope of the Gang Problem

It comes as no surprise that El Salvador has a major gang problem, dominated by MS-13 and 18th Street. Our analyses indicated that the average Salvadorian municipality had over 200 gang members. Most gangs in El Salvador were established 11 to 20 years ago. A disproportionate amount of the gang members reside in the department of San Salvador and in the municipalities of San Salvador, Ilopango, Apopa, and Soyapango. We found that most gang

members were male and between the ages of 16 and 25 years old. While females were involved in the Salvadorian gangs, their presence was not as substantial and we found no female dominated gangs. About 8% the deportees that we interviewed self-reported association with a gang in El Salvador and about 18% of deportees reported association with a gang in the United States. These individuals joined their gang, on average, between 13 and 16 years old, and they reported that most of members of their gang were male. While in many cases the method of joining the gang involved the prospective member not having to do anything to join, in about 50% of cases the individual was jumped in.



Criminal Involvement of Salvadorian Gang Members

Our analyses of official data indicated that gangs are responsible for much of the crime and violence in El Salvador. Salvadorian gang members engage in cafeteria style offending and were engaged in a wide variety of offenses, the most serious of which was homicide. About 70% of the nation's homicides were perpetrated by a gang. Homicides were largely concentrated in the municipalities of San Salvador, Soyapango, Santa Ana, and San Miguel. Likewise, gang experts indicated that gangs are heavily involved in extortion. According to the police, approximately 32%

of businesses, 57% of transportation companies, and 26% of individuals in the nation were extorted; and gangs were said to be responsible for over 59% of this activity. The data that we obtained from interviews with Salvadorian gang members supported the above findings. These data indicated that there was a very high degree of criminal involvement in general and violence specifically among these gang members. For example, 30% of our sample stated that they themselves participated in a homicide in the 30 days prior to the interview.

Salvadorian local gang crime

	Mara Salvatrucha		18th Street		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Common group activities		66		28		94
Graffiti	78.8		78.6		78.7	
Stealing/theft*	84.8		100.0		89.4	
Assaults	51.5		60.7		54.3	
Killings	87.9		96.4		90.4	
Auto theft	56.1		50.0		54.3	
Robbery	57.6		60.7		58.5	
Fraud	10.6		10.7		10.6	
Taxing	22.7		28.6		24.5	
Extortion	97.0		92.9		95.7	
How often does this group do illegal things		65		27		92
Never or Rarely	13.8		3.7		10.9	
Sometimes or Often	86.2		96.3		89.1	
How often does this group use alcohol		65		28		93
Never or Rarely	1.5		3.6		2.2	
Sometimes or Often	98.5		96.4		97.8	
How often does this group use drugs		63		28		91
Never or Rarely	7.9		3.6		6.6	
Sometimes or Often	92.1		96.4		93.4	
How often does this group get into fights		64		28		92
Never or Rarely	35.9		25.0		32.6	
Sometimes or Often	64.1		75.0		67.4	

* p<.05

Source: Gang Expert Survey

Additionally, interviews with gang experts, deportees, and Salvadorian gang members indicated that Salvadorian gang members are regularly involved in drug and gun sales; and gang experts indicated that a number of Salvadorian gangs had a formal relationship with drug traffickers and cartels. While these experts indicated that most of the Salvadorian gangs

trafficked drugs and guns, only a third were involved in human trafficking. These figures were fairly consistent with some of the data we received from the Salvadorian gang members. For example, about one-quarter of Salvadorian gang members said that members of their clique smuggled people into the US or that the clique has members who are, or work for, a coyote.

Criminal involvement associated with Salvadorian gangs

Type of criminal activity	N	Does the clique participate in this activity? ¹	N	Have you ever participated in this activity with your clique? ¹	N	Have you participated in this activity in the last 30 days? ¹
Graffiti	86	86.0	75	76.0	61	29.5
Steal	86	83.7	75	74.7	60	30.0
Intimidate or threaten people	86	79.1	72	73.6	56	42.9
Engage in pimping	86	30.2	37	18.9	20	10.0
Rob	86	73.3	70	67.1	52	30.8
Commit extortions	84	81.0	72	59.7	49	44.9
Jump or attack people	85	76.5	70	70.0	57	43.9
Drive-by shootings	86	83.7	75	72.0	59	30.5
Kill	83	86.7	72	70.8	53	30.2
Use alcohol	86	95.3	84	86.9	75	42.7
Use marijuana	86	95.3	82	80.5	68	57.4
Use cocaine	86	61.6	61	45.9	37	27.0
Sell marijuana	85	84.7	76	69.7	57	40.4
Sell cocaine	85	70.6	63	58.7	43	41.9
Sell drug to drug dealers	85	58.8	55	54.5	40	37.5
Sell guns	86	47.7	48	52.1	32	21.9
Smuggle people (into the US)	84	25.0	33	18.2	22	13.6
Worked as a coyote or for a coyote	84	25.0	33	9.1	18	11.1

Source: Salvadorian gang survey

Organizational Structure of Salvadorian Gangs

Salvadorian gangs exhibited a high degree of organizational structure. More so than American gangs, Salvadorian gangs were typified by leadership, meetings, turf, and special symbols and other indicia. Members of the gang and are the subject to rules and regulations, and if not followed are subject to punishment. When comparing those in a US based gang to those in a Salvadorian

gang there are some major differences in their perceptions of gang cohesion. Specifically, those who belonged to a Salvadorian gang exhibited higher cohesion in terms of their connection and support to others in the gang, and their ability to depend on one another. For a street gang, MS-13 and 18th Street appear to be fairly organized and structured, and as mentioned above, many appear to have formal connections with DTO's and cartels.

Salvadorian gang structure and organization

	Mara Salvatrucha		18th Street		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Has a name	95.5	66	93.1	29	94.7	95
Turf	93.8	65	93.1	29	93.6	94
Protects turf	92.1	63	89.7	29	91.3	92
Signs	92.4	66	89.3	28	91.5	94
Symbols	81.8	66	92.9	28	85.1	94
Ways of speaking	86.4	66	85.7	28	86.2	94
Clothing	66.7	66	57.1	28	63.8	94
Tattoos	92.4	66	92.9	28	92.6	94
Illegal things are acceptable	98.5	65	100.0	29	98.9	94
Supports a political issue	38.7	62	20.7	29	33.0	91
Spend time together in public space	53.0	66	51.7	29	52.6	95
Subgroups	82.8	58	72.4	29	79.3	87
Terminology		66		28		94
Gang	83.3		96.4		87.2	
Band	3.0		10.7		5.3	
Tribe	4.5		14.3		7.4	
Club	0.0		0.0		0.0	
Crew	0.0		0.0		0.0	
Clique	71.2		53.6		66.0	
Other	22.7		14.3		20.2	
Other names						
Mara	22.7		7.1		18.1	
Raza	3.0		3.6		3.2	

* p<.05

Source: Gang Expert Survey

Methods and Approaches to Entering the USA

Our findings were mixed with respect to gang and non-gang methods and approaches to entering the US. On the one hand, gang experts indicated that MS-13 and 18th street gangs had relatively high capacity for entrance into the USA, in large part because about half of the identified

gangs had members who were born in the United States, and more than 90% of them had members living in the US who could help them migrate. Similar findings were reported by the Salvadorian deportees. On the other hand, stakeholders were somewhat split in terms of special networks that might permit gang members easier and cheaper access to the US. In fact some of them mentioned that the special and

unique characteristics of being in a gang might make it more difficult for these individuals to travel to the US because of their high profile to law enforcement.

Interviewees with deportees and Salvadorian gang members suggested that to a large degree there were few major differences between gang and non-gang members in terms of their methods and approaches to entering the US. On average, the deportees and gang members that we interviewed entered the United States between one and two times, and

entered the United States illegally without legal documents. Many of those who came to the US used an organization or group to assist them and traveled by bus, foot, and passenger car. It is interesting to note that a larger than expected number of deportees (about 25%) used an airplane at some point in their journey to the US, and use of train as transportation was used less than expected.

Modes and Methods of Immigration by sample

	Non-Gang Deportee		Gang Deportees		Gang Salvadoran	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Transportation type used at any stage						
Walking	50.3	146	30.2	16	41.7	5
Bus	75.9	220	66.0	35	83.3	10
Passenger car	45.9	133	62.3	33	50.0	6
Semi-tractor/trailer	5.2	15	5.7	3	8.3	1
Train	15.2	44	9.4	5	25.0	3
Airplane	23.8	69	24.5	13	8.3	1
Boat	11.0	32	7.5	4	8.3	1
Used an intermediary	62.0	173	76.9	40	63.6	7
Travelled with other people	77.0	184	91.8	45	72.7	8
Documents						
No documents	57.8	156	55.1	27	50.0	6
Legal documents	38.1	103	30.6	15	33.3	4
Falsified documents	4.1	11	14.3	7	16.7	2
Free to leave at any time	83.6	178	78.6	33	90.9	10
Access to money						
Yes	73.1	158	73.8	31	81.8	9
Did not carry money	4.6	10	0.0	0	9.1	1
Travelled with gang members	1.5	3	5.1	2	9.1	1

Source: Salvadorian Deportee Survey, Salvadorian Gang Member

There were some differences, however, between gang and non-gang members. For example, gang members were more likely to state that other things were smuggled with them in their travels to the US, such as other people, drugs, or guns. Gang members were also somewhat less likely to believe that they would be caught coming the US than non-gang members. Gang deportees averaged the fewest number of days traveling the US (approx 16 days) followed by non-gang deportees (approx 23 days), and Salvadorian street gang members (approx 35 days).

When compared to non-gang members, gang members were also more likely to have access to false documents, which might present some advantages to them. However, with that said, on average, the cost of the trip to the US was more expensive for gang members than non-gang members. Specifically, the cost of the trip from El Salvador to the US was \$6,314 for non-gang deportees, \$6,536 for gang deportees, and \$7,956 for Salvadorian gang members.

Length and cost of immigration by sample

	Non-Gang Deportees		Gang Deportees		Gang Salvadoran	
	mean n=26	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD
Number of days in the most recent migration to the USA	22.68	27.65	15.73	16.69	35.38	44.44
Cost of the entire trip in US dollars	\$6,314	\$3,685	\$6,536	\$3,455	\$7,956	\$1,081



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