



64/2021

27/05/2021

Gara Báez García\*

**Transnational organized crime and maras in the Northern Triangle of Central America**

## *Transnational organized crime and maras in the Northern Triangle of Central America*

### *Abstract:*

*The Northern Triangle of Central America constitutes one of the most dangerous regions in the world, amounting the highest rates of criminality and violence. Transnational organized crime groups – also known as maras - have been operating for decades in the region. The two major factions of these groups, Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18, have enhanced social, economic, and political problems within the region. Both networks have incremented their activities, generating as well different types of violence not seen before. This policy paper analyses transnational organized crime in the NTCA and studies the influence of the two most important groups among the region.*

### *Keywords:*

*Maras, Northern Triangle of Central America, transnational organized crime, Mara 18, Mara Salvatrucha.*

### **How to quote:**

BÁEZ GARCÍA, Gara. *Transnational organized crime and maras in the Northern Triangle of Central America*. Opinion Paper. IEEE 64/2021.  
[http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2021/DIEEEE064\\_2021\\_GARBAE\\_Crimen\\_E\\_NG.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEE064_2021_GARBAE_Crimen_E_NG.pdf) and/or [link bie](#)<sup>3</sup> (accessed on the web day/month/year)

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

## Introduction

Security is considered one if not the most important concerns for both States, as guarantees of public protection, and citizens, as receivers of said service. In this sense, gang violence and crime constitute the most worrying matters for Latin American governments, especially those in the Northern Triangle of Central America<sup>1</sup> (from now on NTCA).

It is believed that rates of criminality and violence influence the quality and stability of democracy within the region, considering the States' strength as a crucial attribute to respond to and defy violence and crime<sup>2</sup>. In the same line, Karstedt and LaFree consider that this connection between democracy and criminal justice is self-explanatory since it is guaranteed by the rule of law, and the "observation of human rights is an integral part of the emergence and institutionalization of democracy"<sup>3</sup>.

Homicides, thefts, and high crime rates are a particular feature of Latin American countries. However, states among the NTCA have gathered the highest violence rates in world since the end of their civil wars in the 1990s. This fact has contributed to the consideration of the region as the most dangerous one in the world and with the highest rates, according to a 2012 UNODC report. The most affected country in the region is Honduras, with a rate of 92 murders per 100,000 inhabitants<sup>4</sup>.

Violence and crime rates are certainly highlighted by the illegal trade of drugs within the countries of the region. A 2011 World Bank report on Crime and Violence in Central America stated that "drug trafficking constitutes the main single factor behind rising levels of violence in the region, with crime rates being a 100% higher in drug trafficking 'hot spots' than in other areas"<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the region is also considered to be the highest value drug flow in the world, mainly due to the transport of cocaine to the United States

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper refers to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as countries considered within the NTCA region.

<sup>2</sup> HINTON, N., MONTALVO, D. et al. "Crime and Violence across the Americas, in The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas", p. 3, 2016, 2014: Democratic Governance across 10 years of the Americas Barometer, ZECHMEISTER, J. E. (ed.). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cbMulY>

<sup>3</sup> KARSTEDT, S. and LAFREE, G. "Democracy, Crime and Justice", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 605, p. 6-23, 2006. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2TGS0Xd>

<sup>4</sup> UNODC. "Transnational organized crime in Central America and the Caribbean: a threat assessment", p. 15, 2012 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XGBDvk>

<sup>5</sup> WORLD BANK. "Crime and Violence in Central America: a development challenge", p. 21, 2011. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3d7PzF9>

via Mexico<sup>6</sup>.

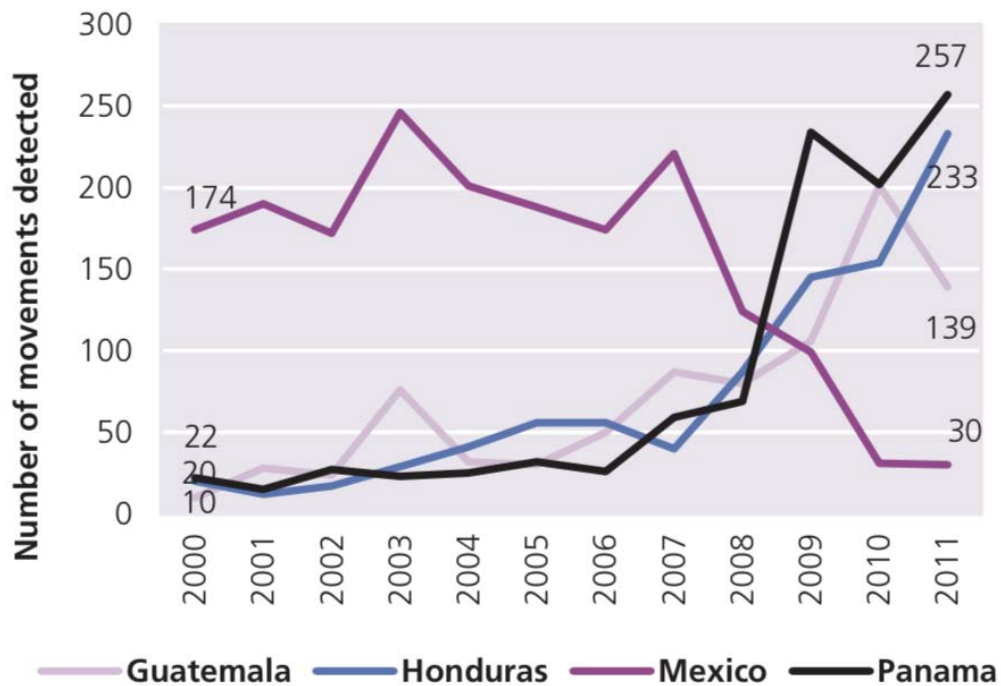


Figure 1. Number of cocaine movements destined/ interdirected in Central America and Mexico, 2000-2011.

Source. ONDCP.

The NTCA's criminal networks have been operating for decades in the region – some of them were even created during the already mentioned civil wars. Their main activities involve movement of drugs, arms contraband, and human trafficking, among others. High rates of criminality have also been arisen by the presence of Mexican organized crime groups. Competition for control of territories, and US and Mexican restrictions on drug flights have made the NTCA an exceptional route for clandestine flights<sup>7</sup>.

Concerning the roots of drug trafficking organized crime in the NTCA states, El Salvador's clandestine structures were originated between the 1970s and the 1980s. Their origins are strongly linked to internal armed conflict, which enhanced the creation of narco trafficking and contraband alliances with criminal groups.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> UNODC. "Transnational organized...p. 16

<sup>7</sup> ARNSON, J. C. y OLSON, L. E. (ed.). "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle", Woodrow Wilson Center Reports on the Americas, 29, p. 3, 2011. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3eqpPEc>

<sup>8</sup> FARAH, D. "Organized Crime in El Salvador: Its Homegrown and Transnational Dimensions", p.104, 2011, "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle", WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL

In Guatemala's case, organized crime has its foundations on 'capos' involvements between the 1930s and the 1940s. However, their most important members were used as a connective tool between politics and crime. From the 1990s onwards, the influence of Colombian cartels became much more important<sup>9</sup>.

Lastly, Honduras' narco trafficking background has been historically under *transportistas* control. The country was once highly influenced by Colombian cartels, but since the beginning of the 1990s Mexican cartels have forced their presence in Honduras, considering it as a primary hot spot for drug trafficking<sup>10</sup>.



Figure 2. Geographical location of the NTCA. Source. International Crisis Group.

The growing presence and influence of these criminal organizations in the region is explained by two important facts: the states' geographical location and their weak institutional systems. The geographical factor is determined by a long coastline and a wide variety of terrestrial blind spots that facilitate logistic and contraband services. To this sum of elements, we must add the proximity of these three countries to Mexico and

CENTER FOR SCHOLARS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2RfmHoa>

<sup>9</sup> LÓPEZ, J. "Guatemala's Crossroads: The Democratization of Violence and Second Chances", p.140, 2011, "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle", WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2RfmHoa>

<sup>10</sup> BOSWORTH, J. "Honduras: Organized Crime Gained Amid Political Crisis", p.62, 2011, "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle", WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2RfmHoa>

the United States.

Regarding weak institutionalization systems, the already mentioned internal conflicts within these countries and their respective peace-making processes facilitated the infiltration of criminal groups in their institutional systems. States' incapacity of providing public security has also contributed to the generation of distrust and weak collaboration on behalf of the population.

To these aspects must be added the US deportation policies, which have influenced the massive growth of organized crime groups who use gangs as micro-level mechanisms to expand their networks. A result of these policies was the sudden emergence of transnational street gangs, also known as maras. The two major factions of these groups—Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18)—were created in Los Angeles and are spread through Latin American countries, especially El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

## Analysis

### ***Maras: main transnational street gangs in the NTCA***

According to Klein and Maxson, street gangs are durable, street-oriented youth groups whose involvement in illegal activities is recognized as part of a group identity<sup>11</sup>. Street gangs are one of Central America's most common form of organized crime.

For the purpose of this paper, the term organized crime is used to refer to any group that has the capability to carry out an illegal system which consists of members of the group demanding money from someone in order to provide protection against any type of threat and/or to avoid harm committed by any other member of the organization<sup>12</sup>. Considering this definition, Central American maras are networks made up by groups of people associated with the identity of two Los Angeles originated gangs: Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18.

The fact that both groups were originated overseas makes the interpretation of the

---

<sup>11</sup> KLEIN, W. M. and MAXSON, L. C. "Street Gang. Patterns and Policies", Oxford University Press, New York, p. 4, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> CRUZ, M. J. "Central American Maras: from youth Street gangs to transnational protection rackets", Global crime, 11(4), p. 382, 2010. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ewdgHr>

concept of organized crime as a broader one. Therefore, maras constitute a form of transnational organized crime and are also referred to as transnational street gangs.

Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 make two separate yet powerful transnational networks in the NTCA region. Their development and expanse throughout the years have facilitated institutionalization processes among public forces and citizens and have also enable them to become organized protection rackets<sup>13</sup>.

Maras rely on families' local support and *halcones*, who are their eyes and ears inside neighbourhoods. As mentioned above, they are found in urban, poor, and marginalized areas, due to the lack of surveillance and state control in these areas<sup>14</sup>. When locals do not behave accordingly to their established code of conduct, they use force against them. Cantor believes that "current *clickas* can be characterized as highly localized and largely urban criminal organizations that swiftly resort to the use of violence against inhabitants"<sup>15</sup>.

The Northern Triangle conforms a particular case in terms of street gang performance. Whilst most of the population is found in capital cities, maras are found "in a much wider range of locales, including towns with less than 50,000 inhabitants"<sup>16</sup>.

These groups represent a clear picture of violence in the Northern Triangle. In this sense, the constitution of maras brings light into social, economic, and political problems within the region, acting as a response to these issues. Both networks have incremented their activities, generating as well different types of violence not seen before. In fact, their denotation as transnational networks or street gangs also indicates that both violence and crime are bigger as well<sup>17</sup>.

Jütersonke, Muggah and Rodgers assure that maras and *pandillas* tend to work as local security apparatus for small drug cartels, which are often managed by *exmareros*<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> BARNES, N. "A Comparative Analysis of Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the United States", Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> JIMÉNEZ, V. E. "La violencia en el Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica: una realidad que genera desplazamiento", *Papel Político*, 21(1), p. 186, 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3eBxRu3>

<sup>15</sup> CANTOR, D. J. "The new wave: forced displacement caused by organized crime in Central America and Mexico", 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3eL75kn>

<sup>16</sup> UNODC. "Transnational organized...p. 29

<sup>17</sup> JIMÉNEZ, V. E. "La violencia en el Triángulo Norte...p. 187

<sup>18</sup> JÜTERSONKE, O., MUGGAH, R. and RODGERS, D. "Gangs, urban violence, and security interventions in Central America", *Security Dialogue*, 40(4-5), p. 7, 2009. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3daLLmt>

These scholars make a distinction between maras and *pandillas*. The later are national groups commonly found in Panamá, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Maras, as it has been previously stated, have transnational origins and are present in the NTCA states<sup>19</sup>.

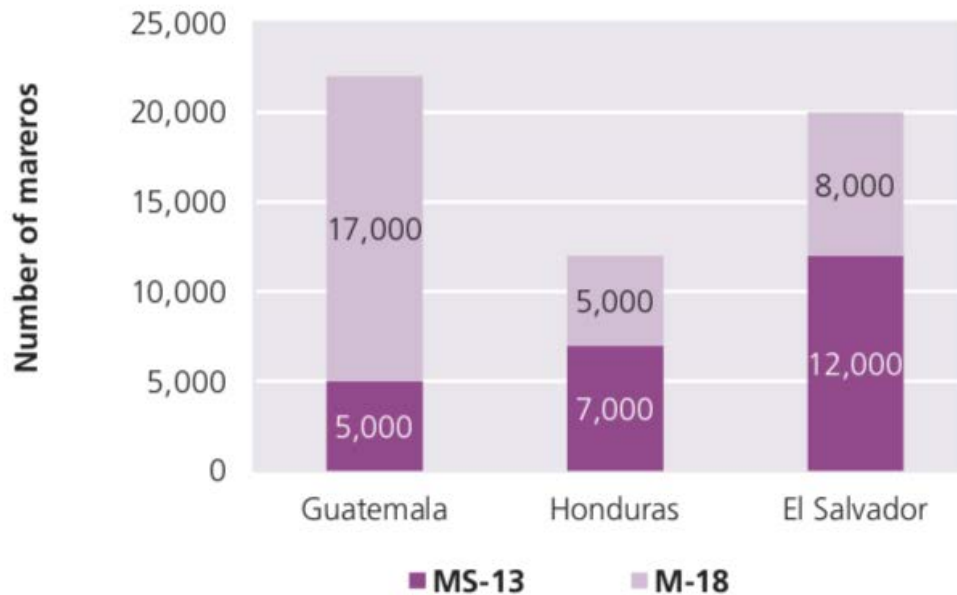


Figure 3. Mara membership in the Northern Triangle, in 2012. Source. Law enforcement interviews.

Maras' membership has escalated during the last decades. In this regard, a 2006 UNODC world report stated that by the late 2000s there were already around 67,000 mara members in Central America. Moreover, a UNODC report indicates that by 2012 there were localized 323 *mareros* every 100,000 inhabitants in El Salvador, 153 in Guatemala and 149 in Honduras.

### *Mara Salvatrucha*

Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 is one of the most if not the most notorious street gang in the Western Hemisphere. Founded in the poor and marginalized neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, this group was formed because of civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. War made people flee from their countries (mainly Salvadorans), ending up in Mexican suburbs of East and Central Los Angeles and San Fernando Valley. As a

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

result of US deportation policies and Mexican gangs regaining territoriality, these immigrants organized themselves in groups and constituted one of the strongest gangs: Mara Salvatrucha Stoners or MSS<sup>20</sup>.

There is little consensus on the origins of the gang's name. However, it is universally known that mara refers to the Central American denotation for gangs; Salva to El Salvador; and Trucha is a slang word that means 'clever' or 'sharp'. Salvatruchas was also a name given to locals who fought against William Walker, an American businessman and proponent of slavery who died executed by Honduran locals. Moreover, the term 'stoners' also refers to refugees from El Salvador who had a reputation for listening to heavy metal, drinking, and smoking. As time passed by, the gang evolved into an institution-structured network which shed their original name and became to be known as MS or MS-13<sup>21</sup>.

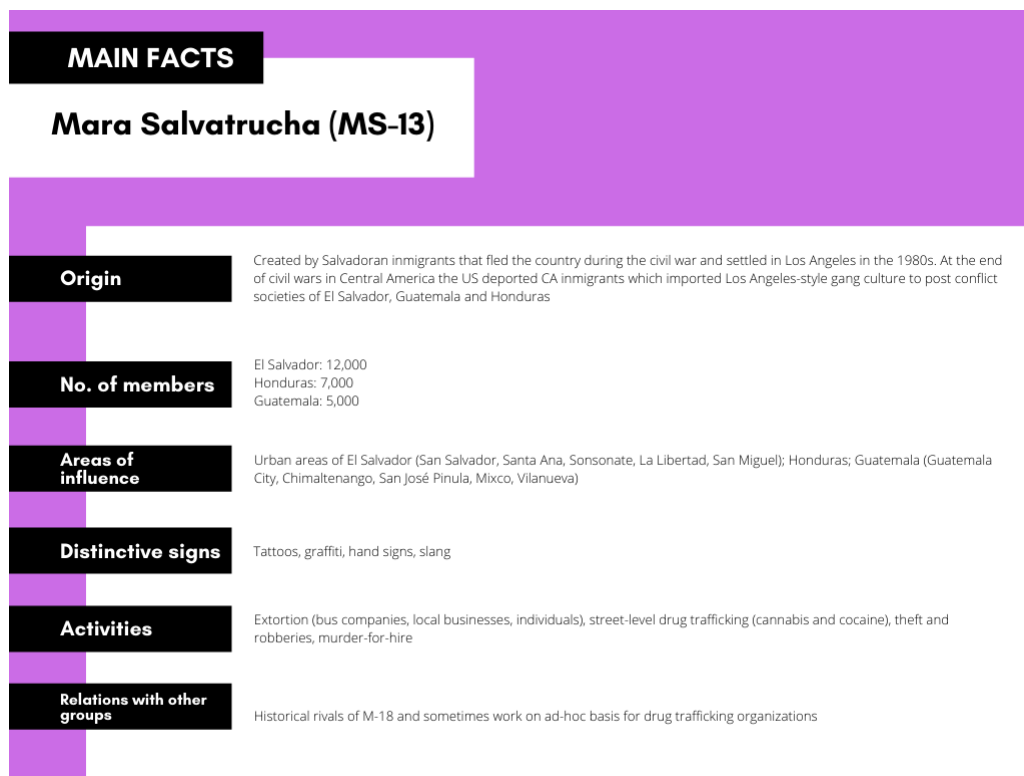


Figure 4. Mara Salvatrucha key features. Source: own elaboration, data from 2012 UNODC report.

<sup>20</sup> FRANCO, C. "The MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Gang Threats?", Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress, p. 6, 2008. Available at: <https://bit.ly/36Bubpf>

<sup>21</sup> INSIGHT CRIME. "MS13". Insight Crime, El Salvador, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2M9Rb52> [Las visited on 27/05/20]



MS-13's reach and size have an influence on the variety of activities performed from one region to another among the Northern Triangle. In the same line, Mara Salvatrucha's operations are diversified—due to its expanse in Central America—and include extortion and control of the neighbourhood petty drug market. As reflected above (figure 4), crimes among MS-13 gangs, such as extorting of bus companies, are the most disruptive criminal activities in the region<sup>22</sup>.

Nonetheless, MS13's performance in the US is focused on local drug sales and extortion of small business and underground bars. Moreover, Insight Crime claims that there is evidence involving the gang in sophisticated transnational criminal activities such as international drug and human trafficking rings<sup>23</sup>. More than a dozen of international drug trafficking cases involving the group have also pointed out the alliance between this group and Mexican Mafia's networks.

Allegedly, the gang is now in its second-generation development and the cycle looks quite difficult to break. Involvement in MS-13 is characterized by youth repatriation as an only way to scape or live through the violence that surrounds them. Entry process into this group seems to be violent and old members seeking to break free find themselves besieged by internal rules<sup>24</sup>. In Mara Salvatrucha's case, desertion is penalized by a death sentence and even if they break free from their membership, tattoos—a distinctive sign among maras—keep them branded for life<sup>25</sup>.

### *Barrio 18*

Mara 18, Barrio 18, M-18 or the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang is, apart from MS-13, one of the largest youth gangs located in the Western Hemisphere. This mara has cells operating in Central America, Canada, and the US, where it has a larger presence than Mara Salvatrucha. As showed in previous sections, Mara 18 has thousands of members spread throughout the Northern Triangle and constitutes one of the most significant criminal threats for the region.

---

<sup>22</sup> UNODC. "Transnational organized...p. 27

<sup>23</sup> INSIGHT CRIME. "MS13..."

<sup>24</sup> STATE OF NEW JERSEY COMMISSION OF INVESTIGATION. "MS-13", p. 6-9, 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ubx18u>

<sup>25</sup> PIRTLE, D. "Mara Salvatrucha", Encyclopædia Britannica, International Criminal Gang, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2B2D7rQ> [Last visited on 27/05/20]

This mara firstly emerged as a “small-time street gang in Los Angeles”<sup>26</sup>. Its formation was around 18<sup>th</sup> street and Union Avenue in Los Angeles Rampart district<sup>27</sup>. Despite not having a clear trace of its origins, M-18 took its current form in the 1980s after numerous riots in the city due to the discharge of the police who brutally beat Rodney King—an African American motorist—and the split from Clanton 14 gang.

Moreover, another particularity of this group are its cells, commonly known as ‘cliques’ and that at first were exclusive province of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, the evolution of the gang showed how other Latino nationalities joined the immigrant population and Barrio 18 recruited members of other areas to enable the group’s expanse in other regions, particularly in Central America. Mara 18 has been operational for 70 years and, according to Insight Crime, “there is no reason to believe they won’t be around for another 70 more”<sup>28</sup>.

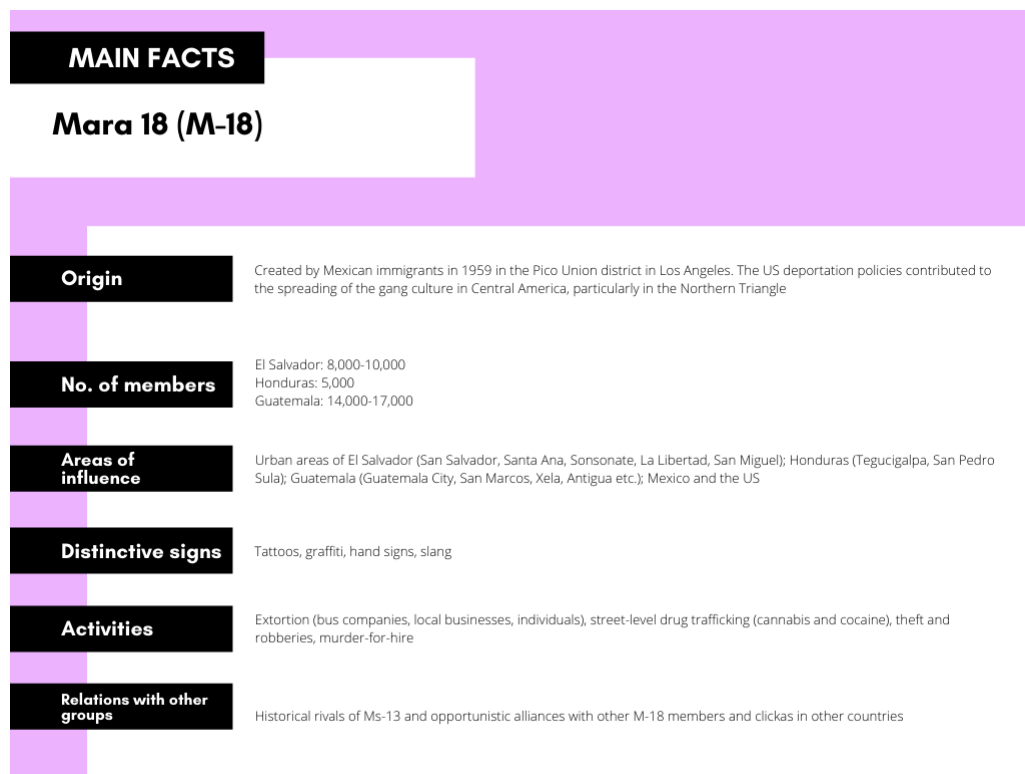


Figure 5. Mara 18 key features. Source: own elaboration, data from 2012 UNODC report.

<sup>26</sup> INSIGHT CRIME. “Barrio 18”, Insight Crime, El Salvador, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Ak5ykB> [Last visited on 27/05/20]

<sup>27</sup> ZILBERG, E. “Space of detention: the making of a transnational gang crisis between Los Angeles and San Salvador”, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> INSIGHT CRIME. “Barrio 18...”

M-18 mainly operates in the Northern Triangle region. However, their presence is mostly defined in the United States. Most of the gang's members are in California but they are also spread in other western cities such as Denver. According to Insight Crime, Barrio 18 has also had a presence in Italy since the mid-2000s, but the arrest of a suspected leader of this mara served as a warning for stopping the gang's desires to spread into Europe<sup>29</sup>.

On the one hand, it is collectively acknowledged that Barrio 18 is fierce enemy of Mara Salvatrucha, and that internal division among the first group usually flashes into violence. Regarding to this division, it is essential to bear in mind that M-18 in El Salvador is separated into two rival factions: the revolutionaries and the Sureños<sup>30</sup>.

On the other hand, this street transnational network has a close relationship with Mexican Mafia, and it is known to have nets of lawyers, taxi drivers and mechanics as allies or collaborators. The gang usually relies on extortion for violence, and this puts them at odds with the local community<sup>31</sup>.

### ***The impact of 'maras' in the region***

The presence of violent and criminal organizations in the region —particularly transnational networks— has enhanced the impact of already existing issues. According to specialized literature, deep rooted issues of corruption in the political system and insecurity created by organized crime has boosted poverty, unemployment, gender violence and climate change concerns forcing thousands of people to seek asylum out of the region<sup>32</sup>.

The instability of the NTCA has clearly made it easier for criminal organizations to prosper and control even more certain areas of the region. For the scope of this essay, the study of maras' impact in the Northern Triangle is made through the analysis of three indicators:

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> PARTLOW, J. "Two Salvadoran gangsters walk into a church", The Washington Post, WorldViews, 2016. Available at: <https://wapo.st/2ZKPjYx>

<sup>31</sup> INSIGHT CRIME. "Barrio 18..."

<sup>32</sup> KENNEDY, K. "Guatemala/El Salvador/Honduras: corruption and organized crime in Central America's Northern Triangle countries impact on migration crisis worsening regional stability", European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, Briefing, p. 1, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XbPtXx>

security, governmental, and humanitarian impacts.

### *Security impact*

Transnational gangs' presence among the NTCA states has delivered the highest rates of violent crime in the world. According to a UN report, the Northern Triangle represented one of the most dangerous regions in the world, with the highest rate of average homicides<sup>33</sup>.

The impact of these figures has left many concerns among citizens and governments, being lack of security the most important of them. This scenario has made states unable to be providers of public security and outsource, under their national laws, the use of force to private military security companies<sup>34</sup> (PMSCs). According to a CDAF and UNLIREC report, there are around 16,174 identified PMSCs with more than 2,500,000 employees in Latin America. Concretely, 1,348 companies and 166,769 guards are legally registered in the Northern Triangle<sup>35</sup>.

However, it is also convenient to clarify that this increase of the use of private security has been made by the wealthy. In the case of the poor, they tend to organize themselves in associations, brigades, and self-defence groups<sup>36</sup>. It has been reported that in Guatemala, for instance, incidences of vigilantism have increased a 400% since 2004, and some of them are directly related to the fight against drug trafficking<sup>37</sup>.

### *Governmental impact*

Current political situation in the Northern Triangle could be defined as unstable. In this sense, corruption among these states has enabled gang violence to endure by creating

---

<sup>33</sup> ACNUR. "Global Trends 2014", p.24, 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3eITkXE>

<sup>34</sup> PMSCs are defined as companies which provide either military or security services or both with the use of material and technical support to armed forces, strategic planning, intelligence, investigation, training activities with military implications, satellite surveillance, or other related activities (CDAF, 2016: 2)

<sup>35</sup> DCAF y UNLIREC. "Armed Private Security in Latin American and the Caribbean: Oversight and accountability in an evolving context", p.13, 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gxwP40>

<sup>36</sup> NOUVET, A. and MUGGAH, R. "Assessing the Impacts of Violence on Humanitarian and Development Agencies in Central America: Preliminary findings from a survey of REDLAC members", Rio de Janeiro: Igarapé institute, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> TEN VELDE, L. "The Northern Triangle's drugs-violence nexus: the role of the drugs trade in criminal violence and policy responses in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras", Drugs and Conflict Debate Papers, 19, Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2012. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2MkWEGF>

an insecure environment for their population and permitting security forces practice extrajudicial violence as a policing mechanism<sup>38</sup>.

El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have a long history of corruption that links political parties to business elites and transnational street gangs. The aid is commonly provided by campaign funding in exchange of favours. This cooperation procedure goes back to the civil war years and afterwards in the 1980s and 1990s, as a way of ensuring influence over political processes<sup>39</sup>.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, violence has a direct negative impact on the support of democracy as citizens do not trust that governments can protect them from crimes<sup>40</sup>. In this line, it is also accurate to indicate that lack of trust in the criminal justice system and disrespect for the rule of law are indicators which have shown to be high in regions such as the Northern Triangle, where there are extreme levels of violence and already existing concerns over the quality of governance<sup>41</sup>.

In terms of governmental matters, it is quite difficult to foresee a change in these dynamics. Taking into consideration the nature of maras in the NTCA, it is likely that any kind of political pressure from the regional governments will only intensify the rate of operations in the Northern Triangle states. In this respect, Kennedy states that it has been demonstrated that “the nature of crimes are likely to adapt to changing situations, including more extortion and targeted killings, indicating that the gangs will not cease to exist but will only adapt”<sup>42</sup>.

### *Humanitarian impact*

The sum of security and governance indicators lead to a third and final effect of transnational organized crime groups in the region: forced migration. The political situation described above has certainly intensified the already present issues among citizens and has pushed people into massive poverty. In addition, enabling gangs to thrive

---

<sup>38</sup> KENNEDY, K. “Guatemala/El Salvador/Honduras: corruption...p. 2

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> MARILENA ADAMS, T. “Chronic violence and its reproduction: perverse trends in social relations, citizenship and democracy in Latin America”, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3eyzBUN>

<sup>41</sup> WORLD BANK. “Crime and Violence...”

<sup>42</sup> KENNEDY, K. “Guatemala/El Salvador/Honduras: corruption...p. 3

has also strengthen the driving factors behind crime and violence<sup>43</sup>.

However, it is also interesting to consider Northern Triangle states' evolution of democracy and political climates in terms of humanitarian impact as well. They are very similar and show a clear picture of how these groups have taken advantage of the difficulties that people live under among the region. The result of these dynamics opens pandoras' box with the instauration of a transnational security crisis, leaving these countries not choice but to rely on support and contributions of third parties<sup>44</sup>.

The main outcome of these issues is presented in the form of a corrupt system and a lack of resources in terms of target production. In short, the NTCA states are unable to tackle crucial matters. Evidently, the mixture of all these problems has translated into people fleeing from their countries to find a secure and stable place to carry on with their lives.

According to a UNHCR report, increasing violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras forced thousands of people to leave their homes, mainly to Mexico and the US. In fact, the US was the second-largest host of new asylum seekers with 172,700 claims in 2015. These people come mainly from Mexico (19,300), El Salvador (18,900), Guatemala (16,400) and Honduras (14,300) due to violence and prosecution generated by transnational crime organizations<sup>45</sup>.

Considering the figures reflected in the UNHCR 2014 report regarding homicide rates and violent incidents in the NTCA, there seems to be a connection between both the increase of violence and asylum petitions, and the recognition of refugees' status among the region: a 130% increase of applications from 2009 to 2013, and a 31% increase in the concession of granted refugees status between 2010 and 2012<sup>46,47</sup>.

### ***Governmental approaches to transnational crime in the region***

#### *Northern Triangle governments*

Northern Triangle governments' response is characterized by numerous tries of pro-

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> ACNUR. "Global Trends 2015", p. 7 and 38, 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ZLpyYc>

<sup>46</sup> ACNUR. "Global Trends 2014..."

<sup>47</sup> ACAPS. "Other situations of violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America: invisible borders, vicious spirals, and the normalization of terror", p. 3, 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ZNzq3S>

development and tough interventions to eradicate crime and violence, but they have produced limited changes in the region.

In terms of economic development and stability, the most significant blueprint is the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P)<sup>48</sup>. The plan was unveiled after a massive flood of immigrants arrived at the US-Mexico border in 2014. Its aim is to increase production, strengthen institutions, expand opportunities, and improve public security; and 80% of it is funded by El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras<sup>49</sup>.

Regarding corruption and good governance, a significant progress has been made. The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) represents the prime example of it. Back in 2007 the country asked the UN for help and the institution provided an independent body to investigate and prosecute criminal groups and transnational networks which are suspects of being infiltrated in the government<sup>50</sup>. Yet to have completely defied organized crime in the country, this organism has helped convict more than 300 officials and significantly reduce Guatemala's homicide rates<sup>51</sup>.

In El Salvador, three former presidents have been charged with money laundering and embezzlement. Even though there is still no organism like Guatemala's, the country has announced plans for their own international corruption panel<sup>52</sup>. On the other hand, Honduras relied on the support of the Organization of American States to establish an anti-corruption committee which in 2016 fired 40% of its police during reforms<sup>53</sup>. However, Meyer believes that citizen confidence in this force remains rather low<sup>54</sup>.

Lastly, violence has been a hard and complex issue to tackle. The most significative measures were implemented in the early 2000s and consisted in the expansion of policy powers and harsher punishments for mara members. The three states implemented approaches based on mass imprisonment and roundups in poor neighbourhoods, a

---

<sup>48</sup> INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK. "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle", 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XgeGjD> [Last visited on 28/05/20]

<sup>49</sup> CHEATHAM, C. "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle", Council on Foreign Relations, 2019. Available at: <https://on.cfr.org/2XcEyMZ> [Las visited on 28/05/20]

<sup>50</sup> CICIG. "Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala", 2007. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cbEgdM> [Last visited on 28/05/20]

<sup>51</sup> CHEATHAM, C. "Central America's...

<sup>52</sup> CALL, T. C. "Can El Salvador's New Anti-Corruption Commission Deliver?", Americas Quarterly, Anti-Corruption Watch, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XGpSVC> [Last visited on 28/05/20]

<sup>53</sup> CHEATHAM, C. "Central America's..."

<sup>54</sup> MEYER, J. P. "Honduras: Background and US Relations", CRS, p. 6, 2019 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zJqxnM>

particular characteristic of these actions relied on the identification of suspects based on “flimsy evidence, such as tattoos”<sup>55</sup>. These policies were recognized as *Mano Dura* in El Salvador, *Cero Tolerancia* in Honduras, and *Plan Escoba* in Guatemala<sup>56</sup>.

However, as stated by Kennedy, the nature of maras and the failure of these policies directly led to a growth in gang membership<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, mass incarcerations also increased the number of prisoners in already overcrowded penitentiaries, a wide number of them run by gangs. In there they recruited thousands of new members as well as expanded their extortion rackets. While it is true that in 2012 Salvadoran officials helped agent a truce between Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs, the agreement fell apart and the negotiations only served to give both gangs political legitimacy<sup>58</sup>.

### *Response from the US*

Throughout the last two decades the US has been a crucial actor helping the Northern Triangle countries defy transnational organized crime to overcome economic, security and migration related issues. However, many critics claim that US policies have been reactive, also prompted by upturns in migration to the US-Mexico border<sup>59</sup>.

Obama brought the so-called Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which helped the region’s law enforcement, counter narcotics agencies, and justice systems<sup>60</sup>. Through his second term, Central America was included in the US Strategy, to complement the region’s A4P plan<sup>61</sup>.

It is also worth mentioning that due to the massive flood of immigrants that took place in 2014, the Obama administration partnered with Northern Triangle governments in order to carry out anti-smuggling operations and information campaigns which intended to

---

<sup>55</sup> CARROLL, JP. “Why the deadliest gang in the world might be rethinking face tattoos”, Daily Caller, World, 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gxuw0K> [Last visited on 28/05/20]

<sup>56</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. “Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America”, p. 7, 2017. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2QDKdeQ>

<sup>57</sup> ZECHMEISTER, J. E. (ed.). “2014: Democratic Governance across 10 years of the Americas Barometer”, 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cbMulY>

<sup>58</sup> CHEATHAM, C. “Central America’s...

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> MEYER, J. P. y RIBANDO SEELKE, C. “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress”, CRS, 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2MlhXrD>

<sup>61</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF STATE. “US Strategy for engagement in Central America”, 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XceYry>



dissuade would-be migrants<sup>62</sup>.

Regarding Trump administration, it has kept Obama's framework for the region while prioritizing the stemming flow of Central American migrants to the US. Many of Trump's actions, such as the 'zero-tolerance policy', have generated controversy and sparked legal challenges<sup>63</sup>. Leaving aside downturn in recent months, worries for Northern Triangle citizens have more than doubled so far in 2019 in comparison to 2018<sup>64</sup>.

Trump has also stated that his administration will temporarily hold back future funding until the region "take concrete actions" to tackle migration issues. In this sense, the American administration tried to revoke temporary protected status for Hondurans and Salvadorans<sup>65</sup>. The program allows migrants from vulnerable or crisis-stricken countries to live and work in the US for a specific period<sup>66</sup>.

Currently, Biden administration includes in its government program a response to the migratory crisis in the Northern Triangle<sup>67</sup>. The strategic plan counts with a budget of \$4 billion, but no details have been revealed as to how funds will be allocated, what regions are being emphasized or how long it will take to notice the impact<sup>68</sup>.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This policy paper studies transnational organized crime in the Northern Triangle of Central America and analyses Mara Salvatrucha and Mara 18 presence and activities among the three countries that constitute the region. In this regard, both street gangs have expanded in a very impressive way through Central America, basically dominating and controlling security and political legitimacy of democratic systems. The impact of maras in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras has left the highest criminality and homicide rates in the world and has enhanced already existing issues among these countries, such as

---

<sup>62</sup> CHEATHAM, C. "Central America's...

<sup>63</sup> CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE. "The Trump Administration's "zero tolerance" immigration enforcement policy", CRS, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/36Hltpf>

<sup>64</sup> CHEATHAM, C. "Central America's...

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> FELTER, C. and SHENDRUK, A. "What is Temporary Protected Status?", Council on Foreign Relations, 2018. Available at: <https://on.cfr.org/3erwcXG> [Last visited on 28/05/20]

<sup>67</sup> BIDEN, J. "The Biden Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with The People of Central America". Available at: <https://bit.ly/3nAzzS3> [Last visited on 28/04/21]

<sup>68</sup> NORTH, D. "Biden Plan for the Northern Triangle", Center for Immigration Studies, 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3t9pexF>

economic instability, citizen insecurity, lack of good governance, corruption, infiltration among political structures and a massive torrent of forced immigration through the US-Mexico border. Despite the wide range of initiatives that both Northern Triangle governments and the US administration have propelled, there is still room to reverse the situation with a more proactive policy course of action.

While it is true that these organizations have an institutionalized and established status among society, political elites, and a high percentage of wealthy population, it is necessary to reduce their presence in the region. In this sense, the following recommendations gather actions planned to defy transnational organized crime and minimize maras' impact in the NTCA states:

- Acknowledging the difficulty of engaging stable dialogs with maras, a good start would be the instauration of transparency confidence-building measures between both actors. For instance, the improvement of prison conditions —also bearing that many penitentiaries are run by these gangs— would facilitate the exchange of peaceful signs from MS-13 and M18 groups.
- It is also believed that part of the strengthen and animosity of these gangs relies on their consideration as terrorist groups. Reconsidering this categorization could potentially reduce criminal and homicide rates considering that this incentive could also lessen their presence in some areas.
- Trinational cooperation between El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras should be a priority. This collective approach would bring benefits such as finding effective harm reduction approaches to street gang crime, target specific operations run in the region and prosecuting gang suspects.
- Security policy improvements must be made as well. The strategy should tackle criminal justice and prison reforms (as already mentioned) and restraining drug trafficking and street gangs' activities.
- All these measures should be accompanied by incentives to reduce corruption and money laundering. Motivating digital financial transactions via payrolls, payments and disbursements could potentially reduce reliance on cash, and therefore, minimize scheming.
- In addition to the measures listed above, it is also advisable to monitor the accountability of them. This will help reduce but also measure the impact of maras'

activities among Northern Triangle countries. The monitorization of these courses of action should entail the regular publication of security and crime data using multiple variables. Furthermore, it is also recommended to these regional governments to measure the success of US aid with the help of institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank. Regional cooperation has the potential to be the beginning of the end of these security, economic, democratic, and humanitarian issues that gangs bring into the region.

*Gara Báez García\**

Journalist and master student of Geopolitics and Strategic Studies,  
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid  
[@baez\\_gara](#)