

# Gangs

## An approach to understanding them and strategic proposals for resolving the conflicts they generate from the perspective of Conflictology<sup>1</sup>

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### Resumen

Las pandillas son un fenómeno contemporáneo, con apenas unos años de historia, que surgen de forma virulenta en El Salvador a finales de los ochenta. En el año 2005 la ciudad ecuatoriana de Guayaquil contaba con unas sesenta mil personas pertenecientes a distintas bandas; en El Salvador esta cifra era de unas cincuenta mil. Actualmente, incluyendo a los Estados Unidos, México y los países de Centroamérica y Sudamérica, se estima que el número de personas pertenecientes a bandas supera el millón. Cabe decir que no todas presentan un carácter violento o delictivo, aunque sí muchas de ellas. Una actividad delictiva que recuerda cada vez más a una guerra civil, una guerra sin ideologías en la que se busca el control o el acceso a la riqueza y el poder por medio de la acción violenta. En este artículo analizamos los elementos que favorecen la aparición de las pandillas, sus características y los posibles métodos con los que hacer frente a sus actividades violentas desde una perspectiva de resolución de conflictos.

### Abstract

Gangs, as such, are a contemporary phenomenon, with only a few years of history, appearing virulently in El Salvador at the end of the 1980s. In 2005, the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, had some sixty thousand gang members; in El Salvador, around fifty thousand. At present, and including the United States, Mexico and Central American and South American countries, the population belonging to gangs may well surpass one million. Even though not all of them have a violent or criminal character, many of them do. This criminal activity increasingly resembles a civil war. A war without ideologies that seeks control or access to wealth and power through violent action. In this article we analyze the elements that favour the emergence of gangs, their characteristics, and possible ways on how to tackle down their violent activities from a conflict resolution perspective.



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## THE ACTIVITIES OF GANGS: INCREASING CRIME, CONFLICTS AND SECURITY BUDGETS

Gangs, as such, are a contemporary phenomenon, with only a few years of history, appearing virulently in El Salvador at the end of the 1980s. At first, they were nothing more than groups of youths looking for company, support, and fun in cities where there was nowhere for them to socialize or institutions where they could channel their demands and concerns. In time, and in a certain social environment, gangs incorporated violent and criminal activities in response to needs not satisfied by society and owing to specific circumstances as well. Some of them, such as the *Ñeta*, appeared in Puerto Rico as a grouping of sections of the prison population, which would later transcend the prison sphere and spread among youth.

Some gangs take inspiration from similar juvenile movements originating in the United States, generated among the Hispanic or Black population of New York or Los Angeles, and adopt names and sub-cultural characteristics such as their style of dress, symbols, motivations, musical taste and organizational principles, as well as others, as is the case of the Latin Kings. There are more than one hundred gangs, known as *pandillas* and *maras*, not all of which have a violent or criminal character: the *Sangre*, *Salvatrucha*, *Rebeldes*, *Nación de Hierro*, or *Masters*, and many others with diverse symbols, habits, and attitudes that share important common elements.

In 2005, the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, with a population of three million, had some sixty thousand gang members; and in El Salvador, a few years ago,

there were fifty thousand. At present, and including the United States, Mexico and Central American and South American countries such as Ecuador and Colombia, the population belonging to gangs (with a greater or lesser degree of violence and criminal practices) may well surpass one million.

In times of change, like ours, conflicts grow and multiply and, therefore, the need to guarantee security brings about an increase in budgets allocated to policing. Nevertheless, this seems insufficient in the face of the constant increase in violent and criminal acts that in some countries may be qualified as endemic, that is, that they have come to be part of the economic development and of the political system and the state itself. In reality, this criminal activity increasingly resembles a civil war. A war without ideologies that seeks control or access to wealth and power through violent action, whether from the repressive capacity of the state or from the criminal activity of organizations that increasingly resemble corporations more than political parties or labor unions.

Gangs, in general, tend to prosper in countries where the following elements exist:

- Widespread corruption and, especially, at the very heart of the state.
- Poverty, marginalization, marked inequality... and the lack of efficient public policies addressing social aspects, employment, distribution of wealth and education. Poor public sector efficiency.
- Security policies and policing based mainly on repression and severity that frequently do not respect civil liberties or human rights. Inadequate police training, both from a technical

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1 Conflictology means Conflict Resolution or Conflict Transformation, Peace Studies and related fields.

viewpoint and in terms of values and democratic principles.

- Disaffection of the majority of the population with regard to their country owing to state corruption, poor functioning of the state and the absence of inspiring principles of democracy and the common good.
- Unstructured or dysfunctional families where unplanned pregnancies, abuse, unemployment, drug addiction and despair exist.
- Predominance of a culture of violence, that is, the belief that achievements come through violence, instead of effort, justice or democratic processes.
- Absence or serious lack of truly democratic institutions and traditions capable of channeling discontent and the demands of the population with the least resources and with different ideologies from those who monopolize economic and political power. Weakness of civil society, and of citizen, professional, cultural and, private or civic, economic associations.

Many homicide cases are related to gang activity. In El Salvador, according to police data, the *maras* are responsible for 40 per cent of the cases of violence; in Honduras, it stands at more than fifty per cent, and the figures are similar for Guatemala. On the contrary, in Nicaragua, it only represents one per cent. One possible explanation may be found in its contemporary history. The Sandinista movement represented the existence of a mobilizing capacity based on political principles that created bonds of solidarity among the most disadvantaged and socially marginalized in society. This prevented the emergence of organizations with criminal objectives but with a similar motivation to create bonds of solidarity and socialization of wealth through criminal activity, which gave meaning to the democratizing practice and a positive feeling of belonging to a country.

The increase in gang activity is occurring as much quantitatively as it is qualitatively. On the one hand, what was at first based on voluntary adhesion has increasingly transformed into forced methods of recruitment by means of threats and aggressions. On the other hand, the cultural pull of gangs increasingly attracts populations that were until now removed from their original influence. Qualitatively, the levels of sophistication in terms of organization, armament and finances are increasing. It is no

longer only a matter of theft and robbery, now the *maras* are increasingly better prepared organizations, even militarized and linked, in some cases, to the criminal economy: drug trafficking, traffic of people, forced prostitution... The ties with the old mafias, arms traffickers and criminal organizations are becoming tighter. In the case of Mexico, there are well-founded suspicions that criminal organizations possess better armament and more personnel than the security forces, army and police combined, and their military training permits them to develop efficient combat tactics. Armed clashes with the police or army serve more as maneuvers and combat exercises than as positive results on the part of the security strategy of the state, generally speaking, and only offer short-lived triumphs and successes.

The additional problem is that gangs are infiltrating the state apparatus. There are gang members who join the army or police force in order to receive training, devote themselves to espionage activities and avoid civil legislation that could bring charges against them. Their integration in security forces does not mean disassociating themselves from their gang, with which they maintain much stronger ties than a simple work contract or symbolic oath. Moreover, desertion in the most violent gangs is 'punishable' with summary execution that any member of the gang in any country and situation is compelled to carry out. The only way out of some gangs is to become a member of a religious order and, even then, the person will be watched for years. Ties with the gangs are for life. Discipline in gangs is much stricter and more efficient than in any police or military organization; it is advisable not to forget this. Training for gang combat is also much tougher and more practical than that of the police forces. In some gangs, in order to have command, one must assassinate a person and even, in some of them, the victim must be a relative. The training period is much harsher than any other is, sanctions may easily be beatings, amputation of limbs or even the killing of relatives, or the torture or killing of the gang member.

The levels of cruelty in the committing of violent acts are increasing because of the need to cause terror both among their members and among the general population and public security forces. Assassinations are committed with extreme cruelty and principles of viciousness, torture and absence of mercy are extolled. In El Salvador, the para-police forces left a trail of extreme cruelty during the

time they fought against guerrilla groups and some of these former guerrillas have continued their 'work' integrated in criminal organizations.

These practices and 'training' programs produce very strong levels of adhesion. They learn that life has no value, they learn even to await death as something positive, to want to live fast and at any price. The psychological conditioning is much greater than for any police officer or soldier who has not entered into combat. Gang members learn to fight on the street, with live ammunition, among themselves and against their adversaries and have many hours of practice, if they survive.

The basic motives for wanting to join a gang are, in general, these:

- Security. In unsafe cities where the police do not guarantee the protection of the population, gangs are a guarantee of respect. If a gang member is attacked, the rest of his gang will take revenge, even in a disproportionate way, for the insult received.
- Solidarity. In unstructured families and unsupportive societies, the gang is a safe refuge. Solidarity among its members is both a habit and an obligation. Solidarity that is not merely economic but also emotional. Gangs create networks where they do not exist or where they are insufficient in citizens' organizations and in social services and where political participation is scarce or lacking.
- Socialization. On one occasion, the leader of a gang, responding to my question about the reasons for joining a gang, in addition to citing the two previous points, added that, in a gang he was able to meet girls and have relations with them. Outside the gang, this was very difficult. Regarding social promotion or prestige, gangs also represent the way to integrate oneself and receive the benefits of social life that they are unable to obtain through public institutions. In addition, it must be stressed how the socializing process of gangs creates a sense of belonging to a collective identity that one can identify with, which establishes habits and ways of relating, gives meaning to life itself and that neither politics, the family or religion currently provide.

Few security policies begin by learning the characteristics of the 'enemy', of the people and orga-

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nizations they must combat against, pursue or suppress and detain. It appears as something superfluous, unnecessary. Crime is fought, the criminal is detained and, in the best of cases, they are tried and put in prison.

On one occasion, a high-ranking police commander from a Latin American country confessed to me that they had an infallible method to use against the gangs: "Give me his name and address (of the gang leader) and we'll waste him". On another occasion, someone told me about another 'efficient' method: the prison was burned down with hundreds of gang members inside. Obviously, they were burnt to death; however, gang activity and revenge came swiftly and caused many deaths among police and the innocent civilian population. These are good examples of how violence does not diminish with more violence, rather it increases and with extremely high human, economic and psychological costs.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (on its website): "Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable". Peace –or security, if you prefer– is an essential element for ensuring market development, the development of productive and commercial activities, the guarantee of respect for property and personal integrity and the existence of broad social sectors with the capacity to produce and consume in a stable, secure and dynamic environment. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has a program called the Inter-American Initiative on Social Capital, Ethics and Development whose objective consists of promoting community networks and ties, i.e., civil society, a country's social capital.

Gangs emerge in urban areas and develop with a strong identity and commitment to their local environment. However, repressive initiatives are causing some gangs to move to rural areas, even to the heart of indigenous communities, which causes social and spatial extension of these communities and makes it difficult to predict the consequences. In any case, we can see a marked growth of powers parallel to those of the state, with their own rules, ways of administering 'justice' and economic development.

Most gang members do not emerge from the poorest strata of the population, the majority of gang members have their origins in what we could call the lower middle classes, a young population with a certain degree of education; their neighborhoods are becoming degraded due to a lack of municipal and national investment. It would therefore appear that the breeding ground for the emergence of gangs could be those populations and neighborhoods with a certain economic and educational capacity but that are in the process of degradation and impoverishment. This could be a reaction against the regressive process itself more than the social situation in which they may find themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The availability of public places specifically devoted to social relations, possibilities for social participation as well as the existence of social services are elements that reduce the emergence of gangs. On the contrary, the absence of normal spaces for social relations and the lack of participation and social assistance facilitate the emergence of gang activity. The absence of opportunities for developing a collective youth existence leads them to find their own spaces. The fact is that one of the activities and motivations for joining a gang is socialization. Some gangs create places where they can get together, dance and listen to music. Being able to meet boys and girls is an important reason for wanting to join a gang.

The absence of social services or citizens' networks of collaboration and solidarity are other determining elements for the creation of gangs. Gangs emerge as a solution to the absence of such systems of relation and social cohesion necessary for living in society. The existence of gangs in certain populations arouses greater interest for social and political participation; i.e., the existence of gangs indicates greater interest for social aspects than does their non-existence.

As regards the levels of trust in institutions themselves, churches occupy first place along with the family, friends and neighbors, while the army, police or state (justice, government, municipality...) inspire the least degree of trust. The Catholic Church has the highest level of adhesion; however, Evangelical Churches show greater growth and attraction in comparison with the Catholic Church. ■

3 *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica* [Gangs in Central America], volume II, UCA Editores, José Simeón Cañas Central American University, El Salvador, 2004.