



The *maras*: violence, instability and religious conversion in El Salvador

The vulnerability of religious ministries in dealing with gangs

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Abstract

This article highlights the potential role that Christianity could play in the management of a structural problem that penetrates Salvadoran society: organised crime. Viewed by observers as the current manifestation of the causes of the Civil War in the early 1990s, organised crime has been the object of studies that try to comprehend both the phenomenon itself and the institutional actions that seek to find a solution to the problem. With its foundations in real-life reports compiled on the ground, this article illustrates how Christianity can play a more effective role in addressing the problem.

1. Introduction

Almost two and a half decades have passed since the Salvadoran Civil War (which took place between the leftist insurgency, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and the conservative Salvadoran government) ended in 1992 with a treaty supported by the UN. The conflict, which was caused by structural and institutionalised violence and gross material inequality between the majority of the poorest social classes and a small rich elite, resulted in material devastation for the country, thousands of people murdered or missing, and forced internal

and international migration, mainly to the United States. Today, Salvadoran society remains deeply fragmented by the same injustice that caused the conflict.

Following the conflict, a grave crisis regarding juvenile gangs, or *maras*, as they are known in El Salvador,¹ has emerged within the poorest social sectors. These gangs are involved in conflicts with each other, extortion, drug use and trafficking, murder, and the control of regional areas inside the State, to name a few of their activities. Gang-related criminal activities not only generate considerable levels of violence, insecurity and instability, but also reduce the ability of the State to effectively control public and national order. The problem is essentially a new type of ‘insurgency’ which cannot be dismantled by using suppression ‘from the top-down’, because the counterproductive result would be a rise in the problem. It is clear that there is a direct link between the violence that took place during the era of the Catholic archbishop and Salvadoran martyr, Oscar Romero, and the scourge of today’s Salvadoran gangs.

A series of complex and interlinking factors have been proposed by different parties to explain the propagation of the *maras*, such as the deportation policies in the United States and social injustice. Solutions have also been put forward to deal with the issue. Palliative measures have been criticised, in essence, because they do not work. However, against this backdrop, religious Christian congregations have been the only means to make a positive impact on the ground and that deserves to be recognised. Taking a counterposition to the strictly punitive element implemented by the State, they look to transform the individual, which also has social implications; they work as a platform for religious conversion and support in all aspects, with a view to reduce violence and redeem the individual.

This article is of a qualitative nature and focuses on determining the systemic cause of the gangs, violence, and the alternative role that religion plays as an element of change in a fragmented Salvadoran society. The employed method is descriptive, even though some interpretative elements have been included; it is based on fieldwork, such as interviews carried out by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, as well as secondary sources of investigation.

This article focuses on five different sections: in section 2, we look at the context in which the *maras*’ uprising has developed, as well as religion as a solution to the problem (briefly); in section 3, in terms of the context that has been constructed, the profile of the *maras* is theoretically discussed; section 4 summarises the results of the fieldwork by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America and, among them, the systemic causes of the *maras* and crime are analysed; in section 5, based on the framework of the investigation, the institutional measures for dealing with the question are presented; and lastly, in section 6, the role that religion plays as a transcendental factor for change on an individual level is analysed.

¹ The exact derivation of the name ‘mara’ is not clear; the name mara appears to come from a ferocious type of Central American ant; salva means El Salvador, while trucha means something like “trustworthy” and “alert” in Salvadoran slang; see Bruneau T. (2014). Pandillas and Security in Central America. *Latin American Research Review*, 49 (2) p. 156. Retrieved from https://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LARR/prot/fulltext/vol49no2/49-2_152-172_bruneau.pdf.

2. The emergence of the *maras* and their relationship with religion

The small Central American State of El Salvador was devastated by Civil War in the 1980s. As a result of the Civil War the infrastructure was practically destroyed; between 75,000 and 80,000 people were killed, there were more than 8,000 missing, and at least three and a half million people emigrated to the United States. The Civil War, which lasted 12 years without a winner on either side, was fuelled by the huge inequality between the oppressive majority of the economically poor population and a small, wealthy minority. A peace treaty supported by the United Nations between leftist group, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, and the conservative government brought an end to the Civil War in 1992, giving rise to the significance of political reforms.²

Nevertheless, in spite of the agreed upon peace treaty, past legacy as well as the conditions under which the martyr, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who gave his life defending the poor and victims of abuse against human rights at the beginning of the Civil War, still remain in the XXI century. In other words, in spite of the change, “there has not been a space for a culture of peace to develop and substitute the culture of violence of armed conflict.”³ Salvadoran society, far from being peaceful, is still endemically divided, spreading into violence and social injustice. Socioeconomic polarisation is evident in a tiered society where the wealthy classes can escape the violence by hiding behind luxury complexes in the hills of San Salvador, while the poor continue to pay the highest price associated with gang violence.

Homicide rates in El Salvador are the highest in the world: 108 per 100,000 inhabitants. During 2015, the most violent year of the Salvadoran Civil War, 6,670 Salvadorans were killed; between approximately 25% and 35 % of these homicides can be attributed to gang violence.⁴ At least 3,954 people were killed in 2017 and, regardless of the fact that the situation has improved since 2016, the Central American nation is still one of the most violent in the world.⁵ More recently, in just the first 50 days of 2018, 494 murders took place.⁶ Gang violence in El Salvador has resulted in

² Moodie, Ellen (2011), *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy*, Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, “Se cumplen 25 años de los acuerdos de paz que terminaron con la Guerra civil”, *Telam*, 01/14/2017. Retrieved from <http://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201701/176663-el-salvador-acuerdos-de-paz-guerra-civil.html>; Report of the UN Truth Commission on El Salvador (1993) Equipo Nizkor. Retrieved from <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/salvador/informes/truth.html>

³ “Se cumplen 25 años de los acuerdos de paz que terminaron con la Guerra civil”, *Telam*, *supra nota* 2, 01/14/2017. Retrieved from <http://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201701/176663-el-salvador-acuerdos-de-paz-guerra-civil.html>

⁴ “Why El Salvador became the hemisphere’s murder capital”, *The Washington Post*, 01/05/2016. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/05/why-el-salvador-became-the-hemispheres-murder-capital/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.be488affa6d2; “El Salvador becomes world’s most deadly country outside a war zone”, *The Telegraph*, 01/05/2016. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/elsalvador/12083903/El-Salvador-becomes-worlds-most-deadly-country-outside-a-war-zone.html>; “26% of El Salvador Homicides Linked to Gang Members”, *Insight Crime*, 03/21/2016. Retrieved from <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/26-percent-el-salvador-homicides-linked-to-gang-members/>.

⁵ “El Salvador, entre los países más violentos del mundo”, *Chicago Tribune*, 01/03/2018. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/hoy/eeuu/sns-bc-amc-gen-el-salvador-violencia-20180103-story.html>

⁶ “Trump sets sights on deadly MS-13 gang”, *Sky News*, 04/04/2018. Retrieved from <https://news.sky.com/story/trump-targets-violent-gang-ms-13-in-immigration-crackdown-11315457>.

conditions that have perpetuated an environment of fear and an endemic culture of violence. This predicament has led to the Salvadoran state being confronted with a crisis of international displacement and forced internal migration, which, in 2015, produced one million victims⁷ that could not be guaranteed protection under rule of law.⁸

In the context of insecurity caused by crime, the role of gangs, or *maras*⁹ is – without a doubt – particularly significant. It has been calculated that Salvadorans pay gangs approximately \$756 million in extortion fees every year, which works out to be around 3% GDP. Bus drivers are frequently kidnapped by these groups, who steal belongings and money from the passengers.¹⁰ Priests, churches, street sellers, and other small business owners are killed on a daily basis when they cannot pay rent money to the gangs as extortion.

This is how, to give an example, while in his vehicle en route to the town of Las Lajas to attend mass, the car of Father Walter Vásquez, who was ordained in 2010 and the current vicar in the parish of Nuestra Señora de la Merced in Usulután, was intercepted by another car driven by three armed men with covered faces. The criminals, who appear to have threatened the priest (possibly with the aim of extortion), stripped him of his watch, wallet and mobile phone, as if it had been deliberately planned. The authorities believe that one of the Salvadoran criminal organisations committed the crime, given the fact that it was carried out in an area dominated by the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang, where there is also a clear presence of the *Barrio 18* gang.¹¹

Between 12th and 13th January 2017, a mango seller and two men who had supposedly been selling drugs were killed in the historical centre of San Salvador. On 15th March of the same year, there was a killing spree during which 5 street vendors and a security guard lost their lives. Once again, the reason for both crimes was the extortion money being demanded by the *maras* from the stationary and mobile street vendors and other shops in the vicinity. Despite the authorities having deployed security measures in that particular place, the office was closed due to threats made by the gangs.

The power of the gangs outweighs that of the security forces, because these juvenile groups are extremely well-armed and always prepared to resort to violence. As a consequence, extortion fees are demanded from everyone and there is no respite for many street vendors and shops around the historical centre, where a security business linked to the *Mara Salvatrucha* gang feigns the provision of surveillance services but, at the same time, demands extortion fees for this criminal

⁷ Displacement Emerges as a Consequence of Violence in Latin America (2015) *Norwegian Refugee Council*, Oslo

⁸ Comabella J. Schwab y Zechmeister (2017) Escuchar el grito de las víctimas. Impulsos desde la teología de la liberación, *Latin American Journal of Theology* (102)

⁹ Gangs are known as *maras* in El Salvador; both words are used interchangeably for juvenile gangs.

¹⁰ For example, see the interview with Kaven in Callizo, Comabella, Jaime, *et.al.* “Escuchar el grito de las víctimas. Impulsos desde la teología de la liberación,” *supra note 8*; “The Gangs that cost 16% of GDP”, *The Economist*, 05/21/2016. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21699175-countrys-gangs-specialise-extortion-they-may-be-branching-out-gangs-cost>.

¹¹ “El Salvador: “Hecho sacrilego asesinato del P. Walter Vásquez”, *Vatican News*, 03/31/2018. Retrieved from <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2018-03/obispo-de-santiago-de-maria-sacerdote-asesinado.html>; “La Policía cree que el sacerdote asesinado en Salvador fue víctima de las pandillas”, *Religión Digital*, 04/03/2018. Retrieved from <http://www.periodistadigital.com/religion/americas/2018/04/03/la-policia-cree-que-el-sacerdote-asesinado-en-salvador-fue-victima-de-las-pandillas-religion-iglesia-investigacion.shtml>.

group.¹² In a country where 40% of the population lives in poverty and the per capita income is below \$9,000 per year - which is one of the lowest in the western hemisphere¹³ - the extortion fees being demanded by those on the margins of society make sense when viewed as a means for survival, especially if we consider the fact that consistently low levels of economic growth are still expected in the coming years (1.95% per year) and the debt of more than 65% GDP.¹⁴ A study recently found that in just the few squares of the historical centre of San Salvador, the gangs make \$100,000 per day by extorting money from companies in exchange for protection.¹⁵

In an interview conducted on 18th April 2018 by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, Pastor Carlos Hernández, who is in charge of the Centre for the Development of Leadership, which is an organisation dedicated to Pastoral leadership training in El Salvador, confirms that the “*maras*... kill people in order to create fear within the community and therefore easily prey on people to pay... the extortion fee[s].”¹⁶ According to Pastor Hernández, “the pastors pay money to the *maras* in order to avoid getting hurt”.¹⁷

On 19th December 2017, five evangelical parishioners were wounded by bullets during gunfire between gang members in Apopa, to the north of San Salvador. This area is a regular point of confrontation between the *maras*.¹⁸ On 20th January 2018 the Catholic parish and church authorities in the town of San Juan Tepezontes, in the department of La Paz, reported their dismay at having the consecrated host and two pieces of gold and silver - which held great historic value - stolen by delinquents.¹⁹

The aforementioned examples and figures represent a microcosm of the situation that El Salvador finds itself in. The options regarding approaching the problem seem to be few and far between, with the exception of religious figures who, taking their background into account, have been the prevailing factor in affecting membership to the gangs in terms of religious conversion, an emphasis on individual transformation, identity renewal, and redemption. In a tiered and socioeconomically hostile society, religion is a way out - and possibly the most effective one - when abandoning a gang and giving meaning to a normal and stable life. This is how, “personal disaffection with the gang and the accompanying intensification of religious membership offer

¹² “Así opera la MS-13 para recoger la extorsión en el centro de San Salvador”, *Elsalvador.com*, 01/14/2017. Retrieved from <http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/361978/pandillas-continuan-ola-de-crime-nes-en-el-centro-de-san-salvador/>

¹³Fondo Monetario Internacional (2012). Base de datos de perspectivas económicas mundiales, en http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2012/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=2010&ey=2017&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&pr1.x=34&pr1.y=12&c=253&s=NGDP_R,NGDP_RPCH,NGDP,NGDPD,NGDP_D,NGDP_RPC,NGDPPC,NGDPDPC,PPPGDP,PPPPC,PPPSH,PPPEX,NID,NGDP,NGSD,NGDP

¹⁴ Banco Mundial (2018). The World Bank in El Salvador. Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/elsalvador/overview>

¹⁵ “35 years after Romero, El Salvador is still at war”, *Crux*, 05/22/2015. Retrieved from <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/05/22/35-years-after-romero-el-salvador-is-still-at-war/>

¹⁶ Interview with Carlos Hernández, 04/18/2018

¹⁷ Interview with Hernández, supra note 16, 04/18/2018

¹⁸ “Cinco feligreses evangélicos lesionados en otro enfrentamiento entre pandilleros en Apopa”, *Elsalvador.com*, 12/19/2017. Retrieved from <http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/431438/cinco-feligreses-evangelicos-lesionados-en-otro-enfrentamiento-entre-pandilleros-en-apopa/>.

¹⁹ “Roban hostia consagrada en iglesia de Tepezontes”, *Elsalvador.com*, 01/20/2018. Retrieved from <http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/441014/roban-hostia-consagrada-en-iglesia-de-tepezontes/>

*favourable conditions for withdrawal from the gang by means of evangelical religion.”*²⁰ This context allows us to build a profile about those who make up the *maras* and the potential systemic causes of crimes out of those already mentioned.

3. The profile of the maras

Stephen Castles and Raúl Delgado Wise suggest that the *maras* are a type of juvenile gang that constitutes an issue for public safety due to the type of crime they commit.²¹ According to InSight Crime, street gangs have given way to a new type of criminal and violent conflict characterised by political and social unrest, in as far as that they are involved in extortion, kidnap, and the sale of drugs at a local level, including crack, cocaine, amphetamines, and marijuana in poor neighbourhoods.²² The surge is due to Salvadoran migration to the United States, specifically Los Angeles, since the Civil War. The children of Salvadoran emigrants were escaping from social, political, and economic exclusion, violence, and the armed internal conflict developed in El Salvador. Once settled in the United States, they were once again confronted with conditions of vulnerability, such as the fear of deportation, the exploitation of their illegal work, rights, and structural violence. These conditions resulted in a lack of vital socioeconomic resources for their mobility and integration into society. Many young immigrants were drawn to street gangs as a way of obtaining a purpose and identity for themselves.²³ This is how the organisation in gangs with ethnic affiliations allowed them to defend themselves against the ethnic domination of other gangs present in their territory. As their members were imprisoned for committing various crimes, once in prison they socialised within the culture of gangs present in the North American penitentiary system. Serious crime is a direct cause of deportation.

According to Portes & Hoffman, *maras* are gangs that constitute a social problem which results in civic victimisation and insecurity.²⁴ The security situation has been acknowledged by the Constitutional Chamber of the Salvadoran Supreme Court of Justice. The Court states that “the gangs are “terrorist groups”, as “terrorism constitutes an organised and systematic practice of violence, which (...) looks to intimidate the population in general, control residential territories, compel government authorities to negotiate penitentiary and other types of concessions, and affect the economic system of a nation, the framework for democratic institutionality and the fundamental system of rights covered in the Constitution.... [It is a well-known fact that the MS and 18 gangs] carry out these actions as systematic attacks on the lives, safety, and personal

²⁰ Orellana C.I. (2017). La Mara y la Fe: La desistencia pandilleril a través de la religión en ¿Hemos perdido el combate contra las maras? Un análisis multidisciplinario del fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador. San Salvador: Fundación Friedrich Ebert, pp. 323-350

²¹ Castles S. & Delgado R. (2007). Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM). p. 33

²² Perfil de El Salvador, Insight Crime, 03/09/2017. Retrieved from <https://es.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-crimen-organizado/el-salvador/>.

²³ Dingeman-Cerda M.K. (2014). ¿Bienvenidos a Casa? Deportation and the Making of Home in the US-El Salvador Transnation (Disertación). Universidad de California, Irvine, Estados Unidos. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/79c92564>

²⁴ Portes A. & Hoffman K. (2003). Latin American Class Structures: Their Composition and Change during the Neoliberal Era. *Latin American Research Review*, 38 (1), pp. 41-82.

integrity of the population, including against the civil, military, police, and penitentiary authorities.”²⁵

International Crisis Group confirms that the *maras* are juvenile groups or criminal street gangs rooted in Salvadoran society that defend a territory, use extreme extortion to sustain themselves, make threats, carry out brutal acts of violence such as the murder of transport workers and chronic abuse of women, cause the forced displacement of women and children, and exert criminal control over prison systems and the forced displacement of families from their homes.²⁶

Based on the previously stated definitions we can infer various common denominators that allow us to determine the profile of the *maras* and their dialectically antagonistic relationship with the Salvadoran government:

- The *maras* are a complex systemic phenomenon with a multidimensional character: criminal, social, economic, religious, and political; as a consequence, integral solutions that attack the root of the problem are required.
- The *maras* generate grave levels of violence, insecurity, and instability. Their criminal activities include arms, drug and people trafficking, assault, all types of robbery, extortion, illegal immigration, kidnap, money laundering, and vandalism.
- The variety and high levels of crime without a doubt question the effective capacity of the Salvadoran State to demonstrate effective power and control segments of national territory. Force, threat, or use of violence is the principal means that enables the *maras* to obtain control over territories, power and the completion of their crimes. In this sense the *maras* are a new type of insurgency that falls back within the perimeters of public and national security.
- In direct relation to point three, the *maras* erode the resources and capacity of the State to maintain internal order. The subsequent result of this loss is freedom to act as they wish, while imposing enough fear on communities, and even security bodies, so that they will not take action. This situation may lead to tough and ‘extraordinary’ governmental methods being put into place in order to control the high level of criminality. The declarations made by Bishop Luterano Medardo on 17th June 2016 in an interview conducted by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America are instructive. According to the bishop, there is no legal coverage for dialogue to take place between gangs and individuals such as pastors, churches, or organisations in civil society looking for a solution to the crisis. The pastor’s assessment was made with reference to the decision by the (aforementioned) Salvadoran Supreme Court in 2015 when reclassifying the *maras* MS-13 and B-18 as terrorist organisations, criminalising any type of collaboration with them. According to the pastor, the “measure is killing the people... the violation of human rights prevails, the repression. The government’s response is prison and killing gang members...extermination groups have emerged... There are 75,000 gang members in

²⁵ “Sala de lo Constitucional declara a pandillas MS y 18 como “grupos terroristas”, *El Mundo*, 08/24/2015.

Retrieved from <http://elmundo.sv/sala-de-lo-constitucional-declara-a-pandillas-ms-y-18-como-grupos-terroristas/>.

²⁶ International Crisis Group. (2017). El salario del miedo: maras, violencia y extorsión en Centroamérica (Informe sobre América Latina N°62). Retrieved from

<http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=58e74ee34>.

prison...”²⁷ A pastor interviewed by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America characterises the situation as “legal persecution” or “persecution by the police” against churches.

- In connection, the new oppressive type of criminal insurgency by the *maras* questions the viability of the Salvadoran State in guaranteeing services to the poorest communities as public and civic security. This difficulty finds its causal link in the fact that the high level of crime and violence threatens social development and economic growth, negatively affecting the quality of life of citizens. Crime and violence increase the cost of starting up businesses, negatively affect investment decisions, and obstruct the creation of employment.
- The institutional fragility of the State and the lack of resources to combat crime, alongside the power of impact held by the *maras* in communities, are conducive to a culture of impunity, lack of reporting crime, and the normalisation of violence; they are also conducive to migration and forced internal displacement. Of equal importance, the continual failure in the provision of basic services to the marginalised neighbourhoods in El Salvador, combined with supposed unlawfulness, and the complicity of security guards in extortion and drug trafficking have fostered a lack of punishment, incentives for delinquency, and violence. This lawlessness includes the formation of death squads, or ‘social cleansing’, which took place during the period of heavy rule, and now, ‘extermination camps’, which aim to eliminate the *maras*.²⁸
- The gangs, as complex juvenile groups, form an alliance which affords them a collective identity, a common purpose in the defence of their territory, survival, and resistance against the actions of the police; this is how the obstruction of justice or their own government, and the execution of criminal activities allow them to create the aforementioned atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and distrust.

4. Systemic causes of the *maras* and crime in El Salvador

Testimonies obtained in interviews conducted by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America in 2016 with Christian leaders and civil servants from organisations in civic society, refer to the complexity and perception of the problem in approaching it ‘from the bottom up’. The comments are instructional with reference to the systemic instigators of the *maras*, the crimes committed, and the ways they behave. See the principal reflections made by those interviewed and their proposed corresponding solutions below:

Problem	Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Environment of poverty; social injustice is the origin of gangs. - Confrontation between gangs. - Impunity and fear of denouncement for not exposing yourself to risk of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide opportunities to study, develop abilities, and work; give hope for change. - Not leave everything to the government; involve society.

²⁷ Interview with Bishop Luterano Medardo Gómez, 04/17/2016.

²⁸ International Crisis Group. (2017). El salario del miedo: *maras*, violencia y extorsión en Centroamérica (Informe sobre América Latina N°62). Supra note 26

Problem	Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distrust among gang members and the institutional structures of government, for example, the police. - Legal persecution against churches and other members of civic society due to a lack of legal coverage for those who want a change of behaviour in gang members; the dialogue is closed because it is seen as an alliance with the <i>maras</i>. - Violence by gangs against churches or individuals to steal money; they are seen as an obstacle to keep attracting new members for the groups. Young people that visit them are kidnapped and put under pressure; they are seen as human material. - Preaching should put territorial control of the <i>maras</i> in danger. - Threats and extortion of families; abandonment of the community, houses (forced displacement). - The abandonment of children while parents work. - Negative valuation of life and low self-esteem: the <i>maras</i> confront death on a daily basis; the incarcerated feel they are treated like ‘animals’. - There are no police or security agencies in the areas where the <i>maras</i> operate and, if there are, the police lack preparation; the implementation of law is problematic. - Perception of weakness of the government in not being able to prevent threats; lack of support for communities. - Corruption and alliances of certain political parties with the <i>maras</i> in order to obtain electoral support. - Culture of normalisation of violence; perception that the problem of the <i>maras</i> is ever-expanding; they do not allow their members to leave them; perception that violence is a vicious circle; if the police kill gang members, the gangs will also look for enforcement. Violence generates violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training and individual psychological support for gang members: motivation and self-esteem. - Total transparency of behaviour is vital because it encourages trust. - Religion as a means for social and individual change. - End the government’s tough stance, repression, violation of human rights, and measures that are killing people; prison is not an answer if 17,000 gang members are inside. - Open the dialogue and give it legal coverage. - End illegal methods used by police to obtain information such as bribery: ‘I’ll let you go free if you give me information.’ - Gang members need help and hope because they do not want their children to go to prison.

The observations made by those interviewed give us a reason to infer that the strict deportation policies of the United States, the ‘iron fist’ policy, as well as the current repressive behaviour of the Salvadoran government, have failed in obtaining public and civic security. Equally, the implemented policies demonstrate that neither government understands the profound and systemic roots of the problem. In effect, levels of criminality remain critical and the *maras*’ ability to grow remains.

The deportation policies, which will intensify with the possible deportation of 200,000 Salvadorans by the end of 2019, have - counterproductively - helped to spread *maras* across Central America.²⁹ Deported members take gang culture with them, which finds fertile ground to reproduce the same pattern of behaviour that allowed them to survive in the United States,³⁰ in a country characterised by a weak economy which does not enable the poorest people to access work opportunities or basic services.

They will also have the effect of reducing shipments, which correspond to 17% GDP³¹ meaning that the security situation will deteriorate even more in criminal and social terms, rehabilitation, sources of work, the use and sale of drugs, extortion; essentially the erosion of the state’s ability to manage the situation. Without the ability to manage this variety of factors, the displacement of the gangs to the rest of the so-called Triangle of Death (Guatemala and Honduras, States also characterised by the same structural deficiencies El Salvador is faced with) is obvious.

In addition, insightful comments made by those interviewed suggest that the continued social decomposition, lack of value of human wellbeing, and high levels of criminality seen in the gangs, are an aggressive consequence of the still recent iron fist policy (during which the police, reinforced by the army, attacked crime) and the current governmental repression. The mix of these two causes could be interpreted as a reflection of an institutional weakness when it comes to solving the problem.

In other words, the gangs are trying to start a ‘war’ against a repressive State which, in its attempt to maintain security, has been met with just one response - and that is the criminalization of gang members. This focus does not address the profound reasons for violence. Nor does it systematically link up with the dynamics of the Christian congregations in their attempt to respond to and reduce violence on an individual and local level. On the contrary, it serves to marginalise adolescents in the country to an even greater extent, encourage gang recruitment, and multiply the prison population.

As a result of the unidimensional focus taken by the government, the large-scale imprisonment of 17,000 gang members inevitably leads to a prison system that is both unstable and under a great deal of pressure. In essence, the inundated prison system, which is organised according to group

²⁹ “Gang Uses Deportation to Its Advantage to Flourish in U.S.”, *Los Angeles Times*, 10/30/2005. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-gang30oct30-story.html>.

³⁰ Rodgers D. & Baird A. (2015). Understanding gangs in contemporary Latin America in Decker S. and Pyrooz D. (eds.), *Handbook of Gangs and Gang Responses*, Wiley, New York.

³¹ The World Bank (2017). El Salvador, “Personal remittances received.” Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=SV>.

membership with members being reunited from all over the country and with those that have been deported from the United States, has provided gangs with the opportunity to reorganise themselves and strengthen their national and international networks,³² allowing the leaders to coordinate arms trafficking, drug trafficking, planning for new resistance methods, extortion, and attacks ‘from the inside’.

Therefore, the transnationalisation of the conflict and subsequent insecurity in more stable countries cannot be ignored. This transnationalisation coincides chronologically with US deportation policies in the 1990s. It also coincides with the US injection of thousands of millions of dollars into Columbia in the same decade to fight against the drug cartels and put a stop to Columbian cocaine being supplied to the United States.

While this measure is rationally plausible, it had the effect of shifting the problem towards Mexico. In response, Mexico has intensified its campaign against drug trafficking since 2006, causing drug traffickers to alter their transit routes through parts of Central America. The addition of Mexican drug cartels in parts of Central America, particularly in the Triangle of Death, has assisted the *maras* in expanding their reach and power. Having observed the ideal conditions in this part of Central America, Mexican drug cartels have created connections with the gangs, using them as local operators. The mixture is toxic; the challenge being presented by the *maras* cannot be separated from drug trafficking.

In consequence, systemic solutions that involve other States are also needed. Awareness already seems to have begun at this level. The gangs have been considered as the main source of delinquency in the region and also, one of the main threats to hemispheric security.³³ However, coordinated efforts between States and political willpower are required to attack the deep roots of the problem and prevent instability.

The gangs have grown so much at the local, national, and transnational levels that they cannot be stopped, imprisoned, or, in the words of the Bishop, ‘exterminated’. The challenge being presented by this new type of crime and organisation of the *maras* requires operational methods that involve States, all of society - including religious figures that agree that the deep roots of wrongdoing must be treated - and strategic objectives that aim to attack the situation.

The perception that ‘legal violence’ exists and is embedded and approved of within law must be added to the previous factor. For example, Article 1 of the *Ley de Proscripción de Maras, Pandillas, Agrupaciones, Asociaciones y Organizaciones de Naturaleza Criminal [Law of Prohibition of Maras, Gangs, Groups, Associations and Organizations of a Criminal Nature]* declared *maras* to be illegal and “therefore the existence, legalisation, funding, and support of them is banned...” This last clause can be broadly interpreted. In addition, if we look at this ruling in light of the testimonies given to the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, the clause could be interpreted in the following way. Even if it is true that the laws finally have the

³² Cruz José M. (2009) Global Gangs in El Salvador: Maras and the Politics of Violence in Global Gangs Workshop, Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding, Geneva, pp. 1-15. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/1451010/Global_Gangs_in_El_Salvador_Maras_and_the_Politics_of_Violence .

³³ Aguilar J., & Carranza M. (2008). Las maras y pandillas como actores ilegales de la región. San Salvador, El salvador: Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), p.19.

protection of the “right to life, physical and moral integrity, freedom, security, work, property, possession, conservation and defence of these rights”, and social behaviour is stable enough for general wellbeing in accordance with what has been outlined in Article 2 of the Salvadoran Constitution, these laws simultaneously increase the practices that harm certain social groups and organisations that want a positive change to the anti-social behaviour seen in the *maras* and their reintroduction into society.

There is therefore some anxiety about the mentioned legislation and the decision made by the Supreme Court to classify the *maras* as terrorist groups, as many feel that the interpretation of the regulations has been increased and then deteriorated, for example, regarding an opening of a dialogue or its legal coverage.

The perception is that measures by social organisations, the church, and individuals aiming to alleviate and resolve the new type of conflict, legitimise gang behaviour and, as a consequence, can be criminalised for being deemed to be support a ‘terrorist affiliation’. Antonio Rodríguez, a priest who spent 15 years working in the most difficult neighbourhoods in the country trying to rescue young people from gangs and promoting a dialogue through the back door, often visiting the bosses in their prison cells after the truce was declared in 2013, was accused of delinquency by association for handling alleged contraband of mobile phones and allowing them to continue committing crimes from behind bars. He pushed for compensation for his cooperation in the way of a reduced sentence and benefits such as increased conjugal visits. In September 2014, Rodríguez, nicknamed the “gangster priest”, was given a sentence of two and a half years in prison, but was freed the following day.³⁴

The complexity of the new type of conflict being presented by the *maras* has multidimensional causes that have political, social, cultural, and economic components. An institutional weakness or slow and deficient reaction from the State is just one of the reasons for the problem that cannot be ignored. Given the systemic nature of the gangs and their crimes, the deep roots of the phenomenon can be found in the alignment of multiple factors: high levels of structural inequality and poverty, few economic perspectives, unemployment, social exclusion, low levels of education, erosion and decomposition of the family, fragmentation in the community, a lack of access to basic services, psychosocial problems, attitudes that favour property and the use of political firearms, marginalisation, and problems in the application of law due to poor preparation of the policy and the violation of human rights.

These systemic problems are dominant in poor neighbourhoods. In the socioeconomic context of marginalisation, gangs can recruit members to offer them the possibility of better economic conditions, even if they are illegal. They also promise ‘security’, work, inclusion against marginalisation - an environment that acts as a substitute for family. Many of the recruits have been abandoned by parents that have emigrated to the United States in order to flee from poverty and violence. This environment is helped by the cohesion of the group and a strong collective identity that allows them to commit extortion as a means for survival. In this sense the *maras* take

³⁴ “35 years after Romero, El Salvador is still at war”, *Crux*, Supra note 15.

on the role of the State as a substitute and provider of ‘wellbeing’ for the members of the group within a context of a society that does not offer them positive alternatives.³⁵

Oppression and repression as well as institutionalised violence³⁶ have created a favourable environment for the membership of Salvadoran gangs, much like the challenge in the Triangle of Death. In this environment the *maras* take out their social frustrations through violence and crime, or “in the name of the injustice”, as it implies dispossession “of the basics and the same life”.³⁷

5. Institutional measures for dealing with violence in the *maras*

We have already implied that the *maras* are difficult to neutralise. There is not really a ‘golden’ solution to the issue. While the marginalisation and economic isolation of whole sectors of the large young population in the countries that form the Triangle of Death, the gangs will continue providing an attractive social space for children and young people that are experiencing deep alienation. Ideally, any transformations should begin by ending these structures.

From an institutional perspective, one important aspect is that State apparatus must be strengthened and State resources must be increased. This ‘top down’ solution must be implemented taking into account a fair framework for action that puts an end to unfair measures and promotes respect for human rights. Measures that are seen as socially just reclaim the State’s loss of legitimacy, promote trust, can reduce crime, and decrease the prison population. This is how, for example, the exoneration of “all of the facilitators of the truce between the gangs accused of illegal association as a means for increasing trust [with the gangs] could be positive; reverting to the decision to reconsider extraordinary measures for the *maras*;... being willing to support the improvement of prison conditions in exchange for gestures of peace from the gangs.”³⁸

Likewise, a different focus regarding gang violence, which involves crime prevention programmes and avoids excluding young people, is necessary. To do that it is essential that, through education at every level, we change attitudes that tend to accept the normalisation of a culture of violence and the perception of *maras* as a purely criminal phenomenon. A systemically comprehensive focus must be encouraged, that is to say, as a social, economic, psycho-affective phenomenon of marginalisation and social justice.

In turn, the reduction of public and national security that places a focus on security that seeks to eliminate ostracism and reflects on robust government policies for rehabilitation that incentivise the dismantling of the *maras* and their social reintegration, is vital. The focus should be planned

³⁵ Richani N. (2010) State capacity in post conflict settings: Explaining criminal violence in El Salvador and Guatemala. *Civil Wars*. 12 (4), pp. 431-455; Cruz J. (2009). *Maras and the Politics of Violence in Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World*, pp. 1-9; Chávez J. (2007). An anatomy of violence in El Salvador. *NACLA Report on the Americas*. 37 (6), pp. 31-38.

³⁶ Gutiérrez C. (1980). La violencia de un sistema. *Concilium*, (160), pp. 566-567.

³⁷ Sobrino J. (1997). La violencia de la injusticia. *Concilium*, (4), p. 66.

³⁸ International Crisis Group. (2017). El salario del miedo: maras, violencia y extorsión en Centroamérica (Informe sobre América Latina N°62). *Supra note 26*

within the context of the elaboration and execution of a “plan for internal security, directed against the *maras*, which does not involve filling prisons, but avoiding the gaps in authority that allow crime to occur; in order to do this it will be necessary to normalise the functioning of the institutions, including a community social service in which neighbours meet each other, as this will eliminate the existence of the *maras* as the only group to be a part of”.³⁹

The United States government should avoid large-scale deportation, take another look at the plan for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans, and provide fair opportunities to facilitate the legalisation of those without legal status. It should also give more financial support to El Salvador to help implement violence prevention plans and increase State institutional strength that respects human rights. The aforementioned suggestions are of a prospective character and we would have to wait to see their effects.

6. Religion: conversion as a factor for change

Much like in the era of Romero, current politics in El Salvador are dominated by competitive reactions to violence. Some advocate a firm hand, arguing that pacifying the gangs simply incentivises them,⁴⁰ but, as previously explained, common effects of a hard line include increasing the prison population made up of gang members and strengthening their ability to coordinate activities outside. In contrast, there is no general consensus that supports this perspective as a viable option, due to the reasons already discussed.

On the other hand, some groups, such as churches, want to open a dialogue with the gangs as a means for change, offering concessions in exchange for a truce. Those that take this position maintain that only by addressing gang members’ complaints and the wider problem of extreme poverty, can long-term peace be achieved. ‘Bottom up’ solutions are necessary, as the interviewees stated, and they involve the whole society instead of leaving everything to the government. This dynamic requires legal spaces for dialogue to be opened based on total transparency of key figures’ behaviour, if the aim is to increase trust. Taking into account that there is a level of fear when it comes to taking on and putting into practice new initiatives that promote change in the right direction given the harshness of the government and the current rulings that sanction the *maras* and anyone that supports them, this possibility is plagued by legal problems.

An intermediary focus for stability has been suggested. The idea of this approach to the problem is to look for a balance between hardline repression and the adjustments proposed by religious actors. In doing this, the government must recognise the ever-increasing presence and power held by the gangs, as opposed to denying it or brushing it off. In addition, game rules must be established in this position, rules that make the most of the leaders’ abilities to pacify criminal markets when areas where the State can gradually supplant the gangs are being laid out; using repression more strategically so that the rules are complied with; creating incentives so that gang

³⁹ Higher Center for National Defense Studies (IEEE) & College of Higher Strategic Studies of El Salvador (CAEE) (2017). El problema de las ‘maras’ y bandas latinas, dos visiones: desde El Salvador y España. Retrieved from http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_trabajo/2017/DIEEET04-2017_Problem_Maras_BandasLatinas_ElSalvador-Espana_DanielLopez.pdf

⁴⁰ “35 years after Romero, El Salvador is still at war”, *Crux*. Supra note 15.

leaders avoid violence and antisocial behaviour; placing authority figures in non-criminal areas where gangs currently dominate in order to regain control.⁴¹

This position seems to have raised a number of questions with many people regarding addressing the complaints made by members of the *maras*. As has previously been conveyed, addressing the complaints implies legitimising them and assisting the spreading of the *maras*; there is no guarantee that repression strategically results in compliance with the rules.

In contrast, religion is the only factor that has affected membership to the *maras*. It is true that paradoxically, in the concentration of the dynamic, churches and religious groups can be attacked by these groups, whether it is by stealing from them or kidnapping the young people that visit them to sustain their ability to regenerate and survive, while at the same time they try to help by recruiting individuals in order to offer them a platform for change and hope. Empirically the relationship appears to be dialectic on both parts.

However, religion as a means of promotion for individual and social change, as well as for dialogue, could be effective due to the relatively high levels of trust that they possess. Many gang members have expressed that they need help and that they do not want their children to repeat the same patterns of behaviour that led them to prison. At the same time many pastors recognise that they are trying to do what many people consider to be impossible: remove members from the gangs of El Salvador. But they believe that it is the only hope for the country. Rehabilitation for gang members requires filling the gaps that led them to these groups.

Pentecostalism offers an attractive combination of individuality and a tight community, which is what members of gangs need. Religion can provide spiritual support, increase self-esteem, and act as a means of rehabilitation, advice and forgiveness for those that have committed atrocious crimes. Approximately 95% of the gang members interviewed by Miguel Cruz in 2016 said that their relationship with God was very important to them. More than half said that joining a church was the best way to leave a gang.⁴²

The land is fertile for sowing a seed of hope and starting transformations at this level. Why? The constant fear and danger of the members of the *maras*, including the restriction of movement by a group for fear of enemies, fights for power within the group to which they belong, dissatisfaction with the gang, the attraction of a normal life, aspirations of gaining respect in society, and a desire for support and to be part of a world free of humiliation and isolation are the drivers of withdrawal from the gangs.

Alternatively, Christianity has been the refuge that has been longed for. Many gang members report having received help from pastors and members of the church as part of their wish to see a change in their behaviour. Churches are providers of social networks that are crucial in gaining

⁴¹ Lessing B. (2016) Inside out: the challenge of prison-based criminal organizations. Washington, Estados Unidos: Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/inside-out-the-challenge-of-prison-based-criminal-organizations/>

⁴² Maslin S. E. (April-May, 2018). Can religion solve El Salvador's gang problem? *The Economist. Stories of and Extraordinary World*. Retrieved from <https://www.1843magazine.com/features/can-religion-solve-el-salvadors-gang-problem>

employment and staying safe, or being rehabilitated, despite the fact that these networks cannot guarantee safety or job security. Christian discourse has also emphasised religious conversion as a launchpad for hope and individual transformation in terms of taking on a new identity for personal dignity; essentially for the reconstruction of lives. Religious conversion, to a greater extent than systemic or political change, appears to be the most common and accepted form of leaving gangs. However, the process of

“withdrawal happens under observation of gang organisation, whether that is implied or explicit. Gang members that are in the process of (...) leaving the gang need to demonstrate total agreement with the new life being offered by the church (...). An individual that leaves a gang through the church faces a number of penalties, possibly death by current gang members, if they are seen drinking alcohol or participating in other criminal activities. The level of agreement with the church is an indicator of whether the conversion is real or not.”⁴³

The question that arises is why the *maras* tend to respect the religious conversion chosen by the ‘dissidents’. It is suspected that there are two explanations. Firstly, it has been speculated that gang members themselves have some type of religious belief having grown up in religious families, and therefore wish to respect the belief and conversion by the ‘dissident’. This premise is supported by the following statistics: “approximately 50% of Salvadorans declare themselves to be Catholic, 40% state that they are Evangelical, and 10% say that they are affiliated with other faiths or no other faith”.⁴⁴ Therefore, respecting the conversion and beliefs of the ‘dissident’ means respecting the gang members themselves. In this sense, religion establishes moral restrictions on behaviour that has social implications.

Secondly, we can assume that once the ‘dissident’ has shown that he is serious about conversion, the church takes control of his care. We can also speculate that the ‘dissident’ has to display the correct behaviour of a convert, which means stopping being a danger or rival (for example, joining a different *mara*, selling drugs, etc.) for the group he has left. Upon opening themselves to religion, members of the *maras* can leave their gangs without fear of reprisal. In other words, if the member of the *mara* does not display true devotion, his previous fellow gang members may kill him out of fear that he will join other organisations and they will become enemies. As we can see, religion cannot be ignored. It is a strong agent for change, perhaps the strongest in a society that is as fragmented as that of El Salvador.

⁴³ Brenneman R. (2014). Wrestling with the devil. Conversion and Exit from Central American Gangs. Latin American Research Review. 49. Retrieved from https://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LARR/prot/fulltext/vol49noSI/49-SI_112-128_Brenneman.pdf; Cruz J. M., Rosen J. D., Amaya L. E. & Vorobyeva Y. (2017). La nueva cara de las pandillas callejeras: El fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador. Retrieved from https://lacc.fiu.edu/research/la-nueva-cara-de-las-pandillas_reporte-final_esp.pdf; Orellana C. I. (2017). La Mara y la Fe: La desistencia pandilleril a través de la religión. Supra note 20.

⁴⁴ Orellana C. I. (2017). La Mara y la Fe: La desistencia pandilleril a través de la religión. p. 333.

7. Conclusion

The challenges being presented by the *maras* are of a systemic and multidimensional nature. They can therefore not be confronted solely by security forces and the police. Even if it is true that the use of state power in all of its spheres is required to attack the root of the problem, its impact is being obstructed by the weakness of the State institutional office. The *maras* take advantage of this fragility, questioning state viability as a provider of the common good in order to exercise power, take territorial control, and develop criminal activities, which results in public and national insecurity. Repressive security measures favour resistance from the *maras* and reflect this fragility. Violence generates violence.

The institutionalisation of the phenomenon finds its deep roots in social justice in terms of structural inequality, social exclusion, marginalisation, poverty, unemployment, drug trafficking, and a breakdown in the structure of the family, among other reasons. While there are no structural changes in place that promote social justice and prosperity in a fragmented society, acting as the force behind the dismantling of the *maras*, there will continue to be high levels of criminality, internal displacement, and international migration, mainly to the United States. Transnationalisation of this problem may be on the horizon.

Without complete solutions which consider the actions of religious figures as agents for individual transformation, the future is currently uncertain. Religious congregations are a vital platform from which changes can be made from the ‘bottom up’. Religious conversion certainly makes more of an impact than the repressive and counterproductive measures taken by the State.

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